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Cowboys of the High Seas: Representations of Working-Class Masculinity on *Deadliest Catch*

LISA A. KIRBY

THE OPENING LINES OF BON JOVI'S "WANTED: DEAD OR ALIVE" open each episode of Discovery Channel's documentary-style reality show *Deadliest Catch*:

[...] the faces are so cold
I drive all night, just to get back home
I'm a cowboy, on a steel horse I ride.
I'm wanted dead or alive.

These lyrics make clear two important aspects of the show and how it is being marketed: crab fishing is dangerous, even deadly, and the men who work the crab-fishing vessels are American icons, cowboys of the high seas, cheating death and redefining working-class masculinity. These two themes reveal a great deal about the series as well as the American psyche.

Portraying working-class males in popular culture, particularly on television, is a complicated endeavor. For decades, these characters were portrayed as one-dimensional, often ridiculous caricatures who seemed to contribute little to society. Instead, they provided a type of comic relief that, unfortunately, also created problematic stereotypes about working-class males. However, more recent television, particularly in the genre of reality shows, demonstrates that blue-collar men are no longer perceived in this way. Discovery Channel's *Deadliest Catch* reveals that working-class males are being represented as hard-working icons trying to achieve the American Dream. When

the show first started, it existed in a sea of Trump-like apprentices vying for lucrative jobs as executives and *Simple Life*-heiresses overtaking small towns and ridiculing their working-class residents; meanwhile, *Deadliest Catch* seemed to be the calm in the eye of a never-ending storm of stereotypical representations of the working class and privileging of wealthy, celebrity culture. However, the marketing of this show and its popularity point to an interesting commentary on our current society and its need to mythologize the working class. This essay will explore depictions of working-class males on television and compare those to the current representation of working-class masculinity on television, particularly on *Deadliest Catch*; I will further consider what this show reveals about current attitudes towards working-class masculinity and American culture.

The fact is that the number of representations of working-class characters on television has been fairly sparse. According to the Media Awareness Network, "social researchers and scholars point out that the mainstream media typically skew their portrayals of economic classes towards the white middle and upper classes, with all their privileges. They rarely represent the interests or perspectives of working-class women and men" (par. 1). There have been, however, some significant working-class representations, though most exist within the realm of sitcoms: think *All in the Family*, *Good Times*, *One Day at a Time*, *Roseanne*, *King of Queens*, and *The George Lopez Show*, just to name a few. It is interesting that comedy seems to be the realm in which these characters exist and, at least with the male characters, they are almost entirely stereotypical. When television does place at center working-class males, the portrayals are seldom positive. In his article "Ralph, Fred, Archie and Homer: Why Television Keeps Recreating the White Male Working-Class Buffoon," critic Richard Butsch points out one of the main problems surrounding the representation of working-class males in the media: they are often portrayed in a "buffoon-like" way. As Butsch contends, these characters "are dumb, immature, irresponsible, or lacking in common sense. [...] They are typically well-intentioned, even lovable, but no one to respect or emulate. These men are played against more mature, sensible wives" (576). One can see this formula play out in a variety of sitcoms and, as such, it seems working-class men are generally portrayed as one-dimensional. Such representations are problematic, to say the least, because they place the

working-class male in a troubling position of bumbling idiot, a type of comic relief that everyone else views as lacking in both intelligence and ambition.

However, while these stereotypes have long existed in television culture, it seems the tide is changing, at least in some regards. Jack Feuer of *Adweek* points out that “the media and advertisers have responded to Americans’ post-9/11 need for heroes by elevating [working-class figures such as] firemen and police officers to mythical status and saturating every conceivable communications vehicle with their images” (9). He also argues that recent stories of trapped miners reflect the media’s fascination with blue-collar workers: the “miners saga was no different: suffocating coverage and a celebration of heroic efforts to liberate the workers” (9). One could also point to this fascination with the working-class and Americans’ need to mythologize and celebrate these figures as one of the reasons why reality shows, such as *Deadliest Catch*, appear to be gaining popularity while also redefining what it means to be a working-class male.

