MATERNAL REPRESENTATION IN REALITY TELEVISION: CRITIQUING NEW MOMISM IN TLC’S HERE COMES HONEY BOO BOO AND JON & KATE PLUS 8

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the ways that TLC’s reality programs, specifically Here Comes Honey Boo Boo and Jon and Kate Plus Eight, serve as hegemonic systems for the perpetuation of what Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels call “new momism.” As these authors demonstrate in The Mommy Myth, the media have served as a powerful hegemonic force in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries for the construction of this dominating ideology of proper motherhood which undermines the social victories of feminism. Expanding upon Douglas’ and Michaels’ analysis of national constructions of motherhood, I explore the role of reality television, a relatively new cultural medium, within the historical tradition of hegemonic institutions. My research examines representations of motherhood specifically within reality programs which document a family’s day-to-day life, differing from other types of reality shows because they take place within the private sphere of the home. These programs market performances of motherhood that invite viewers, specifically those who are mothers themselves, to construct their own identities in opposition to “transgressive” mothers and in awe of “ideal” mothers, thereby reaffirming the oppressive and unreasonable expectations of twenty-first century motherhood.
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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A History of Hegemonic Institutions</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Momism</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality Television</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon &amp; Kate Plus 8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Here Comes Honey Boo Boo</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies of Representation</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern-ness as Otherness</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contradictory Values: Excess and Restraint</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and Nutrition: Controlling Consumption</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-Control Orifices</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority and Discipline</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleanliness as Class Value</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising Productive, Middle-Class Citizens</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproducing Ideology</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resisting Ideology</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

If you were to flip through the channels of your television right now, chances are you would come across several different reality programs. On E!s *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, the wealthy lifestyle of the Kardashian-Jenner family is revealed for all to gaze at in wonder, on A&E’s *Duck Dynasty* viewers get a glimpse into a Louisiana family’s successful duck-hunting business, and on The CW women from all over the country compete for modeling fame in *America’s Next Top Model*. At any given moment, our national airspace is swarmed by passing images from this popular genre, which has steadily increased its footprint and influence since its rollout from the late twentieth century into the twenty-first. Scholars, too, have been fascinated by reality television, examining by and large the history of its development, claims to reality, and viewer responses. Largely untouched by this scholarship, however, is the effect of this relatively novel programming on women and, more specifically, mothers. The explosion of reality programming onto the television scene has resulted in an ever-expanding variety of available programs, from competition and makeover shows to documentary-style programs that give viewers access to other people’s private lives and spaces. Some networks, such as TLC, have converted almost entirely to a style of reality programming which regularly places its emphases on family life and the domestic through documentation of day-to-day activities. This project explores two examples of this type of reality television, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Jon & Kate Plus 8*, which both feature mothers as integral characters and the subject of motherhood as central to the programs’ interests.

Given that the viewership of reality programming, especially for this particular channel, is overwhelmingly female, conversations about the network’s programming and subsequent effects on women’s lives and minds is long overdue. Television exists within a large and
complex history of cultural forms that shape our national ideologies, not the least of which is motherhood, which has undergone a dramatic shift since the twentieth century. Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, in their book *The Mommy Myth*, trace this shift as a post-feminist regression toward intensive mothering, a regression they argue has been spearheaded and supported by the media. Reality television, then, poses a unique addition to this conversation because it allows viewers a kind of seemingly unmediated experience that affects the reception of its promulgated ideology. While today’s scholarship about the circulation of ideology focuses largely on visual media, hegemonic institutions are a historically prevalent phenomena; the study of these institutions and their effects is useful in understanding the ways in which reality television both fits into and diverges from that genealogy within the twenty-first century.

**A History of Hegemonic Institutions**

For instance, in “The Exhibitionary Complex,” scholar Tony Bennett develops upon Foucault’s theories of power and knowledge to identify and address the ideological functions of institutions such as museums and exhibitions which, he argues, “served as linked sites for the development and circulation of new disciplines (history, biology, art history, anthropology) and their discursive formations (the past, evolution, aesthetics, man) as well as for the development of new technologies of vision” (123). Adapting also the work of scholar Douglas Crimp, who identifies museums and such institutions as “institutions of confinement,” Bennett argues that while these are certainly ripe for analysis of power and knowledge, it is because of their characteristics of display and spectacle, rather than confinement: “Museums may have enclosed objects within walls, but the nineteenth century saw their doors opened to the general public—witnesses whose presence was just as essential to a display of power as had been that of the people before the spectacle of punishment in the eighteenth century” (123). It is these
institutions of “exhibition,” then, that Bennett argues are best studied in contrast to Foucault’s analysis of objects and bodies in “Discipline and Punish.” Bennett identifies museums and exhibitions as new technologies which

...were involved in the transfer of objects and bodies from the enclosed and private domains in which they had previously been displayed (but to a restricted public) into progressively more open and public arenas where, through the representations to which they were subjected, they formed vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting messages of power (but of a different type) throughout society. (124)

Unlike the carcerey systems which Foucault describes as moving out of the public sphere and into the private, these exhibitionary institutions evolved in an opposite manner, and it is this transition from private to public sphere which Bennett argues functioned to establish a self-sustaining system of power.

To demonstrate this, Bennett turns to The Great Exhibition of 1851. Famously held in Hyde Park, London, the exhibition served as a grand display and celebration of the world’s newest advances, across multiple disciplines, in industrialization and cultural progress. Here, all of the most groundbreaking specimens of human achievement were brought to one location so that the public could experience the world and its wonders all at once. For a small fee, the entire globe moved within reach—the glorious inventions and discoveries and, as became more and more popular with time, the exotic people and cultures of other, previously inaccessible, spaces and times. These exhibitions were marketed as unrivaled cultural and educational experiences, which “taught the history of human culture by means of models of habitation and working
scenes” and “would illustrate the steps of progress of civilization and its art in successive centuries, and in all lands up to the present time” (Hinsley 346).

Bringing all these demonstrations of advancement to one place, Bennett argues, “translated these into exhibitionary forms which, in simultaneously ordering objects for public inspection and ordering the public that inspected, were to have a profound and lasting influence on the subsequent development of museums, art galleries, expositions, and department stores” (124). Like the systems described by Foucault, the exhibitionary complex was concerned with bringing order to society. It, however, worked differently in seeking to transform that problem into one of culture—a question of winning hearts and minds as well as the disciplining and training of bodies (126). Rather than simply “mapping” society so that power would see and know it, the exhibitionary complex worked to tangibly organize bodies for display so that people would “become the subjects rather than the objects of knowledge” (126). Additionally, this was a system which “sought also to allow the people to know and thence to regulate themselves; to become, in seeing themselves from the side of power, both the subjects and the objects of knowledge, knowing power and what power knows, and knowing themselves as (ideally) known by power, interiorizing its gaze as a principle of self surveillance and, hence, self-regulation” (Bennett 126). By putting objects and bodies on display, the exhibitionary complex allowed for audiences to see themselves as powerful in their ability to gaze upon those being exhibited. At the same time, however, these audiences themselves were aware that they, too, were being watched by both the bodies on display and by the other members of the audience. As Bennett describes it,

[M]useums and department stores… like many of the main exhibition halls of expositions, frequently contained galleries affording a superior vantage point from
which the layout of the whole and the activities of other visitors could also be observed. It was however, the expositions which developed this characteristic furthest in constructing viewing positions from which they could be surveyed as totalities: the function of the Eiffel Tower at the 1889 Paris exposition, for example. (133)

By creating a space that always allowed for the exchange of position from subject to object, these expositions resulted in a self-monitoring public, one which would “commune with and regulate itself through interiorizing the ideal and ordered view of itself as seen from the controlling vision of power—a site of sight accessible to all” (133). Audience members, having seen what other people look like to them from the position of power, then regulated and ordered themselves based on this knowledge of how others would perceive them when the vantage point had shifted.

Everything composing the exhibitionary effect leads, according to Bennett, to a hegemonicindoctrination of bourgeois ideals upon society:

The significance of the formation of the exhibitionary complex, viewed in this perspective, was that of providing new instruments for the moral and cultural regulation of the working classes. Museums and expositions, in drawing on the techniques and rhetorics of display and pedagogic relations developed in earlier nineteenth-century exhibitionary forms, provided a context in which the working- and middle-class publics could be brought together and the former—having been tutored into forms of behavior to suit them for the occasion—could be exposed to the improving influence of the latter. (137)
Expositions served, and continue to serve, as manipulators of culture and reinforcers of dominant ideology, as strategic articulations of power and knowledge. These types of institutions of exhibition still exist today and continue to play an important role in society and its perspective of the past and of our present reality. To Bennett’s list of institutions which includes history and natural science museums, dioramas, panoramas, national and international exhibits, arcades and department stores, I would like to add that additional institution of exhibition that took over popular culture in the twenty-first century: reality television (123).

Like Bennett’s nineteenth and twentieth century technologies of vision, television is a highly influential cultural medium which has moved the entire globe within reach through its depictions of other places and cultures. The ideological narratives circulated through this technology are accessible to anyone who owns a television, granting viewers access to hundreds of different “worlds,” all at the click of a button on the remote. Building on Gramsci’s theories of hegemony, Todd Gitlin explores the hegemonic functions of television in the twentieth century, arguing that television has become a routine and largely unnoticed cultural site which “relays and reproduces and processes and packages and focuses ideology that is constantly arising both from social elites and from active social groups and movements throughout the society (as well as within media organizations and practices)” (253). Television, by displaying and organizing bodies and culture for public consumption, regulates its viewers; as they watch others, they become self-aware and control themselves in accordance with the ideological principles espoused. As Gitlin explains: “[C]ultural hegemony operates within a whole social life-pattern; the people who consume mass-mediated products are also the people who work, reside, compete, go to school, live in families” (253). Though the bodies and places depicted within exhibitionary spaces are not necessarily real or accurately portrayed, the audiences consuming these spectacles
are real and live real lives. Their interactions within this cultural space have real-life implications, so that their judgments of what occurs on the screen translate directly into how they live their everyday lives; this is where the power of the exhibitionary effect lies.

**New Momism**

This is the theory echoed by Douglas and Michaels in *The Mommy Myth*, which also explores the role of the media in the construction and continuation of national ideologies but focuses specifically on its influence upon cultural definitions of motherhood. According to Douglas and Michaels, the media circulates the ideology of “new momism”:

[T]he insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children. The new momism is a highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet. … The ‘new momism’ is a set of ideals, norms, and practices, most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach. (4-5)

Douglas’ and Michaels’ “new momism” is a late twentieth century term for what Sharon Hays, in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, identifies as “intensive mothering” which is the culturally accepted model of motherhood as “a gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children” (x).
Hays analysis challenges what continue to be contemporary assumptions about motherhood, discrediting the idea that our nation’s current standards are “natural” to women or shared across national and cultural boundaries. Instead, she argues that these, as well as the supposed “requirements” of children, are socially fabricated ideas which place impossible and contradictory demands upon women:

Studies have made clear … that the requirements of children do not ‘naturally’ lead parents to approach child rearing in any particular way. And, beyond these minimal requirements, the methods of child rearing that will best serve the needs of children are also ambiguous. Although some would argue that current methods of child rearing are the right methods or the most effective methods for preparing children for contemporary society, others would disagree. (14)

In a survey of the history of cultural expectations of motherhood, Hays demonstrates how these ideals transformed over the centuries, giving shape to the model of intensive mothering. She argues that this model has three defining characteristics: that children are “innocent and priceless,” that mothers should serve as primary caretakers, and that children’s needs should be the guiding force behind a mother’s decisions based upon “methods that are informed by experts, labor-intensive, and costly” (21).

