

FRONTIERSMEN ARE THE “REAL MEN” IN TRUMP’S AMERICA: HEGEMONIC
MASCULINITY AT WORK ON U.S. CABLE’S VERSION OF BLUE-COLLAR REALITY

by

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Abstract

Frontiersmen Are the “Real Men” in Trump’s America: Hegemonic Masculinity at Work on U.S. Cable’s Version of Blue-Collar Reality

Dissertation directed by Associate Professor Polly McLean

The emergence and popularity of the so-called “blue-collar reality shows” on U.S. cable networks in the past decade provide a critical point of entry for understanding the intersecting relationships between race, gender, social class, and hegemonic constructions of individualism and “authenticity” in U.S. culture and electoral politics. These series center on white, male, heteronormative, working-class subjects whose shared structural location in a class-stratified society remains sublimated in favor of narrative frameworks that emphasize their perceived status as “real men.” These subjects are not configured as raced, gendered, and classed, but as “neutral” or “normal” in relation to these social categories.

Theoretical perspectives from across the interdisciplinary terrains of critical race studies, gender studies, and media studies inform the analysis of the following series, which are some of the most popular and longest-running within this subgenre of reality television programming: *Deadliest Catch*, *Ax Men*, *Ice Road Truckers*, and *Gold Rush*. Through applying critical discourse analysis to selected episodes, I demonstrate through an intersectional framework how the interlocking systems of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, settler-colonialism, and capitalism remain simultaneously obscured and ideologically justified via the hegemonic myth of rugged individualism and the related “frontier” ethos in U.S. culture.

I posit that the stylized performances of white, working-class, heteronormative males, as depicted on these series, have been coopted by white male politicians and public figures from the upper classes both historically and at present to attain the symbolic capital such a performance

confers. I also incorporate a critical discourse analysis of randomly selected episodes of *Duck Dynasty*, which exemplifies how affluent, white men take up white, rural, working-class masculine performances to acquire the symbolic capital of masculine legitimacy. I maintain that there is a line of continuity between the proliferation of the blue-collar reality programs in recent years, which are more about validating white masculinity than workers, and the rise of Donald Trump. Lastly, I conduct a critical discourse analysis of self-directed comments from viewers on independent, online discussion forums about these programs. It is through these approaches that I unmask and historicize the systems of power embedded in these seemingly benign cultural productions.

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Introduction and Statement of the Problem

The current president of the United States, Donald Trump, is a former reality television star. Any prior resistance to approaching reality television as a subject worthy of scholarly inquiry has likely faded away with his improbable rise as a political “outsider” to the highest elected office in the nation-state. As host of *NBC’s The Apprentice*, the billionaire real-estate mogul entered U.S. living rooms via the reality television format on a weekly basis beginning in 2004—charting an unlikely course toward political relevance in 2016. However, this dissertation is not about Donald Trump, as much as it is about the systems of power and the confluence of social, cultural, and political circumstances that contributed to his election in 2016. Rather than serve as a political liability, his reality television credentials became an unlikely asset. As Laurie Oullette cautions in a special issue of *Television & New Media* regarding Trump’s improbable ascendancy, “Instead of dismissing reality TV as inherently trite, superficial, and trashy, we need to understand the social, economic, and political contexts that have shaped its cultural development and shifting contours. Only then can we really understand the ‘first reality TV president’” (2016, p. 649).

At the beginning of the economic downturn in 2007-2008, approximately eight years before Trump kicked off his presidential campaign, in a seemingly inconsequential corner of cable television, a new subgenre of reality television emerged on the *Discovery* and *History* networks. The so-called blue-collar reality shows (Lloyd, 2011; Schlosser, 2013) have since multiplied into dozens of series across U.S. cable in the past decade, and are exhibiting no signs of dissipating. The principal casts of these programs are comprised almost entirely of white, heteronormative, working-class men who perform hazardous occupations in remote, rural locations. Despite filming these white male subjects almost exclusively on their job sites, the

seeming salience of social class and capitalism is subsumed within overarching narrative frameworks that emphasize these workers’ perceived status as “real men.”

Why did these formulaic reality programs documenting white, working-class men on their job sites seemingly appear out of nowhere in the past decade? I argue that the emergence and popularity of these programs signaled a deeper socio-political backlash that was brewing among white, rural, working and middle-class men—the same demographic of men that both populates the blue-collar reality world, and came out strongly in support of Donald Trump in 2016 (Filipovic, 2016; Tyson & Maniam, 2016). The rise of these series coincided not only with the onset of the Great Recession, but also in relation to the modest advancements made by women, people of color, and LGBTQ-identified peoples in recent years toward greater social equality.

I contend that the blue-collar reality shows appeared in conjunction with what masculinity studies scholar, Michael Kimmel, refers to as “the contemporary ‘crisis’ of masculinity” (2012, p. 187). As Kimmel explains, this “crisis” of masculinity is specifically afflicting white, (mostly) rural, males from the working and middle-classes. He notes that white male anxiety, fear, and anger over their perceived loss of social status is driven, in part, by the increased economic precarity endemic to neoliberal socioeconomic policies—including trade deregulation, privatization of public resources, and the dismantling of social programs—coupled with the dominant tendency to link masculinity with economic independence. This perceived crisis is also tied to a misperception or a willful ignorance among white, working and middle-class men regarding the comparative socioeconomic disadvantages women and people of color in the United States endure in relation to white males overall. These white men interpret the modest

inroads made by marginalized groups as an intrusion into what they, and evidently only they, are entitled to in terms of economic security and social status.

Rather than question the basis of this dominant conceptualization of masculinity, or challenge white male supremacy, Kimmel finds that many rural, white, working and middle-class men reinvest in traditional metrics of masculine authenticity. This explains why the audience of the blue-collar reality shows is primarily comprised of white men from both the working and middle-classes. It is as though the blue-collar reality shows assuage the fears of this subset of men through reassuring them that they are, in fact, still “real men” at the top of the social hierarchy.

In his 2013 text, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*, Kimmel documents both the masculine insecurities and the profound resentments toward women and people of color experienced by the white men who would later become Trump’s base. Tragically, Kimmel does not forecast the rise of a demagogic political figure like Trump, who would tap into those anxieties and hatreds, which are deeply rooted in existing white supremacist and heteropatriarchal systems, as part of his meteoric rise to power. In Kimmel’s epilogue, he is overly optimistic about the subjects of his investigation and their place in the future of U.S. politics: “It’s America 2.0. America the Multicultural. Angry white men are on the losing side of history...In fact, they’ve already lost...For the truth is that Angry White Men may make a lot of noise, but they are a fast-disappearing minority” (p. 279). It is astonishing that in less than four years, Donald Trump would ride on a wave of white male hostility all the way to the White House.

I contend that if the mainstream political punditry were more aware of what was happening culturally in terms of the profound changes in programming lineups on U.S. cable

networks, specifically *History* and *Discovery*, they may have been less shocked by Donald Trump’s popularity among rural, working and middle-class, white males. Of course, this is not the only piece to the puzzle of Trump’s ascent, but I maintain that remaining attentive to shifts in popular culture can reveal deeper and more consequential sociocultural changes. In this line of reasoning, I argue that the blue-collar reality shows symbolically spoke to the concerns and desires of Trump’s white male supporters.

In this analysis, I specifically examine four of the most popular and longest-running series within this subgenre of reality television: *Discovery’s Deadliest Catch* (2005-present) follows commercial crab fishermen on Alaska’s treacherous Bering Sea; *History’s Ax Men* (2008-2016) features commercial loggers in the forests of Oregon, Washington, Alaska, and other locations in the Western United States, as well as swamp and river loggers in Louisiana and Florida; *History’s Ice Road Truckers* (2007-present) documents commercial truck drivers traversing the winter seasonal ice roads in mostly Northwestern Canada and Alaska; and *Discovery’s Gold Rush* (2010-present) depicts gold miners in Alaska and the Yukon. These are some of the most statistically dangerous occupations in North America, and the specter of bodily injury permeates the blue-collar reality shows.

Before moving forward, it is essential to clarify the parameters of this subgenre of reality television. In referring to the blue-collar reality shows, I am not including so-called “rednexploitation” series (Aho, 2016), such as TLC’s *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* or MTV’s *Buckwild*. Unlike the blue-collar reality shows, these series have mixed gender casts, but also present white, rural, working-class people as worthy of mockery and ridicule. They also do not center on the workplace, but document the lifestyles of so-called “rednecks,” who eschew middle-class social conventions and the Protestant work-ethic. In contrast, the blue-collar reality

series portray their white, rural, working-class male subjects as worthy of admiration and praise for proving their manhood through their performance of highly dangerous occupations.

Thom Beers, who executive produces some of the longest-running and highest-rated blue-collar reality shows, including *Deadliest Catch*, *Ice Road Truckers*, and *Ax Men* is widely considered the driving force behind the inception and propagation of this subgenre of reality television. Beers also narrates *Ice Road Truckers* and *Ax Men*. In a December 2012 profile of Beers in *The New York Times Magazine*, Charles Homans illuminates his pivotal role in creating a new subset of reality television programming on U.S. cable:

It is now virtually impossible to surf the cable spectrum without landing on a series built on the Beers template: shows about bush pilots, swamp loggers, wild-pig hunters, gold miners, snake wranglers, repo men, tugboat operators, animal-control officers. Blue-collar TV shows have tested the bounds of interest (A&E’s ‘Parking Wars,’ a show about parking-enforcement cops that is, bafflingly, in its sixth season) and plausibility (Discovery’s ‘Moonshiners,’ which local officials in Virginia have accused of being an elaborate hoax). ‘He cornered the market,’ says Abby Greensfelder, a former Discovery executive who runs the reality-TV production company Half Yard Productions. ‘Now a lot of people have imitated that, but he was the pioneer. He really defined a genre.’

Therefore, this examination explicitly focuses on the Beers’ template of documenting “real men at work” on reality television, as it pertains to deeper sociopolitical currents. A core claim of this dissertation is that the subjects of the blue-collar reality shows exemplify dominant conceptualizations of hegemonic masculinity and rugged individualism in the contemporary U.S. neoliberal context. In short, the men of the blue-collar reality world are not coded within the dominant logics of commercial television as white men or workers, but as “real men” or “rugged

individuals.” This project also calls attention to which bodies typically constitute neutral individuality in the U.S. context: White men are not treated as raced and gendered subjects in the dominant discourse, but often as “neutral” or “normal” in relation to these social categories.

Ryan Broderick of *Buzzfeed* curiously includes A&E’s popular *Duck Dynasty* (2012-2017) in his analysis of “rednexploitation” series in “The Dark Side of America’s Redneck Reality TV Obsession.” The series centers on the wealthy Robertson family of West Monroe, Louisiana. Despite their economic largesse, the male members of the clan loudly proclaim their “redneck” credentials via their commitment to hunting, fishing, perpetually wearing camouflage, and sporting long, unkempt beards with lengthy, unruly hair to match. Headed by their patriarch Phil, who originally made his millions through establishing Duck Commander—his family-run business, which manufactures duck calls for hunters—the program documents their lifestyle (Magary, 2014). Unlike the true “rednexploitation” series or the blue-collar reality shows, *Duck Dynasty* focuses on a wealthy family. Additionally, like their counterparts on *Ax Men*, *Deadliest Catch*, *Ice Road Truckers*, etc., the Robertsons are not framed as worthy of derision, but as quintessentially exemplifying “real manhood.”

I contend that *Duck Dynasty* is instructive for understanding the symbolic capital a white, rural, working-class masculine *performance* confers to a man who can approximate it, in which whiteness is a critical prerequisite. The show provides insight into the motivations behind wealthy white males, such as the Robertsons and Donald Trump, embracing white, working-class masculine performances, so that they can be perceived as “real men.” Therefore, I include *Duck Dynasty* in this analysis, but maintain an analytical separation between its depiction of wealthy “rednecks” and the blue-collar reality shows presentation of “real men” on their job sites. Another noteworthy division between the format of *Duck Dynasty* and the rest of the

programs included in this examination: It mostly focuses on the Robertsons as a family unit in their home environment, and remains more in line with the 22-minute sitcom structure, whereas the other series are more emblematic of 44-minute workplace dramas.

Lastly, *Duck Dynasty* has been identified as one of the most politically polarizing programs on television, in which its conservative ideological bent has been well-documented (Katz, 2016). The Robertsons publicly supporting Donald Trump, including Willie Robertson endorsing him at the Republican National Convention in July 2016, marks the series as more *overtly* political than the blue-collar reality shows examined herein. In summation, in using the term “blue-collar reality shows,” I am not referring to “redneckexploitation” series or *Duck Dynasty*—the latter of which I address separately in the fourth chapter.

Christopher Lockett observes in his analysis of this subgenre of reality television, which includes *Deadliest Catch* and *Ice Road Truckers*, how this trend appears commensurate with a masculine cultural fixation with accessing “real manhood.” In his aptly titled piece, “Masculinity and Authenticity: Reality TV’s Real Men,” Lockett contends “that this idealization of working-class masculinity takes place by way of reality television speaks to its preoccupation with an *authentic masculinity* [emphasis added], one best accessed unalloyed and unmediated” (2010). Because reality television is unscripted and includes “real people” as its stars, instead of actors, it maintains an allure of authenticity, despite presenting a product that is highly constructed and mediated. In short, part of the mythology of reality television is that it purportedly presents things “as they are.”

Like reality television itself, Donald Trump has been cast as a more “authentic” politician who “tells it like it is.” As Halim Shebaya explains in the *Huffington Post*, it is simply the

superficial appearance of a certain kind of white masculine authenticity that matters to politically conservative segments of the U.S. electorate:

...one way to understand Trump’s success is the fact that he is perceived to state things as they really are, without the filter of establishment jargon and what some denounce as ‘political correctness’...What the NBC, Telemundo, and Marist College poll showed was that more than seven in ten Republicans believe Trump ‘tells it like it is,’...To be sure, Trump is ‘telling it like it is’ for those who believe what he says. For those who disagree with his views, the ‘like it is’ is a racist, fascist, Islamophobic, narrow-minded, and essentially false perception of reality. (2016)

John Baldoni, in a 2016 *Forbes* editorial entitled, “Is Donald Trump a Role Model for Authenticity?” argues that “Politics aside, those who speak in public can admire Trump for his ability to connect with an audience but should be very wary of following what passes for his style of authenticity.” I counter that the dominant perception of Trump as authentic cannot be dislodged from politics or wider systems of power, such as racism and sexism. The notion that his political performance has attained any degree of legitimacy because of its perceived authenticity should raise alarm bells given that Trump unapologetically espouses racist, sexist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic rhetoric.

The perception of Trump’s “realness” also underscores how white male supremacy remains deeply entwined with hegemonic conceptualizations of authenticity. As I address at length in this dissertation, real men are always white men in the U.S. public domain. Taking this a step further, “real Americans” are often conceived of as white, rural, working-class men. As Lockett observes, the blue-collar reality series are situated “...as somehow the norm: ‘real America’” (2010). By logical extension, the reality television president not only typifies

authenticity in a broad sense, but also key elements of an authentic version of masculinity. Trump speaks and performs in a register that gestures toward what it means to be a “real man” in the dominant discourse. This dissertation seeks to answer the question: What systems of power remain embedded in performances deemed authentically masculine, and what is their wider sociopolitical significance?

Before proceeding with an explanation of the specific aims of this dissertation, for conceptual clarity, I must delineate my understanding of the interlocking systems of power (Combahee River Collective, 1986) I consistently refer to in relation to the production and reception of the blue-collar reality television shows. The intertwined systems of oppression that I argue underpin these series include white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler-colonialism. White supremacy in this context does not refer to the overt, ideologically racist rhetoric of far-right, neo-Nazi terrorist groups, as it is commonly conceptualized in the public discourse. White supremacy also refers to the ways in which whiteness has become naturalized as an invisible, default racial identity to which all other racial groups are measured. In *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills characterizes the current racial hierarchy as “... de facto white supremacy, when whites' dominance is, for the most part, no longer constitutionally and judicially enshrined but rather a matter of social, political cultural and economic privilege based on the legacy of the conquest” (1997, p. 73). Hence, the whiteness of the principal casts of the blue-collar reality shows is unremarkable or “normal” in a white supremacist society.

Heteropatriarchy specifically refers to a gender/sexuality system of cis male, heterosexual dominance, in which women and all genders within the LGBTQ community are viewed as subordinate. Settler-colonialism refers to the specific mode of colonization imposed upon indigenous peoples, including the indigenous peoples of North America. Features of settler-

colonialism include displacement, genocide, and a loss of cultural sovereignty at the hands of colonizers who permanently settle and fundamentally transform the society they encounter.

Although capitalism does not need further explanation, I think it is important to clarify what I mean when I refer to neoliberal capitalism or more simply, neoliberalism. George Monbiot of *The Guardian* offers a comprehensive sketch of neoliberalism’s core socioeconomic features:

So pervasive has neoliberalism become that we seldom even recognise it as an ideology...Attempts to limit competition are treated as inimical to liberty. Tax and regulation should be minimised, public services should be privatised. The organisation of labour and collective bargaining by trade unions are portrayed as market distortions that impede the formation of a natural hierarchy of winners and losers. Inequality is recast as virtuous: a reward for utility and a generator of wealth, which trickles down to enrich everyone. Efforts to create a more equal society are both counterproductive and morally corrosive. The market ensures that everyone gets what they deserve. (2016)

As I explain in greater detail in the theoretical frames section regarding intersectionality, I understand these systems of oppression as operating in interlocking and mutually constitutive fashions. I argue that the blue-collar reality shows are invisibly shaped by these systems of power, which have become so naturalized as “common sense” that they often go undetected. In her seminal text, *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins recognizes the critical role of the media in reinforcing intersecting systems of oppression, which further legitimates the importance of examining the blue-collar reality shows as sites of structural domination. Collins examines the common stereotypes applied to African-American women, and poignantly refers to them as “controlling images” (2009, p. 76). As she asserts, “Intersecting oppressions of race,

class, gender, and sexuality could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence” (p. 77).

Research Questions and the Discussion Ahead

It is with the assertion that media and popular culture maintain a critical function within the reification of interlocking systems of oppression that this dissertation seeks to answer the following primary research questions:

- 1) What is the deeper sociopolitical significance of the timing of the emergence and proliferation of the blue-collar reality shows in the past decade?
- 2) What do the discourses, narratives, and imagery of the blue-collar reality shows reveal about dominant ideologies, specifically pertaining to race, gender, social class, and individualism in the current U.S. context?
- 3) What is the role of place, mainly the mythic frontier, within the blue-collar reality shows, and in mainstream U.S. culture and historiography more broadly?
- 4) What is the primary motivation and history behind affluent white male politicians and public figures taking up white, rural, working-class or “redneck” masculine performances?
- 5) What are some of the significant patterns and concerns that emerge within self-directed viewer reactions to the blue-collar reality shows as archived on online discussion forums about the series?

In answering these questions, I incorporate multiple theoretical frames from across the interdisciplinary terrains of critical race theory, gender studies, and cultural studies. This interdisciplinary project attempts to make several unique theoretical interventions within approaches to investigating and conceptualizing social categories as they relate to systems of power within media representations. In the theoretical frames section, I outline how this project offers a reconceptualization of the category “working class” in relation to Deleuzian assemblage. Dominant conceptualizations of the working class need correction to appropriately account for

its diversity and the concomitant power differentials existing among workers along intersecting lines of race and gender. White men continue to be overrepresented in working-class representations, such as the blue-collar reality shows, despite women and people of color comprising the majority of its ranks (Zweig, 2000). I maintain that the deployment of the monolithic category “working class” is analogous to the circulation of the reductive category “women” in the dominant discourse and public consciousness.

This dissertation also calls for intersectionality to become more comprehensively integrated into media studies research engaging with social categories as they are linked to systems of power. In advocating for the indispensability of intersectionality for attending to the mutually constitutive nature of structures of domination, such as white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism, I also touch upon Jasbir Puar’s blistering critique of the common implementation of intersectionality in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. In conversation with Puar’s critique, I delineate how intersectionality, when applied appropriately, remains essential for explicating the ways in which intertwined systems of power operate within media systems and texts. Interestingly, Puar suggests assemblage as a more useful theoretical device for illuminating how social locations cannot be disassembled or decompartmentalized into discrete social categories, such as race, gender, and social class. This project highlights the usefulness of both assemblage and intersectionality as theoretical frameworks within media studies research—disrupting Puar’s notion that the two theorizations are fundamentally at odds.

In building upon the existing literature about the blue-collar reality shows, I attempt to more fully account for the multiple and intersecting systems of power that ideologically structure these media texts, as well as the discursive audience reactions to them in online discussion

forums. Furthermore, I contend that all responsible media studies research should be historicized, and trace the frontier ethos endemic to these series back to its nineteenth-century roots in the United States.

Chapter One outlines how white, rural, working-class masculinity, as depicted on the blue-collar reality shows, constitutes hegemonic masculinity in the contemporary U.S. neoliberal context. I detail and historicize the conceptual parameters of this hegemonic masculine performance, and illuminate how heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism mutually underprop the preferred way to “be a man” in the U.S. dominant domain. I contextualize the emergence of the blue-collar reality shows in relation to the Great Recession, as well the sizeable white male backlash against women, people of color, LGBTQ individuals, and those living at those intersections in recent years. The casts of these series are comprised almost entirely of white men except for a small number of white women. When men of color do occasionally appear, they are largely relegated to the periphery. Notably, women of color are completely absent. I argue that the popularity of these series indicates a deeper sociopolitical undercurrent, which cannot be separated from the rise of Donald Trump.

I also attend to the fraught relationship between the blue-collar reality shows and social class, as they ironically deemphasize the existence of a class system and class consciousness. Moreover, the shows’ principal stars, such as the captains on *Deadliest Catch*, more accurately belong to the managerial or ownership classes. The class hierarchies that exist within the blue-collar reality realm itself require illumination. As I demonstrate, the perception of economic independence and rugged individualism is commensurate with hegemonic masculine status. Lastly, I address the framing of the white women who are provisionally permitted entry into these hegemonically masculine, homosocial spaces.

Chapter Two critically illuminates the role of place, specifically the mythic frontier, within the blue-collar reality shows and in U.S. cultural history by extension. Building off George Lipsitz’s conceptualization of the “white spatial imaginary,” I contend that the mythic frontier constitutes a “white male spatial imaginary.” I argue that the blue-collar reality shows reinvigorate frontier mythology, which is deeply rooted in U.S. exceptionalism and the ideological justification for the settler-colonization of indigenous peoples. I historicize these contemporary depictions of frontier life and labor in relation to U.S. historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s landmark thesis, “The Significance of the Frontier in American history.” This chapter foregrounds indigenous critical theory for explicating how the dominant conceptualization of the frontier as an empty wilderness both erases indigenous peoples, and naturalizes the presence of white men on these terrains. Indigenous critical theory disrupts the seeming banality of frontier narratives, especially those exemplified by the Western film and television genre, which have become some of the most highly venerated and widely circulated stories in U.S. culture. I situate the blue-collar reality shows within the lineage of the Western, and explore why frontier narratives are making a resurgence, albeit in a slightly different iteration, at this juncture.

Chapter Three explores audience reactions to the blue-collar reality shows in independently run, online discussion forums. By independent, I mean that these forums are not in any way affiliated with the *Discovery* or *History* channels, or any of the production companies/corporate entities involved in these series’ productions. As Stuart Hall and Alan O’Shea note, online comments “...capture a discourse which is volunteered, which arises from the writer’s own set of concerns, and is as spontaneous and unfettered by what others may think as possible” (2013, pp. 16-17). The anonymity of these unprompted comments suggests a degree of honesty and openness, or at the very least, a lack of self-censorship about how said comments

might be received. Consequently, these comments represent a more “raw” and unalloyed cross-section of audience response data. The goal of this portion of the study is preliminary in nature: To discover the primary concerns and fixations of this self-selected group of regular viewers in relation to the blue-collar reality series, as well as to determine if said viewers explicitly touch upon any of the core themes that have emerged through the critical discourse analysis of the content of series episodes. As this chapter reveals, this subset of viewers appears largely preoccupied with the degree of authenticity of the series under discussion. Additionally, some commenters reproduce hegemonic and problematic logics regarding race, gender, and social class. Although only a small number of comments touched upon social categories, I assert that the discursive silences in relation to race, gender, social class, and sexuality in these digital archives are just as revealing and noteworthy as the explicit commentary.

Chapter Four exclusively tackles *Duck Dynasty* and the Robertson men’s white, rural, working-class or “redneck” masculine performances, despite possessing substantial amounts of economic and cultural capital. I address the history of the term redneck, and how it has become increasingly dislodged from its class-based origins in favor of its association with masculine authenticity. I argue that the Robertsons, along with affluent white male politicians both past and present, such as Donald Trump, George W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, and Theodore Roosevelt, self-consciously perform white, working-class masculinity to attain the symbolic capital of masculine legitimacy that this performance confers.

I discuss Donald Trump’s white, working-class, masculine political performance at length, and how it has contributed to him garnering support not only from the white working class, but also the white middle class (Bartash, 2016; Silver, 2016; Thompson, 2016). In exploring some of the class-based demographic misconceptions about Trump’s white base, I also

touch upon how classism operates within whiteness. Namely, I note how accusations of racism do not collectively stick to middle-class whites as a group. In the mainstream media, racism is often characterized as the exclusive purview of poor and working-class whites. Although there is plenty of racism to be found among economically disadvantaged whites, I argue that middle and upper class whites are not collectively branded as racist because of their class privilege. In contextualizing Trump and the Robertson men’s gender performances, I unmask the white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, capitalist, and imperial logics that reinforce the performative power of “real manhood.”

Lastly, I conclude this study with a synopsis of the findings; an assessment of the research limitations; and suggestions for future research. Before proceeding with the analysis of the study’s findings, I must further unpack the theoretical interventions contained herein, as well as a discussion of the current literature and the study’s research methods.

Theoretical Frames

This dissertation incorporates multiple theoretical perspectives originating from within the interdisciplinary arenas of critical race theory and critical whiteness studies; gender and performance studies; and media and cultural studies. These theoretical frames include assemblage, intersectionality, visibility, critical race theory, indigenous critical theory, gender performativity in relation to hegemonic masculinity, and Pierre Bourdieu’s formulation of symbolic capital (1987). Because this project makes several theoretical interventions in relation to the study of media texts and social categories as they correspond to systems of power, it is critical to elucidate the applicability of each framework for disrupting the banality, and illuminating the social complexity, of the blue-collar reality shows.

These popular media representations of working-class subjects reify a deeply entrenched U.S. cultural legacy of conflating working-class status and white masculinity. The category “working class” continues to signify white male, blue-collar workers in the dominant U.S. discourse and media (Zweig, 2000). This project aims, in part, to explicate and correct how the social category of “working class” has come to solely represent white male workers in the dominant discourse. This analysis of the blue-collar reality shows seeks to destabilize the hegemonic and monolithic conceptualization of the category “working class” itself through an interrogation of labor along intersecting lines of race and gender.

In accounting for the disproportionate visibility of white masculinity in working-class representations in the contemporary U.S. context, it is crucial to historicize the diversity of the U.S. working class, in that women and people of color were excluded from the “labor aristocracy” as a result of the intersecting systems of oppression of sexism and racism (Arnold, 2008, p. 6-7). The location of the union-organized factory whose workers were predominantly white and male became the primary determinant of recognition and inclusion in the so-called “working class,” whereas women and people of color engaged in migrant and domestic work were not identified in the mainstream discourse as such (Glenn, 2002). This legacy endures at present, as women of all races and people of color of all genders remain discursively excluded from working-class identification in the dominant discourse, despite women and people of color constituting the majority of the U.S. working class (Fisher, 2015).

Because reductive and inaccurate images of the working class continue to circulate in mass media, this dissertation seeks to theoretically intervene with a more nuanced and complete conceptualization of the U.S. working class that accounts for its complex racial and gendered dimensions. I apply Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s spatial metaphor of assemblage for

understanding the ways in which the U.S. working class coheres at certain instances of economic exploitation and diverges at others moments in terms of the particularities of race and gender that overlap within the global capitalist system. These flashes of cohesion and divergence occur congruently—the U.S. working class is not a fixed entity. The working class is continually in the process of becoming, in which multiplicities of bodies varying by race, gender, age, religion, sexuality, etc. perform multiplicities of occupations potentially moving in and out of the workforce. As Deleuze and Guattari state, “There are only multiplicities of multiplicities forming a single *assemblage*, operating in the same *assemblage*: packs in masses and masses in packs” (1987, p. 34). It is important to note that this theorization can logically be extended to contexts outside of the United States and transnationally.

This aptly describes the U.S. working class: multiplicities of diverse bodies perpetually in motion, which can be conceptualized as an assemblage at certain junctures within the capitalist system. This dissertation asserts that the unspecified usage of the category “working class” without qualification in terms of race, gender, nationality, sexuality, etc. is analogous to the problematic deployment of “women” as a monolithic category. In response to this hegemonic tendency, I theoretically locate the U.S. working class as a complex assemblage in which white, heteronormative males remain hegemonic and overrepresented within it—as demonstrated by the blue-collar reality shows—thus illustrating how white supremacist heteropatriarchy cannot be disassembled from capitalism. It is my hope that this dissertation will provide a useful template for other projects, which seek to engage with social class without succumbing to Marxist reductionism. As a spatial metaphor, assemblage allows for an understanding of working-class status as a location of economic disadvantage within the global capitalist system, while

simultaneously attending to the coexisting power disparities and complex social differentiations within that location.

Aside from this necessary reformulation of social class, this project is significant for the field of media studies in that it further legitimates the study of mass media texts for locating the critical place of cultural productions within the reification of social hierarchies. More precisely, I intend to challenge dominant conceptualizations of social categories as they are constructed and reproduced in the popular media, especially in terms of the naturalized and concealed reciprocal relationships between white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism. I intend for this project to serve as a model for what intersectional media studies research might resemble, and to encourage the incorporation of intersectional analytics into studies of mass media and popular culture.

I maintain that intersectionality is indispensable for unmasking how systems of power, such as white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, settler-colonialism, and capitalism operate in seemingly invisible and naturalized ways. Moreover, intersectionality more accurately conceives of social categories, including race, gender, social class, sexuality, nationality, religion, disability, etc., as dimensions of social experience that remain interlocking and mutually constitutive. In other words, gender, race, social class, etc. cannot be parceled out into discrete strands and unitary experiences.

In a 2015 *Washington Post* editorial, Kimberlé Crenshaw eloquently acknowledges that “Intersectionality was a lived reality before it became a term.” Crenshaw coined the term in 1989 to specifically address how U.S. discrimination law fails to account for the lived experiences of African-American women workers, who experience a uniquely intertwined form of both race and gender discrimination. In her landmark piece, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and

Sex,” she critically observes how dominant legal frameworks and analytical lenses cannot adequately correct the injustices experienced specifically by African-American women, which therefore necessitates an explicitly intersectional intervention:

These problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. (2003, p.24)

Crenshaw contends that through the lens of African-American women’s experiences, one can clearly discern the necessity of intersectional theorizing and activism. This logic can be extended to the experiences of all women of color, and even further to all those subjects who endure and negotiate multiple forms of domination.

However, I also suggest that intersectionality can be applied to dominant groups, such as heteronormative white men, who benefit from multiple forms of social advantage. I think African-American feminist epistemologies, notably intersectionality, can reveal critical and unique insights into how white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism function in mutually constitutive ways. Case in point, the subjects of the blue-collar reality shows are not systematically conferred advantages because of *only* their whiteness or *just* their masculinity—it is how these two structures of domination work in tandem that allocates a specifically advantaged social location. Intersectionality also accounts for dimensions of social class, which reveals that the working-class subjects of the blue-collar reality shows do experience a comparative disadvantage in relation to their class privileged white male counterparts. I must caution though that this does not imply that middle-class people of color are advantaged overall

in relation to working-class white males. Responsible intersectional models are not structured in reductive, additive manners. Intersectionality provides a critical vocabulary for teasing out the complexity of the relationships between multiple axes of identity, which are directly tied to systems of oppression.

In applying intersectionality to dominant groups, the intention is not to further decenter marginalized groups. The purpose here is to unmask and destabilize the ways in which white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism appear natural or normal in dominant media and discourses. Unless these systems of oppression are explicitly made visible and grappled with in an intersectional manner, white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy will continue unchecked. To further clarify how I conceive of intersectionality within this analysis of systemically advantaged social locations linked to systems of power, I reference Hillary Potter’s formulation of intersectionality. In *Intersectionality and Criminology: Disrupting and Revolutionizing Studies of Crime*, Potter elucidates the necessity of intersectionality for criminological research, since it more accurately accounts for dimensions of race, gender, social class, disability, nationality, and other mutually constitutive structures of domination, in relation to hegemonic constructions of crime and criminality. Potter briefly defines intersectionality as “...referring to *the concept or conceptualization that each person has an assortment of coalesced socially constructed identities that are ordered into an inequitable social stratum*” [emphasis in original] (2015, p. 2).

I find Potter’s working definition of intersectionality to be the most comprehensive and useful, and it is this conceptualization that informs this analysis. This articulation explicitly speaks to the ways in which “each person” has become interpellated into intersecting social categorizations linked to interlocking structures of domination, which engenders power

differentials between given positionalities. Although she is explicitly engaging with criminology, her characterization of intersectionality can extend to this media studies application. She further emphasizes that intersectional approaches must center “...*social-power differentials based on the social ordering of social attributes that are multiple, multiplicative, and inseparable for each individual*” [emphasis in original] (p. 70).

Potter’s emphasis on power differentials speaks to Bonnie Thornton Dill & Marla H. Kohlman’s delineation between “strong” and “weak” iterations of intersectionality in “Intersectionality: A Transformative Paradigm in Feminist Theory and Social Justice.” Dill and Kohlman contend that intersectionality effectively links theory and practice, since it centers the *embodied* everyday experience of oppressions, and steers away from abstract theorizing. Intersectionality’s explanatory power and subversive potential shine through in that it “...can validate the lives and histories of persons and subgroups previously ignored or marginalized, and it is used to help empower communities and the people in them” (2012, p. 14). As with any theory or research methodology, intersectionality can be interpreted and applied in divergent ways with varying degrees of success.

Dill and Kohlman distinguish “strong intersectionality” as a mode of inquiry that “...seeks to ascertain how phenomena are mutually constituted and interdependent, how we must understand one phenomenon in deference to understanding another” (p. 29). In contrast, they explain that “...’weak intersectionality’ explores differences without any true analysis... [it] eschews the difficult dialogue(s) of how our differences have come to be...” (pp. 29-30). The divide between what the authors label as the strong and weak strands of intersectionality mirrors the paradigms of intersectional social justice and (neo)liberal multiculturalism respectively. The latter celebrates difference without acknowledging social hierarchies/systems of oppression, such

as white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, which congeal specific meanings and experiences to certain embodied identities. In short, liberal multiculturalism is ahistorical and lacks needed social contextualization. Therefore, this examination proceeds with the understanding that questions of identity and social categories should not be approached from a flawed liberal, multicultural framework, which celebrates difference at the expense of recognizing asymmetrical power dynamics. I push Dill and Kohlman’s characterization of “weak intersectionality” even further, and suggest that such analyses should not even be granted the intersectionality label.

I concur with certain aspects of Puar’s noted critique of the common implementation of intersectionality in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Puar utilizes Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualization of assemblage as opposed to intersectionality to reveal how gender, sexuality, and race congeal in logics of U.S. nationalism and imperialism that produce terrorist others. She evaluates the usefulness of assemblage in relation to intersectionality, which is in conversation with Dill and Kohlman’s discussion of “strong” and “weak” strands of intersectionality. As she explains, “As opposed to an intersectional model of identity, which presumes that components—race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion—are separable analytics and can thus be disassembled, an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency” (2007, location 4417).

I only agree with Puar’s assessment insofar as intersectional paradigms can *potentially* be reductive and problematic. However, I think it is too hasty to do away with intersectionality entirely because some scholars have reproduced “weak intersectionality” in their analysis. This project highlights the usefulness of both assemblage and intersectionality as theoretical frameworks within media studies research—disrupting Puar’s notion that the two theorizations

are fundamentally at odds. I argue that assemblage is particularly useful as a spatial metaphor for more accurately locating the working class as a position of economic disadvantage within the capitalist system without erasing the complex heterogeneity of workers and the asymmetrical power dynamics existing between them. Concomitantly, I maintain that intersectionality remains vital for explicating how systems of oppression operate in mutually constitutive and interlocking fashions that structure social experience.

In terms of my contention that intersectionality must be more comprehensively integrated into media studies projects specifically, Patrick R. Grzanka explicates the critical place of media representations within intersectional conceptualizations of social justice in “Media as Sites/Sights of Justice” in *Intersectionality: A Foundations and Frontiers Reader*. Grzanka asserts that “We come to know and create meanings of race, gender, class, sexuality, and other dimensions of difference through representations, so intersectionality is both a structural *and* representational phenomenon” (2014, p. 132). I assert that televisual productions encompass both structural and representational aspects, as per Alison Hearn’s (2014) discussion of the neoliberal production of reality television. Grzanka further legitimizes the importance of specifically intersectional critiques for appropriately analyzing given media texts: “For example, a single-axis analysis concerned only with evaluating gender representations might prematurely conclude that a film or television series supports gender-progressive ideas while incidentally eliding racist or classist images in the text...gender is never isolated from race, sexuality, and other dimensions of difference” (134).

Consequently, intersectionality enables a more precise and critical accounting of the power dynamics embedded in the blue-collar reality shows. White supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism are not functioning in discreet fashions, but in tandem throughout these series and

in broader social relations. This is particularly pernicious given how each of these systems of oppression seems largely invisible despite being so deeply etched into the fabric of this subgenre of reality television programming. Having established the ways in which both assemblage and intersectionality inform this project, I will now detail some of the other relevant theoretical frames contained herein.

I posit that the blue-collar reality shows are demonstrative of a white male supremacist visuality. Nicholas Mirzoeff characterizes visuality as constituting the hegemonic visual order or the dominant modes of seeing that appear naturalized or “normal” in a given set of social relations (2009, p.89-93). Case in point, it is a taken-for-granted assumption that the subjects of the blue-collar reality shows—white heteronormative male workers on the job in rural settings—would be interpreted as signifying America’s ideal image of “real men.” What if one were to rhetorically ask: “What do ‘real men’ look like?” Clearly, the blue-collar reality shows provide the answer in the current U.S. neoliberal context. For one segment of the population to be designated as “real” or “authentic” relationally defines other groups as inferior and subordinate. In this instance, then, men of color are not intelligible as “real men” in the dominant visual domain. Thus, white supremacist logic is encoded in the blue-collar reality shows with the notable absence of people of color of all genders. The white male supremacist visuality of the blue-collar reality shows is succinctly captured in the promotional images from the series included later in this dissertation.

With this conceptualization of visuality in mind, it is crucial to more precisely delineate the systems of power that remain invisibly encoded within these series. Critical whiteness studies, a prominent strand of scholarship within critical race theory, challenges dominant configurations of whiteness, as well as maleness, as naturalized or seemingly unremarkable. A

salient aspect of the way in which white male supremacy functions is that it exclusively reserves dominant conceptions of individuality for heteronormative white males. For example, a white woman may be discursively reduced to representing her entire gender; an African-American man might be reduced to speaking for his entire race; and a queer-identifying person may be called upon to represent all “non-normative” sexualities. However, it is highly unlikely that a heteronormative white man would ever be reduced to his respective gender, racial, and sexual identities in mainstream U.S. discourse. In terms of the dominant discourse surrounding social class in the United States, class consciousness remains underdeveloped. Thus, class signifiers are sublimated within the blue-collar reality series in favor of narratives that frame these workers as “rugged individuals” unconstrained by structural realities of class.

The primacy of the individual remains one of the core legacies of Western modernity, which is intimately connected to white supremacy, colonialism, capitalism, and their respective intersections. Within hegemonic white supremacist epistemologies and discourses, racism continues to be reduced to a matter of individual prejudice, as opposed to the reality of its quotidian social and institutional enshrinement. As Neil Gotanda illustrates in “A Critique of ‘Our Constitution is Color-Blind,’” the U.S. legal system’s claims of racial neutrality belie its systematic history of bolstering white male supremacy, as exemplified via U.S. Supreme Court decisions including *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, *Dred Scott vs. Sanford*, and numerous other landmark cases. Declarations of colorblindness are connected to the primacy of the individual, in which individuality remains primarily reserved for white, heteronormative males in both the dominant discourse and sociopolitical practices.

Gotanda addresses how hegemonic conceptualizations of racism are tied to individualism: “Despite the fact that personal racial prejudices have social origins, racism is

considered to be an individual and personal trait” (1995, p. 265). This logic enables white supremacy to permeate all aspects of society, including media institutions and their cultural productions, unnoticed (at least by the majority of whites). This legacy infuses the blue-collar reality shows, which have tapped into a deep-rooted U.S. cultural/institutional legacy of protecting and valorizing white men as the quintessential individuals.

Cheryl Harris’s groundbreaking piece, “Whiteness as Property,” is also highly useful for conceptualizing the legal institutionalization of white supremacy; the ramifications of which, I emphatically maintain, can be traced to mainstream cultural productions, such as the blue-collar reality shows. Harris argues that “...American law has recognized a property interest in whiteness that, although unacknowledged, now forms the background against which legal disputes are framed, argued, and adjudicated” (1995, p. 277). She astutely grounds the metaphor of whiteness as property in relation to the history of the reservation of full property rights to whites in the United States since the nation’s inception. She critically traces a genealogical sketch of the social construction of race, in which the conflation of whiteness and property underpinned white supremacy, particularly in relation to the enslavement of African Americans as property and the dispossession of indigenous peoples from their lands (p. 278). She characterizes whiteness as a form of property interest in that “...the law has accorded ‘holders’ of whiteness the same privileges and benefits accorded holders of other types of property” (p. 281).

Harris recognizes how whiteness functions as a linchpin to full citizenship and individuality: “...whiteness became the quintessential property for personhood” (p. 281). Therefore, whiteness is the cornerstone of hegemonic masculinity as depicted on the blue-collar reality shows, which subordinates people of color of all genders. As Harris poignantly explains,

“The right to exclude was the central principle, too, of whiteness as identity, for whiteness in large part has been characterized not by an inherent unifying characteristic but by the exclusion of others deemed to be ‘not white’” (p. 283).

Of more specific relevance to the blue-collar reality shows, which inherently deemphasize class consciousness, is Harris’s acknowledgement, which was first notably formulated by W.E.B. Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), that *all* whites have access to the power that whiteness confers: “The wages of whiteness [Du Bois’s phrase] are available to all whites, regardless of class position—even to those whites who are without power, money, or influence” (p. 286). Harris supports Du Bois’s observation that white workers became more invested in their white identity at the expense of class consciousness, which continues to have an enduring legacy. This gestures toward the blue-collar reality shows and the dominant identification of their featured subjects as “real men” and not as workers; astounding given that the shows explicitly depict them on their job sites. The field of critical whiteness studies crucially attends to how both class and racial formations remain fundamentally entangled.

The role of place/landed property within the white male supremacist visuality of these series also requires further elaboration in light of Cheryl Harris’s mapping of whiteness as property. A formulaic narrative device found throughout these programs is the notion that these men are somehow “taming the wilderness” via their occupations, since their jobs require them to work outdoors in relatively desolate, rural landscapes. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” provides an historical account of the ideological relationship between the frontier and the U.S. nation-building project; a sociopolitical endeavor rooted in white male supremacy and settler-colonialism. In 1893, Turner put forth his “frontier thesis.” With the U.S. Census of 1890 announcing the “closure” of the frontier, Turner

believed this would lead to a crisis for the maintenance of the supposedly unique American character—invoking discourses of U.S. exceptionalism. He broadly conceived of (white male) U.S. identity as being continually reified through “westward expansion,” which should be more accurately referred to as the ongoing colonization of indigenous peoples and their lands in the United States. He believed U.S. culture was preserved through the rugged individualism and egalitarian sentiment supposedly endemic to frontier life: “American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier...this expansion westward with its new opportunities...The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic Coast, it is the Great West” (2008, p. 2).