There has been much speculation about the popularity of *Deadliest Catch*. If one looks at the marketing for the show, it is clear Discovery Channel is preoccupied with the “deadly” nature of the crab-fishing industry and is quick to focus on the dangerous aspects of the job. As *New York Times* reviewer Mike Hale points out, on *Deadliest Catch*, “what’s deadly isn’t the catch [as in great whites or stingrays], but the catching: the profession of venturing into the churning waters of the Bering Sea each fall on crabbing boats. And that deadliness is relentlessly driven home. [Even the show’s] opening-credits montage ends with a shot of a seaside cemetery” (par. 2). Viewers and critics alike seem fixated by the violent and dangerously cold waters into which crabmen can be thrown at any moment amid a rollicking-Bering Sea boat, the rattletrap crab pots sliding about, threatening to maim deckhands, and the precarious weather conditions that could toss the crab vessels into a tumultuous tempest at any moment. Even Discovery Channel’s publicity materials for the series reinforce these points:

Discovery Channel’s Emmy-nominated series *Deadliest Catch* returns [...] for a third season of daring adventures on the high seas. Viewers once again voyage to the Bering Sea and follow the brave captains and crew of eight crab-fishing vessels as they

struggle against the treacherous weather conditions doing one of the deadliest—and most lucrative—jobs in the world. (“New Season,” par. 1)

It is clear the “deadly” aspect of *Deadliest Catch* is a big draw for most viewers, at least that is what Discovery Channel is forecasting. Moreover, the show appears to draw a particularly male audience. According to Ronald Grover in *Business Week*, the series “has become one of the hottest things on cable, regularly luring more men over 25 than anything but sports” (Grover, par. 1). From the popularity of *Deadliest Catch* and some of Discovery Channel’s other offerings, it is also clear, according to *New York Times* reviewer Ned Martel, that “manly viewers will watch manual labor. Whether in ‘Dirty Jobs’ or ‘The Deadliest Catch,’ workplace tensions erupt in suspenseful episodes seasoned with gritty insults and an undercurrent of danger” (par. 1). This “undercurrent of danger” is perhaps part of the reason why there has been a rise in other, similarly themed shows, such as Discovery Channel’s *Lobster Wars* and History Channel’s *Ice Road Truckers*.

Most of these shows are the invention of Thom Beers, “the king of reality television - especially the genre called ‘macho TV’ or ‘testosterone-reality’” (Mann, par. 3). According to an article in *The Press Democrat*, “Beers currently has an eye-popping 10 blue-collar workplace shows running on six different cable channels” (par. 4). The mere number of these shows demonstrates their popularity, as well as the fact that the first incarnation, *Deadliest Catch*, is now in its fifth season and is the highest rated show on the Discovery Channel (par. 8). There has been a fair amount of speculation regarding their popularity, and TV critic Bill Mann has his own ideas. He believes that these shows have a specific formula that emphasizes “lots of jargon, especially the military type,” “a military-style hierarchy at the work site and always show the new guys learning hard lessons,” low production costs, “a manly writing style,” “a dash of insanity” and, of course, the promise of danger (pars. 13–20).

However, while all these shows focus on jobs considered treacherous, the emphasis on danger addresses only one aspect of their popularity and, in my opinion, misses a much more important theme. While crab fishing is dangerous, it is also essentially blue collar. The men aboard the crab vessels are working class, struggling with intense physical labor and hoping for the big haul. The job may be,

according to Discovery Channel, “lucrative” for some (a billion-dollar industry, in fact), but this does not change the reality that, for the fishermen, the work is physically demanding and the wages relatively low. In large part because of recent reforms to the crab-fishing industry, according to *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reporter Mike Lewis, “hundreds of jobs have been lost as consolidation puts employment and wealth in fewer hands” (par. 6). Moreover, since the reforms, “an estimated 735 deckhand jobs have been lost for red king crab alone, and more are expected” (par. 16). The reforms seem to have brought about a double-edged sword, as Lewis continues: “it’s true that remaining crews will need to catch twice as much crab to keep the same salaries, but they can be guaranteed more steady work” (par. 20). However, many “captains and deckhands” have “complained that the new system gave all of the bounty to the owners and processors but not the people who worked on the decks for them” (par. 19). In all, it is clear that work on a crab-fishing vessel is far from glamorous. Instead, it is a dangerous and demanding job that seldom reaps great rewards.

