

Louisiana-Style Naturalism? Science, Fiction, and Commerce in *Duck Dynasty* and *Swamp People*

Elizabeth EMERY
Montclair State University

RÉSUMÉ

La Louisiane, ou “Hollywood South” dans le langage du show-biz américain, est actuellement un des hauts lieux de la télé-réalité américaine grâce aux avantages fiscaux offerts par cet état ainsi qu’à sa réputation d’abriter des citoyens plus vrais que nature. Pourtant, la plupart de ces émissions télévisées ne suivent pas la formule classique de la télé-réalité héritée de Survivor ou Big Brother où la concurrence et l’élimination sont à l’ordre du jour. Au contraire, les producteurs des émissions consacrées à la Louisiane, telles que Swamp People, Duck Dynasty et Cajun Pawn Stars positionnent leur série comme documentaires nature: des études anthropologiques sur des familles habitant des milieux bien déterminés.

Cet article décrit les milieux insolites promus par les séries Swamp People et Duck Dynasty afin de comparer le cadre narratif employé par les producteurs de ces séries à celui utilisé par Émile Zola dans ses romans L’Assommoir et Germinal. Bien que ces producteurs de télé-réalité ne se disent pas inspirés par les théories scientifiques si fondamentales pour les manifestes naturalistes de Zola, ils n’en examinent pas moins eux aussi l’influence qu’exerce le milieu sur les familles défavorisées. Et comme Zola, leur cru de naturalisme n’est pas à l’abri des impératifs commerciaux.

Louisiana is known as “Hollywood South” because of a generous tax credit program instituted in 2002 that makes it attractive to film there. A *New York Times* article published in May 2013 drew national attention to a subset of this industry – Reality TV – which has flourished over the last few years because of these tax laws, but perhaps even more so, as Campbell Robertson has suggested, because of the state’s reputation for colorful and talkative locals who play well on television: “There is [...] general agreement that Louisiana is just more interesting than other places, with an ideal mix of Deep South exotica and regular folk accessibility. And Louisianans like to talk.”¹ The appeal of this culture is so great that nearly every cable television channel now features its own variants of Louisiana Reality TV and new shows are added each season. The History Channel’s *Swamp People*, with its focus on alligator hunters in the Atchafalaya River Basin, is credited with starting the Louisiana Reality TV trend in 2010, and has been followed by another series, *Cajun Pawn Stars* (2013), set in a pawn shop in Alexandria.² The A&E channel features the remarkably successful *Duck Dynasty* (2012), set in West Monroe, and the recently cancelled *The Governor’s Wife* (about

¹ See Campbell Robertson, “Seeking Fame in the Bayou? Get Real,” *New York Times* 15 May 2013. For a discussion of the development of “reality TV” see *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

² Web. 15 May 2013 <<http://www.history.com/shows/swamp-people>> and <<http://www.history.com/shows/cajun-pawn-stars>>.

former Louisiana governor Edwin Edwards).³ The Discovery Channel offered *Sons of Guns* (2011-2014), about a gun store and Spike TV promotes *Rat Bastards* (2012), about swamp rat hunters.⁴ Finally, the Country Music television channel's *Bayou Billionaires* (2012) follows a family with a natural gas reserve on their property.⁵

These disparate programs allow viewers to discover different parts of the state, from the Atchafalaya River Basin and West Monroe to Alexandria, Gonzalez, Baton Rouge, and Shreveport, but nearly all of them follow close-knit families trying to maintain their cultural values in a rapidly changing world. In fact, the producers of these programs do not simply attempt to portray "reality" on television; their web sites suggest that their goals are much more akin to the social and anthropological experimentation of naturalist literature than has been previously recognized.⁶ In particular, these programs often present case studies of family members as they respond to variables introduced into their environment (*milieu*):

At Silver Dollar [the store featured in *Cajun Pawn Stars*], the unique family dynamic and never-ending stream of colorful locals make for a fascinating shopping and viewing experience as Big Daddy and his crew appraise, pawn and trade the Cajun way.⁷

The prominence of a specific setting, an urban store, is similar to French naturalist writer Émile Zola's technique of placing characters in particular environments – the working-class Parisian neighborhood of *L'Assommoir*, for example – and introducing catalysts that will affect their behavior: injuries, alcoholism, the return of old acquaintances.

