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“BEING NICE IS LETHAL”: DISCIPLINING AND SUBVERTING SOUTHERN
FEMININITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN POPULAR CULTURE

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Mississippi

Kaitlyn Vogt

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the performance of southern femininity in contemporary southern popular culture, specifically prescriptive literature and reality television. Both texts provide valuable insight into how southern femininity is disciplined and subverted by individual women and the public. Humorous prescriptive literature in the first chapter provides the data necessary to delineate key markers of “ideal” southern femininity and how primarily elite white women perform it. The second chapter focuses on the show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and how June Shannon opened up a liminal space for thinking about alternative southern femininities before ultimately closing it with her scandal in late 2014.

It is primarily concerned about how women embody southern femininity and how other southern women police that performance. While individual women find personal empowerment through the practice of southern femininity, collectively it is a dangerous performance that maintains race and class boundaries and is exclusionary far more than inclusionary. It depends on both the hyper-feminized performance and the seemingly non-feminine performance. This thesis explores how the two act in concert and opposition and attempts to complicate the question of whether or not true subversion is possible.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Sara Austin, Montie Webb Vogt, and Tommie Webb, who inspired me to study southern women and southern mothers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Jaime Harker, Dr. Katie McKee, and Dr. Kirsten Dellinger for their feedback and help throughout the writing process and for graciously serving on my committee. I would also like to thank Elizabeth Trollinger, Shawna Felkins, and Rebecca Albright for reviewing drafts, having marathon writing sessions, and listening to thesis woes over the past year. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Montie and Mike Vogt, who have supported me emotionally and financially over both my undergraduate and graduate career. I never would have gotten to this point if they had not invested their time in me, whether it was piano lessons, homeschooling, or flying out to Mississippi when I was homesick. You're the best, Mom and Dad, and I am forever grateful.

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INTRODUCTION

I grew-up in a small farming community in North Carolina. Except for the occasional doctor or lawyer, it is decidedly working class. There are around two thousand residents and to this day it is still segregated. There are no businesses or schools in town. Houses are set far back from the road and no one walks anywhere. Hunting is the most popular activity and there is a local coon club to prove it. While liberal cities like Chapel Hill and Durham are only about thirty minutes away, the tractor pull and a still active chapter of the KKK keep us firmly rooted in the country and the past. There is a Ruritan club and a baseball field, but the center of the community is the church.

There are two churches in downtown Cedar Grove: Eno Presbyterian and Cedar Grove Methodist. I have at different times belonged to both of them. The Methodist and the Presbyterian churches in Cedar Grove have a rivalry. They also have a cooperative relationship. Each Thanksgiving the churches take turns hosting the Thanksgiving service and potluck and each Easter they rotate who hosts the sunrise service and breakfast. However, the rest of the year they hold each other at arm's length. The Methodist church is more communally engaged. It has a larger number of Ruritan club members and regularly partners with them for charity dinners and auctions. The Methodist church also has the community garden in town. After the murder of a local shop owner, the church worked with the African-American community to build a small

missional garden in their neighborhood.¹ The garden is now a communal gathering place and regularly holds dinners and other events for the community. However, it was Eno Presbyterian and the women who attend there that taught me about southern food, southern hospitality, and coded language and they did it at the church potlucks.

There was a potluck about once a month and the women were in charge. In all other aspects of church life, men dominated. We had a male pastor and the congregation actively opposed appointment of a woman. A male elder taught Sunday school. The men organized and led cookouts. The Ruritan club, a community service and fellowship club for rural adults, was for men only and all their charity dinners were displays of male domestic prowess. But the potlucks, that was a woman's domain. They were held for a variety of reasons. One was always organized in conjunction with a funeral and in a congregation where the median age was sixty something there were a lot of funerals. Certain birthdays and anniversaries were celebrated with potlucks. The biggest ones every year were held at Homecoming, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

My mother was one of two women who helped plan the funeral potlucks. I vividly remember being toted along to each and every one by my mother. We would always get there early to help set-up and we would always stay late to help cleanup. The process always began by assessing what we had to work with. There were a few dishes that we could always rely on. She had a general idea of what people would bring and could call upon others to help fill-in the food gaps. They made sure everything at the funeral receptions went as smoothly as possible. I do not think either one of them ever ate at these potlucks. They were too busy filling drinks, making sure the devilled egg plate was always full, and clearing plates. As a child, I remember

¹ This garden focuses on mission work in Cedar Grove by donating the majority of food produced to local low-income families.

someone coming up and asking how the church managed to arrange such a beautiful reception and someone said: “Do you have a Montie and a Bonita?” referring to my mother and her closest church friend.

Attending these potlucks and watching my mom along with the other women gave me a pretty good idea of gender roles, southern hospitality, and how these women gained power. Food was the conduit through which this communal knowledge was imparted onto me and it taught me a lot of good things and a lot of questionable things. I was taught that men ranked ahead of women no matter how much individual power a woman had. Before the men were allowed to go through the buffet, visitors and guests were encouraged to go. They were the most important people in that room and the members of the church, especially the women, went out of their way to make them feel special. I learned that you always serve your guests first. You always make them feel comfortable even if that means making yourself uncomfortable; most commonly this was expressed by having to stand to eat because we ran out of chairs. You always try to find common ground—by playing the who do you know game. And you never let them leave empty handed. Any extra food was given away to guests or to other people in the congregation. If you went home with your own leftovers, you somehow failed.

Despite the subjugation, these women had power. Participating in these potlucks gave them cultural and social capital. If you wanted to be involved in Cedar Grove, you joined a church. If you wanted to be accepted in the church, you participated in the social events. Potlucks were not the only way. A Wednesday night Bible study also gave women a chance to assert their dominance. Each week one woman signed up to bring a meal for the study. My

mother did it at least once a month if not more. They used food to assert their dominance and as such most of my conception of southern femininity revolves around southern food.

Being associated with a church gives one an in. It vouches for what kind of stock you are: namely good Christians. Once one woman gains control over a particular domain in the church, she is reluctant to let it go even after her original right to the position has disappeared. For example, the same woman has run the Vacation Bible School at Cedar Grove United Methodist for decades. She acquired the position when her own children were little and age appropriate. Both have since graduated from college and she is still running it despite the plethora of young families and moms who would like control of it. It is also important to note that this particular field is racialized white and that there is only so far a woman can ascend. Eno Presbyterian has in the past had female elders, but will not have a female pastor even if that means they will go five years without one. Women can play a role, but they need to stay in their place.

My family is not from Cedar Grove. We moved there when I was four years old. The first day we arrived a man knocked on our door and told us we would be accepted because we were the right color. My mother quickly found out that the community is very insular and is dominated by a handful of families that have intermarried to the point that they might as well be considered one family. She decided we needed to start going to church and almost as soon as we started, she became involved with food there. My grandmother organized the funeral food at her church when my mother was growing up. My mother knew that was her way in to the community. While my family itself is not working class—we would be considered middle to upper middle class—both of my parents grew-up working class and my mother especially felt a kinship to the rural community.

To use a cliché, my mother knew how to play the field. She had the necessary cultural capital to ascend to some of the highest positions of status within the church. She was a Sunday school teacher and an elder in addition to her roles in assisting with church potlucks. This cultural capital was instilled in her by her mother who taught her how to cook the dishes she would take to the potlucks and by her great-aunt who taught her how to be a hostess. They gave her the necessary toolkit to elevate her social position within a very specific domain. My parents' money allowed her to buy fancy themed napkins and plates for the church to use and allowed her to contribute a few showy pieces of tableware, thus giving her an additional way to endear herself to the local women. Her own upbringing in rural Georgia where she spent lots of time at the farms of family and friends meant that she also had the cultural capital via farm knowledge to talk and relate to the predominantly working class farmer congregation. My father, who was raised in the suburbs of Massachusetts and works in computers, did not fair as well building connections.

I learned that much of performing southern femininity involved secrets—mostly a secret knowledge. Either you “just knew” what somebody meant when they said something or gestured at you or you had some secret knowledge of a particular facet of the performance like how to style your hair a certain way or how to make Mary Alice’s chocolate pie. The women of Eno Presbyterian have not published a cookbook because they fiercely protect their recipes. They do not give out their recipes to just anyone because they do not know if that person is going to take over their place as the chocolate pie baker. If everyone knows how to make your signature dish, you may no longer be a key player in the church. Many of the women will gladly give you a written account of the dish, but for some reason it rarely turns out the way they make it. There

are secret steps and ingredients involved that they do not share whether by choice or just because they have forgotten that the written recipe does not include that bit of vital information. People will try to figure out how to make it and come up short because they cannot decode the key to making it exactly the way she makes it. Southern femininity is similar. You can ask a woman what it means to be southern and you'll get a variety of vague platitudes or characteristics that never quite get to the heart of it.

I learned that this performance gives you cultural capital and I learned that you guard that capital fiercely. Being part of that inner circle of church women was a privilege not a right. I learned that you feign ignorance when something does not work out even though you know why. I also learned that when dealing with other women, women tend to speak in code. In all my years going to events coordinated and led by women, I do not think I have ever heard a woman speak highly of her own food. Before the plate is ever placed in front of you, the cook tells you that something is wrong with it. It is too dry. It does not taste the best. It is undercooked or overcooked. She did not have much time and this was the best she could do. Expectations are set very low regardless of how many times they have made the recipe or how many times that person has eaten it. It is a good strategy. It sets the person up for compliments later because the person consuming the food will assure them that it is delicious. Usually it is and even if it is not, one does not say that it is anything less than delicious and so thoughtful of the person to make it and bring it. It is all a code and everyone around that table knows it.

This modesty does not mean that the women do not judge each other. On the contrary, the women of Eno Presbyterian size each other up, pass judgments, and communicate in coded language. Psyche Williams-Forsen writes about signifying in the African-American church

tradition. This verbal play extends into the kitchen and women participate in a culinary game of sorts. Williams-Forsen writes that this competition empowers women: “In this signifying context, black women enjoy a relative amount of self-actualization, self-expression, and self-awareness through the camaraderie, celebration, and competition that permeates this form of culinary play” (136). It is a type of discourse that emerged from fried chicken dinners and that is practiced among black women in the church. Williams-Forsen defines signifying as “encoded with meanings that distinguish between what is *said* and what is *meant*,” (138). Signifying is an African American tradition and I do not want to claim that it goes on in white communities. However, the white women I grew up around did engage in their own encoded verbal play.

If you somehow violated the never-verbalized rules, it would not be addressed directly. Instead one would receive the brush off, a casual dismissal concealed in a sweet missive. To the outside ear, it sounds genuine, but to those in the know, it is a cutting remark meant to usher a person back into their proper place. It is coded language that I absorbed as a young girl and that I use to this day. Unlike African-American signifying, this verbal play generally comes from a place of maliciousness and weariness. It is a way to remind others that they are being judged for everything: the way they dress, what they bring, how they act, and what all of that says about their upbringing.

While the women I grew up around were aware of their socioeconomic class, they were also aware of a different type of class: the kind that your mother tried to raise you with. Having class in this sense means that you know better than to be outright rude. Being rude is considered the ultimate sin. It’s about knowing the appropriate way to act in situations. The worst I was ever punished when I was a child was when I was rude. Anytime I displayed any hint of

selfishness or generally acted like a child my mom would wait until we got home and announce to no one in particular “someone asked who that rude girl was and I couldn’t believe I had to claim *you* as my child.” Shame was her most effective disciplinary tool, although it often wasn’t clear why I was being shamed for things.

Gradually men have been coming into women’s church potluck domain. There are now monthly men’s prayer breakfasts. They cook breakfast for each other and fellowship and afterwards tell all the women how hard it was to make pancakes for twenty people. However, their potlucks are a closed space. They are not serving women. Instead they only serve each other. At Ruritan club functions, which are run by members of the churches, men are in charge of the meat. They will serve at these functions but only in a carving capacity. The women are still responsible for the sides and desserts and they are usually in charge of distributing drinks. They still function as the primary hospitality gatekeepers. The wives are the ones mingling with the crowd and making sure everyone has what they need.

I learned a lot attending church potlucks. I learned that women are nurturers and servers. I learned that there was power in that. It gave you gendered and cultural capital in a world rigidly run by social rules and norms. While my feminist side bristles against this overt display of patriarchy, the dutiful southern daughter side sees the value in learning about hospitality and coded language. It helped me interact with women who held vastly different personal values from me. It has enabled me to make friends with almost anyone because I have learned to be polite and welcoming at all costs. It also taught me that southern femininity was a structured performance that was maintained through disciplining other women.

