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'Duck Dynasty' and Quackery

By CHARLES M. BLOW

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I must admit that I'm not a watcher of "Duck Dynasty," but I'm very much aware of it. I, too, am from Louisiana, and the family on the show lives outside the town of Monroe, which is a little over 50 miles from my hometown. We're all from the sticks.

So, when I became aware of the homophobic and racially insensitive comments that the patriarch on the show, Phil Robertson, made this week in an [interview in GQ magazine](#), I thought: I know that mind-set.

Robertson's interview reads as a commentary almost without malice, imbued with a matter-of-fact, this-is-just-the-way-I-see-it kind of Southern folksiness. To me, that is part of the problem. You don't have to operate with a malicious spirit to do tremendous harm. Insensitivity and ignorance are sufficient. In fact, intolerance that is disarming is the most dangerous kind. It can masquerade as morality.

A&E, which airs "Duck Dynasty," moved quickly to suspend Robertson, as his comments engaged the political culture wars, with liberals condemning him and conservatives — including Gov. Bobby Jindal of Louisiana, a possible presidential candidate — rushing to his defense.

Let me first say that Robertson has a constitutionally protected right to voice his opinion and A&E has a corporate right to decide if his views are consistent with its corporate ethos. No one has a constitutional right to a reality show. I have no opinion on the suspension. That's A&E's call.

In fact, I don't want to focus on the employment repercussions of what Robertson said, but on the content of it. In particular, I want to focus on a passage on

race from the interview, in which Robertson says:

"I never, with my eyes, saw the mistreatment of any black person. Not once. Where we lived was all farmers. The blacks worked for the farmers. I hoed cotton with them. I'm with the blacks, because we're white trash. We're going across the field. ...They're singing and happy. I never heard one of them, one black person, say, 'I tell you what: These doggone white people' — not a word! ...Pre-entitlement, pre-welfare, you say: Were they happy? They were godly; they were happy; no one was singing the blues."

While this is possible, it is highly improbable. Robertson is 67 years old, born into the Jim Crow South. Only a man blind and naïve to the suffering of others could have existed there and not recognized that there was a rampant culture of violence against blacks, with incidents and signs large and small, at every turn, on full display. Whether he personally saw interpersonal mistreatment of them is irrelevant.

Louisiana helped to establish the architecture for Jim Crow. First, there were the Black Codes that sought to control interactions between blacks and whites and constrain black freedom. The Jim Crow Encyclopedia even points out that in one Louisiana town, Opelousas, "freedmen needed the permission of their employers to enter town."

Then, in 1890, the State Legislature passed the Separate Car Act, which stipulated that all railway companies in the state "shall provide equal but separate accommodations for the white, and colored races" in their coaches. The landmark

Plessy v. Ferguson case was a Louisiana case challenging that law. The United States Supreme Court upheld the law, a ruling that provided the underpinning for state-sponsored racial segregation, and Jim Crow laws spread.

Robertson's comments conjure the insidious mythology of historical Southern fiction, that of contented slave and benevolent master, of the oppressed and the oppressors gleefully abiding the oppression, happily accepting their wildly variant social stations. This mythology posits that there were two waves of ruination for Southern culture, the Civil War and the civil rights movement, that made blacks get upset and things go downhill.

Robertson's comments also display a staggering ignorance about the place and meaning of song in African-American suffering. As for the singing of the blues in particular, the jazz musician Amina Claudine Myers [points out in an essay](#) that the blues was heard in the late 1800s and "came from the second generation of slaves, Black work songs, shouts and field hollers, which originated from African call-and-response singing." Work songs, the blues and spirituals were not easily separated.

Furthermore, Robertson doesn't seem to acknowledge the possibility that black workers he encountered possessed the most minimal social sophistication and survival skills necessary to not confess dissatisfaction to a white person on a cotton farm (no matter how "trashy" that white person might think himself).

It's impossible to know if Robertson recognizes the historical resonance and logical improbability of his comments. But that's not an excuse.

The Southern Divide

Life experiences because of race.

Southern Whites Who Said They Had...

Experienced day-to-day discrimination

48%

Been treated with less respect

46

Received poorer service

35

Been racially profiled by police

15

Southern Blacks Who Said They Had...

Experienced day-to-day discrimination

81%

Been treated with less respect

77

Received poorer service

69

Been racially profiled by police

44

Source: 2010 University of Arkansas Blair Center-Winthrop Rockefeller Institute poll of 3,406 adults.



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