Turner’s visuality of an “empty frontier” that erases the presence of the indigenous peoples of the United States imposes symbolic violence upon them, which results in violent, embodied, material consequences. Contemporary references to the frontier, including on the blue-collar reality shows, demonstrate the symbolic power and legacy of an imagined frontier and render invisible its violent historical and ongoing repercussions. Jodi Byrd’s articulation of indigenous critical theory in *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* unmask the oppressive structures that constitute the frontier ethos. Byrd’s provocation guides this analysis in terms of its engagement with frontier mythology: it is imperative not to reinforce the notion that Native Americans have somehow been relegated to the past tense, or in the case of the blue-collar reality shows, that they have somehow been always already gone. The filming locations of these programs are framed as perpetual empty wildernesses, awaiting the arrival of the rightful frontiersmen to stake their claims. Without Byrd’s intervention of indigenous critical theory, one fails to recognize the full extent of the consequences of the replication of frontier

mythology. Simply put: Frontier mythology is inseparable from the violent history of settler-colonization of America’s indigenous peoples.

Turner’s visuality of the frontier not only erases indigenous peoples, but also naturalizes the presence of white men. As Turner notes in terms of the frontiersman’s class status: “Engaged in a struggle to subdue the forest, working as an individual, and with little specie or capital, his interests were with the debtor class” (2008, p. 44). It is noteworthy that Turner qualifies the mythical frontiersman as “working as an individual.” This speaks directly to the blue-collar reality shows, which frame these working-class, white male subjects as rugged individuals on the frontier. Turner offers his assessment of the importance of the settling (colonizing) of the frontier within the wider U.S. nation-building project: “And to study this advance, the men who grew up under these conditions, and the political, economic, and social results of it, is to study the really American part of our history” (2008, pp. 4-5). In other words, “real men” forged “the really American part of our history.” The blue-collar reality shows represent a contemporary manifestation of Turner’s imperial, white supremacist, heteropatriarchal logic, which inextricably links the visualities of the frontier, “real men,” and hegemonic notions of U.S. identity.

Applying Cheryl Harris’s lens of “whiteness as property” reveals how white male supremacy remains entrenched in hegemonic conceptualizations of “the frontier.” Another renowned critical race theorist, George Lipsitz, builds upon Harris’s formulation and speaks to the relationship between white supremacy and place within his theorization of “the white spatial imaginary” in *How Racism Takes Place*. Lipsitz explicates the ways in which places are always already racialized: “White identity in the United States is place bound. It exists and persists because segregated neighborhoods and segregated schools are nodes in a network of practices

that skew opportunities and life chances along racial lines” (2011, p. 6). He characterizes the white spatial imaginary as representing “...the properly gendered prosperous suburban home as the privileged moral geography of the nation. Widespread, costly, and often counterproductive practices of surveillance, regulation, and incarceration become justified as forms of *frontier defense* [emphasis added] against demonized people of color” (p. 13).

Lipsitz’ analysis focuses on the racialized spaces of cities and suburbs. The white spatial imaginary of the suburban home casts itself as race-neutral, in which the systemic advantages of white supremacy remain concealed through mythic discourses of individual hard work and upward social mobility. Particularly germane to this project is how Lipsitz draws a line of continuity between the contemporary white spatial imaginary of the suburban home and the eighteenth and nineteenth-century dominant conceptualization of the frontier. He puts forth the notion that the U.S. colonial desire for “pure and homogenous spaces”—deemed integral for the U.S. nation-building project—necessitated the removal and marginalization of “ ‘impure’ populations” (p.29). He explains that because the colonial march westward ultimately fell short of the imagined vision of (white male supremacist) freedom that “...the properly ordered and prosperous domestic dwelling eclipsed the frontier as the privileged moral geography of U.S. society, as the nation’s key symbol of freedom, harmony, and virtue” (p.30). I argue that the blue-collar reality shows represent a revival of the frontier as the preferred white spatial imaginary in contemporary U.S. society because of its connectivity to hegemonic masculinity. In the dominant discourse, the suburban home signifies white femininity and domesticity; a place where “real men” cannot exist. In that sense, the imagined frontier of the blue-collar reality shows constitutes a specifically white, heteropatriarchal, spatial imaginary. Building off Lipsitz’s

conceptualization, I argue then that the mythic frontier constitutes a “white male spatial imaginary,” as typified by the blue-collar reality shows.

In his groundbreaking piece, “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse,” Stuart Hall explores the salience of the frontier in U.S. culture, particularly through the lens of “The Western” film and television genre. Hall fleshes out the relationship between the historic “American West” and the mythical one that has become embedded in U.S. culture. He explains that “This process, whereby the rules of language and discourse intervene, at a certain moment, to transform and ‘naturalize’ a specific set of historical circumstances, is one of the most important test-cases for any semiology which seeks to ground itself in historical realities” (as quoted in Hunt, 2005, p. 50). This project situates the blue-collar reality shows as operating within the dominant codes of The Western. Hall characterizes this contemporary genre, with its distortion of U.S history, as perpetuating one of the most important mythologies in U.S. culture:

This is *the* archetypical American story, America of the frontier, of the expanding and unsettled West...It is the land of *men*, of independent men...for a time, in film and television, this deep-structure provided the taken-for-granted story-of-all-stories, the paradigm-action narrative, the perfect myth. (p. 50).

In summation, these reality television programs function as part of an ongoing veneration of the Western, frontier myth, in which the intertwined systems of power of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism, and their resultant symbolic and material violence, remain hidden.

A core claim of this dissertation is that the blue-collar reality shows represent a form of hegemonic masculinity in the current U.S. neoliberal context. R.W. Connell originally coined the concept of hegemonic masculinity in *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual*

Politics (1987). In a more recent article, *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept* (2005), Connell and James W. Messerschmidt claim that “...the concept of hegemonic masculinity is in need of reformulation in four main areas: the nature of gender hierarchy, the geography of masculine configurations, *the process of social embodiment* [emphasis added], and the dynamics of masculinities” (p. 847). In essence, hegemonic masculinity should not be collapsed into a monolithic, fixed set of traits. In *Staging Masculinities: History, Gender, Performance* (2003), Michael Mangan succinctly encapsulates the challenges inherent to neatly conceptualizing hegemonic masculinity:

Hegemonic masculinity is that form or model of masculinity which a culture privileges above others... Hegemonic masculinity is by nature paradoxical, since it seems to stand still but in fact is always on the move...Connell’s history indicates the way in which these changes relate to wider social and economic movements (p. 13).

This necessitates intersectional, socially contextualized approaches to hegemonic masculinity and gender performances more broadly. I concur with Hugh Campbell, Michael Mayerfield Bell, and Margaret Finney’s assessment in *Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life* (2006) that white, rural, working-class masculinity implies authenticity, and therefore, legitimacy, since it signifies the most preferred form of masculinity in the U.S. social hierarchy. I assert that this specific constellation of traits reflects a dominant conceptualization of “real manhood” in the current U.S. neoliberal context, which is evidenced through the proliferation and popularity of the blue-collar reality shows.

I understand these depictions of hegemonic masculinity as gender performances as per Judith Butler’s landmark theorizations in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler’s analytical framework of gender performance unmasks how all subjects become interpellated in a binary gender system,

which mandates that all individuals continuously strive to perform in accordance with socially constructed and largely unattainable embodied standards of what it means to be “real men” and “real women.” As Butler explains in *Gender Trouble*, “...the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established...” (p. 191).

Consistent with Butler’s theorizing, all the men of the blue-collar reality shows are performing hegemonic masculinity. However, it is noteworthy that the male Robertsons of *Duck Dynasty* underwent an explicit transformation regarding their masculine performances. Through a series of widely publicized photographs, it emerged that the Robertsons had fully embraced so-called “yuppie” or white, upper middle-class appearances before their careers on A&E (Luzer, 2014). This contrasts with their current performance of a self-proclaimed “redneck” masculinity. Building off Butler’s framework, Helen Wood and Beverly Skeggs explain in *Reality Television and Class* that “...performatives are unconscious repeated gendered and classed enactments, while performances are full-blown conscious actions. What we often see on reality television is the performative made explicit” (2011, p. 17).

The male Robertsons’ on-camera performances of redneck masculinity appear entirely self-conscious and calculated based upon their prior appearances. To echo Pierre Bourdieu’s theorizing (1987), I surmise that despite possessing significant amounts of economic (wealth) and cultural capital (college degrees), the Robertsons were still missing the symbolic capital of masculine legitimacy. Thus, their embrace of a hegemonically masculine performance. The Robertsons are not the only notable wealthy, white men to embrace rural, working-class masculine performances. Prominent political figures, such as former President George W. Bush, publicly performing an embodied image of rural masculinity reveals the extent of its perceived

legitimacy: “...rural occupational and general ‘country boy’ representations are often appropriated by individuals for self-serving political and commercial purposes. Like the banners of God and flag, rural ‘salt-of-the-earth’ occupations confer widespread legitimacy” (Campbell, Bell, and Finney, 2006, p. 269).

Historicizing this style of political performance even further, one can trace its origins back to Theodore Roosevelt in the late nineteenth century. As Gail Bederman notes in *Manliness & Civilization*, Roosevelt self-consciously embraced a highly masculine identity that echoes the Robertsons’ contemporary performance of hegemonic masculinity in order to attain political legitimacy: “... he constructed a powerful male identity for himself in the terms of the Western adventure story...Now, shooting buffalo and bullying obstreperous cowboys, he could style himself the real thing” (1995, pp. 174-175).

To further illustrate the relevance of gendered/raced/classed performativity to the analysis of reality television more broadly, Vicki Mayer explains in *Reality Television and Class* how her experience in the industry illuminates the importance of understanding social categories in relation to how they are performed: “My experience with the reality casting process revealed its emphasis on embodied performances. Casters search not only for people within certain demographics, but also for those who act appropriately to the demographic” (2011, p. 189). Usually, one must perform *stereotypically* within the dominant logic of reality television. Through the lens of reality television programs typically seeking out those who embody certain class-based characteristics that reflect their actual socioeconomic status, the Robertsons presenting as rednecks becomes more incongruous. Despite the notable exception of *Duck Dynasty*, this is consistent with the masculine performances on the other blue-collar reality shows, in which the white males featured do generally occupy a working-class economic

location. The subjects of *Deadliest Catch*, *Ice Road Truckers*, *Ax Men*, and *Gold Rush* are also performing hegemonic masculinity, but it is with the juxtaposition of economically privileged white males performing rural, working-class masculinity that truly reveals the symbolic capital of this performance.

I maintain that Pierre Bourdieu’s formulation of capital illuminates why this performance has become a strategic maneuver for certain affluent, white male politicians. Bourdieu conceives of social life and the struggle for power through the lens of three fundamental and interrelated concepts: habitus—an individual’s predispositions toward certain actions or behaviors, capital—sources of power in its economic, cultural, social, and symbolic forms, and field—a spatial metaphor for the relative distribution of power in a specific context (Bourdieu, 1987). He characterizes the various forms of capital an individual can acquire as the following: “economic capital (money and property), cultural capital (cultural goods and services including educational credentials), social capital (acquaintances and networks), and symbolic capital (legitimation)” (Swartz, 1997, p. 74).

It is the last form of capital, symbolic, that speaks to the power of hegemonic masculine performances, in that they confer masculine legitimacy. Bourdieu’s theorization of capital explains why affluent white males, such as the Robertsons and Donald Trump, who already possess large degrees of economic, cultural, and social capital, take up white, working-class masculine performances—they are seeking the symbolic capital of masculine legitimacy. For Donald Trump, the symbolic capital of his white, working-class masculine political performance helped him access the prodigious powers of the American presidency.

Having established the rationale for utilizing these specific theoretical frames in combination with each other, I will now assess the contributions of the existing literature addressing this subgenre of reality television.

Literature Review

A significant number of academic articles and texts have explicitly engaged with this subgenre of reality television programming on U.S. cable networks. One of the first academic commentaries to emerge was Christopher Lockett’s brief article, “Masculinity and Authenticity: Reality TV’s Real Men.” Here Lockett correctly observes that the blue-collar reality shows depict a hegemonic form of masculinity: “That this idealization of working-class masculinity takes place by way of reality television speaks to its preoccupation with an *authentic masculinity* [emphasis added], one best accessed unalloyed and unmediated” (2010). Lockett further illuminates the obfuscation of these workers’ experiences as common to working-class struggle in favor of narratives that frame these men’s occupations as individualized displays of masculine prowess: “Ultimately, whether the object is oil or crabs, the drama played out is that of *testing one’s masculinity against nature* [emphasis added]...” (2010). Their occupations are transformed into individualized tests of manhood that subordinate the reality of collective economic hardships. They are the archetypical rugged individuals.

Despite these recognitions, Lockett noticeably omits the centrality of these subjects’ whiteness, which is an integral component of what comprises the imagery of “real men.” The fact that the racial identity of these subjects does not elicit comment is unsurprising in a white supremacist world. As various critical whiteness studies scholars have noted, whiteness is configured as the “default” or “normal” race. The concept of race itself is often situated as only

applying to people of color. As Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic cogently assert regarding white supremacy and the power it extends to whites: “Some even question, not how, but *do* whites see themselves? ... Most whites have not thought much about their race. Few, upon being asked to identify themselves by attributes, would name whiteness among their primary characteristics” (1997, p. 1). The invisibility of whiteness *for whites* is evidenced in Lockett’s critical assessment of the blue-collar reality shows. He sees masculinity (gender), but he does not see whiteness (race). This is all the more troubling since he is approaching these programs from a critical scholarly perspective. One can only surmise that mainstream audiences unflinchingly see the intended code: These are “real men” or “rugged individuals.”

In “Cowboys of the High Seas: Representations of Working-class Masculinity on *Deadliest Catch*,” Lisa Kirby also fails to account for the role of whiteness within one of the longest-running blue-collar reality series. Kirby perceives the popularity of *Deadliest Catch* as a positive in that it valorizes working-class men’s experiences in a time of increased class stratification. She views it as a more desirable alternative to the stereotypical working-class representations typically found on television. I refute this assessment in that she neglects to consider how the show does not situate its subjects as members of a social class facing common economic/structural challenges. Furthermore, she does not mention that these shows only illuminate *white* working-class men’s experiences. In fact, she does not mention whiteness at all. This article further exemplifies why white supremacy must be made visible on the blue-collar reality shows (and elsewhere). In *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Delgado and Stefancic situate popular culture as having as consequential of a role in bolstering white supremacy as the U.S. legal system “If literature and popular culture reinforce white superiority, law and courts

have done so as well” (2012, p. 84). Therefore, these shows should not be dismissed as mere entertainment: White male supremacy is effusive and cumulative in all areas of society.

With Lockett and Kirby’s glaring omission of the place of white supremacy within their analyses of the blue-collar reality shows, one can understand the critical importance of not only recognizing white men as both raced and gendered, but also congruently noting the absence of women of all races and people of color of all genders. In Augie Fleras and Shane Michael Dixon’s “Cutting, Digging, and Harvesting: Re-masculinizing the Working-Class Heroic,” the authors provide a more thorough and theoretically nuanced content analysis of the blue-collar reality shows, specifically attending to *Deadliest Catch*, *Ice Road Truckers*, *Sandhogs*, and *Ax Men*. They recognize the ways in which these unscripted programs function as celebrations of white, working-class masculinity, which ultimately distorts the complexity and diversity of working-class realities. The authors more explicitly engage with whiteness and its relationship to hegemonic masculinity than Lockett and Kirby. They conclude the following: “These shows reproduce a white gender order...that (1) celebrates working-class men as heroic, (2) reaffirms aspects of hegemonic masculinity, (3) uncritically whitewashes reality...” (2011, p. 593).

Fleras and Dixon also situate the integral role of place within these series. These shows taking place in rural wilderness or “frontier settings” reveals a critical aspect of hegemonic narratives of “rugged individualism” in U.S. culture. Lockett also acknowledges how the “frontier” shapes these series, as Fleras and Dixon similarly assert that they are “...redramatizing the mythic (frontier) struggle between men and untamed wilderness” (p. 589). The significance of historian Frederic Jackson’s Turner’s “frontier thesis” in relation to hegemonic U.S. cultural history will be unpacked at length in the second chapter. The role of place in relation to hegemonic masculinity and its intersections with race and social class, as they pertain to rugged

individualism, constitutes a critical linkage that has yet to be adequately teased out within a media studies framework.

Pepi Leistyna tackles the significance of the blue-collar reality shows, specifically *Deadliest Catch*, in “Working Hard to Entertain You: The Discovery Channel Looks at Labor.” Leistyna echoes the observation that commercial television networks are invested in perpetuating negative stereotypes of working-class people, in which their failure to attain middle-class socioeconomic status is depicted as being a result of “...their inferior qualities such as bad taste, lack of intelligence, poor work ethic, and dysfunctional family values” (2008, p. 148). However, he identifies these cable series on *Discovery* as departing from typical working-class representations on network television historically and at present, in that the narratives center on workers performing their occupations in a largely flattering way.

Although Leistyna does not delve into the deeper significance of the glorification of hegemonic masculinity and rugged individualism as portrayed within these series in this succinct article, he notes that “There’s certainly plenty of testosterone and macho nonsense flying around these shows and room for a lot more stories of working women, but featuring working-class women on the job is atypical in TV land, regardless of the fact that women make up a large part of the workforce” (p. 150). Aside from briefly mentioning that most working-class occupations are performed by women, particularly women of color (p. 150), he fails to more critically account for the ways in which white supremacy and heteropatriarchy function in tandem to cast the white male workers of these series as neutral individuals, in which even their working-class status remains sublimated. Furthermore, he does not speak directly to the ways in which *Deadliest Catch* and the others promote the myth of a classless society.

The anthology, *Reality Television: Oddities of Culture*, contains two highly pertinent chapters for this critical examination of the blue-collar reality shows: Burton P. Buchanan’s “Portrayals of Masculinity in the Discovery Channel’s *Deadliest Catch*” and William C. Trapani and Laura L. Winn’s “Manifest Masculinity: Frontier, Fraternity, and Family in Discovery Channel’s *Gold Rush*.” Buchanan rightly contextualizes *Deadliest Catch* as part of “...a specific subgenre; the reality program that showcases and documents the efforts of American workers doing their jobs” (2014, p. 1). He recognizes the ways in which *Deadliest Catch* depicts hegemonic masculinity, and appropriately situates hegemonic masculinity as remaining inextricably linked with whiteness. Of significance to this study is how he crucially pinpoints the ways in which the hegemonic masculinity featured on *Deadliest Catch* represents a backlash of sorts to the inroads made by women, people of color, and non-hegemonic masculinities in recent years—advances that are comparatively modest and quite contested in relation to the dominance of white supremacist heteropatriarchy. He elucidates what this representation of hegemonic masculinity means at this juncture:

...white male power has endured encroachment as women, gays and minorities have gained social power in recent decades. *Deadliest Catch* serves as a fine example of a reality television program that demonstrates an environment where traditional masculinity is exercised, a place where white males can perform masculine rituals, compete with one another in an adverse environment and reassert their position in the social cultural hierarchies. (p. 2)

Buchanan provides significant insight into the resurgence of this form of masculinity via the format of reality television on U.S. cable networks. He posits that “frontierism” is one of the primary characteristics of hegemonic masculinity in U.S. culture (p.5). Thus, these programs

taking place in wilderness or “frontier” settings. Buchanan appropriately historicizes the role of the frontier: “As Frederick Jackson Turner put forth, the frontiersmen were those *rugged individuals* [emphasis added], daring and romantic who helped build up the American continent and left a lasting image that remains symbolic of America” (p. 10). As his description implies, this reserves rugged individualism, one of the prized tenets of U.S. culture, as the exclusive domain of white males embodying working-class aesthetics. However, he neglects to note the ways in which Turner’s “frontier thesis” naturalizes colonialism and erases indigenous peoples. My examination will subsequently detail how the concept of the frontiersman is predicated upon white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler-colonialism. Through Buchanan’s description of frontiersmen, one can trace the legitimacy and symbolic power this fundamentally exclusionary performance signifies in the United States.

In Trapani and Winn’s “Manifest Masculinity,” the authors situate *Gold Rush* and the other blue-collar reality series as demonstrative of a “new masculinity crisis” (p. 185). They trace the development of this crisis, in which the economic downturn beginning in the late 2000s serves as a flashpoint: “Indeed, the recent economic meltdown that began in 2007 set off the newest and perhaps deepest yet anxiety over the role of men in the social order” (p. 186). Like Lockett and Kirby, they also ignore the centrality of whiteness to these hegemonic masculine narratives, but do recognize the reinvigoration of frontier mythology via this subgenre of reality television. However, without explicit attentiveness to white supremacy, their analysis of the role of the frontier within these shows remains incomplete. As they explain in relation to the symbolic objective of *Gold Rush*,

...we read the 19th Century advance to the ‘frontier’ against the proliferation of hypermasculine reality programs today...discovering gold is ancillary to the cause

itself...to effect a reconnection to the symbolic order in which men are once again in charge even if it is because all *others* [emphasis added] have been evacuated from the scene. (p. 185)

This speaks to the large absence of women and people of color of all genders throughout these series with a few notable exceptions. It is surprising then that the authors do not offer a more explicit treatment of white supremacy within these narratives. However, the authors do connect the blue-collar reality shows to the Western film and television genre, and I will unpack the thematic continuities between them in the second chapter.

Helen Wood and Beverly Skeggs' *Reality Television and Class* is a foundational text for contextualizing the wider relationship between unscripted television and social class as a whole. Although this anthology does not address the blue-collar reality shows on U.S. cable networks specifically examined in this project, it touches upon common neoliberal framings of social class on reality television with attention to intersections of race and gender. Spanning both U.S. and U.K. contexts, this text explicitly emphasizes the role reality television plays in reifying the naturalization of class inequality: "...we think it is important to discuss television's intervention in class formations, particularly at a time when political rhetoric is diverting the blame for structural inequality onto personal, individualised failure" (2011, p. 2). The authors observe that despite the frequent presence of working-class subjects within the landscape of reality television, they are continually framed as individuals exhibiting certain class-based characteristics and lifestyles in common, not as members of a wider social class enduring the structural limitations of the capitalist system.

Laura Grindstaff poignantly summarizes this tendency in her chapter, "From *Jerry Springer* to *Jersey Shore*: The Cultural Politics of Class in/on US Reality Programming": "The

performance logic of reality television—in which class-coded performances are dissociated from the socio-economic bases of class inequality in the service of ‘class-less’ self-expression—is commensurate with and predicted by certain features of late modernity...” (Wood & Skeggs, 2011, p. 203). Again, class signifiers within these programs remain sublimated in favor of individualized narratives, which is aptly demonstrated via the overarching logic of the blue-collar reality shows.

In Alison Hearn’s, “Producing ‘Reality’: Branded Content, Branded Selves, Precarious Futures,” she grounds the emergence and popularity of reality television as a whole in relation to wider neoliberal macroeconomic trends that have engendered a lack of economic security for the majority of workers globally. Hearn observes that “In the midst of this economic and political turmoil, however, transnational media corporations and television networks in developed countries, specifically the United States, continue to accumulate record profits *driven in large part by the success of reality television* [emphasis added]” (2014, p. 437). She critically maintains that the production of reality television itself, which circumvents paying writers and actors prevailing, unionized wages and benefits, must be situated within wider neoliberal economic trends that naturalize and promote a flexible workforce.

Although she does not attend to the blue-collar reality shows specifically, it is her assessment of the material consequences of reality television as a whole that illuminate the broader significance of its propagation. She contends that “...reality television's texts, audiences, and modes of production are all bound up together, effectively working to narrate, propagate, and advance the broader logics of contemporary capitalist production and accumulation” (p. 438). This project proceeds with an awareness that reality television is itself a neoliberal project, in which the conditions of its production cannot be exorcised from a critical engagement with its

content. Therefore, the blue-collar reality shows have flourished, not only because their formulaic narratives resonate within U.S. culture, but also because they are comparatively cheap to produce in relation to more traditionally scripted programming.

Methods and Procedures

To appropriately answer the primary research questions, this project requires a comprehensive engagement with a multitude of media texts. I apply critical discourse analysis, a form of textual analysis, to selected episodes of the blue-collar reality shows, as well as to comments in online discussion forums about the same series. Before outlining my rationale for giving texts primacy and utilizing critical discourse analysis specifically, I will detail the procedural basis for the implementation of the analysis of series episodes and online comments in answering research questions one through four and research question five respectively.

I selected episodes for textual analysis from the following series, which are some of the longest-running and highest-rated within this subgenre of reality television: *Deadliest Catch*, *Ice Road Truckers*, *Ax Men*, and *Gold Rush*. I also selected episodes from *Duck Dynasty* to answer research question four. Each individual episode is considered a single unit of analysis. I randomly selected ten episodes from within all the existing episodes of each series for a total sample size of fifty units of analysis. Using an online random number generator, I selected ten numbers from within the range of one—signifying the first episode—up to and including the last and most recent episode number. For example, there were 177 episodes of *Deadliest Catch* at the time this research was conducted in September 2016. Therefore, I had the random number generator produce ten numbers between one and 177 for the *Deadliest Catch* sample of episodes. The only two episodes that were not randomly selected within the sample were the pilot of

episode of *Gold Rush*, “No Guts, No Glory” and Season Three: Episode Two: “Rookie Run” of *Ice Road Truckers*. The pilot episode of *Gold Rush* establishes the premise of the series, which is highly predicated upon frontier mythology—more so than any other series in the sample. To more precisely ascertain how the frontier myth operates in this specific series, I found it necessary to examine how the series endeavored to build its audience in its first installment. In “Rookie Run” of *Ice Road Truckers*, Lisa Kelly, the only woman driver featured in the series across multiple seasons, is introduced. Because the show frames Lisa in accordance with the male gaze and other hegemonic gender expectations that subordinate women, I ventured that examining the first episode in which she appeared would provide rich material for understanding how the show chose to begin her narrative arc.

The sample size of 50 episodes is large enough to discern dominant patterns in relation to the narrative themes/structures, discourses, and imagery that occur across this highly formulaic subgenre of reality television. It is important to note that I accessed the episodes in their entirety through commercial-free streaming services. The reason for this was to focus the analysis exclusively on the content of the episodes. Although the advertisements aired during original broadcasts might reveal key demographic information about the viewing audience, this information was gathered through other existing sources, as documented in chapter three.

I analyzed these texts through a multipronged approach of reading and interpretation, which necessitated multiple viewings. The first viewing consisted of what Stuart Hall characterizes as a “long preliminary soak,” (1975), in which I absorbed as much discursive and visual information as possible, including voiceover narration, dialogue, graphics, music, lighting, camera angles, scenery, clothing, etc. I also recorded detailed transcriptions of these episodes

within this first viewing. Upon the second viewing, I could more precisely delineate key patterns and codes within the episodes.

In answering research question five, I examined a subset of voluntarily composed, digitally mediated reactions of a self-selected group of viewers, who are emotionally invested enough in the trajectory of these series to contribute comments, mostly anonymously, to independently run, online discussion forums. By independent, I mean that these forums are not in any way affiliated with the *Discovery* or *History* channels, or any of the production companies/corporate entities involved in their production. I specifically chose such forums because I wanted to mitigate the possibility of interference in the content of the comments from primary series stakeholders—a far more likely scenario within discussion boards on network-affiliated sites.

Hall and O’Shea’s assessment of the usefulness of online comments informs the rationale for looking at these digital archives in relation to audience reactions. As they note, online comments “...capture a discourse which is volunteered, which arises from the writer’s own set of concerns, and is as spontaneous and unfettered by what others may think as possible” (2013, pp. 16-17). The anonymity of these unprompted comments suggests a degree of honesty and openness, and at the very least, a lack of self-censorship about how said comments might be received. Even an anonymous survey prompts respondents to consider certain questions, perspectives, and examples—these digital archives are entirely voluntary and spontaneous. Consequently, these comments represent a more “raw” and unalloyed cross-section of audience response data.

As I explain at length in the third chapter, I maintained the analytical separation of *Duck Dynasty* from the blue-collar reality series in relation to audience reactions. Therefore, I looked

at online forums discussing *Deadliest Catch*, *Ax Men*, *Ice Road Truckers*, and *Gold Rush*. Because there were thousands of comments to potentially sift through, I approached this analysis with the objective of discerning the presence of several key patterns. First, I noted the topics/labels of the discussion threads on the forums, in which there were anywhere from a few comments to dozens of exchanges within each. I then distinguished the recurring themes in the subject headings of the topic threads—a more manageable way of delineating the primary concerns and subjects of discussion among these viewers. Each forum ranged from having anywhere from a few threads to dozens of discussion subheadings.

After garnering the overarching patterns of the topics of the threads, I then closely examined comments that fell under recurring topics. Next, I studied the comments posted in threads with specific relevance to this study’s investigation of social categories and systems of power more broadly. For example, I inspected threads that addressed the few women cast members on the series. There was only one thread on any of the show forums that explicitly addressed race, and I delve into the significance of this at length. I also closely analyzed the few comments that happened to touch upon the broad themes of the nature of work/social class, rugged individualism, and the American dream. I assert that the discursive silences in relation to race, gender, social class, and sexuality in these digital archives are just as revealing and noteworthy as the explicit commentary.

Although the clear majority of commenters contribute under pseudonyms, if any demographic information could be gleaned from a relevant posting, such as the author’s gender, location, age, etc., then I noted it accordingly. Occasionally, some of the posters have an avatar, which can reveal their presumed gender and racial identity. The anonymity of the commenters presents both a strength and a limitation in this analysis. It is an asset in that anonymity

emboldens posters not to censor their comments; it is a weakness in that key demographic identifiers remain unknown for most of the posters. Such demographic data is highly useful for understanding how one’s social location might impact one’s perspective on issues of race, gender, social class, nationality, etc. Sporadically, a poster identifies themselves as someone who works in the industry documented in said series, such as logging in *Ax Men*, or as someone directly related to a person who works in that field. This information is useful in that it reveals how people close to the occupation view the series as “insiders.” Moreover, the gender identity of the poster is occasionally disclosed in detailing their relationship to someone who purportedly works in the industry.

It is critical to emphasize that my methodological approach to this collection of media texts is anchored in Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model (Hall, 2006). I engage with these texts with the operational understanding that the blue-collar reality shows, as with all television programs, are created within the capitalist mode of production and are encoded with connotative values reflecting dominant ideologies and naturalized assumptions, including white heteronormative male supremacy. Hall critically accounts for how audiences are not monolithic in their interpretation/decoding of these texts/codes, and recognizes that television is inherently polysemic. He clarifies that its polysemy does not suggest that when approaching television as a text, one should recognize all potential interpretations as having equal value:

Polysemy must not, however, be confused with pluralism. Connotative codes are *not* equal among themselves. Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested. (p. 169)

Therefore, I am utilizing Hall’s conceptualization of “*dominant or preferred meanings*” (p. 169) in terms of the mutually constitutive structures of domination of white supremacy, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy encoded in these series. In short, I am critically approaching these programs from the “*dominant-hegemonic position*” in which I specifically attend to a hypothetical viewer that “decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded” (Hall, 2006, p. 171). Because the objective here is to make visible the systems of power inscribed in these programs, it necessitates a primary engagement with the dominant meanings of these texts. With this in mind, I acknowledge the existence of negotiated and oppositional interpretations (Hall, 2006), but cannot adequately speak to those possibilities within the scope of this project. I address the complexity of television’s polysemic character more thoroughly in relation to my analysis of online audience reactions to these series in chapter three.

An important note: In engaging with the dominant or preferred meanings encoded in these series, I am not suggesting that show creators, such as Thom Beers, self-consciously or intentionally reproduce dominant ideologies within these texts. The ways in which these series bolster white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, and capitalist logics do not typically register at the conscious level, since these systems of power have become normalized as “common sense.” Nevertheless, I do not want to emphasize the intentionality of show creators in this analysis. Ultimately, these media texts enter a wider system of meaning upon their distribution in a given sociocultural context—generating specific reactions and signaling deeper trends regardless of the expressed intentions of show creators. This foregrounds why I give the text primacy—it reveals critical understandings about dominant ideologies and systems of power that shape social life irrespective of producers’ intentions and heterogenous audience readings.

Media studies scholars commonly utilize variations of textual analysis, including prominent theorists, such as Stuart Hall and John Fiske. Both have also explicitly engaged with televisual texts, which is particularly germane to this examination. Elfriede Fursich emphasizes in “In Defense of Textual Analysis: Restoring a Challenged Method for Journalism and Media Studies,” the unique insights that can be derived from giving primacy to texts: “I ultimately argue that despite many advantages of large-scale research projects that integrate moments of production, content and reception, only independent textual analysis can elucidate the narrative structure, symbolic arrangements and ideological potential of media content” (2009, p. 239). In situating these texts within the wider political, economic and social realities of their production and reception, my goal is to specifically uncover the ideological work performed by these mass mediated texts and the power relations inscribed therein. As Fursich further elaborates, “To understand the narrative role of media it is necessary to engage in independent textual analysis by drawing on...anthropological insights which clearly lay beyond the producers’ or audiences’ intentions and the economic-systemic context of media production” (p. 245).

I contend that critical discourse analysis is the most appropriate method for determining the “dominant or preferred meanings” of these texts, which subsequently illuminates their place within wider structures of domination. I specifically applied Teun van Dijk’s formulation of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to the selected episodes and comments. Van Dijk characterizes CDA as “...a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (2002, p. 352). Through the entry point of the blue-collar reality shows, my aim is to uncover and subvert the modernist legacies of white supremacy,

heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and the corresponding conceptualization of individuality as being exclusively reserved for white, heteronormative males.

As Nollaig Frost and Frauke Elichaoﬀ elucidate in “Feminist Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Critical Theory,” postmodernist approaches often utilize critical discourse analysis for the purpose of demystifying the power relations that underpin social categories, such as race, gender, and sexuality, in which whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality respectively remain oppressive norms by which all other bodies/identities are measured. Frost and Elichaoﬀ succinctly explain that postmodern feminist researchers’ ideological justification for centralizing the place of discourse “...is based on the premise that there is an inextricable link between language (or knowledge, expressed through language) and power” (2014, p. 45). The authors attest to the efficacy of discourse analysis for challenging systems of oppression as depicted in mass mediated cultural productions: “This approach allows for the analysis of language, spoken or written, and of images, symbols, and other media representations” (p. 46).

In “Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Articulating a Feminist Discourse Praxis,” Michelle Lazar discusses the ideological orientation and aims of an explicitly feminist discursive analytic, which corresponds with Frost and Elichaoﬀ’s sketch of critical discourse analysis within postmodern feminist research paradigms. Lazar’s characterization of the methodological parameters of feminist critical discourse analysis informs my multilayered approach to the blue-collar reality shows: “Frameworks for analysis of discourse in CDA also, importantly, acknowledge a multimodal dimension...Increasingly in CDA research, language is critically analysed together with other semiotic modalities like visual images, layouts, gestures, and sounds, which makes for an enriching and insightful analysis” (2007, p. 144). In my critical discourse analysis of series episodes, I remain attentive to spoken language (narration and

dialogue); written language; all aspects of embodied performances (clothing, body language, etc.); settings/landscapes (rural wilderness); and the nuanced ways in which said components interact within the overarching narrative frameworks of the series. In the analysis of online comments, the form dictates an almost exclusive engagement with written text. However, I do note any demographic indicators revealed through a commenter having a corresponding avatar.

Lazar addresses the importance of interrogating sites, such as advertising, which are often hegemonically configured as harmless or benevolent: “However, such banal texts are no less important for critical scrutiny...precisely because they do not invite serious attention, are fleeting, and yet are everywhere in modern, urban industrialized societies” (p. 156). This logic speaks to the wider importance of critically engaging with popular culture, including the blue-collar reality shows. I maintain that critical discourse analysis is uniquely suited for the task of disrupting the banality of entertainment television, and illuminating how systems of oppression remain deeply, yet often imperceptibly, etched in these media texts. This approach not only generates a richer, more detailed textual analysis, but it also gestures toward a deeper understanding of how intersecting systems of oppression manifest themselves in popular media.

Despite its many strengths for a project of this kind, it is essential to recognize the potential limitations of critical discourse analysis as a methodological approach. As Frost and Elichaoff note, because postmodernism rejects universal truths and essentialism, it opens up the *possibility* of the relativistic validation of a potentially infinite number of interpretations. However, this does not imply that all postmodern feminist discourse analysis projects inherently succumb to this tendency: “The criticism of relativism is a valid one, but at the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that the attention given to the variety of voices accentuates the complexity of human experience and allows for the inclusion of those who would be otherwise

marginalized” (p. 52). This mirrors Hall’s cautioning against the validation of all potential interpretations of a polysemic text, such as television, as having equal weight or value (2006, p. 169). Therefore, truth claims made via critical discourse analysis must be appropriately historicized and grounded within the given sociopolitical context in which it has been produced and interpreted respectively.

The goal of my project remains in line with Frost and Elichaooff’s assessment of the ideological orientation of feminist postmodernism: “Feminist postmodern research is in essence not about finding an absolute truth, but about effecting a change within the political, social, and cultural structures it examines” (p. 52). In summation, I seek to expose the ways in which the blue-collar reality programs reify white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism in a manner that remains undetected within the dominant discourse. I argue that these systems of oppression must be destabilized, and ultimately, transformed.

Chapter 1: Hegemonic Masculinity at Work on Reality TV

“I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision, and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere. This is the gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation. This gaze signifies the unmarked positions of Man and White...”

--Donna Haraway, “The Persistence of Vision,” *The Visual Culture Reader* (2013), p. 356.

“American white men bought the promise of self-made masculinity, but its foundation has all but eroded. Instead of questioning those ideals, they fall back upon those notions of manhood—physical strength, self-control, power—that defined their fathers’ and grandfathers’ eras, as if the solution to their problem were simply ‘more’ masculinity.”

--Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (2012), p. 240.

Introduction

Suggesting that the blue-collar reality series on U.S. cable networks are about valorizing white masculinity, and not workers, may seem incongruous or unfounded at first glance. After all, the viewer is witnessing workers perform some of the most statistically hazardous occupations in North America. Through watching these programs, one invariably learns about the nature of crab fishing on *Deadliest Catch*; the logistics of logging in various terrains on *Ax Men*, the perils of mining for gold on *Gold Rush*, and the risks of hauling massive cargo via semi-trailers across the seasonal ice roads on *Ice Road Truckers*. However, as Christopher Lockett confirms in his critical analysis of this subgenre of reality television, “Ultimately, whether the object is oil or crabs, the drama played out is that of testing one’s masculinity against nature...” (2010).

Mainstream television critic Robert Lloyd concurs with this sentiment in his review, “Blue-collar, redneck reality series surging.” Lloyd reinforces the seeming contradiction that despite these programs centering on working-class subjects, social class itself is not intended to be essential to the plot: “Blue collars and rednecks aside, these series are not really about class. A little financial struggle is good for the narrative...but by and large these are not people

operating on the margins” (2011). This begs the question: If these programs are not intended to be about class and workers, then what are they about?

In this chapter, I attend to the ways in which the structural realities of social class remain sublimated throughout these programs, even though they document workers almost exclusively on their job sites. Not only do these series suppress class consciousness, but they simultaneously bolster white, rural, working-class, heteronormative males as exemplifying hegemonic masculinity and rugged individualism in the contemporary neoliberal context. The emergence of these series coincides not only with the Great Recession, but also in relation to the modest inroads made by women, people of color, and LGBTQ-identified peoples in recent years toward greater social equality.

I contend that these series have appeared in conjunction with what masculinity studies scholar, Michael Kimmel, refers to as “the contemporary ‘crisis’ of masculinity” (2012, p. 187). As Kimmel explains, this “crisis” of masculinity is specifically afflicting white, (mostly) rural, males from the working and lower middle-classes. Kimmel notes that this crisis is driven by the increased economic insecurity endemic to neoliberal socioeconomic policies—including trade deregulation, privatization of public resources, and the dismantling of social programs—coupled with the dominant tendency to link masculinity with economic independence. He calls this ideal conceptualization of masculinity in the United States the “Self-Made Man” (2012, p. 7). To be clear, men of all races, ethnicities, classes, and sexual orientations are measured in relation to the “Self-Made Man” and hegemonic masculinity writ large. I situate Kimmel’s mythical “Self-Made Man” as constituting one critical aspect of hegemonic masculinity in the contemporary U.S. context. In sketching out the parameters of hegemonic masculinity, I emphasize the systems of power that underpin it in mutually constitutive ways, including white supremacy,

heteropatriarchy, U.S. nationalism, and capitalism. A central aim of this chapter is to make these systems of power visible, as they operate in seemingly imperceptible ways, not only in these television programs, but in U.S. sociopolitical institutions and the dominant culture more broadly.

As Kimmel notes, rather than questioning the socioeconomic order and challenging hegemonic masculinity, a sizeable portion of white, rural, working-class men have doubled down on their sense of entitlement to economic security as “real men.” This entitlement to a decent standard of living operates under the presumption that they are the rightful heirs to the American Dream *as white men*. This sense of worthiness is premised upon the framing of women and people of color as undeserving of economic viability. Certainly, white, rural, working-class men have a right to be distressed regarding their decreased standard of living; it is where that anger is misdirected that is highly pernicious and counterproductive. In *Angry White Men: Masculinity at the End of an Era*, Kimmel describes the increasingly angry, rural, white, male backlash that has been simmering since the 2008 economic collapse:

They don't make common cause with others who have been so marginalized by the class war...they are seduced into blaming other people who are in the same situation they are in—other groups who are equally hurting because of the rapacious greed of the bankers and their pals in politics. They lash out at immigrants or minorities, whom they accuse of stealing ‘their’ jobs. They lash out at women, whose inroads into the workplace have coincided with the collapse of a living wage among white men. (2013, p. 223)

This is the same demographic of men featured on the blue-collar reality series. I maintain that this is not incidental, but an example of commercial television tapping into the legacy of white supremacist heteropatriarchy at a time when there are considerable challenges to its

hegemony. In essence, these series reinforce white, rural, working-class masculinity as hegemonic masculinity in the contemporary context in direct response to *perceived* threats to the *masculine* hegemony of that group. As Kimmel notes, U.S. working and middle-class white men are behaving “...as if the solution to their problem were simply ‘more’ masculinity” (2012, p. 240). It is as though both the *History* and *Discovery* networks have responded in kind through injecting “more masculinity” into their programming lineups. Of course, it is a specific kind of masculinity—white, rural, working-class. They have carved out a space for viewers to watch “real men” at a time when there is a perception that “real men” are losing their grip on the American Dream of economic independence and upward mobility. In the U.S. context, the designation of “real men” can also be directly equated with dominant conceptions of “real Americans” or ideal citizens. As Lockett observes, these series are cast “...as somehow the norm: ‘real America’” (2010).

Taking this a step further, I argue that the election of President Donald Trump on a platform of racism, sexism, and xenophobia that largely shocked the mainstream political establishment, could have been anticipated considering the popularity of the blue-collar reality shows. As I discuss at length in chapter four, Trump directly appeals to white, rural, working-class voters through his cooption of a white, working-class, masculine performance. Because these programs found substantial success via a formula that valorizes white, rural, working-class masculinity, it gestures toward a wider sociopolitical phenomenon. As I note in the introduction, the emergence of the blue-collar reality shows and the political rise of Donald Trump, who is a former reality television star himself, suggests the legitimacy, and I would argue, the urgency, of approaching reality television as a subject of serious scholarly inquiry.