Southern femininity writ large is a white and middle to upper class performance built on archaic stereotypes of southern gentility and hospitality. Like cultural studies scholar Tara

McPherson, I view southern femininity as being a set of ideals and norms that dictate appropriate feminine behavior within the specific cultural context of the American South (21). I could also borrow from Florence King and her work *Southern Ladies and Gentleman* and describe southern femininity as: “The cult of Southern womanhood endowed her with at least five totally different images and asked her to be good enough to adopt all of them. She is required to be frigid, passionate, sweet, bitchy, and scatterbrained— all at the same time” (37). The performance of southern femininity while highlighting the differences in gender and gendered expectation in the South often serves to obscure other sites of difference such as race and class and render them invisible in the public figuring of southern identity. It was constructed under specific cultural circumstances, namely Reconstruction and the Jim Crow period, and although it is a performance that many white women of a certain means may find personally empowering, that empowerment comes at the expense of other southern women.²

Southern femininity focuses on an arbitrary set of rules that are almost impossible for any one woman to uphold, so coping mechanisms and mental gymnastics are enacted to continue the illusion. While southern femininity is built on both white supremacy and patriarchy, it has much in common with paternalistic standards all women are encouraged to uphold. It prizes beauty, a sacrificial temperament, and humility, and it prioritizes care work over other forms of work and acts of affection. It serves to keep women firmly placed in the domestic sphere both in their private homes and their public lives. Although many may find empowerment through traditionally feminine activities such as cooking, baking, or beautification, they still serve as an excuse to keep women out of positions of power in non-domestic spaces. It also can be inherently misogynistic as women compete with each other and create an impossible set of standards. As Florence King succinctly states: “All the ultrafeminine qualities that the South

² See Glenda Gilmore’s *Gender and Jim Crow*, Grace Hale’s *Making Whiteness*, or Tara McPherson’s

requires women to have, come tumbling out of her in a mockery of femininity, until Mary Lou starts to seem like a misogynist's parody of her sex" (116).

Southern femininity is about discipline. Women discipline themselves and they discipline each other. It is a codex of rules and mannerisms that are rigidly maintained although they are meant to appear effortless and ingrained. These rules are passed down generationally, drummed into young women by their mothers, grandmothers, and older community members. Failing to display the artifice of a southern woman is a reflection not only on the woman herself but all the other women in her family. This creates a sense of urgency and obligation that contributes to the overall disciplinary aspect of the performance.

The performance of the southern feminine is constructed on race and class. The southern feminine I am discussing is very white and tends towards middle and upper class women. In this way, it is a racist performance and is used to create a racial hierarchy. Tara McPherson elaborates on the racialized aspect of the performance in her work *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*:

The performative nature of the lady signals a difference both in kind and of degree, limning a very different history of race, gender, and place than that of other regions. Even if this difference in regional femininity were only one of degree, that difference has been fetishized, fixated on, and marketed for so long that it has taken hold, creeping in to white southern consciousness like kudzu.

(152)

It is a performance perpetuated by the selling of the South. The mystique of the southern lady and her mannerisms is crucial to perpetuating the marketplace of "Dixie" and related material

Reconstructing Dixie for a more in depth explanation of the creation and context of the myth of the southern lady.

culture and ephemera. This cultural narrative served as a way to promote tourism and sell southern kitsch and has become ingrained in certain white southern women's conceptions of their personal identity (Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie*).

This differentiation in femininity between the South and everywhere else in America can be condensed into attributes the South believes it does better than anyone else including manners, tradition, food, and hospitality. It is a romantic figuring of the women and of the region that serves to defang women as much as it raises them on a pedestal and disguises both the ferocity of the southern woman and her culpability in the region's worst sins. While popular culture likens the southern woman to decorative and sweet objects, "steel magnolias," Georgia peaches, etc., there is also an undercurrent of ferocity indicating that southern women are not to be trifled with and that underneath all the sweetness and fluff lies a figure not to be crossed. McPherson writes: "The belle or lady raises flirtation and softness to an art form, deploying a performance of heightened femininity to disguise both determination and potency. This performance is an agreed-on social fiction, allowing a simultaneous privileging of both delicacy and strength" (153). It is her sweetness that allows her to get away with her subversion of the norm and create slightly more pliable rules, within reason. Her polite nature allows the grand southern matriarch to gain a firm foothold in the community and the family and exert her rule over others.

Southern femininity has long been considered one of the high points of southern culture. It is romanticized in almost every form of popular culture. It is marketed as one of the strengths of southern universities, e.g. "the women of Ole Miss are the most beautiful women in the

world.”³ It serves as the origination point of the South’s other famous selling point: southern hospitality. Southern femininity is built on tradition and manners. It is a gendered performance and a social construct and it both gives women power and leverage and suppresses them. It is a highly constructed artifice that excludes many southern women, most notably black women and lower-class women, although nearly all southern women perform it to some degree.

An unspoken code of conduct among southern women has developed, which guides their behavior, helps maintain the illusion of the docile southern lady, and allows women space to deviate without too many social repercussions. According to McPherson, “Properly packaged, mannerisms perfect, the belle traverse particular regional spaces with ease (and of course, grace) other spaces remain off-limits, beyond the proper domains of the refined southern woman” (151). These spaces include those traditionally dominated by men, although women have increasingly encroached on these enclaves using feminine pursuits, like using domestic skills to reign over the social sphere of male-led churches or creating Junior Leagues and other women’s clubs that gain enough authority to influence local policies such as the women who pioneered historical preservation in Charleston, South Carolina.

Women gain these spheres of influence through perpetuating and manipulating the norms of white southern feminine behavior. Judith Butler writes about norms in *Undoing Gender* stating: “A norm operates within social practices and the implicit standard of normalization. [...] Norms may or may not be explicit, and when they operate as the normalizing principle in social practice they usually remain implicit, difficult to read, discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce” (41). In order to gain more insight into the norms of southern

³ The anonymous mobile message board Yik Yak is full of such sentiments and many other institutions have similar unofficial mottos such as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s “Carolina girls are the best in the world.”

femininity one could turn to myriad sources: observing southern women, analyzing novels, TV, and films about southern women, or reading how-to manuals for southern ladies.

Theoretically this paper is working with Judith Butler's concept of performativity, specifically because I view southern femininity as a performance. However, I think that it is also important to briefly discuss the role of social construction as southern femininity is built on race, gender, and regional identity, which are social constructions. Candace West and Don Zimmerman pioneered the idea of gender as social construction and in their article "Doing Gender" define gender as "the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (127). They situate gender in a specific context as a social construct that is dictated by normative conceptions of what it means to act and look like a man or a woman. This dovetails nicely with Butler's discussion on norms as presented above. The norms are a social construction that dictate the performance.

Judith Butler developed the concept of performativity and viewing gender and femininity/masculinity as a performance. In her first work on performativity, *Gender Trouble*, she states: "Gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained," (5). As such, it is hard to separate the femininity from southernness particularly because the region is feminized and often referred to by a woman's name--Dixie. Even southern masculinity has feminine aspects to it. Florence King writes: "There are many straight but effeminate men in the

South, which is why it is so hard to define the Southern gentleman. There is a point at which gallantry and effeminacy meet and become inextricably intertwined in one terribly nice man. Too much gallantry, especially in this day and age, can seem effeminate because it takes on the anachronistic qualities of a minuet” (151-152).

Butler describes performativity:

Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.

(185)

Her work is closely intertwined with sexuality and subversion and the way those operate within and outside the performance. While much of her work focuses on the body, her emphasis on acts and desires is key to understanding the performance of southern femininity as it is a series of actions that culminate in the designation of southern lady. It is not a simple birthright that makes one a southern lady. It involves comportment and behavior and discipline more than anything. Just being a woman in the South does not entitle one to southern womanhood.

There are advantages to both Butler’s theoretical framework and the work of Candace West and Don Zimmerman’s analysis of gender as a social construction. For the purposes of this thesis, I argue that gender is a social construction that an individual performs incorporating both theories into one cohesive reading of gender. West and Zimmerman are a bit unclear on the

individual's role in the social construction of gender. They mention dismantling institutionalized gender as a way to achieve gender equity, but they never actually provide ideas on how to do this. While a fantastic framework for looking at norms and institutions that suppress or promote gender equity, in "Accounting For Doing Gender," West and Zimmerman address some of the criticisms directed at their research. Specifically they elaborate on the role of accountability in the doing gender framework. Doing gender relies on a set of norms for a gender and person to be held accountable to. Changing those norms does not imply an undoing of gender, but rather a redoing as the accountability practices have shifted but they have not been eliminated ("Accounting," 117-118). Butler, in contrast to West and Zimmerman, is interested in the role of the individual in performing gender. However, while Butler's great strength is analyzing individual performance of the body, she is not very good at connecting it to broader institutional structures. Like West and Zimmerman, she fails to account for those that transgress gendered norms or she overly praises those that do without looking at why those norms may be problematic.

Both frameworks are useful when discussing southern femininity. West and Zimmerman provide a lens for looking at larger social structures and organizations that allow for the proliferation of southern feminine ideals. Butler offers a more individualized viewpoint on how women specifically perform and subvert these norms required to perform southern femininity. She also provides an excellent framework for discussing the role of size and the body in the construction, deconstruction, and performance of southern femininity in her discussion on pollution and the body. Polluted bodies, and fat bodies are polluted in America, are othered, defined as operating outside society's boundaries, through their pollution, which justifies their

oppression. This is key when thinking through the othering of June Shannon in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. Bodies represent the social hegemony and anything that transgresses that hegemony pushes those individual bodies to the margins (*Gender Trouble*, 177-180). Fat bodies and “white trash” bodies in particular are often ostracized and coded as polluted and are then pushed out of representing the dominant groups, namely middle-upper class thin bodies.

This thesis is also interested in Pierre Bourdieu’s work on cultural capital and legitimate culture, although less so than it is with West, Zimmerman, and Butler’s work on social construction and performativity. Bourdieu explored the realm of legitimate culture versus illegitimate culture. Legitimate culture was created and enforced by the dominant group in society and in Cedar Grove and other rural southern towns that dominant group is the church and in this thesis it is older upper class white women. Legitimate culture is a way to accrue cultural capital, which is a way of using non-financial assets to accrue social gains. These assets can include education, dress, skills, and knowledge. In the case of this thesis, the cultural capital is knowing the correct way to perform southern femininity and successfully embodying that performance. Bourdieu’s analysis specifically applies to class, but I think his concept of developing cultural capital to gain status can be applied to this situation. Building off of Bourdieu’s ideas about the various types of capital one can gain, I suggest that there is also gendered capital at play here. The women gain social positions and prominence by displaying skills and knowledge bases that are traditionally depicted as feminine and women’s work. They also gain power by displaying traits that are culturally ascribed to women and that women are encouraged by the media and society to uphold. Gendered capital is all of those attributes coming together to give them a way to navigate and rise in the social hierarchy. Knowing how to deploy

the ideal southern feminine performance gives one gendered and cultural capital. Knowing the rules and regulations and how to bend them also allows an individual to accrue gendered and social capital, although to a lesser degree than embodying the rules themselves. Bourdieu also heavily emphasizes that virtually all capital is passed on generationally, which is important for southern femininity as it is handed down from grandmother to mother to daughter.

This thesis focuses on how ideal southern femininity is constructed historically and contemporarily along race and class lines and how women who fail to achieve the ideal are shamed by other women for their performance. The first chapter will discuss prescriptive literature, specifically Florence King's *Southern Ladies and Gentleman* and Gayden Metcalfe and Charlotte Hays' guidebook series, *The Pastel Trilogy*, and how the ideal southern feminine identity is structured along white, upper class lines. It lays out the rules and regulations for performing southern femininity and the various ways women discipline themselves and others into performing. The chapter also outlines some cracks that have developed in the performance and how these subversions have been subsumed into southern femininity. Finally, it is interested in explaining the historical and cultural roots of the performance as it developed in resistance to black women's assimilation into southern society and how manners and appearance served to delineate the good southern women, read as white and rich, from those they seek to other, namely poor and black women.

The second chapter looks at women who have deviated from the southern feminine ideal and the public shaming that accompanies them. What happens to women who lack the discipline set forth in chapter one? How are they treated? How does their treatment by the public mirror that of other undisciplined bodies and identities? For this chapter I will be using the reality show

Here Come Honey Boo Boo as my case study and focus more specifically on “Mama” June Shannon. The show was contentious with the public. Some found the Shannon-Thompson family’s behavior gross and off-putting and sought to distance them from the overall narrative and image of the South. Others agreed that while some of their antics could be construed as over the top, the family in general was endearing because of their treatment of each other. Most of the criticism fell on June for not sufficiently teaching her daughters manners and failing to present herself and her family the way a “proper” woman should. Critiques focused on the family’s class background and weight two things that seem to determine whether or not a woman is allowed to perform southern femininity. Status as “white trash” inherently precludes one from performing southern femininity as a good southern lady always avoids appearing “trashy.” To add the already coded undisciplined fat body and a general disregard for performing idealized southern femininity means that June Shannon will never be accepted as a southern lady and her seeming nonchalance about that fact deeply unnerves people. I also will address the recent scandal surrounding the family and the show and how their weight, gender, and class influenced the court of public opinion.

CHAPTER I

“I’M FIT TO BE TIED”

Prescriptive literature has a long and storied history in propagating the rules of femininity for both southerners and other women. Emily Post pioneered the genre with her etiquette book, which is still considered the gold-standard of the genre. The literature became increasingly specialized and now there is an entire sub-genre devoted to southern etiquette and within that a smaller collection of humorous southern etiquette books. The most well known of these humorous southern guidebooks is Florence King’s *Southern Ladies and Gentleman* written in the 1970s as a precursor to her memoir *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady*. Others have copied her model to various degrees of success. Virtually all do not follow the traditional list of rules and instead trade their secrets and rules to performing southern femininity in a series of anecdotes. Some use her memoir format and structure their work as a series of essays about their own lives. Most follow the rubric of *Southern Ladies and Gentleman* and illustrate the rules by telling stories about their friends and family that emphasize how to and not to behave.