In the *Roman expérimental* Zola distinguishes between the "observer," who simply studies characters who move in these milieus, and the "experimenter," who actively tinkers with this *milieu* to see how change will affect the characters:

On appelle *expérimentateur* celui qui emploie les procédés d'investigations simples ou complexes pour faire varier ou modifier, dans un but quelconque, des phénomènes naturels et les faire apparaître dans des circonstances ou dans des conditions dans lesquelles la nature ne les présentait pas.⁸

For both Zola and modern Reality TV producers the working class milieu offers many interesting variables (a "stream of colorful locals," workplace rivalries, injuries or illness, job loss) that act as catalysts on behavior and, at the same time, provide dramatic tension.

³ Web. 18 Feb. 2014 <<http://www.aetv.com/duck-dynasty>> and <<http://www.aetv.com/the-governors-wife>>.

⁴ Web. 15 May 2013 <<http://www.spike.com/shows/rat-bastards>>.

⁵ Web. 15 May 2013 <http://www.cmt.com/show/bayou_billionaires/season_2/series.jhtml>.

⁶ There is, of course, a large body of scholarly literature devoted to the historical and sociological importance of Reality TV as a realist genre or as a social experiment (many such texts are cited below), but less mention of its relationship to naturalism, which, in the tradition of Émile Zola's foundational writings on the movement, draws precise distinctions between "observers" and "experimenters." See Émile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 10, ed. Henri Mitterand (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1968) 1177. Alejandro Adams is one of the few to note that Reality TV programs have coopted film techniques considered naturalist, but he is less interested in the ways their narrative framework emulates those of naturalist fiction. "The Cult of Naturalism," *Post Identity* 5.1: (Winter 2007), Web. 5 May 2014 <<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.pid9999.0005.104>>.

⁷ Web. 4 March 2014 <<http://www.history.com/shows/cajun-pawn-stars/about>>.

⁸ Zola, *Le Roman expérimental*, 1177.

While Reality TV producers do not generally acknowledge naturalism as a model or recognize the kind of scientific and activist inspiration evident in Zola's naturalist manifestoes,⁹ we will see that the texts on the web sites of many programs set in Louisiana make it clear that they, too, have chosen to examine families from a variety of socio-economic levels to portray the effects that changes to the distinctive *milieux* exert on the behavior of different generations of family members. In this essay I will compare and contrast some of the narrative framing devices used in *Swamp People* and *Duck Dynasty* with those used by Zola, in novels such as *L'Assommoir* and *Germinal*, before questioning the relationships among Reality TV, literary naturalism, science, and commerce.

The History Channel's *Swamp People* debuted in August 2010.¹⁰ Until the 2013 season, when locations were expanded to other areas in Louisiana and Texas, the program was set in the Atchafalaya River Basin during alligator hunting season (the month of September). The show follows five teams of trappers (or "swampers") as they try to make as much money as possible by catching as many alligators as they are legally allowed. While this race against time creates the series' suspense, the star of the show is the environment: the swamp and the ways of life that have grown up to survive in it. Alligator season is open to anyone with a license, but the series' creators have packaged the show in terms of the families living in the swamp and their struggle to maintain tradition: "At its core, this is a uniquely American story of a proud and skillful people fighting to maintain an ancient way of life in a rapidly modernizing world, despite the many perils and trials that stand in their way."¹¹ The emphasis on heritage is evident in the opening credits for episode one of the series, which "welcomes" viewers to the swamp (as does every subsequent episode) and provides documentary footage of landscape, animals, and people who live off this land.¹² From its web site and opening credits *Swamp People*, produced for the History Channel, thus seems to have been conceived with documentary intent: "Welcome to one of America's last frontiers: the wild swamplands of Southern Louisiana, a place whose history stretches back to the 17th century."¹³

The producers go further, however. They do not settle for showing simple photographs of the swamp and the people who live there; they create a compelling narrative framework for their footage. The images in the opening credits, many of them shot by handheld camera and at night, in tandem with the voice-over narration by an omniscient (and invisible) male speaker, establish the *milieu* in a manner directly inherited from naturalist literature, with its interest in the working class, difficult environmental conditions, and man's struggle to survive: "In the farthest corner of America lies the nation's largest swamp, a hidden world where nature rules and man fights back."¹⁴ The opening credits of *Swamp People* are not dissimilar to the beginning of Zola's *Germinal*, where an omniscient narrator documents the Voreux mine's operation after having followed Étienne Lantier as

⁹ These have been gathered and published as *Le Roman expérimental*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 10, ed. Henri Mitterand (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1968) 1145-1415.

