

11-14-2008

# Scripting the Unscripted: Gender and Sexual Orientation in Strategy-Genre Reality Television

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Scripting the Unscripted:  
Gender and Sexual Orientation in  
Strategy-Genre Reality Television

by

L. Elizabeth Zollner

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of English  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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Date of Approval:  
November 14, 2008

Keywords: hegemony, capitalism, popular culture, rhetoric, audience

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## Dedication

In loving memory of my mother  
Gertrude Pauline Loesche-Zollner

In honor of my spouse  
Joyce Ann Halstrom

With special love and gratitude to  
J, Jacko, Teddy, Livvie,  
Nick, Stella and Ollie

With many thanks to Debra Jacobs  
for her wisdom, guidance and love

In the hope that others might watch reality television  
with a critical eye and mind

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in Strategy-Genre Reality Television

L. Elizabeth Zollner

ABSTRACT

Since 2000, there has been an explosion of “reality,” or unscripted, television shows in a variety of formats. The series in which new societies are created in isolation appeared almost immediately to be influenced by certain identity constructs, particularly gender and sexual orientation. Audiences came to these shows with definite expectations already in place. I intend in this study to determine why this is so and what those expectations are.

*Survivor*, the germinal presentation of this genre, has as its motto “Outwit, Outplay, Outlast.” However, as the show has developed through many iterations, the ability to literally survive in a hostile environment has been eclipsed by what is now called “the social game” by contestant, viewers, producers and observers of the phenomenon.

Because of cultural stereotypes about gender, amateur review writers, along with regular viewers who frequent internet communications spaces, began to remark on how women win (when they do) compared to how men win, and to comment upon the various player behaviors and strategies in terms of sexual orientation, race, age and other constructs. Because I was hooked in the first *Survivor* series, and subsequently became interested in *Big Brother* as well, I

searched for information online and discovered the explosion of discussions. Despite all the other aspects of, and activities in, these games, the large majority of the texts seemed to center upon identity constructs. Although there is a great deal of strategy to observe and discuss, even that was frequently couched in what a viewer could expect of a person of given gender or sexual orientation.

It wasn't long before I began to perceive both the programs and the writing generated by them as texts that could be analyzed in terms of rhetorical appeals. Certain texts which might be expected to demonstrate credibility were ignored in favor of emotional reinforcement. Viewers and reviewers seemed most pleased with, and attributed the most credibility to, those speech acts and behaviors which resonated with their values and beliefs systems, regardless of their effectiveness

I found this trend interesting enough, and distressing enough, to examine in depth to learn how people read the texts of strategy-genre reality television. In general, there is a complete lack of critical viewing and no application of logic except by academics and journalists. Average viewers reject whatever does not match their belief system, even if that behavior wins the game. Feelings have eclipsed all else as the standard of credibility and value.

I conclude that credibility may only be derived from a text when feelings match viewer values. Of paramount importance in matching these values are the behaviors of the players, in that they must meet expectations in stereotype and tradition, and of course, the gender and sexual orientation of the winner.

## Chapter One

### The Genre Strategy of Competition Reality TV

#### Introduction

*Survivor* is now airing its 17<sup>th</sup> iteration, and is planning more, with no end in sight, since it began in the summer of 2000. It reigns supreme as the most successful example of strategy-genre reality television. I am designating as “strategy genre” those reality TV shows that feature a group of contestants whose unscripted activities and competitions throughout the time they live together, isolated from all others, provide weekly entertainment to TV viewers. Removed from their everyday routines and social conditions, the contestants have only their individual wits, talents, and physical abilities to rely on as they negotiate how best to live day to day with one another, making decisions all the while based on their sense of what will give them an advantage against those with whom they negotiate. Forming their own mini society, the contestants continue to dwindle in number as competitions occur that eliminate one or more of them until only one remains. The show title *Survivor* is thus unsurprisingly apt, and the show is not only the most successful of its kind, but as the first of its kind; it influenced the defining features of the many strategy-genre reality TV shows that followed.

Because I am examining what is a popular culture phenomenon, let me briefly take a cursory look at popular culture context selected historical moments and at the show’s point of origin, May 2000. Most people treated the year as the beginning of a new millennium. George W. Bush had recently taken office after



his appointment by the Supreme Court following questionable election results. There was still some nervousness about “Y2K,” a predicted electronics and communications disaster that never materialized. The internet had reached its stride with its own vernacular full of abbreviations, which were quickly taken up by text-messaging fans. Cell phones became cameras as well.

Vacations continued to be perceived as a frill, while serious people worked 60 hours a week or more. The money they made was often invested in real estate, and more and more people thought they’d give “flipping a house” a try as property values boomed.

As late capitalism shifted into overdrive, the rich and poor grew farther and farther apart as the diminished middle class held on in between by its fingernails, gaping in dismay as many technical and manufacturing jobs were shipped overseas. Left behind were the less well-paid service sector jobs, as well as the many menial tasks most white Americans simply will not do. Rushing in to fill the gap came waves of immigrants, many legal, but also many illegal. The Census Bureau reports that 10.4 of the population in 2000 consisted of immigrants, which is more than one of every ten persons (Camarota 1). Further, the Migration Policy Institute reports that in 2000, there were an estimated 8.5 million undocumented immigrants in 2000 (“Immigration Facts”). The ever-growing increase of immigrants continued to contribute to the already strained infrastructure and social systems of the nation to nearly a breaking point. According to the Center for Immigration Studies, the poverty rate of immigrants is 50% higher than US-born citizens and the use of welfare programs is 30-50%

higher. The Center even attributes “virtually all of the national increase in public school enrollment over the last two decades” to immigration (Camarota 1-2).

And still the notion persisted at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that capitalism works for everyone, and we could all be rich if we would work more hours, staying electronically connected to everyone else, especially at work, every waking moment. Accompanying extra money from working more was extra spending, if not on oneself, then on one’s children. Youth culture benefitted in conspicuous ways from parents’ greater earnings. Young males were still wearing Jenkos several sizes too large at \$75 a pair, but \$200 Diesels had also entered the picture. Young women, on the other hand, squeezed into less and less, with Bebe’s “Skinny Jeans” averaging around \$150 a pair. Even as gas prices continued to climb, reaching around \$1.50 per gallon during the summer of 2000—an increase of 25% from the previous summer’s average of \$1.17 (Energy Information Administration)—the popularity among teen drivers of the less than fuel efficient SUVs compelled more and more parents to purchase these vehicles for their children, and this despite the warnings from news reports that SUVs are particularly dangerous with new drivers behind the wheel (Stark).