All of them emphasize the disciplinary role of mother in enforcing southern femininity and the ways daughters have manipulated those rules for their own gain and sanity. They also illustrate the mental gymnastics required to keep the southern lady and southern femininity going from generation to generation. Florence King wrote her book in the 1970s about growing up in

Virginia and later attending the University of Mississippi and much of what she covers parallels statements made by writers focusing on the Deep South (Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi); giving weight to the idea that while there are multiple Souths, there are overriding southern mannerisms that permeate the multiplicity. This chapter will look at King's *Southern Ladies and Gentleman* and Gayden Metcalfe and Charlotte Hays's *The Pastel Trilogy* to draw out the rules and discipline of southern femininity and to show that not much has changed in the thirty years between when the two works were written.

Gayden Metcalfe and Charlotte Hays outline appropriate southern feminine behavior in their *Pastel Trilogy*. The trilogy is a self-aware exploration of southern femininity in Greenville, Mississippi. The authors use anecdotes from friends and family as well as general observations to construct a narrative about how southern femininity is policed and enacted both in public and private spheres. The texts appear to be written for fellow southern women as much of the language, while funny and biting, reads as though the audience is in on the joke and has had similar experiences with their own mothers, wedding, and funerals. The most significant of the three is *Some Day You'll Thank Me for This: The Official Southern Ladies' Guide to Being a "Perfect" Mother*. In this text, Metcalfe and Hays chronicle the experiences of daughters of southern mothers or DSMs as they affectionately refer to them—itsself a reference to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual used in psychiatry to diagnose mental disorders—and the mental fracturing that occurs from dealing with southern mothers. King also highlights the mental strain caused by performing southern femininity stating: “losing one’s mind is the most important prerequisite for fitting in with Southerners. Sanity has never held any charms for us; in fact, we’re against it” (24). Sanity means addressing the inherently misogynistic nature of

women policing other women, the racial maintenance of southern femininity, and requires acknowledging that the way southerners have always done it may not be the best way. Or as King remarks: “Madness has also helped us survive the rigidly stratified, conformist society that our fear of change forced us to build around ourselves” (24).

The Pastel Trilogy covers all the topics one would need to be the ideal southern lady: cooking and serving food, gardening for your child’s future wedding, instilling manners in your child through guilt and shame, and bending your husband to your will. Although sections of the books are written out as actual advice, each chapter ends with a collection of recipes and many include a list of appropriate foods, flowers, and music for certain scenarios, the majority of their advice is not written in a serious manner. Instead things are stated directly and are immediately embellished with a tongue-in-cheek deconstruction revealing some hidden aspects of the advice. For example: “Always wear nice underwear—you may be killed in a car wreck, and you don’t want the EMS workers to take one look at your poor dead little body and say, ‘Well, she certainly wasn’t a lady.’ That would be a fate worse than death” (*Some Day*, 8). While they frequently mention Northerners who “don’t know” and allude to the service they are providing with these books, the primary objective seems to be to encourage southern women to read along, identify with the stories, and laugh at what southern women go through and do to each other. They point out how ridiculous the behavior is, but they do not exactly suggest changing it instead viewing the behavior as a weird inheritance women must endure. Sifting through the humor reveals the bizarre rules and codes that govern southern women’s behavior. They also illuminate the mental and physical gymnastics women perform to perpetuate the ideal while simultaneously failing to live up to it. This performance, though taxing on the individual, is a source of pride for

women because it is a legacy and southerners love a legacy. King writes: “Being able to say, ‘It runs in my family,’ on the other hand, lends a fine glow of continuity to individual emotional problems” (26).

I have attempted to collect a general list of rules based on King’s book, Hays and Metcalfe’s series, other assorted how to be a southern lady guidebooks, and my own experiences as a DSM. The rules are as follows:

Be nice to everyone. It does not matter how tacky or vulgar you think they are, it is your duty to be the better person.

Especially be nice to your elders. They have lived long enough to be rude; you have not.

Do not acknowledge another person’s faux pas. If you must, encode it in a sweet missive. Everyone will know what you are doing, but you’ll still sound nice.

Never visit someone empty handed.

Never let someone leave your home empty handed. Give them a sack of oranges if you have to.

Be gracious and always send a thank-you note. The more detailed the better.

Be humble. Nobody likes to hear bragging. If you are desperate for a compliment, purposefully lower your guest’s expectations.

If there’s been a death, visit the family and take them something to eat.

Know how to carry on a conversation. Gossip is not necessarily frowned upon.

Always mind your manners.

Hays and Metcalfe’s sharpest critique and praise of southern women is *Some Day You’ll*

Thank Me For This. It is in this text that they most explicitly define what makes a southern lady and the ways that knowledge is disseminated to the next generation. It also clearly reveals the way discipline is involved in maintaining a southern feminine performance. Many women will indicate that they do not know how they know the rules of southern womanhood and decorum. They just know. This is a shrewd calculation on the part of their mother who strives to make the performance of southern womanhood not a performance at all, but an act as natural and ingrained as breathing. If this particular shade of femininity is meant to be an essential part of southern womanhood, it justifies their constant berating of their daughters and their obsession with etiquette, manners, and hospitality as the lack thereof speaks to the background of the individual woman.

King writes: “The moment of truth tends to arrive in a burst of comprehension, following an incident in which an important truth suddenly becomes perfectly clear despite the fact that it makes no sense whatsoever” (11). She is writing about the discovery that one is southern, but the point stands for discovering one is a southern lady. She implies one does not know how they know, but once it dawns on them that they possess this knowledge it becomes a key part of their sense of self. She goes so far as to describe it as a cult and the fervor with which some women practice southern femininity and extol its praises does suggest a certain degree of cult-like devotion. However, most southern women devote little time to examining the behavior and reasoning behind southern femininity and its rules. As King states: “The Southern mother is no more able than her daughter to cope with the intricacies of the cult of womanhood; she ‘would rather not know’ what her daughter is up to because such knowledge might unearth some conflict of her own and cause her to have one of those Southern nervous breakdowns known as ‘going to

pieces” (47). Despite wanting to discipline her daughter’s every move to make sure she is one of the women who “knows” southern behavior, there are certain aspects that even she and her all-seeing eye would rather remain unaware of.

Metcalf and Hays write: “This highlights the strange schizophrenia of the Southern mother when it comes to instilling manners. While she spends every waking moment torturing her children about their manners, she also somehow expects her children to have been born knowing the finer parts of etiquette. She is shocked when they don’t” (86). Even though southern femininity is structured around rules, it is considered a grievous error when those who “don’t know” break those rules or need guidance to fulfill those rules. As their series continually asks, how could they not know? Do they not have a southern mother? As they write in *Somebody is Going to Die if Lily Beth Doesn’t Catch This Bouquet*, a southern woman is always responsible for the manners of her fellow women related or not: “Southerners never needed etiquette books in the past because all Southern towns had socially connected matrons who ruled the roost with an iron hand” (8). Policing other women becomes somewhat of a hobby of older women who see it as their duty to protect the reputation of their family and their town. In this way they are able to exert power over others through age and experience. They frequently mention through all three texts that older southern women see it as their birthright to be cantankerous, demanding, and blunt as they have spent most of their lives being instructed, disciplined, and critiqued by their elders and now it is their turn. They write “[A southern woman] is bound by genetic makeup to pass along these rules—she cannot help herself; her mother before her did this to her, and her daughters will one day do it to their own daughters” (*Some Day* 8).

Within the series, the southern mother takes on a mythical status. A southern woman

plays different roles throughout her life--the daughter, the mother, and the grandmother—and at a certain age she may play all three, although none is as crucial as that of the mother. They write of the southern mother:

Southern society is arranged along matriarchal lines. The Southern matriarch is a far more formidable creature than the much nicer Southern male. She has to be this way. She has no choice. She was put on earth with a sacred mission: to drum good manners and the proper religion—ancestor worship—into the next generation [...] To achieve her ends, the Southern mother practices shock-and-awe parenthood. She is shocking in her demands and awesome in her subtlety. She speaks in code—the nice code. In the hands of a practiced Southern mother, being nice is lethal. (*Some Day* 4-5)

King also emphasized this fact in her work. The South is a gynecocracy and men just live there. King explains: “Suddenly I realized, with that visceral instinct that children have, that I lived in a goddess world in which women reigned supreme according to a carefully worked out hierarchy” (54). The hierarchy she refers to being grandmother and her sisters, mother and her sisters, and daughter. It was through this hierarchy that decorum was passed down often with an iron fist disguised in a lacy-gloved hand. The rules are enforced via other women by what is not said as opposed to what is said. It is much less vulgar that way.

Politeness functions as a form of disciplining. One does not want to make mother angry, so they do everything in their power to keep her pleasant. She has no need to be angry or rude as it serves her no purpose when she could just easily be nice, achieve the same goals, and retain her image as a sweet old woman. The polite discipline is often disguised in the form of a benign

question or general statement meant to point out a problem without directly calling attention to it. For example asking if someone is cold is not a demonstration of concern, but rather a directive to put on more clothes. The stealth with which they are employed allows them to pass by unnoticed in most crowds, although other southern women may discern the code. King emphasizes over and over that southern women never say what they mean. They use vague coded language and pointed glares to convey their thoughts and expect others to “just know.” This helps distinguish southern ladies from those not performing idealized southern femininity-namely “white trash” women. King tells a particularly illustrative anecdote about unspoken disciplining:

But suddenly [my grandmother] turned, looked down, and gave me the Southern woman’s all-powerful silent reproach known as “freezing.” This is a look that needs no words. It is an exercise in pained hauteur and courageous endurance topped off with flaring nostrils and a stiffening just this side of rigor mortis.

Despite my tender age, I knew instantly what it meant without being told: Ladies don’t eat on the street. Granny did not have to tell me why, because my burgeoning Southern instincts told me: It looked trashy. (12-13)

King implies that not only do trashy people not smoke on the street; they also do not know about freezing and therefore fail to realize the public display of judgment taking place in their presence, despite the subtlety or lack thereof.

Metcalf and Hays reinforce again and again how much mother suffers turning her daughters into southern ladies. Every misstep a daughter makes reflects back on the mother. It is a commentary not only on the individual woman, but on all women who came before her:

“Whenever a Southerner sees a man seated while ladies remain standing, she thinks: ‘I know

what kind of mama he had.' Mama is well aware that, should she fail, total strangers will someday condemn her with their very words. She reminds us of this frequently" (4). Even the most mundane action reveals what kind of person raised her. They recount the importance of the thank you note in *Being Dead is No Excuse*: "Notes are almost as important as food, and Southern mothers work hard to ensure that their children grow up able to write a good one. They know they will be judged on this. 'Whenever somebody writes me a blah note, I say, 'I bet her mother wasn't a Southern girl,' said Sally Morgan Gilliam. Nobody wants to be talked about in that fashion" (75). This essentializes southern identity down into a series of actions one performs. If it is based on action and not personal identification, this makes it easier for people to decide who is excluded and included as southern. It also closely binds southern with larger identifiers like race and class if a woman's actions reveal her social standing and family background. Only women who are and have been disciplined enough to perform southern femininity perfectly ascend to the category of southern lady and southern belle themselves largely synonymous with upper class and white.

Southern women couch these perfect performances under the terms of manners, hospitality, and taste. All three are powerfully tied up in ideas about race and class, especially taste. Taste is meant to distinguish those who "know" from those who "don't know" and often serves to distinguish those who can afford expensive items from those who cannot. To display something or act in such a way that indicates poor taste is to reveal your social class and position; however, southern women will frequently publically disregard these acts and in doing so hide the way taste functions as a class barrier and social organization. Metcalfe and Hays write "We don't think it is nice to talk about c-l-a-s-s, even if we spend every waking hour

thinking about it” (*Somebody* 11). They are consciously aware of class, but refuse to engage with it. King expresses a similar sentiment: “No one ever told me what ‘trashy’ meant, but I never asked because I can’t remember ever not knowing. As any Southerner can verify, the definition of trashy is trashy” (13).

Tara McPherson has this to say about taste: “Taste in the South has everything to do with manners, with knowing ‘one’s place,’ propping up an entire social system and naturalizing its strictures” (151). She builds on Pierre Bourdieu’s work on taste which argues that taste is a social necessity made second nature, turned into muscular patterns and bodily automatisms. Everything takes place as if the social conditionings linked to a social condition tended to inscribe the relation to the social world in a lasting, generalized relation to one’s own body, a way of bearing one’s body, presenting it to others, moving it, making space for it. (474) It is normalized through not only the actions of southern women, but the material culture associated with them. Things like china patterns and family silver are mentioned frequently throughout *The Pastel Trilogy* as an integral part to being a southern woman. One picks a china pattern at their wedding and polishes the silver as a grieving action upon a death. Comportment and manners distinguish those who have taste from those who do not. Rules and actions become embodied performances that speak to much more than the individual woman; they demonstrate her entire social class and family. However, a distaste for directly addressing class means that the classist tones remain hidden beneath the surface.

Hays and Metcalfe tiptoe around lower class women throughout their series. They are present, but are used primarily as cautionary tales by the southern matriarchs in their anecdotes. It is emphasized that one should always be polite to everyone regardless of their social position

while making it clear that they are different and that their politeness does not have to extend beyond the encounter. To have manners is to ignore faux pas as they happen, but to viciously gossip about them later with others of the same station. This attitude demonstrates a disconnect between the public and private performance of southern femininity. Publically it carries great weight, but privately there is space to deviate from the performance and manipulate the rules. The disciplining relaxes, at least as it pertains to women of one's own age group.