Integral to this analysis is Hays’ assertion that the ideology of intensive mothering is middle-class. She explains, “Working-class, poor, professional class, and affluent mothers alike nearly all believe that child-rearing is appropriately child-centered and emotionally absorbing…[But] it is middle- and upper-middle class mothers who are the most likely to take the labor-intensive tenet of intensive mothering to the extreme” (115). Her analysis demonstrates
that this cultural construction of motherhood is specific to class as well as to gender and culture. Its ideology ignores and often out rightly rejects performances of motherhood inherent to other classes and cultures, disseminating dangerously specific and exclusive expectations for women regarding their relationships with their children.

Intensive mothering, as Douglas and Michaels explain, reappeared on the scene and was quickly adopted by the media around the 1980s, a time when our nation was particularly obsessed with working and self-improvement (Douglas and Michaels 5). New demands for women to be working outside of the home ironically only increased expectations of them within it, and the media solidified these expectations within the consciousness of our nation. As they describe it, “Women have been deluged by an ever-thickening mudslide of maternal media advice, programming, and marketing that powerfully shapes how we mothers feel about our relationships with our own kids and, indeed, how we feel about ourselves” (6-7). The media have been a powerful ideological force in the construction and maintenance of the new momism: both through those positive portrayals of perfect, obsessed, doting mothers and those negative depictions of mothers who don’t fit into this image.

Douglas’ and Michaels’ new momism explores representations of intensive mothering in the media, examining the ways in which “images of motherhood in TV shows, movies, advertising, women’s magazines, and the news have evolved since 1970, raising the bar, year by year, of the standards of good motherhood while singling out and condemning those we were supposed to see as dreadful mothers” (14). This condemnation of “dreadful” mothers and its parallel exaltation of images of ideal, though impossible, motherhood, implies that there is a normative standard of motherhood to which all mothers must abide, and consequentially “[divides] us by age and race and ‘lifestyle choices,’ and seeks to tame us all by reinforcing one
narrow, homogenized, upper-middle-class, corporately defined image of motherhood” (22).

New momism, being such an invasive ideology, has entered into all types of media representation including reality television.

**Reality Television**

Reality television began as an inexpensive solution in a time of economic crisis; due to new television distribution, decreased spending in advertising, and shifting viewership, networks found themselves needing a way to increase audience while decreasing production costs, and reality television provided the answer (Skeggs and Wood, “Reacting” 22). This new style of programming provided great entertainment for little cost, which led more and more networks to add reality programs to their lineups between the more expensive programming of dramas and sitcoms which required elaborate sets and generously paid actors. The genre soon gave way to concerns, however, “that the spread of ‘factual entertainment’ is driving out the space for traditional documentary output” (Skeggs and Wood, “Reacting” 22). Because documentaries were traditionally viewed as informational and educational, rather than entertaining, reality television began to “represent not just the restyling, but rather for some, the bastardizing denigration of the documentary form” (Skeggs and Wood, “Reacting” 22).

Scholars have linked this understanding of reality television as a “low” genre of television to the melodrama of eighteenth-century fiction which emphasized the “feminine” concerns of the domestic experience. Both genres ask questions about the nature of ‘reality’ and its representation and, in both cases, audiences largely understand the constructed nature of this claim to realism: “Audiences recognize that the jungle-setting and dangerous tasks assigned to *Survivor* contestants are not “realistic”…And yet all accept that what happens in these shows
really is real on some level. In other words, audiences acknowledge the shows’ artifices, but believe that their content reveals moments of intimate truth about real people” (Johnston 118).

Adding to this sense of authenticity is the ability for audiences to “get inside” the minds of characters. In fiction, authors would incorporate letters and diaries to add to the authenticity of the story. Reality television, thanks to the digital age, allows viewers to directly contact and engage with the contestants and participants on their favorite shows through email and social media: “[A] claim to historicity depends on our ability to empathize with the characters’ actions and motivations, and we can do so by identifying with the emotions they express…[B]ecause the diary entries of Jen Scheft of The Bachelor and The Bachelorette fame seem to evidence a compelling psychic struggle, moreover, because we see her crying on the show, we willingly suspend our disbelief. We agree to identify with her” (Johnston 119). Often characters will post to a page and/or directly respond to viewer thoughts and questions with “behind-the-scenes” information and impressions.

The “feminine” qualities of reality television both influence and include its appeal to women, making it an especially important genre to examine in its relationship to female viewership and influence. These reality programs are “the latest and most self-conscious in a string of transparently staged spectacles,” which simultaneously publicize the private and privatize the public spectacle; as the private sphere is made publicly available, it moves the public spectacle into the privacy of the home (Andrejevic 3). In the twentieth century, representations of women were undeniably fictionalized; they were written into a script upon which actors then agreed or disagreed to work. In the twenty-first century, however, reality television provides what are seemingly more “real” representations because there is no script and the characters are not professional actors. This seemingly unmediated access to other people’s
lives provides viewers with the sense that “‘everyone can have their own TV show’—
or at least a distant chance of becoming a star on one of the dozens of reality formats”
(Andrejevic 2). The feeling of being watched that comes from the idea of “it could be me,”
combined with the awareness of regularly watching the private lives of others, contributes to the
self-regulation described by Bennett’s exhibitionary complex.

Much scholarship on reality television exists, but so little of it examines day-to-day life
programming and even less studies the effect of these programs on women. TLC is an especially
important network, because its programming consists almost exclusively of reality shows about
domestic concerns and women dominate the viewership. Women are watching other women;
because of this, it is necessary to both examine how those women are being represented by
reality television and what those representations tell us about the ideologies being circulated by
the media in our society. Though her analysis does not address this particular format of reality
programming, Fiona Joy Green is one of the few scholars who directly addresses the issues of
motherhood in reality television. Green draws from Douglas’ and Michaels’ analysis of the new
momism to argue that: “Together, new momism and mommy wars idealize and support a
discourse of motherhood that sets mothers up to fail by encouraging them to compare themselves
to and compete with each other and to judge themselves and others as “good” or “bad” mothers”
(74). Although the standards of the new momism are impossibly idealistic, the media still
continues to propagate these narratives and reality TV serves as an especially convincing genre
because of its purported realism. If the perfect mothers on these programs are real, then anyone
should be able to achieve this kind of motherhood and, in fact, must be expected to.

As Green argues, “This so-called new and improved version of motherhood relies on
fear, fantasy, and marketing by the media: ‘the rules of play for the new momism are spelled out
in media messages that invite mothers to compare their flawed human lives to unrealistic and unattainable ideals of motherhood” (73). Although the majority of these media representations of mothers could be said to be overly idealistic, the opposite happens as well but to the same end. Reality television provides spectacles of “bad” motherhood as well as good. By showcasing scenarios that provoke feelings of shock and disgust in the audience toward the actions and behaviors of the spectacle taking place on their television, reality programs deepen the self-other binary of motherhood that is propagated by the media. These negative representations of motherhood invite mothers who are tuning in to react with a sense of disgust and difference; because the feeling of repugnance is so strong, there is an immediate desire to contrast oneself from that which elicits the emotion. The audience may reflexively reject that behavior for its ostensibly uncivilized, low-class qualities in favor of an alternative narrative which, in this case, is the new momism. Gitlin’s analysis of televisual hegemony, written in the eighties, does not address what would later become an especially pervasive and influential genre of television, but his examination is fitting for the type of ideological role this programming plays within the twenty-first century.

Through its representations of motherhood, TLC’s *Jon & Kate Plus 8* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, amongst other shows in the network’s lineup, establish specific standards for appropriate motherhood, reflecting the type of hegemonic work described by Gitlin, Douglas and Michaels, and Green. *Jon & Kate Plus 8* follows the lives of Jon and Kate Gosselin, who have a set of twins and a set of sextuplets. Mother of eight, Kate is portrayed as the perfect picture of motherhood. She is responsible, focused, and organized and runs her household like a well-oiled machine. Despite the challenges of raising eight children and the inevitable chaos that sometimes ensues, Kate handles every situation quickly and efficiently, and serves as a positive role model
for all mothers to emulate. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, on the other hand, is almost the complete opposite. Although the program also follows the lives of an American family, it depicts the matriarch, June Shannon, as the antithesis of proper, effective motherhood. June’s life is depicted as excessive and chaotic; the program focuses on her obesity, her loud, brash personality, and the family’s “red-neck” lifestyle and behaviors. Unlike Kate, June appears to have little control over her household and children, who are often seen behaving without manners or respect. These reality programs, by portraying specific behaviors and practices positively or negatively, promote to viewers particular understandings of motherhood.

This is not to say, however, that viewers *necessarily* respond to these televised messages in one uniform, accepting manner. Viewers are often active and critical spectators, engaging with texts on multiple levels. It is important to recognize, then, that regardless of what ideals are endorsed, these spectators still maintain some level of control over their own interpretation and response. Andrea L. Press, a scholar who is influenced by and worked directly with Gitlin, demonstrates this in her analysis of women’s responses to the hegemonic influence of television. Though she, like Gitlin, argues that television is a significant force in the formation of our national consciousness, Press makes a point that where there is viewer accommodation of hegemony there is also always viewer resistance, and that the two come into play for different types of women and at different times in their lives (168). As she argues: “[I]ndividuals and groups of individuals receive media actively [and] to receive television involves the active interpretations of its images and their meaning. Viewers bring their own perspectives, often critical ones, to the viewing experience” (173). Hegemony theory, then, is not cut-and-dry; as much as it is a theory about media control, it is also a theory of “human action… highlight[ing] the role of thoughts, beliefs, and practices of human actors in the process of social change”
(Press 173). Viewers respond to media hegemony in various ways that expose, complicate, and even challenge the promoted ideologies.

Before examining actual examples of these responses, however, I think it important to critically examine the practices through which *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Jon & Kate Plus 8* frame motherhood and to what ideological end. Although these programs are based upon “reality,” the subject matter and representation of every episode are carefully chosen and crafted for specific reasons. Through these processes, these two programs establish a portrait of proper twenty-first century motherhood which demands adherence to specifically white, middle-class constructions.

**Jon & Kate Plus 8**

*Jon & Kate Plus 8* was one of TLC’s longest-running reality series which, even after its cancellation, is still remembered as one of their most popular programs. First airing in April of 2007 and ending five seasons later in September of 2011, the show followed the lives of Jon and Kate Gosselin and their eight children, consisting of one set of twins and one set of sextuplets. As the show’s opening theme reveals, Jon and Kate were not initially able to get pregnant, so they turned to fertility treatments and gave birth to their twins, Cara and Mady. Then, when they decided they wanted to increase their family by one more, the same process unexpectedly resulted in the sextuplets, Alexis, Hannah, Aaden, Colin, Leah, and Joel. The program documents the family’s life, both the joys and the struggles, through omnipresent camera footage interspersed by interview sessions with Jon and Kate and/or their children which give insight to behind-the-scenes information, emotions, and perspectives.
While the adorable children are featured as the draw of this programming, the majority of the show’s focus is placed on Kate and how she manages the seemingly impossible task of running a household of ten people. Kate Gosselin appears to be in complete control as a mother, and the show’s episodes often center on the ways that Kate maintains the family’s loving, productive, organized, and efficient lifestyle. She is the quintessential adherent and purveyor of Douglas and Michael’s new momism which, as evidenced by this tongue-in-cheek description, insists that mothers’ worlds revolve around their children and giving them the “best” of everything:

Now, if you were a “good” mom, you’d joyfully empty your shopping bags and transform the process of putting the groceries away into a fun game your kids love to play (upbeat Raffi songs would provide a lilting soundtrack). Then, while you steamed the broccoli and poached the chicken breasts in Vouvrya and Evian water, you and the kids would also be doing jigsaw puzzles in the shape of the United Arab Emirates so they learned some geography…The children, chattering away happily, help set the table, and then eat their broccoli. After dinner, you all go out and stencil the driveway with autumn leaves. (1-2)

What is ironic about this description of what Douglas and Michaels are clearly identifying as unattainable and absurd standards of motherhood is how accurately it actually describes the day-to-day life of the Gosselin family. Certainly, there are days when all of the toddlers are crying, Mady is throwing a tantrum, and Kate, frustrated and exhausted, starts yelling at her husband for help. Amazingly, however, Kate always handles the situation quickly and efficiently; she knows what to do to in every crisis and, by the end of the episode, has the family back on schedule again. This emphasis on Kate’s motherhood is introduced to us in the series theme, which in
between footage of the children, depicts Kate’s enormous pregnant belly, shots of her corralling all eight children, and includes a voice-over of Kate explaining that she gave up her job as a nurse to stay home full-time with her kids.