Statistical data released by the US Census Bureau for the year 2000 revealed that equality between men and women and between whites and minorities still wasn’t realized in our paychecks. The gap between men and women earnings did narrow, but it did so more or less depending on age group. Basically, the older the age group, the greater the gap, as the 20-24 year-old women earned 91% of what their male counterparts earned, while the 55-64

year-old women earned just 68%. Also, whites across the boards earned more than blacks or Hispanics, with white men earning the most no matter what comparison was made. The wage gap was greatest between white men and white women, the latter earning overall only 74.7% as much (U.S. Department of Labor 1-2; 25).

Wages earned by most firefighters, police, teachers, nurses, and social workers barely enabled them to be classified as “middle class,” and many, in fact, made less than middle-class wages. Yet professional athletes continued to be paid astronomical salaries. While such salaries could indicate a great valuing of athleticism, the skyrocketing obesity rates make that interpretation questionable, to say the least. Instead, the rise in cost to go to a professional sporting event and the increase of televised sports point to the entertainment value offered by professional athletes. Looking ahead in 2000, sports enthusiasts were awaiting the excitement of the Summer Olympics, which were soon to be held in Sydney.

Although health- —or at least weight- —consciousness may not have been on the rise in the general population, religious values were. We were witnessing the growth of born-again, evangelical Christianity, along with Islam, both of which were growing like Topsy in the United States. The rise of religious fundamentalism in the United States did not begin precisely at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, of course; it would be more accurate to describe the growth of fundamentalism as *in medias res* at that point, continuing a trend that had begun some years earlier, both reflected by and aided by the then-popularity of our born-again Christian President. Popular culture offers evidence of the

population's embrace of conservative religious values, with such primetime TV shows as CBS's *Touched by an Angel* finding a place in the Nielsen's top-10 and Christian pop-rock groups such as Jars of Clay and Three Days Grace well reviewed by *Billboard* ("Ratings: Top 20, 1995-2000"; "Hot Christian Songs"). Top-selling books of 2000 also reflect the *in medias res* growth of Christian fundamentalism in the United States. Two books of the immensely popular Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind* series, apocalyptic Christian fiction novels that begin with the rapture, were released in 2000, as was the Christian self-help book *Boundaries in Marriage*, one of the several follow-up books to the successful, Gold Medallion Book Award winner *Boundaries*, all by Henry Cloud and John Townsend, Christian psychologists, co-hosts of a weekly national radio program, and award winning Christian authors.

While fundamentalist Christians began to worry about the upcoming release of the first *Harry Potter* movie, movie theaters had just enjoyed the money raked in by one of the top-grossing movies ever, the "first" *Star Wars* movie, which was actually the fourth ("Top Grossing Films"). Julia Roberts continued to grace the screen and impress the critics, winning the "Best Actress" Academy Award for *Erin Brockovich*, while Russell Crowe took the "Best Actor" Award for *Gladiator* ("Academy Awards USA"). Meanwhile, TV said 'goodbye' to *Beverly Hills 90210* and welcomed such newcomers or nearly new as *West Wing*, *CSI*, *The Fugitive* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*. One of the newcomers also soon became a smash hit: ABC's prime time game show *Who Wants to Be*

*a Millionaire*. But the biggest entertainment news was the newly minted “reality TV,” beginning with the first *Survivor*, which was shortly followed by *Big Brother*.

Although *Survivor*’s first season was broadcast prior to September 11, 2001, most of its programming has followed that date that sent so many in America groping for heroes. Police, firefighters and the military, all still male-dominated, filled that breach. Visible signs that patriotic values had skyrocketed included homemade “Let’s Roll!” banners on homeowners’ garages, “God Bless America” bumper stickers, and displays of the American flag—on front-lawn flagpoles, on tee-shirts, at community centers, and in every public elementary school, middle school, high school, college, and university classroom across the United States. All of the buttons of the American psyche had been pushed, and the only way to quiet the alarm bells was to reassure ourselves that our values were right and worth fighting for.

Whether as a result of the wounds inflicted on 9/11, or simply because of the politically polarized culture in which that event occurred, I submit that the success of strategy-genre reality TV shows, and of *Survivor* in particular, owes in large part to the way such shows yield the “right” winners. The right winners are those who elicit the feelings viewers need to maintain their sense of safety, security, and moral rectitude. What must be maintained, then, is the *status quo*, the familiar hegemonic order that constructs a person’s sense of self and other. The success of strategy-genre reality TV may also be attributable to its ability to provide—even more so than TV shows in general—a way to escape, for a time, one’s own reality, an escape from an unstable society over which an individual

may feel she or he has very little control. Regular viewing may offer a way to live through an experience vicariously, a viewer imagining what it's like to help create and succeed within a brand-new society. The competition aspect of strategy-genre TV likely helps to foster a viewer's imagined existence in the newly created society. In a "correct" society, the "right" person will emerge victorious. And the correct society is the one that is as familiar, "right," and "good" as it used to be prior to 9/11/01, if not even more so. What is not familiar, right, and good is that which is marked as "Other." Although there have always had "Others," some of these former "Others" were slowly assimilating until within the last decade or so. Now, some are being re-Othered, such as women, and the Otherness has intensified of homosexuals, Arabs, non-Christians, pacifists, academics and possibly other sectors of society. This may not all be strictly our reaction, as a culture, to 9/11, as we were quite the binary Us/Other bunch right up to that point, and the disaster has likely contributed to continuous and escalating polarization.

Even though with each iteration of *Survivor* comes the creation of a "new" society, the society conforms to the status quo American culture, a conformity reflected most conspicuously by those on the show who are marked as "Other." As Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn write in their introduction to their book *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*, "The politics of reality TV is a cultural politics. It is usually concerned with 'social difference' . . . [and] with the politics of identity" (3). Both professors of media and cultural studies at London's Roehampton University's School of Arts, Biressi and Nunn are interested in particular with

identity politics of class, which they see operating in *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, two of the programs discussed in various chapters of their book. They note, for example, that “the participants are presented as classed subjects,” and they observe that for a contestant to have a chance at winning, he or she must be neither too wealthy or cultured nor too “trashy” or uncultured (151). Although my investigation does not concern class in a technical sense, I would contend that discriminations based on identity politics of any kind invoke what for all intents and purposes are class hierarchies. And considering the issue of class in a technical sense—i.e., money—I believe that critical analyses of the cultural phenomenon that is reality TV are important for the inroads they make toward fostering a more critical viewing audience. For a practical “problem” and even moral dilemma is that viewers pay for what they view on TV without critical thought. I agree with Biressi and Nunn that the bottom line is money; it is always money in a capitalist culture (95). Producers, performers, and sponsors are trying to get it from the viewing audience. In theory, people will not pay for entertainment they don’t enjoy. It turns out, though, that plenty of people are paying to see the strategy genre of reality television, suggesting that they enjoy it or at least are not so offended that they will all at once boycott the products thereby advertised. The monetary cost, as well as the psychological cost, is even greater for us as a culture, given the additional options for paying provided by the producers, such as live internet feeds, e-mail and text-message bulletins, and souvenir items, along with the usual products and services advertised by the sponsors.