¹⁰ Developed by Dolores Gavin, it is produced by Jay Peterson. The series premier was a tremendous success, garnering nearly six million adult viewers and setting viewing records. See Robert Seidman, "History® Continues its Ratings Success with Sunday Night Debut of *Swamp People*. Drives *HISTORY* to #1 in Cable within 10-11pm Time Period and Sets Record as Network's Best-Ever Original Series Launch," *TV by the Numbers* 24 August 2010, Web. 5 May 2014 <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/08/24/series-premiere-of-historys-swamp-people-sets-record/60858/>>.

¹¹ Web. 4 March 2014 <<http://www.history.com/shows/swamp-people/about/season-1>>.

¹² Many episodes from the five seasons are available online: Web. 4 March 2014 <<http://www.history.com/shows/swamp-people/episodes/>>.

¹³ Web. 4 March 2014 <<http://www.history.com/shows/swamp-people/about/season-1>>.

¹⁴ The shaky handheld camera, filming on location, and use of untrained lower class actors using local dialect are also hallmarks of naturalism in independent American filmmaking of the early twentieth century. See Adams, "The Cult of Naturalism."

he encounters its terrifying aerial fires (“il aperçut des feux rouges, trois brasiers brûlant au plein air, et comme suspendus”).¹⁵

While at first glance both Zola and the producers of *Swamp People* seem to be what Zola called “observers” – those who portray a *milieu* and the interaction of characters within it – they go further than simple observation by using words and images to influence viewers’ interpretation of these *milieux*.¹⁶ The Voreux mine is, from this initial vision, monstrous and frightening, its very name summarizing its quasi-mythological bestiality: “Cette fosse tassée au fond d’un creux, avec ses constructions trapues de briques, dressant sa cheminée comme une corne menaçante, lui semblait avoir un air mauvais de bête goulue, accroupie là pour manger le monde.”¹⁷ Similarly, the producers of *Swamp People* depict the swamp not as a peaceful wildlife refuge, but as a terrifying place. The opening images of each episode are preceded by a “Viewer Discretion Advised” warning: “The way of life depicted in this program dates back 300 years. Hunting, especially alligator hunting, lies at its core.” The ghostly letters of this text, accompanied by atonal music punctuated by strange natural and synthetic buzzes, fade in against a black background.

Such narrative framing of the *Swamp People* footage makes the *milieu* as exotic and threatening as Zola’s monstrous Voreux mine, an effect reinforced by the jerky camera movements, nighttime images, hand-written titles, abundance of blood, and chilling image of a childlike alligator paw lifting slowly from a boat, all of which call up the stock techniques of pseudo-documentary horror films such as the *Blair Witch Project*.¹⁸ Long before the ominous narrator says so, viewers have already gathered that this is a frightening place – “a hidden world where nature rules” – and that “only the toughest choose to live here”; they must “fight back” against nature. The program focuses squarely on man’s struggles with nature and particularly, as the rest of the opening sequence reveals, with the way generations of Cajuns, the Acadians expelled from Canada in the eighteenth century, settled here and have “passed on the rule of survival from generation to generation” over the last 250 years.¹⁹ As the show’s title suggests, the people living here – “swamp people” have come to be defined by their environment. Just as Zola’s narrator presents the coal mine as a hellish beast devouring men and spitting out flames, *Swamp People*’s producers edit their footage to emphasize the ominous, the violent, and the macabre. *Swamp People* and *Germinal* are not just documentaries about swamps and mines, but dynamic and near mythological explorations of man’s struggle to survive in horrifying conditions.

Zola and the producers of *Swamp People* attract and repel their audiences by depicting the dangers and exoticism of unfamiliar *milieux*, yet they are not mere “observers” of this world; they use experimentation to reveal the psychological impact of changes to this environment. The narrative framework of *Swamp People* suggests that producers will document the “hidden world” of the swamp (an impression reinforced by the show’s host: the History Channel), yet they experiment with

¹⁵ Émile Zola, *Germinal*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1964) 1133.