However, these facts do not seem to detract from the show’s popularity and, in fact, the representation of working-class males is part of the series’ appeal. The captains and deckhands on *Deadliest Catch* are not celebrities in the traditional sense of the word (though they have become cult figures as a result of the show’s success). Instead, they are hard-working “everymen” who aspire to the American Dream. They work hard, spending long stretches of time away from their families, while struggling to provide for them financially. Hale suggests that it is the way these men are depicted that may, in fact, contribute to the popularity of the show:

Presumably it’s this lurid focus on the dangers of rogue waves and flying ropes and dangling 800-pound steel crab pots that has made “*Deadliest Catch*” a cult hit. Otherwise there wouldn’t be three seasons’ worth of drama in the life of the crabbers, as opposed to those of top models or bounty hunters. Or at least that’s what the Discovery Channel seems to think. It’s possible that viewers are responding to the show’s other attractions, like the authenticity of its characters—these captains and bait boys and ship’s cooks are about as real as reality television gets—or the wintry beauty of its signature images of orange-clad fishermen against the lowering sky. (Hale, par. 3)

This “authenticity” is part of the show’s draw and one of the reasons why it proves so important within the realm of working-class studies. Nevertheless, one cannot help but ask whether the lives of the working class portrayed on the show are, in fact, authentic or realistic. This is, after all, reality TV in all its complexity. Hale continues, “as this third season starts, you’re forced to wonder whether the grounding in real work that makes the show stand out could be compromised” (par. 5). One could even assert that the emphasis on deadliness already compromises the integrity of the show, cashing in on danger and the possibility of injury or death. As with any reality show, of course, viewers are seeing the stylized, edited version of the creators’ and producers’ “reality.”

Moreover, there appears to be a move to market these real-life, working-class males as larger-than-life rock stars. As MSNBC’s De-Ann Welker points out:

[The producers] are trying to make the show’s “characters” into a new version of hard-living, do-as-they-please rock stars. It might seem like a stretch to compare an aging [crab fisherman] to a rock star, but watch the show and then take a look at the Rolling Stones. Their ways of life are sort of eerily similar: They’ve chosen careers that allow them to live the lives they enjoy without being tied down by normal social mores. And their bodies show the wear and tear of the rough-and-tumble life they’ve chosen. The show’s producers were clearly a step ahead of us on figuring out that death-defying, blue-collar work is the new rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle. (par. 11)

In the fifth season of *Deadliest Catch*, this emphasis on “the rough-and-tumble” life seems especially evident. One episode, titled “Mortal Men,” shows not only the dangerous aspects of below-freezing temperatures, rogue waves, and heavy, unpredictable equipment slamming against the boats’ decks, and sometimes the deckhands, but also the physical toll that the crab fishing lifestyle takes on these men. For both the captains and deckhands, staying awake for thirty-six plus hours is not unusual, as they work hard to meet their quotas within the ever-shrinking days of the crab fishing season or must finish their work before massive storms torment the Bering Sea. Their prescription for staying awake such long hours? A combination of nicotine, Red Bull, and adrenaline, which most surely begins to

impact their health. In fact, one of the most beloved captains on the series, Phil Harris of the F/V *Cornelia Marie*, passed away in 2010 from a pulmonary embolism, no doubt the result of his hard-living, hard-working lifestyle.

However, this emphasis on the men's mortality again explains the show's popularity. After all, many working-class jobs, even if they may not be as treacherous, do take a serious physical toll on workers. The men on the crab fishing vessels merely mirror many of the real-life struggles of the working class, which perhaps accounts for part of the show's popularity.