Like Trump, the blue-collar reality world offers a faux populism, in which white masculine prowess is glorified through the performance of hazardous occupations at the expense of both class consciousness and all those who demographically fall outside of the parameters of “real manhood.” It is important to emphasize that I am not suggesting that show creators, such as Thom Beers, whose purported intentions for producing these series will be discussed in the fourth chapter, are *consciously* reproducing white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. These systems of oppression are naturalized to the extent that they remain largely unremarkable in the dominant discourse and public domain. Regardless, the point is not to stress the intentionality of show creators, but to challenge dominant narratives circulating in U.S. culture that, on the surface, appear benign. Clearly, these shows have consequences outside of entertaining their audiences and attracting advertising dollars, and provide a productive entry point for understanding wider sociopolitical trends. How did show producers know that this formula of watching “real men” battle the elements in wilderness settings would appeal to U.S. cable audiences? I address the place of frontier mythology and its connection to hegemonic masculinity in U.S. culture at length in the second chapter, but I specifically examine the symbolic power of glamorizing tests of *white* manhood within the logic of reality television in this current chapter.

First, I will discuss how these series holistically frame social class overall, and then delve into the fraught class hierarchies that exist within the casts themselves. Second, I sketch out the parameters of hegemonic masculinity, not only in terms of its intersecting demographic characteristics that mirror structures of domination, but also in relation to the occupations and ritualized tests of manhood featured therein. The jobs themselves are framed as masculine competitions, in which the crews on each show are often pitted against each other in a fictional

race for who can catch the most fish; haul the most logs; mine the most gold; or drive the most loads across the ice. The “prize” is symbolic: the right to claim masculine authenticity and dominance.

A considerable amount of gender policing also occurs in the series, which will be dissected at length. Men who do not perform appropriately are often mocked as feminine. Kimmel succinctly encapsulates the deeper meaning behind this tendency within homosocial male spaces: “In large part, it’s other men who are important to American men; American men define their masculinity, not as much in relation to women, but in relation to each other. Masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment” (2012, p. 5). This explains the gender homogeneity of the blue-collar reality world, as well as the resistance and discomfort that arises when women enter these traditionally hyper-masculine terrains. I detail the reactions of male cast members to the introduction of female cast members later in the chapter.

I also address the near absence of people of color entirely across all four series under investigation. When people of color do occasionally appear, they are rarely identified by name, and the audience does not typically hear them utter more than a sentence or two. The relegation of people of color to the periphery speaks to how white supremacy operates within the visuality of hegemonic masculinity. As I note in the introduction, the absence of people of color and the universal whiteness of the principal cast members are rarely noted even in academic critiques. This speaks to the systemic normalization of whiteness, which typically is not considered a racial identity worthy of comment or scrutiny in the dominant discourse.

Lastly, I address the portrayal of the small number of white women featured in these four series. It is telling that women of color are completely absent. Only one of the white women featured in this sample, Lisa Kelly of *Ice Road Truckers*, is a main cast member. I examine the

reasons why Lisa is permitted entry into the blue-collar reality world, and how she is marginalized and stereotyped in accordance with hegemonic framings of white femininity.

Are “Real Men” Part of a Class?

Before delving into the boundaries and political consequences of hegemonic masculinity, it is vital to discuss what these series reveal about dominant conceptualizations of social class and capitalism in the United States. The notion that commercial television suppresses class consciousness and circulates the myth that the United States is a classless, meritocracy partially accounts for the relegation of structural economic realities to the periphery of these programs. As Michael Zweig poignantly summarizes in *The Working Class Majority: America’s Best Kept Secret*, “The major television networks are owned by Fortune 500 conglomerates whose executives have an interest in downplaying workers’ sense of themselves as workers,” (2000, p. 56). Therefore, even when the socioeconomic locations of the subjects of the blue-collar reality shows seem pertinent to the narrative, these instances are typically reduced to individual problems and character flaws.

Helen Wood and Beverly Skeggs’ *Reality Television and Class* contextualizes the relationship between unscripted television and hegemonic framings of social class. Although this anthology does not include the blue-collar reality shows on U.S. cable networks specifically examined in this project, it emphasizes the role reality television plays in reifying the naturalization of class inequality in both U.S. and U.K. contexts: “...we think it is important to discuss television’s intervention in class formations, particularly at a time when political rhetoric is diverting the blame for structural inequality onto personal, individualised failure” (2011, p. 2). As I will discuss, the emergence and proliferation of the blue-collar reality series in the past

decade coincides with the Great Recession, in which the middle and working-classes in the United States were hit particularly hard (Peck, 2011), especially African-American families (Allegretto, 2011).

The post-2008 economic downturn represents a critical moment of rupture in relation to the public acceptance and sustainability of neoliberal socioeconomic policies and paradigms, such as the push for deregulating financial institutions and liberalizing trade agreements. Rather than highlight the shared vulnerability of workers, these series instead ideologically reinforce the veneration of rugged individualism and meritocracy. As I will detail momentarily, both the racial and gender identities of the blue-collar reality stars are critical components of the narrative imagery therein. The focus on white males in these shows then is not inadvertent or circumstantial, but intentional and essential. White males are framed as the *rightful heirs* of the American Dream, in which they struggle *as rugged individuals*, not as members of a social class, for upward economic mobility. Not only did the Great Recession signal a crisis for neoliberal capitalism, but it evidently gestured toward a *perceived* masculinity crisis for white, rural, working and lower middle-class males in the United States (Kimmel, 2013). It is the latter “crisis” that the blue-collar reality shows answer to, as they valorize white, rural, working-class masculinity.

Kimmel refers to his conceptualization of American hegemonic masculinity as the “Self-Made Man” (2012, p. 7). He traces a critical genealogy of the Self-Made Man throughout U.S history, and observes its deep and increasingly volatile connection to class status beginning in the early nineteenth century: “American men began to link their sense of themselves *as men* [emphasis added] to their position in the volatile marketplace, to their economic success—a far less stable yet far more exciting and potentially rewarding peg upon which to hang one’s

identity” (p. 7). Success in the capitalist system then became a test of manhood unto itself—a legacy that endures at present. If a man loses his job, then his masculine identity comes under duress. In contrast, if a woman loses her job, this does not lead to a feminine identity crisis.

Of course, the Self-Made Man is inextricably linked to white supremacy, as Kimmel traces the origin of the concept to when African-American men were still enslaved in the United States. Black masculinity remains heavily associated with criminality and economic dependence upon the state in the U.S. public consciousness (Alexander, 2010). As Kimmel further elucidates, “...since the nineteenth century, racism has often been cast in gender terms... ‘They’ are not ‘real men’ either because they are ‘too masculine’ (savage, rapacious animals) or ‘not masculine enough’ (irresponsible, absent fathers, dependent on the government)” (2012, pp. 284-285). The complexity and nuance of how all men of color, not only black men, are measured in relation to white, hegemonic masculinity, cannot be adequately addressed within the scope of this project. The most important takeaway is that the whiteness of the Self-Made Man operates invisibly, and functions to oppress all men of color who are barred at the outset from approximating this ideal.

The Self-Made Man is a mythological construct with profound material consequences—deeply interconnected with frontier mythology and rugged individualism, which I explicate in the next chapter. The Self-Made Man’s whiteness and maleness confer structural advantages, including economic ones, that often go unrecognized by white men themselves. The narrative of the Self-Made Man functions to not only bolster white male supremacy, but to justify the hierarchical class system that capitalism engenders. The Self-Made Man suggests that economic success is always possible through the exercise of self-discipline, hard work, self-reliance, and other traits that have been widely coded as masculine in the dominant discourse and culture. Because most white men fail to achieve this self-made status, it then generates significant

feelings of anxiety and anger when these expectations do not materialize. Kimmel posits that “the Self-Made Man of American mythology was born anxious and insecure, uncoupled from the more stable anchors of landownership or workplace autonomy. *Now manhood had to be proved* [emphasis added]” (2012, p. 7).

The blue-collar reality series document white, rural, working-class men repeatedly proving their manhood through their occupations. In this context, work is exclusively a proving ground for masculinity, and becomes dislodged from the structural realities of working-class experience more broadly. Case in point, if men are unable to support themselves and their families economically, then it is perceived as a failure to live up to gendered expectations within the logic of hegemonic masculinity. As I mention later in relation to the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity, manual labor jobs, especially those that pose the threat of bodily injury, are viewed as more masculine than white-collar or service sector employment. Physical labor, violence, and “taming the wilderness” are deeply linked with what it means to be a “real man” in the U.S. context.

This speaks to why middle and upper class white men, such as the Robertsons of *Duck Dynasty*, try to approximate this masculine ideal through other means than their employment, such as hunting and fishing for recreational purposes. Kimmel refers to author Tom Wolfe’s observation about middle and upper class men’s insecurities regarding their masculinity: “Preppies were feminized, Wolfe argues, by a class culture that shielded them from the harsher realities of masculine life” (2012, p. 200). Manhood has become so deeply entwined with class status that the former subsumes the latter as the primary axis of identification—particularly with white males. Thus, the blue-collar reality stars are not coded as workers, but as “real men.”

Of critical importance to this analysis is that the white males of blue-collar reality television are not only framed as classless to a degree, but as raceless and genderless. As Donna Haraway poignantly asserts in her seminal essay, “The Persistence of Vision,” whiteness and maleness remain invisible as racial and gender categories respectively. This dissertation explicitly calls attention to the ways in which white males’ lives are profoundly structured and imperceptibly advantaged because of their race and gender. Although these shows are clearly about displays of (white) masculine prowess, gender as a social category is typically viewed in the public domain as applying exclusively to women and gender nonconforming groups. In the same vein, race is often conceptualized as only having relevance for people of color.

As discussed in the introduction, the designation of neutral individuality is typically reserved for white males in the dominant discourse and in U.S. sociopolitical institutions. Kimmel reflects upon his former understanding of his privileged identity: “I’m universally generalizable. As a middle-class white man, I have no class, no race, no gender. I’m the generic person!” (2012, p. 3). The dominant tendency to identify white males as individuals or “generic persons” also speaks to how class identifications become subsumed by other coexisting markers. I emphasize that this acutely demonstrates the necessity of approaching social experience through an intersectional analytical framework.

Whereas whiteness and maleness remain largely normalized and unremarkable in the dominant discourse and visual domain, social class tends to be framed in the public sphere, including on reality television, in a more ambiguous manner. Laura Grindstaff poignantly summarizes reality television’s rendering of social class more broadly: “The performance logic of reality television—in which class-coded performances are dissociated from the socio-economic bases of class inequality in the service of ‘class-less’ self-expression—is

commensurate with and predicted by certain features of late modernity...” (Wood & Skeggs, 2011, p. 203). Working-class peoples are typically identified and largely configured in reality television programming—and I argue in mass media more broadly—in relation to their personal appearances and lifestyles. Neoliberal multiculturalism removes social categories from their structural origins, and instead pushes for conceptualizations of identity that are delinked from power relations.

In other words, commensurate with neoliberal, multicultural frameworks, working-class peoples become legible within the logic of reality television not in relation to their structural location within a hierarchical class system, but in terms of their stylized performances. In keeping with the hegemonic notion that upward economic mobility remains achievable for all contingent upon hard work and prudent choices, the working-class peoples of reality television are typically depicted as solely responsible for their socioeconomic status. It is vital to recognize that the western, liberal value of the primacy of the individual runs counter to recognizing how systems of oppression, including capitalism, structure individual experiences in common.

Furthermore, particularly in mainstream U.S. discourse, there is a lack of acknowledgment and discussion of social class entirely. Wood and Skeggs note that “the term ‘ordinary’ is one of the many euphemisms used to stand in for ‘working class’, because in many different nations it is no longer fashionable to speak about class identifications” (pp. 1-2). Not only is it not fashionable in the United States to discuss social class, it is largely frowned upon (Zweig, 2004). The acknowledgment of an entrenched class system, which of course is also structured by intersecting racial and gender hierarchies, as I note in the introduction with my formulation of “the working-class assemblage,” could potentially lead to a collective challenge

to the status quo. Corporate-owned networks remain both materially and ideologically invested in the suppression of class consciousness and in the bolstering of neoliberal capitalism.

In including working-class subjects on reality television, U.S. cable networks have either framed them as worthy of ridicule or mockery, as is the case with the so-called “rednexploitation” series addressed in the introduction, such as *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Buckwild* (Aho, 2016; Broderick, 2014), or are aiming to venerate white, rural, working-class *masculinity*, as I elucidate here. Thus, the systemic injustices engendered by the capitalist system are omitted, and individual agency and effort seem to determine socioeconomic status both in the realm of reality television and in the wider public discourse. The performance logic of reality television in relation to social class is then inseparable from its production logic within a neoliberal capitalist system (Hearn, 2014).

This project proceeds with the awareness that reality television is itself a neoliberal project, in which the conditions of its production cannot be exorcised from a critical engagement with its content. The blue-collar reality shows have flourished, not only because their formulaic narratives resonate within mainstream U.S. culture, but also because they are comparatively cheap to produce in relation to more conventionally scripted programming. Consequently, neoliberal capitalism underpins their material production, as well as their ideological content.

Are the Blue-Collar Reality Stars Really Working-Class?

This leads to the analysis of the fraught class dynamics that exist within the casts themselves. The men given the most prominent storylines are the captains of the boats featured on *Deadliest Catch*; the owners of the logging companies on *Ax Men*; drivers that own and operate their own trucks on *Ice Road Truckers*; and the heads of the mining operations on *Gold*

Rush. In the opening credits for most of the seasons under examination, particularly for *Deadliest Catch*, *Ax Men*, and *Gold Rush*, the captains/owners are typically pictured standing in the front and center of their crews; signaling that they are the stars of the show. In mainstream critical and academic analyses, thus far, the class hierarchies present within the casts are not noted. Within the neoliberal capitalist logic of reality television, it is unsurprising that the captains and members of the ownership class are more venerated than low-level workers. These men are given primacy within the narratives as masculine leaders who exemplify the entrepreneurial American spirit. The men, and occasional women, who labor for them are usually secondary figures. Within the visual terrain of these series, the captains and owners share the *appearance* of white, rural, working-class masculinity. From the standpoint of their masculine performance, it may seem that these men all share the same class position.

Upon closer examination, the owners and captains have significant material advantages over their employees, as well as a greater sense of security and power. As per Michael Zweig’s understanding of class, socioeconomic status is not solely determined by income, or even contingent upon whether a worker is paid a yearly salary or by the hour. Ultimately, class is about the power one has over his or her own work, and in society by extension. Zweig defines the working class in a highly inclusive manner in relation to the nature of their work, but identifies their lack of power and autonomy in their occupations as their binding characteristic:

They are skilled and unskilled, in manufacturing and in services, men and women of all races, nationalities, regions. They drive trucks, write routine computer code, operate machinery, wait tables, sort and deliver the mail, work on assembly lines, stand all day as bank tellers, perform thousands of jobs in every sector of the economy. For all their differences working class people share a common place in production, where they have

relatively little control over the pace or content of their work, and aren't anybody's boss. (2000, p. 3)

The shows glamorize the captains and owners as risk-takers and entrepreneurs who graciously bestow employment upon their crews. In contemporary neoliberal capitalist discourse, particularly since the recession, it is often suggested that workers should feel fortunate to have a job at all (Smith, 2014). Workers are not treated as key players who enable companies to succeed *because* of their labor, and businesses are rarely scrutinized for labor exploitation. Executives and business owners are even praised as “job creators,” as Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney famously called them during his 2012 campaign (Burns, 2012). Mike Rowe, the narrator of *Deadliest Catch*, explicitly reproduces this conceptualization with the captains of the commercial fishing vessels in Season One: Episode 10: “The Final Run”: “In a job where every second counts, the strategy and planning of the captain makes the difference between rags and riches for the deckhands” (2005). I am not suggesting that the captains' decisions are not consequential for their crews—they clearly are. I am calling attention to how the captains and owners throughout the four series are given primacy and more developed storylines in relation to their employees who have significantly less power and economic security.

Case in point, Peter Liske, captain of the *Lady Alaska*, seems blasé about the economic precarity of his crewmembers in the same episode. Peter bemoans the crew's performance during that crab season: “We should have done better. We're a big boat...But I am thankful. The guys made some money, and they're just gonna have to go get a job somewhere else” (2005). He makes these comments at the end of a season in which a partner shipping vessel, the *Big Valley*, sank and lost five crewmembers. Fishermen risk their lives to only make a modest living, and like a lot of workers in the neoliberal era, must work multiple jobs to support themselves and

their families. In addition, the captains navigate the ships from where it warm, dry, and far safer than on deck, where deckhands contend with heavy equipment, hazardous weather, and rough waves. The captains are framed as bold risk-takers, but the deckhands endure the true hazards of commercial fishing on the Bering Sea.

The captains often call for their crews to work long hours without breaks and little sleep. For example, Sig Hansen, captain of the *Northwestern*, forces his crew, including his brother Edgar, to work more than 24 hours straight in Season Four: Episode Four: “Unsafe and Unsound.” Rowe narrates that “although the crew is ready for a break, Sig wants to fish” (2008). As his exhausted crew continues to haul in crab on deck, Sig leans back with his feet up, and says to the camera: “I’d rather work until my eyes pop out of my head than sleep...Quite honestly, the longer you work, the better I feel” (2008). It is far easier for Sig to remain awake and continue working from where it is warm and comfortable. In Season Five: Episode Three: “Stay Focused or Die,” Sig again forces the crew to work more than 24 hours without stopping. Jake Anderson, a deckhand in his 20s, mentions that working long hours on little sleep is common on the *Northwestern*: “You up for 20 hours a day—mandatory, ya know? Right now, we’re up for over 24...we’ve been up for 28” (2009). In relation to the grueling schedule, Sig, looking exhausted himself, dismissively comments from the wheelhouse: “Who the hell says 9:00 to 5:00 is normal anyway?” (2009).

The show makes light of a particularly disturbing incident involving Sig and his crew in Season Five: Episode 15: “Day of Reckoning.” In the episode, a dangerous Arctic hurricane is descending upon the fleet. Sig turns back the ship’s clock below deck, so his crew loses track of how long they have been working in subzero temperatures. At one point, the crew has been laboring for more than 48 hours nonstop, and Sig appears unconcerned about their health and

safety. He pretends to give the crew the “option” of either staying up all night or working during the height of the incoming storm. He says flippantly to the camera: “I’m like the king of manipulation with them” (2009).

Sig’s abusive management style generates significant tension on the *Northwestern* in Season Six: Episode 10: “The Darkened Seas.” Deckhand Jake Anderson expresses grievances about the workplace culture on the boat: “You always deserve some time to relax when you’re done fishing, but apparently not on this boat, it’s just one job after the next” (2010). The camera cuts to the deckhands doing repairs on deck, as Sig sleeps below. Matt Bradley, another deckhand, complains to the camera: “I’m a little tired. Job takes a toll on you. It’s not like you ever get a day off. I haven’t had a day off in 20 days already” (2010). The camera jumps to Sig dismissing the crew’s legitimate protests: “I find it insulting that you’ve got a gripe when you’re sleeping every night. Hell, it ain’t that often that they sleep at all” (2010). This feeds into the dominant narrative that workers should always be grateful and deferential to their employers.

Within the logic of hegemonic masculinity, these hazardous occupations are framed as tests of manhood. Therefore, if a man complains about his job, then he risks emasculation: If you cannot endure the pain and suffering, then you are not a “real man.” This specter of emasculation enables abuse like Sig’s to continue unabated. Sig’s dismissal of his employees’ objections culminates with him defiantly stating to the camera: “Eat me, ya know? That’s not my problem” (2010). Sig is one of the most prominently featured captains throughout the show’s 12 seasons—one of its true “stars.” It is surprising then that academic analyses to this point have not acknowledged the class hierarchies present within the cast of *Deadliest Catch*, especially considering Sig’s treatment of his employees.

On the cover of the DVD for the fourth season of *Deadliest Catch*, Sig, who is pictured on the far left, and all the other captains, are triumphantly perched atop piles of crab. The fact that only the captains of the vessels make the cover, and not any of the low-level deckhands, establishes who the stars of *Deadliest Catch* are supposed to be. Additionally, the captains in Figure 1 below typify a lot of the physical traits and manner of dress associated with white, rural working-class masculinity, including wearing jeans, ball caps, and keeping facial hair. This image is highly representative of the visual order of hegemonic masculinity depicted across the blue-collar reality shows, in which the captains themselves remain at the top of the masculine hierarchy.

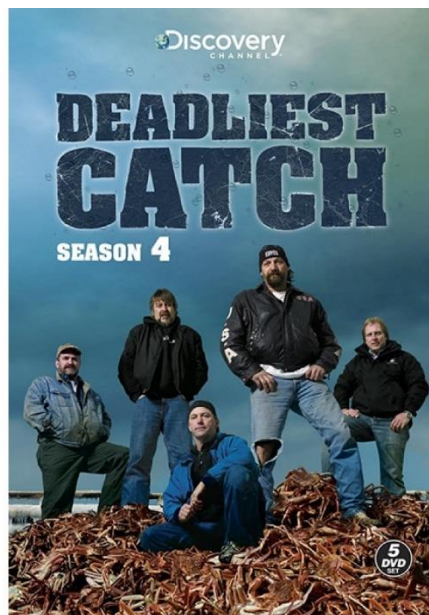


Fig. 1. Discovery Channel (2008), Retrieved February 12, 2017 from <http://store.discovery.com/deadliest-catch-season-4-dvd/detail.php?p=520774>

Hugh Rowland is one of the stars of *Ice Road Truckers*, and in addition to driving his own truck, also owns several of the trucks driven by fellow cast members. As is the case in all the series included here, the more economic capital a cast member possesses, the more likely

they are to be given primary and mostly flattering storylines. Hugh, like Sig, has a domineering personality, and is harsh with his drivers. In Season One: Episode Nine: “The Big Melt,” Rick Yemm, one of Hugh’s drivers who is prominently featured throughout the series, suffers from frostbite because the floor heater in his truck is malfunctioning. Because Hugh owns the truck, it is his responsibility to ensure that it is operating appropriately. Hugh dismisses Rick’s concerns, who decides to quit working for him as a result. After the two argue on the phone, Hugh emasculates Rick to the camera for expressing grievances about his working conditions: “He hung up on me, that’s how mad at me he is (laughs), it’s like a little fucking girl, eh?” (2007). After their altercation, Rick vents at a local bar: “I’ll starve before I go back and work for him again. This is not how you treat your right-hand man and your best friend...this is just unacceptable. I’m freezing up there. I tell him that and he laughs at me like it’s a joke” (2007).

After learning officially that Rick quit, Hugh mocks and emasculates him further: “He was a carpet cleaner before I got a hold of him. I made a man out of me [*sic*]” (2007). Hugh shirks his responsibility of maintaining the quality and safety of his trucks for his drivers by accusing Rick of not being tough enough to endure subzero temperatures without a heater. Because Hugh also “wins” that season’s fictional race for who can haul the most loads across the ice, he appears in a positive light overall since he was “tough enough” to finish out the season on top. The tendency to delegitimize genuine health and safety concerns in the workplace as trivial complaints from men who fail to live up to ideals of masculine toughness is one of the most pernicious currents running through these series. Industry and workplace deregulation remains one of the hallmarks of neoliberalism, and framing these hazardous occupations as masculinized competitions of survival of the fittest further justifies the practice.

Health and safety regulations are particularly germane to the workers of the blue-collar reality world because they perform some of the most statistically dangerous jobs in the United States (Johnson, 2016; Korch, 2017). Janet Webb, chief forester and president of Big Creek Lumber in central California, explains that the high fatality rate is partially attributable to the remote, rural locations in which these jobs are performed: "Whether it's logging, fishing or agriculture jobs, when you're working in wilderness type settings you're not right there next to [a] facility that can bail you out" (Johnson, 2016). On *Ax Men*, the viewer is regularly reminded of the dangers of commercial logging, in which narrator and executive producer, Thom Beers, explains the perils of the job with the occasional assistance of computer animations. These animations graphically simulate loggers being impaled by branches, losing limbs, and enduring other violent injuries.

With the dangers of the occupation firmly established, viewers witness living proof of those hazards with Jay Browning, the owner of J.M. Browning Logging, who lost his hand in an accident with a saw many years prior. Jay, who now uses a prosthetic hand, explains with a sense of pride in Season One: Episode Two: “Risk and Reward” how he refused workers’ compensation insurance after the incident:

When I got out of the hospital, they sent me workmen comp checks. I even sent ‘em back. I just never felt that I should cash those checks because it was my stupid move that created the whole problem, so kinda had to fight with them. They didn’t wanna take the checks back, but they finally did. (2008)

His comments suggest that safety is the sole responsibility of the worker, and therefore, workers’ compensation programs are unnecessary. This rationalizes the neoliberal practice of eroding any semblance of a social safety net and worker protections. Of course, Jay is not a low-

level worker, but the owner of a successful commercial logging company. The fact that Jay has enough economic security to refuse workmen’s compensation is omitted from the narrative. His remarks also imply that he does not believe the loggers who work for him should receive workers’ compensation in the event of an accident. As one of the principal cast members who receives a highly-developed storyline, Jay exemplifies how class hierarchies remain sublimated throughout the series. He is depicted as a self-made success story, in which his status as the owner and manager of a company coupled with his white, rural, working-class masculine embodied performance, signals his masculine authenticity. The class-based distinctions between he and his employees are subsumed by the show’s gendered emphasis on masculine performances. Within the visuality of *Ax Men*, all the men featured are “real men,” but Jay and the other owners remain at the precipice of what it appears to be a hierarchical masculine order, not a class-based system. This is consistent with the mainstream U.S. cultural mythology of rugged individualism and the classless society.

Gold Rush is premised upon the Great Recession more than any other series included in the sample. The pilot episode documents Jack and Todd Hoffman, a father and son team, who are forced to sell their family’s airfield business because of the economic downturn. The Hoffmans decide to mine for gold in Alaska, not with the hope of maintaining a middle-class standard of living, but with the lofty aspiration of striking it rich. As show narrator, Paul Christie, intones with dramatic emphasis, “With the price of gold at an all-time high, Jack and Todd are about to risk everything they own on the biggest gamble of their lives” (2010). Despite their economic woes, the Hoffmans still have a substantial amount of economic capital—hundreds of thousands of dollars to purchase high-powered machinery and supplies—which enables them to even attempt an Alaskan mining expedition in the first place.

With this degree of economic capital, it would be inaccurate to claim that the Hoffmans share the same socioeconomic status as the workers mining at their behest. In fact, the miners they are employing are foregoing wages until they find gold and begin raking in profits. Sadly, the Hoffmans are largely unsuccessful in their mining endeavors, and only make modest gains over the course of the series. In Season One: Episode One: “No Guys, No Glory,” Jack says unflinchingly about his crew: “These guys are paying their own way until we strike gold” (2010). The show glamorizes the Hoffmans’ economic risk-taking as demonstrative of masculine prowess, and not necessarily reflective of class-based advantages.

In summation, the common embodied performance of white, rural, working-class masculinity in the blue-collar reality shows contributes to the flattening of class distinctions among their casts. This is highly demonstrative of neoliberal conceptions of social class, which frame class identity in relation to individual, stylized performances as opposed to a shared structural location produced by the capitalist system. Because of their economic advantages and power over their subordinates, the owners and captains more closely align with Kimmel’s core conceptualization of U.S. hegemonic masculinity, the “Self-Made Man.” Of course, these men are far from self-made, and heavily rely upon the labor of their employees for their success. Building off Kimmel’s formulation of the “Self-Made Man,” I will now discuss one of the central claims of this dissertation: The blue-collar reality shows exemplify hegemonic masculinity in the contemporary United States.

Blue-Collar Reality TV: A Response to U.S. Hegemonic Masculinity in Crisis

Nicholas Mirzoeff characterizes visuality as constituting the hegemonic visual order or the dominant modes of seeing that appear naturalized or “normal” in a particular set of social

relations (2009). Case in point, it is a taken for granted assumption that the subjects of the blue-collar reality shows—white, heteronormative male workers depicted on the job in rural settings—signify America’s ideal image of “real men.” What if one were to rhetorically ask: “What do ‘real men’ look like?” The blue-collar reality shows provide the answer in the contemporary U.S. neoliberal context. Whether an individual observer contests this notion does not change the fact that these subjects are widely recognized as “real men” in the dominant visual domain. It is worth reiterating that I am approaching these programs from the “*dominant-hegemonic position*,” in which I engage with a reading of these series that “decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded” (Hall, 2006, p. 171).

Before proceeding, it is integral to delineate the conceptual parameters of hegemonic masculinity. R.W. Connell originally coined the concept of hegemonic masculinity in 1987 in *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*. Connell asserts that patriarchy “requires the construction of a hypermasculine ideal of toughness and dominance” (1987, p. 80.) I argue that the primary objective of *Deadliest Catch*, *Ax Men*, *Ice Road Truckers*, and *Gold Rush* is to construct a visuality of (white) masculine toughness. Their occupations function as repeated and ritualized tests of manhood within the narrative logic of these series, which further contributes to the suppression of their shared structural location as workers. In short, these white male subjects are not coded as workers, but as “real men.” Robert Hanke’s formulation of hegemonic masculinity is also highly instructive for this analysis:

Hegemonic masculinity thus refers to the social ascendancy of a particular version or model of masculinity that operates on the terrain of common sense and conventional morality that defines ‘what it means to be a man,’ thus securing the dominance of some men (and the subordination of women) within the sex/gender system. (1992, p. 190)

As Christopher Lockett notes in his aptly titled piece, “Masculinity and Authenticity: Reality TV’s Real Men,” hegemonic masculinity is often identified as “real” or “authentic” masculinity. In his discussion of this subgenre of reality shows, which includes *Deadliest Catch* and *Ice Road Truckers*, he observes “that this idealization of working-class masculinity takes place by way of reality television speaks to its preoccupation with an *authentic masculinity* [emphasis added], one best accessed unalloyed and unmediated” (2010). For there to be “real men,” it then suggests that there are “fake” or “inauthentic” men, as well as women. Lockett connects that there seems to be no better way to showcase “real men” than on reality television, which despite remaining highly mediated and constructed, maintains the appearance of authenticity.

The demographic of men that populate the blue-collar reality world—white, rural, (mostly) working-class, heteronormative males—are the group of men that Kimmel documents as most outwardly experiencing a perceived “masculinity crisis” because of their increased economic precarity since the Great Recession (2012; 2013). As Kimmel elucidates, this perceived crisis of masculinity has “...pressed men to confront their continued reliance on the marketplace as the way to demonstrate and prove their manhood” (2012, p. 216). The blue-collar reality shows respond to this perceived crisis through valorizing and reinvigorating the notion that masculinity must be proved through workplace performance. I argue that it is the specific occupations featured therein—highly hazardous, manual labor jobs in remote locations—as performed by white males, wearing the clothes and speaking in the gruff manner typically associated with working-class manhood, that collectively signify hegemonic masculinity in the contemporary U.S. neoliberal context.

I concur with Hugh Campbell, Michael Mayerfield Bell, and Margaret Finney’s assessment in *Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life* (2006) that white, rural, working-class masculinity implies authenticity, and therefore, legitimacy, since it signifies the most preferred form of masculinity in the U.S. gender hierarchy. This is evidenced through wealthy, white male politicians, such as Donald Trump and George W. Bush, embodying the dress, mannerisms, and speech of working-class white males, to attain the symbolic capital that gender performance confers. Campbell, Bell, and Finney provide a vivid description of this performance through the lens of former President George W. Bush, which closely characterizes the masculine performances endemic to the series included in the sample:

But there will be no blush on President George Bush’s face as he faces the cameras at the next photo opportunity at his Crawford, Texas ranch. Wearing his boots and Stetson, posing with his horses, leaning on the rail of his cattle yards, clearing brush, and striding out across his land, Bush uses the imagery of rural life to portray not just a persona of authority and control but a *masculine* persona of authority and control . . . Real men don’t drink latte. They drink beer, smoke Marlboros, and ride their SUVs through mud and up mountains . . . *Real men are rural men* [emphasis added]: this cultural idea wields not only enormous political power but enormous economic power. (2006, pp. 1-2)

It is noteworthy that Bush’s movements and physical labor are included as part of the description of his performance of “real manhood.” As John Berger poignantly captures in his groundbreaking text, *Ways of Seeing*, in the dominant visual culture, “...*men act and women appear*” (1977, p. 47). For men to live up to hegemonic masculine ideals, they must always be active and have physical control in an outdoor environment.

The narrators of these programs frequently describe these men as “battling” the elements and “wrestling” with heavy machinery. Unlike women, their actions are emphasized, not their appearances. These workers are not only framed as powerful and in control, but as confronting death at every conceivable turn. Rowe does this frequently in his narration of *Deadliest Catch*. He offers a typical example in Season Six: Episode 10: “The Darkened Seas,” when he emphasizes the dangers faced by the crew of the *Time Bandit*: “With the deck barraged by ice chunks, every step the crew takes could be their last” (2011). Rowe regularly reminds the viewer throughout the series that commercial fishing is the most dangerous job in the world. His narration signals that these men exemplify hegemonic masculinity because of their willingness to risk serious injury to themselves. In the beginning of Season Three: Episode Seven: “New Beginnings,” Rowe provides his near standardized description of crab fishing on Alaska’s Bering Sea: “Die-hard crews are back to face down bigger waves...more boat crippling ice...and deadly steel...the vicious Bering Sea will unleash surprises on the 400 brave souls tempting fate for fortune...” (2007). His narration is intercut with action-packed footage of crews fishing on decks with crashing waves, in which frequent, quick edits create a sense of urgency and suspense.

Thom Beers, who produces and narrates both *Ice Road Truckers* and *Ax Men*, frequently invokes a sense of peril and suspense through his narrative choices. Beers provides his usual introductory narration for *Ice Road Truckers* at the beginning of Season One: Episode Four: “The Big Chill”: “At the top of the world, there’s an outpost like no other. And a job only a few would dare...The rewards are great...the risks even greater...These are the men who make their living on thin ice” (2007). Like *Deadliest Catch*, the introductory narrative remarks are interspersed with fast-paced edits, jumping from one driver to the next. Earlier seasons also

include an animation of a tractor trailer falling completely through the ice—an event that, although possible, fortunately, does not occur during filming of the show’s 10 seasons.

As mentioned previously, the shows are framed as masculine competitions. Nowhere is this theme given more weight than in *Ax Men*. Beers offers one of his most overt invocations of hegemonic masculinity in his narrative preview of Season Two: Episode 11: “Clash of the Titans”: “Crews endure subzero temperatures...rising water...and a brawl on the landing. With just one week left, *it’s give up or man up* [emphasis added]” (2009). The message is clear: These real men prove their manhood through performing some of the world’s most statistically dangerous jobs. Moreover, the specter of bodily injury coincides with the connection between hegemonic masculinity and violence. As Kimmel points out, “Today, the capacity for violence is a marker of authentic masculinity...a test of manhood” (2012, p. 269). In that same episode, Beers even employs warlike imagery in describing the show’s fictional contest between the Rygaard and J.M. Browning logging companies: “Deep within the mountains of Oregon and Washington, an epic battle rages between two titans of logging” (2009). The term “battle” is oft-repeated throughout the episodes in the sample. Beers similarly invokes violent imagery in his introductory remarks in Season Four: Episode One: “Alaska,”: “From coast to coast, it’s an all-out assault” (2011).

In *Gold Rush*, Season Two: Episode 17: “Frozen Out,” narrator Paul Christie also suggests that gold mining is an aggressive enterprise: “Up in the frozen north, three crews continue their battle against the elements to strike it rich” (2011). This brief description touches upon two of the primary features Kimmel identifies as commensurate with U.S. hegemonic masculinity: violence and self-made, upward economic mobility. The association with hegemonic masculinity and violence can be observed in a still, promotional photo for *Gold Rush*.

In Figure 2, one notices some of the traditional visual codes of masculinity: All the men pictured are standing up straight with stern expressions. Visual codes that are specific to white, rural, working-class masculinity include the men sporting hard hats and work boots; wearing jeans, flannel shirts, and safety vests; and grasping shovels and other mining equipment in an assertive, controlling manner. This image is highly similar in its construction to many of the promotional stills used to advertise the blue-collar reality shows. Thus, Figure 2 can be considered representative of the visuality of hegemonic masculinity in the current U.S. neoliberal context. Noticeably, Jack Hoffman, who is pictured directly to the right of his son Todd, is holding what appears to be a hunting rifle and aiming it slightly to his left. The placement of the firearm in the image further cements the association between hegemonic masculinity and violence.



Fig. 2. Discovery Channel (2011), Retrieved February 9, 2017 from <http://www.tvguide.com/tvshows/gold-rush/episodes-season-2/308214/>

It is critical to stress that violence is only permitted within hegemonic masculine performances because of the whiteness of the males therein. The role of white supremacy within hegemonic masculinity cannot be overstated, especially given that whiteness often operates

invisibly as a racial identity that confers systemic advantages. Kimmel touches upon white supremacist, heteropatriarchal framings of masculinities of men of color: “The ‘other’—whether racial, sexual, religious, or any other identity—was either ‘too masculine’ or not ‘masculine enough,’ ... They’re either wild, out-of-control animals, violent and rapacious (too masculine, uncivilized), or they are weak, dependent, irresponsible (not masculine enough)” (2013, p. 257). Therefore, the shadow of violence that underpins the blue-collar reality shows only seems acceptable and nonthreatening because of the near-exclusive presence of white males.

Case in point, Edgar Hansen, deckhand and brother to captain Sig Hansen of the *Northwestern*, menacingly lights his throwing hook aflame before hurling it into the Bering Sea to retrieve pots full of crabs in Season One: Episode 10: “The Final Run.” Edgar announces to the camera: “I’m gonna light my throwing hook on fire. Why? For the hell of it” (2005). He also briefly lights himself on fire before doing so, and is applauded by his brother Sig over the loudspeaker from below deck. One could safely suggest that such behavior would not be received the same way if enacted by a man of color. In Season Three: Episode Seven: “New Beginnings,” Edgar comments on how he plans to treat the greenhorn deckhands, while simultaneously making a repeated punching gesture with his hand: “I gotta pack in as much abuse as I can over the next few weeks” (2007). These overt displays of hegemonic masculine behavior are undoubtedly interpreted by the viewing audience in relation to Edgar’s whiteness.

In the same episode, it is also revealed that one of the greenhorns on the same boat, Matt Bradley, a young white male in his 20s, has a criminal record. Matt explains his sentencing to the camera: “I got home in time for my court date, and the judge was pretty lenient. I didn’t get the eight-month sentence, like I would’ve got if I missed that court date. I ended up getting a couple weeks” (2007). The nature of the charges against Matt are not revealed in the show, and in the

same episode, the cameras cut to his fellow crewmates making light of his brief incarceration. Because there are marked sentencing disparities along racial lines in the U.S. criminal justice system, particularly in relation to black male defendants receiving far more severe prison sentences than white male defendants for similar crimes (Palazzolo, 2013; Alexander, 2010), it is telling that Matt received a relatively light sentence. Furthermore, because criminality is so heavily tied to black masculinity in the United States (Alexander, 2010; Cacho, 2012), Matt’s criminal past does not collectively stigmatize white males in the same fashion. One cannot separate Matt’s whiteness from how his criminal record is framed on *Deadliest Catch*—as a relatively minor mistake that does not define him. In short, violence and even unlawful behavior are far more palatable to mainstream audiences within the confines of whiteness.

Despite whiteness and compulsory heterosexuality (no cast members on the blue-collar reality shows are identified as homosexual) remaining consistent features of hegemonic masculinity throughout U.S. history (Kimmel, 2012), hegemonic masculinity itself should not be collapsed into a monolithic, fixed set of traits. In *Staging Masculinities: History, Gender, Performance* (2003), Michael Mangan succinctly encapsulates how hegemonic masculinity is dynamic, and often evolves in relation to wider systemic changes: “Hegemonic masculinity is by nature paradoxical, since it seems to stand still but in fact is always on the move...Connell’s history indicates the way in which these changes relate to wider social and economic movements” (p. 13).

I maintain that the emergence of the blue-collar reality shows is a direct response to the false notion that the Great Recession posed a “crisis” for white masculinity. It is worth emphasizing that the 2008 downturn disproportionately harmed people of color, especially African-Americans (Allegretto, 2011; White, 2015). Since women of all races and people of

color of all genders were hit hard by the recession, then why did the Great Recession lead to an explicitly white masculinity crisis? Kimmel addresses the substantial impact of the 2008 downturn on white males in the United States, which he refers to as the “he-cession,” (p.209) in his prescient 2013 text, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*. Although Kimmel does not forecast the rise of an angry white, male presidential candidate successfully tapping into sexism, racism, and xenophobia, such as Donald Trump, he does identify the anger of working-class and middle-class white males as palpable and unwavering during this time of economic uncertainty.

The decline of traditionally masculine spheres of labor since the Great Recession, such as U.S. manufacturing, contributes to the *perception* among white men that there is an assault on *white men*. This is in contrast to the more complicated reality of the neoliberal attack on working people across races and genders, with more vulnerable groups, such as African Americans, suffering disproportionately because of systemic racism. Kimmel contextualizes the effects of dramatic declines in traditionally male-dominated employment sectors, coupled with the increased presence of women in the workforce in recent years:

During the first five years of the twenty-first century alone, 2.5 million manufacturing jobs were lost. The unemployment rate for men is nearly two percentage points higher, at 8.8 percent, than the rate for women...If women’s entry into the labor force stirred up men’s ability to anchor their identity as family provider, women’s emergence as primary breadwinner is a seismic shift, shaking men’s identity to its foundation. (2012, p. 288)

The sizeable change in the gendered distribution of labor contributes to the misnomer that women are somehow systemically advantaged over men. Kimmel further unpacks how the modest inroads made by women and people of color in recent years have shattered white males’

expectations of economic security: “...It dramatically levels the playing field, so that you have to compete now with women, immigrants, men of color, and even gay men. One can no longer presume that the positions once *reserved* [emphasis added] for ‘people like us’ are still yours for the taking” (2013, p. 219). Traditionally feminized occupations, such as jobs in the service sector, have become the primary source of job growth since the Great Recession (Fox, 2015). It is important to contextualize that the growth in traditionally feminized occupations has not led to women surpassing men in earnings overall. Not only do conventionally female-dominated fields remain more precarious and pay lower wages, but as women enter traditionally male-dominated sectors, the payrates tend to drop as well. Claire Caine Miller explains in the *New York Times* article, “As Women Take Over a Male-Dominated Field, the Pay Drops,” that “It may come down to this troubling reality, new research suggests: Work done by women simply isn’t valued as highly” (2016).

Additionally, according to a report from the Women’s Bureau in the U.S. Department of Labor, women of color endured some of the highest rates of unemployment compared to white women during and after the Recession: “For each year from 2007-2012, Black women had the highest unemployment rate (peaking at 14.1 percent in 2011 and dropping to 12.8 percent in 2012)...Latinas had the next highest, peaking at 12.3 percent in 2010 and dropping to 10.9 percent in 2012” (“The Economic Status of Women of Color: A Snapshot”). Women of color are also overrepresented in low-wage service sector positions, and experience a much more pronounced gender wage gap with white men as compared to the pay deficit between white women and white men (Fisher, 2015).

The data indicate that this sense of economic precarity is a relatively new phenomenon for working and middle-class white men *as a group*. Furthermore, it seems white, working-class

and middle-class men are also selectively ignoring the comparative economic disadvantages of women and people of color in the United States in relation to white males overall. They interpret the modest inroads made by these groups as an intrusion into what they, and evidently only they, are entitled to in terms of economic security. Because whiteness and maleness are constructed as the default racial and gender identities in the United States, white males, as per Kimmel’s analysis, are more likely to view themselves as individuals, and not as members of wider social groups. Moreover, it appears that white males are even less likely to recognize that they systemically *benefit* from their social location at the intersection of white supremacy and patriarchy. Combine this tendency with the potential for a racial and gender-inclusive class consciousness not materializing, in part, because of an attachment to achieving hegemonic masculine ideals (among other complex sociopolitical factors), and you have a recipe for misplaced blame and aggression toward women and people of color in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal system.