**Here Comes Honey Boo Boo**

Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, one of TLC’s newest programs, documents the lives of Alana Thompson, a six year old beauty queen, and her Southern family. Fondly referred to by her family and fans as “Honey Boo Boo Child,” Alana Thompson lives with her family of six that includes her mom, June (“Mama”), her dad, Mike (“Sugar Bear”), and her three sisters, Lauren (“Pumpkin”), Anna (“Chickadee”), and Jessica (“Chubbs”). The first season of the show follows the Thompson family during their summer vacation, as Alana prepares for her pageants and the family gets ready for the birth of Anna’s baby and tries to find ways to have fun and keep cool in the Georgia heat. In the second season, the family prepares for a commitment ceremony for Mama and Sugar Bear, who have finally decided to take another step in their relationship.

The manner in which TLC portrays this family focuses on qualities that depict them, and consequently other Southerners, as strange and backward. The program’s opening in the first season sets the tone with a short clip of banjo music while the family poses as though for a pleasant, simple family snapshot—until June lets out a loud fart and the family erupts into an argument over the disturbance. The theme in the second season is almost the same, except that the fart is blamed on Sugar Bear instead of Mama. The “theme” of this show established in this opening, every episode of Honey Boo Boo focuses on the aspects of difference, mainly their poverty, obesity, and complicated family situations that make for entertaining television.
Although not the program’s title character, June Shannon is the show’s real star since she is clearly the person who is running this household. The *Honey Boo Boo* matriarch is the object of the cameras’ scrutiny throughout both seasons; more specifically, June’s practices and decisions as a mother feature prominently both in the show and its critical reception. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is, after all, a spin-off of another TLC program called *Toddlers and Tiaras*, which follows the experiences of the families of child pageant contestants from around the country. June became infamous when her episode of the show debuted because of the “go-go juice,” a mix of Mountain Dew and Red Bull, which she would give to Alana before a performance to get her hyped up. Both June and *Toddlers and Tiaras* came under fire from mothers across the country, who took to the internet to protest her neglectful parenting.

For example, mom Julie Ryan Evans wrote an article entitled, “‘Go-Go Juice' Pushing Pageant Mom Should Go Straight to Jail” in which she angrily criticizes June for pumping her young daughter full of caffeine. She responds to June’s defensive statement, “There are far worse things, I could be giving her alcohol” by writing:

> Um, yes you could, if you want to go to JAIL. And I wish she could go to jail for this too. While both are legal substances, the way in which she's using them and the intent -- just to win a freaking crown -- are criminal. Weed killer is legal too, but not if you pour it down your kid's throat. And the substances aren't harmless. Beyond the obvious threats like obesity and poor nutrition, ABC points to experts who say too much caffeine and sugar can lead to neurological and cardiovascular problems as well as physical dependence and addiction. … It's child abuse plain and simple as far I'm concerned -- to knowingly put your child's health in danger so blatantly for what are selfish reasons. No, we can't arrest every parent who
gives their child junk food -- nor should we -- but when it comes to something this flagrant and outrageous, I think at least an investigation is needed. (Evans)

Clearly, the reactions to June’s parenting decisions have been strong even since before Alana had her own show.

Although no one actually denies that June loves and cares about her children, her portrayal on *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is problematic in that the show emphasizes her negative qualities at least as much as, if not more, than her positive ones. She is portrayed as a loud, crude, and fat woman and her parenting skills are frequently critiqued by the cameras as we watch her lose control of her household, feed her family unhealthy food, and model “improper” behavior. June is often shown often making sexual comments and gestures in front of her children, When the phone rings, June yells out “Booty call!” and, during the Redneck Games for instance, the camera zooms in on June grinding on a random man in an overtly sexual manner (“This Is My Crazy Family”). Based on the show’s depiction, June’s entire history with men is outside the realm of normative relationship structures. All of her children have different fathers and she has no desire to marry Sugar Bear, even though they have been living together for nine years and have a child (a problem that is “corrected” in the second season by her agreeing to a commitment ceremony). In fact, June is depicted as behaving in every way contrary to our twenty-first century notions of proper motherhood. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* portrays June’s motherhood as deviant, thereby reinforcing the normative ideology of the new momism through its condemnation of styles of motherhood outside the prevailing narrative.
Strategies of Representation

Southern-ness as Otherness

Perhaps the most significant way that TLC contrasts this family from that of the dominant culture is through its focus on and depiction of their Southern background, lifestyle, and accent. The focus on “redneck” culture is part of a recurring trope in the series which based on audience reactions, generates strong feelings of disgust in the show’s viewers. As one reviewer chronicles, TLC’s Facebook wall contains strong negative reactions from viewers who respond with comments such as: “TLC you have reached a new low. I Just [sic] put TLC on parental control. Don’t want my children watching the REPULSIVE TRASH that you call a “new show”. Shame on you for airing a show like HONEY BOO BOO. It’s Disgusting!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” and, “I must say I am really appauld [sic] by this Honey Boo Boo show. This show definitely needs to be off the air. You will find more people who do not like this show, than you will find that actually like it. The children are really going to need therapy from here on out as well. This family is very disgusting and not well mannered at all” (Kurp). There are countless instances in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* of extreme scenarios and quotes which highlight the repulsiveness of these individuals, a practice which, at times, seems to be the main point that TLC seeks to convey.

Throughout both seasons, almost every word spoken by the characters is accompanied by subtitles across the bottom of the television screen, as though these people were speaking a different language that its audience wouldn’t be able to understand. These self-dubbed “rednecks” are depicted as such in the very first episode, when they participate in the annual “Redneck Games” which June describes as “a lot like the Olympics but with a lot of missing
teeth and butt cracks showing” (“This Is My Crazy Family”). The camera zooms in multiple times on the confederate flags that decorate the venue and the family is shown belly-flopping into a large mud pit (at which point Alana exclaims, “I likes to get in the mud because I like to get dirty like a pig.”) and even bobbing for pigs’ feet. These activities, as well as others shown on the program (most of which include being covered in mud), construct the “redneck” identity of the Thompson family, an identity which is already quite marginalized in American society.

The term “redneck” is one that distinguishes a specific kind of “whiteness,” one which is cordoned off from the privileges inherent to traditional, middle-class whiteness. The use of this term in speaking about people from the South is significant in that it,

[Evidences] the forms of decorum or etiquette that whiteness depends upon for its hegemonic position and which is consistently threatened by the words, actions, bodies, and lifestyles of various strata of whites who reveal the tenuous and artificial nature of these social conventions by their inability to conform to the decorums of whiteness. (Hartigan 96-97)

Southern-ness is commonly regarded and portrayed as otherness by the upper classes and terms like “redneck” and “white trash” are utilized to associate people of low income with people of low “class”: “In each instance of these labelling practices, a normative status of whiteness is affirmed, one that is free of the blemish of poverty and protected from the ruptures of decorum that might undermine its hegemonic status” (Hartigan 110).

In stark contrast to the restrained, reserved, and organized bodies of the Gosselin family, the Here Comes Honey Boo Boo family celebrates the excess, the bodily, and the grotesque. Like Bakhtin’s description of the carnivalesque, the body in this text is raw, unedited, overflowing,
uncontrollable; it is a body “continually defying the strictures of bourgeoisie manners and mores and instead governed by its lower intestinal tract—a body threatening to erupt at any moment” (Kipnis 223). The “low class” values, or lack thereof, associated with “rednecks” inhabit the carnival space of “laughter, bad taste, loud and irreverent music, parody, free speech, bodily functions, eating and feasting, [where] excess is glorified” and, against this space, the dominant culture defines itself, labelling it as “other” in order to resist its threat of the “body [that] evades, resists, and outrages the dominant social order—mainly the Northern middle class” (Sweeney 254, 256). June and her family consistently resist and subvert bourgeois values, the values of new momism, through their revelry in the grotesqueness of the body and its most private functions. In Bakhtin’s carnival, the strict standards of propriety and ‘high’ culture of the bourgeoisie are overturned and the grotesque body is symbolic of the ‘low’ of society wherein “the transcoding between the body and the social sets up the aesthetic mechanisms through which the body is a privileged political trope of lower social classes, and through which bodily grossness operates as a critique of dominant ideology” (Kipnis 224).

Although the body and the grotesque are celebrated by this family and especially by June, who is remarkably self-aware and comfortable in her own non-normative skin, TLC represents their subversion of new momist, bourgeois values as negative transgression rather than as positive undermining of repressive norms. The power of the ‘low’ culture of the Honey Boo Boo family as entertainment lies in its obvious opposition to traditionally accepted standards of ‘proper’ behavior; they are funny and/or disgusting because their behavior flies in the face of all that is considered decent by the dominant class standards:

The power of grossness is predicated on its opposition from and to high discourses, themselves prophylactic against the debasements of the low (the lower
classes, vernacular discourses, low culture, shit…). And it is the dominant ideology itself that works to enforce and reproduce this opposition—whether in producing class differences, somatic symbols, or culture. (Kipnis 224-225)

In its strategic production practices, TLC reinforces this opposition of high and low culture, depicting the ‘low’ as improper, immoral, and repulsive in order to hegemonically promote bourgeois ideology.

Everything about this family is reminiscent of Bakhtinian carnival, and yet much of the program reads as more of a mockery of social transgressions rather than the celebration of freedom and renewal described in Rabelais and His World. The negative representation of June’s body and lifestyle assumes a particular kind of viewership that will be able to laugh along at her grotesque body and failed attempts at adopting certain bourgeois values, but this representation negates the differences of class and culture inherent within our television-watching society. Certainly, there are women watching who will identify with the camera-work and editing that depicts June’s habits as disgusting and improper; there are, however, other women, even women like June, who identify with this family’s lifestyle, beliefs, and values. The reduced and manipulated picture of the Honey Boo Boo family TLC provides portrays the “classical,” restrained and reformed body as inherent and expected, and refuses an acknowledgement of its construction, a construction which June consistently undermines and proves false, in spite of the program’s attempts to bias her portrayal.