In a less conspicuous way—and therefore more crucial to recognize-- “reality” television game shows are additionally useful to late capitalism because they perpetuate values and beliefs of capitalism simply by reflecting in microcosm the social system of capitalism without there being, presumably, any predetermination to do so. In other words, it is perhaps the case that reality television strategy-genre shows are even more useful to capitalism because the contestants have the option of behaving in a non-standard manner in order to win, yet time and again, they return to the behaviors that are approved of and encouraged by hegemonic forces in our culture. In fact, the contestants may be so constructed by status quo culture as to be unable to deviate from the “norm.” The contestants, not the producers, create the new society and thus determine what is right and good. Right and good, then, seem to emerge naturally, reinforcing the notion that what is right *is* Right, what is good *is* Good. It just so happens that what is right and good matches what the American status quo has constructed as right and good. It stands to reason that when viewers witness that with which they are familiar and secure reconstituted “naturally,” it becomes exceedingly difficult for them to recognize the manipulation and cooptation that has occurred.

In this work I will demonstrate that, in short, to these viewers, it’s all about feeling: feeling good, secure, right, moral, and possibly many other descriptors of correctness and belonging, especially to a majority. They want reassurance that they are right, and that the Others, whoever they are, constitute a minority that won’t upset the “classed” hierarchies to which they are accustomed. Strategy-



genre reality television has been delivering this electronic pacifier since the original American *Survivor*, in Borneo, first aired.

### Reality TV Meets Game Show

As can be surmised, what we currently label “reality” television is not, exactly, real; it’s simply unscripted. Performers or contestants are placed in highly unlikely yet highly structured situations and challenged to abide by the rules, win the sub-contests, remain in the game the longest and win the grand prize. These circumstances are only vaguely and distantly related to real life in Western/ized civilizations, although our values frequently remain intact inside the game parameters, for better or for worse.

Scholars have already taken issue with the concept of reality, because most viewers already realize the reality is, at least to some extent, contrived. It is not “real” to wear a loincloth and compete for food in a swimming pool full of goop and gigantic puzzle pieces. Mark Andrejevic points out that viewers may be beginning to accept television reality as real in fact, even though producers admit to manipulation of events during editing (Andrejevic “Kinder” 264, 261; Bignell 95; Biressi and Nunn 26). Even as we agree that the situation is unlikely, we come to accept the behavior within the situation as authentic.

It is not a large cognitive leap from “real” (because we saw it happen) to “normal” because we heard and saw a “normal” person (i.e., not an actor) doing it. As humans we tend to extrapolate from one “normal” incident to a group “norm.” Children love to do this to their parents. They declare “everyone” is doing

it when in fact only the most popular or cool among their peers may be doing it. As adults, we do it to ourselves. We must all have the latest iPhone because the iPhone is the new norm, even though it is clearly, at least for the moment, new and unique. Long before Andrejevic, Max Horkheimer in 1968 remarked, “Popularity no longer has anything to do with the content or the truth of artistic production” (“Art” 290). Truth is beside the point now, in reality TV, even more than in the mass culture of 1968.

Game shows can claim to be the first reality programming. They actually predate television because they first aired on radio. Thus, the game and “reality” factors both precede reality television by many decades.

The innovation of filming unscripted activities for entertainment began with the original *Candid Camera* in the late 1940s. There was no game element to this program. It was simply an opportunity to observe human reactions to unusual situations, and thus it had the unpredictability and novelty needed to pique viewer interest. These concepts are still working because “cop” shows, sports, a new *Candid Camera*, the Canadian *Just for Laughs*, and courtroom situations made just for TV are still being produced.

Innovative producers, looking for something to attract a demanding new generation, hit upon something fairly unusual in the 1970s: *An American Family*. Closely resembling a documentary, *An American Family* offered viewers the opportunity to watch a family’s activities and interactions. Twenty or so years later, MTV developed *The Real World*, which has been produced in many locations with some cast overlap. The innovation here was that the cast was not

a family or group of friends; instead, it was a group of strangers in a communal living experience.

The shows I have indicated as providing “unscripted activities for entertainment” might well be called “reality situation-dramas.” Such shows lack prizes (though some offer gifts or even salaries), and there is no competition centered on playing some sort of game. Viewers tune in, presumably, with one simple question in mind: “What will a family/group of people do while we’re watching?” For whatever voyeuristic reasons, many viewers were content just to watch other people’s lives. Then again, many were not. *An American Family* appeared only on PBS, and *The Real World* appears only on MTV, a cable network. Strategy-genre reality shows are carried by major broadcast networks and later appear in syndication on cable. This does not make them “better” in quality, but it does indicate a larger and broader range of audience.

It was a relatively short step from *The Real World* to *Survivor: Borneo*, which premiered in 2000, as did *Big Brother*. It wasn’t a direct step; both of these shows had origins in other ideas or productions having to do with games, survival, competition, and the like. But in both cases, the additional element was money, not in the form of a salary or wages, although contestants do get paid, but in the form of a grand prize of half a million dollars or more.

Combining elements of game shows with reality shows has taken hold in a big way, creating an entire genre of what is often referred to as “competition reality TV.” Because the genre consists of many different shows—and, I find, different *kinds* of shows—it can be useful to designate subgenres. I am dividing

up competition reality TV into three subgenres: performance, romance, and strategy. Shows such as *Dancing with the Stars*, *Top Chef*, and *American Idol* are examples of current, highly successful performance reality TV. The romance subgenre of competition reality TV includes *Bachelor* and *Joe Millionaire*, among a couple dozen others. Strategy reality TV, which is the subgenre that contextualizes the subject under investigation in this work, includes—in addition to a host of others—NBC's *Big Brother*, ABC's *The Mole*, and CBS's *Survivor*. Besides being the most successful and most popular strategy-genre program, *Survivor* can be credited (or blamed) for paving the way for the many others that followed it. In fact, *Survivor* initiated the broader genre of competition reality TV in the first place.

#### Strategy-Genre Reality TV

Strategy is a component of all three types of competition reality TV programs I have identified. It is that component which involves the contestants' critical thinking abilities: interpretive skills, by which contestants gain insights about the other contestants and thereby attempt to position themselves to their own best advantage; and rhetorical skills, by which contestants attempt to influence the perceptions of the other contestants so as to create or dismantle alliances. By far, critical thinking abilities affect the outcomes of strategy-genre reality TV shows more than the performance and romance genres. This is not to say that strategy is everything, as there is certainly an element of luck as well. But in *Survivor* and other similar shows, such as *Big Brother*, strategy based on

critical thinking is continuously necessary. As with other competition reality TV shows, the game element means that the goal is to win, to be the last one “left standing,” and the incentive to vie for that victory is a huge payoff for that single person—that “survivor.”