Interestingly, Kimmel identifies white working-class and middle-class males as having an increasingly shared sense of commonality despite their class differences, which are gradually becoming negligible as neoliberal economic policies continue to shrink the middle class entirely (Fry and Kochhar, 2016). As Kimmel explains, “The white working class and the white middle class have rarely been so close *emotionally* as they are today; together they have drifted away from unions; from big government; from the Democratic Party, into the further reaches of the right wing” (2013, p. 204). This partially explains Trump drawing white male votes from across the class spectrum (Tyson and Maniam, 2016; Silver, 2016). It is noteworthy that his working-class white supporters have come under the most scrutiny in mainstream political reporting. I contend that the dominant characterization of working-class whites as racist is attributable to

how classism operates within whites, since charges of racism do not collectively adhere to middle-class whites as a group. Certainly, there is racism to be found within the ranks of the white working class, but the common perception that working-class whites are the dominant purveyors of racism in the United States needs correction. Regardless, all whites systemically benefit from a white supremacist racial caste system.

The increased sense of commonality between working-class and middle-class white men speaks to how the blue-collar reality shows appeal to both groups. As Kimmel points out, “If you feel yourself to always be taking it on the chin, media fantasy is the place where you get to pump your first in defiance. If you feel emasculated in real life, you can feel like a man in ‘reel life,’” (2013, p. 218). In this sense, the emergence of these programs is in direct conversation with white male fears and anxieties regarding their social status in the United States. These shows document occupations that remain white, male-dominated spheres at a time when white-male dominated employment sectors, such as manufacturing, are in decline. This is not a coincidence. It is as though the shows rhetorically say to their white male viewership: “Don’t worry, you’re still on top as the real men in the United States.” In “Portrayals of Masculinity in the Discovery Channel’s *Deadliest Catch*,” Burton P. Buchanan poignantly encapsulates the deeper social meaning behind this program for white male viewers:

...white male power has endured encroachment as women, gays and minorities have gained social power in recent decades. *Deadliest Catch* serves as a fine example of a reality television program that demonstrates an environment where traditional masculinity is exercised, a place where white males can perform masculine rituals, compete with one another in an adverse environment and reassert their position in the social cultural hierarchies. (2014, p. 2)

In addition, since both working and middle-class white men recognize white, rural, working-class masculinity as the most “legitimate” form of masculinity in the contemporary U.S. context, class distinctions, even those that exist within the casts of these series, become erased within the visuality of “real men.” Having firmly established that the blue-collar reality shows reaffirm white, rural, working-class masculinity as hegemonic masculinity in the contemporary U.S. context in response to the socioeconomic changes engendered by the Great Recession, I will now detail with greater specificity the role of gender policing within performances of hegemonic masculinity.

The Blue-Collar Reality World: Policing Masculinity in Homosocial Spaces

Since the blue-collar reality shows provide a visual archive of hegemonic masculinity in the past decade, it may come as a surprise that gender policing itself remains a central aspect of the narratives. If the men of the blue-collar reality world signify “real men” at the level of commonsense, then why would the men in these series feel the need to explicitly engage in gender policing? I delineate gender policing in this context as the occasions in which men overtly call attention to their supposed masculine superiority *at the expense of other men*, or more simply, when men ridicule other men with feminizing insults. I configure this teasing in homosocial spaces as a ritualized practice commensurate with the performance of hegemonic masculinity. The preoccupation with *proving* one’s manhood suggests that one’s place at the top of the masculine hierarchy is never fully secured, and these programs provide an opportunity to bear witness to “real men” ritualistically doing so in relation to their male coworkers.

Kimmel points out in *Manhood in America* that men can only appropriately demonstrate their masculinity in exclusively male spaces: “Throughout American history American men have

been afraid that others will see us as less than manly, as weak, timid, frightened...American men define their masculinity, not as much in relation to women, but in relation to each other” (2012, p. 5). Because these workplaces are almost entirely homosocial spaces—with women only occasionally entering the perimeter with significant resistance from men—the series entail a substantial amount of gender policing. Kimmel further elucidates the significance of single-gender environments for men in proving their masculine worth: “Masculinity defined through homosocial interaction contains many parts, including the camaraderie, fellowship, and intimacy often celebrated in male culture. It also includes homophobia” (p. 6). He elaborates that homophobia is not merely about fearing or discriminating against homosexuals, but that it also “...is the fear of other men—that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, *are not real men* [emphasis added] ...” (p. 6).

I concur with Kimmel’s determination that men emasculating other men can be read as a manifestation of homophobia. Additionally, I contend that this mode of ridicule constitutes one of the primary ways in which men enforce gender normative expectations of one another, in which compulsory heterosexuality is considered integral to ideal manhood. It also functions to correct seemingly undesirable behaviors through peer pressure—as there is no worse insult to a man than feminizing him. In Season Eight: Episode Four: “The Hook,” *Deadliest Catch* viewers witness one of the more brutal instances of feminized insults being deployed to purportedly modify behavior. Captain Bill Wichrowski of the *Kodiak* grows frustrated as he watches his son, deckhand Zack Larson, unsuccessfully throw the hook to retrieve the pots full of crab from the Bering Sea multiple times in a row. After scolding him on deck for his performance, Bill returns to the wheelhouse and then declares over the loudspeaker so that the entire crew can hear: “Zack,

I’ve got to say—you’ve probably made your mom proud throwing the hook this season. She always wanted a girl” (2012). He then removes Zack from throwing the hook.

Evidently, Bill thinks the best way to help improve his son’s performance is to mock him by suggesting that he is “throwing like a girl.” The implication, of course, being that a woman could never perform a job that requires that kind of physical strength and coordination. This type of gender policing further solidifies the linkage between job performance and masculinity: If a man does not perform his job well, or have a job at all, then he is not living up to masculine ideals. In Season 11: Episode Nine: “Hell’s Bells,” one of the deckhands engages in a similar type of gendered harassment against a fellow crewmember. Veteran deckhand, Danny Chiu, is relentlessly hounding twenty-something deckhand, Phillip Hillstrand, aboard the *Time Bandit*. Danny’s behavior on deck is erratic, as he aggressively taunts Phil: “We’re crabbing. It’s a crab deck. Move your ass little girl...Come over here and be a man” (2015). Danny’s abusive behavior culminates with him slapping Phillip. Although Danny’s actions are perceived as wild and unsafe by most of his crewmates, and are presented as such, it is not until he physically strikes a fellow crewmember that anyone intervenes. The gendered verbal harassment that preceded it remains consistent with the kind of gender policing endemic to the homosocial male spaces catalogued in these series.

The viewers witness a seemingly more jovial instance of gender policing in Season Two: Episode 11 of *Ax Men*, “Clash of the Titans.” This episode highlights the manufactured competition to haul the most lumber between the J.M. Browning and Rygaard logging companies in Oregon and Washington respectively. The Rygaard crew sends the Browning loggers pink gloves to suggest that they are too feminine to win the competition. In return, the Browning crew sends them pink tutus. As Jay Browning reiterates, “It’s important that they’re

pink” (2009). Although lighthearted, the notion that pink is an intrinsically feminine color that would inherently emasculate any “true” man wearing it, is a common form of gender policing. Gender policing in relation to the colors pink and blue begins at birth for most U.S. children based upon their biological sex characteristics. Even if done in a humorous fashion, the cumulative effects of this type of gender patrolling in heteronormative, male homosocial spaces enforces and naturalizes hegemonic masculine standards of conduct. In short, “real men” do not wear pink.

In Season Four: Episode One: “Alaska,” *Ax Men* continues with the plot device of pitting crews against each other, in which the “winners” can claim bragging rights to having proven themselves as the toughest and truest of men. Within the narrative arch of *Ax Men*, the winners are given the title of “King of the Mountain.” In this installment, the viewer is introduced to Papac Logging in Alaska. An unidentified logger from Papac proclaims in the introduction of the episode that Alaska is “where the real men come to log the real wood” (2011). (The relationship between place, specifically the mythic frontier, and hegemonic masculinity in the U.S. context is addressed in the next chapter.) Logger, Mike “Costsy” Coats, announces later in the episode that “...it’s just the terrain’s way tougher up here. I mean, my daughter could log down there where Rygaard logs (Washington)” (2011). Again, women, even if they are directly related to a man himself, are used as a reference point to demonstrate another man’s supposed inferiority. Hegemonic masculinity in the U.S. context requires the performance of these discursive rituals of gender policing for its maintenance; it is never stationary and assumed, but requires repeated, performative expression.

Given that the most preferred way to insult a man is to feminize him within the logic of hegemonic masculinity, then the best way to compliment him is to praise his masculinity in

homosocial spaces. The primary way of recognizing a fellow man’s masculine prowess is through complimenting his toughness or “guts.” In Season Four: Episode Four: “Unsafe and Unsound,” *Deadliest Catch* viewers witness a young deckhand on the *Wizard*, Jason Moilanen, aka Moi, struggling to keep up with the pace of the workload in a harsh environment. Mike Rowe narrates as Moi continues to complain, “Jason Moi is barely hanging on” (2008). Captain Keith Colburn expresses irritation at Moi’s complaints. Shortly thereafter, Moi smashes his finger in the door of an 800-pound steel pot used to catch crabs. Keith minimizes the extent of his injury, and then has Moi poke his finger with a hot tweezers. Moi does not emote as blood pours out of his heavily bruised and swollen extremity.

Rowe then contextualizes the significance of this event in relation to Moi’s standing with the captain: “Moi has yet to impress the skipper with his deck work, but he does prove he may have some guts” (2008). The camera then cuts to Keith praising Moi for enduring pain without much complaint or display of emotion: “You’re a tough guy. That was impressive. Should have given you a shot of whiskey first” (2008). A critical aspect of hegemonic masculinity is enduring pain or the threat of violence without displaying emotions that have become stereotypically coded as feminine, such as fear and sadness. Although Moi is not wholly successful in proving his masculinity through his job performance, he remains in good standing with his male peers and supervisor through his display of masculine toughness in the face of serious injury. The show frames this incident as redemptive for Moi, since his masculine authenticity was coming under scrutiny up until that point.

Season Five: Episode Three: “Stay Focused or Die” is one of *Deadliest Catch*’s most emotional episodes. The episode recounts the season’s greatest tragedy—the sinking of the *Katmai*, in which seven fishermen perished and four survived. Although the vessel and its crew

were not directly taking part in the filming of the series, the viewer sees the Coast Guard deployed on a rescue mission, and the reactions of principal cast members to the devastating news. The narrative jumps back and forth in time, in which much of the episode consists of studio interviews with three survivors of the tragedy. During a moving interview with survivor Ryan Appling, he holds back tears as he lauds his fellow fishermen who died: “There’s not much you can say other than that they were hell of good guys. *They were real men* [emphasis added], real men with character and real men to really be around, have a part of your life, and I enjoyed each and every second of that” (2009).

Ryan has clearly been through an incredible trauma, and the aim here is not to criticize his expression of that. However, it is noteworthy that he chooses to honor and pay tribute to his deceased crewmates through calling them “real men.” It provides insight into how highly valued that designation is *to men* in the contemporary context, and why it matters to them to discursively call attention to their own masculinity, as well as their peers, in both positive and negative fashions accordingly. To be a real man is to have truly attained a highly-venerated status. In short, that is the overriding message of all the blue-collar reality programs: These shows claim to document real men, and they reinforce that this subset of men has a preferred status in the current U.S. neoliberal social context. Consequently, this masculine performance confers a significant degree of symbolic capital, which explains why upper-class white males seek to associate themselves white, rural, working-class masculinity.

Because homosocial spaces are a linchpin to the visibility of hegemonic masculinity, I will now detail how the small number of white women who have been included in the blue-collar reality subgenre are portrayed.

White Women with Blue-Collars: Rules for Representation

Because the premise of these series is predicated upon displays of masculine toughness, it creates tension when women do occasionally enter the scene. As mentioned previously regarding the way white supremacy operates within the series, there are no women of color depicted, even peripherally. This is not solely incidental, but suggests a preference for white femininity, if any femininity, within the visual logic of the blue-collar reality shows. As per the strict gender policing endemic to hegemonic masculine performances, the women of the blue-collar reality world are permitted entry within the confines of hegemonic, white feminine expectations.

First, the only woman who is a principal cast member in any of the series included here is Lisa Kelly of *Ice Road Truckers*. Lisa is included in the opening credits, and is given a significant storyline after she is introduced in the third season. Lisa stars in the series for a total of seven seasons. Although Maya Siber is introduced as a main cast member in the fifth season, her stint on the series is limited to a single season with an underdeveloped story arch. Lisa is conventionally attractive, and I maintain that this is a prerequisite for her inclusion in the series. She is in her twenties, and has long blonde hair. Notably, Maya is also conventionally attractive, in her twenties, but with long dark hair. As per Berger’s adage regarding the portrayal of men and women in the dominant visual domain, “...*men act and women appear*” (1977, p. 47). Because physical appearance is so foundational to a woman’s social experience and treatment, it is unsurprising then that the only woman who receives a prominent storyline embodies conventional standards of beauty and white femininity.

Despite performing the same job, Lisa’s appearance is the linchpin to her marketability as compared to her male counterparts. In fact, most of the men throughout the blue-collar reality shows do not meet conventional metrics of attractiveness. I argue that this indicates that

heterosexual male audiences only accept the inclusion of female cast members if they visually appeal to the male gaze. As per Laura Mulvey’s groundbreaking 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Lisa’s portrayal coincides with the visual expectations and desires of heterosexual male spectators. This is particularly evident when looking at promotional photos of Lisa. None of the male cast members in any of the blue-collar reality shows have ever been photographed in a similar fashion. In Figure 3 below on the right, Lisa is bent over suggestively on her knees, as she appears to be superficially fixing a truck. She is in a vulnerable position consistent with what sociologist Erving Goffman describes as the “ritualization of subordination” in his pioneering work investigating the patterns of women’s portrayals in advertising, *Gender Advertisements* (1979). In contrast, if any of the men of the blue-collar reality shows were photographed in the same bent over position on their knees, it would seem bizarre and laughable. Lisa’s positioning suggests passivity and vulnerability—two traits associated with dominant conceptions of femininity in U.S. culture. Hegemonic masculine performances necessitate standing up straight, grasping objects with authority, and appearing in control of one’s surroundings. In short, dominant codes of masculinity suggest power, whereas dominant codes of femininity suggest weakness within a patriarchal system.



Fig. 3. Getty Images (2010), Retrieved February 15, 2017 from <http://www.gettyimages.com/event/at-home-shoot-with-lisa-kelly-from-a-es-ice-road-truckers-98766612#lisa-kelly-the-only-female-driver-for-aes-ice-road-truckers-poses-a-12000000>



Fig. 4. Getty Images (2010), Retrieved February 15, 2017 from <http://www.gettyimages.com/event/at-home-shoot-with-lisa-kelly-from-a-es-ice-road-truckers-98766612#lisa-kelly-the-only-female-driver-for-aes-ice-road-truckers-12000000>

In the same image, Lisa peers back over her shoulder, which signals that she is aware that she is being observed. In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger notes that this is one of the canonical ways women are represented in commercial photography, which has its roots in Western European nude portraiture. Berger explains that in these images, “Women watch themselves being looked at” (p.47). Lisa displays a similar over-the-shoulder glance in Figure 4. In this image, her back and shoulders are exposed by the halter-style dress she is wearing. None of the men featured in these series are ever photographed in attire that deviates from their white, rural, working-class masculine performances—they are always depicted in what they wear to work. Although she is pictured in front of semi-trailer truck, the photo does not connect to her workplace abilities, but solely accentuates her appearance.

In accordance with hegemonic feminine visual codes, Lisa is also highly sexualized. Her sexuality is integrated into her performance on the series in both overt and subtle ways. In Season Three: Episode Six: “Arctic Ice,” Lisa must manually fix her truck’s frozen brake lines. Before lying down beneath the truck to hammer ice off the wheels, she comments suggestively to the camera: “I like being on the ground anyway” (2009). As she finally gets her truck running,

the sexual innuendo continues with her provocatively stating, “Bend me over and spank me. Crack that whip” (2009). The men on these shows are never sexualized in any capacity. Lisa is performing in accordance within hegemonic expectations of femininity.

I argue that for Lisa to gain any degree of acceptance in male homosocial spaces, she must not deviate from the strict feminine gender codes of physical attractiveness and sexual appeal to men. Otherwise, her presence would be too threatening to masculine hegemony. The show underlines Lisa’s sexuality in indirect ways as well. In the same episode, the camera cuts to an image of a wild, arctic fox on the ice on two occasions before segueing to Lisa driving. This hints toward associating Lisa with the term “arctic fox.” Regardless of her driving abilities, which prove to be formidable throughout her tenure on *Ice Road Truckers*, her appearance remains her defining characteristic within the narrative logic of the series.

It is important to emphasize that although Lisa is permitted entry into the homosocial male landscape of blue-collar reality television because of her appearance, she is never on equal footing with her male colleagues. She shoulders an added burden as one of the only women working in her field, in which her job performance remains under far greater scrutiny. Unlike the men of the series, any mistake she makes is more likely to be attributed to her gender identity. Thom Beers describes Lisa’s recent admission into the occupation of commercial truck driving in his narration in Season Three: Episode Two: “Rookie Run”: “And as a woman working in a man’s world, she had to want it more than anyone else...Lisa’s career choice often shocks the guys” (2009). Aside from satisfying the male gaze, including Lisa in the series functions as a plot device to keep the show engaging: She is the sole outsider within the cast, which provides a productive entry point for narrative tension.

Season Seven: Episode One: “Collision Course” exemplifies how Lisa’s gender identity creates narrative conflict. Hugh Roland, one of the stars of the series, declares that Lisa is unfit to drive on the ice roads because of her gender. Hugh explains his objections to the camera: “It’s not safe for her. Don’t matter who she’s with or anything, it’s just not safe for her. They’re the roughest toughest roads in North America, and I don’t even think Lisa will make it on these roads, like, because she’s a girl” (2013). The camera then cuts to Lisa driving, and she defends herself against Hugh’s unfounded allegations: “Just because you’re a woman doesn’t mean you can’t do a thing. I may be a woman in a man’s world, but I’m not gonna try to change it, I’m not gonna try to feminize it, and I’m not gonna be pretending to be a man” (2013). Lisa’s line of reasoning in her own defense still suggests that truck driving is somehow an inherently masculine endeavor. This naturalization of occupations as gendered needs correction.

The camera then returns to Hugh, in which he refers to the show’s fictional competition between the drivers for who can haul the most loads across the ice: “I don’t think Lisa’s even cut out—she shouldn’t even be here. She’s not really a truck driver. She’s no threat to me whatsoever. Not even in the least” (2013). Obviously, some of this tension is fostered for dramatic effect. However, based upon Kimmel’s findings in *Angry White Men*, a sizeable portion of rural, white, working-class men do resent women performing occupations that they view to be exclusively “their jobs.” Hugh does seem genuinely afraid that Lisa will defeat him in the competition. If she were to do so, Hugh would feel highly emasculated. The fear of emasculation is so deeply entrenched that Hugh wants women barred from the competition. Despite the threat Lisa poses to hegemonic masculine dominance, she is begrudgingly accepted within the logic of the series because her physical appearance satisfies the male gaze, and her presence creates some productive narrative tension.

In contrast, a female driver briefly featured in the first season, Karen McDougal, does not receive top billing or a developed story line. In Season One: Episode Four: “The Big Chill,” Thom Beers notes that she is one of the few women drivers on the winter ice roads. As Karen is shown driving her truck, the viewer can see that she is white, middle-aged, and sports long blonde dreadlocks. Unlike Lisa, Karen does not embody conventional standards of beauty. As she is driving, Karen discusses the challenges of being away from her home and children for more than two months during the driving season: “I do have a son at home, and I’m gonna be out here. I’m gonna miss his 16th birthday...I’m probably gonna have a crappy day that day” (2007). Karen’s personal story of sacrifice, especially as one of the only women who works this job, is compelling and worthy of the spotlight. Many of the male drivers on the show have children as well, but a mother being away from her children is less acceptable within dominant gender expectations of parenthood.

Karen attests to the notoriety she has achieved since just shortly after her arrival: “I was out here for, like, two days, and everybody knew my name. They don’t see a lot of women out here, and they don’t see a lot of dreadlocks” (2013). Despite Karen’s fascinating story, this is the last the viewer sees of her. I contend that Karen is not given a more developed storyline because she does not embody hegemonic feminine ideals that satisfy male spectators. In other words, women must approximate either Lisa or Maya’s standard of attractiveness to star in blue-collar reality television.

In *Ax Men* Season Four: Episode One: “Alaska,” the series introduces Leah Proctor, a woman logger, who looks to be in her 20s, to Pihl logging company. Although Leah does not become a prominently featured cast member, she does more closely approximate hegemonic feminine beauty ideals. Before owner Mike Pihl introduces her to the crew, Thom Beers narrates

that “...Mike is trying something few logging crews would dare” (2011). As Leah approaches the crew, the men look stunned. Mike instructs them to “...just give her a handshake like she’s a man, yeah” (2011). In a cutaway interview, Leah expresses her concerns about joining an all-male logging crew: “I definitely had a lot of anxiety about coming out today. Hopefully the guys will take me in and not judge me for being a girl” (2011). Leah has experience as a wild land firefighter, but despite her credentials, her gender is instantly perceived as a limitation.

One of her fellow loggers, Stacey Robeson, expresses his reservations and doubts about her ability to do the job of setting chokers on logs that need to be pulled uphill: “I’ve never worked around a girl setting chokers. I don’t know. They’re gonna send some little 5-foot-nothing girl out here who might weigh 100 pounds. It’ll be something to watch anyway” (2011). It is noteworthy that Stacey refers to Leah as a “girl” and not a woman. Referring to her by this more infantilizing designation signals that he does not view her as an equal. It becomes apparent immediately that Leah’s gender precludes her from equal status when Mike tells his crew explicitly to “treat her with respect” (2011). She ends up performing quite well, but always under the added pressure that if she makes a mistake, it will be attributed directly to her gender identity. Mike explains his rationale for hiring her toward the end of the episode: “You know, logging is somewhat of a man’s world. It’s just never anything we considered, hiring a woman...Actually, looks like Leah’s doing great. She’s getting around like a deer, keeping up with Stacey” (2011). Mike seems surprised by her job performance, and reinforces the notion that logging is fundamentally a man’s job. I surmise that the idea of hiring a woman originated with show producers as a plot device, since Mike indicates it was something he had never thought of previously. Even when women perform their jobs well, they are never fully accepted because they are viewed as intruding upon men’s rightful territory.

In Season Three: Episode Four: “Secret Weapons,” *Gold Rush* introduces a woman miner for the first time, who is working for “Dakota” Fred Hurt’s mining operation. Christie provides some background in his narrative introduction: “Melody Tallis, a rodeo rider from Arizona, has been gold-mining for the last four years” (2012). Melody appears middle-aged and has blonde hair. Youthful appearance is integral to achieving hegemonic feminine standards of beauty, which explains why Lisa and Maya of *Ice Road Truckers*, who are in their 20s, receive top billing. The show reveals that Fred, who appears to be in his 60s, hired her, much to the dismay of his son Dustin, who looks middle-aged as well. Dustin complains about his father bringing in Melody: “I wasn’t expecting a woman. I really wanted a big strong guy to do all the lifting for me or help me with the lifting. But now, what I get is a little woman” (2012). Fred dismisses his son’s concerns, and then tellingly remarks upon Melody’s appearance: “Dustin’ worrisome about having a woman on the job, and not a bad-looking one at that” (2012). Fred’s comments indicate the extent to which women’s physical appearances are always given primacy. Additionally, because Melody does not fully embody conventional standards of beauty, the show does not feature her prominently or give her much of a storyline. Her introduction into a male homosocial space does generate some short-lived narrative tension, as women are always interpreted as trespassing on men’s territory, irrespective of their appearances.

Conclusion

The blue-collar reality shows provide a rich visual archive of performances of hegemonic masculinity in the past decade. Through their framing of the highly hazardous occupations of commercial fishing, logging, truck driving, and gold mining as individualized tests of manhood, the blue-collar reality shows solidify the connection between masculine authenticity and this type

of work. The flattening of class hierarchies present within the casts of these series also reinforces the myth of the classless society, as the embodied performance of white, rural, working-class masculinity is presented as disconnected from one’s social location within a class hierarchy.

I argue that these programs valorize white, rural, working-class masculinity as “real manhood” in direct response to Kimmel’s discovery that the Great Recession engendered a “masculinity crisis” for white, rural, working and middle-class men in the United States. These shows document that discursive gender policing itself is commensurate with the performance logic of hegemonic masculinity, which gestures toward the underlying insecurity many U.S. men have in relation to their place in the gender hierarchy. This reinvestment in work as a marker of masculine authenticity, as opposed to challenging the wider economic order and the social construction of gender, is a counterproductive tendency in relation to alleviating the precarious nature of work in the contemporary neoliberal labor market. Corporate-owned U.S. cable networks would much rather inject celebratory displays of white masculine prowess into their programming schedules than foster class consciousness.

Moreover, the emergence of these shows signaled that there was a profound white male backlash brewing against the modest social gains made by women, people of color, and LGBTQ-identified peoples in recent years. This explains the near universal presence of heteronormative white males across these series, in which only white women who generally satisfy the visual desires of male spectators are conditionally granted entry. However, irrespective of their appearances, there remains an underlying hostility toward women who dare to enter male homosocial spaces. I maintain that the proliferation and popularity of the blue-collar reality shows gestured toward a wider sociopolitical phenomenon, which led to the election of President Donald Trump. If the mainstream political punditry were more aware of what was happening on

U.S. cable networks, they may have been less taken aback by Donald Trump’s popularity among rural, working and middle-class, white males.

In the next chapter, I explicate the critical role of place within these series, as frontier mythology remains deeply entwined with hegemonic masculinity.

Chapter Two: “Real Men” Work in “Real America”

“I’m no miner. I’m just your average guy tired of sitting here, not making any money. So, like my forefathers—they balls-ed up, and they went out into the frontier.”

--Todd Hoffman of *Gold Rush*, Season One: Episode One: “No Guts, No Glory” (2010)

“The West was quite literally nowhere—or everywhere, which was to say the same thing.”

--Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire Building* (1997), p. 465.

A critical component of the popular appeal and commercial success of the blue-collar reality shows is that they reinvigorate frontier mythology in the United States. All the series under examination, *Deadliest Catch*, *Ice Road Truckers*, *Ax Men*, *Gold Rush*, and *Duck Dynasty*, are filmed primarily in rural, wilderness settings in the Northwestern continental United States, Alaska, and Northwestern Canada. Only *Duck Dynasty* is filmed exclusively in the Southern United States, specifically rural and suburban Louisiana, where the Robertson men are portrayed as asserting their masculine prowess via their outdoor recreational activities, including hunting and fishing. As I detail in chapter four, *Duck Dynasty* functions as an exception within this sample because its approximately 22-minute narratives have more in common with domestic, family sitcoms than the roughly 44-minute episodes of *Deadliest Catch*, *Ice Road Truckers*, *Ax Men*, and *Gold Rush*, which are more in line with workplace dramas.

Because *Duck Dynasty* gives primacy to heteronormative, nuclear family structures, in which traditional U.S. gender roles are policed within the show’s overarching narrative, the viewer sees more women present than in the other series. The presence of women within this stereotypically patriarchal purview necessitates their depiction in the home, whereas the other programs focus almost exclusively on men in the workplace. In addition, the Robertsons are also far wealthier than their blue-collar reality counterparts, and I explicate the symbolic capital their

white, rural, working-class, masculine performance confers in the contemporary U.S. neoliberal context in the fourth chapter.

Despite these distinctions, through the lens of the blue-collar reality shows in their entirety, the role of place, specifically the frontier, remains integral for understanding the parameters of hegemonic masculinity, white supremacy therein, and its connection to two of the most deeply embedded myths in U.S. culture: rugged individualism and U.S. exceptionalism. These mythologies function to both ideologically justify and obscure social inequalities, in which the latter specifically validates U.S. settler colonialism/imperialism and the wider U.S. nation-building project. The role of place in relation to hegemonic masculinity and its intersections with race and social class, as they pertain to rugged individualism, constitutes a critical linkage that has yet to be adequately teased out within a media studies framework.

For the purposes of conceptual clarity, I must delineate how I am operationalizing myth/mythology and ideology before proceeding with this analysis, as there is significant overlap between the two concepts. First, Stuart Hall defines ideology as a “way of representing the order of things which endowed its limiting perspectives with that natural or divine inevitability which makes them appear universal, natural, and coterminous with ‘reality’ itself” (1982, p. 65). Thus, the systems of power embedded within the portrayals of “real men” on the blue-collar reality shows go largely unnoticed and unquestioned because they appear “real” or “natural,” not constructed ideologically. This definition is particularly relevant to reality television, which is highly constructed and mediated, but has the appearance of presenting things “as they are.”

Because there is no singular definition of ideology, I further complement Hall’s understanding with John Storey’s characterization of ideology specifically in relation to media

forms: “...texts (television fiction, pop songs, novels, feature films, etc.) always present a particular image of the world...of society as conflictual rather than consensual, structured around inequality, exploitation, and oppression. Texts are said to take sides, consciously or unconsciously, in this conflict” (2012, p. 3). I proceed from the premise that the blue-collar reality shows are taking sides ideologically with their perpetuation of frontier mythology and the systems of power inscribed therein. It is likely accurate to suggest that the creators of these programs, such as Thom Beers, take sides unconsciously. Regardless, the cumulative effects of the continued circulation of the interlocking racial, gendered, classed, and colonial ideologies embedded in these programs must be made visible.

Mythology is related to ideology, but some critical distinctions need to be outlined. Paul M. Gaston describes myths as “combinations of images and symbols that reflect a people’s way of perceiving the truth. Organically related to a fundamental reality of life, *they fuse the real and the imaginary* [emphasis added] into a blend that becomes a reality itself, a force in history” (1970, p. 9). Gaston’s definition informs this analysis regarding the interconnected mythologies under scrutiny here: the frontier ethos, rugged individualism, and U.S. exceptionalism. These myths are imagined and constructed, but have generated real, material consequences. Additionally, it is widely disseminated and understood in the United States that these myths are true, and therefore, they underpin dominant notions of America’s collective identity. Therefore, unlike ideology, myths are typically highly valued and venerated within a given cultural context.

Richard Slotkin also offers a critical distinction between ideology and myth in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, which is highly pertinent herein. Slotkin refers to ideology as “the basic system of concepts, beliefs, and values that defines a society’s way of interpreting its place in the cosmos and the meaning of its history”

(1998, p. 5). He explains that a “myth expresses ideology in a narrative, rather than discursive or argumentative, structure,” (p. 6). Therefore, I view the blue-collar reality shows as retelling frontier myths within the narrative structure of reality television, which ideologically reinforces heteropatriarchal, white supremacist, and colonial logics in naturalized and seemingly undetectable ways. Slotkin also acknowledges the critical place of mass media within the circulation of dominant mythologies: “The mythology produced by mass or commercial media has a particular role and function in a cultural system that remains complex and heterodox. It is the form of cultural production that addresses most directly the concerns of Americans as citizens of a nation-state” (p. 9). As I discuss at length in the first chapter and will touch upon again shortly, the economic downturn of the past decade played a significant role in the resurgence of the frontier myth on reality television, as frontier mythology reifies U.S. exceptionalism, rugged individualism, and white male supremacy. The widespread economic anxiety and precarity engendered by neoliberal capitalism and the Great Recession, as well as the social advancements made by women and people of color in recent years, signaled that there were substantial challenges to the hegemony of these myths and the power structures underpinning them in the United States.

For example, in the pilot episode of *Gold Rush*, Todd Hoffman explains that he and his father are responding to their economic misfortune by heading up to Alaska to mine for gold. Todd invokes frontier mythology to justify his decision: “So, like my forefathers—they balls-ed up, and they went out into the frontier” (2010). Were Todd’s literal forefathers “pioneers” who went westward as incentivized by the U.S. federal government? Whether he is a direct descendant of those who made that journey or not, it is significant that he conceives of himself as a rightful heir to that highly venerated U.S. mythology. As a white male who owned an airfield

in Oregon with his father Jack that was hit hard by the 2009 economic downturn, Hoffman wants to convey that he is reacting to his circumstances as he ought to be. He overtly connects the frontier ethos to masculine prowess, and the whiteness of his forefathers remains implicit and unremarked upon, as whiteness often is the dominant discourse.

Todd does not simply state that he and his father are taking an economic gamble by travelling up to Alaska to mine for gold; he essentially declares that he is exercising his birthright (as a white male) by going “out into the frontier.” It is also significant that the Hoffmans have a substantial amount of economic capital—hundreds of thousands of dollars to purchase high-powered machinery and supplies—which enables them to even attempt their mining expedition in the first place. Are they enduring difficult economic times? Certainly. However, the Hoffmans and their white, male crew’s structural location is comparatively advantaged within the working-class assemblage overall. As I discuss later in the chapter, the socioeconomic status of the mythical frontiersman necessitates further scrutiny.

This leads to an important clarification regarding frontier mythology: What and where exactly is the frontier? As Richard Dannon notes, “The West was quite literally nowhere—or everywhere, which was to say the same thing” (1997, p. 465). This echoes Gaston’s parameters of myths in the sense that “they fuse the real and the imaginary” (p. 9). Within frontier mythology, the frontier is in “the West,” which throughout U.S. history, can be charted as a relative geographic destination. The series under examination are filmed in the following locations, which vary occasionally throughout their multiple seasons: *Deadliest Catch* follows commercial fishermen on the Bering Sea off the coast of Alaska; *Ax Men* features commercial loggers in the forests of Oregon, Montana, Alaska, and other locations in the Western United States, as well as swamp and river loggers in Louisiana and Florida; *Ice Road Truckers*

documents commercial truck drivers traversing the winter seasonal ice roads in mostly Northwestern Canada and Alaska; *Gold Rush* depicts gold miners in Alaska and the Yukon, but also follows the Hoffman crew down to the jungles of Guyana for one season; and *Duck Dynasty*'s wilderness locations include the woods and swamps of Louisiana. Although these series primarily take place in the Western portions of the United States and Canada, all filming occurs in relatively remote wilderness settings, in which the elements themselves provide the backdrop for the overarching narrative of white men demonstrating their masculine prowess as they “tame the wilderness” through their occupations. It is the element of danger that nature itself poses that signals to audiences that these are not just workers, but “real men.”

Therefore, I conceive of the frontier in this analysis as an actual geographic terrain, primarily confined, but not limited to, Western North America, characterized by remote, unindustrialized, and sparsely populated natural landscapes, including forests, swamps, and large bodies of water. Simultaneously, I conceptualize the frontier in relation to its mythological function as a “spatial imaginary.” More specifically, I describe the frontier as a “white male spatial imaginary.” I am building upon critical race scholar George Lipsitz's theorization of “the white spatial imaginary” in *How Racism Takes Place*, which speaks to the relationship between white supremacy and place.

Lipsitz's conceptualization of the “white spatial imaginary” is in conversation with critical race theorist Cheryl Harris's formulation of “whiteness as property,” which is also useful in this analysis. Harris argues that “...American law has recognized a property interest in whiteness that, although unacknowledged, now forms the background against which legal disputes are framed, argued, and adjudicated” (1995, p. 277). She astutely grounds the metaphor of whiteness as property in relation to the history of the reservation of full property rights to

whites in the United States since the nation’s inception. She traces a critical genealogy of the social construction of race, in which the conflation of whiteness and property underpinned white supremacy, particularly in relation to the enslavement of African Americans *as* property and the dispossession of indigenous peoples from their lands. She characterizes whiteness as a form of property interest in that “...the law has accorded ‘holders’ of whiteness the same privileges and benefits accorded holders of other types of property” (p. 281). Harris recognizes how whiteness functions as a linchpin to full citizenship and individuality: “...whiteness became the quintessential property for personhood” (p. 281). Frontier mythology propagates the notion that the frontier exists as an empty terrain awaiting the settlement of whites, specifically white males. Thus, the frontier is a place reserved *for* white males.

Lipsitz explicates the ways in which places are always already racialized: “White identity in the United States is place bound. It exists and persists because segregated neighborhoods and segregated schools are nodes in a network of practices that skew opportunities and life chances along racial lines” (2011, p. 6). His analysis primarily focuses on the racialized spaces of cities and suburbs. He characterizes the white spatial imaginary as representing “...the properly gendered prosperous suburban home as the privileged moral geography of the nation. Widespread, costly, and often counterproductive practices of surveillance, regulation, and incarceration become justified as forms of *frontier defense* [emphasis added] against demonized people of color” (p. 13). The literal and figurative fortification of both the suburban home and the frontier is premised upon the white supremacist notion that only white people are *worthy* of inhabiting these spaces. The white spatial imaginaries of the suburban home and the frontier are cast as race-neutral terrains, in which the systemic advantages of whiteness remain concealed through mythic discourses of individual hard work and upward social mobility.

Particularly germane to this project is how Lipsitz draws a line of continuity between the contemporary white spatial imaginary of the suburban home and the eighteenth and nineteenth-century dominant conceptualization of the frontier. He puts forth the notion that the U.S. colonial desire for “pure and homogenous spaces”—deemed integral for the U.S. nation-building project—necessitated the removal and marginalization of “‘impure’ populations” (p.29). He explains that because the colonial march westward ultimately fell short of the imagined vision of (white male supremacist) freedom that “...the properly ordered and prosperous domestic dwelling eclipsed the frontier as the privileged moral geography of U.S. society, as the nation’s key symbol of freedom, harmony, and virtue” (p.30). I argue that the blue-collar reality shows represent a revival of the frontier as the preferred white spatial imaginary in contemporary U.S. society because of its connection to hegemonic masculinity. In the dominant discourse, the suburban home signifies white femininity and domesticity; a place where “real men” are constrained by a culture attempting to neutralize their masculine impulse to tame the wilderness. In that sense, the frontier of the blue-collar reality shows constitutes a specifically white, heteropatriarchal spatial imaginary.

Consequently, the frontier itself within frontier mythology functions as both a geographically tangible place *and* a white male spatial imaginary. It is the latter conceptualization that is of utmost relevance to the visibility of the blue-collar reality shows and understanding the systems of power congealed within their production and reception. As I will explain, U. S. historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” constitutes the ideological basis of frontier mythology. Turner views the frontier as an indispensable aspect of the social and cultural fabric of the United States, and claims it is the linchpin for U.S. exceptionalism. Moving forward, I refer to the frontier, rugged individualism, and U.S. exceptionalism as fundamentally

interrelated myths, and to white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism as the mutually constitutive ideological systems of oppression that underpin said myths.

In this chapter, I explore and historicize the presence of frontier mythology in the contemporary U.S. cultural context through the lens of the blue-collar reality shows. What cultural legacy do the remote, wilderness filming locations of these series tap into with U.S. audiences? I trace the origins of the frontier myth to U.S. historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s landmark thesis, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” which Turner delivered at the 1893 meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago. I contend that the frontier thesis ideologically underpins the contemporary frontier ethos, which is predicated upon the erasure and *ongoing* colonization of North America’s indigenous nations. It remains noteworthy that one of the most renowned U.S. historians of the last two centuries cites U.S. colonial expansion westward as fundamental to the preservation of what he refers to as the exceptional “American character” (2008, p.2). Therefore, this chapter not only aims to make the intertwined systems of power of colonialism, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy visible within the context of current mainstream media representations, but to also do so within the confines of orthodox U.S. historiography.

First, I will discuss Turner’s legacy within frontier mythology and “the Western” film and television genre. I contend that the series under examination signify a contemporary iteration of “the Western.” Although the blue-collar reality shows do not strictly adhere to all the conventions typically associated with the Western, they echo critical aspects of this distinctly American genre. Why are the narratives typically associated with this genre experiencing a cultural resurgence, albeit in a slightly different iteration, at this particular moment? I argue that the Great Recession spurred the production and popularity of these series in conjunction with the

white male backlash to the modest gains made by women, people of color, LGBTQ individuals, and those living at those intersections, in the mainstream political and cultural domains in recent years. This constellation of events has generated significant anxiety and anger among working and middle-class white, heteronormative men (Kimmel, 2013), and parallels the successful rise of President Donald Trump, as I detail more extensively in the first and fourth chapters. The blue-collar reality shows revive frontier mythology, which is commensurate with white male supremacy and U.S. exceptionalism, in the same spirit as Trump’s campaign slogan: “Make America Great Again.”

Second, I assert that indigenous critical theory is essential for understanding how frontier mythology, Westerns, and the blue-collar reality shows by extension reify settler-colonial logics and the erasure of North America’s indigenous peoples given the dominant conceptualization of the frontier as an “empty” or uninhabited wilderness. Although some Westerns include conflict with Native Americans as a prominent component of their narratives, the blue-collar reality shows make no explicit reference to indigenous peoples. It is only through the lens of indigenous critical theory that one can discern how the blue-collar reality shows reinscribe the ideological justification for the *continuing* colonization of indigenous nations and their lands. Lastly, after laying the theoretical foundations for unmasking the systems of power that ideologically buttress the frontier ethos as exemplified through the blue-collar reality shows, I will then detail how *Gold Rush*, *Ax Men*, *Ice Road Truckers*, and *Deadliest Catch* specifically invoke frontier mythology within their narratives and visuality. I contend that uncovering the systems of power entrenched within frontier mythology is a critical first step toward destabilizing the oppressive ideologies contained therein and, ultimately, delegitimizing and transforming them.

“*The Archetypical American Story*”

In his groundbreaking piece, “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse,” Stuart Hall explores the salience of the frontier in U.S. culture, particularly through the lens of “The Western” film and television genre. Hall fleshes out the relationship between the historic “American West” and the mythical one that has become embedded in U.S. culture. He explains that “this process, whereby the rules of language and discourse intervene, at a certain moment, to transform and ‘naturalize’ a specific set of historical circumstances, is one of the most important test-cases for any semiology which seeks to ground itself in historical realities” (as quoted in Hunt, 2005, p. 50). This project situates the blue-collar reality shows as operating within some of the dominant codes of The Western. Hall pinpoints this contemporary genre, with its distortion of U.S history, as perpetuating one of the most consequential mythologies in U.S. culture: “This is *the* archetypical American story, America of the frontier, of the expanding and unsettled West...It is the land of *men*, of independent men...for a time, in film and television, this deep-structure provided the taken-for-granted story-of-all-stories, the paradigm-action narrative, the perfect myth” (p. 50). These reality television programs can be situated within the lineage of the Western, frontier myth, in which the intertwined systems of power of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism, and their resultant symbolic and material violence, remain hidden.

Before I outline the genre conventions that the blue-collar reality shows share with the Western, I want to stress that I am not offering an exhaustive description of tropes endemic to this category of film and television—only the characteristics most germane to the series under examination. Richard Slotkin attests to the extensive influence of frontier mythology on U.S. media and popular culture in his own analysis:

...its characteristic conventions have strongly influenced nearly every genre of adventure story in the lexicon of mass-culture production...I have chosen, therefore, to limit this study to the genres that may be described as ‘Westerns’: story-forms whose connection to the characteristic images, characters, and references of frontier mythology is observably direct. (1998, p. 25)

This analysis echoes Slotkin’s observation, and I argue that like Westerns, the blue-collar reality shows are a highly productive entry point for directly observing frontier mythology in the contemporary, neoliberal context.