Historically, feelings of disgust have been invoked to banish the grotesque from society as a means by which to construct a definition of ‘high’ culture:
The bourgeois subject has ‘continuously defined and redefined itself through the exclusion of what it marked out as low—as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating…[The] very act of exclusion was constitutive of its identity. So disgust has a long and complicated history, the context of within which should be placed the increasingly strong tendency of the bourgeois to want to remove the distasteful from the sight of society…These gestures of disgust are crucial in the production of the bourgeois body, now so rigidly split into higher and lower stratum that tears will become the only publicly permissible display of bodily fluid. (Kipnis 226)

Interestingly though, rather than conceal and suppress the grotesque in order to maintain the bourgeois ideology (as has historically been the case on television, which has lacked representations of lower classes and counter-cultures), with Here Comes Honey Boo Boo TLC has taken on the subversive grotesque and transformed it to fit its own hegemonic agenda. Because the “redneck” body threatens new momism, it must either be hidden from society or strategically incorporated:

If this White Trash Aesthetic threatens to intrude too far, the dominant culture must further marginalize: it must brand Elvis as just another drugged-out rock star destroyed by his own fame; it must censor Roseanne or discredit her as a kook, troublemaker, or feminist; or else it must incorporate the Trash discourse into its own and thereby quell that unruly voice by subsuming it. (Sweeney 261)

TLC chooses to incorporate it. That which had been relegated to the private sphere is made public, but in such a way as to expose the ‘low’ of our society in order to reinforce and support
the already established ‘high.’ On the one hand, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo appears to be an exceptionally progressive program: it features a lower-class family and provides a fairly novel platform for representation of Southerners and the South. On the other hand, however, June and her family’s counter-cultural lifestyle is mocked more than it is celebrated and admired. Bodily functions, excess, and chaos are mostly featured in ways that provoke discomfort with the televised transgression of bourgeois norms, rather than an admiration for the individuality and non-normativity of this family.

Contradictory Values: Excess and Restraint

Examined alongside Jon & Kate Plus Eight, these two programs represent a dichotomy of excess and control existent within media expositions of motherhood which pits the predominant values of the bourgeoisie (new momism) against those which would threaten the dominant culture, denouncing June’s obnoxious parenting style in favor of Kate’s order and restraint. This contrast of class and assumed class values is consistently highlighted by both programs. In Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, for instance, it is made clear even from the small house located directly next to a railroad in which the family lives that they are part of the working class. June is often shown cutting coupons to help save the family money and there are several instances where the program shows the family buying groceries at auctions and “shopping” in dumpsters for clothing and other necessities. In Jon & Kate Plus Eight, the Gosselin family is also represented as struggling financially but in a markedly different way.

Throughout the series Kate shares with viewers additional ways, since giving up her career, that she continues to make sacrifices for her family. For instance, in the third season, an entire episode is dedicated to Kate’s wardrobe makeover. Prior to this episode, Kate is almost
exclusively seen without makeup, her hair disheveled, wearing sweat pants and frumpy clothing, even when leaving the house. Jon explains to the cameras that Kate needs new clothes and that the only way to get her to buy nice things for herself is for him to take her on a shopping trip himself and help her to pick out a new winter wardrobe. When he says in the interview—“After dinner we planned to go shopping together for new clothes for the both of us, mainly for Kate to get her a new wardrobe for the winter”—Kate quickly interjects and adds, “-and for the next five years” (“Kate’s Wardrobe Makeover”). According to Kate, this is a luxury far outside her comfort zone since, as she explains, she has been putting her own needs aside since the birth of the sextuplets: "Ever since the little kids were born, there was no option of going shopping. There was no option of me having the choice to go shopping and buy myself outfits. I am always more willing to shunt that money toward something that the kids need or, you know, in a different way, will get us what we need as a family" (“Kate’s Wardrobe Makeover”) The camera follows Kate around the store during their shopping trip as she aimlessly wanders around, outside her element and completely unsure of how or what to buy for herself. As she puts it, “I know I don't really have taste. I desire to have that but that's not a strength of mine” (“Kate’s Wardrobe Makeover”). While she is explaining her lack of fashion sense, the scene switches to footage showing Kate’s everyday attire of sweats and even a bathrobe that she often spends most of the day wearing while she is at home.

Kate’s outdated wardrobe is not the only consequence of the financial challenges faced by this family of ten; viewers are also shown that Kate has to adhere to a strict weekly budget so that the family can survive on Jon’s mediocre IT analyst salary. Super-mom Kate Gosselin takes the time every week to meticulously gather and organize coupons and rain checks for groceries, and manages to feed the whole family for an average of $150 a month. Although both Kate and
June use coupons to cut back on their families’ expenses, Kate’s couponing is portrayed much more positively than June’s. As with everything else, June’s experience with the money saving technique is portrayed as excessive and inappropriate: she purchases too much of everything and the foods she buys are unhealthful. The camera’s gaze often frames June’s “stockpile” in the background, depicting the abundance of shelf-stable foods (i.e. not fresh), toilet paper, toiletries, and home goods she has amassed, piled onto a series of shelves by which her kitchen is lined. June looks like a hoarder while Kate looks like a domestic hero.

The season one episode “Shopping for 10” follows an average shopping-day for Kate, from taking care of the kids and planning her trip all the way to the actual grocery store and back home in time for the kids to wake up from their nap. As Kate explains, when she needs to go grocery shopping she has exactly two hours from the time she leaves the house to the time she gets back to get all of her shopping done for an entire week. As she prepares for her trip, a timer appears on the bottom of the screen, ticking away at the two hour limit, emphasizing not only the short amount of time she has to accomplish an impossible task, but how efficiently and accurately Kate adheres to the schedule she has developed for herself. As the camera follows Kate around the store, viewers can see that she is picking up fresh fruits and vegetables, and even get a close up of the organic brand of milk she is purchasing with rain checks. Not only does Kate feed her family on a budget, but she does it while also selecting nutritious and organic foods. She explains to viewers, "I don't settle for feeding them whatever is cheapest. I believe in feeding them healthy, organic as much as possible, and just nutritional" (“Shopping for 10”).

Kate is committed to feeding her children according to the absolute strictest of standards, and the episode sends the message to viewers that anyone can do the same: "You know, people think big families, you have to live on the cheap bread and pastas and things that are dirt cheap. But I think
I'm excited to say that that doesn't have to happen” (“Shopping for 10”). Kate’s shopping trip demonstrates to viewers that it is possible to shop for healthy, organic food for a family of ten with $150 dollars and only two hours of free time. When Kate finishes filling her two carts with the week’s groceries, she heads home to unpack and put things away and is shown entering the kids’ room to wake them up from their nap just as the timer counts down to the last second of her two-hour time limit.

**Food and Nutrition: Controlling Consumption**

Even while adhering to a shockingly demanding schedule, Kate manages to use coupons and strategic shopping to save money without sacrificing quality and nutrition. In both of these programs, nutrition and the state of bodies are depicted as integral to proper motherhood and June, of course, fails on both counts. Food plays an important role in this; there is an emphasis on eating which ties into the family’s obesity problem, both of which represent this family’s excessive habits of consumption. Contrary to bourgeois ideology which places value upon work and production, this family is depicted as one that only consumes and whose consumption results in overflowing, uncontrollable grotesque bodies. June does not regulate her family’s diet; as the person who cooks the food they all eat, June bears the responsibility for her children’s health and well-being. Yet, *Honey Boo Boo* repeatedly emphasizes the lack of nutrition and enormous portions which have presumably led to their struggles with obesity. The camera often zooms in to draw attention to the physical act of eating, as well as point out the absurd portions that this family consumes. The *Honey Boo Boo* family also touts their penchant for road kill, which they collect off the side of the road and cook (“I’m Sassified”). In the second season, there is an episode dedicated mostly to the family’s process of collecting, preparing, and cooking a huge hog from the side of the road as part of a family activity they call a “Hog Jowl” (“Mo’ Butter,
Mo’ Better”). Their other favorite meal, “sketti,” is a sauce made entirely of melted butter and ketchup which is poured over a bed of noodles (“Time for Sketti!”).

The girls are often seen seated on the couch eating cheese balls and candy, even though they are supposedly trying to lose weight. June defends this saying, “The girls weeks ago decided they want to lose weight for the commitment ceremony. But they haven’t lost anything yet. But the reason why they don’t lose weight is because they want to eat a bunch of junk food but they’re kids” (“Big Girls Wear Lace-Ups”). June goes on a bit of a rant about how she tries to feed her family healthy food saying,

I mean, you know, I’ve lost a bunch of weight so I was hoping that I would lead by example. We don’t eat a lot of fried food. We like baked chicken and baked pork chops and, you know, baked food and everything. At restaurants they use too much, like, oil and butter, and stuff like that. So, if you cook at home you’re able to control that. Our family is predominately big-boned. It’s just in our gene. (“Big Girls Wear Lace-Ups”)

As June is speaking, the camera shots contradict everything that she says. While she speaks about their not eating fried foods, the camera zooms in on her squeezing Velveeta cheese out of a pouch and into a pot. Although Velveeta isn’t fried, processed cheese from a pouch is obviously not healthful. Then, while June is speaking about how much butter and oil restaurants use in their cooking, the footage displays her dropping one spoonful of butter after another onto a pan of chicken, right before she explains that her family is more “big-boned” than actually fat. When the food she has been cooking during this segment is finished, Anna asks June, “So, how healthy is this food you’re cooking, Mama?” to which June replies, “Um, pretty much all the levels the
food pyramid. So it’s as healthy as you’re gonna get for the day.” Anna then asks, “Mama, what’d you cook that’s green?” and June replies, coolly, “Nothing.” The camera then switches to an interview shot of Alana saying to the cameras, “Last time I ate a salad was never” (“Big Girls Wear Lace-Ups”).

Committed to helping her daughters lose weight however, June later tries out a recipe for cabbage soup. As she is chopping up the ingredients she says to herself, “This is the most vegetables I’ve had in my house at one time, anyway” and the camera focuses on not being able to chop an onion properly as it splays out underneath her knife. June clearly is unaccustomed to cooking with vegetables and she hates to eat them; she says, “If I got to eat this, I better lose 50 pounds instantly ‘cause I don’t eat these damn things” and (referring to the celery she is adding to the pot), “These don’t even taste good when they come with chicken wings, peanut butter, or whatever else you wanna put on ‘em” (“Big Girls Wear Lace-Ups”). Speaking of their efforts to lose weight she says, “I mean we tried all different kinds of things for the girls to lose weight. We tried exercising which sucks, so we’re gonna try vegetables which is really gonna suck, but it gets your bowels moving.” Then, as she is stirring the soup on the stove, June is shown making gagging sounds over the smell of the vegetables which she says is like “wet gym shorts.” Everyone is disgusted by the idea of eating vegetable soup and Wild West showdown music plays in the background as the family prepares for the first dreaded taste. June takes a bite and then hurriedly leaves the table saying, “I’m ‘bout to puke. Oh my God, I’m ‘bout to puke for real.” The camera follows her as she walks into the bathroom and closes the door, and then remains fixed on the door while we listen to the sounds of June gagging and coughing over the toilet. June takes a “taste” of bourgeois values but is physically nauseated by them, since she and her family do not fit in to that narrative.
As in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, *Jon & Kate Plus 8* often focuses on the selection and consumption of food. Unlike the former, however, *Jon & Kate Plus 8* portrays the decisions Kate makes regarding sustenance only positively, and uses her as an example of how mothers ought to be feeding their families. Kate conspicuously takes responsibility for controlling her family’s consumption and actively seeks to rein-in their bodies and appetites, encouraging everyone to eat consciously and healthfully. In the second season, for example, the family takes a trip to go purchase half a cow from a local farm. They buy all of their beef in bulk from an organic farm, and make a yearly trip to pick up their meet as well as spend a day at the farm going on hayrides and visiting the animals. Kate explains why this is important to her saying, "we eat organically and, naturally then, we eat organic beef. And this is the second year that I have bought a quarter—or half of a cow, for this year, from Natural Acres. It's very important to us, we won’t eat any other meat just because its hormone free and antibiotic free, and I want to feed them the healthiest possible" ("A Cow Purchase"). Kate seems to get a lot of support for her decision to live organically from others on the show as well. In this episode, Farmer Ivan of Natural Acres shares with the Gosselins how glad he is that they feed their family only natural and organic foods and shares with viewers his stance on organic living saying, “I believe our health problem comes from two main things--toxicity and lack of nutrients. And so, organic is non-toxic with humans, and most of the time, it's also higher in nutrition” ("A Cow Purchase"). In a subsequent episode airing the same day, the Gosselins also receive acknowledgement and support of their organic lifestyle from Sara Snow, a personality from the Discovery Channel who is a purported expert in healthy living.