While some women openly and publically deviate from the rules and ideals of southern femininity, there are certain tricks that women use to subvert and manipulate the rules, and they often have the dual purpose of self and communal policing and marking those in the know. After all as King writes: "Any society that demands rigid standards of conduct from certain of its members is bound to make finks out of them. Women in competition with one another for male approval form a natural self-police state; they vie with each other to see who can set the most impossible requirements in the hope that some of their number will fall from grace, thus eliminating some of the competitors" (156). One way that southern mothers discipline their southern daughters is through coded language and double-speak which share much in common with the politeness and nice code mothers employ. This double speak functions in two ways. First it serves to preserve the image of the southern lady as being gentle and humble. Second it serves to remind daughters subtly of their performance and duties without overtly calling attention to the disciplining.

Instead of being outright rude or speaking their minds, women will instead employ phrases or words that in the context they are spoken mean something very different. In an anecdote from *Some Day You'll Thank Me For This*, Hayes and Metclafe write:

When she and her mother-in-law went shopping together, she was actually pleased whenever Mrs. Nelson Senior said, ‘That’s right cute.’ We finally had to break the news: If there’s anything ‘that’s right cute’ *doesn’t* mean it’s ‘that’s right cute.’ We explained that neither ‘right’ nor ‘cute’ was the operative word. What Mrs. Nelson was actually seeking to convey was: ‘That outfit makes you look like the side of a barn, if not the whole damned barn.’ (6)

Southern mothers and by extension all southern women have “perfected the art of diplomatic double-speak” (*Some Day* 5). They cannot outright say something is tacky, rude, or otherwise undesirable so they attempt to convey it through alternative means. It is a language that operates in euphemisms--ones that are often only detectable to those that also participate in the double-speak themselves. As King puts it “Granny raised me on the Southern *idée fixe* that ladies do not lie except in the interests of tact” (27). Doublespeak is a form of tact. It spares the person being spoken to from outright embarrassment despite everyone who also speaks doublespeak knowing the truth.

Another coping mechanism is to create a narrative of suffering. This also functions as a display of humility and an outlet for seeking praise. King focused on female trouble being the prime outlet for suffering in her southern ladies. The worse one’s menstrual period, childbirth, and menopause are, the more of a lady she is. She explains the significance of female trouble: “There being nothing more feminine than female trouble, everybody was happy. The Southern man could take one look at this pale, wan creature and tell himself that aristocratic women were too delicate to lift a finger— and that slavery was therefore necessary. The Southern woman could enjoy one clearly defined image, at least, and rest assured that nobody would ever question

it” (68). This fragility allowed them to do as they pleased and shored up the cultural hegemony of upper class white women as superior beings. As Metcalfe and Hays write “It’s not nice not to suffer” and as has been discussed being not nice is a grievous sin (*Some Day* 136).

Suffering is romanticized as an essential experience to being a southern woman and something they have endured for generations. It allows women to mention how much they have sacrificed for others, chiefly their daughters, without it appearing as though they are bragging. Regardless of how hands-on or hands-off a mother was in her child’s life, she feels that she has failed as a mother if her daughter does not feel guilty about everything she has done for her. This suffering merits recognition from all parties involved; otherwise it would be for naught. Metcalfe and Hays write: “When Mother is particularly aggrieved, she might pose at the front door and muse sadly, ‘I am going outside,’ adding poignantly, ‘I do not know if I shall return.’ She will. In a life spent among strangers, nobody would grasp the full import of her sacrifices. Now, that *would* be suffering” (137). These dramatics allow those in attendance to lavish praise on the woman and explain how they could not function without her—a fact she already knows, but likes to have reaffirmed. The disciplinary factor comes from reminding her daughter that if she suffers this much while teaching her the rules, imagine how much she suffers when her daughter breaks them.

Gossip and the assorted exchange is another way women manipulate the rules while performing southern femininity. It is an agreed upon and allowed social faux pas, one that most people, including the protestant religion that southern ladies cling to, frown upon. However southern women from all walks of life use it as a way to build connections and to shift focus away from their own missteps onto someone else’s. Hays and Metcalfe state, “Gossip is a life

skill all good Southern mothers impart to their daughters. In this, our mothers taught us by example. Southern mothers are always in fishin' mode. They will (innocently, according to them) repeat anything. Gossip is an Olympic sport down here" (*Some Day* 89). Gossip is a hobby. It allows them to not have to be polite all the time and still maintain their social circle. Bon mots are traded back and forth and become a type of currency in social exchanges. They also serve as a warning to others that if they fail to behave other women will talk about them like this. King emphasizes the joy of gossip a bit more bluntly: "Thanks to this dramatic bent, women rip each other up simply in order to entertain [...] The idea is to go ahead and tell the story so that your listeners will have a good time—because, after all, slander is fascinating" (162). It is fun, it is socially permissible, and it allows southern women to be dramatic.

Southern women can also use their age as a coping mechanism and "the power that old ladies wield can be phenomenal" (King 177). Older women are frequently allowed to say what they want without repercussions, even if what they say is horrifying in its racism, homophobia, and classism. Hays and Metcalfe state: "Southern grandmothers don't so much age as they marinate. The older they get, the stronger they become. Nobody is permitted to bat an eye if a sweet old thing pipes up and says something so mean it makes your hair stand on end. This is her prerogative. She is, after all, *an old lady*" (*Some Day* 50). She becomes an untouchable figure. With no one above her alive to discipline her she is held to much lighter standards than other women. They also take their age as an opportunity for revenge on their daughters: "A Southern grandmother sees her role in life as twofold: undermining Mother's rules, the very rules of which she was once the chief enforcer, and providing refuge against what she see as Abu Ghraib in the Mississippi Delta. That would be the reign of Mother" (52). Rules that she once enforced on her

own children are suddenly restrictive and unfair when enacted on her precious grandchildren.

This passes on the suffering to her daughter and allows her to flagrantly disregard the rules when it comes to her grandchildren. Disciplining is not her primary role as grandmother, although she still disciplines her daughter through double-speak and snide remarks; her function is to provide a space for granddaughters to discover ways to manipulate the rules for their own gain and sanity. Knowing that there is a time when southern women are free to do and say as they please enables them to perpetuate the performance for the time being or in more colorful terms “A country without a tradition of redoubtable battle-axes is a country that does not offer its young women any positive images for female old age” (King 215). It becomes a cyclical legacy, a legacy that requires the complicit participation of all three generations involved.

Finally, guilt is used as a coping mechanism for southern women. It is either used as a weapon that they inflict on those around them or a self-induced affliction. It spurns women to attend functions they would rather not and to be on their best behavior. Funerals are often where people are on their best behavior due to guilt because one, they know that a well attended funeral reflects positively on the family and two, it is a chance to atone for what one has said about the deceased, thereby absolving any guilt regarding gossip. Guilt keeps southern daughters in line and it is what keeps southern mothers from snapping at southern grandmothers. Feeling guilty for not living up to the southern lady’s standards keeps a person attempting to fulfill those standards. It is a powerful disciplining tool and one that is easy to utilize.

Guilt also has a more insidious function in the South. It serves as a distraction from both present, past, and future problems. Women become controlled by their guilt either feeling it themselves or inflicting it on others and that stalls progress. It prevents white southerners from

directly facing their history and their relatives and their own complicity in Jim Crow and the still present racism. McPherson writes “Guilt can become a kind of self-indulgent fixation, an end in itself that stops the processing of emotion, encouraging the endless confession of many southern memoirs. Guilt might also be masked or covered by a self-righteous anger, which denies the source of guilt, blaming the other” (6). White guilt is the most well known culturally potent guilt in the South. It enables white southerners to acknowledge the existence of the South’s tumultuous history of racial oppression without having to directly address or encounter it. It serves as self-given absolution.

The women Hays, Metcalfe, King, and I have discussed are white women, and upper and middle class white women at that, and as such they have much more freedom to subvert, deviate, and otherwise play with the rules of behavior established by their fellow well-to-do white women. Lower class women of both races are held to a different standard or excluded from the southern lady identification all together. White women of all classes do not have to acknowledge or even be cognizant of the fact that southern femininity was created as a way to distinguish white women from black women. It was a way to elevate white woman above black southerners of both genders.

In a way, the southern lady and the southern belle function as a focal point to perpetuate the Old South and preserve its legacy. The imagery associated with the figures is deeply associated with the plantation South. Scarlett O’Hara is the go to popular culture figure for the southern belle and even today cotillions, debutantes, and other assorted pageantry use the hoopskirted Old South style. Metcalfe and Hays frequently reference *Gone With the Wind* as if it is a guidebook in its own right. They instruct women to be a Melanie Wilkes and not a Scarlett

O'Hara, mention that all women secretly wish she were a Scarlett, and even allude to lusting after Rhett Butler. King also frequently invokes *Gone With the Wind* when discussing southern women and the various shades of southern ladyhood. Like Metcalfe and Hayes she sees all southern women as divided between their inner Scarlett and their inner Melanie: "The Southern woman's problem with the virtuous image has been intensified by constant articulation. One minute she is called a 'ladybug,' the next minute a 'heartbreaker,' so it is not surprising that she behaves like Scarlett O'Hara for a month and then puts in a week as Sweet Melanie Wilkes" (47). The southern lady and belle romanticize the era and the women while ignoring the role white women played in slavery and Jim Crow. While southern lady and southern belle are becoming less popular in younger southerners' vernacular, there is still a problematic sense of ancestral heritage to the idea of the southern belle. She stands divorced from her historical context and is viewed as a harmless figure unrelated to the racism that has always existed in southern culture.

Tara McPherson elaborates on the construction of the southern lady and belle: "The South responding to its own feminized position vis-à-vis the North turned to a hyperfeminized figure of the southern woman as discursive symbol for the region with the land itself being figured as feminine as well. The myth of the southern lady is central to southern culture" (19). She becomes symbolic of the South. Although the South as of late has become associated with rampant poverty and obesity as well as whole host of other negative stereotypes, images of the South are still intertwined with those of Scarlett O'Hara and the women of *Steel Magnolias*, especially in marketing and tourism. The pictures that spring to mind are the southern lady, the southern belle, and the mammy, representing black femininity. Despite the South rarely elevating

women to positions of actual power, the woman stands in for the collective image of the South and as such it becomes difficult to parse what to do with women who do not match this imaginary figure who is almost exclusively a rich white woman. The performance requires a construction of an other, something to contrast it to, and in the case of white southern ladyhood this contrast is created by black femininity even if white women under the guise of politeness refuse to engage with this contrast.

Metcalfe and Hays continue this image by mainly focusing on rich white women in their books; all the women are eccentric, but based on descriptions, they could be interchangeable. They never directly mention black women in their works. However, black women's roles can be inferred through closely reading certain anecdotes and references they make in the text. One fact they reiterate over and over about the older southern lady is that she rarely does anything herself. They know many women who refused to learn how to cook, drive, or perform basic household tasks because they knew if they learned how to do it they would be expected to do those tasks stating "Another rule by which the Southern matriarch lives: Never learn how to do anything you don't want to do" (*Some Day* 13). In *Some Day*, they devote an entire chapter to religion and the importance of a child attending church, but also mention that mother rarely goes with them and it is a rare sight to see her out of bed before 10am. Somebody is cooking, cleaning, driving, and taking care of the children, but they never quite articulate who this person is. Given the history of domestic labor in the South, it is most likely a black woman who is helping raise the children and keep the house. She is also helping to enforce the rules of ladyhood as the person raising the children even though enforcing and teaching these rules illuminates her black femininity's position as the other to her employer's white femininity.

Rebecca Sharpless elaborates on the role of black women in white households in her work *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic workers in the South, 1865-1960*. While Sharpless focuses primarily on black women's role in the domestic space of the kitchen, she also speaks more generally on the relationship between white women and their help. She writes "Domestic service is usually highly gendered, as two women, sometimes near the same age, occupy space under the same roof. But the roof covers the home of the more privileged woman; the less privileged woman is there to work at the more privileged one's behest" (130). White womanhood is impossible without blackness. Black women and their labor are what allowed white women to go out and participate in civic life through Junior Leagues, church clubs, and the like while black women took care of their home and children. Their ability to entertain and perform southern hospitality was often reliant on black women who cleaned their houses for guests and made the food.

Even their virtuous reputation was only made possible by casting black women in the role as the other. The southern feminine was created as a white narrative predicated on keeping the white woman virginal and pure. It stood in opposition to the black brute and the lustful black woman. King regularly mentions that white women have found ways to remain the eternal virgin, or at least until marriage, despite sleeping around and it involves constructing the idea that southern white women are inherently virginal and desexualized, although flirting and coquettish behavior are an integral part of the southern belle's charm. In fact while she frequently refers to lower class women as tawdry she only ever indirectly calls white women sluts when they sleep with black men, indicating that white women can be tarnished by encounters with blackness: "Race enters into it only insofar as race enters into the Blue Angel

Syndrome; the combination of a white woman and a black man has traditionally been ‘proof’ of her sluthood and the combination of a white man and a black woman has always been, by definition, an incidence of *nostalgie de la boue*—the white man’s ultimate wallow always occurred in the slave cabins , or, in more recent times, in ‘niggertown’” (56). Everything about the southern white women from her footholds of power to her code of conduct to her image was created to contrast her against blackness. She thinks of herself as above them, but her sense of self would not exist without them.