*Survivor* and *Big Brother* debuted in the US in the same year with something in common: they had been tried elsewhere first, namely the United Kingdom. The shows' producers, Mark Burnett (*Survivor*) and John De Mol (*Big Brother*), were able to benefit from the earlier versions, eliminating errors and adapting their shows to North American audiences. One such adaptation entailed ensuring that the programs were high on innuendo but low on graphic sex. For *Survivor*'s entire 16 seasons through spring 2008, there has not been a single sex scene, and *Big Brother 4* was the first (and only until the recently-completed *Big Brother 10*) to produce an act of intercourse, although the broadcast portions were indistinct: the act took place completely under a blanket. In the most recent series, *Big Brother 10*, the airing of the one instance of sexual relations was confined to cable and the internet; it was not aired on broadcast television at all. The lack of real sex hasn't been a problem because there is always the suggestion of sex, the opportunity for sex, the hope of sex. Indeed, *Survivor* has spawned a married couple.

The distinct North American flavor is provided in other ways besides veiled sex: larger cash prizes than anywhere else, a generally young cast, a lush tropical location or a fancy house. Both *Survivor* and *Big Brother* also cast a disproportionate number of would-be entertainers, many of whom are surgically

“enhanced,” along with quirky personalities, which reflect the North American emphasis on individuality and obsession with youth, beauty, celebrity, and publicity. That being said, this individuality and quirkiness occupy a very small slice of the available continuum of human variety in almost any aspect one can name, from age to socioeconomic status, as will be demonstrated in greater detail in an examination I offer later.

Having debuted within a few weeks of each other with casts of similar sizes, these two shows had a great deal more in common: gender parity, isolation, the aforementioned large cash prizes, and the removal of one contestant per week of programming, a procedure unheard of in previous television game programming. In addition to the difference between the two shows in terms of, of course, location, the only truly significant difference between *Survivor* and *Big Brother* was the way the two shows determined the contestant to be eliminated. It was a difference that nearly resulted in the failure of *Big Brother* after its first season. At least, that was how the producers seemed to feel about it; following *Survivor*'s success, *Big Brother* was revamped and reappeared the following summer with a voting procedure very similar to *Survivor*'s. Now it fills in the hiatus periods between *Survivor* seasons. *Big Brother* is also rushed into production during writers' strikes.

That a difference in the way the two shows eliminated a contestant each week might contribute to the success of one and the near failure of another merits some consideration. In the first production of *Big Brother*, contestants nominated one another for eviction from the house. The two houseguests with

the most nominations were then at the mercy of the viewing audience, who voted for eviction by phone for a small charge. Given the financial security of one of the two awaiting eviction or the continuation of houseguest privileges, the charge posed little obstacle. Family and friends paid for special phone lines and campaigned for calls from the rest of the audience. The contestants were urged to campaign on the air as well, and so the outcome was, predictably, a popularity contest based on money.

Viewer ratings of *Big Brother* dropped, the American cultural narrative of the “American Dream” apparently having been violated. The solution, as far as recapturing ratings, was to cut the viewers out of the equation as *Survivor* had always already done. The second season of *Big Brother* introduced the Head of Household—the HoH. This person, determined by a sub-contest, nominated two players for eviction, and all contestants not nominated did the voting on which of the two potential evictees would be ousted. The attention of the houseguests was thus focused inside their own “society,” on themselves and on one another, eliminating the blatant pandering to the viewers that made contestants appear inauthentic, insincere. Never mind that the target of the pandering merely shifted from the viewing audience to fellow contestants. In any case, the end result was that, after a stumble in the *Big Brother* eviction format, the two shows, now airing at different times of the year unless there should be a writers’ strike, resemble one another so closely that *Big Brother* has been nicknamed “*Survivor* in a box” by insiders and fans. In other words, the games are similar enough now that they can be examined as if one in the same show. Although I will not adopt that

approach exactly, choosing to focus primarily on the strategy-genre reality TV show *Survivor*, I will at points also include relevant comparisons to *Big Brother*. The extent to which *Big Brother* is regarded as a *Survivor* “spin-off,” I believe, warrants occasional references to the very similar show.

Before proceeding with a focused, critical examination of strategy-genre reality TV and of the specific show *Survivor* in particular, I think it is important to describe the main components of such programs. This objective further warrants an inclusion of *Big Brother* along with *Survivor*, as any sort of generalized descriptions about the elements of the genre requires, necessarily, references to more than one instance of the genre. For the remainder of this chapter, I will describe, both generally and critically, the participants of the strategy-genre; the kinds of games—competitions—designed for the genre; the settings of the shows, which whether “on-location” or “exotic” have similar physical characteristics and challenges; the internal challenges contestants face that are crucial to the outcome of the games but that are not directly tied to the competitions; the “props”—artifacts—typical to the shows, including those that are designated as assets/liabilities to particular participants; and the viewers of the shows, or at least the viewers as they are disclosed by their responses to the shows.

I end this chapter with a look at one final component of strategy-genre reality TV: the identity constructs that are foregrounded by the shows. Among the various identity constructs, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, age, physicality, educational level, and so on, the identities of



gender and, closely connected, sexual orientation, are disclosed by the programs as the most meaningful markers of an individual, meaningful in the sense of imparting some sense of the individual's relative worth—or, perhaps more accurately—worthiness, in terms of what is right and good as opposed to what is not. A more thorough examination of gender and sexual orientation, then, is continued in Chapter Two.

### The Participants

The participants include anyone involved in the production or consumption of the strategy genre of reality television. They fall into four groups, and the more of these programs that are produced, naturally the more players are involved. The four groups are producers, sponsors, contestants, and audience. Critical observers in academia and journalism are a subset of the audience group.

As I argue throughout this work, these groups are involved in one way or another with reinforcing the values and beliefs of the dominate culture of the United States—save, perhaps, the subgroup of critical observers in academia and journalism. This is not to say that there is a conspiracy within or among the groups of those involved in strategy-genre TV. Indeed, if such a conspiracy existed, I should think it would be relatively easy to expose it. Instead, what I am arguing is that there is a complicity with the dominant culture of which those who perpetuate its values and beliefs are at best barely conscious and, more likely in most cases, is beneath the critical radar of the vast majority of those who, unbeknownst to them, buy into the values and beliefs of the dominant ideology.

The insidious aspect of such complicity is that everyone involved performs the very labor that reinforces the ideological support structures that make the appeal of “grand prize” so compelling in the first place. There is an “all about me” attitude that is a staple of American culture, the admiration for the millionaire entrepreneur who appears to have risen to the top by dint of an all-American spirit of rugged individualism. It is an attitude that has spurred capitalism forward, reinforcing the support beams that maintain the boundaries between the dominant, “ruling” class and everyone else.