¹⁶ “On donne le nom d’*observateur* à celui qui applique les phénomènes qu’il ne fait pas varier et qu’il recueille par conséquent tels que la nature les lui offre.” Zola, *Le Roman expérimental*, 1175.

¹⁷ Zola, *Germinal*, 1135.

¹⁸ See Sarah Lynn Higley and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, eds., *Nothing that is: Millennial Cinema and the Blair Witch Controversies* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2004).

¹⁹ This highlighting of a particular population – Cajuns – is clear not just through mention of them on the web site and in the narration, but through Cajun music. Like Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart* novels, with their emphasis on family, *Swamp People*, too, focuses on the effects of inherited traits (notably alcoholism with hints at inbreeding) and interaction among family members. Yet despite the stated importance of Acadians and their history on the web site and in the narration (this is the History Channel after all), very few of the characters in the series are actually of “Cajun” heritage.

the documentary genre by framing alligator hunting as a competition among different groups of men, and by editing and packaging their footage into narrative arcs that expose the behavioral changes produced by new developments (catalysts): a drinking problem gets in the way of safety (Episode 1); tourist tag-a-longs cause trouble (Episodes 2 and 3); mechanical breakdowns or capsized boats cause tempers to flare (all episodes).²⁰ Zola, too, traces the effects of material change on his subjects: increasingly dangerous working conditions and hunger leave his mining families with no alternative but to strike. But where Zola emphasizes the monstrosity of the mine in order to inspire social reform,²¹ the producers of *Swamp People* seem to play up the swamp's mysteries less for sociological or political aims, than to entertain viewers fascinated by an unfamiliar and exotic locale and the arcane hunting rituals that still take place there.

The excesses of *Swamp People*'s narrative framing become evident when its opening credits are juxtaposed to those of another Reality TV show, *Duck Dynasty*, where a cheerful first-person narrator (who will turn out to be Willie Robertson, the owner of the family business featured in the series) comments on a near-identical opening photograph of a swamp. "The backwoods of Louisiana is now the home of a new breed of millionaire. My family. Scary, huh?"²² The horror film overtones of *Swamp People* are acknowledged and redirected into comedy as the opening credits roll, showing scenes from the family's homes, work place, and land, to ZZ Top's song, "Sharp Dressed Man," and ending with the Robertson men dressed in tuxedos and sporting enormous golden rings ("bling") on their fingers, their beards flowing as they climb into a limousine.

Duck Dynasty, while also dealing with families who live off the land, takes a diametrically different approach to the *milieu* of the Louisiana swamp by exploring the ways in which new money and the "yuppie" values it is said to bring (college education among them), affect longstanding family traditions, thus making attempts to "remain true to ourselves," as Willie says, a central tension of the series. From the show's clever title, which riffs on the 1980s American soap opera, *Dynasty*, while evoking genealogy and the family business of making duck calls, to ZZ Top's opening music and the shots of "bling," this series takes a much more light-hearted approach to the struggle between man and environment.

The "experimentation" inherent in the editing of *Duck Dynasty* is also much clearer because its producers make no attempt to present the program as "historical" or "documentary," with the implied scientific objectivity such terms carry.²³ Each episode alternates among three *milieux*: the "Duck Commander" warehouse, where two of the Robertson sons and Uncle Si work; "Robertson Land," where they hunt or trap; and the parents' house ("Phil and Kay's"), where they interact with

²⁰ A description of each season's episodes can be consulted here: Web. 20 May 2013 <<http://www.history.com/shows/swamp-people/episodes/>>.

²¹ He describes *Germinal* in an initial outline as "La lutte du capital et du travail, coup d'épée donné à la société qui craque, la question la plus importante pour le XXe siècle. La révolution par la faim," Zola, *Germinal*, 1803-04. For discussion of the contradictions between Zola's intended "factualism" yet tendency to slip into mythological registers, see Philip Walker, *Germinal and Zola's Philosophical and Religious Thought* (New York: John Benjamins Publishing, 1984) and Chantal Bertrand-Jennings, *Espaces romanesques: Zola* (Sherbrooke, Canada: Éditions Namaan, 1987).

²² *Duck Dynasty* premiered on 21 March 2012 and is produced by Gurney Productions. It has consistently broken viewership records and holds the record for the most-watched non-fiction telecast. Episodes can be watched here: Web. 15 March 2013 <<http://www.aetv.com/duck-dynasty/video>>.