Grace Elizabeth Hale’s *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* and Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore’s *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina 1896-1920* both track the ways white femininity developed in opposition to black women in the South. Hale focuses on life in the South as a whole, while Gilmore turns her attention specifically to the positioning of white woman against black women in the political arena. Hale explains that the fiction of the white southern lady was juxtaposed against the mammy figure as a way for white women to retain their image as domestic paragons of virtue while still enabling them to seize some modicum of power. The black mammy functioned in the white home as the primary domestic entity devoting herself to caring for the white family’s children and doing the majority of the care work. This enabled white women to still have a structured home life and freed them up to pursue political activities like suffrage and championing the Lost Cause narrative (Hale 105-114). Hale writes: “...attempts to rebuild white southern gender relations and especially the passive, subservient conventions of the southern lady were riddled with contradictions [...] But here the old black mammy waddled to the rescue. She played the symbolic role of the woman, she covered the contradictions, and she linked the

new white woman to those southern ladies of old” (106). If white women were to represent domesticity, they needed to make sure their home life was in order and taken care of. Black women served in that function and allowed white women to continue to play the role of mistress even after slavery was over. They allowed white women to continue to symbolize the home even if their pursuits were largely outside of it.

King is much more explicit in her discussion of race, although she does ignore the role black women play in her contemporary South as she acknowledges their role in constructing the attitudes of the southern ladies she discusses. Specifically she focuses on the role chastity has played in constructing white femininity in opposition to black femininity. She translates the praise of white women’s sexual coldness thusly: “To Woman, without whose purity and chastity we could never have justified slavery and segregation, without whose coldness we wouldn’t have had the excuse we needed for messing around down in the slave cabins and getting plenty of poontang. We pledge our hearts and our lives to the protection of her virtue and chastity because they are the best political leverage we ever did see” (38). It is this frigidity that protects upper class white women in the South from slurs such as slut and whore and enables them to be directed freely at black women who endured rape at the hands of their owners and other white men. Either way it is a woman’s fault as a man can lay the blame at either the black temptress or the white ice queen. As King remarks: “An unfailingly good way to find a psychological punching bag is to create an ideal to which no mere mortal woman can possibly aspire, and then, when the inevitable happens , cast blame upon the waters” (92).

While King’s description of this racial construction frequently veers into the romantic, many of her points are salient and align with academic research on the construction of whiteness

versus blackness. She writes: “Antebellum Southern civilization was built upon the white woman’s untouchable image. In order to keep her footing on the pedestal men had erected for her, she had to be aloof, aristocratic, and haughty” (37). King attempts to explain the complexity and seemingly unattainable image of perfect southern femininity by deflecting the responsibility onto men and to a lesser degree black women: “[These qualities] enabled the white woman to maintain her sanity when she saw light-skinned slave children, who were the very spit of Old Massa, running around the plantation. By being sufficiently frosty and above it all, she was able to ignore and endure the evidence of intercaste sexuality that surrounded her” (37). She continues: “Good blood became very important in a region where white men were busy mixing theirs with blacks, so the Southern woman was given the job of proving how aristocratic everybody was. Whenever she shied violently, showed the whites of her eyes, and laid her ears back, the South could feel superior to the egalitarian North” (46). Southern women became symbolic for the Lost Cause and their particular quirks and disciplinary behavioral rules pointed to the fiction of the South as a great aristocracy.⁴ King highlights that this is an undue burden on white women to have to symbolize that, but she never directly challenges or points out that black women in the South bear a much greater burden.

King does directly speak to the role of race in creating a class system in the South and the reason class is still such an important topic of concern with southerners. She writes:

This sharp class difference was exacerbated by slavery. The caste mentality, leisure, and immense farming potential that slave labor created in the South lent upper-class life a Babylonian aura, so that when nonaristocratic Southerners dreamed of improving their lot and raising their status, their dreams tended to run

⁴ See Charles Reagan Wilson’s *Baptized in Blood* for more information on the creation of the Lost Cause narrative.

riot. Unlike the poor but ambitious New Englander, who merely wanted to have the best farm in the county, the poor but ambitious Southerner merely wanted to be a belted earl. (31)

Not content to be merely landowners southerners wanted to be wealthy and bonafide gentry. Most humorous guidebooks will devote time to what they call ancestor worship, which is the southern woman's obsession with lineage and genealogy. She wants to be descended from both the founders of her hometown and the titled heirs of Europe. This obsession comes from wanting to be of the "right stock" or, more bluntly, proving that they are white and were once rich if they are not rich now. This illustrious pedigree is the purview of the white, upper class and serves to enforce the racial and class divides in the South and as King points out would not have been possible without slave labor building a majority of these presumed fortunes.

In addition to behavior and pedigree, white women also attempted to distance themselves from black women through appearance. Blain Roberts in *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women: Race and Beauty in the Twentieth-Century South* traces the development of southern beauty ideals through both a racial and gendered lens. White women sought to make themselves appear whiter through creams and powders. Black women used beauty as a tool for racial uplift and a way to challenge white supremacy. Roberts argues "as southern women experimented with new products and rituals at odds with the region's ideals of female behavior, their bodies came to represent the modern, in economic and especially cultural terms" (8). Wearing risqué clothes and make-up gave white women an additional avenue to subvert the rules of southern femininity while still firmly remaining in the category of southern belle. Indeed southern femininity itself evolved to cover this pageantry as debutante balls and cotillions becoming performances

reserved for modern southern belles. As King writes “Today’s belles are, therefore, brides and debutantes” (109). White woman’s beauty cycled through praise of the natural, to enhancing the natural, to the more made-up aesthetic of the mid 1900s and beauty pageants, before once again returning to the enhanced natural look. While both races of women were judged by society, black women were held to different standards and white women judged them on their use of beauty products and their natural features.

This delineation between black women and white women continues in the contemporary South. Zandria Robinson in *This Ain’t Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South* looks at racial boundary work in Memphis, Tennessee. Robinson discusses how black southerners privilege the black southern experience over other black experiences in America believing that it allows them an extra layer of authenticity. Robinson found that regional identity and performance was just as powerful a marker of cultural and social capital for black southerners as it is for white southerners. She demonstrates how even in the New South racial lines are powerful dividers and the legacy of Jim Crow shapes how black and white southerners interact, namely that racial microaggressions were to be expected and that white southerners should not be praised for not being racist.

The ideal southern woman is a fiction, a fiction created to sell the image of the Lost Cause and the Old South, but the narratives and characteristics surrounding her have prevailed and had consequences for southern women. The ideals dictate behavior and appearance norms for both white and black southern women, but have stricter consequences for black women should they deviate. White southern women who attempt to live up to the ideal have created several coping mechanisms and other behaviors meant to offset the mental and physical toll of

performing southern femininity. However, these coping mechanisms also uphold the cultural hegemony and prevent women from talking openly about the racism they perpetuate in southern life.

Metcalf and Hays focused on well-to-do white women in the Mississippi Delta. King focused on upper class white women in Virginia and the Delta. While they never explicitly state the income level of the women, they make plenty of references to lower-class women as being of ill repute. They point to their big hair, loud demeanor, and what part of town they from as indicators of their class position. While the disparaging remarks are kept to a minimum, the worst is a general “bless their hearts” attitude, it is clear that they do not think highly of these women. For my next chapter, I will look at women who overtly deviate from the southern lady ideal; specifically, I will be looking at Mama June Shannon of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and the myriad of responses to her persona from the complimentary to the disparaging. In particular the next chapter is interested in what happens to women who lack the disciplined femininity discussed in this chapter.

CHAPTER II

“YOU BETTER REDNECKONIZE”

While guidebooks and literature focus primarily on portraying the southern woman in her ideal form, or at least striving for the ideal, other forms of popular culture allow southern women to play with the trope, subvert the norms, or deviate entirely. Television has been the primary popular culture form where southern women have played and played with all the tropes associated with the region. Scripted shows like *Designing Women* and *True Blood* have tackled how women navigate the roles of the belle and the lady and how women from various backgrounds approach being southern and being a woman. Reality television, on the other hand, illustrates how women, and southern women in particular, do or do not live up to the expectations and stereotypes, both good and bad, of the South and the southern lady. In particular, it highlights the counterpart to the southern lady—southern “white trash” and the myriad of assumptions and stereotypes that accompany that type of southern femininity.

The southern women of reality television provide an interesting case study because, much like the women of Gayden Metcalfe and Charlotte Hays’ book series, they are presented as real women living their lives as though the audience were not there. It is now common knowledge that most reality shows are scripted to varying degrees and as such the “reality” should be treated with skepticism, but that does not stop viewers from holding them to a higher scrutiny and less

sympathy than fictional characters. Those southern families featured on southern reality television tend to focus on either upper class southerners living “moonlight and magnolia” scenes on plantation homes or on lower class southerners who live in trailers, in the swamp, or engage in animal wrestling. Both are meant to gawk at but for different reasons. Issues like food insecurity, lack of educational and economic opportunity, and housing troubles become reasons to ridicule and point to the reality stars’ lack of “class” or lower-class status and are not seen as real issues that affect the South. If something does happen on the show or in the stars’ non-televised personal lives, their “trashy” actions on the show are seen as proof of the moral failings of an entire group of people or proof of why the stereotypes exist.

I will be focusing this chapter on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and the Shannon-Thompson family. The show and the family play with the southern “white trash” stereotype and also fit into the current southern grotesque genre proliferating on cable television. It is also unique in the amount of both disgust and admiration it has inspired in the blogosphere with many critiquing the stars’ habits and others praising their values and outlook on life and family. It opened up a liminal space in how the public viewed poor, white southerners and complicated the discussion surrounding weight and body image in women. The family was also the subject of a scandal in the fall of 2014 that saw many commenters reversing their opinions on the family and others using it to prop up malicious beliefs about the South and lower class southern families in particular.

Here Comes Honey Boo Boo is one of many contemporary reality shows set in the American South. It joins the ranks of other programs like *Duck Dynasty*, *Swamp People*, *Myrtle Manor*, and *Call of the Wildman* that capitalize on the South and portray it as a paradise for

“rednecks,” “white trash,” and backwards “country hicks.” These shows perpetuate a specific southern imaginary that feeds into the public perception of the South as being more conservative, rural, and poor. However, while the Shannon-Thompson family of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* are lower class, white southerners, they do not quite so easily fit into the stereotype given to them by their network, TLC (formerly The Learning Channel), and the public. Instead they are progressive about gay rights, support positive body image, make informed financial decisions, and are heavily involved in charity. The family, June Shannon in particular, uses the reality show narrative structure to subvert society’s expectations and create an empowering narrative for her four daughters. Specifically she has used the show to instill positive body image and self-love in her daughters and encourages them to love their bodies at any size and to not worry about what others think of them. She also used the show to begin to lift her daughters out of poverty.

The Shannon-Thompson family is composed of Mike “Sugar Bear” Thompson, June “Mama June” Shannon, Anna “Chickadee” Shannon, Jessica “Chubbs” Shannon, Lauryn “Pumpkin” Shannon, and the titular Alana “Honey Boo Boo” Thompson. The show is a spin-off of TLC’s widely popular series *Toddler and Tiaras*, which featured Alana and June in season five episode one. It is from this episode that Alana received her nickname when she became known for her catchphrase “A dolla makes me holla Honey Boo Boo child” (“Precious Moments Pageants” 2011). This episode is also where June started being the punch line of jokes about the South and fat women. In one memorable and frequently replicated scene, June is shown dancing along to Alana’s routine in the audience; something not that unusual for pageant moms. She also began receiving heavy criticism after this episode for Alana’s “go-go juice,” a mixture of Mountain Dew and Red Bull, and the damage she was doing to her daughter’s health. This

concoction is not unique to Alana and June and many other girls on the series are shown imbibing similar sugar and caffeine filled beverages. Alana's weight is frequently highlighted, even by Alana herself who squishes her stomach into a mouth shape so that it appears it is talking, and that heightens the amount of scrutiny June receives.

June has four daughters with different men, is staunchly anti-marriage, worked outside the home until a foot injury prevented it, and displays feminist beliefs and leanings. She is frequently seen with little or no make-up and in one episode said "I just look good only when I wanna look good." June not only subverts society's expectation for the southern feminine introduced in chapter one; she subverts society's expectations for any woman. They are crude, loud, and brash. While the women of chapter one were highly disciplined, June and her daughters appear to the audience to lack this discipline. They transgress the rules and regimens of the highly disciplined southern lady and her politeness, which involves hiding much of the information that June freely exposes—like the fact that women have bodily functions. Florence King in *Southern Ladies and Gentleman* defines trash as being largely about appearance and behavior stating: "According to Granny, the family arbiter in all such matters, a trashy look ranges from ferret-faced , predatory sharpness to the heavy, bovine face with undefined features that look as if the Lord had smeared them while they were still wet—the opposite of what Granny called "chiseled" features. Also beyond the pale were beady eyes, shifty eyes, slack mouths, weak chins, and something she called "that pink-eyed look"" (34). Much of the trash accusations leveled at the family have stemmed from their appearance and their lack of "conventional beauty." In many ways the public are suggesting just like King's Granny that their appearance itself would warrant "white trashiness" regardless of their perceived unladylike

behavior.