In *Riding the Video Range: The Rise and Fall of the Western on Television*, Gary A. Yoggy provides a detailed analysis of the history of the genre on television. Yoggy defines the Western as follows: “Time *and* place are both important criteria. A program should be considered a Western if it takes place west of the Mississippi *after* 1900, or east of the Mississippi prior to 1800” (1995, p. 2). It is critical to note that the blue-collar reality series take place within the last decade, but all the episodes are filmed west of the Mississippi, with the exception of some episodes of *Ax Men* featuring river loggers in Florida. Either way, the remote, wilderness settings remain a constant. In *The Western: Parables of the American Dream*, Jeffrey Wallmann offers a more expansive definition of Westerns, which aligns more closely with the blue-collar reality shows: “Because the frontier serves as the symbolic ‘cutting edge’ of American civilization and progress, there is no specific region or time period, and consequently there are westerns set on the Canadian frontier, the Alaskan frontier...westerns are adventures” (1999, p. 9).

It is this understanding of the Western that most aptly frames the emergence and popularity of the blue-collar reality shows in the past decade: They depict “real men” who within

frontier mythology are depicted in their rightful place on the “‘cutting edge’ of American civilization and progress.” Thus, the cultural and symbolic power of the frontier for reasserting U.S. exceptionalism, rugged individualism, and white male supremacy. As Wallmann concisely states, “...westerns are fundamentally allegories of the American dream” (p. 17). Therefore, when the American dream of upward economic mobility comes under more widespread duress and scrutiny because of the worst global economic downturn since the Great Depression, a reinvigoration of frontier mythology within the commercial television landscape aids in reaffirming the viability of those intertwined myths within the U.S. context.

As John E. O’Connor and Peter C. Rollins note in *Hollywood’s West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History*, “Contemporary politics clearly affect the construction of Westerns...” (2005, p. 31). The blue-collar reality shows provide a space where “real men” or white, rural, working-class men can be reified as the rightful purveyors of rugged individualism on the frontier at a time when their socioeconomic and cultural status has come under increasing external pressure and scrutiny. In short, these white males are configured as the standard bearers of the American dream itself. As Wallmann notes regarding the mythology of Westerns, “Only the strong were able to survive” (p. 22). The blue-collar reality series configure their subjects as such at the expense of those who fall outside of the social categories that define the frontiersman.

In *Westerns in a Changing America, 1955-2000*, R. Philip Loy addresses the wider cultural significance of the popular perception of John Wayne, a landmark figure for the performance of white, rural, working-class masculinity in the Western film genre, particularly during the sociocultural upheaval of the 1960s and 70s. I argue that Loy’s characterization of Wayne’s impact parallels the cultural significance of the frontiersmen of the blue-collar reality world in the last decade:

The notion that John Wayne came to be identified as *the* American at that moment in American history (when many Americans believed that the country they loved was passing away) is seminally important for understanding Wayne’s impact on the country during the last twenty years that he lived. (2004, p. 144)

It is telling that Loy fails to acknowledge the integral role of white male supremacy within the dominant perception of Wayne as “*the* American” at a time when struggles for justice for women, people of color, and LGBTQ individuals were gaining more traction in mainstream U.S. political and popular culture. I contend that the frontiersmen of the blue-collar reality shows are perceived similarly as “*the* Americans.” I argue that the like Westerns, these series reaffirm frontier mythology, which concurrently conceals and justifies white male supremacy as the linchpin to ideal U.S. citizenship and belonging.

Interestingly, Yoggy’s discussion of the 1955 Western anthology series, *Frontier*, touches upon some of the common threads within the series in this sample: “Realism was stressed and most plots portrayed settlers coping with the harsh environment...Although *Frontier* stressed human emotions and psychological influences, rather than gun duels and chases, it did not lack for action” (p. 82). The primary action of the blue-collar reality shows centers on white, male characters as they “tame the wilderness” via their occupations, in which the specter of bodily injury remains a critical component of the plot. Realism, as with all reality television programming, is emphasized as well, regardless of its actual validity. Wallmann reiterates that “...westerns are considered to be adventure stories, set on a frontier, about personal character striving to overcome perilous circumstances” (p. 9).

As Thom Beers, who serves as producer for *Deadliest Catch*, *Ax Men*, and *Ice Road Truckers*, as well as the narrator for the latter two series, remarks about his now cancelled series

Coal, “It’s a great, epic man-against-nature story” (Jennings, 2011). This characterization applies to all of Beers’ series under examination here. Unlike many conventional Westerns, the blue-collar reality programs align more stylistically with series like *Frontier*, in which gun battles and conflicts between “cowboys and Indians” do not transpire. As I discuss later, cowboy references do appear within these series—solidifying the association between the Western and contemporary U.S. hegemonic masculinity. As always, the threat of violence, due to the natural elements and the operation of heavy machinery in the case of the blue-collar reality programs, is a prominent feature within the Western and its underlying frontier mythology. For the frontiersman to be a “true man,” he must expose himself to danger and violence in the wilderness.

Slotkin charts the popularity of the Western throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He notes that despite the genre waning in overall popularity at certain points, its overriding ideological power remains endemic to U.S. culture: “The displacement of the Western from its place on the genre map did not entail the disappearance of those underlying structures of myth and ideology that had given the genre its cultural force” (p. 633). The popularity and proliferation of the blue-collar reality shows gestures toward the sustainability of frontier mythology as a cultural force in the United States. Although some purists would scoff at the suggestion that this subgenre of reality television programming constitutes an iteration of the Western, I maintain that its core premises and ideological bases fall within the parameters of the genre.

The essence of frontier mythology within the Western remains intact in *Ax Men*, *Gold Rush*, *Ice Road Truckers*, and *Deadliest Catch*. With the understanding that blue-collar reality series can be traced back to the Western film and television genre, I must turn to the foundational

ideology that underpins the Western, frontier myth and its counterparts of rugged individualism and U.S. exceptionalism: Turner’s “frontier thesis.”

Turner and Teddy’s Tales of “Real Men” Taming the Wilderness

Turner’s frontier thesis is encapsulated within this excerpt from his 1893 address:

American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier.

This perennial rebirth, the fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of *primitive society* [emphasis added], furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic Coast, it is the Great West (2008, p. 2).

With the U.S. Census of 1890 announcing the “closure” of the frontier, Turner warns that this will foster a crisis for the maintenance of the supposedly unique American character—invoking discourses of U.S. exceptionalism. He broadly conceives of (white male) U.S. identity as being continually reified through “westward expansion.” This term mitigates the brutal reality of the settler-colonization and genocide of indigenous peoples in U.S. history. He believes U.S. culture is preserved through the rugged individualism and egalitarian ethos supposedly endemic to frontier life. His visuality of an “empty frontier” that erases the presence of the indigenous peoples of the United States imposes symbolic violence upon them, which contributes to and justifies *actual* violence and other embodied, material consequences within the indigenous experience of settler-colonization. Contemporary references to the frontier, including on the blue-collar reality shows, demonstrate the symbolic power and legacy of frontier mythology, in which its historical and ongoing repercussions are rendered invisible.

Turner’s conceptualization of the frontier, which has become the dominant one in U.S. culture, not only erases indigenous peoples, but also naturalizes the presence of white males therein. Although Turner does not specify that the frontiersman is white, whiteness often operates as the “default” race, and typically goes unmentioned. It is evident that Turner is referring specifically to white men when he refers to individuals, as is typically the case in the dominant U.S. discourse—individuality tends to be reserved for white men. As he notes in relation to the frontiersmen’s class status: “Engaged in a struggle to subdue the forest, working as an individual, and with little specie or capital, his interests were with the debtor class” (2008, p. 44). It is noteworthy that Turner characterizes the mythical frontiersman as “working as an individual.” This speaks directly to the blue-collar reality shows, which frame their working-class, white male subjects as rugged individuals on the frontier. Furthermore, the blue-collar reality shows remain largely consistent with Turner’s understanding that the frontiersman’s “interests were with the debtor class.” However, both Turner and these series present frontiersmen as generally unrestrained by their socioeconomic location.

Turner’s brief acknowledgment of the existence of a class system belies his overriding assertion that rugged individualism and upward mobility thrive via an endlessly expanding frontier: “The self-made man was the Western man’s ideal, was the kind of man that all men might become. Out of his wilderness experience, out of the freedom of his opportunities, he fashioned a formula for social regeneration—the freedom of the individual to seek his own” (p. 48). He configures the frontier as an empty wilderness awaiting white frontiersmen to advance their individual social standing, which he theorizes also advances the United States as a nation-state. Per Turner, “. . . the frontier is productive of individualism. . . The frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy” (p. 30). He conceives of the frontiersmen as the

linchpin to U.S. democracy, despite his thesis being predicated upon the erasure of indigenous peoples and the subordination of all those who fall outside of the intersecting social categories that comprise the social location of the frontiersman. He demarcates white males as the universalizing individual persons to whom the frontier belongs. The role of place in relation to hegemonic masculinity cannot be overstated, as well as Turner’s notion that U.S. exceptionalism itself depends upon frontiersmen.

Turner offers his assessment regarding the significance of the settling (colonizing) of the frontier within the wider U.S. nation-building project: “And to study this advance, the men who grew up under these conditions, and the political, economic, and social results of it, is to study the really American part of our history” (2008, pp. 4-5). In other words, “real men” forged “the really American part of our history.” The blue-collar reality shows represent a contemporary manifestation of Turner’s imperial, white supremacist, heteropatriarchal logic, which inextricably links the visualities of the frontier, “real men,” and hegemonic notions of U.S. national identity. Again, the Western, frontier myth has become so commonplace and normalized within U.S. culture, that upon engaging in dominant readings of these series, the legacies of the systems of oppression imbued in them remain invisible.

Slotkin characterizes the essence of Turner’s frontier mythology. He explicitly comments on the role of race therein, but does not note the normalization of patriarchy in conjunction with white supremacy. However, he does touch upon some of the parallel dichotomies that shape the frontier ethos:

The moral landscape of the Frontier Myth is divided by significant borders, of which the wilderness/civilization, Indian/White border is the most basic. The American must cross the border into ‘Indian Country’ and experience a ‘regression’ to a more primitive and

natural condition of life so that the false values of the ‘metropolis’ can be purged and a new, purified social contract enacted. Although the Indian and the Wilderness are the settler’s enemy, they also provide him with the new consciousness through which he will transform the world. (p. 14)

In the blue-collar reality series, the wilderness functions as the primary antagonist, and Native Americans are absent, or more accurately, remain outside of the observable frame of these series. Despite this, the frontier myth, no matter its iteration, is always already predicated upon the erasure of indigenous peoples. The blue-collar reality shows present the ritualized journey of frontiersmen, which Slotkin describes above as travelling “to a more primitive and natural condition of life so that the false values of the ‘metropolis’ can be purged and a new, purified social contract enacted” (p. 14).

The vary basis of the conceptualization of the frontier, as articulated by Turner, is that it exists as an empty wilderness awaiting the frontiersman, who somehow transforms the nation-state via his personal transformation. As discussed extensively in chapter one, the popular appeal of the blue-collar reality shows resides in their depiction of “real men.” As per Turner and Slotkin’s description above, the idea that men must leave the city for the wilderness to appropriately perform hegemonic masculinity speaks to the critical role of place therein. In short, the frontier corresponds with dominant conceptualizations of both “real men” and “real America,” and the blue-collar reality shows reify the hegemony of the two during a time of widespread economic and cultural anxiety in the United States, particularly for white, working and middle-class men (Filipovic, 2016; Rampell, 2009; Thompson, 2016).

Turner asserts that “moving westward, the frontier became more and more American” (p. 4). He implies that the farther the frontiersman moves away from the Eastern metropolises and

into “primitive” territory, the more truly American he becomes. I explore this notion more specifically in relation to the series that film in Alaska. This echoes my contention that the frontier functions as a white male spatial imaginary, which brands itself as the seemingly race and gender neutral landscape of “real America.” Turner develops this further and emphasizes the separation between the Eastern and the Western United States:

From the time the mountains rose between the pioneer and the seaboard, a new order of Americanism arose. The West and the East began to get out of touch with each other. The settlements from the sea to the mountains kept connection with the rear and had certain solidarity. But the over-mountain men grew more and more independent. The East took a narrow view of American advance, and nearly lost these men. (p. 17)

It is critical to stress that Turner conceives of U.S. exceptionalism as being preserved not only through white men taming the wilderness, but through their doing so as part of the wider settler-colonizing march westward. Thus, he expresses alarm regarding the “closure” of the frontier. His claim that U.S. exceptionalism can only be reified through never-ending imperialism, which is the reality of westward expansion, suggests that the settler-colonization of indigenous peoples is natural, inevitable, and desirable.

Theodore Roosevelt, whose embodied performance of white, rural, working-class masculinity as an aristocratic politician from the East Coast is discussed in the fourth chapter, rhetorically built upon Turner’s thesis. On April 10, 1899, Roosevelt gave a speech before the Hamilton Club in Chicago entitled “The Strenuous Life.” In this landmark address, Roosevelt espouses his belief that (white) American men must not remain docile, inactive, and cautious: “...I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife...to the man who does not shrink from danger, from

hardship, or from bitter toil...” (2008, p. 7). He addresses the audience as the “men of the great city of the West” (p. 7). His emphasis on the West cannot be overlooked within the context of Turner. Roosevelt, who was born into a wealthy family in New York City, also echoed Turner’s sentiment that the West was where American exceptionalism thrived. It is through Roosevelt that one can directly observe the effects of the frontier thesis on mainstream U.S. political discourse and public policy.

As Gail Bederman explains in *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, Roosevelt performed as a frontiersman to attain political legitimacy: “...he constructed a powerful male identity for himself in the terms of the Western adventure story...Now, shooting buffalo and bullying obstreperous cowboys, he could style himself the real thing” (1995, pp. 174-175). As contemporary iterations of Western, frontier myths, the blue-collar reality shows operate within the same codes as Roosevelt’s political performance. As was the case for Roosevelt, “the Western adventure story” continues to be a reliable cultural force for ideologically reasserting white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and colonial logics in U.S. culture, in which these systems of oppression remain simultaneously concealed and naturalized.

Like Turner, Roosevelt does not delineate between one’s personal behavior and the wider national objectives of the United States: “As it is with the individual, so it is with the nation” (p. 8). It is critical to reiterate that Roosevelt’s conceptualization of “the individual” mirrors Turner’s: the individual is assumed white and male. Bederman pinpoints how Roosevelt ideologically championed both white male supremacy and U.S. imperialism: “As he saw it, the United States was engaged in a millennial drama of manly racial advancement, in which American men enacted their superior manhood by asserting imperialistic control over races of

inferior manhood” (p. 171). Bederman further contextualizes Roosevelt’s “The Strenuous Life” address as demonstrative of the fact “...that his strenuous manhood was inextricably linked to his nationalism, imperialism, and racism” (p. 193).

One can envision the fishermen, loggers, gold miners, and ice road truckers of the blue-collar reality programs as signifying Roosevelt’s ideal of the “strenuous life” when he proclaims that “...it is only through strife, through hard and dangerous endeavor, that we shall ultimately win the goal of true national greatness” (p. 13). Again, Roosevelt and Turner conceive of rugged individualism on the frontier as the exclusive, rightful terrain of heteronormative, white men. Therefore, the mythical frontiersman is underpinned by logics of white male supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism, which remain hidden via the related myths of rugged individualism and U.S. exceptionalism. As I have mentioned, the mythical frontier landscape itself is grounded in the historical and ongoing colonization of indigenous peoples in its dominant construction, as articulated most notably by Turner and Roosevelt, as an empty, uninhabited wilderness. To fully account for the implications of frontier mythology in relation to the symbolic and material violence it imposes upon indigenous nations, I must foreground indigenous critical theory in this analysis.

In *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*, Jodi Byrd outlines indigenous critical theory, which makes the oppressive structures that constitute the frontier ethos visible. Byrd illuminates the inherent tension between indigenous critical theory and postcolonialism, in which the former calls attention to the false perception that currently colonized spaces and peoples, including the indigenous peoples of North America, exist in a ‘post’-colonial state. For the indigenous nations residing within its borders, the United States remains an active colonizing agent. She challenges how settler-colonial logics have

problematically constructed the social category of “the Indian” or what she refers to as “paradigmatic Indianness” to begin with: “...it suggests a cultural and racial homogeneity that does not exist. There are over five hundred and sixty indigenous nations and/or communities and hundreds of language stocks within the lands that constitute the United States alone that would fall under the category ‘Indian’” (2011, p. 73). This collapse of indigenous nations into a seemingly unidimensional, racial category within a framework of liberal multiculturalism obfuscates the enduring legacy of settler-colonialism. She further elucidates how the frontier ethos deepens settler-colonial logics and currently configures “the Indian”:

Although critical theory has focused much attention on the role of frontiers and Manifest Destiny in the creation and rise of U.S. empire, American Indians and other indigenous peoples have often been evoked in such theorizations as past tense presences. Indians are typically spectral, implied and felt, but remain as lamentable casualties of national progress who haunt the United States on the cusp of empire and are destined to disappear with the frontier itself. (Location 191-199)

Byrd’s provocation guides this analysis in terms of its engagement with frontier mythology: it is imperative not to reinforce the notion that Native Americans have somehow been relegated to the past tense, or as is the case with the blue-collar reality shows, that they have somehow been always already gone. The filming locations of these programs are framed as perpetual empty wildernesses, awaiting the arrival of the rightful frontiersmen to stake their claims. Without Byrd’s intervention of indigenous critical theory, one fails to recognize the full extent of the consequences of the replication of frontier mythology. Simply put: Frontier mythology is inseparable from the violent settler-colonization of America’s indigenous peoples.

Byrd contends that “the United States needs ‘cowboys and Indians’ to inhabit the ‘frontiers’ of its borders...” (p. 209). The blue-collar reality shows can be understood as an attempt to fulfill one of the “needs” of hegemonic U.S. culture: to document and preserve the actions of contemporary cowboys on the frontier, in which their primary conflict is with nature. Despite indigenous peoples not being within the observable purview of the blue-collar reality shows, indigenous critical theory provides the lens through which to detect how they are always already interpellated within frontier mythology and discourses. It is important to clarify here that I am not suggesting that indigenous peoples should somehow be represented within the narratives of the blue-collar reality shows—representation alone would not rectify the pernicious cumulative effects of frontier mythology. My goal here is to disrupt the normalization and veneration of frontier mythology in U.S. culture, so that its role in ideologically justifying white male supremacy and settler-colonialism can be unmasked and subsequently destabilized.

Byrd argues that “U.S. frontier discourses” suggest that “...the only way to become ‘true’ American citizens is to first go native and then carve democracy out of the wilderness” (p. 191). This encapsulates Turner’s thesis, and it is important to emphasize that the notion of “going native” is at the expense of Native Americans. Within frontier mythology, it is white, heteronormative men who are the rugged individuals that foment U.S. democracy out of their dangerous encounters in the wilderness. I argue that during this time of widespread socioeconomic and cultural anxiety and anger among white males in the United States (Kimmel 2013), the mythology of the frontier is being rearticulated within the logics of commercial television to assuage those fears. In *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*, Ray Allen Billington provides insight into the purported reasons why frontier mythology continues to flourish in U.S. culture:

Students of American thought have isolated three reasons for the persistence –and exaggeration—of the frontier myth in the twentieth-century United States: a strong back-to-Nature urge among a sizeable portion of the people, a rebellion against conventionalism, and a longing for individualistic expression... That those frontiers never did exist is not important; they are nonetheless real to their creators and wondrously suited to the psychological needs of today. (1981, p. 313)

Although Billington fails to recognize the place of white male supremacy and settler-colonialism within frontier mythology, he does touch upon the power of an imagined frontier in meeting “the psychological needs of today.” However, he does not address whose needs precisely are fulfilled via frontier mythology and at whose expense.

With the revelation that frontier mythology serves to ideologically justify and conceal the intertwined systems of white male supremacy, capitalism, and settler-colonialism under the seemingly benevolent guise of celebrating rugged individualism and U.S. exceptionalism, I will now detail how the blue-collar reality shows specifically exemplify the frontier ethos.

The Frontier: “Real Men” in “Real America” on “Real TV”

Several media studies scholars have engaged with the role of the frontier within U.S. cable’s blue-collar reality terrain. In Augie Fleras and Shane Michael Dixon’s “Cutting, Digging, and Harvesting: Re-masculinizing the Working-Class Heroic,” the authors provide a thorough and theoretically nuanced content analysis of the blue-collar reality shows, specifically attending to *Deadliest Catch*, *Ice Road Truckers*, *Sandhogs*, and *Ax Men*. Fleras and Dixon assert that these series are “...redramatizing the mythic (frontier) struggle between men and untamed wilderness” (2011, p. 589). The anthology, *Reality Television: Oddities of Culture*, contains two

highly pertinent chapters for critically examining frontier mythology within the blue-collar reality shows: Burton P. Buchanan’s “Portrayals of Masculinity in the Discovery Channel’s *Deadliest Catch*” and William C. Trapani and Laura L. Winn’s “Manifest Masculinity: Frontier, Fraternity, and Family in Discovery Channel’s *Gold Rush*.” Buchanan recognizes the ways in which *Deadliest Catch* depicts hegemonic masculinity, and appropriately situates hegemonic masculinity as inextricably linked with whiteness. He elucidates what this representation of hegemonic masculinity means at this juncture, and pinpoints the role of place therein:

...white male power has endured encroachment as women, gays and minorities have gained social power in recent decades. *Deadliest Catch* serves as a fine example of a reality television program that demonstrates an environment where traditional masculinity is exercised, a place where white males can perform masculine rituals, compete with one another *in an adverse environment* [emphasis added] and reassert their position in the social cultural hierarchies. (2014, p. 2)

Buchanan critically posits that “frontierness” is one of the primary characteristics of hegemonic masculinity in U.S. culture (p. 5). He reiterates the cultural importance of Turner’s frontier thesis: “As Frederick Jackson Turner put forth, the frontiersmen were those *rugged individuals* [emphasis added], daring and romantic who helped build up the American continent and left a lasting image that remains symbolic of America” (p. 10). As his description implies, this positions rugged individualism, one of the prized tenets of U.S. culture, as the exclusive domain of white males embodying working-class aesthetics and/or engaging in manual labor on the frontier. Despite this observation, he neglects to note the ways in which Turner’s frontier thesis naturalizes colonialism and erases indigenous peoples. I maintain that the concept of the mythic frontiersman is predicated upon the complex intertwinement of white supremacy,

heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism. Through Buchanan’s description of frontiersmen, one can trace the legitimacy and symbolic power this fundamentally exclusionary and oppressive performance confers in the United States.

In Trapani and Winn’s “Manifest Masculinity,” the authors situate *Gold Rush* and the other blue-collar reality series as demonstrative of a “new masculinity crisis” (p. 185). Like Kimmel, they trace the development of this crisis, in which the economic downturn beginning in the late 2000s serves as a flashpoint: “Indeed, the recent economic meltdown that began in 2007 set off the newest and perhaps deepest yet anxiety over the role of men in the social order” (p. 186). I attend specifically to the connections between the rise of blue-collar reality series, the masculinity crisis, and the Great Recession in the first chapter. Trapani and Winn ignore the centrality of whiteness to these hegemonic masculine narratives, but do recognize the reinvigoration of frontier mythology within this subgenre of reality television. However, without explicit attentiveness to white supremacy, their analysis pertaining to the frontier remains incomplete. As they explain in relation to the symbolic objective of *Gold Rush*,

...we read the 19th Century advance to the ‘frontier’ against the proliferation of hypermasculine reality programs today...discovering gold is ancillary to the cause itself...to effect a reconnection to the symbolic order in which men are once again in charge even if it is because all *others* [emphasis added] have been evacuated from the scene. (p. 185)

This speaks to the absence of women of all races and people of color of all genders throughout these series with a few notable exceptions. It is surprising then that the authors do not explicitly acknowledge how white supremacy operates within these narratives.

Despite this glaring omission, the authors do rightly connect the blue-collar reality shows to frontier mythology. Specifically attending to *Gold Rush*, they note that “... the West is often characterized as the place where one can experience the last vestiges of real America” (p. 194). With the recognition that place matters within hegemonic masculinity, it is predictable then that *Gold Rush*, *Ax Men*, *Ice Road Truckers*, and *Deadliest Catch* feature panoramic, overhead shots of wilderness landscapes in nearly every episode, typically accompanied by narration at points of introduction or transition. The prominence of scenic landscape shots within these series speaks to the visuality of frontier mythology. These shots suggest that these forests, mountains, seascapes, and frozen tundra signify “real America”—even if they are filmed in Canada, as is the case with *Ice Road Truckers* and occasionally *Gold Rush*. As Wallman notes, “Because the frontier serves as the symbolic ‘cutting edge’ of American civilization and progress, there is no specific region or time period, and consequently there are westerns set on the Canadian frontier, the Alaskan frontier...” (1999, p. 9). Thus, geopolitical borders are not as important as the mythical notion that this seemingly vast and sparsely populated terrain awaits the frontiersman to demonstrate his masculine prowess and rugged individualism to symbolically “make America great again”—to echo Trump’s campaign slogan. I maintain that this is the subtext of the blue-collar reality shows: a reinvigoration of frontier mythology reclaiming “real America” for “real men.”

I will begin with the most recent series in the sample, *Gold Rush*, since it is the most overtly aligned with frontier mythology in its overarching narrative structure, as per the discussion of Todd Hoffman’s comments at the beginning of the chapter. The first season was entitled *Gold Rush: Alaska* before the series began to follow mining crews in the Yukon. The show situates itself within the lineage of the historic Klondike Gold Rush in the Yukon and Alaska from 1896 to 1899; occasionally showing black-and-white photos of miners and stating

facts about the mining expeditions of the period. As narrator Paul Christie notes in the pilot episode, “Back in the Klondike Gold Rush in the 1890s, less than one percent of those who set out struck it rich” (2010). The goal for miners is not to achieve a comfortable standard of living, but to strike it rich. The show commends attempting to join the ranks of the one percent during the Great Recession.

This all-or-nothing, every-man-for-himself mentality mirrors Turner’s conceptualization of rugged individualism. Despite the acknowledgment of the grim economic and environmental realities Klondike miners endured in the late nineteenth century, the show still romanticizes the pursuit for gold and accumulated wealth. It promotes the idea that there is honor in the journey itself, since this is what real men do in the face of economic hardship. As per Todd Hoffman’s comments, regardless of the risks, he is honoring his imagined ancestral legacy by following his supposed forefathers’ path since “...they balls-ed up, and they went out into the frontier.” Within this romanticized pursuit of riches, the Hoffmans themselves hardly break even the first few seasons. Throughout the series, they never reach the upper echelons of wealth and status through mining.

The episode description on *Amazon* for the pilot episode, “No Guts, No Glory,” provides insight into how the series is framed and promoted: “When the going gets tough, *the tough seek new frontiers* [emphasis added]. Six recession-hit patriots from Oregon become greenhorn old miners and head north to Alaska to dig for gold and save themselves from financial ruin” (2010). Framing these miners as “patriots” speaks to the relationship between frontier mythology and U.S exceptionalism. The message is that patriots are real men (white, rural, working-class men) who seek new frontiers. In the opening sequence, Todd Hoffman is seen asking the camera rhetorically: “Can’t a guy risk it all in America anymore?” Todd is setting out to prove that

somehow, he can. This rhetorical question is in conversation with Trump’s campaign slogan of “Make America Great Again.” Hoffman’s inclusion of the word “anymore” gestures toward the idea that at one time it was possible for “a guy” to “risk it all in America.” Rather than address economic inequality as a systemic, long-term problem that requires collective action, the series glamorizes frontier mythology, so as not to point toward a deeper examination of the complex, neoliberal economic policies that fostered the Great Recession in the first place. The show reinscribes the dominant U.S. mythology of rugged individualism and upward economic mobility, which are central to neoliberalism, at a time when it should logically come under increased scrutiny and critique.

In keeping with frontier mythology, the Hoffmans and their crew journey northwest to Alaska. As the narrator explains in the first episode, “To find a gold claim, the Hoffmans are travelling to *America’s last frontier* [emphasis added]. Buried in the Alaskan wilderness is an estimated \$250 billion worth of gold” (2010). The claim that Alaska is America’s “last frontier” is common, and the phrase is even included on one of the state’s recent license plate designs (Gutierrez, 2015). One might logically gravitate toward Alaska as “the last frontier” in the United States in relation to Turner’s assertion that “moving westward, the frontier became more and more American” (p. 4). Within the logic of frontier mythology, Alaska is then the focal point of “real America” because it is the farthest western U.S. continental territory. It contains a vast and largely uninhabited wilderness seemingly awaiting brave frontiersmen, who are always configured as white, rural, working-class men, like the Hoffmans and their crew. Frontier mythology has become so naturalized and ubiquitous in U.S. culture that its ideological roots in white male supremacist heteropatriarchy and settler-colonialism remain hidden.

Within the logic of frontier mythology and in *Gold Rush* by extension, “real men” are white, rural, working-class men and Alaska typifies “real America.” What also constitutes Alaska as a designated frontier within frontier mythology is that its terrain, particularly the mining sites featured in the series, are highly remote and hazardous. As Jack Hoffman, Todd’s father, says to the camera as they finally arrive at their site after a risky trek with their massive load of equipment: “It takes some kahunas to do this. There are dangers every time we turn around” (2010). Thus, the frontier functions as a white male spatial imaginary upon which hegemonic masculinity can be ritualistically enacted.

Later in the episode, Jack Hoffman gives a rousing speech to his crew after they arrive at their gold claim and admire the surrounding mountainous landscape. Standing tall and pointing at the adjacent areas, he loudly proclaims: “Everything you see right here is ours. All this down here is ours. Up there is ours” (2010). Indigenous critical theory problematizes such statements. Jack reinforces the idea that these originally indigenous lands are rightfully theirs for the taking. His proclamation does more than just state the obvious: yes, this is the land upon which they will mine for gold. His declaration implies something more grandiose and sweeping—that the land *belongs* to them. This is consistent with frontier mythology, which configures the wilderness as the *exclusive* terrain of white men who must ultimately tame and subdue it. This colonial conceptualization of land and nature, in which natural resources are valued solely in relation to their ability to be extracted and monetized within the capitalism system, speaks to another pernicious aspect of frontier mythology. All the shows included in the sample document and glamorize the destruction of the natural environment to simultaneously fulfill material, capitalistic, as well as ritual, heteropatriarchal, needs and desires. Unlike indigenous nations, the dominant white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, capitalist culture does not approach the

environment with a sense of reverence and appreciation. If anything, these series demonstrate how the dominant culture continues to rationalize and celebrate environmental destruction.

In season One: Episode 10: “Never Say Die,” Paul Christie reminds the viewer of the narrative framework of the series at the beginning of the episode: “Last spring, six down-on-their-luck men left Oregon...for the Alaskan wilderness...They dropped everything to find gold...to live the American dream” (2011). The voiceover is interspliced with footage of the miners, and cuts to an American flag flapping in the wind upon the Christie mentioning the American dream. *Gold Rush* demonstrates how frontier mythology serves as a highly visceral and effective shorthand for appealing to U.S. exceptionalism. Despite the crew experiencing equipment failures, bad weather, and other misfortunes, their struggle for riches is still glamorized as a ritualistic exercise of hegemonic masculinity, and suggests that this is the proper way to honor the American dream.

As the series progresses, the cameras document the trials and tribulations of other white male gold mining crews in Alaska and the Yukon. The other crews are included to keep the show engaging, and as is the case with the other blue-collar reality shows under examination, to frame the shows as competitions for who can rake in the most money. This allows the rugged individualism endemic to frontier mythology to come even more flagrantly to the forefront. Rugged individualism tends to mask itself as a gentler form of Social Darwinism. As Wallmann notes regarding the mythology of Westerns, “Only the strong were able to survive” (p. 22). The element of manufactured competition within these series speaks to the Western, frontier tradition, and therefore, has implications beyond functioning as a plot device.

In Season Two: Episode Three: “Virgin Ground,” Todd gives his crew a pep talk during a mining season already marked by mishaps, especially in comparison to the other two crews featured in the second season. Todd addresses his skeptical crew:

If you guys got the cajones, let’s team up again and really hit it hard, 100 percent... We represent the best country in the world. That’s where we live, that’s where we were born, and people have died for the freedoms that we have. So who’s with me? (2011)

It is striking that he makes a dramatic appeal to both hegemonic masculinity and U.S. exceptionalism in convincing his crew to continue supporting an incredibly risky business venture, in which they are all taking considerable economic and physical risks. Todd’s message is clear: If you are a real man and a true American patriot, then you will continue to support his mining expedition. Therefore, if any of his crew were to back out, they would risk being emasculated and being perceived as unpatriotic. This suggests that the frontier is for real men who are simultaneously designated as real Americans—the two conceptualizations remain inextricably linked. Todd’s remarks reveal the extent to which frontier mythology and its interrelated myths of rugged individualism and U.S. exceptionalism bolster white male supremacist and capitalist systems.

Moving to *Ax Men*, one can observe the imprints of frontier mythology throughout its nine seasons. The series, which is also narrated by producer Thom Beers, places various logging crews in a manufactured competition with one another for who can haul the most loads. In Season Two: Episode Eight: “One Weak Link,” Beers begins the episode with a sense of urgency: “Tonight on Ax Men...the race for loads is on...It’s man...versus the wild...and not everyone will make it” (2009). His voiceover epitomizes frontier mythology. Even though each logging crew consists of multiple loggers working together, Beers frames the episode as though

“It’s man...versus the wild.” As per Turner’s thesis, it is fundamental that rugged individualism remain at the epicenter of frontier mythology. Furthermore, Beers demonstrates the Social Darwinian aspect of rugged individualism when he dramatically declares that “not everyone will make it.” Of course, this dramatic exaggeration builds suspense.

It is worth reemphasizing that frontier mythology necessitates the construction of a seemingly independent frontiersman overcoming nature. For the frontiersman to be exceptional, it requires the relational construction of those who fail to tame the wilderness or those who do not “make it.” Of course, as is the case with *Ax Men*, none of these men are logistically unaided, and their social advantages as white males remain hidden or at least unremarkable within the dominant discourse. Because frontier mythology is constructed as a masculinized, individualistic encounter with nature, it is unsurprising that the Social Darwinian foundations of rugged individualism are frequently articulated within frontier discourses. As Dwayne Dethlefs of the Pihl logging company says in Season One: Episode 11: “Storm of the Century,” “You gotta be tough to live in the West” (2008). The role of place, specifically the Western wilderness, within contemporary U.S. hegemonic masculinity cannot be overstated. The frontier functions as the white male spatial imaginary through which “real men” or “rugged individuals” solidify the legacy of U.S. exceptionalism.

In Season Two: Episode 11: “Clash of the Titans,” the plot centers on a heightened sense of competition between the Rygaard Logging and J.M. Browning Logging companies. Beers begins the episode: “Deep within the mountains of Oregon and Washington, an epic battle rages between two titans of logging” (2009). Euphemisms for war and violence are also interwoven throughout the series—a standard practice within representations of hegemonic masculinity, as discussed at length in the first chapter. The episode first heads to the Browning site in Oregon.

Beers includes an overt reference to the Western film and television genre when he describes Jesse Browning, the son of the company’s eponymous owner as follows: “Jay’s son Jesse has been top gun at shingle mill” (2009). This is a prime example of the series trying to discursively situate itself within the legacy of the Western to achieve broad-based commercial appeal with U.S. audiences. Although there is no usage of guns or firearms within the show, the narrative framings often contain a violent subtext.

Beers concludes the episode with more melodramatic language invoking the rugged individualism of frontier mythology: “The men of the mountain battle for pride...for survival...and for the title, king of the mountain” (2009). *Ax Men* awards the owner of the logging company that hauls the most loads at the end of the season with the symbolic title, “king of the mountain.” Despite the labor and teamwork of an entire crew making their operations run smoothly, the owner of the logging company becomes the proverbial king. The mythology of the frontier is one of survival of the fittest, and fosters a false sense of masculinized self-reliance and independence for the frontiersman. Furthermore, the suggestion that cutting down a massive number of trees enables a single man to somehow dominate or “own” nature further legitimizes environmental destruction in the name of celebrating masculine prowess.

In Season Three: Episode Three: “King of the Mountain,” Gabe Rygaard, heir of Rygaard Logging, says to the camera after an exhausting nonstop, overnight shift of dangerous downhill logging: “You know, I’m tired. I feel like crap. But I’ll tell you what: Me and my crew own this mountain” (2010). It is noteworthy that Gabe does credit his crew, which momentarily disrupts the winner-take-all narrative. However, the capitalistic notion of private ownership defines his relationship to his line of work. He does not only own a company that cuts down trees—he somehow conceives of himself as also owning the mountain from which they spring. *Ax Men*

exemplifies the idea that hegemonic masculinity must be tested and celebrated on the frontier, in which nature itself only serves as a proving ground. I maintain that hegemonic masculine status remains contingent upon the appearance of mastery over nature, in which environmental destruction is but another casualty.

Like *Gold Rush*, *Ax Men* reinforces the perception that Alaska is somehow the last frontier. In Season Four: Episode One: “Alaska,” the cameras begin to document the Papac Alaska Logging company. Beers begins the episode with the bold claim: “The Ax Men strike out into uncharted territory: Alaska” (2011). This echoes the idea that Alaska is a mythical and uninhabited wilderness. The panoramic overhead shots of Alaska also include wildlife, notably wolves and bears. As per Turner’s thesis, the farther West and more remote the terrain, the more truly American it becomes. Alaska is situated as a more venerable proving ground for hegemonic masculinity because of the harsher weather and presence of more dangerous animals.

Beers introduces Papac Alaska Logging as follows: “700 miles north of the lower 48, a new outfit is pushing logging all the way to America’s final frontier” (2011). The designation of Alaska as either the final or last frontier implies that no other terrain surpasses it as an ultimate test of manhood. As Mike “Coatsy” Coats of Papac brags to the camera, “And it’s just the terrain’s way tougher up here. I mean, my daughter could log down there where Rygaard logs [Washington]” (2011). Coatsy also speaks to the capitalist underpinnings of frontier mythology: “Bigger risk in Alaska. Bigger reward. That’s why I come up here. For the big money.” The message is clear: Real men prove their masculine authenticity through attempting to strike it rich in hazardous terrain. Even if these frontiersmen fall short of accumulating substantial wealth—as most of them do—undertaking the ritualized frontier journey itself confers a superior masculine status.

Deadliest Catch also finds itself in Alaska—more specifically, the frigid waters of Alaska’s Bering Sea. The series incorporates the frontier mythology of rugged individualism through its construction of a competition between the five to six boats prominently featured each season. The show keeps a running “crab count” for how many pounds of king or opilio crab each boat catches in the November and January fishing seasons respectively. Narrator Mike Rowe frequently reminds the audience that Alaskan crab fishing is statistically the most dangerous job in the world. Of all the programs in this sample, *Deadliest Catch* maintains the distinction of documenting fatalities, including a crew of six fishermen during its first season. Although this was not a boat the series was following closely, stark reminders of the dangers of the job appear frequently, as the U.S. Coast Guard makes multiple appearances throughout the series on search and rescue missions.

Despite remaining a highly dangerous occupation, Alaskan crab fishing has gotten much safer overall since new quota rules were implemented for each fishing vessel after the show’s first season (Christie, 2012). Captain Sig Hansen of the *Northwestern* is featured throughout the show’s twelve seasons, and bemoans the end of “derby-style” fishing, in which boats such as his would regularly take extreme risks to haul as much as crab as possible—putting profits over safety. In Season One: Episode Nine: “The Clock’s Ticking,” Sig invokes U.S exceptionalism and rugged individualism in his opposition to the new regulation: “I like the way it is...It’s the American way to me. Go for it and do it yourself and all that” (2005). He does not seem to value the safety of his crew, who place themselves in dangerous scenarios for the sake of his success as much as their own, as much as his desire for increased profits. Rowe narrates in Season One: Episode 10: “The Final Run” that “...this is the final season for free-spirited entrepreneurs to win big on the Bering Sea” (2005). The end of cutthroat and potentially deadly competition for the

sake of capitalist ends is framed as a mournful development. Despite the class hierarchies that exist between the captain and his crew, they are all collapsed into the category of “free-spirited entrepreneurs” in accordance with the capitalist foundations of frontier mythology. Government regulation for the benefit of workers’ health and safety is at odds with frontier mythology and neoliberal capitalism, and this is but one telling example.

In relation to overt associations with the Western genre, the show’s opening theme song is Bon Jovi’s “Wanted Dead or Alive,” in which cowboy imagery figures prominently in the lyrics (1986). In addition to including panoramic landscape shots of the Bering Sea and the Alaskan shoreline, the camera occasionally flashes to a wild American bald eagle, such as in Season Three: Episode Seven: “New Beginnings” (2007), Season Six: Episode 10: “The Darkened Seas” (2010), and Season Seven: Episode One: “New Blood (2011). The inclusion of the U.S. national bird is a nod to U.S. exceptionalism, and signals an attempt at associating the commercial fishermen with patriotism.

Despite the structure of the occupation itself requiring a substantial amount of teamwork, the rugged individualism counterpart of frontier mythology remains a staple of the series. In Season Nine: Episode Two: “Dagger in the Back,” Rowe melodramatically intones, “The hunt is on...And it’s every man for himself” (2013). The ways in which white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism structure the life chances of the captains and their crews in various ways remains invisible. These fishermen are framed as both unencumbered and unaided by structural realities.

Frontier mythology also tends to anthropomorphize nature itself. Considering the occupations featured in the blue-collar reality shows often cause significant environmental harm, it is important to emphasize that nature functions as a proving ground for authentic masculinity

and capitalistic resource extraction within the logic of the frontier myth. There is no respect for nature beyond the challenge it poses to the individual men attempting to tame it. In “The Final Run,” Rowe minimizes tragedy in preserving frontier mythology, while autotomizing nature: “Six men died before the sea finally showed mercy. These fishermen risk their lives for the opportunity to make fast cash” (2005). The idea that the sea autonomously shows mercy, or independently “decides” to take some lives and not others, feeds into the fatalistic Social Darwinism that accompanies frontier mythology. The idea that people die in an attempt “to make fast cash” is glamorized, not problematized or challenged. In “Season Three: Episode Seven: “New Beginnings,” Rowe again demonstrates this tendency to anthropomorphize nature: “...The vicious Bering Sea will unleash surprises...on the 400 brave souls tempting fate for fortune...Now the hunt continues...for the deadliest catch” (2007). In keeping with Turner’s thesis, fetishizing the frontier is necessary for conserving U.S. exceptionalism. Thus, even when these dominant, intertwined mythologies face increased public scrutiny, such as during the Great Recession, dominant institutions such as commercial television reinvest in them. This is not only because these myths appeal to mainstream U.S. audiences, which then assures advertising revenue, but also because the corporate-owned networks have an ideological stake in the preservation of the neoliberal capitalist status quo. Romanticized narratives of rugged individualism seek to deter collective organizing and action (Zweig, 2000).

Frontier rhetoric also figures prominently in *Ice Road Truckers*. Thom Beers too produces and narrates the series, and begins Season One: Episode Four: “The Big Chill” as follows: “For half a century, truckers have hauled heavy loads over the frozen lakes of Northern Canada, bringing supplies to the remote outposts of civilization. They are the trailblazers of our time” (2007). Beers overtly situates these truckers within the lineage of the mythic frontiersman.

Hugh Rowland, who is featured throughout the show’s eight seasons, also wears a cowboy hat while driving in this episode. The show further cements the connection between these contemporary truckers and Western pioneers as “trailblazers” in Season Eight: Episode Seven: “Blazing the Trail” (2014) and Season Nine: Episode Three: “Trailblazers” (2015). The series frequently refers to the ice roads as being located at the edges of “civilization.” As Slotkin notes, the frontiersman must journey “to a more primitive and natural condition of life so that the false values of the ‘metropolis’ can be purged and a new, purified social contract enacted” (p. 14). Indigenous critical theory unmask and destabilizes the settler-colonial and white supremacist logics that construct relational classifications of “civilized” and “primitive.” According to Turner’s thesis, the civilized (white male) frontiersman must encounter “primitive” territories and peoples to transform both himself and the nation.