To repeat, a conspiracy would be relatively easy to expose—at least compared to the forces of hegemony, so-named by Antonio Gramsci to designate those multitudinous ways in which the dominate culture of a social group expresses its ideology—its values and beliefs—in virtually all spheres of social life. But even this is not quite correct, for if only one agent—the ruling class—expressed its ideology, it might still be not such a thorny path to uncover a given value or belief back to its “source.” It’s not even so “simple” as to determine the legions of those who champion the dominant ideology. For, as Gramsci has indicated, hegemony not only involves but necessarily *depends on* a lack of critical awareness. It is precisely due to the hegemonic lack of critical awareness that is important to conduct critical investigations of all kinds of expressions of classed hierarchies within popular culture, even the most mundane—or perhaps especially the most mundane. Following Gramsci, Biressi and Nunn would contextualize such analyses inside the rubric of class, and I do not disagree with this understanding/method. However, I would, again,

underscore that what is meant by the political identity of class is not limited to economic status. Instead, class includes those aspects of identity that most likely contribute to a rise in a person's economic position, whether by monetary capital or by cultural capital measures. Most assuredly, these are aspects that would not mark a person as "Other," or at least not on multiple fronts or in ways more "Othered" than others.

The logical group with whom to begin our examination of strategy-genre participants, their motives and behaviors, is the *producers*. Producers invent and stage the programs, hire staff, lure advertisers, screen contestants, and listen for feedback from the audience in the forms of ratings and other means of assessment. Without producers, there would be no involvement of any other group. The producers, in effect, are the writers of the text. The contestants merely act it out.

While it is highly unlikely that John De Mol of *Big Brother* or Mark Burnett of *Survivor* were drawing upon either panopticism or its philosophy (at least, not consciously) when developing their programming, the framework is still there. They certainly adapted the surveillance tactics they found already embedded in our cultures, but not for the purpose of philosophical, rhetorical, or textual analysis. They utilized the many surveillance strategies available to them in order to have limitless options in presentation, options that would assist them in gaining and maintaining viewers. Utilizing the many recording options available, the production crew is then capable of choosing those portions of what has been

recorded for the TV audience to see and hear, parts that include or disinclude what would be considered “normal” or in accordance with “common sense.” Let me hasten to add that the determination of what is normal or common sense appears to depend on audience analysis. An audience would not accept the producers’ determinations; the credibility of the producers is a matter of speculation to the viewing audience. Likewise, the contestants are not well-known experts in strategy or interpersonal relations. They are everyday people deemed to be just like those who are viewing the shows. (We’ll overlook the fact that a good number of the participants have aspirations of becoming actors or otherwise famous persons.) And like the everyday person who views the shows, a contestant will be “rewarded” for behaving normally and “punished” for out-of-bounds behaviors, often regardless of whether she or he actually “hurt” someone or violated a stated rule. Since the code of conduct and the social mores, clearly, have been transported from US culture rather than created anew, there is little need for the TV audience to turn on its critical thinking abilities. There is little need to evaluate whether something is “good” or “bad”, “right” or “wrong” when an entire category of behaviors has already been evaluated for us.

The producers need not locate a cast of contestants unless and until they can pay them and all the rest of the production staff. The financing comes from *sponsors*, the second group to become involved. Sponsors can be very skittish. They shy from controversy, especially in broadcast network programming. Various sociopolitical altercations have erupted throughout broadcast history

because sponsors were slow to “endorse,” for example, heterosexual couples in the same bed, pregnant women, interracial kissing, persons with AIDS, persons who had same-sex attractions (Murphy screens 1-2). Sexuality is always a problem in any form or format, yet sex sells, and thus producers who need sponsors must walk the line between the boundaries of what is “socially acceptable” or “non-controversial.” Material not meeting these parameters, which are dependent on the prevailing values of the moment, is produced on cable channels for smaller audiences who are willing to pay more for it. One warning sign of a strengthened hegemony is the reification (or ossification, in the Habermasian sense) of a particular set of values as “normal” and “common sense” (45, 50). This makes critical thought on the part of the masses as unnecessary as it is unwelcome.

*Contestants* are chosen to represent a range of cultural/social demographics. In fact, Biressi and Nunn suggest that contestants are selected in part to represent “stereotypes of diverse identities that populate contemporary media culture—lesbian or gay, black, heterosexual bachelor, twenty-thirty something white ‘Essex’ girl or boy, stud, tart, shy loner” (151). The contestants are also selected according to the extent to which they show potential for contributing to a relatively high level of conflict. As Ellis Godard, professor of sociology specializing in conflict management, discusses in his article “Reel Life: The Social Geometry of Reality Shows,” when producers first create and later “adjust” the cast or the game by re-selecting, re-playing, re-shooting and the like,

and the contestants are aware of this, the contestants will in turn adjust their behavior in the game as they play it (74). If the potential for conflict isn't realized as "promised," the game is changed to force conflict (as in the tribal swap first seen in *Survivor: Africa*). If that doesn't result in sparks, scenes are cobbled together or edited to create an episode of conflict. If contestants sense manipulation, they adjust to please the producers, and probably to avoid many hours of re-takes in hot sun or cold downpours. Finally, viewers, even those who are aware of the various levels of manipulation, clamor for more, "justifying" the practice for the producers.

Strategy game shows, via producers and sponsors, also push certain agendas by presenting particular activities. Remember there are hundreds, even thousands of hours of footage from which to choose, so one wonders if all of the praying we see is really necessary to the story line (Cavender 160). A possible reason for this is offered by Rebecca Stephens: "It is now a commonplace that television has become the shared public sphere of an increasingly fragmented nation . . ." (193). It is a place where people can go to share values and be reinforced in them. When they see all the praying (usually to the Christian God) that permeates reality television, they must feel relieved and hopeful, and always eager to tune in again. After all, these are real people really praying. What could be more comforting? Based on his studies of fandom, which he contextualizes within a focus on *Survivor* in his article "Jump in the Pool': the Competitive Culture of *Survivor* Fan," Derek Foster reminds us that, no matter what the viewer sees, the point is to reinforce traditional values and the reality of viewers'

interpersonal conflicts (285). Either the viewer agrees with the behavior of the players, or hates it and watches, hoping the villains will be thrown out of the game by the good guys.