Due to their class and weight, the family is placed in the margins of society and, as Judith Butler explains, the margins are dangerous because they are the perfect sites for subversion. The margins expose what society dislikes and why. Butler argues all social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and all margins are accordingly considered dangerous stating: “If the body is synecdoche for the social system per se or a site in which open systems converge, then any kind of unregulated permeability constitutes a site of pollution and endangerment” (*Gender Trouble*, 180). The family’s weight, crude behavior, and lower class status all figure them as polluted as they fail to live up to the idealized version of femininity on multiple axes. June’s unapologetic existence exposes society’s dislike for fat women, loud women, and poor women because society casts them as the other.

Critics of the show admonish TLC for what they feel is exploitation of the Shannon-Thompson family. Karen Cox, American Studies scholar, writes about the series pick-up on her blog “Pop South” stating:

What the folks at TLC are celebrating in this tragic production is that a ripe plum for exploitation fell right into their laps. It has all the elements of the deprived South, which production companies like Authentic Entertainment create for public consumption and profit. Rural Georgia? Check. Rednecks? Check. Do they roll around in the mud? Check. Are there people with nicknames (besides “Honey Boo Boo,” there’s “Sugar Bear,” “Pumpkin,” “Chickadee,” and “Chubb”)? Check, check, check, and check. (Cox “Pop South”)

Cox’s objection primarily comes from how *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* will affect outsider’s

perceptions of the South. Early in the show's tenure, she admonishes it frequently on her blog because clips from the show are often used whenever someone, usually a comedian, wants to denigrate the South as being poor, rural, and crass. Choice clips and sound bites are divorced from their context by shows to illustrate this version of the South that is deprived of manners. Similarly many of the gifs of the show that are circulated around social media choose the more outlandish moments of the show, such as June proclaiming that "I'm gonna vegetate my fat ass," June dancing along to Alana's pageant routine, Alana playing with her belly, or Alana demonstrating her signature move the "cup-a-fart." However, when these "outlandish" moments are placed within their context or viewed as part of the larger episode, seasons, and series, it is clear that the Shannon-Thompson family are much more than "white trash" and "rednecks."

However, Cox does eventually expand on her thoughts about the exploitation at play stating in another blog post:

Maybe they have hit a small jackpot with their show (no doubt TLC has). During commercials, you'll see that the network is offering ringtones of Alana's sayings like "a dolla makes me holla." I just hope TLC is cutting Alana a check for those ringtones, since it is profiting by exploiting her. Maybe she will earn enough to fund a college education, break her family's cycle of poverty, and escape the country ghetto. I'm rooting for her. (Cox "Pop South")

Her primary objection shifts from the show misrepresenting the South to wondering if the show really is helping them escape the cycle of poverty they are trapped in. While reality television is by nature exploitative, June has appeared to manipulate her image on the show for her family's financial gain. In the initial seasons, she used the money to set-up trust funds for all four

daughters and in the later seasons used the paychecks to move her family out of their two bedroom, one bath trailer and into a larger home. Throughout the series she continues to “extreme coupon,” initially to afford Alana’s pageants and later as a means of support, and when Sugar Bear proposes late in the show’s tenure, he does so in front of her still full stockpile housed in the dining room. June used the show to help lift her family out of poverty and while it did exploit the family to a degree, they still found a way to work the exploitation for their own benefit.

Others journalists begin their reviews by critiquing the show and TLC’s exploitation of the family, but then devolve into an attack on the family itself. *A.V. Club* writes: “Not having seen *Toddlers and Tiaras*, it’s hard to know if she’s naturally an attention-seeking woman or if TLC realized she was a 300-pound malapropism waiting to happen” (*A.V. Club*). The author, Ryan McGee, is fat-shaming here, but also places the onus on TLC at this point in the review. However, by the end of the article, McGee is dismissing the show because of the family it focuses on: “It’s not so much that Mama actively abuses her children, so much as provides perhaps the worst example possible of how to live a life with a bit of respect, or at least decorum [...] It’s not that the Thompsons *have* to be this way. They either don’t know how to change or don’t understand that change is even an option” (*A.V. Club*). Because the family enjoys toilet humor, getting dirty, and eating junk food, things that plenty of scripted television and film characters enjoy with little critique, they lack respect. Many of the statements can be attributed to misogyny as almost all of the criticism is placed on June for “failing” to take proper care of her family, i.e. not behaving like a traditional housewife and idealized mother and not following the manual of traditional southern femininity. Sugar Bear receives little criticism and in some cases

is even applauded for staying with June despite her weight and “vulgar” behavior.

McGee does hint that the show could do important cultural work. He thinks the show has potential, but it never lives up to it: “There’s some really interesting material here about the intersection between far-flung dreams and stubborn realities, how cultural entrenchment affects social mobility, and the ways in which the delusions of parents impact children before they even have a chance to know any other way to live. Instead, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* wants it all to be about the vajiggle juggle”⁵ (A.V. Club). The show does do that work. It demonstrates the lack of social mobility the Shannon-Thompsons have and how it is hard for them to overcome that cycle of poverty even with the reality television money. His statement about “the ways in which the delusions of parents impact children” is confusing as June and Mike did not decide to be poor. If he is referring to Alana’s pageant participation she and June explicitly state multiple times that it is Alana’s choice and she can quit anytime and halfway through the series run she does.

James Poniewozick, a critic for *Time Magazine*, falls somewhere in the middle in his criticism of the show. He thinks the family has some problematic aspects, namely they seem to embrace the redneck stereotype wholeheartedly: “But the pageants are secondary in *Honey Boo Boo*, which is less like *Toddlers and Tiaras* than it is a reality-show version of *The Fatties: Fart Two*” (Poniewozick). Again relying heavily of fat-shaming, he praises the family for not appearing to care about how they are perceived, but acknowledges that that is probably a shrewd calculation on TLC’s part. His main criticism falls on what TLC’s presentation of this show says about the viewers:

But there’s enough in *Honey Boo Boo* to see what the producers feel will be the attraction of the show—the train-wreck, freak-show aspects—and to be creeped

out by that assumption. [...] Which might lead you to say the Thompsons are being used in *Honey Boo Boo*. I don't know if that's true; they seem savvy and happy enough, they're getting paid, and I'm not sure they're so unaware of, or concerned with, how TLC viewers are perceiving them. The depressing thing, really, is the TLC viewers, or rather, the way the show seems to assume that those viewers will look at this family and the world. (Poniewozick).

He is right in his assumption that viewers will not look past the family's weight and behavior, at least initially. However he is guilty of doing just that in the review when he boils the show down to "*The Fatties: Fart Two*" and suggests the show is all about their weight and crude behavior.

In contrast, *The Washington Post* is pretty upbeat in their review of the show writing: "This a show about seemingly dumb people who are in fact quite smart, starting with Alana herself" (Stuever). Hank Stuever, the author, continues:

You'll blow a gasket if you watch this show with any trace of superiority or outrage [...] You could hire all the comedy writers you want and still not come up with more ludicrous sitcom characters—and anyhow, all the comedy writers would have gone to Ivy League schools. Their conception of such folk would be just as stereotypical and somehow not nearly as true. (Stuever)

Stuever recognizes that the Shannon-Thompsons are controlling their image and identity much more so than the network. Megan Carpentier at *The Guardian* also praises the show primarily for how the women are not bothered by what the rest of the world thinks of them. Carpentier writes:

⁵ Referring to the act of jiggling your vagina. Something June references numerous in the first season.

None of the women or girls who participate in the show seems to hate themselves for their poverty, their weight, their less-than-urbane lifestyle or the ways in which they diverge from the socially-acceptable beauty standard. So, instead of being the harbinger of a dying hegemon's cultural apocalypse, the show is actually telling viewers that said apocalypse is in the rearview mirror. (Carpentier)

Her criticisms fall almost squarely on the audience and the internet “concern trolls” who cannot reconcile the Shannon-Thompsons’ physical appearance with their self-acceptance: “No, what's tragic is the fact that the Thompsons don't aspire to those mannerisms or those beauty standards yet so many people find it shocking that they love each other and themselves” (Carpentier).

These two reviews distill what *Honey Boo Boo* lovers like about the show. It shows women who are unperturbed by idealized depictions of femininity and are working to be comfortable in their own identity. They are the opposite of the standard the previous chapter discusses. Carpentier’s review also highlights the truth that many dislike the family precisely because they are not bothered by criticism nor are they attempting to change to fit society’s view of femininity. In a culture obsessed with self-improvement, especially for women, it seems unconscionable that women would be happy as they are.

All the reviews illustrate that reacting to reality television is difficult because while it is fake to a degree, it also is starring real people. It is hard to discern where Mama June and Honey Boo Boo end and where June Shannon and Alana Thompson begin. They are likely playing up certain aspects of their personality, but due to a small number of interviews with the press it can be hard to discern what traits they are emphasizing.

While fictional characters are allowed to get away with a lot of things, reality TV stars

are subjected to higher scrutiny despite the fact that most people watch reality TV to see people act ridiculous. Shannon Kelly in her work *Reality TV* discusses why people are so enthralled by reality TV and it does have to do with the spectacle aspect of the genre. She writes

This attitude highlights another reason why some people watch reality programming of *all* types—to make fun of the people on the shows, feel superior to them, or experience feelings of *schadenfreude* [...] Indeed, many people claim to watch reality television because it makes them feel better about their own lives—they may have problems, but at last they are not living in a house filled to the roof with garbage or dealing with an unwanted teen pregnancy. (34-35)

Reality TV is escapism. It is an opportunity for the audience to feel a sense of superiority and gawk at other's misfortunes whether they are physical, emotional, or romantic.

Misha Kavka in her book *TV Genres: Reality TV* explains how reality television influences both the media and real world perceptions. She states:

Having redefined industry practices and audience expectations, reality TV now seems poised to redefine reality itself—and, in a sense, it has. It is no longer so easy to demarcate 'real life' from life on camera, or to think of the TV screen as a hard line of separation between media professionals on one side and ordinary people on the other. Mediation has entered reality, and reality legitimates itself through mediation. (178)

Reality TV blurs the lines between what is real and what is constructed. While reality TV bills itself as the authentic unfiltered experience, in truth there is a producer making executive decisions behind the scenes that shape what the audience sees. Kavka continues: "Discursively,

reality TV makes claims about ordinariness, authenticity and the social value of accessing private lives. [...] For all of its claims about giving viewers access to a ‘backstage’ reality, there is always a producer off-camera whom we do not see; for all of its emphasis on ‘being real,’ participants nonetheless perform themselves in spectacular ways” (179). At the crux, reality TV is a performance just like any other genre, but it does not market itself as one. The Shannon-Thompson family are performing, but interviews and social media indicate that this is not as heavy of a performance as others in the genre. There does appear to be truth to June’s body positivity and self-image. She has been able to spin her family’s performance into making her and her family’s life markedly better.

Journalists Karyn Riddle and J. J. De Simone conducted a study on reality television and why people watch it. Their article, titled “A Snooki Effect: An Exploration of the Surveillance Subgenre of Reality TV and Viewers’ Beliefs About the ‘Real’ Real World,” used statistical analysis and surveys of college undergraduates—one of reality television’s target demographics—to figure out how viewing reality television affected participant’s views of actual reality. They found that it does skew people’s perceptions about the real live people and not necessarily in a good way. They state:

More specifically, our data suggest that viewers of these programs believe women in the real world engage in bad behaviors (e.g., spreading rumors and verbal aggression) more often than do men. Furthermore, heavy viewers of these shows overestimate the prevalence of discord (e.g., affairs and divorces) and an emphasis on sex (e.g., sex on first date, having multiple sex partners) in romantic relationships. (Riddle)

This perception was not just limited to gender. They also discovered that individual's opinions about overweight and obese people shifted negatively when exposed to programs like *The Biggest Loser*.

Similarly, the internet commons has a critical view of the Shannon-Thompson family's obesity expressed in thinly veiled fat-shaming disguised as concern for the family's health. This is part of a much larger American discourse regarding physical ideals, weight, and femininity, but it has particular poignancy in the South where the go-to image of southern women is often modeled after the waifish nineteen-inch waist having Scarlett O'Hara and the go to punch line is how obese the southern states are and how fattening the food is. Research points to fat being considered an identity marker, especially a gendered identity marker, i.e. being known as "the fat girl." As being fat becomes deeply entangled with their sense of self, it becomes harder for girls and women to break free of this identity and they self-perpetuate it in their own thoughts and actions. Being a fat girl strips them of any other gendered role such as tomboy or femme as they are cast by society and their own interior identity as being incapable of performing an identity beyond fat (Rice). The few times we see the family display "traditional femininity," e.g. make-up and big hair, is when Alana is participating in pageants. However it is made clear to the audience, and to a certain degree Alana, that she will not win the Grand Supreme title due to her weight.

The Shannon-Thompsons self-identify as rednecks with Alana frequently telling the audience and others that they better "redneckonize." In the first episode of the show, they participate in the redneck games,⁶ an action that caused the most divisive response from viewers

⁶ The redneck games take place in episode one and consist primarily of Alana and the other daughters jumping into a mud pit and otherwise getting dirty.

reviewing the series based on that episode alone. The redneck is closely entwined with the “hillbilly” and “white trash” archetype. It is deeply entangled in the southern imaginary and in how the South is represented in popular culture. The redneck is often portrayed as crass and crude, two words that are frequently applied to the Shannon-Thompson family, which makes them part of a larger story of the southern grotesque.