Thom Beers invokes “civilization” again when describing driver Jay Westgard’s route in “The Big Chill”: “Jay is leaving the last outpost of civilization and driving into a vast expanse where help, if he needs it, can be hundreds of miles away” (2007). The more remote and dangerous the frontier, the more celebrated it is within frontier mythology. In Season Three: Episode Two: “Rookie Run,” Beers declares at the beginning of the episode that “At the top of the world...there’s a job only a few would dare” (2009). The perception that Alaska in particular is the most dangerous frontier is reinforced in this season as well. After focusing on truckers in far Northwestern Canada in the first two seasons, the series frames a locational shift to Alaska as a plot point of heightened danger: “This season, two old pros join four of America’s bravest truckers to tackle the continent’s deadliest ice passage...Ice Road Truckers take on Alaska” (2009). This also reifies U.S. exceptionalism in relation to Canadian truckers and terrain: Only the toughest can handle Alaskan ice roads.

The show follows the truckers to Manitoba in its seventh season, and the formulaic reinstatement of frontier mythology continues unabated. In Season Seven: Episode One: “Collision Course,” Beers opens the episode with his nearly standardized introduction: “In a remote corner of North America...join the grudge match on the world’s most dangerous frontier” (2013). The camera then cuts to driver Hugh Rowland declaring that “these are the roughest, toughest roads in North America” (2013). Are the roads in Manitoba tougher than Alaska or the Yukon? Again, the factual basis of these statements is not important; a critical aspect of the performance of frontier mythology is the continual reassertion that any given frontier is somehow the most dangerous. This rings true in the blue-collar reality world, in which this claim recurs throughout the sample of shows included here. The importance of stressing that the frontier is dangerous speaks to the Social Darwinian aspect of rugged individualism. The more dangerous the frontier, the more “fit” the man is who overcomes it. As driver Darrell Ward poignantly encapsulates moments later in the same episode: “It all comes down to survival of the fittest” (2013).

The drivers are also placed in a manufactured competition with each other for who can haul the most loads across the ice by the end of each season. Beers frequently refers to it as “the dash for the cash.” This maximizes the viewer’s perception that this occupation is a masculinized test of rugged individualism on the frontier serving capitalist ends. I discuss the show’s problematic and tokenizing framing of Lisa Kelly, one of only two women truckers featured in the series, at length in the first chapter. In “Rookie Run,” Beers characterizes her efficient handling of the Alaskan passage as surprising, and suggests that she has yet to fully prove herself in relation to her male counterparts: “Lisa is surprisingly confident on the ice, but she still has 375 miles of raw *frontier* [emphasis added] ahead” (2009). His narration casts doubt on her

ability to conquer the frontier—a white male spatial imaginary. Irrespective of her performance, her presence as a white woman remains incongruous within frontier mythology.

Conclusion

The hegemonic conceptualization of the frontier in the United States exemplifies how a mythical, imaginary place can yield tremendous power and material consequences. In the dominant U.S. discourse, the frontier is often cast as a race and gender neutral construct—a place devoid of any deeper ideological or material struggle. Not only did U.S. historian Frederick Jackson Turner falsely conceive of the frontier as empty backwoods, he portrayed life on the frontier as a necessary rite of passage for white men to continually reconstitute U.S. exceptionalism and rugged individualism through their taming of the wilderness. Without stating it explicitly in his “frontier thesis,” Turner provides an ideological template for justifying continued settler-colonization of indigenous peoples and their lands; perpetual environmental destruction to satiate capitalist greed; and white manhood as the normative standard for ideal citizenship. In configuring the frontier as a “white male spatial imaginary,” I aim to make visible how frontier mythology naturalizes the presence of white males in remote wilderness settings at the expense of women, indigenous peoples, and people of color. The frontier is not neutral or uninhabited: It is a contested site upon which imperial white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy is ritualistically enacted and resisted.

The blue-collar reality shows provide an illustrative contemporary example of how the mythic frontier continues to serve as a proving ground for hegemonic masculinity. “Real men” prove their masculinity in “real America”—as Turner infamously conceived of the frontier. These series document white men performing hazardous occupations in remote, wilderness

settings to reinvigorate frontier mythology at a time in which its intertwined core tenets, including rugged individualism, white male supremacy, and unregulated capitalism, are facing considerable public scrutiny on multiple fronts. Both the Great Recession and systemic challenges to white male supremacy elicited the proliferation of this subgenre of reality television programming—a conservative reaction to a changing U.S. sociocultural landscape. Blue-collar reality television seems to discursively suggest that it is only through going back to the frontier that—per Trump’s campaign slogan—white men can “make American great again.”

Chapter 3: Audience Reactions in Online Forums

“To get a better sense of the way discourse works, and of how people are engaging with neoliberal frames and agendas and reworking their common sense in response, we need to do more than work with simple answers to questions commissioned by vested interests. We have to capture discourse which is volunteered, which arises from the writer’s own set of concerns, and is as spontaneous and unfettered by what others may think as possible. Online comments are rather like this, especially as everyone contributes under a pseudonym.” Stuart Hall and Alan O’Shea (2013), “Common-sense Neoliberalism,” pp. 16-17.

Introduction

A television study of this kind necessitates an engagement with the reactions of the viewing audience. What is the best way to approach and situate audience responses to the blue-collar reality shows? Several conceptual frameworks structure the current landscape of television audience research (Morley, 1992; Fiske and Hartley, 2003). Although I cannot offer a comprehensive accounting of prominent audience research paradigms and methodological approaches within the space allotted here, I must delineate the type of audience research I am *not* engaging in, so that the aims of this portion of the study can be appropriately situated and understood. I utilize critical discourse analysis to discern the patterns that have emerged within a subset of voluntarily composed, digitally mediated reactions of a self-selected group of viewers, who are emotionally invested enough in the trajectory of these series to contribute comments, mostly anonymously, to independently run, online discussion forums. By independent, I mean that these forums are not in any way affiliated with the *Discovery* or *History* channels, or any of the production companies/corporate entities involved in their production.

I specifically chose such forums because I wanted to mitigate the possibility of interference in the content of the comments from primary series stakeholders—a far more likely scenario within discussion boards on network-affiliated sites. Hall and O’Shea’s assessment above informs the rationale for looking at these digital archives in relation to audience responses.

As they note, online comments “...capture a discourse which is volunteered, which arises from the writer’s own set of concerns, and is as spontaneous and unfettered by what others may think as possible” (2013, pp. 16-17). The anonymity of these unprompted comments suggests a degree of honesty and openness, and at the very least, a lack of self-censorship about how said comments might be received. Even an anonymous survey prompts respondents to consider certain questions, perspectives, and examples—these digital archives are entirely voluntary and spontaneous. Consequently, these comments represent a more “raw” and unalloyed cross-section of audience response data.

In remaining consistent with the analytical separation of *Duck Dynasty* from the other blue-collar reality series thus far, I do not address the plethora of comments that exist about this series in numerous online discussion venues. I exclude *Duck Dynasty* for several key reasons. First, as mentioned previously, it differs from the other series in its format and presentation, in that it aligns more closely with 22-minute, domestic, family-centered sitcoms, whereas *Deadliest Catch*, *Gold Rush*, *Ice Road Truckers*, and *Ax Men* run parallel to 44-minute workplace dramas. Second, as I detail at length in the fourth chapter, the Robertsons occupy a far more economically advantaged social location than loggers, truck drivers, crab fishermen, and miners. This even includes the captains, managers, and owners who are the blue-collar reality shows’ principal stars. The Robertsons’ considerable economic capital, as well as their cultural capital of college degrees, place them in a much higher stratum in the class hierarchy.

Lastly, *Duck Dynasty* has elicited far more public commentary because of the public outcry over Phil’s racist and homophobic remarks (Magary, 2014). Additionally, the Robertsons have openly endorsed and supported Donald Trump, with Willie even speaking at the Republic National Convention in July 2016 (Nickoloff, 2016). To that end, *Duck Dynasty* is far more

politically polarizing than the other series in the sample. The political conservatism and high concentration of Trump voters within its viewership has been well-documented, as most of its audience is also white and resides in rural areas (Geraghty, 2013; Katz, 2016). Therefore, the politics of *Duck Dynasty* and its audience are far more apparent than the other series under examination. Although there is significant overlap within the viewership of these shows, the conservative ideological bent of the Robertsons and *Duck Dynasty* by extension is far more overt and has already generated substantial public scrutiny and commentary. In fact, the show has provoked so much public discussion that there is enough online commentary to comprise an entirely separate, full-scale project. Consequently, in keeping with the goal of unmasking the ways in which racism, heterosexism, and classism discursively circulate in seemingly invisible ways as “common sense,” I focus this analysis on the online message boards of series that are both structured similarly and seem largely apolitical/ideologically neutral in the dominant discourse.

It is important to reiterate that this is a qualitative undertaking—I am not claiming that this sample of comments is in any way representative of typical audience reactions. I frame their comments as “re-actions” in accordance with Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood’s understanding of audience responses in *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience, and Value* (2012). Skeggs and Wood claim that “to hyphenate re-act is to emphasize ‘act’ again which points us to reactions’ relationship to notions of performance” (Location 220). Through commenting in discussion forums, these viewers are taking considerable action in response to viewing these programs—not only are they logging on and composing text, but they had to originally search for the online discussion forum to which they would decide to contribute. Skeggs and Wood note that their “...research involves analyses of performances *on* reality

television, but also performances produced *in* reaction to television...” (Location 228). I understand these comments as discursive performative expressions mediated by digital platforms. As I explicate, it appears that posters “perform” in relation to the other commenters on the board. They do not want their contributions to remain unremarked upon. They seek engagement with other viewers, and aim for their posts to elicit further commentary and discussion.

The goal of this portion of the study is to determine what constitutes the primary concerns and preoccupations of this group of highly-invested viewers. I posit that these commenters comprise a particularly devoted group of audience members, since they care enough about the shows to expend significant energy volunteering their points of view and digitally engaging with other viewers. These commenters are more likely, as some of them explicitly express, to have watched these programs from their debut to the most recent episode preceding their postings. For clarification, I do not refer to these commenters specifically as “fans.” Although it may be reasonable to conclude that these regular viewers are indeed fans of the series, I do not want to denote them as such. The forums are not explicitly labeled as “fan forums,” and since many of the comments in the sample skew negative in tone, I prefer the more neutral designations of “commenter” and “regular viewer.” Therefore, I am not situating this portion of the project within the wider cultural studies subfield of “fan studies,” since I am not attending explicitly to fan cultures and audiences who overtly self-define as such (Jenkins, 2012).

It is integral to clarify that I am not situating the audience research portion of this project within media effects research (Fiske and Hartley, 2003, pp. 49-63). The goal of this analysis is preliminary in nature: To discover the primary concerns and fixations of this self-selected group

of regular viewers in relation to the blue-collar reality series, as well as to determine if said viewers explicitly touch upon any of the core themes that have emerged through the critical discourse analysis of the content of series episodes. Because critical discourse analysis provides insight into the ways in which power differentials are enacted and contested through discursive praxis, including along axes of race, gender, social class, and nationality, the aim here is to determine if commenters reproduce or challenge the same problematic ideologies presented within the series themselves. What drives these viewers to their computers to compose text about these programs in conversation with others, and what is the wider significance of said commentaries, if any?

In keeping with the ideological orientation of this study, I am specifically calling attention to the ways in which the comments on these discussion boards might expose how systems of power operate discursively within these interpersonal digital communications. Do the comments provide any evidence that these consistent viewers of the blue-collar reality programs have similarly problematic conceptualizations and beliefs regarding social categories/inequalities in relation to rugged individualism and the American dream, as espoused in the series that they regularly watch? As I explain momentarily, this critical discourse analysis of select comments does indeed reveal problematic understandings and other relevant findings in terms of race, gender, and social class.

It is important to stress that I am not suggesting that there is a directly *causal* relationship between watching these series and *developing* oppressive viewpoints. One of the reasons media effects research remains highly disputed is that it is extremely challenging to establish controlled settings where the effects of media on people’s attitudes and behaviors can be measured in isolation from other preexisting social factors and conditions. The objective then is to determine

if there is any indication that this subset of viewers holds the same ideological beliefs and problematic conceptualizations regarding race, gender, social class, etc. embedded in these series, and what that might suggest about how systems of power (white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, etc.) operate discursively in the contemporary U.S. cultural context. In other words, do these seemingly benign and mundane discussion forums offer meaningful insights into the ways in which hegemonic U.S. value systems and mythologies are invisibly shaped by white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, and capitalist logics? Lastly, what other significant findings arise upon examination of these comments, and do they have any wider social relevance?

My methodological approach to this collection of digital comments is anchored in Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model (Hall, 2006). As I noted in relation to my critical discourse analysis of the episodes themselves, Hall critically accounts for how audiences are not monolithic in their interpretation/decoding of texts, and recognizes that television is inherently polysemic. He clarifies that its polysemy does not suggest that when approaching television as a text, one should recognize all potential interpretations as having equal value:

Polysemy must not, however, be confused with pluralism. Connotative codes are *not* equal among themselves. Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested. (p. 169)

I argue that the same logic should apply when approaching digital discussion forums. Therefore, I do not comprehensively account for every audience reaction archived in these forums. This is not only logistically infeasible, but belies the aim of delineating the prominent patterns that emerge, as well as appropriately situating their deeper meaning and significance.

Because there were thousands of comments to potentially sift through, I approached this analysis with the objective of discerning the presence of several key patterns. First, I noted the topics/labels of the discussion threads on the forums, in which there were anywhere from a few comments to dozens of exchanges within each. I distinguished the recurring themes in the subject headings of the topic threads. Commenters started numerous threads regarding the personal lives of the shows’ stars, including their health problems; romantic and family lives; legal troubles; and other business endeavors. Many posters took to the forums to express grievances and criticize the shows’ stars, whether for their on-screen performances or decisions in their personal lives. Because of the nature of reality television, the private and public lives of the genre’s stars often become blurred.

One of the primary criticisms lodged on these forums is that the shows are “fake.” Reality television viewership’s seeming preoccupation with authenticity more broadly will also be addressed. Additionally, many of the comments are negative in tone, which suggests that negative emotions and disapproval drive commenters to express themselves in this specific format. In fact, multiple commenters take to the forums to declare that they will no longer watch the series. After garnering the overarching patterns of the topics of the threads, I then more closely examined the comments posted under topics with specific relevance to this analysis. I inspected threads that addressed the few female cast members on the series. There was only one thread on any of the show forums that explicitly addressed race, and I will delve into the significance of this at length. I also analyzed comments that touch upon the broad themes of the nature of work/social class, rugged individualism, and the American dream. I assert that the discursive silences in relation to race, gender, social class, and sexuality in these digital archives are just as revealing and noteworthy as the explicit commentary. Consequently, I include

pertinent comments for dissection herein, and congruently address the significance of the absence of remarks in relation to germane subjects, such as race, gender, and social class.

Although the clear majority of commenters contribute under pseudonyms, if any demographic information can be gleaned from a relevant posting, such as the author’s gender, location, age, etc., then I note it accordingly. Occasionally, some of the posters have an avatar, which can reveal their presumed gender and racial identity. The anonymity of the commenters presents both a strength and a limitation in this analysis. It is an asset in that anonymity emboldens posters to express themselves openly and unselfconsciously; it is a weakness in that key demographic identifiers remain unknown for most of the posters. Such demographic data is highly useful for understanding how one’s social location might impact one’s perspective on issues of race, gender, social class, nationality, etc. Sporadically, a poster identifies themselves as someone who works in the industry documented in said series, such as logging in *Ax Men*, or as someone directly related to a person who works in that field. This information is useful in that it reveals how people close to the occupation view the series as “insiders.” Moreover, the gender identity of the poster is occasionally disclosed in detailing their relationship to someone who purportedly works in the industry.

Before analyzing this segment of audience responses, it is critical to outline what has already been unearthed about the demographics of the blue-collar reality television audience more broadly. Furthermore, I discuss the specific observations of mainstream television critics about why these series appeal to certain segments of the population—primarily white men—and the wider sociocultural meaning behind the proliferation of this subgenre of reality television programming. I also briefly mention the significance or lack thereof of the intentionality of one

of the driving forces behind blue-collar reality television, Thom Beers, in relation to interpreting audience reactions.

Audience Demographics, Ratings, and Mainstream Appeal: What We Know

One of the primary limitations in analyzing demographic data gathered from within the commercial television industry is that is not aggregated intersectionally. Dimensions of age, income, and gender are often given primacy without accounting for the ways in which these categories intersect. Race, gender, and region are also less frequently noted in published industry reports. However, based upon the available data and other observations from mainstream television critics, one can get a sense for which segments of the population are primarily watching the blue-collar reality shows, and why these programs appeal to these groups.

In mapping the general demographic patterns found within the audiences of the series in the sample, it is critical to emphasize that each of these shows tends to attract the same type of viewers demographically. Thus, demographic observations about the audience of *Deadliest Catch* have been generally consistent with findings about the audience of *Ax Men*. With this degree of demographic overlap, it is then safe to refer to the “blue-collar reality television audience” as a group unto itself. As I discuss shortly, television critics often refer to the viewership of this subgenre of reality television as a singular entity.

Age is a metric given a lot of primacy in commercial television. Interestingly, the median age of the viewers of the series under examination skew older—mostly toward the upper end and beyond of the industry’s coveted 18-to-49 age demographic. Commercial television’s long-held practice of courting this age group has also been subject to increased scrutiny in the past decade (Dakss, 2005; LaCour, 2013). According to Andy Denhart, the median age of the audiences for

the series under examination, of which *Ice Road Truckers* is not included, are as follows: *Deadliest Catch* is 47; *Ax Men* is 51; and *Gold Rush* is 53 (2015).

More precise metrics account for both age and gender. In illuminating the latter dimension, it becomes clear that the audience is largely comprised of men. In Mitch Metcalf’s breakdown of Sunday television ratings and their demographic distribution from March 2015, he notes that “*Ax Men* on History skews toward men 35+.” *Entertainment Weekly* reported on *Deadliest Catch*’s record ratings in 2010, and noted the sizable portion of male viewers of a certain age: “For the last two months, *Deadliest Catch* has been the No. 1 program in all of cable on Tuesday nights among persons (an average 3.7 million viewers) and men 25-54 (1.4 million viewers)” (Rice, 2010). An October 2014 *Deadline* report discussing *Gold Rush*’s remarkably high ratings for its fifth season premiere notes that *Discovery* dominated in male viewership across age brackets: “Discovery finished the primetime night in first place among guys 25-54 — and guys 18-49, and 18-34” (Deadline Team). In 2011, *The Los Angeles Times* acknowledged *Ice Road Truckers*’ role in making *History* one of the top-ranked networks among men with its prodigious lineup of blue-collar reality shows: “The network, home also to ‘American Restoration,’ ‘Ice Road Truckers’ and ‘Swamp People,’ is the top-ranked nonfiction network in key viewer demographics and the second-ranked network for men behind ESPN” (Stanley).

An industry report about *Discovery Channel*’s audience is highly informative for understanding the viewer profile of the blue-collar reality television programs overall. Scarborough, a local market research subsidiary of Nielsen, not only compiled useful demographic information about the *Discovery* audience, but also gathered revealing information about the recreational and leisure activities the network’s viewers tend to engage in. Their

demographic profile offers a substantial level of detail, but notably excludes any information about the racial composition of the network’s audience:

According to Scarborough’s audience demographics, 30 percent of U.S. adults seek outdoor adventure in their television watching – they say they’ve watched the Discovery Channel in the past seven days. Though these television statistics include viewers of all ages, 36 percent of Discovery Channel Viewers are Baby Boomers and they are 19 percent more likely than all U.S. adults to be male...Discovery Channel Viewers are seven percent more likely than all U.S. adults to be employed full time and 13 percent more likely to hold blue collar employment. More than one-fifth (21%) have an annual household income of \$100K or higher and seven percent of Discovery Channel Viewers own a home valued at \$500K or higher (2012).

The glaring omission of the racial identities of *Discovery*’s viewers in this demographic composite suggests that most of its viewers are likely white. Whiteness often evades the label of “race” in a white supremacist society, in which it tends to be cast as the “normal” or “default” race. Therefore, it is safe to presume that if race goes unremarked upon, then white people are most likely the racial subjects under examination. Additionally, the recreational and leisure activities of its audience are largely associated with white males. Scarborough finds that *Discovery*’s viewers are far more likely to have gone hunting, fishing, golfing, camping, and powerboating in the past 12 months. The report specifically credits *Deadliest Catch* for drawing in this subset of white male viewers: “*Deadliest Catch* may very well be the show that draws viewers in as Discovery Channel Viewers are much more likely than all U.S. adults to have gone fishing or to have gone powerboating in the past year” (2012).

It is also noteworthy that *Discovery* seems to draw viewers from across the class spectrum with a significant portion having blue-collar employment, as well as a sizeable number reporting relatively high incomes. The network attracting white male viewers from both the working and middle classes remains consistent with Kimmel’s psychological profile of U.S. white working and middle-class men in *Angry White Men*. Kimmel notes that despite their differences in income, “The white working class and the white middle class have rarely been so close *emotionally* as they are today... (2013, p. 204). This partially explains Trump drawing white male votes from across the class spectrum as well (Tyson and Maniam, 2016; Silver, 2016).

The relationship between Donald Trump and the blue-collar reality television audience requires further elucidation. In a groundbreaking study regarding television viewership and voting patterns in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Josh Katz reports in *The New York Times* that “If you had to guess how strongly a place supported Donald J. Trump in the election, would you rather know how popular ‘Duck Dynasty’ is there, or how George W. Bush did there in 2000? It turns out the relationship with the TV show is stronger” (2016). Katz pinpoints that the divide between television preferences mirrors the wider urban/rural divide in the United States, which correspondingly interpolates racial divisions. According to the Housing Assistance Council’s 2012 rural research brief, “The 2010 Census reports that approximately 78 percent of the population in rural and small town communities are white and non-Hispanic.”

Deadliest Catch is included in Katz’s “‘Duck Dynasty’ vs. ‘Modern Family’:50 Maps of the U.S. Cultural Divide.” As I mentioned previously, *Duck Dynasty* is widely noted for its conservative ideological bent. Katz explains that “the correlation between fandom and the percentage of people who voted for Mr. Trump was higher for ‘Duck Dynasty’ than it was for

any other show” (2016). Although there is no specific data for *Ax Men*, *Ice Road Truckers*, and *Gold Rush* in this study, the regional/racial divide is thoroughly documented with *Deadliest Catch*. Based upon the common demographic characteristics of the audiences of the blue-collar reality series more broadly, it is safe to extend the findings regarding the racial/regional divide with *Deadliest Catch* to the other series in the sample.

Deadliest Catch is listed as one of the “shows most common in rural areas” (2016). Again, whites remain an overwhelming racial majority in rural areas (Housing Assistance Council, 2012). The show registers as having the least similarity to several shows with high popularity in the so-called “Black belt.” Katz explains that “the extended Black Belt — a swath that extends from the Mississippi River along the Eastern Seaboard up to Washington, but also including city centers and other places with large nonwhite populations” (2016). Regarding the audience’s rural character, Katz more precisely hones in on its geographic distribution: “It’s most popular in areas that are rural, cold and close to the sea, particularly Alaska and Maine” (2016). It seems that perhaps fishermen like to watch other fishermen.

In compiling the available data about the demographic character of the blue-collar reality shows, in which each report often only focuses on or two social categories, it suggests that the audience skews rural, white, male, and slightly older in general. This strongly aligns with the demographic characteristics of Donald Trump’s supporters (Tyson & Maniam, 2016). Paralleling the class distribution of Trump voters, the audience appears comprised of both middle and working class white males (Silver, 2016). However, as mainstream television critics have observed, the audience tilts more toward the affluent end of the class spectrum overall. Dana Jennings of *The New York Times* poignantly noted in 2011 that these series appeal to more well-off men who long to watch “real men” on screen. In “Grab a Brew While They Face Death,”

about the now defunct *Coal on Spike*, which documented West Virginia coal miners, Jennings speaks to how professional, white-collar men reaffirm their masculinity through watching other men perform physically arduous, manual labor on television:

But Spike knows the audience for ‘Coal’ and its brawny brethren like ‘Deadliest Catch’ and ‘Ice Road Truckers.’ It’s the mostly white-collar guys who go to Knicks and Rangers games, the baby-handed men who commute between Penn Station (beneath the Garden) and the suburbs. It’s an uneasy modern dynamic. The men on these ‘documentary-reality’ shows sacrifice their bodies and risk their lives doing down and dangerous jobs to try to provide a good life for themselves and their families. But what the producers and viewers want is what they call ‘good TV’ — in this case, working-class fantasies aimed at men craving televised booster shots of testosterone. (Ratings show that these series consistently reel in men in the prized but elusive 18-to- 49 age group, many of them upscale.) (2011)

It is crucial to note here that Jennings does not attend to the racial identity of these middle-class, professional men, but one can conclude from his description that they are likely white. Naming whiteness is an important aspect of this project, as it often goes unremarked upon or is coded in other ways. Jennings critically identifies the irony of upscale and urban white-collar men gravitating to these programs to get in touch with their masculinity via a “working-class fantasy.” This points to white, rural, working-class masculinity’s status as hegemonic masculinity in the contemporary U.S. context.

Tanja Aho similarly observes how these shows appeal to middle-class men in “Reality TV and Its Audiences Reconsidered: Class and Poverty in *Undercover Boss* (CBS)”: “Masculinity-centered reality TV shows such as *Ice Road Truckers*, *Deadliest Catch*, and *Ax*

Men draw on a rhetoric of realism while focusing on the white, male, heroic worker to provide a romanticized ideal of labor. Such an ideal appeals to many middle-class men who feel emasculated by their office jobs” (2016). In *Angry White Men*, Kimmel also addresses the place of media escapism for both working and middle-class white men, who he documents as experiencing a *perception* of marginalization because of economic shifts, as well as racial and gender-based movements for equal rights: “If you feel yourself to always be taking it on the chin, media fantasy is the place where you get to pump your first in defiance. If you feel emasculated in real life, you can feel like a man in ‘reel life,’” (2013, p. 218).

Thus, I conclude that the blue-collar reality television shows attract mostly white, rural, middle-class men—a demographic group that largely came out in support of Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. As I note in the introduction, I do not want to overemphasize the intentionality of show creators, such as Thom Beers, in relation to audience reactions.

Ultimately, these programs enter a wider system of meaning upon their distribution in a given sociocultural context—generating specific reactions and signaling deeper trends irrespective of the expressed intentions of show creators. I argue that blue-collar reality television is in conversation with the wider white, male backlash against feminism, antiracism, and LGBTQ rights, as well as changes in the nature and distribution of work engendered by neoliberal economic policies.

Beers, of course, has never explicitly stated that he intended to tap into this wider sociopolitical phenomenon in producing *Deadliest Catch*, *Ax Men*, and *Ice Road Truckers*. The ways in which these series bolster white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, and capitalist logics do not typically register at the conscious level, since these systems of power are normalized as “common sense.” It seems Beers recognized that straight, middle-class, white men would

gravitate toward this type of programming to vicariously live out masculine fantasies—he himself is a straight, middle-class white man from a rural area, Batavia, New York. In tapping into this “market,” he likely did not foresee or consider the deeper social implications of the appeal of this type of programming for white male audiences. In 2010, as his series were just recently taking off, T.L. Stanley noted about Beers in “Manly-Man TV” that “...the 58-year-old hit maker is more in demand now than ever, given that his macho adventure series attract a large and loyal following of tough-to-reach young men and can be created, even with exotic locales and film-quality production values, for a fraction of the cost of scripted programs” (2010). In a fragmented cable television market, the goal is to reach a niche audience to attract advertisers at minimum expense. Beers has clearly been successful in that endeavor.

Jennings references Beers’ understanding of the appeal of his shows: “In a video promoting ‘Coal’ Mr. Beers said: ‘It’s a recipe for good storytelling. You basically need high stakes with high reward.’ He gets energized by the unpredictable nature of these jobs...In his best Hollywood voice he also intones, ‘It’s a great, epic man-against-nature story’” (2011). Beers implicitly points to the deeply entrenched legacy of frontier mythology in U.S. culture. As Stuart Hall aptly identifies, the frontier narrative formula, which Thom Beers reproduces, constitutes “... *the* archetypal American story...in film and television, this deep-structure provided the taken-for-granted story-of-all-stories, the paradigm-action narrative, the perfect myth” (2005, p. 50). Again, whether Beers intended at a conscious level to replicate this formula and all the intertwined ideologies that underpin it, ultimately, does not alter the fact that these series become interpellated within wider systems of meaning. In short, Beers cannot dictate the wider, cumulative effects of the series that he produces.

Having established the core demographic characteristics of the blue-collar reality television audience (white, rural, middle and working-class men), and the primary reasons why this subgenre of reality television generally appeals to them, as well as the political platform of Donald Trump, I can now move forward with discussing the implications of viewer reactions in online discussion forums.

Audience Responses: Revealing Comments, Telling Silences

On these independently-run, online discussion venues, some key patterns have emerged within these digitally mediated viewer reactions. As mentioned previously, many posters express opinions about the personal lives of the shows’ stars, including their business dealings, romantic engagements, medical issues, and other tabloid-style rumors. Commenters discuss the show’s stars in a similar vein as other celebrities in the public discourse. However, since the shows stars are not professional actors playing characters, the lines between their public and private lives are more blurred. Other common topics include speculation about when a new season is set to premiere; praise or derision of certain stars’ on-camera performances of their occupations; and general comments about the logistical nature of the occupations featured in the series.

The most prominent topic and/or point of contention on the boards by far is commenters decrying the shows as “fake.” Most of the discussions about authenticity anchor on denouncing the show because of its lack of authenticity, as well as posters declaring their knowledge and awareness that a series has been fake from its debut. The latter point is particularly important: Commenters seek to perform their authority on authenticity in these forums. They seem emotionally invested in making other posters aware that they are too sophisticated to be tricked into believing that these shows constitute accurate representations. On “Deadliest Catch Forum,”

site user “doder” starts a thread entitled “reasons why the Deadliest Catch is fake” on November 12, 2016, which links to a corresponding article. “Bentwillow,” whose avatar resembles a white woman, responds:

Oh, please.....how stupid does the author of this article think we are??? Of course there are a hundred boats out there fishing crab. Of course, fishing is boring - so is working in an emergency room where hours of boredom are interspersed with sheer [sic] terror. We get it. As for the lives of the fisherman, show me any workplace that doesn't have its share of drama. It's awfully nice watching a program like DC where, for a while, we can forget about our problems while someone else sorts out theirs. It's called entertainment.

Another commenter, “sciencer,” whose avatar appears to be a white man, also expresses his prior awareness about the editorial bent of the series: “We have known that events are condensed/exaggerated/dramatized. The show still has the power to keep us in our seats, ex Sig's heart attack. Even though, by the time it aired we all knew how it turned out, it was still riveting to watch it play out” (2016). “Nannyb” contributes to the thread with a white woman avatar: “We who love the show really could not care less if some of it is dramatized, etc. And those who get all in a tizzy do not have to watch” (2016).

In another thread contributed to the same forum entitled “Is Elliot really that crazy, or is this all staged?” beginning July 3, 2013 with a post from “blueknight110,” a poster called “The Boz” defends the authenticity of *Deadliest Catch*:

The one thing I've always like about DC is that it is depicted as real as possible. I'm not saying there isn't some steering of issues, but they [sic] way they portray the seasons is how I remember them. They don't play up stupid things that aren't really a big deal, and

they don't downplay the ugly parts either. IMHO [in my humble opinion], its [sic] the most "real" show there is. With that said, I don't like Elliot in the least. (2013)

Another poster, “anitalalouise” retorts directly, “The trouble is it isn't real, Boz. Elliott did not buy the Saga, it's the same group that owned the Ramblin' Rose who owns it. So the whole thing with Elliott is a sham. It's just not clear if his girl troubles are part of the sham too” (2013).

Frequently, accusations of fakery are lodged from posters who claim to work the same jobs depicted in the series, or cite a close relationship with someone who does. They share their “insider” knowledge and status to perform that they are a greater authority on the show’s authenticity. On a “topix Ax Men forum,” a poster identifying himself as “Thomas – Denmark,” begins a thread labeled “Ax Men: Staged and fake!!!” on November 11, 2014. “Bill” of Sacramento, CA concurs with Thomas’s accusation based upon his experience as a logger: “This show is a joke! I do this job everyday with 7 other guys. We as a full crew could work circles around any of those outfits... This show make my profession look like a gosh darn circus” (2014). “Chris” of Forest Hills, NY responds directly to “Bill” in agreement: “I work in the timber industry also and there is no way that this is all real. It's a script that the producers write. This drama and non-safety wouldn't fly on my jobsites!” Like a lot of the self-proclaimed industry insiders who contribute to these forums, these posters seem passionate in their denunciations of the show. It is clearly these negative emotions that drive them to “re-act” (Skeggs & Wood, 2012, Location 220) in these digital discussion venues.

On the same forum in a similarly titled thread, “Ax Men is fake,” one can observe industry insiders and outsiders condemning the series for its supposed lack of realness. Amy Giorgi of Grants Pass, OR begins the thread on April 9, 2012, and claims that her husband appeared on *Ax Men* as a greenhorn logger, in which his image was distorted and tarnished.

“Community Disorganizer” from Florham Park, NJ responds dismissively to her comment:

“Amy, anyone with half a brain knows *Ax Men* is a fake. 1. Nobody can be as stupid as the loggers on that show are portrayed; 2. If they worked like that every day they'd all be dead” (2012). Like several posters, “Community Disorganizer” highlights not only their knowledge that something is obviously fake, but also their supposed intellectual superiority for their ability to discern between “the real” and “the fake.” Many of the comments in the thread skew negative in tone, with several posters declaring that they no longer enjoy the series, and plan to discontinue watching because it is too unrealistic.

One particularly vitriolic comment demonstrates a concern for the show no longer portraying loggers as “real men.” “Kane” of Addison, TX proclaims, “I’m a construction worker. i [*sic*] always believed that loggers were real men. but this show has a bunch of cry babies. if [*sic*] anyone of them acted like that on a construction site, they would be beaten then fired from the job. need [*sic*] to change the name from *Ax Men*, to *Ax Pussies*.” This comment exemplifies the dominant heteropatriarchal logics that underpin hegemonic masculinity or “real manhood.” In articulating the legitimacy of physical violence and using derogatory, misogynist language as modes of enforcing dominant masculine gender expectations, “Kane” is also engaging in his own performance of hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, in identifying himself as a construction worker, he insinuates that he works a “real man’s” job, and therefore, is a rightful authority on masculine authenticity. Only one self-identified industry insider, “bigdude” of Bowling Green, OH, defends *Ax Men* regardless of the accuracy of its portrayal of loggers: “Wat [*sic*] does it matter? We as tree pros go out and risk our lives daily. and [*sic*] just hope that America [*sic*] respects what we do for 1 hr a week, is an honor. fake [*sic*] or not people begin to understand the dangers we go through everyday [*sic*]” (2013).

In the “IRT (*Ice Road Truckers*) Forum,” the legitimacy of the show’s portrayals of trucking also comes under scrutiny in a July 10, 2012 thread entitled, “The Show is FAKE.” In response to SCANIA posting links to articles that suggest all the conflicts on the series are scripted, “webe123” follows the similar pattern of declaring prior knowledge of the show’s inauthenticity: “SERIOUSLY? You are JUST NOW FINDING THIS OUT????...This show is NOT a documentary. It is simply a show that acts like it is. Most of the stuff is scripted. It is for entertainment. Most people on here [the forum] already know about this” (2012). Consistent with the tenor of these conversations, expressions of outrage about the show’s lack of realism are met with declarations of access to insider knowledge and/or prior awareness. As per “webe123”’s comment, responses to accusations of a show’s phoniness are usually sprinkled with an added layer of condescension, in which a poster assumes that everyone should already possess the knowledge that the show is fake. Interestingly, some commenters express consternation over the series appearing to lose its authenticity over time—suggesting that in the beginning of its run, it was more real. As “Will” of Aurora, CO remarks in a “topix Gold Rush Alaska” forum on January 14, 2013, “Gold Rush Alaska is no longer believable....at all... Needless to say, the more implausible the story line gets the less compelling the show is to me....and I suspect other viewers.”

Reality television scholars have noted that viewers commonly maintain a preoccupation with a show’s degree of authenticity. Mark Andrejevic provides poignant insights into this tendency among reality television audiences:

These days, reality TV has become a sprawling meta-genre, but the promise of the real remains a self-contradictory one. There is the familiar rejoinder of savvy viewers who pointedly remind others and themselves that reality TV is not *really* real—an insistence

that doubles as a panic-stricken assertion of the possibility of direct access to a more *real* reality. (2016, p. 652)

Sarah Banet-Weiser extensively documents the contemporary fixation with authenticity in *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*. She posits that “what is understood (and experienced) as authentic is considered such precisely because it is perceived as *not* commercial” (2012, p. 10). Commenters in these forums often express dismay when the show appears to push certain plot lines as a ploy for ratings. Ironically, the entire purpose of these series is to attract high ratings so that the network can sell more ads at a higher price. It seems some viewers in these forums resent the results of the economic logic of commercial television. In a profile of Thom Beers, Charles Homans discusses the appeal of these shows in “A Soap Opera on the High Seas.” Homans touches upon the male viewership’s desire to access an authentic version of masculinity, as they feel emasculated via their white-collar occupations:

The frequency that we respond to in Beers’s work is the same one that makes suburban accountants buy Ford Super Duty pickups and Brooklyn graphic designers grow fake lumberjack beards. And yet this very desire for authenticity has turned some of the last truly unreconstructed frontiersmen in America into that least authentic of creatures: the minor celebrity. (2012)

In this sense, there seems to be an impossible standard of authenticity within the confines of commercial television. Whether viewers’ desires for authenticity can ever possibly be satiated remains debatable, but it is abundantly clear that authenticity matters greatly to many viewers. This explains the highly passionate and emotional reactions on discussion forums about the degree of realness on blue-collar reality television.

This then leads to the deeper, underlying question: What does it mean that white, rural, working-class men are held up as a standard for authenticity? Per the ideological foundations of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, white, rural, working-class men toiling on the frontier constitutes the dominant image of “real America.” This suggests that the experiences of women and people of color in the United States are hegemonically situated as “less real” or illegitimate within the American experience. As Lockett observes, the blue-collar reality shows are framed “...as somehow the norm: ‘real America’” (2010). In this line of reasoning, the inauthentic label functions as a justification for continuing to subjugate traditionally marginalized groups and experiences.

Evidence of this conceptualization can be gleaned from comments on the boards that contest the inclusion of women in the series as merely ploys for ratings that compromise a show’s authenticity. In a “topix Ax Men forum” entitled “women on Ax Men” from December 9, 2012, “schoolmarm” of Crossville, TN protests the show introducing women: “Ax Men should just be that! Why is it necessary to bring on women in bathing suits? Ruining the whole concept of the show! We won't watch it anymore!!!!” Interestingly, based on the screenname, this poster is likely a woman herself. She seems to specifically reject the introduction of women into the series because they are scantily clad. Rather than protest the inclusion of women within the framework of the male gaze, she appears to object to the incorporation of women into the series entirely. She frames this development as a fundamental betrayal of the show’s authenticity, since the word “men” appears in the series’ title.

A “topix Ice Road Truckers forum” thread labeled “Ice Road Truckers: Girls gone wild in the hot springs?” from June 13, 2011, links to an article critiquing the framing of the women drivers in the series, Lisa and Maya. The article specifically takes show producers to task for

emphasizing the physical appearances of the women truckers. “Tony” of Winter Garden, FL suggests that the women drivers are unqualified to drive on the ice roads:

This show is changing...This new chick didn't even know the sound of a tire blow out but they will put her out there on the ice road. I guess it just shows, it doesn't matter what you know or how much experience you have as long as you look good on camera.

Rather than criticize how the show frames women drivers, he suggests that they are unworthy of inclusion in the series at all. Furthermore, he implies that their presence subverts the supposed meritocratic basis of the profession. He reproduces a common argument against hiring women and people of color: These groups are supposedly taking employment positions from more qualified candidates—typically implied to be white men. “Tim” from Lexington, KY also comments that “Maya doesn't need to be a truck driver, she knows nothing of what to do to keep her truck running, she can barely hitch up her trailer [*sic*]” (2011). Tim’s assertion that Maya “doesn’t need to be a truck driver” further solidifies that she is somehow in the wrong job. I counter that Maya does not “need” to be a truck driver any more (or less) than her male counterparts.

Viewers’ observations that women are depicted in a manner consistent with the male gaze corresponds with the findings of the critical discourse analysis of the content of series episodes. It is noteworthy, however, that rather than argue for more multidimensional representations of women, commenters imply that women should simply not be included within the purview of these series at all. In another topix forum about *Ice Road Truckers* from May 18, 2012, a poster makes a transphobic comment about Lisa. In the thread beginning with a comment from “Franken xj” labeled ““Ice Road Truckers’: No Lisa Kelly on IRT Season 6,” “Cantusee” of Auckland, New Zealand alleges that “she (Lisa) was born a he.” This senseless comment not

only implies that is shameful to self-identify as transgender, but suggests that if Lisa performs as well as she does in a “man’s job,” then she must have been secretly born male. A preoccupation with authenticity also underpins that same comment: Lisa is not a “real woman” because of her prowess in a highly-masculinized occupation.

Occasionally, commenters explicitly applaud when women are framed in accordance with the male gaze. On the Straight Dope site’s “Gold Rush TV show” message thread started by “Bijou Drains” on January 5, 2011, “muldoonthief” offers praise for a similar *Discovery* series, *Bering Sea Gold*. In a post from January 31, 2012, he (his comment indicates that he is a straight man) describes the plot of an episode: “Competent guy went out in his boat with his new not-girlfriend/greenhorn and everything went fine. Some bonus cleavage from not-girlfriend/greenhorn.” It is telling that he feels compelled to identify her as not being someone’s girlfriend. Women characters on television are often secondary to men characters, and are typically defined by their relationships to men. His comment about her cleavage signals his agreement with the show portraying her in a manner consistent with the male gaze. Although this is one of the few overtly sexist comments on the boards under examination, it is important to contextualize that there are also relatively few instances in which women even appear on blue-collar reality television at all. Thus, portrayals of women are more consequential in these male-dominated depictions.

In a related fashion, the lack of representation of people of color on these series and the subsequent lack of commentary on race on these message boards reveals critical truths about dominant conceptualizations of race in the contemporary United States. Only one thread on one of the message boards explicitly touches upon race, and happens to also include commentary on gender and sexuality. The fact that only one thread mentions race speaks to how white viewers

typically do not think of race as a construct that applies to whiteness. Because whiteness is normalized as the “default” or normal race in a white supremacist society, white people often do not recognize race as a construct that interpolates them in an advantaging way, much less at all. Therefore, the lack of discussion about race on the discussion boards indicates that white viewers likely do not think of race at all in relation to these series—echoing hegemonic conceptualizations regarding race and whiteness.

The thread that discusses race appears on the “Deadliest Catch Forum” and is entitled “Minority captian [*sic*].” This thread includes several problematic conceptualizations regarding race and gender. “Freddiefan12” starts the thread off on August 7, 2014 with the following post:

I couldn't help but notice how every captain is a white straight male. Would you guys be interested in watching a black man or an Eskimo man captain a boat? I don't know if there are any out there or not, but I think that would be a great idea in drawing new interest. Better than bringing a captains [*sic*] daughter on board at least; what an obvious gimmick that was. Not to be mean, I loved Mandy, but I still saw it as a gimmick to get more women interested in the show.

It is important to note that “Eskimo” is not the preferred term for indigenous peoples from Alaska. Aside from “freddiefan12”'s sloppy phrasing, it is interesting that they identify a lack of representation of women and people of color as limiting the reach of *Deadliest Catch*. However, in the same post, they also dismiss the inclusion of Mandy in the series as “a gimmick to get more women interested in the show” (2014). Despite this seeming contradiction, the post signals at least a degree of awareness about race, gender, and sexuality. The poster provides no indicators of their social location, so it remains unknown what their race, gender, and sexuality might be.