It is also interesting and important to consider the behavior and attitude of the contestants on the strategy sub-genre game shows. Whatever they think going in, they are soon shaped by the experience and presented as the sponsors and producers think best for their bottom line. Some participants buy into the scheme, some rebel and others remain clueless or are apathetic. Mark Andrejevic, a professor of media studies who is a leading researcher in the area of reality TV and culture, has made several cogent observations of these phenomena. First, audiences realize the cast is being manipulated, along with the programs. Those who watch *Big Brother* live feeds make other viewers aware of the degree to which activities in the house are staged (*Reality TV* 121, 132). The problem is exacerbated by the realization that this is not done to improve the quality of the entertainment. Andrejevic writes "The result is a form of demystification that is not at all empowering: the manipulative character of prime-time programming is conceded and simultaneously portrayed as a given and unchangeable feature of the medium" (122). It's here to stay and our choice is to accept it and like it, or accept it and not like it. Many viewers dislike it intensely. They seem to feel that a win by anyone who could not physically compete successfully in every challenge is tainted, and this taint is likely to fall on women.

Good examples of how this works occurred on *Survivor: Africa* and *Marquesas* where older people were eliminated by a youth bloc (catering to the

audience demographic) and where the lazy bloc united against the worker bees (Godard 87). This provided something for everyone: heroes for the majority of viewers, villains for quite a few of the rest. Everyone kept watching.

The contestants are also forced or manipulated into accepting and furthering the hegemonic agenda. The most peculiar evidence of this is the gratitude so many of them express for “the experience” (of making millions of dollars for the sponsors). They turn down chances to win large amounts of money by leaving the show early, and/or stay in the game because “the experience” of being controlled and observed is “priceless” (Bignell 145). Viewers do the same thing by asking for more of the same, like some sort of collective Oliver Twist. If we ask for gruel, we’ll get it, especially if nothing but gruel presents itself as an alternative to starvation.

Classed value hierarchies are so thoroughly entrenched that they act against an individual’s inclination to win. Some examples are fairness (*Outback*) androcentrism (*Borneo, Africa, Vanuatu*), and loyalty (virtually all, including *All Stars*). Fear of appearances back home has led many players to act against their self-interest. Although this horrifies strategists, those players who indeed place strategy and winning above other values are vilified among fans and in the press (*Borneo, Thailand*; Thackaberry 165-66; Chvasta and Fassett 215).

The contestants further comply with hegemonic values by gradually eliminating the less-favored identity constructs from the game. The producers honestly don’t care who wins or is eliminated, or if the audience likes the outcome or not, as long as they tune in to watch the conflicts and support the



sponsors, the sponsors' products, and the capitalist value system that sits on top. The trick, however, is to tell them what to want, and then give them that, to keep them hooked.

More or equally disturbing is the way in which viewers are roped into echoing the sponsors' and producers' "values" systems. Although they may often be conservative themselves, and have a conservative, political and capitalist agenda, paradoxically they are faced with the issue that sex sells (Bignell 44). They tell us we must accept certain content, such as sex and violence, to keep the ratings up on our favorite shows so that they will stay in production. Thus, viewers become concerned when there isn't "enough" sex and violence. The sponsors then claim they are giving the audience what it wants: sex and violence (134-35). This is fine as long as the sex, implied, imaginary or obscured, is straight and not visually explicit, since this is the only kind of sex seen on broadcast strategy-genre reality television in the United States thus far.

*Viewers* make up the largest of all participant groups, and we should not for a minute think of them as a disparate and isolated number of individuals choosing and watching programming independent of outside influences or of each other. Far from it; viewers are in constant contact with other aspects not only of the what Louis Althusser termed the culture portion of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) but with other ISAs, all of the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), and, through personal relations and electronic communications, significant numbers of other viewers (182, 295, 319-20).

Viewers are constantly told what to watch by family, co-workers, friends, the government, religious institutions, education systems, the media and even total strangers they encounter on the internet. Not only are they told what to watch, but what to watch *for*, how to watch, and what to do if they don't like what they see or hear.

The danger is that so few people who watch these programs grasp that the shows themselves function as part of the culture ISA to keep them in their unquestioning and compliant state. They just want the rush of being right, and if they don't get it from the show, they'll get it from complaining about the results with others who share their values.

John Podhoretz, who writes for the *New York Post* and the *Weekly Standard*, reinforces this idea of a pathos-as-ethos utopia in his analysis: "Whatever its faults, and they were manifold, *Survivor* became a sensation in part because it offered viewers a heady mix of fantasy fulfillment and honest emotion" (50). While I agree with him I doubt the mass of viewers would see or agree to his point. Nor would I expect them to, because average North Americans are simply not that self-aware or introspective. To most viewers, unfortunately, it's just an electronic circus in which Christians are eaten by lions. It's an acceptable way to vent rage at our own helplessness, and reinforce what feels good, and must therefore be right. Hegemonic forces can make use of this directed rage by making sure the targets are "appropriate," or "Others."

We allow ideology to trick us into thinking we are in control of the system. We watch television uncritically and pretend what we see is working for us all, a

sort of mass false consciousness we aid and abet daily. The outcomes are “right” and the way things are “supposed” to be, and that’s what we need and want to see, because we believe we are part of, and have a say in all this, and thus a say in what is “right.” Television shows, among many other texts, deliver the pathos, the values with which we identify, so that we will be complacent and content. The hegemonic structure is secure. Otherwise, we’d be obliged to set off that social revolution which has yet to materialize.

We should also keep in mind that viewers, while nearly powerless as individuals, can have a major influence on programming if they unite in sufficient numbers. The legendary retention of *Star Trek* by DesiLu for an additional season in the 1960s was effected by a massive grass-roots letter-writing campaign (“Star Trek”). With modern technology the impact has been even greater, witness the outcome, discussed earlier, of allowing viewers to vote each week to evict players from the first US *Big Brother*. The drop in ratings after the stereotypically acceptable players were eliminated almost ended the American *Big Brother* phenomenon. Once again, critical thought, this time in the form of player and viewer initiative, was wiped out. The power of the vote was recognized, apparently deemed too influential and therefore eliminated. And since viewership recovered the next season, clearly the audience approved of being left out of the decision-making process.

As previously discussed, panopticism plays a role in creating and maintaining hegemony, and it works both ways. We are watched by hierarchic elements and by each other, so that any aberration may be observed and

corrected. But, by placing a group of contestants in a panoptic situation, we become the watchers. This provides an example to us of how the hierarchy would have us behave. We are thus given a chance to create feelings that translate to the credibility of the producers and the show, and so we are motivated to purchase the sponsors' goods and services (Andrejevic, *Work* 2-3). This observation/influence hegemony cycle is fine-tuned as producers observe the audience to see what keeps them watching and buying (Andrejevic, *Work* 14).

## The Games

Both *Survivor* and *Big Brother* are cases of social Darwinism for a prize. Each show requires the removal of approximately one contestant per broadcast week until one is left. While the two games, or formats, differ in minor details, the procedure is the same.