²³ Betsy McLane's *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013) defines documentary film based on conforming to specific expectations related to subject, purpose or viewpoint, form, production methods, and audience experience (4-5). Her concluding chapter briefly (and uncomfortably) notes the problems Reality TV creates for such tidy definitions, because it often stems from a documentary impulse while transgressing "every boundary of documentary ethics" (378).

other family members. Each episode closes with the family gathered around the dining room table saying a prayer. Both *Swamp People* and *Duck Dynasty* reinforce stereotypes about Louisiana, but where the former depicts Cajuns as relics of the past, the latter provides a much more modern view by portraying the difficulties of maintaining family traditions anchored in the outdoors while struggling to maintain a viable indoor business. Like Zola's novels and *Swamp People*, *Duck Dynasty* also places a great deal of weight on heredity and environment, from the parents, Phil and Kay, to their sons, all of whom have very different temperaments and skills: Willie's business acumen; Jase's product development and hunting talents; Jep's mastery of technology. Uncle Si's oddball behavior can be attributed in part to his experiences in Vietnam.²⁴

Like much naturalist fiction, conceived as "experiments" where variables are introduced into a *milieu* to see how they impact characters, each episode of *Duck Dynasty* involves change – a person, an object, or an event – that pits characters against one another. In the first episode, for example, we learn that a several hundred thousand dollar order for duck calls has not been filled and that no one is in the factory to do it. Jase has gone catfish hunting (it is a two-week season), Si is breaking up beaver dams, and Willie has to leave to help his mother make a cooking DVD because they have already sold copies and need to ship them.²⁵ He struggles to balance the success of the company with the idiosyncratic interests of his family members. The naturalist technique of experimenting with characters inhabiting a stable environment by introducing change drives nearly every episode, as it does in *Swamp People* and Zola's novels.

That said, *Duck Dynasty* is so aggressively edited that it seems incongruous to speak of it in the same breath as a nineteenth-century novel, which develops its narrative arc slowly and over many hundreds of pages. In Reality TV hours of footage are pruned, packaged into coherent narrative sections, and cleverly titled ("Fowl Playhouse," "Jase and the Argonauts," "G.I. Si"); each episode within an episode is further turned into a chapter containing its own witty title.²⁶ Nearly every scene is followed by a family member commenting on what has just taken place. Willie has called this "guided realism" and its heavy editing differs from *Duck Commander*, the original Robertson family hunting reality show on the Outdoor Channel, for which he and his brothers grew their now-legendary beards.²⁷ Not only do A&E producers "set up" experiments with the Robertsons (buying a new piece of technology, someone's refusal to do something at an important moment, a new arrival), but they have family members analyze their own behavior after the fact, often in terms that poke fun at the techniques of Reality TV; the example of the cooking show is just one of the moments where the Robertsons make documentaries, take "selfies," or create war films. They are constantly making references to the artificial process behind what they are documenting and selling as reality.²⁸ The heavy editorial framing transforms the footage shot with the Robertsons into a

²⁴ A Robertson family tree can be studied here: Web. 4 March 2014 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duck_Dynasty>.

²⁵ "Family Funny Business" (Season 1, Episode 1) 21 March 2012.

²⁶ Patriarch Phil Robertson has complained in interviews about the Los Angeles-based producers' editing practices. See, for example, Greg Gilman, "'Duck Dynasty' Star Reveals Clash With Producers Over Fake Bleeps, Cutting Jesus," *The Wrap* 4 October 2013, Web. 6 March 2014 <<https://tv.yahoo.com/news/duck-dynasty-star-reveals-clash-producers-over-fake-224906242.html>>. For more on the heavy-handed editing practices, staging, scripting, and reshooting that often take place on Reality TV sets see "Real or Not, It Doesn't Matter," in Richard M. Huff, *Reality Television* (Westport, USA: Praeger, 2006) 167-76, and "Lies, Damn Lies, and Editing," in Jennifer L. Pozner, *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth about Guilty Pleasure TV* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2010) 26-30.

²⁷ Neil Genzlinger, "Lured in by a Family Just being Itself on TV," *New York Times* 7 October 2012, Web. 2 March 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/08/arts/television/duck-dynasty-lures-a-growing-audience-on-ae.html?_r=0>.