In a blending of two organic-living advocacy programs, Sara visits the Gosselins to teach Kate more about cooking organic meals and about ways that the family can continue to improve
upon the steps they’ve taken toward organic and eco-friendly living. Kate describes for viewers her family’s current stance on natural and organic living and how it lines up with the values expressed by Sara Snow on her own program:

Our family eats quite organically and it's important to us. About 80% or 90% of our food that we bring into the house is organic. We're almost as organic as we can become in eating and lately I've been thinking about, like, cleaning products, so she was gonna give me all of her wealth of knowledge on that because getting rid of the chemicals that we breathe and that are in our house is just another good step in the right direction. ("Sara Snow Visits!")

A strong supporter of the Gosselins and the lifestyle they represent, Sara affirms and praises Kate for this saying, “I was really excited to come here to the Gosselin's house because this woman not only raises a family of eight kids, but she also recycles, she buys organic food whenever possible, she buys local food whenever possible, and she's overcome a lot of the obstacles that a lot of people are still tripping on” ("Sara Snow Visits!"). For TLC viewers, Sara serves as a representative for the benefits of regulating one’s diet and maintaining a healthy, trim body. An “expert” in her field, Sara’s endorsement of Kate’s efforts reinforces both their appropriateness and feasibility.

During her visit, Sara introduces Kate to some new varieties of (organic) vegetables and shows her how to prepare a healthy stir fry dish. Then, the whole family sits at the kitchen table with Sara for dinner, and everyone in the family is shown enjoying the delicious and healthy meal. The children are all behaving well as they contentedly consume their vegetables and even eat the seaweed provided with their meal. For Kate, this is part of a consistent daily effort to give
her family the very best; as she puts it, “I want to build my kids' bodies strong and healthy so that they can hopefully have a healthier life, and that's important to us” (“Sara Snow Visits!”). Kate exercises the utmost control and vigilance over her family’s food consumption, focusing on health and sustainability in a way that dwarfs June’s meager and failed attempts at middle-class motherhood. June’s concern for the family’s weight problem is almost comical within the show’s context, as their bodies are depicted as completely unrestrained in a way that supports the narrative of disgust that is woven so intricately throughout.

**Out-of-Control Orifices**

Bodily functions play an important role in constructing this narrative; farting and burping are consistently sensationalized, with every occurrence captured by the cameras and broadcasted, usually shown in “improper” scenarios such as at the kitchen table or when out to dinner with an important celebrity, like in the episode where Alana meets with Miss Georgia 2011 and not only farts during their meal, but chooses to announce it and laugh (“Ah-choo!”). Not only are the bodies of June’s family uncontrollable, overflowing, and animated, but the family finds humor in their grotesqueness. Contrary to the bourgeois body which restrains itself and relegates functions of the body to the private, this family revels in the bodily, defiantly sharing with each other and with viewers their carnivalesque behaviors. Bodily smells are central to the way that the Thompson family entertains themselves and are also featured for its disgust quality; in addition to all of the mud-related activities, the first season shows them playing a game of “Guess Whose Breath,” in which each person takes a turn being blindfolded and then has to sniff each family member’s breath and correctly identify the person who is breathing into their nose (“Time for Sketti!”). In the second season, the featured activity amongst the kids is a game called “Safety; Alana describes it as such: “Farting can be healthy and fun, especially when you know how to
play the Doorknob Game! Rule number one: when a farter farts, and someone says, “doorknob,” you have to beat them up until they get to a doorknob. Once the farter touches the doorknob, they are safe. Rule number two: If a farter farts and they say “safety” before the other person says “doorknob,” they’re safe from getting beat up (“Safety”). This, and Alana’s “Cup-a-fart,” her signature wrestling move in which she farts into her hand and throws it into her opponent’s face, highlight the show’s regular emphasis on bodily functions (“Mo’ Butter, Mo’ Better”). The problem, as it is presented, is not only that June allows this type of bodily behavior, but that she herself engages in it. Farting is touted in this household as a healthy way to lose weight when Mama declares, “If a person farts 10-15 times a day then they’re healthy. So I guess my girls are healthy…” and Chubbs explains, “My mother has told me in the past that if you fart 12-15 times a day you can lose a little weight, so I think I'll lose a lot of weight because I'm going to fart a lot” (“This Is My Crazy Family”).

Even more pointed than the concentration on farting and eating is the show’s repetitive filming and marketing of sneezing. TLC repeatedly focuses on the unrestrained orifices of these bodies, zooming in and stationing its cameras to capture every instance in which family members let their bodies run rampant. In one episode, Alana is having her moment to speak directly to the camera about the day’s events when she, all of a sudden, let’s out a large sneeze that results in a disturbing amount of snot covering her face. She quickly covers her nose and mouth in an effort to contain the mess, and is clearly embarrassed, but the camera makes no effort to move away from the scene and no one on the crew moves to hand her a tissue or cut the segment. Instead, the camera remains focused on Alana for several, very long seconds as she sits there with her nose and mouth covered and no way to remedy the situation. Finally, she decides the only thing to do is to snort it back up her nose and then walk away, her hands still covering her face, during
which time the camera remains steadily fixated on her and her dilemma ("Ah-choo!"). Alana’s “sneeze” scene, along with the many, many others which could cause people to view this family as the strange, uncivilized other, could easily have been edited out of the footage. Instead, it was included, along with an “elephant walk” soundtrack and several uncomfortable minutes of awkward silence while the audience watched in horror and disgust as Alana sat, motionless, trying to invent a solution to her predicament. In addition to the aforementioned burping and farting that is characteristic of every member of this family, there is special emphasis placed on June’s sneezing throughout both seasons of the show. Whenever June sneezes (always loudly and dramatically) the camera focuses on and captures the explosively loud and dramatic scene; especially when she is speaking directly to the camera, in scenes filmed outside of the daily life, “fly on the wall” segments, these instances could easily be edited out but there is a very conscious decision on TLC’s part to not only include them but make them an integral part of how the audience views this family. On Here Comes Honey Boo Boo these bodily functions take center stage, reminding us that June is the “other” mother by associating the bodily with class value insofar as “the pleasures of the carnival are subordinate pleasures: unruly and lower-class, vulgar, undisciplined” (Sweeney 254).

The supposed grotesqueness of June’s body is highlighted throughout with emphasis on aspects such as her “neck crust” and “forklift foot.” June and her children often talk about the dry patches June develops in the folds of the skin of her neck, the “neck crust,” and, in the second season when she is getting a facial, the camera actually zooms in to show viewers how “gross” this is. June’s “forklift foot” is a topic that is talked about throughout the first season and culminates in a big reveal episode. In this episode, June explains she has a mangled toe as a result of a forklift accident from when she used to work in a warehouse. At first, she refuses to
show her foot to anyone, not even her family, because she is so embarrassed by its condition. For several episodes the audience sees Mama wearing socks everywhere and at all times, even at the water park, and there is buildup until the moment when she finally agrees to reveal the foot to her curious and nagging children. At this moment, the camera zooms closely into June’s foot to show the misshapen and discolored injury which, to the confusion or horror of the audience, actually has gnats flying around it, as though to amplify the disgust factor (“A Bunch of Wedgies”). Whether the gnats were natural or an added effect of the show is unclear, but the emphasis placed on June’s disfigured foot as a focal topic for several episodes overtly evidences how the show works to depict her body as repulsive.

Of course, what *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* production strategies would have you believe is the most repulsive thing about June Shannon is her obesity. It is obvious that there is no way to hide this fact about June, but this program goes particularly out of its way to emphasize and exaggerate her weight issues. Partway through the first season, the women of the family all decide to lose weight together and they begin the process with a weigh-in. After Alana and Jessica have weighed themselves, it is time for June to step on the scale. The camera focuses in on the scale’s digital display and, in the moments leading up to the results, dramatic, suspenseful music plays until the scaled reads “E” and everyone makes jokes about her having broken the scale (June does end up trying again and weighs in at 309 pounds) (“This Is My Crazy Family”).

Often, the show stresses June’s weight problem by repeatedly focusing its cameras on her struggle to get up from a chair or get out of various tight places. The same episode that debuted her “forklift foot,” watches closely as June struggles for several moments to get out of a tube at the water park and, in the second season there is significant attention given to her attempts at
exiting a go-cart at a track the family visited for Sugar Bear’s birthday (“Turn This Big Mama On”). Hesitant to participate in the race in the first place because she can’t see well and doesn’t know how to drive, June gives in after her family nags her enough. She drives down the track slowly and carefully, but partway through gets stuck on one of the barriers. Of course, the cameras are there to watch as first one, then two, and finally three employees work to push her car back onto the track so that she can continue driving. Then, when they are ready to leave, June attempts multiple times to haul her too-large body out of the tiny car, a struggle on which the camera zooms in so that the audience doesn’t miss the fact that she is stuck. June’s body is repeatedly portrayed as oversized, overflowing, and out of control. In the second season when she goes dress shopping, the show uses added sound effects to influence the audience’s perception of her size. As June is trying on the dress, stretching and tearing sounds are superimposed, even though the dress fits her fine and does not tear at all while she is trying it on (“Big Girls Wear Lace-Ups”). And it’s not just June’s body that the show wants us to recognize as out of control; the entire Honey Boo Boo family is an out-of-control mess and, as the mother in charge, June ends up receiving most, if not all, of the blame.

Authority and Discipline

Moments such as June’s forklift foot reveal and go kart ride come across as her lacking authority, since she repeatedly gives in after her kids have nagged her enough to do something. The show makes painfully obvious how undisciplined and badly behaved June’s children are and how little authority she is actually able to exert over them. They are always screaming and running through the house, they all curse, and even Alana quotes movies like Austin Powers that are arguably inappropriate for a 6 year old (Stein). Even in the moments when she does exert some power, her attempts fall flat. For instance, in the first episode of the second season June
tries to get the kids to stop spending so much time on their phones and do their chores but they
don’t listen to her; she literally has to tackle them and pry the phones from their hands and, even
after successfully taking them away, it ends up backfiring on her (“Mo’ Butter, Mo’ Better”).
Because the girls are bored without their phones, they act out more than usual, screaming and
wrestling and stressing June out so that we see her yelling from another room, “Shut up in
there!” She says to the cameras, “The girls are even starting to drive me crazy even more without
their phones” (“Mo’ Butter, Mo’ Better”).