However, these issues do not detract from the more important aspect of the show: that what viewers see in this documentary series is working-class life at its most difficult and most dramatic. For many viewers, particularly those of the middle and upper classes, it may also be that this is one of their only views of working-class life. The corporate sponsorships of the show, most notably Lexus, demonstrate that the audience make up is most likely middle to upper class. As such, it is possible that *Deadliest Catch* opens up working-class life to an entirely new demographic. In the show, everyday work is interwoven with themes of the importance of family, a strong work ethic, and trying to make a living—all values inherent in the American Dream. This narrative of hard work and American values appears to be at the heart of the show and gives the audience a sense of how it might be read as a reflection of American cultural consciousness.

Deadliest Catch, then, is an important reflection of the American psyche at a particular historical moment. In a society that has long heralded the common man, and in a post-9/11 world that is even more interested in the working-class hero, it seems the media is seeking to mythologize and romanticize the working-class male. One may look no further than some of the language used to describe this new breed of reality shows to understand how these larger-than-life figures are being acclaimed as American icons: as Ned Martel puts it, "the men show the silent determination of other tightly knit laborers of love: quilters, graffiti artists, jigsaw puzzlers. They're in the upper reaches of the Atlantic, but to them it feels as if they're on top of the world" (par. 10). This romanticized version of the working class and of males more particularly, is probably the result of several factors, including 9/11 as Fehre points out. However, I would argue this

applause of working-class masculinity is also a result of how men are positioned in society as a whole. As Susan Faludi points out in *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*:

America is having a masculinity crisis. Angry White Males are becoming a voting bloc. Dads are deadbeat. Boys are on the rampage. And with each schoolyard shooting and presidential peccadillo, with each corporate sexual harassment lawsuit and laid-off worker gone beserk, the media offer up the stock pronouncements: Men are out of control, overcontrolling, dangerous, violent, and even, it as been written, obsolete. (par. 1)

In a media-saturated society that so often seems obsessed with what is wrong with American males, *Deadliest Catch* offers a refreshing alternative perspective: working-class men who are hard-working, adventurous, and striving for the American Dream. Equally important, the crab boats are not only sites of labor, but they are also communities of men, working together, towards a shared goal. Though charges of labor exploitation and corporate greed may exist within the larger crab industry, on each individual boat, there is a communal, familial atmosphere of solidarity and common values, a narrative that is really part of the American cultural fabric. As Hale points out:

After all, “*Deadliest Catch*” has its place, however small, in a great American tradition of maritime storytelling, from Herman Melville to Sebastian Junger. It’s just presenting the old story—days of boredom and mischief punctuated by moments of terror, the salty mix of danger and free enterprise and manly sentimentality—in reality TV terms. That means highlighting every brush with death, or at least minor injury, that the cameras were lucky enough to capture and using the daily business of crabbing as narrative glue between those scenes of mayhem. (Hale, par. 4)

Hale’s recognition of *Deadliest Catch* as part of an established cultural narrative focuses on both the dangerous nature of crabbing as well as how the series underscores the ins and outs of a specific blue-collar job.

While *Deadliest Catch* may be marketed as dangerous and deadly, it seems it is the triumph of the human spirit and the celebration of American working-class masculinity that is the more interesting

theme. One of the captains prominently featured on the series, Sig Hansen, even speculates why the series is so popular: he suggests “*Catch*’s 3 million primarily male fans are drawn to the series much as they are to Westerns. ‘We’re the last of the cowboys,’ he says. ‘You get to do your own thing, make your own decisions, go where you want to go and do what you want to do’” (qtd. in Johnson, par. 8–9). This statement is powerful and demonstrates not only the autonomy that is another of the show’s values but also how *Deadliest Catch* is really a part of American mythmaking. The series’ theme song further reflects this idea: Discovery Channel may be marketing the crabmen on their steel horses and teasing the viewer with uncertainties of whether they will return “dead or alive,” but it is really the celebration of American working-class masculinity and the values that suggests, which is both alive and well in this series, that is much more significant.

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