²⁸ See Adams, "The Cult of Naturalism," for the realist illusions effected by Reality TV:

fascinating commentary about the artificiality and commercialism of Reality TV itself. The show seems to be a transparent depiction of a family's life, but it really involves a crew of hundreds of people and many "takes" of each allegedly unscripted scene.²⁹ This explains the public relations fiascos that occur when characters like Phil Robertson speak frankly in TV or magazine interviews.³⁰ Is *Duck Dynasty* a Reality TV show or a sitcom, the *Seinfeld* of the South?

Given the heavy editing of Reality TV programs such as *Duck Dynasty*, it may seem a stretch to compare them to nineteenth-century naturalist fiction. This is particularly true because of the strong social agenda associated with naturalism in the American context: "naturalism is an essentially didactic literature with a thesis to prove, whether it be economic determinism, the latent atavism of human beings, or the inescapable force of heredity."³¹ Frank Norris, Upton Sinclair, and Theodore Dreiser are all associated with social reform. The American naturalist to whom *Swamp People* and *Duck Dynasty* owe the most, however, is Jack London, whose man-against-nature plots set in the Yukon or the East Pacific captured the imagination of American readers interested in last frontiers in much the same way that Louisiana swamps do today.³² It is no coincidence that the History Channel markets them as "one of America's last frontiers" and that it falls into a category of Reality TV that documents similar occupations linked to the extremes of North American geography: *Ice Road Truckers*, *Mountain Men*, or *Wicked Tuna*.³³

And yet, the experimental methods employed by the producers of both *Swamp People* and *Duck Dynasty*, along with a host of other family-based, *milieu*-based Reality TV programs, are remarkably similar to the techniques of *French* naturalist novels and particularly Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* series where the "muckraking" took place in order to expose the complex mechanisms governing human behavior, so often influenced by environment and heredity.

Today, Zola has been enshrined as the leader of the naturalist movement and celebrated for his social activism because of his intervention in the Dreyfus Affair.³⁴ It is through the lens of Zola

The New Naturalism is a style in which actors and dialogue and camera techniques are de-refined or counter-refined until they revert to their most "natural" state, appearing as if they had simply occurred in nature without the orchestrating presence of a single governing consciousness – the auteur, or God, or whatever. New Naturalism appears to be a cinema of spontaneous generation.

As he notes, the proof of such illusions is recent attempts by Reality TV writers (who are not supposed to exist) to unionize.

²⁹ The Internet Movie Database listing for *Duck Dynasty*'s cast and crew runs for pages and pages. Web. 6 May 2014 <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2229907/fullcredits/>>. And although various scenes may be unscripted, as in all Reality TV, footage is organized into a coherent narrative in post-production. See, for example, Estella Tincknell and Parvati Raghuram, "Big Brother: Reconfiguring the 'Active' Audience of Cultural Studies?" *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 5.2 (2002): 199-215.

³⁰ Web. 4 March 2014 <<http://www.gq.com/entertainment/television/201401/duck-dynasty-phil-robertson>>.

³¹ Keith Newlin, "Introduction," *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 3-20 (6).

³² For more about American naturalism see Donald Pizer, *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Carbondale, USA: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984).

³³ *Ice Road Truckers* premiered on the History Channel in 2007 and takes place on ice-covered roads in Alaska and Canada. *Mountain Men* debuted in 2012, also on the History Channel, and follows a number of "frontier" families located in the mountains of North Carolina, Maine, Alaska, and Montana. *Wicked Tuna* (A&E, 2012 premiere) follows Gloucester, Massachusetts, fishermen pursuing blue fin tuna in the North Atlantic. These are just three of many such programs. My thanks to Susan McCready and her colleagues at the University of South Alabama for asking challenging questions related to *Swamp People* and American frontier literature at a March 2014 lecture I gave there.