Later in the same episode, the girls create a “redneck slip n’ slide” while June is out of
the house. As Lauren explains, “If you give me too much free time, I’m gonna make trouble…
Mama is definitely gonna pay for taking our phones away”; in an effort to entertain themselves
because they still don’t have their phones back, Alana, Jessica, and Lauren don trash bags, wrap
themselves up in multiple layers of tape, rub Country Crock spread all over their bodies, and
slide across the kitchen and hallway floors. By the time June gets home, every inch of the
kitchen is coated in a layer of butter spread, including the counters and cabinets. She screams at
the girls, “What in the hell are y’all doing? This is what happens every time I leave y’all by
yourselves! ... Y’all get this mess cleaned up, now!” Still, June ends up cleaning much of the
mess herself as we learn from the family interview in which Sugar Bear says, “Ya’ll had a mess”
and June responds, “That I am still cleaning up today.” Ultimately, June gives up and gives the
girls their phones back explaining, “The ‘No Phone’ policy is going pretty bad. They have
destroyed my house. The Butter-Oil fiasco put it over the top. I came to the realization that I
would prefer to have the girls with phones, instead of them destroy my house” (“Mo’ Butter,
“Mo’ Better”). Although June claims authority in her household, her children are more “in
control” than she is, as she almost always defers to them.
The Gosselin children, in contrast, are amazingly well-behaved thanks to their mother’s strict requirements of behavior and discipline tactics. Kate has strict rules about meal times and how her children should behave at the table. In one instance, Aaden makes a farting noise with his mouth while sitting the table; when he repeats the sound after having been instructed not to, Kate promptly sends him to time-out (“Shopping for 10”). Manners in this show and for this family serve as a mechanism of class distinction; here, Kate again ensures that the family’s bodies are reined in at all times, maintaining a sense of decorum in the carefully controlled space of her home. This is a fairly common type of occurrence, and she is often seen having to deal with tantrums over not wanting to eat or children who aren’t behaving at the table. When Hannah is playing with her food, rather than eating it, Kate takes her food away and sends her to time out, removing her from the situation and from the other children who are behaving and eating properly. There are also specific rules about dessert; though Kate rarely provides dessert for the kids because she is vigilant about their sugar intake, when there is dessert available it is only given to those children who eat their dinner. As she explains it, this does not mean that they have to clean their plates before dessert, only that they need to make an effort to eat their meat and vegetables before they can have a treat:

You don't have to finish your plate. I don't believe eating past when you're full. But you need to eat the meat and the vegetable and the fruit or most of it in order to get dessert. I don't like to reward with dessert. It's just a matter of if we have dessert that night, you either get it or you don't if you finish your plate. It's just to help everybody eat their food groups that they need, and usually everybody will comply. (“Kate’s Wardrobe Makeover”)
One evening, the family returns home to have dinner after decorating cupcakes at a bakery as part of the sextuplets’ fourth birthday celebration. During dinner, however, the three boys refuse to eat their food, and so they are not given their cupcakes for dessert. Even though crying and screaming ensues, Kate adheres to her rule and does not give into their demands (“Sextuplets Turn Four!”).

As can be expected in a family with six young children, chaos often erupts in the house; the kids are often shown playing nearby while Kate is taking care of things in the house, when all of a sudden some of the children start fighting and yelling at one another. When moments occur, Kate always diffuses the situation quickly and quietly. She tells the offending child (or children) to go sit on time-out and they immediately comply. Chaos is not tolerated in this home; all the Gosselin children are expected to compose themselves and control their volume, even when they are not in public. Throughout the house Kate has established various designated time-out locations and the children always know exactly where they are supposed to go to sit out their punishment. Then, after their time-out, they apologize to whomever they offended and give each other a kiss and a hug: “And the longer they're loud in the corner, the longer they sit. They sit in the corner, and then after they sit for a few minutes, they can come over, say they're sorry, and give them a kiss on the cheek. They have to look each other in the eyes and say they're sorry, kiss, and hug” (“Discipline”).

Kate is depicted by the show as the ideal figure of authority, as a mom who knows the right way to raise her children and keep control of her household. So much so, that the third season includes an episode entitled “Discipline,” wherein the Gosselin parents share their tips for parenting and discipline, using clips from the show to demonstrate Kate’s effective techniques for maintaining order. The way that TLC frames Kate as a parenting expert in this and similar
episodes aligns with Hays model of intensive parenting in that new momism is an ideology of motherhood that is “expert-guided:” “[M]others do buy child-rearing manuals (as their best-selling status testifies), they do often consult these manuals, they do frequently make a point of watching television shows and listening to radio programs that feature child-rearing experts, they do take their children to pediatricians, and they do (albeit only occasionally) take their children to child psychologists” (121). By airing episodes that allow viewers to write to Kate asking for advice, TLC establishes Kate as an expert in motherhood and further advocates her particular beliefs and practices.

In her child-rearing and keeping of her home, Kate Gosselin serves as a domestic authority to which viewers can turn for practical examples and guidance. The show lends credit to Kate’s knowledge not only through her own experience, but through her willingness to learn from others and reveal her sources of knowledge. The Sara Snow episode is an interesting one because, although Kate has already been established as an expert in her field, it portrays her as someone who still wants to learn and directs viewer attention to the networks partner, the Discovery Channel, as a source for reliable instruction. In addition to teaching Kate more about eating organically, Sara helps Kate to extend her control beyond the food her family eats and into the maintenance of their home as well as the environment.

**Cleanliness as Class Value**

Kate has already been working toward more sustainable and chemical-free living, so Sara adds to those efforts by helping Kate and the kids establish a recycling center for their home and involves the children in painting, labeling, and organizing the various recycling bins. She and Kate explain to them the importance of recycling and conserving energy, and the younger
children take turns learning how to turn off the lights every time they leave a room. *Jon & Kate Plus 8* consistently focuses its episodes on Kate’s efforts to make her home an environment centered more on productivity and less on consumption. In the fourth season this effort toward sustainable living continues when Jon and Kate purchase a new home and, soon after moving in, perform a complete home renovation that includes the installation of solar panels, solar-powered lights, LED light bulbs, and energy-efficient appliances (“Go Green!”). The episode makes a point that, because they are *so* ecologically conscious and committed to reducing their footprint, they also find themselves having to upgrade the recycling center that the kids created with Sara Snow, since the family was filling each of those bins on a daily basis and needed larger containers that would hold an entire week’s worth of their recycling.

Despite having ten children to look after, Kate is able to spend a remarkable amount of time and effort on her home, updating it as well as keeping it clean and in order, things which are all of utmost importance to her. Just as the messy, uncontainable bodies of June’s family serve to represent their lower—class status, Kate’s obsession with cleanliness translates to bourgeois values of refinement and order, of controlling her living space and the bodies within it. She is a self-proclaimed “germaphobe” and many of the show’s episodes center on Kate’s plans for reorganizing the house and cleanliness standards. She is continually concerned about the kids getting themselves or their clothes dirty, making sure that they are always wearing aprons or smocks for any messy activities.

In fact, Kate’s standards for cleanliness are so rigorous that other people cannot seem to keep up with just how well she maintains her home. In the first season, Kate decides that she needs help keeping up with the demands of cleaning her house, so she decides to hire a maid. Before the interview, the cameras follow Kate around the house as she picks crumbs up off the
kitchen floor, making sure to never leave anything behind. Detailing her cleaning standards, Kate explains to viewers that on a daily basis she mops the floor, wipes the table, and wipes down all the chairs and high chairs three times, as well as cleans the sink, counters, and stove; this is just in the kitchen. She also vacuums the house, dusts, and cleans the windows. Because of her rigorous standards for cleanliness, Kate has a lot of hesitation about hiring someone to clean her house. As she explains to one interviewee, “It's very nerve-racking to me to hire a cleaning person. Just to tell you that. I'm a germaphobe. I'm a control freak” (“Housekeeper Hunt”).

After interviewing three maids (one of which isn’t suitable because she isn’t willing to get down on her hands and knees to sweep for crumbs under the kitchen table), Kate hires someone but quickly decides that she doesn’t fit the bill. On the maid’s first day, Kate walks around the house checking behind and under furniture for dust, and discovers that the maid is not thorough enough if her work: "So then, like anyone would do, first time having someone clean, I followed behind her and became concerned when I found that areas were completely undisturbed as far as dusting went. And these are all things that the list said… "God bless her for giving it a try but I don't know whose standards that would meet" (“Housekeeper Hunt”). Seemingly, Kate gives up on the idea of having a housekeeper after this experience, and goes back to doing her own cleaning.

Interestingly, while Kate is obsesses over leftover dust and using eco-friendly cleaning products, June completely throws caution to the wind when it comes to cleanliness. The girls’ bedrooms are always messy and Alana’s pets (a pig named “Glitzy” and then a chicken named “Nugget”) are free to roam the house as they please, even sleeping in her bed and, shockingly, laying on the kitchen table. In a particularly disturbing episode, the girls place Glitzy on the table and he defecates while the family screams and gags (“She Oooo’d Herself”). Even so, nobody moves to stop Glitzy or pull him off of the table; instead, they stand around screaming and June
watches, laughing, until after he has finished and is taken away. June says that it was disgusting, but she allowed him on the table in the first place and then chose not to react during the incident. This lack of preoccupation with cleanliness stands in stark contrast to the Kate’s practices, which are constantly focused on eliminating germs and maintaining organization of the house.

In season three, the episode “Winter Preparation” depicts Kate reorganizing the entire house to make the limited space the family has more functional. Kate thrives on organization and, just as she can’t stand a dirty house, also can’t stand one that isn’t efficiently organized: “A disorganized house means a disorganized mind and disorganized schedule. An organized house is just like a breath of fresh air” (“Winter Preparation”). The Gosselin family is quickly outgrowing their home, and as the kids grow older Kate finds that the house is in disarray and in need of a newer system. Part of this process, she explains, is to create organization that will allow for the children to participate in cleaning more easily, like installing baskets and cubbies for their toys and belongings. She and one of her friends head to IKEA for an entire day and, by the end of the episode, have completely outfitted the entire home with new furniture and organized the kids’ bedrooms and playroom. Kate puts labels and pictures on baskets, draws, and cubbies and teaches the kids where all of their toys go so that, when it is time to clean up, they will all be able to participate in putting their things away.

The Gosselin children are willingly helpful to their mother and to one another, committed to the bourgeois values of productivity, restraint, and order that their mother espouses on the show. As soon as they are old enough to begin helping around the house, Kate finds creative and productive ways to teach all of her kids to be helpful and responsible. In “Household Chores,” Kate designs and orders a set of chore charts for the family, designating chores that each family member can perform according to their age and abilities. She explains to viewers, “It’s just the
first step of showing them that as a family we need to work together and do everything. It doesn't always go as planned, but just a notification hanging before their very eyes that they need to get themselves ready to help in our family" ("Household Chores"). Kate hangs these on the kitchen door so they are easily visible, and teaches the kids to check on the chart frequently throughout the day to see what is left to be accomplished. For the children who can’t read, Kate includes pictures that correspond to the labeled tasks; this way, even the youngest children can be responsible for knowing what needs to be done to maintain their home. Chores on the list include sweeping up crumbs, making the beds, picking up toys, folding laundry, throwing away trash, wiping down tables, and putting laundry away in the hampers.

**Raising Productive, Middle-Class Citizens**

Kate’s childrearing tactics have, based on what is revealed to viewers, helpful, well-mannered, and respectful children who live productive, structured lives. Although it is arguably a challenge to keep even one child entertained daily, somehow Kate seems to manage to regularly engage all eight of her children involved in fun and educational activities. The majority of the show’s episodes document these activities, from projects at home to day trips to family vacations. It is rare for the children to be seen sitting in front of the television or causing mischief; instead, they are constantly shown making cards and crafts, reading books, and playing outside.

Sometimes, Kate has to be especially creative to find ways to entertain her kids due to bad weather or not having Jon around to help out. During the winter the kids get bored easily since they aren’t able to go outside to play so, in one episode, Kate hires a special travelling gymnasium to stop by the house so the younger kids can play for a few hours while the twins are
at school (“Kate’s Wardrobe Makeover”). Part of the challenge she faces is also finding activities that are age appropriate for each of her children, so she often arranges for the sextuplets and twins to do activities for their own age groups as well as those in which the entire family can participate. For example, the sextuplets attend a weekly Gymboree class and Kate signs the twins up for cooking classes and music lessons. Family day-trips featured on the show have included visits to farms, museums, theaters, sports events, amusement parks, and zoos, during which the kids always engage in special learning activities and adventures.