Feminist and scholar Patricia Yaeger argues that the gigantic and grotesque woman is an inherently political figure. She focuses on the gigantic women in southern literature written by women, but I see a lot of parallels in her analysis of the gigantic, grotesque woman in June and Alana. Yaeger is building on the work of Susan Stewart, who wrote a meditation on the gigantic in her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Stewart writes:

The giant is represented through movement, through being in time. Even in the ascription of the still landscape to the giant, it is the activities of the giant, his or her legendary actions, that have resulted in the observable trace. In contrast to the still and perfect universe of the miniature, the gigantic represents the order and disorder of historical forces. The consumerism of the miniature in the consumerism of the classic; it is only fitting that consumer culture appropriates the gigantic whenever change is desired. (86)

The Shannon-Thompson family is gigantic not only in physical size, but also in personality. They are loud. They squabble. They get dirty after having rolled around in mud and butter among other things. They engage in eating for sport and create games revolving around bodily functions. The family is in the viewer’s face and in the case of one marketing stunt was also in

the viewer's nasal passages with a scratch and sniff card itself a tribute to John Waters and his *Odorama*—indeed June could be seen as an offshoot of Divine's many maternal figures in Waters' films as both Divine's characters and June are big, loud, crass, and cared deeply about their daughters.

The Shannon-Thompsons confirm certain stereotypes about the poor, rural South, but they also complicate them. In this way, the show functions as a liminal space where viewers can see variations and contentions in the stereotype. Yaeger contends that the gargantuan and the grotesque have always had a sense of liminality to them: "The gargantuan body both maps its own limits and refuses to stay within boundaries, to serve asked-for-ends. What resounds throughout this awkward frame are the very power plays that the petite white female body tries to mask" (126). June refuses to stay within the role of the overweight woman, although she recognizes that it is a part people want her to play. She embraces her body's shape and encourages her daughters to do the same. The overwhelming cultural narrative is that women should make themselves as small as possible and the Shannon-Thompson family rejects that. The daughters frequently go on diets and work-out plans and June supports them; often she joins in herself, but she never suggests that they need to lose weight or that losing weight would make them more attractive. In one episode the family goes to the pool and Alana, wearing a yellow swimsuit, asks June "Do I look like a chunky lemon?" to which June replies "Yes and you look beautiful." The family does not pretend that they are not overweight. They are aware of their size and how others view women of their size. However, June does try and make sure that her daughters understand that they are beautiful no matter what their size is.

In this way, the family has much in common with the fat acceptance movement, which attempts to empower women to accept their bodies as they are and to educate the public that fat does not equal unattractive or unhealthy. Ngairé Donaghue and Anne Clemitshaw examined the thin ideal and the fat acceptance movement in their article “‘I’m totally smart and a feminist... and yet I want to be a waif:’ Exploring Ambivalence Towards the Thin Ideal Within the Fat Acceptance Movement.” They found that women who participated in fat acceptance were less likely to believe in diets or equate thinness with happiness and therefore were much happier, but they also had difficulties coping with being excluded from certain relationships, fashion spaces, and jobs due to thin privilege. Similarly while they rejected the idea that thinness equated happiness and health those around them had not. As such they still struggled with friends and family who still saw them only as the fat friend. It also took enormous mental energy as the women could not withdraw from society and were still bombarded by visuals and messages promoting thinness and it took conscious effort to be happy and content with their existing bodies (Donaghue and Clemitshaw).

To deviate from the norm of the self-hating fat-woman carries a large mentally taxing weight. Returning to Butler’s thoughts about norms and identity: “the social norms that constitute our existence carry desires that do not originate with our individual personhood. This matter is made more complex by the fact that the viability of our individual personhood is fundamentally dependent on these social norms,” (*Undoing*, 2). It requires a vast amount of agency and determination to willfully reject the script norms and society have written for you. The Shannon-Thompsons are deviating from two different sets of norms: those set for fat women and those set for southern women.

The Shannon-Thompsons display this conscious effort, but the commons still dismisses them as poor, fat women who just need to exercise and eat better; critiquing not only their physicality but their diet, which is composed mainly of cheap but filling foods like spaghetti with ketchup and butter, hotdogs, and other items June is able to buy in bulk using coupons. Their diet is similar to other working class families across the South and the nation and many of the items they eat fall under what writer Chris Offutt described as trash food in a talk he gave at the Southern Foodways Alliance 2014 Symposium. Through their habits the family upholds their southernness by employing certain southern dietary tropes, namely using a lot of butter, but negates it by rarely eating the foods associated with the South like fried chicken, vegetables with fatback, fanciful pies and cakes, etc. June does not cook much and in this way does not live up to the public expectation of southern mother as the family cook and caregiver.

June does not seem too concerned by what the critics have to say about her and her family. She told CNN in an early interview:

People are going to talk, good and bad, and it is what it is. My family, we enjoy what we've done and I would do it again. My family is crazy and - like, crazy.

We're not boring. People have opinions, but if people actually sit down and talk with me and my family or talk with Alana, you'll see that Alana thoroughly enjoys doing what she does, and that we're not ignorant people like everybody says.

(Marquee Blog)

She explains that her family is a normal family and that they live a normal life outside of the show and Alana's pageants.

In fact the pageants are one of the few times that Alana and June display the traditional

southern femininity discussed in chapter one. Returning to Tara McPherson and *Reconstructing Dixie*, she writes about southern feminine representation: “This is not to say that these popular constructions of the belle and the lady were completely embodied or enacted by southern women, past or present. Rather, in their glorified forms, the belle and the lady can be seen as asymptotes, as limit figures against which many southern women evaluated their own lives” (152). The figures that McPherson profiles include Scarlett O’Hara and the other women in *Gone With the Wind*, the women of *Steel Magnolias*, and the women of *Designing Women*. These are women with big hair, full make-up, and puffy dresses. Alana performs this femininity in her pageants, but is aware that she is excluded from it outside of the pageant world. June also is aware that her daughter and her own performance of southern femininity is restricted by the perception of what it means to be a southern belle and lady and what that popular image looks like.

The southern feminine is divorced from sexuality and instead revolves around domesticity and, for single women, romance (McPherson 153). Perhaps this is why many of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*’s critics, most notably internet commenters, have critiqued Alana and June for their lack of femininity. The Shannon-Thompson women are not seen as feminine because they are not particularly domestically minded or well-mannered and none of the girls seem, in any way, swayed by romance. However, they are sexual. Sugar Bear regularly attempts to seduce June and refers to himself as Horny Bear in the attempt, she has four children by three different men (proof of her desirability to more than one man), she describes Sugar Bear as a one-night stand gone wrong, and the daughters are shown being physically affectionate with their boyfriends. June also regularly discusses her vagina, which she refers to as her biscuit, and Alana

refers to her niece as coming “out of the biscuit express.” Feminine women and southern ladies do not discuss sex and vaginas as that is seen as crass and not polite. Despite being highly sexualized figures, they are encouraged not to discuss or highlight their own sexuality. Even Metcalfe and Hays mention this in *Some Day You’ll Thank Me For This* when they suggest that southern women do not even know proper anatomical terminology.

We see a presentation of the traditional southern lady in other reality television families namely the Robertson family on *Duck Dynasty*. Matriarch Kay Robertston is always in a full face of makeup and is featured in nearly every episode doing some type of homemaking for Phil and the boys. Similarly the Robertson daughters-in-law are always perfectly dressed in dresses and heels and stand in sharp contrast to their husbands who spend most of the show in camouflage pants and t-shirts. Phil often refers to Kay as the ideal women. However, the rhetoric he uses to describe her centers around her value as a homemaker, specifically her cooking skills. The Robertson family are also conservative icons and have gotten media attention for their views, Phil’s specifically, on homosexuality and race.

In contrast, June is far from this ideal. She can cook, but her repertoire of recipes is limited and she is rarely shown in the kitchen. The homemaking skill she claims as her crowning achievement is her ability to extreme coupon. Her stockpile has been the backdrop for many scenes in the show, including Sugar Bear’s proposal. June and her daughters do not just reject performing ideal southern femininity, they reject many aspects of the modern performance of femininity. In particular, they reject the idealization of dating and marriage. Alana says in one episode “I don’t want a boyfriend. Too much drama.” This is understandable given the fact that she has watched her older sisters’ relationship dramas play out over the years. In particular she

has watched her eldest sister have a child out of wedlock at age seventeen and then date the father on-and-off for years.

June dislikes the idea of marriage altogether and Sugar Bear is the longest relationship she has ever had. She refuses to legally marry him and mostly scoffs during his proposal. She eventually breaks down and agrees to have a commitment ceremony at the request of her daughters. June met Sugar Bear online ten years ago and describes her intentions as being “a pump it and dump it.” He was meant to be a one night stand, but they stayed together and had Alana. In the show, he frequently attempts to seduce and romance her, which is largely met with eye rolls and snide remarks instead of swooning. At one point she even tells him “Buy me a crockpot or a new deep fryer and then we’ll talk.”

The Shannon-Thompsons also reject the conservative southerner narrative that the Robertsons gladly inhabit. Sugar Bear’s brother Lee Thompson, affectionately called Uncle Poodle by the girls, is a gay man and HIV positive. The family embraces him and his sexuality and he is a frequent guest star on the show. Alana even announces in one episode that “everybody is a little gay.”

Although LGBTQIA individuals are featured regularly on the show, African Americans are rarely featured. However, Alana herself performs a sort of black pageantry highlighting the racial aspect of their particular performance of femininity. Her nickname Honey Boo Boo comes from her episode of *Toddlers and Tiaras* when she said “A dolla makes me holla, honey boo boo child” which clearly borrows from African American Vernacular English. Sociologist Zandria Robinson explains the significance of the phrase and the nickname:

Honeybabychickeechele emerged from the syrupy sweet yet positively

condescending terms of endearment southern women deploy to draw lines of power, privilege, and femininity in polite discourse and interaction. Honey. Baby. Chickadee. Child. Together, they soften the blow of what might otherwise be some unpleasant news or a caustic observation. Further, they preface a read, or shade, directed at a person present or an absent third party. (Robinson “New South Negress”)

Alana is not shading anyone in her particular deployment; she says it in a talking head to producers, but she is using it as a way to display sass. Robinson defines her speech as slipping between racialized language patterns and writes:

Who knows where honey, baby, chickadee, and child first came together, or how and when their semantic shift to “Honey Boo Boo Child/Chile” occurred. Did Alana overhear some black woman saying it and misremember it? Did she make it up while watching BET and re-runs of *Good Times* by creating a mashup of overheard phrases? Is she appropriating blackness? Or is she code switching between the rural, working-class talk of her parents and a more acceptable white southern speech pattern conducive to the promise of upward mobility in/through/of pageant life? (Robinson)

Alana herself is regularly code switching between her home persona as a rural, working class Georgian and her role as an aspiring pageant queen.

While Robinson praises the show, others have criticized Alana for her black vernacular appropriation calling it thinly veiled racism. Helena Andrews of *The Root* initially wants to dislike *Honey Boo Boo* for its appropriation of the “sassy black women” trope. However, she

discovers as she watches the show that it may actually be beneficial to ending the trope as it blurs the lines between black and white vernacular in a good way. She writes:

Alana's occasional bursts of "ghetto" are a weird appropriation of stale, decades-old stereotypes and Southern redneck colloquialisms, like when she drops her squeaky girl's voice a few octaves down to happily announce, "I like to get in the mud because I like to get dirty like a pig" -- a childlike proclamation that's nonsensically wrapped in racial subterfuge too utterly ridiculous to be authentic. [...] And that's sort of the beauty inside *Honey Boo Boo* -- minus the pageants and the pre-packaged ghetto-isms -- some authenticity can be found even as the Thompsons' native language is riddled with inauthentic "black talk." It doesn't really make sense, but somehow it works. (Andrews)

Willa Paskin of *Salon* is slightly harsher on the show and worries about the long-term implications of the speech adoption:

What we're seeing here, then, is the unpredictable, viral progression of television itself: the "Jerry Springer Show" ingested, assimilated and then passed on to a small child, who is now performing some version of it on her very own reality TV show, without any awareness of its source or racial implications. Given this, who could possibly predict what "Here Comes Honey Boo Boo" will inspire? (Paskin)

Much like the southern femininity of the previous chapter, the Shannon-Thompson's performance of femininity involves racial contrast. In fact their designation as "white trash" implies that just "trash" is non-white. Being white also protects them in some ways from some of the more hateful remarks and stereotypes given to poor people. Their whiteness allows them to

use African American Vernacular English without being labeled uneducated, although they certainly have that accusation leveled at them more so for their lifestyle choices than their speech. June does not work outside the show and has been on disability for years because of her “forklift foot” which was disfigured in an on the job accident. Although it is never explicitly stated, it is strongly implied that prior to the reality show deal, the family used food stamps or SNAP benefits along with June’s extreme couponing to cover the cost of food in the home. Black women that subsist on government assistance in the same way June once did would be described as “welfare queens” but that particular insult has never been directed at her. In fact most accusations of laziness are the result of her fatness and undisciplined eating and behavior and not her lack of a job.

Many who watch the show may not be aware of the “blackness” of her performance due to what Tara McPherson calls the “lenticular lens.” She explains the lenticular lens as an inability to see both the African American South and the white South at the same time and coexisting in the same space. She writes:

Put briefly, a lenticular logic is a monocular logic, a schema by which histories or images that are actually copresent get presented (structurally, ideologically) so that only one of the images can be seen at a time. Such an arrangement represses connection, allowing whiteness to float free from blackness, denying the long historical imbrications of racial markers and racial meaning in the South. (7)

She compares it to old viewfinders which depending on the picture either showed the white plantation mistress or the black slave mammy but never both at the same time.