³⁴ See, for example, Evelyn Gould, *Dreyfus and the Literature of the Third Republic: Secularism and Tolerance in Zola, Barrès, Lazare and Proust* (Jefferson, USA: McFarland Press, 2013).

as great cultural figure that scholars tend to see him today when discussing naturalism in terms of the scientific or social intent he expressed in *Le Roman expérimental*. Yet, in his day Zola was much criticized by his peers as a “sell out,” a hugely successful commercial writer who chose to depict unsavory lower class characters in order to make money by piquing bourgeois readers’ curiosity. The same complaints about “awful ordinary people [...] being allowed on TV” elicited by early Reality TV programs were the major complaints about Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart* novels.³⁵

This issue of commercialism has been overlooked in discussions of naturalism. To carry the “naturalist” label, must literature and film privilege social or scientific agendas over commercial imperatives? If so, will commercially successful genres such as Reality TV ever be considered naturalist? Although Zola, London, and Norris are all known today for the effectiveness of their novels for social reform, we tend to forget that their works were commercially successful in their own time. In fact, Zola’s use of scientific models to validate his theory of naturalism was a remarkably viable formula for entertaining middle and upper class readers (the working classes generally did not buy books). The proof is that his experimental model still thrives today in television shows such as *Swamp People* and *Duck Dynasty*. Unlike the humdrum life of middle class people portrayed in realist novels like Flaubert’s *Éducation sentimentale* (not a best-seller), struggles among men and struggles between men and environment now considered central to naturalist works allowed (and continue to allow) writers to generate book and television contracts, which favor topics that will engage or provoke viewers. Zola became rich from writing about taboo topics such as impoverished workers; this was considered radical at the time and it took a toll on his reputation, evident in the many caricatures of him as a pig or sitting on chamber pots.³⁶ Yet it was sheer marketing genius (it is not coincidental that one of Zola’s first jobs was in the marketing department of Hachette).³⁷ This search for untapped topics and markets explains much of the popularity of Reality TV shows; the naturalist-infused *Swamp People*, for example, set a new viewing record for cable television, even though (or perhaps because) the show had to warn viewers about its bloody depictions of hunting and trapping alligators.³⁸

The exoticism of unfamiliar *milieux* (even if distasteful) draws viewers, while allowing writers and directors to experiment endlessly with their characters as they introduce variables (What happens when a family member is too drunk to work? When a boat tips over? When a new family member joins the workplace?). Perhaps more importantly, as the narration of *Swamp People* suggests, the tension between man and environment inherent in naturalist fictions allows writers to create suspense, a necessary element in maintaining reader or viewer interest. This is what the producers for the National Geographic Channel do when they edit footage of the animals their

³⁵ Peter Bazalgette, “*Big Brother* and Beyond,” *Television* (October 2001): 20-23; cited in Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn, *Understanding Reality Television* (London: Psychology Press, 2004) 9. Zola collected the insults he received from critics and thought about publishing them someday under the title *Leurs injures*. See Sylvie Thorel-Cailleteau, ed., *Zola: textes de Ulbach, et al.* (Paris: Presses Paris Sorbonne, 1998).

³⁶ See Jean Grand-Carteret, *Zola en images* (Paris: Librairie Félix Juven, 1908).

³⁷ Colette Becker, *Les Apprentissages de Zola, du poète romantique au romancier naturaliste* (Paris: PUF, 1993).

³⁸ Su Holmes has made the point that one of the most remarkable aspects of Reality TV is that it has resulted in a marked rise in the number of “ordinary people appearing on television.” “All you’ve got to worry about is the task, having a cup of tea, and doing a bit of sunbathing’: Approaching Celebrity in *Big Brother*,” *Understanding Reality Television*, ed. Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn (New York: Routledge, 2004) 111-36 (111). Marisa Guthrie, “Swamp People’ Sets Ratings Record for History: Premiere of Louisiana Bayou series gives net best original debut in key demos,” *Broadcasting & Cable* 24 August 2010. Web. 2 March 2014 <<http://www.broadcastingcable.com/news/programming/swamp-people-sets-ratings-record-history/36730>>.

scientific teams have observed: they organize, edit, and narrate this material to build suspense. Will gazelles or elephants make it to safety? Or will they be eaten by the lions tracking them?

By framing these *milieux* and the actions that happen within them by means of suspenseful (and sometimes near-mythological) narration, Zola and the writers for *Swamp People* and *Duck Dynasty* (and *National Geographic*) are hardly objective. Their commentary profoundly affects viewers' interpretation. The History Channel may have documentary credibility, but choosing to depict "swamp people" only during the thirty days of the year dedicated to alligator hunting season, by framing them as "fighters" and as an inbred population, and by providing running commentary on their activities, its producers package them in a way that confirms the audience's stereotypes about Southern Louisiana and its people. The problem with such active narrative intervention is what Anna Gural-Midgal has recently called "the naturalist paradox of the descriptive": the reality viewers might have seen on their own is overwritten by the narrator's dominant point of view.³⁹ The "reality" shown on television, although theoretically more transparent (because we can see swamper at work), is just as problematic as fiction because it, too, is staged for cameras; it is then edited retroactively to form a coherent narrative.