Kate also goes out of her way to do special little things for her kids on a regular basis. When Cara and Mady go to school, Kate packs each of them a different lunch based on the foods they prefer, and includes a handwritten note in each lunch box reminding them that they are loved and missed (“Day in the Life”). On Saturdays, Kate always prepares a special pancake breakfast that has become a tradition for the family and something that all the kids look forward to weekly. Birthdays and holidays are especially important to her: for the sextuplets third birthday, for example, Kate envisions and creates an entire carnival complete with carnival food, activity booths, pony rides, and a clown. For Valentine’s Day, a holiday featured twice on the show, Kate goes all out for her kids; she decorates the house, makes each of the kids a card, and prepares Valentine’s-themed foods throughout the day that include heart shaped pancakes with strawberry syrup for breakfast and heart-shaped grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch.

June also attempts to provide activities for her children, but repeatedly falls short of society’s standards for productive, educational entertainment. Instead of Gymboree or cooking classes, June’s idea of entertaining her children involves taking them to the Redneck Games to bob for pigs’ feet and jump into mud pits. When she wants to do something special for her kids, an eating contest, not themed-foods and a decorated house, is her way of showing she cares: on
Pumpkin’s thirteenth birthday, for instance, June takes her to her favorite restaurant, Papa Bucks BBQ, to tackle a four pound sandwich named the “Pigzilla” (“It’s Always Something With Pumpkin”). The restaurant advertises a contest that challenges visitors to eat the massive sandwich within forty-five minutes for a prize of $200. Aside from the issue of Pumpkin’s already existent weight problem, June’s encouragement of such unhealthful eating habits in her kids clearly transgresses the responsibilities of TLC’s version of motherhood. When the June’s children are left to entertain themselves, they automatically resort to destroying the house or making a mess of themselves, participating in activities that a mom like Kate would never tolerate. In addition to the butter shenanigans described previously, the girls make mud pits in the backyard, wrestle, toilet paper the house, and play various games involving farting or burping. Unlike the Gosselin kids, June’s children are rarely, if ever, shown engaging in any activities that would be considered educational or productive by the standards of new momism.

**Conclusion**

**Reproducing Ideology**

In its production of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Jon & Kate Plus Eight*, TLC reveals its stance on normative motherhood. These two programs fall into place amongst a lineup of reality shows which reinforce traditional family and gender expectations; reaching out to female viewers between the ages of 18 and 34 through shows like *A Makeover Story, A Dating Story, A Wedding Story,* and *A Baby Story,* the network has established an ideological timeline for how women’s lives should play out, and their portrayal of women like June Shannon and Kate Gosselin only advance this narrative (Maher 197). Kate, symbolizing proper motherhood as the quintessential “Supermom,” and June, exemplifying transgressive, dysfunctional motherhood,
work within the larger system of cultural media (identified by Douglas and Michaels) to promulgate the destructive ideology of new momism. As a contemporary exhibitionary complex, this type of reality programming creates a spectacle of motherhood and moves it into the private (and, ironically, more public) sphere of the home, recreating and repeating the ideology in a way that is especially accessible and influential to viewers.

These two programs represent opposite sides of the same hegemonic coin. As Gitlin explains:

[T]he hegemonic system is not cut-and-dried, not definitive. It has continually to be reproduced, continually superimposed, continually to be negotiated and managed, in order to override the alternative and, occasionally, the oppositional forms. To put it another way, major social conflicts are transported into the cultural system, where the hegemonic process frames them, form and content both, into compatibility with dominant systems of meaning. Alternative material is routinely incorporated, brought into the body of cultural production. (264)

In order to effectively reproduce its ideologies, television has to include representations of both the ideal of new momism (shows like *Jon & Kate Plus 8*) and its opposite (*Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*). Feminist critic Bonnie Dow, building on Gitlin’s work, explores this inclusion of oppositional forms in the context of televisual depictions of women. Dow argues that although television has increasingly included women in its production and in on-screen roles, the hegemonic system prevents any real change from occurring in representations of women and normative gender expectations:
In this process, one protects the dominant ideology from radical change by incorporating small amounts of oppositional ideology...the demands made for increased minority and female representation result in higher visibility for these groups on television, although the situations and characters through which they are depicted may implicitly work to ‘contain’ the more radical aspects of the changes such representation implies. Some limited changes in content result, but the general hegemonic values remain intact. (262-263)

According to Dow’s analysis, channels like TLC may appear to be more progressive in their inclusion of other, marginal cultures such as that featured on Here Comes Honey Boo Boo when, in fact, “[t]he point of a hegemonic perspective is not that television never changes—it clearly does—but that it is less progressive than we think. The medium adjusts to social change in a manner that simultaneously contradicts or undercuts a progressive premise” (263). Though it somewhat revolutionizes traditional televised subjects by giving exposure to the lifestyles of lower-class Southerners, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo does so in a way that only incorporates this culture into TLC’s message, reinforcing rather than razing pre-established notions about “proper” (i.e. white, middle-class) motherhood. Like the fairs Bennett describes in his essay, TLC’s selection of reality programming provides for audiences a “progressive taxonomy” which organizes representations of motherhood into visual categories that guide the viewer in classifying them as inspirational or transgressive, promoting new momism. To indulge in this spectacle is, according to Bennett,

[T]o see and be seen, to survey yet always be under surveillance, the object of an unknown but controlling look; in these ways, as micro-worlds rendered constantly visible to themselves, expositions realized some of the ideals of panopticism in
transforming the crowd into a constantly surveyed, self-watching, self-regulating, and, as the historical record suggests, consistently orderly public—a society watching over itself. (133)

Mothers survey other mothers on the screen and, in accordance with how those mothers are represented, adjust and conform their own behaviors as well as constantly evaluate the behaviors of the mothers around them so that, “[mothers] must learn to put on the masquerade of the doting, self-sacrificing mother and wear it at all times, With intensive mothering, everyone watches us, we watch ourselves and other mothers, and we watch ourselves watching ourselves” (Douglas and Michaels 6).

Based on this phenomenon of self-surveillance, a project by Angela C. Henderson, Sandra M. Harmon, and Jeffrey Houser argues that, contrary to Douglas’ and Michaels’ arguments, “it is not the media that upholds these unrealistic standards of perfection for modern mothers, but mothers themselves who are perpetuating New Momism through informal means” (231). Using Foucault’s theories of surveillance, Henderson, Harmon, and Houser claim that social institutions are no longer necessary for the perpetuation and control of behavior. Rather, we (in this case mothers), “surveil one another through interpersonal communication and observation, ranging anywhere from conversations about children’s appropriate developmental milestones to a covert, silent monitoring of other moms’ disciplining behavior in public places” so that, “[t]his constant surveillance perpetuates the standards of perfection promulgated by New Momism, but [on] an interpersonal, not structural, level” (231). According to these authors, while the media does “perpetuate” new momism, this happens most powerfully through the interactions mothers have with one another during which they are constantly watching and evaluating while being watched and evaluated.
While this study contributes to discussions on television and new momism through its unique and valuable emphasis on interactions amongst mothers, it mistakenly underestimates the power and influence of the media in the perpetuation of this myth of motherhood. As Douglas and Michaels themselves articulated, women absolutely promulgate new momism amongst themselves. Bennett’s analysis of the exhibitionary complex, however, demonstrates how this complex, which reality television has inherited, actually creates and maintains this self-regulating system whereby mothers continue to judge themselves and each other even after they have walked away from the television screen. In his analysis of Foucault, Bennett argues,

The peculiarity of the exhibitionary complex is not to be found in its reversal of the principles of the Panopticon. Rather, it consists in its incorporation of aspects of those principles together with those of the panorama, forming a technology of vision which served not to atomize and disperse the crowd but to regulate it, and to do so by rendering it visible to itself, by making the crowd itself the ultimate spectacle. (131)

Today’s newest “technology of vision” is reality television, and it is a technology, much like those Bennett described, that is a “permanent display of power… not reduced to periodic effects but which, to the contrary, manifested itself precisely in continually displaying its ability to commence, order, and control objects and bodies, living or dead” (130). As demonstrated by close analyses of the two shows, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Jon & Kate Plus 8* both promulgate new momism and establish themselves as permanent self-maintaining systems for the continuation of their hegemonic influence. Mothers circulate new momism ideology amongst themselves, but they do so as part of a larger system, as part of the exhibitionary complex of reality television.
Resisting Ideology

The hegemonic influence of reality television on the lives of mothers, however, is not as straightforward as it may initially seem. As scholar James Lull explains: “[R]esistance to hegemony is not initiated solely by media consumers. Texts themselves are implicated. Ideology can never be stated purely and simply. Ways of thinking are always reflexive and embedded in a complex, sometimes contradictory, ideological regress (35). Though the programming clearly has a specific ideological agenda for motherhood, inherent fissures and fractures in this system allow for varied reactions to these complicated texts. Because reality television uses “real” individuals for its subjects, rather than actors, the subjects are not and cannot be simplified into any one specific role or type. Television editing practices can accomplish a lot for how we perceive things, but they can only go so far. To a certain extent, the people featured on these programs are still in control of who they are and how they are represented by virtue of not having a specific script to follow. The producers of Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, for example, can edit and zoom and add soundtracks, but only to what already exists. June is certainly framed in a particular, negative light, but the events portrayed have, in fact, happened, and the producers have much less control over what those events are than how they will film and display them.

Even if production processes were enough to completely eclipse the true nature and identities of the subjects of reality television, the spectator/spectacle relationship adds another level of complication to the hegemonic process. Hegemony is always unstable in that “[t]here is a continuous process of struggle and change as the dominant fights to maintain its position and alternative or oppositional forces threaten its place in society” (Escoffery 99). Viewers are not (always) simply passive receptacles of ideology who never question the messages broadcast to them through the television. Their readings of these texts are varied and multiple and have the
power to resist the ideology promulgated by shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Jon & Kate Plus 8*.

Through online reviews and participation in the recent trend of “mommy blogs,” viewers have taken hold of the internet platform as a medium for countering new momism ideology through critiques of current televised representations of motherhood. As Lull describes it,

> [Counter-hegemonic tendencies] are formulated in processes of communication—in the interpretations, social circulation, and used of media content….ideological resistance and appropriation frequently involve reinventing institutional messages for purposes that differ greatly from their creators’ intentions. Expressions of the dominant ideology are sometimes reformulated to assert alternative, often completely resistant or contradictory messages. (35)

These “mommy blogs” are weblogs written by women that address issues of parenting, family, and homemaking. Mommy blogs and, less specifically, the internet, have provided a unique method for women to discuss motherhood amongst themselves, share their lived experiences, and thereby counter the hegemonic process of reality television which spews the ideology of new momism into the living rooms and minds of today’s women. They serve as a space wherein women can question the representations of other women in their favorite (or least favorite) shows, exposing and critiquing television rather than absorbing all its messages. The widespread availability of these media allow for sharing a multiplicity of ideas and opinions, complicating the reception of reality television programs which would otherwise be nothing more than a set of numbers representing viewership and ratings. These responses, Lull argues, complicate and weaken hegemony: “Audience interpretations and uses of media imagery also eat away at
hegemony. Hegemony fails when dominant ideology is weaker than social resistance” (35).
Now, women have access to multiple interpretations, and this access poses a real threat to the hegemonic forces behind new momism.