1. A group of contestants who are strangers to one another (with some exceptions introduced occasionally as “twists”) meet at a setting they have never seen. Here they are to create a society in isolation from all others until the game is over.
2. Every week, there are sub-contests to award privileges, prizes or immunity from elimination. *Survivor* has an immunity challenge almost every week. Until there are only ten surviving players, they are split into two, three or four sub-groups called “tribes.” These tribes are given names from the local culture, and the players wear a bandana or “buff”

in their tribal colors. When they are competing as a tribe, the whole tribe shares either the immunity or other reward.

3. Whichever tribe loses the immunity challenge goes to Tribal Council and votes off a member. The winners don't go to Tribal Council. Whichever tribe wins a reward shares it, and the losers get nothing.
4. Each tribe has its own beach or camp on *Survivor*, while *Big Brother* contestants all live together in a big house full of recording equipment. On *Big Brother*, there are no tribes. Each player plays alone, unless a twist forces them into a couple, team or other small group. *Big Brother* also has luxury, food and veto challenges, and some of the challenges make them play in teams, but these are random and last only for the duration of a challenge.
5. The challenges are designed to pit tribes or individuals against one another, sometimes also causing friction or fractures in alliances, which are the relationships players make on their own to get further into the game. In general, a player with no alliances cannot win. Most players try to have more than one, each kept secret from the others.
6. The alliances were not an original part of the game, but were invented by Richard Hatch, the first winner of the first *Survivor*. Neither of these games has been played without alliances since that time.
7. While *Survivor* is set in a primitive location with almost no facilities, tools, food or any necessity, *Big Brother* is enclosed in a house with a yard, pool and hot tub, so that there is no physical danger or

deprivation. A good illustration of the difference is that on *Big Brother*, the loss of a food challenge can put half the players on a peanut butter and jelly diet for a week. On *Survivor*, a peanut butter sandwich, no jelly, is a reward.

8. Toward the end of the game, in both cases, losing players become the jury which will award the win to one of the remaining two or three players. The size of the jury and the number of finalists may vary from season to season.
9. At the finale of each show, the finalists address the jury and answer questions from each juror. The jurors then vote to award the grand prize.
10. The object of the game, therefore, is to eliminate as many players as possible and then to convince the jury that you are more deserving than the other remaining finalist(s). This means that you must convince those you ejected to give you money, and normally some of these will be people with whom you had alliances and to whom you broke promises.

## The Settings

As alluded to above, the settings for the games are quite different.

*Survivor* was inspired by an earlier Mark Burnett show, *Eco-Challenge*, “arguably the world’s toughest expedition race . . . across the world’s most brutal landscapes” (Burnett 9). The similarity only begins there, because *Survivor*

contestants are also fully exposed to the elements but have fewer, if any tools with which to feed or protect themselves. The only difference is, they are not racing, but toughing it out in one spot. Burnett goes on to explain that the climate and deprivations were the smallest part of completing the *Eco-Challenge*, and interpersonal relations and cooperation, or lack thereof, were by far the more difficult elements. The greatest challenge is intended to be the other players and not the environment. This is the main element of *Survivor* (9-10).

Only a few series have started the players off with food or supplies of any kind. Sometimes they have a chance to strip the ship that carries them to their camps. Other times they are stripped of all their belongings and sent off in whatever clothes they have on their backs. On one show every player had a machete and each tribe had a crate of food. On other shows, there was only one machete and a pot for boiling water on each beach. Some shows provide a water source such as a well. Other series force the players to desalinate and/or boil whatever water they can find. Sometimes they are given a flint for starting fires. Sometimes they have to use their eyeglasses or rub sticks together.

In the *Survivor* locations, there are always plenty of insects, heat and rain. Misery is the order of the day, and until the contestants build a shelter, there's no escaping it, and usually not much escape after they build one, either. While they may be supplied with sun screen, there is no insect repellent. There are some slit trenches for toilets, and that's all, and that means no toilet paper, either. No electricity or other power is available, not even flashlight batteries. This is why it's so important to earn flint, usually the initial reward challenge prize. As to food,

they fish, collect snails and gather fruit if they can. A lot of time is spent whacking coconuts. Some of the other early rewards might be fishing gear, a tarpaulin, a blanket, a lantern and the like. If they don't build some sort of sleeping platform, they have to sleep on the ground, along with the insects, reptiles and rodents that populate the area. If they happen to find a cave, they also find bats. More than once, contestants have been driven by hunger to eat everything (bats, rats, worms) cooked or raw.

The *Big Brother* house changes from season to season, but there's always something wrong with it. The décor is generally hideous, though not uncomfortable. One year there were luxurious beds and military cots to squabble over. On another occasion some of the beds were too short for an adult. Not all of the beds are single, and so some must be shared. Sometimes one bedroom is hidden behind moveable walls or secret doors and the players must find it or go without beds until they do. There is only one bathroom, with one toilet, for the entire house except the Head of Household, who has a private one for the period of their reign. Of course the cameras and microphones are ubiquitous, and they swivel and slide to follow the players, even into the water closet. This camera, however, is not supposed to be activated unless more than one person goes in at a time, nor are the ones in the two shower stalls. The yard is completely enclosed so that only the sky is visible. For various contests, any number of bizarre things, such as eggs, foam or slime, might come flying over the walls from outside. Sometimes the contestants are imprisoned in a small, temporary glass house with dead fish, flies or both for an endurance contest.



On *Big Brother*, the food is pretty basic, and must be earned. It can also be taken away, or a fancy meal might be a reward. People who win good food eat it in the presence of those on the prison diet as circumstances dictate. They must all wear lavalier mikes all the time, and are subject to the constant commands and demands of the disembodied *Big Brother* voice (male or female).

Another difference is the medical situation. *Big Brother* has a psychiatrist available all the time in case of mental strain. *Survivor* has a team of medics and a boat standing by in case of snake bites or fires. Although both shows have had people quit, *Survivor* has had to remove people for severe burns, constipation, sprains, infected bites and emotional breakdowns. On one *Survivor* series, a player suffered a heart attack after being voted off, and was later discovered to have been close to starvation. On the other hand, one US *Big Brother* removed a player for threatening a rival with a knife, and one European *Survivor* pushed an eliminated contestant to suicide (Ronson par 14). Regardless of the type of stress, and although *Survivor* is meant to be physically challenging, both shows can push players to the edge of mental illness. There is a psychiatrist on duty to debrief contestants as they are voted out of the game.

All *Survivor* settings so far have been tropical. Most have taken place on islands, but some have been warm and often steamy inland locations such as Guatemala, Kenya and Australia. No matter the exact location, minimal clothing is a hallmark of the program. In the US *Big Brother* series, the set is in Los Angeles, so that the weather is generally warm, and again, scanty clothing is the

norm. On both shows, most players spend most of the time in bathing suits, indoors or out.