One of the major criticisms of Zola's naturalist method – how is it possible to "experiment" with fictional characters when one is creating both environment and characters? – holds equally true for television and film. Production companies may claim to be filming "normal" people, but the industry makes money only if it identifies those unusual people and places most likely to improve ratings (the "never-ending stream of colorful locals" mentioned in the web site of *Cajun Pawn Stars*). They hold casting calls in which directors select the participants who will best fit their desired outcome.⁴⁰ Like naturalist writers, they are designing their own experiment and choosing the characters. The many hours of footage then taken of these characters are condensed and edited to fit the format of a thirty-minute or one-hour television program. Any editorial choice – in literature as in film – impacts whatever "reality" is said to be displayed.⁴¹

In this sense, the Louisiana-centric naturalism on display in *Duck Dynasty* is relatively honest about its lack of realism. Its writers, editors, and the Robertsons themselves acknowledge the paradox of the Reality TV genre by poking fun at the commercial intention of the series, packaging their "life" into pre-digested "episodes" for the entertainment of others. The tongue-in-cheek relationship to real life is on display from the "Sharp Dressed Man" ZZ Top lyrics (and ZZ Top beards) in the opening credits to the clever episode titles and the family's many ideas for marketing their brand (the show itself is the best publicity of all). At the time of this writing, the shelves of Walmart and CVS are full of Duck Dynasty merchandise and Phil Robertson has been invited to speak at the Republican Leadership Conference.⁴² Hundreds of products carry the Duck Commander brand, from the duck calls they manufacture to cigars, sea cruises, and even wine. And yet on blogs,

³⁹ Anna Gural-Midgal, *L'Écrit-Écran des Rougon-Macquart: Conceptions iconiques et filmiques du roman chez Zola* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2012).

⁴⁰ An Internet search for "reality tv casting call" brings up scores of results including www.realitywanted.com, a beautifully named site. See also "Casting: Finding the Freaks, the Geeks, and the Stars," chapter three of Richard M. Huff's *Reality Television*, 31-43.

⁴¹ In much the same way, the concept of reality itself can be questioned. Each person sees things differently. See, for example, Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994).

⁴² Web. 27 May 2014 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2014/05/27/duck-dynasty-star-phil-robertson-to-address-republican-leadership-conference/>>.

viewers continue to express outrage when they discover evidence suggesting the series might be scripted (that is, “fake”).⁴³

In conclusion, although the family and environmentally centered category of Louisiana Reality TV programming I have discussed here is clearly an offshoot of naturalism, its commercialism makes it suspect in ways that nineteenth-century naturalist literature is no longer. Novels such as *Germinal*, *L'Assommoir*, and *The Octopus* have been canonized over time because of the social reforms these fictions engendered. Although Zola's novels achieved commercial success by exposing little-known pockets of poverty and misery, he was also serious about calling out social injustice. Many of his novels, and *Germinal* chief among them, provide remarkable case studies of the impact poverty and poor hygiene played in exacerbating underlying hereditary conditions. As a result, his writings convinced contemporaries to work toward improving social welfare systems. Louisiana-style naturalism is unlikely to do the same. Both *Swamp People* and *Duck Dynasty* use naturalist subjects and experimentation for little more than entertainment value and, aside from provoking the wrath of animal protection associations, their depictions of backwoods hunting and trapping are unlikely to prompt much change. Their producers make their methods invisible, packaging their product to attract viewers rather than to encourage them to think about how they might help the characters in these series improve their quality of life. Zola, London, and Norris may have been commercially successful writers, but in the end, their greatest legacy came from using naturalist methods as a catalyst for social change.

⁴³ See, for example, “‘Duck Dynasty’ Is ‘Fake’! 25 Shocking Secrets & Lies Behind TV’s Favorite Family,” *Radar* online, Web. 27 May 2014 <<http://radaronline.com/photos/duck-dynasty-fake/photo/804353/>>.