Reality TV Shows Perpetuate Stereotypes about Southerners

Reality TV, 2013

Karen L. Cox is an associate professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She has written a number of books and articles on southern history, including *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* and *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture*.

Reality TV shows based on southern culture do not present an accurate portrait of southerners or their lifestyle. These shows depict the South as either a mysterious and foreign region with a different heritage from the rest of the United States, or as a land of ignorant "good old boys" and daisy duke-wearing southern belles. In reality, southerners are far more diverse and educated than such portrayals would indicate, and these stereotypes only serve to discourage them from reaching their full potential.

If you go by the sheer number of programs and casting calls, reality television has become thoroughly Dixiefied. Whether it's Lifetime's *Glamour Belles*, truTV's *Lizard Lick Towing* or CMT's *Sweet Home Alabama*, series purporting to show a slice of Southern life are huge, and getting bigger: more than a dozen new programs have been introduced so far this year, while others have been renewed for second or even third seasons.

Such shows promise new insight into Southern culture, but what they really represent is a typecast South: a mythically rural, white, poorly educated and thickly accented region that has yet to join the 21st century. If you listen closely, you may even hear banjos.

These stereotypical depictions are insulting to those who live in the region and know that a more diverse South exists. Even worse, they deny the existence of a progressive South, or even progressive Southerners.

Southern reality TV programs fall into a few subcategories. Sometimes, producers seek to portray the South as culturally foreign to the rest of America, and they choose characters or remote locations that reinforce this image.

The History channel's *Swamp People*, for example, focuses on alligator-hunting season in southern Louisiana by showcasing individuals who live and work in the Atchafalaya Swamp, thereby preserving their "ancient way of life." The show uses subtitles to emphasize the cultural differences between the bayou and the rest of the country, even though the "stars" speak plain English.

We've been here before, with *The Dukes of Hazzard* and *Green Acres*—and it's no surprise that more than one production company wants to take us back there.

Other shows focus on those Southerners that Americans feel as if they already know, like Southern belles and hillbillies. In its own bid to buy into the trend, Animal Planet has given us *Hillbilly Handfishin'*, in which two Oklahomans, Skipper Bivins and his pal Trent Jackson, teach people, generally big-city Northerners, how to catch catfish by using their own limbs as bait.
Then there’s *Sweet Home Alabama*, a Dixiefied version of *The Bachelorette*, only in this setting she is choosing between city slickers and Southern boys. It’s not unlike the show with the catfish duo: both feature a competition between country and city or, put more pointedly, North and South. The message is reduced to a Hank Williams Jr. song: a country boy can survive.

### Southern Stereotypes Are Nothing New

These stereotypes have a long history—we’ve been here before, with *The Dukes of Hazzard* and *Green Acres*—and it’s no surprise that more than one production company wants to take us back there. Alongside *Hillbilly Handfishin*’ is *Redneck Riviera*, a show still in development that trumpets itself as the Southern *Jersey Shore* and that has selected the racially insensitive Confederate battle flag for its logo.

The show is casting for type by seeking "guys and gals" who answer "yes" to the loaded question, "Do you drink sweet tea, talk endlessly about Nascar, sport a rebel flag (on your bikini or jacked-up pickup truck), listen to loud country and/or Southern rock, or enjoy walking around shirtless or in Daisy Dukes?"

There’s no doubt that more than a few people would answer yes, especially when money and potential fame are involved. But millions of Southerners would say no—including the Indian communities of Mississippi, the Latinos who are now the largest minority in towns across the region and the thousands of white suburbanites who feel more of a connection with exurban Chicago or Denver than Lizard Lick, N.C.

In fact, the last decade has brought dramatic demographic changes to the region. The South’s population is more ethnically and racially diverse than it ever has been. Hispanics are the fastest-growing ethnic group in the country and, according to census statistics, most of that growth has been concentrated in the South.

The region is increasingly urban and cosmopolitan, and has become more economically and politically powerful. Atlanta hosted the 1996 Summer Olympics, and Charlotte, N.C, will be home to the 2012 Democratic National Convention.

Therefore, you might expect better programming from the History channel. But don’t hold your breath. It recently introduced the show *You Don’t Know Dixie*, which promises to educate people about the South. But evidence to the contrary is right there in the opening credits: the term “Dixie” (instead of “South”), and the use of the Confederate battle flag to illustrate the “X,” tell us the show is more concerned with simplistic mythmaking than piecing apart contemporary cultural complexities.

Indeed, the program is heavy on regional trivia and relies on "well-known Southerners" like *[Extreme Makeover* host] Ty Pennington and [comedian] Jeff Foxworthy (and a hillbilly moonshiner whose speech, like that of the folks on *Swamp People*, required subtitles) to tell us "hidden truths" about the region. These "truths" rarely involve women, and they reduce African-Americans to cooking and singing the blues.

It reinforces a message to Southerners themselves, particularly whites, that they are in fact benighted and backward—so why change?
And in *You Don't Know Dixie*, as in all these shows, "Southern" almost always means "white," regardless of the central role that blacks play in the region's culture.

It's not that other reality TV shows don't trade in stereotypes of other places, too—say, New Jersey or Los Angeles. But those shows never pretend to show the entirety of Jersey or Southern California life, just a cliched corner of it. Many of the Southern reality TV programs, on the other hand, trade in age-old stereotypes that indict the entire region.

Of course, one could ask why all the fuss about what is, ultimately, mindless entertainment? But there are two big problems. First, it gives non-Southerners license to point their fingers at a supposedly culturally deficient region, while ignoring their own shortcomings.

And second, it reinforces a message to Southerners themselves, particularly whites, that they are in fact benighted and backward—so why change?

To present the full scale of the South's diversity would do more than just undermine negative popular perceptions of the region. It would also ruin the stock in trade that has long been used by the dominant media to represent the South as a place that is culturally different from the rest of the country. Although of course, it wouldn't be as entertaining.

### Further Readings

#### Books


Periodicals and Internet Sources


• Kate Coyne "Kate Plus Eight: 'My Family Can't Be Canceled,'" People, September 19, 2011.


Source Citation

Document URL
http://electra.lmu.edu:2089/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?failOverType=&query=&prodId=OVIC>windowstate=normal&contentModules=&mode=view&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&limiter=&currPage=&amp;disableHighlighting=false&displayGroups=&sortBy=&source=&search_within_results=&zid=&action=e&catId=&activityType=&scanId=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010307244&userGroupName=loym48904&jsid=daf39c3b74e36e565be3caf93e19834

Gale Document Number: GALE|EJ3010307244