Not all viewers of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* are tuning in to bash on Mama June and her flailing attempts at mainstream motherhood. Reviews of the show reflect the kind of varied responses which indicate more nuanced and critical readings that look past the glaringly obvious framing and editing. Many mothers are able to see through these techniques and engage with the show on a different level, one which appreciates and admires June as a mother. A post on Jezebel, a popular blog site dedicated to women’s interests and issues, reacts to reviews which argue against reality programming for its exploitation of subjects as objects of laughter and mockery. In “Here Comes the Honey Boo Boo Backlash,” blogger Tracy Egan Morrissey writes,

This happens every time a reality show becomes a huge hit and crosses over into iconographic territory. Social critics start wringing their hands over how low we've sunk as a civilization, joke about how said show is a sign of an impending apocalypse, and express shock that anyone could bring themselves to watch such "trash.” … The sentiment, essentially, is that these people are too stupid and ignorant to know that their lives are unessential and embarrassing. Publicly voicing such opinions is the height of rudeness. Also, give these shitshows a little more credit: the stars tend to know why they're on air. They're not as clueless as we might like to believe.

Morrissey touches on the important fact that the subjects of these programs *are* aware that they are being filmed and *do* see the final representation being aired, as well as experience viewer
reactions to those representations. To say that the subjects don’t realize they’re being made fun of (an argument made by many), is to deny these human beings any sort of agency in their own lives. To participate in a reality program is a decision made my June’s own volition, and she is not oblivious to the way many people perceive her based on the show.

Additionally, Morrissey addresses viewers’ discomfort with the show, arguing, “And why shouldn't the Thompsons showcase their cheeseball breakfasts, pregnant daughter, Redneck Games, and discussions of their own obesity? Is it because it's bad for them? Or is it because it's bad for you? Does it make you uncomfortable to see how other people live? … [T]hey might not be representations of the America that you like, but they're a part of an America that exists” ("Here Comes the Honey Boo Boo Backlash"). Her response to Here Comes Honey Boo Boo demonstrates a side of viewership that enjoys the show expressly as a “real” and subversive representation of American life, specifically a side of American life that is rarely showcased on television simply because it does not fit in with standards of supposedly normative behavior. Morrissey praises June and her family for their ability to laugh at themselves and allow others to laugh along with them. As she puts it, “They have their own definitions of beauty. And they seem to have a shared, and healthy, sense of humor” ("Here Comes the Honey Boo Boo Backlash").

In an article entitled “10 Reasons Honey Boo Boo’s Mama June is (Yes!) a Good Mom,” managing editor of Life & Beauty Weekly and blogger Shana Aborn responds to the show as well, focusing specifically on June as a positive figure of motherhood. Aborn writes that June’s personality is endearing and admirable because she is humble, friendly, and, most of all, a great mom to her kids. She writes,
Most of all, she just happens to be a good mother to Alana, Anna (“Chickadee”), Jessica (“Chubbs”) and Lauryn (“Pumpkin”), which is her top priority. True, she could do better in the nutrition, exercise and etiquette departments, and not everyone agrees that moms should let their children compete in beauty pageants. Yet she has it together in other important areas, such as love, communication and acceptance. And like the rest of us, she’s doing her best to raise her children to be good people – farting, mud bogging and all.

In spite of the negative aspects of June’s personality and child-rearing decisions on which TLC focuses its gaze, Aborn recognizes in June the more important elements of what makes her a good mom and role model to both her children and other mothers watching the show. Her post lists and describes ten things that make June a good mom: “She adores her children,” “She teaches self-acceptance,” “She’s open about her flaws,” “She teaches her children compassion,” “She doesn’t judge her kids,” “She believes in family togetherness,” “She doesn’t mind pets,” “She encourages her daughter’s dream,” “She doesn’t freak out over dirt,” and “She won’t let success go to her kids’ heads” (“10 Reasons”).

Interestingly enough, the qualities that Aborn identifies as qualifying June as a “good” mother are not those specifically bourgeois qualities endorsed by new momism, which the media so desperately wants viewers to embrace as representative of proper motherhood. June isn’t “perfect” by those standards. She doesn’t feed her kids organic, nutritious food. She doesn’t keep her house spotless at all times. She lets her kids scream, curse, and get dirty. Her kids, however, are happy and loved. What is more, June does at least make an honest attempt to be for her children the kind of mother that society expects, even if it doesn’t always work out in hers or her children’s favor. She acknowledges that her family is overweight and unites with her daughters
in a joint-effort to eat more healthfully and lose the weight, even though she herself is comfortable with her own body and not actually inclined toward weight-loss. In an attempt to help the family, she tries new recipes for healthy foods and encourages the girls to put down the cheese-balls in favor of cabbage soup. No member of the family actually liked the soup enough to eat it, but June supported her children and tried to change some of their habits in order to better everyone’s health. In another effort of trying to be a positive role model for her children, June decides to satisfy their (and Sugar Bear’s, of course) desire to see her officially committed to the man with whom she has been in a relationship for around ten years. Although June is resistant to the idea of marriage, she agrees to a commitment ceremony because it is important to her family that she makes a public declaration of her commitment to Sugar Bear. Aborn’s reading of the show focuses on what June does do well, rather than what are portrayed as her missteps or failures. More important to Aborn and many mothers viewing June Shannon as mother-model, is that she does her best as a mom, supporting her children and teaching them to be kind, compassionate, and loving individuals.

Reactions to Kate Gosselin, as well, have been mixed, revealing the same kind of resistance to televised ideologies demonstrated by viewers of Here Comes Honey Boo Boo. Jon & Kate Plus 8 would have its viewers believe that Kate Gosselin is an all-American super-mom; the meals she cooks and the activities she provides for eight children are astonishingly perfect and the way that she handles everyday chores and catastrophes would put most moms of even one child to shame. As the show wore on, however, spectators became more and more critical of this image of perfection, to the point where the majority of the reactions to the show were at least mixed, if not entirely negative.
Most of the negative response centered on Kate’s relationship with Jon, which viewers criticized as creating a hostile environment for the young children. Kate is constantly shown belittling her husband, complaining about his ineptitude and behaving aggressively with him. In terms of her mothering practices, what viewers used to perceive as proof of Kate’s excellence became grounds for critique rather than praise. Her obsessive demands for cleanliness and orderliness repulsed viewers who began to see her as overbearing rather than on top of things. In a blog post outlining the “Nine Worst Moms in History,” blogger Teresa Strasser denounces Kate not because of her bad attitude and abusive tendencies, but for the very qualities which used to garner admiration from fans of the show’s earlier seasons. She writes,

Forget the usual stuff people hate about Kate, the bossy attitude, the haircut, or the superb exploitation of her brood. None of that lands her on this list. For me, it's the eight little plates of hummus and sliced apples, the matching outfits, the annoying attention to maternal detail. I know one needs to be organized with that many kids, but Kate just overmoms it. While most of the worst moms in history got there by undermoming it, Kate represents all of the overmoms who not only smother their kids and make them self-absorbed entitled jerks, but also make the rest of the moms feel bad. Overmoms take seven childbirth classes while pregnant, grimly interview a slew of pediatricians, become experts on car seats and the merits of co-sleeping, start a home business selling organic baby food and generally tackle motherhood with all of the spontaneity and unfettered joy of a prison chaplain.
While *Jon & Kate Plus 8* encourages viewers to define Kate as the “good” mother because she feeds her kids hummus and sliced apples, Strasser challenges this reading, exposing the faults of Kate’s signature “overmomming” style.

In the “Sextuplets Turn Four!” episode, for instance, Kate’s finicky and controlling personality stampedes over the children’s experience. Even on their birthday, the children are limited in what they are allowed to do because Kate’s primary concern is whether they keep their clothes, hands, and faces neat and tidy. Responding to this obsession with cleanliness, mom Tracee Sioux (a fan of both Kate and her show) critiques Kate on this front, saying, “[t]he beauty of children is that they – and their clothes – are WASHABLE… There’s no way on God’s Green Earth that I would want to do laundry for 10 people, and you obviously deserve the Good Housekeeping Award for keeping a house of 10 people presentable enough to be on TV every day. But, dirty and messy kids really isn’t the end of the world. It can be pretty fun” (“Kate Gosselin and Dirty Kids”). Sioux admires Kate and agrees with her parenting on most ends, but she complicates her reading by questioning whether Kate’s obsession with clean clothes is really good for the kids who are missing out on the good childhood fun of just getting messy.

Another blogger, Jill C. Horton, directly addresses the show’s filming and editing practices which she reads as making Kate seem like a better mother than she actually is. Responding to defenders of Kate arguing that film editing makes her seem worse than she is, Horton argues that the mom’s seemingly supernatural abilities are taken out of context, instead giving her much more credit than she necessarily deserves. Horton writes,

Kate's sometimes calm, cool and collected demeanor is what's taken out of context, not her high-strung behavior… Kate has nannies, and even a neighbor
who comes over every week to fold piles of laundry -- for free! How many of you can get someone to fold your laundry for free? The show is edited to make it look like Kate Gosselin has her hands full. But half the time, her kids are being watched by other people. Imagine a reality show about two low-income parents with 8 kids living in a small apartment, the kids each having only two toys, no bicycles, no vacations, no spa trips, no pretty clothes...a show about THEM would be so utterly boring... (Jon & Kate Plus 8: Does TV Editing Make Kate Come Off like a Shrew?”)

Horton sees through the illusion of perfect motherhood established by Jon & Kate Plus Eight, undermining the ideology of new momism which is so damaging to women’s expectations of themselves as mothers. Horton reveals the danger of esteeming Kate as the ultimate mother; editing of footage conceals most of the support (physical, mental, and financial) Kate receives that makes all her lofty accomplishments possible. These types of resources are unavailable to the vast majority of mothers outside of television, making the show’s expectations for women unreasonable and unattainable.

What is espoused by Here Come Honey Boo Boo and Jon & Kate Plus 8 as proper twenty-first century motherhood is not necessarily what viewers are actually striving for. These mothers have their own lived experiences that often contradict the messages on the television screen that tell them how motherhood is best enacted. Perhaps the biggest myth promoted by the ideology of intensive mothering of new momism is that mother should consider themselves solely responsible for the kinds of adults their children grow up to be. As Hays sees it,
Part of the reason that the methods of nurturing, listening, responding, explaining, negotiating, distracting, and searching for appropriate alternative care are so labor-intensive, so time-consuming, so energy-absorbing is, as I have noted, that parents (especially mothers) understand themselves as largely responsible for the way their children turn out...The guilt, the sleepless nights, and the worry about doing it appropriately are common to many mothers. As it turns out, nearly all the issues that they worry about follow directly from the logic of intensive child rearing. (120-121)

The idea that mothers are responsible for maintaining a spotless home, providing their children with productive, educational activities, feeding them only organic (read: expensive) foods, maintaining composure and perfectly disciplining them, and completely sacrificing their own lives and desires in favor of those of their children is socially fabricated and dangerous to women.

As Douglas and Michaels identified, the media are largely responsible for disseminating this poisonous rhetoric, which portrays intensive motherhood as natural and timeless, rather than revealing its own social and cultural constructions. This bourgeois narrative, which conflates income with decorum and bodies with class, attempts to elevate its status by debasing other, non-normative representations of motherhood, a move which, if successful, would maintain existing class distinctions and continue to undermine other, perfectly valid manifestations of motherhood. Because of their claim to "reality," the programs on TLC are especially problematic for women who have not the understanding to read them critically. Fortunately, though hegemony is a powerful force, it is not unstoppable. The digital age has provided women with a medium of their own through which to combat the contradictory messages of motherhood disseminated by
popular television, providing hope for more accepting and supportive definitions of motherhood for the future.


"Turn This Big Mama On." Here Comes Honey Boo Boo. TLC. Georgia, 17 Jul. 2013. Television.