Here Comes Honey Boo Boo has a lenticular lens at play as well and not just in respect to

race. Casual viewers seemingly just focus on the lower class position of the family and their grosser habits and do not see the other things the family does. Observe the comment sections of any article about the family, which splits between staunch defenders and those who want to dismiss them for their weight and crassness. June is a shrewd woman and has used her family's participation on the show to help create a better future for her daughters. She has saved the majority of the money from the production to put towards the girls' college fund and they began looking for a larger home that would give everyone more space. The family is also fairly charitable themselves. Every year Alana and her sisters hold a toy drive and Sugar Bear dresses up as Santa and helps pass the toys out to other children. They also regularly hold food drives and put any donations from fans to good use helping out others in the community. Alana herself is extremely engaged in social media and interacts with anyone who mentions her and will pose or record a Vine with the various things she is sent by her fans.

Although the family created a space that complicated and questioned people's assumptions about poor, rural white southerners, that space closed in fall 2014. Internet vitriol towards the Shannon-Thompson family increased after a scandal developed in October 2014 regarding June's personal life. In September 2014, rumors surfaced that June and Sugar Bear had separated after it was discovered that Sugar Bear was using internet dating sites to look for women. After the couple acknowledged the spilt, gossip site TMZ reported that June had started dating Mark McDaniel, a recently released sex offender. Nearly every week that followed saw the release of additional information about Shannon and McDaniel's relationship including that he had molested her oldest daughter Anna a.k.a Chickadee and that Shannon was withholding Anna's trust fund. Shannon denied these accusations and even went on the show *Dr. Phil* to

address the rumors. She stated that she had met with McDaniel only twice and that it was to give her daughter, Lauryn “Pumpkin”, closure because Lauryn believed that McDaniel was her father. Thompson and Shannon reconciled briefly in December 2014 before Thompson was once again discovered cheating.

As the scandal developed, many sites covered the announcements and as such there were ample opportunities for the public to offer their opinion. Many pointed to the family’s lower socioeconomic status as the reason Shannon was allegedly dating a child molester. Many comments on the site *Jezebel* referred the family as “those people” and suggested that one could not expect anything else given their background. According to these comments, working class, rural, southerners lack the moral clarity to not date sex offenders. Others pointed to Shannon’s weight and general level of attractiveness as the reason why she was with McDaniel implying that women with her physical appearance would be lucky to date anyone at all and therefore she has to date whoever shows an interest, even if they are a sex offender. This scandal essentially confirmed all their preconceived notions and stereotypes about Shannon and her family. The nuance that once existed disappeared and was replaced once again with generalities about poor, rural southerners. Websites and blogs that had previously praised Shannon and the show for their body positivity and emphasis on family similarly dismissed them. While it would be naïve and overly optimistic to expect individual’s commenting on articles to express nuance regarding the situation, it is not out of the question to want think pieces regarding the scandal to address Shannon’s allusions to her own abuse, her previous relationship with McDaniel, and the constant verbal abuse from the public as contributing factors to her briefly reuniting with him.

The Shannon-Thompsons’ embrace of the negatively viewed “white trash” stereotype

ultimately made it much harder for them to bounce back from the scandal. Although they did subvert some of the stereotypes placed on poor, fat women while on the show, their real life actions confirmed people's assumptions and cemented the association of the stereotype with perversion, deviance, and pollution. Their willingness to play against the figure of the southern lady gave that figure, her disciplinary nature, and the set of norms associated with her legitimacy even if that was not the family's intention. Although there are undoubtedly southern ladies who have scandals similar to June's, their scandals are not seen as fulfillment of a stereotype nor do their scandals speak to their entire social class and cast all southern ladies into a particular light like June's experience came to be indicative of the disposition of all her fellow poor, white, fat southern women. The type of southern femininity performed by southern ladies also provides them with some protection as June's subversion left her vulnerable to heightened attacks from the commons due to the increased scrutiny already placed on her and her family.

Here Comes Honey Boo Boo is a spectacle like much of reality TV. The Shannon-Thompson family is putting on a performance for the cameras, a performance that is campy and plays into stereotypes of the depraved South and what others think of rural southerners. However, there is also subversion hidden within the performance. June and her daughters directly challenge femininity and fat shaming in a way that can be read as radical. Their performance has notes of pageantry, most notably black pageantry, and this pageantry has the potential to open the doors to conversation about deeper issues including racism, classism, and body image.

CONCLUSION

Southern femininity is a disciplined performance that is policed by other southern women and the public at large. While no femininity is truly undisciplined, a lack of adherence to the established norms leads to a public perception of undisciplined femininity even though it is just as maintained as any other gendered performance. Southern femininity is not real, but the idea holds a certain degree of realness that those who perform it cling to, especially as they conceptualize their identity as southerners and as women. However, it is a performance and idea that is only accessible to white, upper class women. All others are relegated to other types of femininity—black femininity, “white trash” femininity—that can either be read as an alternative or opposite end of the binary or can be seen as non-feminine depending on the audience reading the performance. Those who do not display the idealized femininity are subjected to a heightened scrutiny that is looking for reasons to confirm their stereotypes and suspicions of lower class, black, and/or fat women.

The saga of June Shannon and her rise and subsequent fall from grace highlights America’s strange relationship with the South. It loves to gawk and mock southerners for being backwards, stupid, and otherwise unsavory. While many view the South as a source of shame, they also treat it as an endless source of entertainment. It is a region plagued by the highest rates of poverty and obesity and the region that is the most resistant to measures to alleviate them.

They cast it as the imaginary place where everything is moonlight and magnolias and then attempt to shun its less picturesque parts. They love the southern belle and southern lady, but only when she fits the popular image. Southerners themselves are reluctant to claim ownership of their blemishes with many doing elaborate footwork to distance themselves from the southerners on television. Some of the harshest critiques of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* came from southerners who were concerned about the way this family represented the South. At the 2015 Southern Foodways Alliance symposium participants erupted into cheers when it was announced to the crowd the show had been cancelled. The South does not like to reconcile with things that do not fit its own self-image.

Southern womanhood is a collection of norms that result in an embodied performance. There are a variety of ways that women have attempted to subvert it over the years—from the more subtle manipulation of the rules to outright disregarding the conventions. However, it can never truly be subverted as flagrantly disregarding the performance and being proud in this disregard indicates that there is some value, personally ascribed or otherwise, to the performance. One is bound to the rules regardless of if they follow them or not. As such while it is possible to open up liminal spaces and dialogues surrounding the contradictions and problems associated with southern femininity, that space can quickly be closed when any behavior reifies the stereotype associated with the deviance. Southern femininity can be complicated, but it cannot be untangled from its historical context or its popular culture constructed image.

This disciplined versus undisciplined femininity discussion has much deeper ramifications and reach beyond the scope of the South. While southern women are particularly guilty of it, to the point it has almost reached the status of a trope, they are by no means the only

group disciplining its members into submission. Much of the broader American culture views femininity as aligned with the South's view. There is still an emphasis on politeness, thinness, and agreeability that are imposed on all women in America regardless of regional identity.

I only briefly discussed the role of men in creating and perpetuating southern femininity. While white women are the chief enforcers and had a significant part in creating the ideal, white men played a large role in establishing southern femininity as a white, upper class identity. They are the ones who initially created it as a means to gain political traction. They are the ones seen as the gatekeepers of female sexuality and as King frequently points out they are the reason women are so frequently thought of as being in competition with each other. It is also important to acknowledge that femininity would not exist without an opposite in masculinity and the hegemonic norms entailed in it.

Returning to Cedar Grove and my childhood, the hierarchy of men over women despite the alleged matriarchal nature of the South, was abundantly clear in the interactions I observed. The women of Eno Presbyterian were needed to run potlucks, but this did not leave them much time to participate in other parts of church life. They could bake the communion bread, but not necessarily serve it. They could toil away in the kitchen preparing the food, but could not bless it. And after making the food and setting up a dining room, the women were rarely allowed to eat first. They had to serve drinks and watch the buffet while the men and guests enjoyed their spoils. Watching these gendered interactions taught me that men occupied a place of privilege; after all they got the best food by going first. They were meant to be catered to and coddled, since they could not get their own drinks or clear their own plates. I also learned that you do not

question this system or the authority. These men were elders, both in the church and in the literal sense, and the women who kept these traditions going were also to be respected.

This thesis has only begun to unpack southern femininity in contemporary popular culture and the twenty-first century South. There is much more to discuss regarding the role of race in performing southern femininity and how it factors into the historical and contemporary South. There is also much to be done with generational differences between southern women. Older southern women perform a very different southern femininity than southern women who are in their twenties. Many older southern women go to Wal-Mart in their pearls and furs while younger southern girls will attend almost all except the most formal of functions in leisure wear. Even the foodways of the South has generational gaps. Younger southerners are increasingly adopting globalized approaches to southern cuisine and limiting their consumption of traditional southern foods. Gendered care work has begun to evolve in households across the United States as men begin to take on more of the domestic tasks, although the women in the household still do the majority of the housework, cooking, and child care.

I conducted additional research that I did not incorporate into the thesis about bodywork, food, and fatness and the ways my particular theoretical frameworks interacted with them. I think this research would be interesting to incorporate and utilize in the future. The study of southern femininity and how it is written on the body through food and size combines three relatively new fields: fat studies, food studies, and regional studies. As such, there is not much existing literature on my specific topic. Instead I surveyed how texts on gender and the body, gender and the South, and gender and food could be used to better understand the construction and performance of southern femininity as it relates to the body and food. I also devoted a significant

amount of time to the two most prevalent theoretical frameworks I have seen regarding studying gender and the body and its materiality: doing gender and performativity. As much of my thesis is my own analysis of Mama June's performance of southern femininity contrasted with the constructed, idealized southern femininity put forth in popular "how to be a southern lady" guidebooks I felt that it was important to understand how the theories overlap and differ and where they would be most appropriate to use.

The literature was rich with information about the role of race and ethnicity in the construction and maintenance of gendered identity, but was lacking in its analysis of class. While I did find one article that mentioned upper class attitudes and relationships between food and gender, I found nothing that discussed poverty or specifically discussed class, weight, and gender, which is closely tied to food consumption and access. I found quite a bit that discussed the role of the body in gender, especially fat bodies, but was disappointed that much of it focused on disordered eating and thinking instead of women who attempted to resist the cultural narrative that fatness is inherently bad. However, many articles cited Susan Bordo and Elizabeth Grosz and their works on the body and gender and while I did not have time to read over them nor did I want to introduce an additional framework into the discussion, I am interested in pursuing their work as I delve further into my topic.

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VITA

Education

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

May 2013

Chapel Hill, NC

Bachelor of Arts in American Studies with minors in Music and History

Graduated with honors and distinction.

Honors Thesis: "Carolina Home Place: The Bluegrass and Folk Community in Chapel Hill"

Awards and Grants

- Sounds of the South Award, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, April 2012. A \$1000 grant to record southern musicians awarded to one student a year.
- Graduate Assistantship, 2013-2015

Teaching Experience

- Teaching Assistant, EDHE 105: The Ole Miss Experience, University of Mississippi, Fall 2014

Conference Presentations and Invited Lectures

"The Male Gaze and the Male Gays: A Queer Reading of HBO's *True Blood*." *2015 Annual Conference: Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association*. New Orleans, LA, April, 2015.

"Coming Out of the Coffin: Queer Identity Politics in HBO's *True Blood*" *Space and Place: 15th Annual Sarah Isom Center Student Gender Conference*. University, MS, March, 2015.

"Doublespeak and Southern Ladies: Class and Femininity in Contemporary Popular Culture" *Brown Bag Lecture Series*. Center for the Study of Southern Culture. University, MS, March, 2015.

"That's Right Nice of You: Southern Foodways and the Performance of Southern Womanhood." *Brown Bag Lecture Series*. Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies. University, MS, November, 2014.

“‘That’s Right Nice of you:’ Church Potlucks, Southern Hospitality, and Southern Womanhood.” *Insider/Outsider: 14th Annual Sarah Isom Center Student Gender Conference*. University, MS, March, 2014.

“From *O Brother* to Punch Brothers: The Sound, Appeal, and Aesthetic of Psuedo Bluegrass.” *Music of the South: Innovation and Experimental Music in the South*. University, MS, April, 2013.

“From *O Brother* to Punch Brothers: The Sound, Appeal, and Aesthetic of Pseudo Bluegrass.” *Global American South: Southern Sounds/Out of Bounds*. Chapel Hill, NC, February 2013.

Professional Service

- Co-chair, MLK Day of Service Planning Committee, University of Mississippi, 2014-2015
- Member, Search Committee for Assistant Dean of Students for Student Involvement, University of Mississippi, 2015
- Co-chair, Adopt-A-Basket Planning Committee, University of Mississippi, 2014
- Member, 9/11 Day of Service Planning Committee, University of Mississippi, 2014
- Member, Chancellor’s LGBTQ Advisory Committee, University of Mississippi, 2013-2014
- Volunteer, Southern Foodways Alliance Annual Symposium, 2013, 2014
- Graduate Volunteer, Sarah Isom Center for Gender Studies, 2014-2015

Professional Affiliations

- American Culture Association/Popular Culture Association

Languages

- English (native speaker)
- German (beginner, speaking, writing, and reading)