The reaction this post receives is particularly telling. “Doder” rejoins with admonishment: “o.m.g. please do not let political agendas or political correctness enter into discussions on this board!” (2012). This indicates the type of discomfort that often arises in even discussing race and gender. Dismissing “freddiefan12”’s legitimate question as “political correctness” is a standard, politically conservative tactic frequently deployed to halt discussions of race, gender, and sexuality. Although “doder’s” demographic identifiers remain unclear, it would not be unreasonable to surmise that they belong to several majoritarian groups.

“Freddiefan12” replies to “doder” as follows:

Oh give me a break. If watching a man of color, a gay man, or a woman captain a boat doesn't sound appealing to you just say so! The reason I brought this up was I was trying to think of ways to draw new viewers to the show. People tend to like things that they can relate to in some way, shape, or form. I wasn't trying to spew left wing ideology on this forum. I'm here to talk *deadliest catch*, *point blank* period. This show and board has nothing to do with politics, affirmative action, or political correctness.

“Freddiefan12”’s comment belies the reality that television shows, including *Deadliest Catch*, are in fact political, contested sites of ideological struggle. In one sense, they seem to understand the wider significance of a lack of portrayals of women and people of color. However, they limit the relevance of these issues to the show’s potential or lack thereof to attract more diverse audiences. I think “Freddiefan12” does astutely pinpoint that “doder”’s resistance to discussing the topic resides in a core objection to seeing women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ community on *Deadliest Catch*.

“Bentwillow,” whose avatar resembles a white woman, offers another common rejoinder to calls for increased representation and inclusion of women and people of color in the public

domain: Denying that race or gender have any relevance to the matter. She claims that “...People watch the show for the drama of men (and an occasional woman) battling the Bering Sea and overcoming incredible odds in order to make a living. I don't think race or gender or culture play into that” (2014). The goal of this project is to illuminate just how much race, gender, and culture structure blue-collar reality television. “Anitalalouise” offers another common justification for not discussing race and gender in the public discourse—suggesting that to do so is inherently divisive. Like “bentwillow,” she also contends that race and gender do not have pertinence to the series:

How exactly would someone's race or sexual orientation help them captain a boat or find crab? I honestly can't think of anything that would make me turn the show off quicker than trying to shoehorn some liberal storyline into it. Mandy was the limit to that as far as I'm concerned. Being gay or being a person of color or being female to my mind doesn't make you more interesting, it just makes you human, same as anyone else. It's only when we stop separating each other out that we'll be equal. (2012)

It is highly revealing that “anitalalouise” assesses the inclusion of Mandy in the series as demonstrative of producers “...trying to shoehorn some liberal storyline into it.” Therefore, the addition of a woman cast member is somehow ideologically tinged, but the standard, all-male cast is not. Again, this gestures toward the normalization of patriarchy. “Anitalalouise”'s comment further exemplifies the common discursive resistance to suggestions that race and gender require conversation. The notion that it is somehow virtuous and advisable to censor discussions of race and gender to mitigate divisions serves to ideologically justify the maintenance of racist and sexist systems. Racism and sexism cannot be resisted if they cannot be

discussed. Moreover, pointing out existing divisions does not generate new ones—it simply illuminates what is already there.

Lastly, despite the series centering on workplaces, class and capitalism are also rarely discussed on any of the boards. This likely speaks to how the blue-collar reality shows deemphasize class in favor of showcasing the occupations therein as proving grounds for real manhood. Class is also rarely discussed in the dominant U.S. discourse, as the United States continues to be hegemonically framed as a classless society, in which upward socioeconomic mobility is possible for all through merit and hard work. This encapsulates the core tenets of rugged individualism and the American dream. As noted in the critical discourse analysis of episode content, these series reify the intertwined mythologies of rugged individualism and U.S. exceptionalism. In the Straight Dope’s “Gold Rush TV show” message board, “Terr” suggests that the miners on *Gold Rush* do not adequately represent the American dream in a post from December 3, 2011:

They keep talking about ‘American Dream’ - well, you know what, ‘American Dream’ is when you work as hard as you can and you manage to get something in return. Not when you goof off like this guy is doing and hope something will make up for it. The work ethic in these guys is non-existent. They don't deserve to find the gold. If they do, I will be disappointed.

It is illuminating that “Terr” views the miners on *Gold Rush* as unworthy of success because of what they perceive as a lack of hard work. This comment reflects the dominant understanding in the United States that anyone can achieve upward socioeconomic mobility through hard work, despite a deeply entrenched class system disproving that myth. Furthermore, they echo the hegemonic conceptualization that people are simply either worthy or undeserving of economic

advancements. Thus, if someone lives in poverty, then they clearly deserve that fate. Conversely, if someone is wealthy, then they logically must have earned their spot at the top of the class hierarchy.

Another commenter on the same thread makes a disparaging class-based remark about the *Gold Rush* miners. “The twilight zone” not only derides the miners, but also the other viewers on the board for watching the show: “Who are you people?... You actually spend your time watching trash like these rednecks trying to mine for gold? In fact, you've made it the number one show on cable!!! You should be boycotting this kind of Reality Crap!” (2011). It is telling that the commenter identifies the miners as “rednecks.” I discuss the history and contemporary usage of this term in the next chapter, in which it has become increasingly dislodged from its derogatory, class-based origins. Like a lot of the comments on these boards, the tone of this post skews negative. It is unique, however, in that the poster specifically uses a class-based insult in relation to the subjects of the series under discussion.

Although the comments analyzed in this chapter do not provide a comprehensive picture of online audience reactions to the blue-collar reality shows, they do offer some revealing, preliminary insights into some prominent audience concerns and preoccupations. Above all, this group of self-selected viewers seems largely concerned with the preservation of authenticity. Conversations across all the boards in the sample follow a similar trajectory, in which someone denounces a series as “fake,” and is met with a chorus of posters claiming to have always already known that. Many commenters “re-act” to these programs on message boards to perform their authority on authenticity for their fellow posters.

Additionally, the occasional inclusion of women in these programs is viewed by some commenters as an affront to the perceived authenticity of blue-collar reality television. The

commenters appear to concur with the ideological orientation of the shows that suggests that white, rural, working-class men toiling on the frontier constitutes the preferred or commonsense image of “real America.” Hegemonic notions of U.S. authenticity are deeply linked to white male supremacy. Thus, the experiences of women and people of color are not coded as representative of “real America” within the dominant logics of commercial television.

Although race, gender, and class are not frequently discussed in an explicit manner in these online venues, the lack of commentary about these social categories suggests their invisibility to these commenters. Whiteness and maleness remain the normative racial and gender standards to which all other groups are measured. Therefore, the dominant discourse frames white males as individuals—not as raced and gendered subjects. Because the myths of rugged individualism and the American dream persist, class consciousness remains elusive within U.S. public discourse, as exemplified on message boards for series that highlight blue-collar occupations. Consequently, the silences regarding these systems of power on the boards are just as telling—it demonstrates how systems of power, such as white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism, circulate in seemingly undetectable ways.

In the next chapter, I discuss how Donald Trump successfully appealed to the same demographic that primarily watches the blue-collar reality series: white, rural, middle and working-class men. It is critical to emphasize that I conceive of the proliferation and popularity of the blue-collar reality television series as signaling a deeper, white male sociopolitical backlash, as documented by Michael Kimmel in *Angry White Men*. In short, if mainstream political pundits were more in tune with what was happening to the programming lineups on the *Discovery* and *History* channels in the past decade, then they may have been less surprised by the rise of Donald Trump. Moving forward, I illuminate and historicize the symbolic power of white,

rural, working-class masculine performances when taken up by wealthy white men in U.S. popular culture and electoral politics.

Chapter Four: When Wealthy White Men Perform “Real Manhood”

“But I have a theory about how they [media experts] missed the Trump train. They don’t hang out with regular folks like us who like to hunt and fish and pray and actually work for a living. Hey, I don’t even know that they know how to talk to people from Middle America. I mean, when I tell ‘em I’m from Louisiana they really start talking real slow and real loud. Let me tell you why I’ve been on the Trump train from the beginning. See when you’re from the South and you grow up with rednecks [emphasis added], there are some occasional disagreements. Sometimes those disagreements turn into fisticuffs. But any time I was ever in a bad spot, I always knew my brothers would have my back. And today in a lot of ways, America is in a bad spot, and we need a president who will have our back.” –Willie Robertson, CEO of Duck Commander, and star of *Duck Dynasty*, endorsing Donald Trump for president at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio on July 18, 2016.

Sporting his trademark American flag-patterned bandana and long, disheveled beard and hair, Willie Robertson of *Duck Dynasty* began his speech at the Republican National Convention with a Christian prayer. His sentiment openly defies the Jeffersonian tradition of the separation of church and state. This is particularly noteworthy at a presidential nominating convention, in which Islamophobia was also one of the defining rhetorical characteristics (Fuchs, 2016). Robertson self-righteously comments that “As some of you know, we end every episode of *Duck Dynasty* with a family prayer at the dinner table” (Nickoloff, 2016). He then suggests that more prayer is required “...with the way things are going in this country” (2016). Given that the Republican nominee, Donald Trump, is himself a former reality television star, it may not seem incongruous to have Robertson appear as a credible endorser. However, it is highly unlikely that viewers of *Duck Dynasty*’s first airing in 2012 would have predicted that the Robertson family of West Monroe, Louisiana would chart a course toward political relevance in 2016.

Willie continues with the observation that he and Trump have three things in common, including that they are successful businessmen, have hit television series, and are married to women who are more intelligent and better looking than they are. His remarks draw laughter and applause, but it is highly revelatory that he fails to mention some of their most obvious

commonalities: They are both white, heteronormative males who have inherited considerable wealth from their fathers. Thus, they have been conferred a unique constellation of structural advantages, which belie the self-made, upwardly mobile mythology of U.S. capitalism. Willie’s lack of acknowledgment of these shared experiences illuminates how white supremacist capitalist patriarchy functions covertly and at the level of “commonsense.” Trump and Willie’s shared racial and gender identities would likely never occur to either of them or most mainstream media analysts, since they are the norm to which all non-dominant gender and racial groups are measured.

As was extensively elucidated in the first chapter, white supremacy and patriarchy retain their power in part because whiteness and maleness seem unremarkable. Willie and Trump’s lived experiences enable them to never self-reflexively consider their own race or gender. Furthermore, neither of them have ever publicly acknowledged that the class-based advantages bestowed upon them from birth have factored heavily in their own economic “success.” In response to fellow Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio’s accusation that he inherited \$200 million from his father, Trump defended himself by claiming that he only received “a small loan” to start his real-estate empire (Kessler, 2016). Glenn Kessler explains in *The Washington Post* that although the \$200 million figure cited by Rubio is too high, that Trump received extensive financial assistance from his father, Fred Trump, who was himself once one of the wealthiest people in the United States as a result of his own real estate dealings. Kessler summarizes the benefits Trump received at the behest of his wealthy father:

He benefited from numerous loans and loan guarantees, as well as his father’s connections, to make the move into Manhattan. His father also set up lucrative trusts to provide steady income. When Donald Trump became overextended in the casino

business, his father bailed him out with a shady casino-chip loan—and Trump also borrowed \$9 million against his future inheritance. (2016)

Because the myth of rugged individualism remains embedded and celebrated in U.S. culture and political discourse, Trump’s inherited wealth remains a liability in relation to his claims of hard work and self-made success.

In a related fashion, Willie is now the CEO of Duck Commander, a multi-million-dollar business which manufactures duck calls for hunters, and was originally established by his father, Phil Robertson (Magary, 2014). Willie did not earn his position as CEO through hard work, dedication, and self-reliance. Nepotism is his key to success. With an awareness of his social privileges, it is almost comical when he suggests that media experts “...don’t hang out with regular folks like us who like to hunt and fish and pray and *actually work for a living* [emphasis added] (2016). How is his occupation as the CEO of a duck call company founded by his father considered more legitimate work than that of journalists and political pundits?

Willie characteristically commits to his performance of a “redneck” identity, which is documented throughout *Duck Dynasty*. I will unpack the raced, gendered, and classed implications of this performance in-depth momentarily, but in only a few short minutes in this speech, he taps into the symbolic capital this performance confers. Through his embodied performance and discourse, he proclaims that he is just one of the “regular folks” from “Middle America.” In actuality, through a critical discourse analysis of *Duck Dynasty*, it becomes overwhelmingly clear that the Robertsons have much more materially in common with the East Coast elites they self-consciously attempt to distance themselves from than with “regular folks.” As Helen Wood and Beverly Skeggs explain in *Reality Television and Class*, more overt signifiers of social class are typically replaced with an alternative discourse that subjugates class

consciousness: “The term ‘ordinary’ is one of the many euphemisms used to stand in for ‘working-class’, because in many different nations it is no longer fashionable to speak about class identifications” (2011, p. 2). “Regular” and “ordinary” discursively gesture toward a white, working-class social location. This speaks to the power of white supremacy, in that whiteness is considered an “ordinary” or normalized racial identity. I contend that this obfuscation of explicitly class-based discourse not only occurs in reality television, but in U.S. public discourse writ large. Therefore, Willie Robertson, despite his assertions, is a white, college-educated multi-millionaire, and not “regular” or “working-class.”

As Willie’s speech culminates with his endorsement of Trump, he discursively deploys another salient euphemism in the 2016 presidential election cycle: “He [Trump] may not always tell you what you want to hear, and you may not always agree, and it may not always be *politically correct* [emphasis added]. But when your father is Phil Robertson, I’m used to that, okay?” (Nickoloff, 2016) The Republican party, political conservatives, and most prominently, Donald Trump, use the term “politically correct” and its various iterations to delegitimize individuals or organizations calling attention to and challenging racism, sexism, homophobia, and other systems of oppression (Robinson, 2015; Illing, 2016). The term also functions to deflect and justify social inequalities. It is telling that Willie mentions his father Phil to much applause. Significant public controversy arose following the revelation of Phil’s racist and homophobic beliefs in late 2013 (Magary, 2014), which led to a significant decline in *Duck Dynasty*’s ratings (Kissell, 2014). Essentially, Willie’s praise of political incorrectness in relation to Trump and his father Phil can be equated with sanctioning racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Trump’s campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” has generated substantial controversy because it implies that the modest inroads made in recent years by women, people of

color, and LGBTQ-identified groups, and those living at those intersections, must be overturned. Trump’s racist, sexist, Islamophobic, and anti-immigrant rhetoric has provoked considerable condemnation in the mainstream media, as well as a robust critique of Trump’s supporters. His base is often characterized in mainstream media coverage as white, working-class males, who are unapologetic, reactionary bigots (Vavreck, 2016; Galston, 2016; Cohn, 2016).

Although there appears to be plenty of bigotry within the ranks of Trump’s followers, the common claim that most of his devotees belong to the working class is incorrect. It remains accurate, however, that his supporters are overwhelmingly white and male (Thompson, 2016). Jeffrey Bartash summarizes the misconception: “Here’s an emerging theme of the 2016 election: The improbable rise of Donald Trump has been fueled by a rapid shift of working-class, economically struggling white men into the Republican ranks. Only problem is, there’s not much hard evidence to support that” (2016). As Nate Silver further elucidates in “The Mythology of Trump’s ‘Working Class’ Support,” his followers are comparatively affluent overall:

Since almost all of Trump’s voters so far in the primaries have been non-Hispanic whites, we can ask whether they make lower incomes than other white Americans, for instance.

The answer is “no.” The median household income for non-Hispanic whites is about \$62,000, still a fair bit lower than the \$72,000 median for Trump voters. (2016)

Silver further explains that Trump’s supporters are more formally educated than is often presented: “Likewise, although about 44 percent of Trump supporters have college degrees, according to exit polls...that’s still higher than the 33 percent of non-Hispanic white adults, or the 29 percent of American adults overall, who have at least a bachelor’s degree” (2016). How did overt racism, sexism, and homophobia become exclusively associated with working and lower-class whites? White supremacy and bigotry certainly exist within this demographic, but

why do charges of racism and sexism not collectively stick to middle and upper-class whites in the same stigmatizing fashion?

This is particularly confounding given that Trump, who has deliberately made racism and sexism centerpieces of his administration’s platform, is himself one of the wealthiest persons in the United States. Certainly, this is a manifestation of how classism operates within whiteness, since middle and upper-class whites avoid collective stigmatization because of their economic advantages. I posit that the answer resides, in part, in the permeation of the stylized *performance* of white, rural, working-class masculinity, as taken up by highly visible and politically conservative wealthy, white males, such as Willie Robertson at present, and Theodore Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush in the past. As I argue in the first chapter, this form of masculine performance constitutes hegemonic masculinity in the current U.S. neoliberal context, since it confers legitimacy and symbolic power. Although Trump’s gender performance is not explicitly rural, which I will dissect shortly, the style and content of his speech coincides with a white, working-class masculine performance.

Case in point, J.D. Vance, author of *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and a Culture in Crisis*, in which he discusses his experiences growing up in an impoverished white family in rural Appalachia, touches upon the symbolic power of white, working-class, masculine performances in relation to Trump. In an interview in *The American Conservative*, Vance reinforces the misnomer that Trump’s supporters are largely poor and working-class whites, and suggests that his political traction and appeal are rooted primarily in white, working-class identification with his rhetoric:

No one seems to understand why conventional blunders do nothing to Trump. But in a lot of ways, what elites see as blunders people back home see as someone who—finally—

conducts themselves in a relatable way. He shoots from the hip; he’s not constantly afraid of offending someone; he’ll get angry about politics; he’ll call someone a liar or a fraud. This is how a lot of people in the white working class actually talk about politics, and even many elites recognize how refreshing and entertaining it can be! So it’s not really a blunder as much as it is a rich, privileged Wharton grad connecting to people back home *through style and tone* [emphasis added]. Viewed like this, all the talk about ‘political correctness’ isn’t about any specific substantive point, as much as it is a way of expanding the scope of acceptable behavior. People don’t want to believe they have to speak like Obama or Clinton to participate meaningfully in politics, because most of us don’t speak like Obama or Clinton. (Dreher, 2016)

I do not refute that this may be the reason Trump has garnered a sizeable segment of white, working-class support. However, even Vance acknowledges that some elites are “entertained” by his discursive performance. It is telling though that he stops short of suggesting that elites may also enthusiastically agree with Trump’s rhetoric and policy proposals; he implies that they are too sophisticated to experience anything more than detached amusement. His remark about political correctness again operates as a code for racism and sexism, and his overall assessment indicates that Trump’s white, working-class backers long for a president and a dominant culture that will condone the bigoted speech to which (only) they are accustomed. He fails to acknowledge the demographic reality that Trump’s base is comprised of comparatively more affluent white males overall, and reifies the notion that bigoted rhetoric chiefly appeals to lower and working-class whites. In short, racism, sexism, and the push for subverting the supposed reign of “political correctness” is not the exclusive domain of lower and working-class whites, but middle and upper-middle class whites as well. The fact that lower and working-class

whites are often collectively branded as bigoted and intolerant in U.S. media, and subsequently, in the public consciousness, whereas middle and upper-class whites avoid that stereotypical characterization, speaks to how classism manifests itself within U.S. whites.

I argue that through the entry point of *Duck Dynasty*, one can discern the symbolic power embedded within the performance of white, rural, working-class masculinity *when coopted by affluent white males*. I explicate the connection between the Robertsons’ redneck performance and other white, rural, working-class, masculine performances in U.S. electoral politics, specifically in relation to the office of the U.S. presidency both past and present. I attend to the particularities of Trump’s performance, in which it lacks a more typical rural character, but as Vance notes above, echoes the cultural norms of white, male, working-class speech. Regardless, Trump’s performance can be situated within this lineage, and I maintain that based on the demographics of his supporters, his performance also appeals to middle and upper-class white males because of the association between working-class, white masculinity and dominant conceptions of “real men.” Like Trump’s supporters, viewers of *Duck Dynasty* are also mostly comparatively affluent white males (Consoli, 2013; “National TV Spots”, 2014). It is even more telling that according to National Media, a Republican ad-buying firm, the typical *Duck Dynasty* viewer resides in Southern and/or rural areas that characteristically lean Republican (Geraghty, 2013). It is unsurprising then that Trump’s campaign asked Willie Robertson to speak at the convention—Trump’s supporters are demographically more likely to have watched *Duck Dynasty*.

Therefore, through situating *Duck Dynasty* in relation to the embodied performances of prominent wealthy, white male political figures in contemporary and historical contexts, one can trace the symbolic power of this performance because of the confluence of white supremacy,

heteropatriarchy, and capitalism within U.S. culture. It provides a productive entry-point for fleshing out the tension between social class simultaneously operating as a socioeconomic structural location and an individualized, stylistic performance, in which the latter conceptualization is given greater primacy in U.S. popular and political culture.

I approach *Duck Dynasty* as a case study that exemplifies the power relations that underpin “redneck,” “country boy,” or “frontiersman” performances when taken up by wealthy white males, in which class hierarchies are suppressed, and white male supremacy is bolstered. In summation, a critical discourse analysis of *Ducky Dynasty* makes the systems of power that encompass the dominant conceptualization of “real men” in the United States visible, and pinpoints the motivation for this working-class performance at the behest of comparatively wealthy, white men. It is critical to stress that a working-class structural location itself is undesirable, but the credibility of white, working-class masculinity is actively sought, as demonstrated by the Robertson men, Trump, George W. Bush, etc.

Duck Dynasty: A Case Study in Hegemonic Masculine Performance

A&E’s reality television program, *Duck Dynasty*, is the highest-rated nonfiction series in cable television history; peaking with a record audience of 11.8 million viewers for its season four premiere in August 2013 (Cohen, 2013). Despite the show’s comparative decline in the Nielsen ratings in its six most recent seasons—a drop that has been largely attributed to the publication of Phil’s racist and homophobic comments in *GQ* magazine in late 2013 (Yahr, 2014)—it remains relatively popular for cable television with its season 10 premiere bringing in 1.3 million viewers that evening (Metcalf, 2016). The series centers on the wealthy Robertson family of West Monroe, Louisiana. Despite their economic largesse, the male members of the

clan loudly proclaim their “redneck” credentials via their commitment to hunting, fishing, perpetually wearing camouflage, and sporting long, unkempt beards with lengthy, unruly hair to match. Headed by their patriarch Phil, who originally made his millions through establishing Duck Commander—his family-run business, which manufactures duck calls for hunters—the program documents their lifestyle (Magary, 2014).

Each episode replicates a highly formulaic trajectory across the show’s 10 seasons. The Robertson men are often depicted outdoors either hunting or fishing, and the Robertson women typically appear in the home performing domestic duties, particularly cooking. At times, traditional gender roles are almost hyperbolically enforced. Phil frequently makes remarks regarding who in the family is “appropriately” behaving in accordance with “redneck” standards and who is deviating from the preferred mode in a “yuppie” fashion. Each episode ends with Phil leading a Christian prayer as the whole family enjoys dinner together, while Willie, Phil’s son and CEO of Duck Commander, recaps the “lesson” of the episode in a voiceover narration.

One of the core themes of the show is that not only do the family members habitually invoke their “redneck” identities, especially Phil, they also frequently assert their superiority in relation to so-called “yuppies.” Although the term “yuppies” commonly refers to young (white) urban professionals, Phil applies the term generously to anyone who does not embrace his lifestyle of hunting and fishing. The show discursively configures “rednecks” as authentically masculine and yuppies as somehow feminine, which therefore implies the superiority of the former over the latter in a heteropatriarchal context.

David McKillop, general manager and executive vice president of A&E, sums up the appeal of the Robertson family on *Duck Dynasty*: “The Robertsons represent a lot of things we as Americans cherish: self-made wealth, independence, three generations living together” (Cohen,

2013). It is evident that A&E has tapped into salient aspects of U.S. culture given the show’s record ratings. The Robertson family has also generated \$400 million in sales from *Duck Dynasty* merchandise—establishing the Louisiana clan as a highly marketable brand (Boorstin, 2014). Narratives of rugged individualism and upward social mobility remain hegemonic in U.S. culture, especially in the current neoliberal discourse and in reality television by extension (Skeggs & Wood, pp. 2-3).

In this chapter, I explicate and historicize the political significance of upper-class white male public figures and politicians embracing a white, rural, working-class performance through the lens of *Duck Dynasty*. I separate *Duck Dynasty* from my analysis of the other blue-collar reality series for several reasons. First, the Robertson family is far more affluent than the crab fishermen of *Deadliest Catch*, the loggers of *Ax Men*, the drivers of *Ice Road Truckers*, and the miners of *Gold Rush*. This is even the case for the comparatively economically advantaged captains, managers, and company owners featured as the principal stars of said programs. Although *Duck Dynasty* frequently follows members of the Robertson family to the Duck Commander warehouse where they are filmed “on the job,” the program does not center on their occupation in the same way as the other blue-collar reality series. The recreational and leisure activities of the Robertson men are more heavily emphasized in relation to their masculinity; a distinction that I will attend to in significant detail.

In short, the Robertsons are not working-class, but are performing as though they are. I will detail through Judith Butler’s groundbreaking framework of gender performance how the embodied performances of the Robertson men differ in relation to the embodied performances depicted on the other blue-collar reality series examined here. Through the lens of this program,

the fraught dynamic between the dual conceptions of social class as both a socioeconomic category and as a lifestyle orientation in the United States can be observed.

Second, *Duck Dynasty* specifically invokes and valorizes the Robertson men’s self-proclaimed “redneck” identity, unlike the other shows, which do not mention the term explicitly. I explore the contested boundaries of the redneck identity, and its changing meanings throughout U.S. history. Third, all the series are structured by the genre conventions of reality television, but there is a noteworthy division between the format of *Duck Dynasty* and the other programs: It mostly focuses on the Robertsons as a family unit in their home environment, and remains more in line with the 22-minute sitcom structure, whereas the other series center on the workplace and are more emblematic of 44-minute dramas. Lastly, there are more women characters on *Duck Dynasty*, and as I will discuss, policing of traditional, binary gender roles encompasses the vast majority of the plot lines.

Throughout my analysis of *Duck Dynasty*, I will draw parallels between the embodied white, rural, working-class masculine performances of the Robertson men and prominent wealthy, white male political figures who have done the same. Although Donald Trump’s white, working-class, masculine performance does not adhere to the explicitly rural character of George W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, and Theodore Roosevelt’s performances, I elucidate the crossover within entrepreneurial masculinity or “transnational business masculinity” as Connell coins it, and Hooper’s conceptualization of “frontier masculinities” within the contemporary globalized economy (Kenway, Kraack, and Hickey-Moody, 2006, pp. 27-28). I also emphasize how language maintains a performative function, which Trump most aptly exemplifies with his highly masculinized, white, working-class manner of speaking.

My core objective here is to illuminate the motivation behind these performances. Why would some of the most structurally advantaged subjects—wealthy, white, heteronormative men—self-consciously perform white, working-class masculinity? It is critical to reiterate that this performance remains rooted in white male supremacy, as it inherently excludes women and people of color of all genders. I maintain that Pierre Bourdieu’s formulation of capital illuminates why this performance has become a strategic maneuver for certain affluent, white male politicians. Bourdieu conceives of social life and the struggle for power through the lens of three fundamental and interrelated concepts: habitus—an individual’s predispositions toward certain actions or behaviors, capital—sources of power in its economic, cultural, social, and symbolic forms, and field—a spatial metaphor for the relative distribution of power in a specific context (Bourdieu, 1987). He characterizes the various forms of capital an individual can acquire as the following: “economic capital (money and property), cultural capital (cultural goods and services including educational credentials), social capital (acquaintances and networks), and symbolic capital (legitimation)” (Swartz, 1997, p. 74).

In the case of Phil Robertson, the primary patriarchal figure on *Duck Dynasty*, he not only has a comparatively large amount of economic capital, but he also possesses the cultural capital of a master’s degree in education (Strauss, 2013). Furthermore, because of Phil’s prominence as a successful business owner and reality television star, this affords him a significant degree of social capital. I assert that Phil and the male Robertsons adopted their current appearances in order to attain the symbolic capital that the “redneck” image confers in the U.S. context. In *Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life*, Hugh Campbell, Michael Mayerfield Bell, and Margaret Finney contend that white, rural, working-class masculinity implies authenticity, and therefore, legitimacy, since it signifies the most preferred form of

masculinity in the U.S. gender hierarchy (2006). Again, working-class status as determined by a lack of economic and cultural capital remains objectionable unto itself in the dominant domain. However, the appearances, consumption practices, and recreational activities associated with white, rural, working-class men hold tremendous symbolic power as markers of masculine authenticity.

Based on Bourdieu’s understanding of social class, the Robertson family possesses far too many forms of capital in abundance to truly be considered “rednecks”—at least in the socioeconomic sense—a point I will return to. Within this line of reasoning, select white male political figures, who tend to be ideologically conservative, embrace this performance because they seek to gain the symbolic capital and legitimacy of masculine authenticity. This is unsurprising given that political conservatism in the United States remains heavily associated with heteropatriarchy and sexism as governing principles. I argue that white, male, rural, working-class masculinity or “redneck” masculinity constitutes hegemonic masculinity in the current U.S. neoliberal moment. In accordance with this standard of masculinity, white male political conservatives are highly invested in appealing to their base as “real men.”

It is important to briefly revisit the parameters of hegemonic masculinity. R.W. Connell originally coined the concept of hegemonic masculinity in *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (1987). In a more recent article, *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept* (2005), Connell and James W. Messerschmidt claim that “...the concept of hegemonic masculinity is in need of reformulation in four main areas: the nature of gender hierarchy, the geography of masculine configurations, *the process of social embodiment* [emphasis added], and the dynamics of masculinities” (p. 847). In essence, hegemonic masculinity should not be collapsed into a monolithic, fixed set of traits. In *Staging*

Masculinities: History, Gender, Performance (2003), Michael Mangan succinctly encapsulates the challenges inherent to neatly conceptualizing hegemonic masculinity: “Hegemonic masculinity is that form or model of masculinity which a culture privileges above others... Hegemonic masculinity is by nature paradoxical, since it seems to stand still but in fact is always on the move” (p. 13). This necessitates intersectional, socially contextualized approaches to hegemonic masculinity and gender performances more broadly.

The Robertson men are not specifically or overtly visually coded in *Duck Dynasty* as white, rural, working-class men—their embodied performances imply a visual shorthand for “real men” in U.S. culture at this particular moment. It is only armed with a critical feminist lens that a viewer could consciously discern that the Robertsons’ race (white), heteronormativity (cis, straight men), place (rural Louisiana), and class-based aesthetics (working-class/redneck) are each mutually constitutive of their perceived legitimacy as real men. I concur with Campbell, Bell, and Finney’s assessment that white, rural, working-class masculinity implies authenticity, and therefore, legitimacy, since it signifies the most preferred form of masculinity in the U.S. gender hierarchy. In keeping with the contingent nature of hegemonic masculinity, this does not imply that rural/redneck-type masculinities are ahistorical and static. However, I think one can safely assert that this particular constellation of traits reflects a dominant conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity in the current U.S. neoliberal context.

Prominent political figures, such as former President George W. Bush, publicly performing a white, rural, working-class masculinity with his cowboy hat, boots, t-shirt, and jeans on his Crawford, Texas ranch, reveals the extent of its symbolic capital: “...rural occupational and general ‘country boy’ representations are often appropriated by individuals for self-serving political and commercial purposes. Like the banners of God and flag, rural ‘salt-of-

the-earth’ occupations confer widespread legitimacy” (Campbell, Bell, and Finney, 2006, p. 269). Historicizing this style of political performance even further, one can trace its origins back to Theodore Roosevelt in the late nineteenth century. As Gail Bederman notes in *Manliness & Civilization*, Roosevelt self-consciously embraced a highly masculine identity that echoes the Robertsons’ contemporary performance of hegemonic masculinity in order to attain political legitimacy: “... he constructed a powerful male identity for himself in the terms of the Western adventure story... Now, shooting buffalo and bullying obstreperous cowboys, he could style himself the real thing” (1995, pp. 174-175).

Before further analyzing the white, working-class performances of affluent white, male presidents who hail from the Northeastern and Midwestern United States, including Theodore Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump, it is critical to note that this performance has recognizable limits in conferring symbolic capital. This white, working-class performance only seems to be embraced in the political arena when these figures possess either bourgeois or aristocratic U.S. pedigrees. In contrast, white male politicians who truly sprung from working-class, white, Southern roots, such as presidents Lyndon Johnson and Bill Clinton, had to overcome their backgrounds since they were framed as potentially shameful political liabilities.

As Nancy Isenberg notes in *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, when Johnson became president after Kennedy’s assassination, he had to self-consciously distance himself from his origins: “Yet what made LBJ different from his democratic predecessor was the necessity that he reinvent himself by shedding the predictable trappings of a southern backwater identity—which he did without unlearning his famous Texas drawl” (2016, p. 232). Isenberg explains that Bill Clinton had to similarly overcome his rural,

working-class Arkansas upbringing: “By calling on a Jefferson or a Kennedy in his speeches, Clinton was attempting to distance himself from his home state and class background” (p. 297).

This speaks to the reality of class hierarchies in the United States: It is fashionable to pretend you are a working-class, “regular” or “real” man, if and only if you are a white, heteronormative man with inherited class privilege. Otherwise, your impoverished or working-class, rural upbringing is something to be ashamed of and “overcome.” Thus, if the Robertsons of *Duck Dynasty* were truly working-class, then they would more likely be framed as objects of ridicule rather than subjects of masculine admiration. In this sense, *Duck Dynasty* does not fall in line with the so-called “redneckploitation” series, such as *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, which focus on poor and working-class, rural whites, in which they are comically mocked for eschewing middle-class sensibilities and social mores (Aho, 2016, p. 91).

Duck Dynasty: A Redneck Drag Show

After public controversy ignited following the revelation of Phil’s homophobic and racist comments in late 2013 (Magary, 2014), the family’s starkly contrasting appearances before the reality show also surfaced in the popular media (Vyan, 2013). Through a series of widely publicized photographs, it became clear that the Robertsons had fully embraced so-called “yuppie” appearances before their careers on A&E (Luzer, 2014). The discursive deployment of “redneck” as an authentically masculine, superior identity and “yuppie” as a feminized, subordinate label remains one of the core rhetorical characteristics of the series. The irony of the Robertsons having previously performed as “yuppies” themselves elicited significant media and public commentary.

In these “before” photos as seen in Figures 5 and 6 below, the Robertson men are on the beach and on the golf course looking clean-shaven with short haircuts, as they pose wearing khakis and button-down shirts. Figure 6 shows Willie presenting a drastically different look than during his speech at the Republican National Convention. These images sharply contrast with their trademark long beards, hair, and camouflage, as depicted in Figure 7 (Luzer, 2014). These photos prompted several mainstream media commentators to decry the Robertsons as “fake” (Lowry, 2013). Critics drawing parallels with the drag show as a site of gender performance in relation to the Robertsons’ redneck performance is evidenced in the headline from the Daily Kos: “Duck Dynasty is a Fake Yuppies-in-Red-Neck-Drag Con Job” (Vyan, 2013).



Fig. 5. *The Inquisitr* (2014), Retrieved February 23, 2017 from <http://cdn.inquisitr.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Duck-Dynasty-Fake-Playing-Golf.jpg>



Fig. 6. *The Inquisitr* (2014), Retrieved February 23, 2017 from <http://cdn.inquisitr.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Willie-Robertson-Before.jpg>



Fig. 7. *A&E* (2013), Retrieved February 23, 2017 from http://a57.foxnews.com/images.foxnews.com/content/fox-news/entertainment/2013/05/08/willie-robertson-duck-dynasty-fans-overwhelming-crowding-warehouse-daily/_jcr_content/par/featured-media/media-1.img.jpg/876/493/1459960266108.jpg?ve=1&t1

As Drew Magary notes in the now infamous *GQ* profile on Phil, *Duck Dynasty*'s \$400-million merchandising empire includes an iPhone game, which according to the press release, describes the goal of the game as follows: “As players successfully complete the challenges, their beards grow to epic proportions and they start to transform from a yuppie into a full-blown redneck!” (Magary, 2014). The irony of the game’s description in relation to the Robertson men’s real-life transformation from yuppies to rednecks is comical. As Daniel Luzer effectively summarizes regarding the emergence of the photographs in *Washington Monthly*,

Indeed, Jep and Phil (who has a master’s degree in education from Louisiana Tech University) might think of themselves as rednecks. And they surely enjoy hunting and fishing. But if ol’ frosted tipped, barefoot on the beach Willie is a redneck, I don’t know what a real southern gentleman even is. A&E appears to have taken a large clan of affluent, college-educated, mildly conservative, country club Republicans, common across the nicer suburbs of the old south, and repackaged them as the Beverly Hillbillies. (2014)

This examination is highly informed by Judith Butler’s work on gender performance, in which Butler treats gender as an embodied social construction that one “does” or “performs” either in accordance with or in subversion of hegemonic gender expectations (2006). In the preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler critically elucidates the interconnectivity of gender and sexuality: “...under conditions of normative heterosexuality, policing gender is sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality” (Location 141). Policing normative gender roles is a prominent current that runs throughout *Duck Dynasty*'s 10 seasons. The Robertson men are often depicted outdoors either hunting in the woods or fishing in the swamp, and are rarely shown wearing anything other than their camouflage attire. The Robertson women typically

appear in the home, usually dressed in either middle-class, business casual or leisure attire, as they perform domestic duties, particularly cooking. Overall, the Robertson women are rarely portrayed as active in either indoor or outdoor environments. As John Berger once noted regarding patriarchal gender depictions in the dominant visual order in *Ways of Seeing*: “...men act and women appear” (1972, p. 47). This rings true for *Duck Dynasty*.

Phil at times hyperbolically enforces traditional gender roles, as he makes frequent remarks regarding who in the family is “appropriately” behaving in accordance with masculine “redneck” standards and who is deviating from the preferred mode in a feminized “yuppie” fashion. One can infer from Phil’s virulent homophobic comments (Magary, 2013; Ray, 2015) that his preoccupation with performing an authentic masculinity is connected to his belief in compulsory heterosexuality. It is essential to contextualize that Phil’s beliefs are consistent with hegemonic and inherently oppressive ideologies regarding the relationship between normative performances of gender and sexuality.

Within Butler’s formulation of gender performance, it is crucial to understand that the male Robertsons are always already performing masculine identities in accordance with their male sexual assignment at birth. As Butler explains in *Gender Trouble*, “...the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established...” (p. 191). Even when they were performing “yuppie” masculine identities prior to their careers on *A&E*, they were not deviating from the limited spectrum of characteristics and behaviors ascribed to normative standards of gender and sexuality. However, the “yuppie” masculine identity is not configured as the most preferred or legitimate within masculine hierarchies. It is then useful to draw an analytical distinction between *performativity* and *performance*. Building off Butler’s framework, Helen

Wood and Beverly Skeggs explain in *Reality Television and Class* that “...performatives are unconscious repeated gendered and classed enactments, while performances are full-blown conscious actions. What we often see on reality television is the performative made explicit” (2011, p. 17). The male Robertsons’ on-camera performances of redneck masculinity appear entirely self-conscious and calculated based upon their prior appearances. To echo Pierre Bourdieu’s theorizing, I surmise that despite possessing significant amounts of economic and cultural capital (college degrees), the Robertsons were still missing the symbolic capital of masculine legitimacy. Thus, their embrace of redneck *performances*.

To further illustrate the relevance of class performativity to the analysis of reality television more broadly, Vicki Mayer explains in *Reality Television and Class* how her experience in the industry illuminates the importance of understanding social categories in relation to how they are performed: “My experience with the reality casting process revealed its emphasis on embodied performances. Casters search not only for people within certain demographics, but also for those who act appropriately to the demographic” (2011, p. 189). Therefore, one must often perform *stereotypically* in relation to social categories within the dominant logic of reality television.

Through the lens of reality television programs typically seeking out those who embody certain class-based characteristics that reflect their actual socioeconomic status, the Robertsons presenting as rednecks despite their economic largesse becomes even more incongruous. It is highly instructive then to situate their self-proclaimed redneck presentation as a performance, and not as an unconscious performative expression. The masculine performances of the male subjects of *Deadliest Catch*, *Ax Men*, *Gold Rush*, and *Ice Road Truckers* would fall more in line with unconscious performative expression because they are not wealthy, white men who have

self-consciously decided to perform as though they belong to the working-class—they are actually workers, or at least middle-class managers, as discussed in the first chapter.

Butler is widely recognized for pinpointing the drag show as a site of gender performance that destabilizes the naturalized rigidity of the gender binary: “...*drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency...*In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (1999, p. 187). It is critical to distinguish that Butler does not suggest that drag is necessarily subversive unto itself. As exemplified by the Daily Kos headline, “Duck Dynasty is a Fake Yuppies-in-Red-Neck-Drag Con Job” (Walton), there is nothing transgressive about the Robertsons’ performances. These wealthy white men self-consciously perform a redneck identity to find legitimacy, broad-based appeal, and commercial success. If anything, *Duck Dynasty* performs the ideological work of reifying the gender binary, white supremacy, and the neoliberal paradigms of rugged individualism and upward mobility.

As Butler explicates in her chapter “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, “Identity categories” discipline bodies within regulatory regimes, whether for hegemonic or counterhegemonic ends (1993, p. 308). It is integral to understand that performances constitute subject formation. In other words, subjects become intelligible through performances. It is noteworthy then that marginalized groups are often discursively, socially, and legally deprived of subjectivity. This accounts for the anxiety produced when individuals do not conform or neatly fit within socially constructed categories, such as transgender individuals. Gender nonconforming individuals are only intelligible as “others” within hegemonic framings. This process of relationally marking certain bodies as

either naturalized or “other” through the lens of social categories and interrelated structures of domination only has a fictional, socially constructed basis. As Butler asserts, “If a regime of sexuality mandates a compulsory performance of sex, then it may be only through that performance that the binary system of gender and the binary system of sex come to have intelligibility at all” (1993, p. 318).

Building off Butler’s formulation, the Robertson men went on television to perform as “real men” for a national audience. Compulsory heterosexuality and gender normativity produce the ideas of “real men” and “real women”; these are the fictionalized “original” standards by which all bodies are measured. As Butler cautiously elucidates, they are socially constructed notions, but have *real* effects and consequences via the naturalization and repetition of gender performances. This does not imply that the characteristics associated with “real men” and “real women” do not shift or evolve according to context, but standardized barometers of authentic masculinity and femininity unto themselves, in some form or another, always remain.

In *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance*, Diane Torr and Stephen Bottoms crucially recognize that masculine drag performances are not confined to the stage, in which male roles are performed by bodies socially marked as female, such as with drag kings. Torr and Bottoms provide a lens through which everyday masculine gender performances can be made legible as form of drag: “It is almost commonplace nowadays to suggest that men, too, are male impersonators...imitating the available models of masculinity and anxiously trying to live up to some idealized notion of what a ‘real man’ looks like” (2010, p. 8). When one approaches the male cast of *Duck Dynasty* as male impersonators, their anxiety-ridden quest to be real men becomes visible.

A&E gravitates toward promoting the Robertsons as real men because they know such a narrative will attract viewers. The program’s overarching narrative trajectory, in which “real men” hunt and “real women” cook, appeals to a more conservative, mainstream audience’s familiarity and comfort with the gender binary. Moreover, perhaps the series speaks to viewers’ own personal attempts to approximate masculine and feminine ideals respectively. Looking back at Willie Robertson’s comments at the RNC, one can infer that the “media experts” he is referring to must be men, when he states that “they don’t hang out with regular folks like us who like to hunt and fish and pray and actually work for a living” (2016). Willie is attempting to feminize and therefore, delegitimize them, because they do not engage in the appropriate hegemonically masculine activities.

The policing of gender roles on *Duck Dynasty* is not only confined to the male Robertsons. In Season One: Episode Three: “High Teck Redneck,” Phil takes his teenage grandson, John Luke, hunting because as he proclaims in a cutaway interview (a common narrative device utilized in reality television) that through hunting animals: “We teach them valuable knowledge about life, manhood” (2012). The integral connection between manhood and hunting is reinforced throughout the series. Miss Kay, Phil’s wife, is shown wearing her apron in the kitchen, which is how she is typically represented. As she finishes up cooking squirrels, she tells John Luke as he is leaving to go hunting with Phil: “You bring home the game or you’re not a man. That’s what I say” (2012). This illuminates how patriarchy is not only maintained by men, but by women who have internalized patriarchal values as “common sense.” Later in that same episode, Phil informs John Luke while they are hunting: “If you catch squirrels for your woman, your woman will never cut you off in bed.” The link between hunting and masculine sexual prowess within compulsory heterosexuality is cemented.

Trump’s Performance: Not Far from the Frontier

Although Trump is not known for hunting himself, he is a gun owner who made virtually unrestricted access to firearms a centerpiece of his campaign—garnering him an endorsement from the National Rifle Association (Romain, 2016; Licata, 2016). His sons, Donald Trump, Jr. and Eric Trump, generated significant controversy when photos of them posing with a dead leopard, elephant, and buffalo that they had hunted in Zimbabwe circulated on social media in 2012 and again in 2015 (Licata, 2016). Trump has defended his sons, and speaks of their hunting activities with pride (Romain, 2016; Licata, 2016). Theodore Roosevelt is famously associated with hunting big game (Heyes, 2015), and George W. Bush was an avid hunter during his presidency (Sapatkin, 2004). Although Reagan was not known for hunting specifically, he was publicly photographed holding rifles (Gilson, 2013), and his “cowboy” public persona was solidified through his frequently being photographed while riding horseback and sporting a cowboy hat (Sapatkin, 2004).

As is emphasized throughout *Duck Dynasty*, real men wield guns, hunt, and have a general proclivity toward violence. Willie Robertson strengthens the place of violence within this performance of white, working-class masculinity when he draws a parallel with Trump and his brothers in his speech at the RNC:

See when you’re from the South and you grow up with *rednecks* [emphasis added], there are some occasional disagreements. Sometimes those disagreements turn into fisticuffs. But any time I was ever in a bad spot, I always knew my brothers would have my back. And today in a lot of ways, America is in a bad spot, and we need a president who will have our back. (2016)

The implication is that Trump, like his “redneck” brothers, will use violence as president. The question remains: *Who* exactly would Trump be using violence against, and in the defense of *whom* in the United States? Who are the subjects of the “our back” Willie refers to? Clearly, Trump’s racist, sexist, and anti-immigrant rhetoric implies that he will be “defending” primarily white men.

In a frightening turn of events, Trump implied in August 2016 that his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton and/or her potential Supreme Court nominees, should be shot. At a rally in Wilmington, North Carolina, Trump casually commented regarding Hillary’s potential choices for Supreme Court: “If she gets to pick her judges — nothing you can do, folks. Although, the Second Amendment people. Maybe there is. I don’t know” (Date, 2016). Trump has also directly incited violence with his rhetoric numerous times against protestors at his rallies (Sommers-Dawes, 2016). Highly masculinized threats of violence; aggressive posturing; racist, sexist, and xenophobic speech; and the glamorization of gun ownership have become hallmarks of Trump’s performance on the campaign trail and in the White House.

I situate Trump’s white, working-class performance within Kenway, Kraack, and Hickey-Moody’s synthesis of Hooper and Connell’s conceptualizations of “frontier masculinities” and “transnational business masculinity” respectively (2006, pp. 27-28). Trump consistently appears in public wearing standardized, professional male business attire—a suit and tie. Trump has been a well-known real-estate mogul for decades, and dresses the part accordingly. Unlike the Robertsons and the other white, affluent male political figures included in this examination, Trump rarely deviates from his professional attire in public, and does not embrace an explicitly “rural” image. The only notable exception to this was when Trump adorned his now iconic red, baseball cap with his campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” scrawled across the front

during the campaign (Spodak, 2017). The hat represents a concerted attempt to connect with white, working-class voters, and as I contend, gestures toward Trump’s self-conscious effort to present as authentically masculine.

Furthermore, Trump taps into salient aspects of white, working-class or hegemonic masculinity within the transnational corporate realm as well. Kenway, Kraack, and Hickey-Moody interpret Hooper’s conceptualization of “frontier masculinities,” which speaks to the nature of Trump’s performance: “...‘frontier masculinities’, have been reinscribed or recontextualized in relation to globalization...the kind of masculine behavior that was integral to the process of English imperialism and American frontiers has been updated and become fundamental to global corporate zones of influence...” (pp.27-28). Essentially, Trump’s performance in the boardroom and on the campaign trail is commensurate with the white supremacist, patriarchal imperialism endemic to the mythic frontier, as is discussed at length in chapter two. As Isenberg notes in *White Trash*, Donald Trump’s performance on his reality television series, *The Apprentice*, was “...billed as a ‘seductive weave of aspiration and Darwinism,’ [which] celebrated ruthlessness” (2016, p. 306). Trump’s merciless catchphrase from the series, “You’re Fired!”, became iconic in U.S. popular culture (Chavez and Stracqualursi, 2016). Even though rural dress and other frontier characteristics are absent from Trump’s performance, the attitude, sensibility, and rhetoric remain.

Historicizing Trump’s performance of hegemonic masculinity in relation to Theodore Roosevelt is instructive regarding the relationship between mainstream conceptions of “real manhood” and white supremacist, patriarchal, imperialist discourses. Roosevelt said himself in his famous 1899 address “The Strenuous Life”: “As it is with the individual, so it is with the nation” (2008, p. 8). Gail Bederman provides a critical lens in *Manliness & Civilization* for

interpreting Roosevelt’s speech, in which he aggressively advocated for the U.S. to colonize Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines: “...Ostensibly, the speech never mentions gender at all. Yet the phrase ‘the strenuous life’ soon began to connote a virile, hard-driving manhood...” (1995, p. 184). She notes that is vital to understand “... that his [Roosevelt’s] strenuous manhood was inextricably linked to his nationalism, imperialism, and racism” (1995, p. 193). I argue that is vital to read Trump’s performance of manhood in a similar fashion—it cannot be delinked from his racism, sexism, and imperialism.

A critical caveat to Butler’s theorization of gender performance is the notion that the clear majority of subjects will always already fail to reproduce gender ideals. As Jonathan Culler summarizes, “To be a subject at all is to be given this assignment of repetition, but—and this is important for Butler—an assignment which we never quite carry out according to expectation, so that we never quite inhabit the gender norms or ideals we are compelled to approximate” (1997, p.104). Few bodies naturally approximate the fictionalized standards of “real men” and “real women,” especially when configured within a global context wherein these categories are continually underpinned by compulsory heteronormativity and white supremacy. Bodies of color and gender nonconforming bodies are precluded from “the real” standards of gender at the outset. I conclude that it is this overriding anxiety of not living up to masculine ideals that, in part, compelled the Robertson men to shed their so-called “yuppie” appearances in favor of the more authentically masculine, redneck performance in the first place.

Trump’s performance can be situated similarly. In the chapter, *Sexually Suspect: Masculine Anxiety in the Films of Neil LaBute*, in the anthology, *Performing American Masculinities: The 21st-Century Man in Popular Culture* (2011), Brenda Boudreau discusses what Michael Kimmel refers to as “Marketplace Man”: a well-groomed, nicely dressed, white-

collar professional man who asserts his masculinity through overt displays of money and status (Location 436). “Marketplace Man” would directly coincide with the characterization of “yuppies” on *Duck Dynasty*, and is also applicable to Donald Trump. Boudreau notes the tenuous position of marketplace masculinity, since its very essence resides in white male professionals appearing to deliberately invest time and money into their embodied performances. For example, Trump is often criticized for appearing to wear a hairpiece and sporting a fake tan (Spitznagel, 2015; Cutler, 2016). It is important to contextualize that part of what makes redneck-type masculinities appear authentic is that they imply a lack of time and energy expenditure on one’s own appearance. The inference is that real men do not care about how they look. Ironically, the Robertsons’ redneck performance indicates quite the opposite.

Boudreau succinctly captures the inherent anxiety and tension within performances of so-called marketplace masculinity: “Thus, while their class position gives these men the time and freedom to worry obsessively about appearances, it has paradoxically emasculated them, revealing the performativity of masculinity (and, hence, its vulnerability)” (Location 446). One can then insinuate that the Robertson men felt the same degree of emasculation when they were performing as yuppies, and thus sought out redneck drag as a refuge to ensure their masculine authenticity. In the same vein, Trump’s hyper-masculine and violent rhetoric functions to counteract any perceived feminization that comes with a “Market-Place Man”-style performance. However, as per Hooper’s conceptualization of “frontier masculinities” within the globalized economy, Trump’s performance can also be understood as overlapping with white, rural, working-class masculinity’s imperialist sensibilities.

A highly representative instance in *Duck Dynasty* of the anxiety that drives gender policing is with Jase Robertson, Phil’s son and Willie’s brother, who also perpetually wears

camo with a long beard and unkempt hair, in Season Three: Episode Nine: “Ring Around the Redneck” (2013). The narrative arch of the episode centers on Jase’s reluctance to wear a replacement wedding ring because he previously lost it frog hunting twenty years ago. Jase is only doing so at the behest of his wife, Missy Robertson. As Jase says to the sales clerk at the jewelry store: “I’m not a ring type of guy” (2013). When they are looking at the display case in the store, Missy suggests a ring that has diamonds in it. Jase puts it on, and then immediately takes it off saying with disgust, “No. That’s way too feminine.”

Later in the episode, when Jase is at the Duck Commander warehouse spinning his new ring on the table, Jase’s Uncle Si, Phil’s brother and a U.S. Army veteran, comments: “He’s been stripped of his manhood, boys. She finally won.” Willie jumps in and adds: “Today a wedding ring, tomorrow a fanny pack!” It is clear that Jase’s commitment to a redneck performance is highly tenuous, as simply wearing a wedding ring can somehow threaten to overturn his masculine authenticity. Although the tone of the series is often comedic, it does not suggest that the anxiety around this seemingly light-hearted gender policing is any less serious or consequential. For example, Jase appears sincere after his wife, Missy, and Willie’s wife, Korie, challenge Jase and the other men to a game of ping-pong, and he says: “We can’t lose to the women. That’s embarrassing” (“Spring Pong Cleaning,” 2012).

Tough Talk: How “Real Men” Speak

In *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Jonathan Culler reveals how language itself has performative and regulatory functions linked to subject formations. Culler cites how everything from gendered pronouns to derogatory gender/sexuality-based pejoratives function to interpolate subjects. For example, if I am referred to as “she” by my relatives from birth, this

repetitive language subjects me to female performativity. The “yuppies versus rednecks” dichotomous discourse on *Duck Dynasty* has a similar “performative force” (1997, p. 104). Via the show’s narrative framing, Phil Robertson repeatedly utters the term “redneck” in contexts that discursively reassert his claims to hegemonic masculinity, while simultaneously defining inferior, feminized others as “yuppies” in relation to himself. As per Culler’s theorizing, this discursive repetition carries as much performative power as the Robertson’s embodied performances.

The performative function of language is overwhelmingly apparent with Donald Trump. It is not only his aggressive finger-pointing (literally and figuratively) as he speaks, but his name-calling and bullying rhetoric. As Willie implies, real men hunt, fish, pray, and are “politically incorrect” like his father Phil and Trump. Although I do not want to reproduce the numerous sexist, racist, and homophobic quotes spewed by Trump, I want to highlight that his domineering, mocking, and violent rhetoric is commensurate with white, male supremacist ideology. Again, “real men” are white men in U.S. culture. Trump is not genteel in his speech—he is brutish and vitriolic. As Vance notes, Trump’s performative speech mirrors the discourse of Vance’s own white, rural, working-class upbringing in Appalachia. It is not only the content of his words, but his body language and aggressive posturing.

Trump’s performance provides a glimpse into the central place of violence within hegemonic masculinity, especially given that his rhetoric has actually incited violence at his rallies, as was mentioned previously (Sommers-Dawes, 2016). In Season Two: Episode Seven: “Spring Pong Cleaning,” one can observe a representative instance of violence being normalized and celebrated in relation to masculine prowess. Jase Robertson states in a cutaway interview from a scene in which he and the other employees at the Duck Commander warehouse play a

game of ping-pong: “Everyone likes a little violence...how can we make ping-pong more violent?” (2012) Hunting itself is also inherently violent. In Season Three: Episode Nine: “Ring Around the Redneck,” Jase reluctantly goes shopping for a wedding ring with his wife Missy to replace the one he lost. He states in the cutaway interview: “The only metal that I find precious...is the metal that they use to make guns” (2013). Again, guns, hunting, and violence are core characteristics of white, rural, working-class masculinity.

Trump’s rhetoric is overtly anti-intellectual, which is also a principal characteristic of white, rural, working-class speech. One of the primary features of a working-class structural location is a lack of higher education. Trump’s deployment of anti-intellectual rhetoric is ironic given that he is a graduate of the elite Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania (Dreher, 2016). In *Duck Dynasty*, Phil often ridicules anyone who relies on technology—either labeling them “yuppies” or “nerds.” In Season One: Episode Three: “High Tech Redneck,” Phil declares in a cutaway interview about taking his grandsons hunting: “I would consider it an obligation to my grandkids to show them the great outdoors, as they say. The last thing I would want for my grandkids is to grow up to be nerds” (2012). It is important to emphasize that Phil is not referring to his female grandchildren. He conceives of a “nerd” as a feminized male identity that he wants to ensure his grandsons do not gravitate toward. To reiterate, he recognizes hunting and the outdoors as linchpins to masculine authenticity. In Season Two: Episode Seven: “Spring Pong Cleaning,” Phil once again chastises his grandsons for playing video games and declares: “The last thing we need is more nerds” (2012).

The series humorously celebrates anti-intellectual endeavors and behaviors, despite several of the Robertson men possessing advanced degrees. When the Robertson men engage in some drills with the West Monroe Fire Department in Season Six: Episode Four: “Quackdraft,”

Willie asserts in a cutaway interview: “As a redneck myself, I can safely say that when it comes to fire, we’re usually the ones setting the fire...Definitely not putting them out” (2014). As always, Willie explicitly self-identifies as a redneck; a designation which the audience then further associates with anti-intellectual and dangerous behavior, such as setting fires. In Willie’s closing voiceover narration of Season Eight: Episode Two: “Induckpendence Day,” he notably solidifies the critical place of anti-intellectual rhetoric and behavior within white, rural, working-class masculinity. As he espouses his view of the symbolic importance of the Fourth of July and its hegemonic association with personal freedoms, he announces: “That includes the freedom to say what we want, like your uncle calling you a ‘maggot,’ or the freedom to do what we want, like setting off a crate full of fireworks” (2015). Interestingly, the sentiment here echoes Willie’s RNC speech, in which he defends his father and Donald Trump’s racist, sexist, and homophobic rhetoric, or in other words, their right “to say what they want.” Given the systemic erosion of civil liberties post-9/11, it is disconcerting that Willie identifies “setting off a crate full of fireworks” as an example of a cherished and protected personal freedom. However, this remains in line with his redneck performance—he wants to present as anti-intellectual and violent—as real men supposedly are.

Former President George W. Bush is still widely remembered for his anti-intellectual rhetoric. His mispronunciations, grammatical errors, and oversimplified explanations provided ample fodder for late-night comedians. Bush memorably espoused anti-intellectual, Western frontier rhetoric just days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Regarding the search for Osama bin Laden, Bush remarked on September 17, 2001: “I want justice. And there's an old poster out West, I recall, that says, 'Wanted: Dead or Alive'” (abcnews.com, 2001). Obviously, Bush is referring to the posters he had seen in fictional Western films. Bush’s cowboy rhetoric matched

the cowboy persona he cultivated on his Crawford, Texas ranch, also known as the Western White House during his tenure (Owens, 2014).

In the 2004 presidential election, Bush was characterized in the mainstream media as the more authentically masculine candidate as compared to his Democratic opponent, John Kerry. Meredith Conroy analyzes the media coverage of the 2004 election at length in *Masculinity, Media, and the American Presidency*. Conroy argues that the mainstream media branding Bush as authentically masculine and Kerry as effete and feminine was a contributing factor in Kerry’s electoral defeat (2015, p. 136). In a 2004 Pew Research poll, 56% of respondents answered that Bush came off to them as more of a “real person” than Kerry (Benedetto, 2004). I suggest that the designation of “real person” could logically be extended to the more overtly gendered term, “real man.”

The notion that high intelligence is an undesirable, feminizing trait for men has emerged at other prominent moments within U.S. presidential politics. As Isenberg notes in *White Trash*, 1956 Democratic presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson was pejoratively described as an “egghead” (p. 260). President Obama’s performance in one of the 2012 presidential debates against Republican candidate Mitt Romney was negatively characterized as “professorial” by numerous political pundits (Gavin, 2012). Although overtly gendered terms were not utilized in describing Obama’s performance, the notion that speaking in a professorial or intellectual manner indicates weakness, was apparent in the critical commentary following the debate. In a patriarchal context, weakness and femininity are linked, as is masculinity and strength. Fox News contributor Mark Sanford portrayed the debate as follows: “As Romney leaned in, Obama seemed to retreat rather than engage. Keep it up for a few more debates and the president might be putting that *professorial* style to good use — in academia” (Gavin, 2012). Romney is

portrayed as aggressive and decisive, which in line with hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, in the case of Trump and the Robertsons, their anti-intellectual, brutish speech signals that they are, in fact, real men, and not feminine nerds or wimps.

Moving forward, it is critical to chart the contingent meaning of the term “redneck,” which the Robertson men discursively unleash so frequently. Although Trump does not use this term in reference to himself, it is clear in Willie’s RNC speech that he identifies Trump as behaving similarly to him and his fellow self-proclaimed rednecks. What does the redneck identity mean, and how has its meaning changed throughout the years?

What Does It Mean to Play Redneck?

The wealthy and highly educated Robertsons embracing a so-called “redneck” lifestyle raises critical questions about what the term signifies in the contemporary, neoliberal context. That being said, the family’s redneck self-identification is all the more incongruous given their comparative wealth. Is redneck still a *classed* term in the contemporary context? Is it now only used to signify white, rural Southerners who are drawn to a lifestyle that appreciates the outdoors regardless of their socioeconomic status? With Bourdieu’s configuration of social class in mind, one can then analytically juxtapose the notions that the term redneck signifies both a working-class structural location and a stylized performance marked by white, rural, working-class masculinity. The latter conceptualization of redneck is particularly relevant in the current hegemonic, neoliberal discourse, which deemphasizes class consciousness. Charles Reagan Wilson describes the contemporary, neoliberal characterization of a redneck in the mainstream discourse in *White Masculinity in the Recent South*: “The Southern working-class version of

redneck is becoming the national version, and it’s good-natured, it has humor, and in some ways, it’s a *performance* [emphasis added]” (Watts, 2008, p. 5).

The word redneck is most widely documented as having its roots as a derogatory term used by aristocratic whites in reference to white rural laborers in the American South, particularly Mississippi, in the late nineteenth century (Huber and Drowne, 2001, pp. 434-435). Despite its negative connotation, the term seems to have gone mainstream in recent years (Watts, 2008, pp. 4-5). Edward W. Morris succinctly encapsulates the parameters of the term in his ethnographic study of a rural school in “Rednecks, Rutters, and ‘Rithmetic’”: “The term ‘redneck’ is a well-known popular culture identity that implies being blue-collar, rebellious, and southern. On a more tacit level, ‘redneck’ also strongly represents masculinity and whiteness...This identity is unabashedly white, but opposed to middle- and upper-class whiteness” (2008, p. 741).

Morris explicates the interconnection of race and gender within social class in terms of white masculinity’s indispensability to the redneck identity, as is exemplified on *Duck Dynasty*. He further explains the resurgence of the term in the rural location of his study, as a result of the white male subjects there investing more in their whiteness and masculinity, evidently, because of their economic marginalization: “Uses of the term ‘redneck’ captured a sense of pride embedded in living in this ‘rough,’ white working-class, rural location. Through the implication of toughness and opposition to elitist sophistication, this regional category offered a classed and raced template consistent with local hegemonic masculinity” (p. 742).

Isenberg discusses how the redneck identity became more prominent in popular culture as part of a collective embrace of multiculturalism in the 1970s: “The same impulses would soon be used to refashion the redneck and embrace white trash as an authentic heritage...Vernon Oxford

[the country music singer] defined ‘redneck’ as ‘someone who enjoys country music and likes to drink beer’” (p. 276). Isenberg attends to the ongoing class conflicts that persisted, even as the redneck identity appeared superficially to have attained mainstream acceptance: “Many southern suburbanites had no sympathy for the white trash underclass in their section. They drew a sharp class line between the lower-class rednecks and the ‘upscale rednecks’” (p. 277).

Isenberg pinpoints the structural limitations of a redneck performance: A person who occupies a white, male, rural, working-class structural location is still maligned for not achieving the American dream of self-made, upward economic mobility. Thus, the Robertsons can be admired and emulated as real men because their redneck performance coincides with a higher socioeconomic status, whereas the truly working-class, largely female, self-proclaimed redneck Shannon-Thompson family of TLC’s *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, was subject to ridicule and criticism for their on-camera performances (Deggans, 2014). The dominant culture will only truly accept comparatively affluent white men “playing redneck.”

Isenberg speaks to the rigid gendered aspect of the redneck performance. She observes that in the 1990s, “Redneck was no longer the exclusive province of country singers. It had become part of the cultural lingua franca, a means of sizing up *public men* [emphasis added], and a strangely mutated gender and class identity” (p. 292). This suggests that there was a steady process by which the redneck identity became continually dislodged from the structural realities of social class. It was morphing into an identity that would fall in line with neoliberal, multiculturalism, in which the power differentials that exist between identities are suppressed in the public discourse and consciousness. She identifies two women authors from white, rural, working-class backgrounds, Dorothy Allison and Carolyn Chute, whose contributions to popular understandings of white, rural, working-class life did not receive the same type of mainstream

adulation. She pinpoints that “what they showed instead was that women cannot wear ‘white trash’ or ‘redneck’ as a badge of honor” (p. 292). Simply put, only class privileged, white, heteronormative men can.

Interestingly, Isenberg does not recognize the tension of the Robertsons occupying a higher socioeconomic status than their truly working-class, reality television counterparts:

After 2008, a new crop of TV shows came about that played off the white trash trope...The modern impulse for slumming also found expression in reviving the old stock vaudeville characters. One commentator remarked of the highly successful *Duck Dynasty*, set in Louisiana, ‘All the men look like they stepped out of the Hatfield-McCoy conflict to smoke a corncob pipe.’ The Robertson men were kissing cousins of the comic Ritz Brothers in the 1938 Hollywood film *Kentucky Moonshine*. (p. 307)

Indeed, *Duck Dynasty* emerged as part of this wider trend in reality television. However, the fact that the Robertson men are treated as subjects worthy of admiration because of their wealth and masculine prowess, and not derided as lower class degenerates, needs to be acknowledged.

Phil Robertson’s continual usage of the word redneck is almost always in relation to his criticism of yuppies (young urban professionals or young upwardly-mobile professionals). Phil employs the terms redneck and yuppie in a context that does not overtly signify class status; he uses them as expressions that represent two divergent and gendered lifestyle orientations. It seems the redneck versus yuppie dichotomy in many ways mirrors the gender binary. The redneck lifestyle is constructed as authentically masculine, while the yuppie lifestyle is situated as feminine and inauthentic, and therefore, subordinate. According to Phil throughout the series, yuppies are not “real men” because they live in urban areas, have professional occupations, wear formal attire, and do not hunt or fish.

This central theme in *Duck Dynasty* is encapsulated in the compilation clip entitled “yuppies” (A&E, 2012). The clip summarizes Phil’s characterizations of who he identifies as a yuppie. It not only includes Phil’s comments, but his son Jep and Jep’s wife Jessica’s opinions about what being a yuppie means:

Phil [to his grandson]: Don’t marry some yuppie girl...find you a kind-spirited country girl...if she knows how to cook...now there’s a woman.

Jep: A dude that’s clean-shaved, that’s wearing like a shirt and tie, oh he’s a yuppie...pretty much anybody that doesn’t spend time in the woods, that’s a yuppie.

Jessica: City people that, you know, don’t generally know anything about hunting or live that lifestyle. (2012)

Remarkably, Phil’s conception of the ideal woman is heavily tied to traditional domestic duties, such as cooking. This suggests by logical extension that so-called yuppie women do not fulfill these roles adequately. Again, the understanding of the term yuppie as a category of social class is subsumed by rhetoric that delineates it solely as a lifestyle orientation tied to geographic location. Although Phil and the others do not state it explicitly here, it is implied that men are typically the ones who fish and hunt, while women remain in the kitchen. Throughout the series, the men and women of *Duck Dynasty* strictly adhere to these ascribed gender roles, including Phil’s wife Miss Kay. These roles are only occasionally “transgressed,” such as when Phil takes his granddaughters fishing in Season Four: Episode Two: “So You Think You Can Date?” (2013).

A particularly telling moment regarding the policing of gender roles occurs in Season Five: Episode Four: “From Duck ‘Til Dawn.” Miss Kay is painting her nails with her two young granddaughters in the kitchen when Phil enters. The girls ask if they can sleepover, and Phil is reluctant. Leaning back in his recliner, the two girls hop on Phil’s lap, and ask him repeatedly and excitedly if they can sleepover. He then asks them a series of questions before he agrees:

Phil: “Who’s the best hunter in the world?”

Girls: “You!”

Phil: “Who’s a great fisherman?”

Girls: “You!”

Phil: “Who’s a great cook?”

Girls: “Grandma Kay!” (2014)

Phil’s granddaughters respond to each question without hesitation. Although Phil does not make reference to yuppies or rednecks in this scene, the policing of gender roles is ever-present throughout the series. It suggests that the masculine authenticity of the redneck identity does not merely speak for itself, but needs to be continually reinforced and uttered aloud.

Instances in which gender roles are policed in relation to the grandchildren are particularly troubling. It suggests the considerable anxiety underpinning gender performances, in which the adults voice concerns that the young members of their family will not live up to gendered expectations. In Season Two: Episode Seven: “Spring Pong Cleaning,” Phil returns to his home after taking his two older grandsons fishing. Miss Kay is cooking jelly with her apron on, as Phil and his grandsons arrive in the kitchen. Phil asks his grandsons: “Ya’ll gonna grow you some whiskers when you get big?” (2012) The boys say that they are required to shave for school. In the cutaway interview, Phil proclaims: “Let that hair come out their face. That shows that they’re a man. They’re not doing that. That’s happening on its own.” However, as Phil continues, he objects to women allowing their hair to grow naturally without intervention: “...I was roaming around in South Arkansas one time and some old gals up there—woo! Women with whiskers. It’s a bummer” (2012).

The compilation clip, “Phil’s Way of Life,” encapsulates the importance of gender policing for Phil. He reiterates the importance of women being able to cook, and refers to men who cook as “girlie men” (A&E, 2013). This clip also captures his condemnation of technology as something “real men” do not rely on (A&E, 2013). Although the terms redneck and yuppie

are not specifically mentioned in this clip, the signifiers of these terms remain present. The yuppies versus rednecks—us versus them—binary is one of the show’s most salient aspects. Gender policing encompasses so much of the narrative in the series that it would be hard to imagine the show without it.

A highly illustrative episode that contains several of the core themes endemic to the series is Season One, Episode Five: “Redneck Logic.” It entails the Robertson men trudging through the Louisiana swamp with their rifles, blowing up old duck blinds, and then rebuilding them for their future hunting expeditions. Although Phil is disinclined to rid of an old duck blind, his son Willie offers the following observation: “Let me tell you a little bit about redneck logic: If you wanna take something away from him just blow it up because then he’s gonna be so enamored by the fire that he’ll forget all about what he’s losing” (2012). The connection between the redneck identity and hegemonic masculinity is overt. As per Willie’s commentary, rednecks are assumed male, anti-intellectual, and easily transfixed by activities and displays that are coded in the popular discourse as authentically masculine.

After one of the old duck blinds is spectacularly lit aflame, Phil returns to his home where his wife, Miss Kay, can be seen cooking dinner. Phil informs Miss Kay about having used explosives to demolish the duck blind: “Willie—he’s the one that concocted that scheme. A Redneck stunt if I ever seen one.” Interestingly, this scene segues to Miss Kay commenting in a cutaway interview about how the family upholds traditional gender roles: “It’s never dull being married to a Robertson. Never. It’s just like you know, ‘I’m the man, you’re the woman’...we’re like in the cave, but not really, we’re in modern times” (2012). Although Miss Kay does not appear to contest the Robertson men’s preference for traditional gender roles, it remains noteworthy that she considers the dynamic to be antiquated.

Later in the episode, the Robertson men decide to assemble a new duck blind out of an old Recreational Vehicle. Phil hurls a possum from the RV at Willie causing him to comically run and fall to the ground. Phil remarks about Willie’s reaction: “What would happen if you threw a possum on a man? Married a yuppie girl, living in a subdivision, that’s what happens to you—a possum will scare you” (2012). Phil emasculates Willie by claiming that he married a “yuppie girl,” and therefore, yuppies are presumed feminine and associated with cowardice. The terms redneck and yuppie are employed in a highly gendered discursive context that naturalizes (white) masculine dominance. The class dimensions of these expressions remain obscured.

Another highly illuminating moment is when the Robertson men hire a whole crew to build the new duck blind. Willie then comments about their economic largesse: “Being a wealthy redneck does have its advantages, ‘cause no matter how dumb an idea is, we can always hire an entire redneck army to make sure the job gets done” (2012). The celebration of anti-intellectualism is again reinscribed here. Critically, Willie is not subjected to scorn and ridicule for such a statement because he, as he himself acknowledges, is a “wealthy redneck.” *Duck Dynasty* cements the neoliberal understanding of the redneck identity—the embodied performance and lifestyle orientation most commonly associated with hegemonic masculinity. The structural, classed implications of the redneck identity are becoming steadily subsumed by its association with hegemonic masculinity.

Conclusion

Duck Dynasty offers an illustrative case study for understanding the performative power of white, rural, working-class or “redneck” masculinity in the contemporary U.S. context. The power of this gender performance resides in its conferral of authentic masculinity to those white

males who can “realistically” take it up. This is especially true for comparatively wealthy white males, such as the Robertsons, who skirt the stigma of occupying a poor or working-class socioeconomic location. Again, women of all races and people of color of all genders remain fundamentally barred from taking up this performance at the outset. If anyone other than white men attempt to perform or claim a redneck identity, then it is perceived as inauthentic since white male supremacy is integral to this performance of hegemonic masculinity or “real manhood.”

The conceptualization of a redneck signifying a white, rural, Southern, working-class structural location has become subsumed by its association with hegemonic masculinity in a neoliberal context that deemphasizes class hierarchies and structural inequalities writ large. This explains how the Robertsons’ wealth somehow does not belie the dominant perception that they are rednecks. A critical discourse analysis of *Duck Dynasty* reveals how white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism invisibly shape seemingly benign entertainment programming. The Robertsons’ support of billionaire President Donald Trump, who also derives symbolic power from his own white, working-class-style performance, clearly discloses the Robertsons’ enthusiastic support for racist, sexist, classist, and xenophobic public policies. These friendly “rednecks” on cable television demonstrate that systems of power are often propagated by seemingly harmless and benevolent public figures. In addition, their wealth also indicates that contrary to dominant media discourses, racism and bigotry are not the exclusive terrains of poor and working-class whites. Donald Trump, who inherited his wealth, proves that white supremacist and heteropatriarchal beliefs have significant traction in elite white spheres as well.

In summation, *Duck Dynasty* exemplifies the power of hegemonic masculine performances, as well as their tenuous nature. As per Kimmel’s observations regarding

hegemonic masculinity throughout U.S. history, real men must constantly “prove” their masculine authenticity. The Robertson men’s habitual discursive reassertions that they are rednecks, when read in contrast to their former “yuppie”-style presentations, unmask the deeper anxiety they likely carry about approximating masculine gender ideals. The social importance placed upon being a “real man” or a “real woman” demonstrates how all persons become interpellated within the dominant, patriarchal logic of the gender binary. The question remains: For how long can one expect the redneck performance to signify hegemonic masculinity in the United States? I predict that with the ascension of Donald Trump to the highest office in the nation-state, white, rural, working-class masculinity will continue its reign as the preferred way “to be a man” throughout his tenure.

Conclusion: Synopsis of Findings

The findings of this critical discourse analysis indicate that the blue-collar reality shows provide a rich visual archive of performances of hegemonic masculinity in the past decade. Through their framing of the highly hazardous occupations of commercial fishing, logging, truck driving, and gold mining as individualized tests of manhood, the blue-collar reality shows solidify the connection between masculine authenticity and this type of work at a time in which the nature of work itself is becoming increasingly precarious. More precisely, these series cement the linkage between “real manhood” and the type of man who performs this kind of work—white, rural, and *appearing* working-class in manner and dress.

The flattening of the class hierarchies present within the casts of these series also reinforces the myth of the classless society, as the embodied performance of white, rural, working-class masculinity is presented as disconnected from one’s social location within a class hierarchy. In mapping the parameters of contemporary hegemonic masculinity in the United States, this dissertation uncovers the systems of power, including white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, settler-colonialism, and capitalism that underpin the preferred way to be a “real man” in the contemporary context. The blue-collar reality shows reinforce the notion that “real manhood” materializes in a vacuum, and that the cameras are just neutrally documenting these men “as they *naturally* are.”

I confirm that these programs valorize white, rural, working-class masculinity as “real manhood” in direct response to Kimmel’s discovery that the Great Recession engendered a “masculinity crisis” for white, rural, working and middle-class men in the United States. These shows document that discursive gender policing itself is commensurate with the performance logic of hegemonic masculinity, which gestures toward the underlying insecurity many U.S. men

have in relation to their place in the gender hierarchy. This reinvestment in work as a marker of masculine authenticity, as opposed to challenging the wider economic order and the social construction of gender, is a counterproductive tendency in relation to alleviating the precarious nature of work in the contemporary neoliberal labor market. Corporate-owned U.S. cable networks would much rather inject celebratory displays of white masculine prowess into their programming schedules than foster class consciousness. This study further confirms commercial television’s congruent economic and ideological investment in the status quo.

A critical assertion of this study is that the emergence of these shows signaled a profound white, rural, working and middle-class male backlash against the modest social gains made by women, people of color, and LGBTQ-identified peoples in the past decade. This explains the near universal presence of heteronormative white males across these series, in which only white women who generally satisfy the visual desires of male spectators, such as Lisa Kelly of *Ice Road Truckers* most notably, are conditionally granted entry. Regardless of their appearances, there remains an underlying hostility toward women who dare to enter male homosocial spaces, as documented throughout these series upon women occasionally arriving on the scene. I maintain that the proliferation and popularity of the blue-collar reality shows gestured toward a wider sociopolitical phenomenon, which led to the election of President Donald Trump. If the mainstream political punditry were more aware of what was happening on U.S. cable networks, they may have been less taken aback by Donald Trump’s high approval ratings among rural, working and middle-class, white men. In this seemingly inconsequential corner of cable television resided some inklings into a deeper white male supremacist social current, which aided in launching Donald Trump to the presidency.

This dissertation also attests to how a mythical, imaginary place, namely the frontier, can yield tremendous power and material consequences. In challenging the ideological basis of frontier mythology, as articulated by renowned U.S. historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, this study not only historicizes these contemporary media depictions, but also intervenes in orthodox U.S. historiographical narratives. Additionally, in noting the common conventions between the blue-collar reality shows and the Western film and television genre, this project situates these contemporary media texts within the lineage of visual mass media representations of frontier mythology. In the dominant U.S. discourse both past and present, the frontier is often cast as a race and gender neutral construct—a place devoid of any deeper ideological or material struggle. Not only did Turner falsely conceive of the frontier as empty backwoods, he portrayed life on the frontier as a necessary rite of passage for white men to continually reconstitute U.S. exceptionalism and rugged individualism through their taming of the wilderness. Without stating it explicitly, Turner provides an ideological justification for continued settler-colonization of indigenous peoples and their lands; perpetual environmental destruction to satiate capitalist greed; and white manhood as the normative standard for ideal citizenship.

In configuring the frontier as a “white male spatial imaginary,” I expose how frontier mythology naturalizes the presence of white men in remote wilderness settings at the expense of women, indigenous peoples, and people of color. The frontier is not neutral or uninhabited: It is a contested site upon which imperial white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy is ritualistically enacted and resisted. The blue-collar reality shows provide an illustrative contemporary example of how the mythic frontier continues to serve as the preferred proving ground for hegemonic masculine status. These series document white men performing hazardous occupations in remote, wilderness settings to reinvigorate frontier mythology at a time in which its intertwined

core tenets, including rugged individualism, white male supremacy, and unregulated capitalism, are facing considerable public scrutiny on multiple fronts. Both the Great Recession and systemic challenges to white male supremacy elicited the proliferation of this subgenre of reality television programming—an ideologically conservative reaction to a changing U.S. sociocultural landscape. Blue-collar reality television seems to discursively suggest that it is only through going back to the frontier that—per Trump’s campaign slogan—white men can “make America great again.”

In relation to the findings of the online audience reaction portion of this study, the comments analyzed do not provide a comprehensive picture of online audience reactions to the blue-collar reality shows. However, they do offer some revealing, preliminary insights into some prominent audience concerns and preoccupations. Above all, this group of self-selected viewers seems largely concerned with the preservation of authenticity. Conversations across all the boards in the sample follow a similar trajectory, in which someone denounces a series as “fake,” and is met with a chorus of posters claiming to have always already known that. Many commenters “re-act” to these programs on message boards to perform their authority on authenticity for their fellow posters.

Furthermore, the occasional inclusion of women in these programs is viewed by some commenters as an affront to the perceived authenticity of blue-collar reality television. These commenters appear to concur with the ideological orientation within the shows that suggests that white, rural, working-class men toiling on the frontier constitutes the preferred or commonsense image of “real America.” Hegemonic notions of U.S. authenticity are deeply linked to white male supremacy. Thus, the experiences of women and people of color are not coded as representative of “real America” within the dominant logics of commercial television.

Although race, gender, and class are not frequently discussed in an explicit manner in these online venues, the lack of commentary about these social categories suggests their invisibility to these commenters. Whiteness and maleness remain the normative racial and gender standards to which all other groups are measured. Therefore, the dominant discourse frames white males as individuals—not as raced and gendered subjects. Because the myths of rugged individualism and the American dream persist, class consciousness remains elusive within U.S. public discourse, as exemplified on message boards for series that highlight blue-collar occupations. Consequently, the silences regarding these systems of power on the boards are just as telling—it demonstrates how systems of power, such as white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism, typically go unremarked upon.

Lastly, this study finds that the conceptualization of a redneck signifying a white, rural, Southern, working-class structural location has become subsumed by its association with hegemonic masculinity in a neoliberal context that deemphasizes class hierarchies and structural inequalities writ large. This explains how the Robertsons’ wealth somehow does not belie the dominant perception that they are rednecks. A critical discourse analysis of *Duck Dynasty* reveals how white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism invisibly shape seemingly benign entertainment programming. The Robertsons’ support of billionaire President Donald Trump, who also derives symbolic power from his own white, working-class-style performance, clearly discloses the Robertsons’ enthusiastic support for racist, sexist, classist, and xenophobic public policies. These friendly “rednecks” on cable television demonstrate that systems of power are often propagated by seemingly harmless and benevolent public figures. In addition, their wealth also indicates that contrary to dominant media discourses, racism and bigotry are not the exclusive terrains of poor and working-class whites. Donald Trump, who inherited his wealth,

proves that white supremacist and heteropatriarchal beliefs have significant traction in elite white spheres as well.

This dissertation finds that *Duck Dynasty* exemplifies the power of hegemonic masculine performances, as well as their tenuous nature. As per Kimmel’s observations regarding hegemonic masculinity throughout U.S. history, real men must constantly “prove” their masculine authenticity. The Robertson men’s habitual discursive reassertions that they are rednecks, when read in contrast to their former “yuppie”-style presentations, unmask the deeper anxiety they likely carry about approximating masculine gender ideals. The social importance placed upon being a “real man” or a “real woman” demonstrates how all persons become interpellated within the dominant, patriarchal logic of the gender binary. The Robertsons’ prior appearances indicate that the considerable economic, cultural, and social capital they had already acquired was not enough—they needed the symbolic capital of masculine authenticity.

This study effectively illuminates how affluent white males, such as the Robertsons and Trump, take up white, working-class performances as a strategic maneuver for increased power. In Trump’s instance, this symbolic capital contributed to his current access to the extraordinary powers of the U.S. presidency. The question remains: For how long can one expect the redneck or white, rural, working-class masculine performance to signify hegemonic masculinity in the United States? I predict that with the ascension of Donald Trump to the highest office in the nation-state, white, rural, working-class masculinity will continue its reign as the preferred way “to be a man” throughout his tenure.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The nature of this dissertation project posed some significant challenges. For feasibility purposes, critical discourse analysis could only be applied to ten episodes per each series under examination. Although the highly formulaic trajectory of each series made it manageable enough to discern wider patterns, it was challenging to piece together certain plot points, particularly changes in casting, across multiple seasons for each series. Furthermore, each episode presented a voluminous amount of relevant visual and discursive information. It is a formidable task to capture and translate such visually dense media texts into a written document. Although inclusion of selected images certainly assisted in this regard, thoroughly describing and providing a critical discourse analysis of television programs to a reader who may not have any familiarity with them presents a significant limitation. This dissertation is likely more accessible to people who have at least viewed multiple episodes of each series.

Some significant challenges presented themselves in relation to the online audience reaction portion of the study. Because there exists such a prodigious amount of online commentary about the blue-collar reality shows in multiple venues, it took a considerable amount of time to wade through these discursive digital archives. Additionally, these sites remain active, and new commentary can emerge in these spaces at any time. Navigating multiple sites required a diligent accounting and tracking of the online comments included in this analysis. As I noted previously, the anonymity of these commenters presented both a strength and a limitation. Although anonymity emboldens posters not to censor themselves, it also prevents deeper insights from emerging about the relationship between commenters’ demographic characteristics and reactions to these series—particularly as they pertain to dominant understandings of social categories. Although this slice of audience reaction data does

reveal compelling findings, there is enough online audience reaction data out there to constitute an independent project of its own.

To that end, future research projects should more comprehensively engage with audience interpretations and reactions to these series through multiple methods. Although audience studies of that scope are formidable, it would be beneficial to ascertain some more in-depth data about audience interpretations of blue-collar reality television, particularly in relation to wider ideological beliefs and social locations. It is critical for all future audience data to be aggregated intersectionally, as audience studies often only account for one or two demographic dimensions. In light of Katz’s study (2016) revealing the clear relationship between television viewership patterns and voting tendencies, it seems that studies exploring the connection between media consumption and political/ideological beliefs will continue to grow.

Lastly, this project began several years before the election of President Trump. Although these series provided clues to a deeper current of rural, white male anger against women, people of color, and the LGBTQ community, I distinctly remember being taken aback by Trump’s emergence as the Republican frontrunner for president in late 2015. However, because of this research project, I never felt confident that he would soon return to his role as host of *Celebrity Apprentice*. Since this past election cycle, mainstream news media discussions of the political motivations and experiences of the white working class have skyrocketed. These stories often reinforce the notion that the white working class is somehow THE working class, even though people of color comprise the clear majority of U.S. workers. In this line of reasoning, I hope both mainstream political reporters and academic researchers begin to reformulate their understandings of not only social class, but the dominant construction of social categories writ large. Because clearly, the future of social research and political activism must be intersectional.

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