### Internal Challenges

Each of the two shows is characterized by a set of sub-contests. On *Survivor*, there are usually a weekly Reward and Immunity challenge, although occasionally they are combined into one. *Big Brother* has many more:

1. A Head of Household competition which is crucial because the HoH has the power to nominate players for eviction.
2. Food competitions. One team (randomly chosen) either wins normal food for the week; or, while the losers get peanut butter, and more recently, oatmeal “slop,” the winners get luxury food. Early in the game, there are free-for-all food competitions in which everyone randomly participates to fill up the pantry. Later, teams win and lose food privileges.
3. Luxury competitions for experiences such as movies, a shopping spree, a visit to the People’s Choice Awards, a blimp ride, and so on.
4. The Veto competition, in which nominated players can remove themselves from danger, or which other players can use to remove a nominated player. The winner cannot be nominated in the place of someone who is saved.

On *Big Brother*, which is broadcast and cable-cast thrice weekly, and live-streamed via the internet 24/7, the competitions are the main events for each

broadcast. Since *Survivor* is only shown once a week, they usually have to make room for two competitions, scheming and plotting, and the weekly Tribal Council all in the same hour.

The internal challenges on *Survivor* are heavily skewed toward male physical abilities or characteristics, requiring speed, upper body strength and size. When women win the million, it is almost always as a result of their social skills. This has been labeled “riding coattails” and “flying under the radar” by viewers and reviewers, who cry that the win is unfair because the person could not really have survived in a wilderness situation, or that their strategy was too passive. Jonathan Bignell, a British educator and researcher of television and film, with a particular interest in reality television, has dealt with this at some length, pointing out that “While masculine values entail the suppression of emotion in favour of efficiency, achievement and stoicism, feminine values encourage the display of emotion as a way of responding to problematic situations” (98). Thus sometimes we see women manipulating men via flirting or displays of emotion because the men are perceived as being capable of “taking” the women to the end, while women often don’t seem to believe they can take themselves, much less anyone else.

This kind of thing happened in *Survivor: Australian Outback*, which Tina won when Colby made a poor decision about who to take to the finals. She had worked hard on their friendship, and she beat Colby, who had won all the “manly” competitions. On *Survivor: Marquesas* when Vecepia won, she was branded “Decepia” because she told people what they wanted to hear (despite professing

the Christian faith) and convinced them to vote with her or for her. On *Survivor: Amazon*, Jenna was a member of the “cute girls” and willingly exposed body parts that had to be blurred out in editing. This was considered manipulative by fans. On *Survivor: Pearl Islands*, winner Sandra sold her vote to any faction that wanted it. These women won few of the challenges, if any.

Having said all this, the players themselves often claim they voted for the better strategist, but fans frequently disagree with this justification. They have, for a large part, internalized masculine “values” as good and feminine ones as somewhat, if not entirely, defective. I’ll offer just a couple of examples here, because we’ll see so many in subsequent chapters.

Although this post is not specifically about flying under the radar, it does attack women for lack of physical ability. I have reproduced it exactly as it appeared online.

U know what,Scout should have been the 1st female voted out,it was her fault they lost the very 1st challenge (the whole blind fold thing in episode 2)it was her fault they lost the 1 after that,they almost lost the very 1st 1 if it wasnt 4 Chris who couldn't make it accross the beam.Why they keep her around baffles me,she really isnt playing,she is being carried through the game,which isnt fare 4 those who r participating 100% in the challenges. When she isnt sitting 1 out,she fucking up the other.I mean what happened 2 the Survivor were people were voted out b/c they couldnt keep up,or participate,or voted put b/c they fucked up the

challenge. Remember Sonja in season 1, 1st one out, it was her fault they lost. Jessie (season 3) and Tanya (season 5) both had 2 b voted out b/c they were kind of sick and couldn't participate 100%. I just don't want 2 see her in the final 4, it will b totally unfair. Bum knee u know what i don't care she shouldn't have applied. (Olivera, #461 Yahoo! SurvivorVanuatu)

This message refers to several older, weaker or simply female players from seasons before *Vanuatu*, as well as *Vanuatu* itself. The next one is more articulate, but expresses the same sentiment:

Scout will never win an individual 'athletic' immunity challenge with her bum knee. She better hope that if she is still around with the final few that the challenge is a mental one. I am sorely ticked off at Jules & Twila. They should have stuck with the men. My opinion of them dropped last night. Ami makes me want to puke. I know that she's a lesbian, but she is SO anti-men its insane. And the comment that Sarge made that Ami hangs all over Jules telling her she's hot and kissing her on the head and stuff...oh, brother... I hope at least ONE man makes it to the end because just watching a bunch of women for the final episodes is going to get nauseating. (and I'm a woman too, so I know what I'm talking about - lol). (Lee, #523 Yahoo! SurvivorVanuatu)

The contestants themselves believe it: Here's a selection from a post-vote interview with an eliminated player:

Leann: My original plan, before I knew the tribes would be split by gender, was twofold. First, I would try and team up with a strong male... and try not to make it obvious... then make suballiances. Secondly, I would try not to stand out either positively or negatively to the other tribemates. I would not be the hardest worker, or the laziest. I wouldn't be the best at challenges (easy for me!) or the worst at challenges.

For the most part, I was able to stick with my strategy; however, with the gender split, I obviously had to adjust the "strong male" thing. Instead, I teamed up with a strong female, Ami. (Slaby, qtd. in Bloomberg, "HUGE Mistake": pars. 4-5)

Finally, here is the commentary of a polished reviewer, expressing similar ideas.

Just about as soon as they arrived at camp, Terry started plotting. He suggested an all-male alliance of him, Dan, Austin, and Nick. But wait! Sally had different plans. She suggested an alliance of younger players – her, Misty, Nick, and Austin. Nick and Austin are going to have to make a decision soon, but they're in the good position of having everyone want them to be part of an alliance. As long as they act decisively and don't waver, the two of them should be safe. (Wasser, "Giant Zombie" par. 3)

Here a woman approaches two men as potential alliance-mates. There was another woman, but she was totally ignored. We don't know if she was a sure

thing, but she wasn't even considered. The writer doesn't even mention her, probably because young women asking the young men seems so "normal." The women never even think of going to their own gender. They expect men to "take" them to the finale, just as men are expected to "take" women out on a date. They cannot take men, or each other, or go together. They must be taken. This is a hegemonic concept that will not go away as long as women themselves reinforce it, and are reinforced by it. They have no reason to act independently, because they are shown that doesn't work, or shouldn't. In this case, the writer (also a woman) the players, the viewers/readers and the producers are all in unconscious collusion unaffected by critical thought. It helps the capitalist hegemony because women are driving men to pay their way, and at the moment, men have the larger incomes.

While some of the competitions on *Big Brother* emphasize upper body strength or speed, there is a greater variety of types of these games and some are simplistic as an Easter egg hunt, while others involve mazes, standing on one foot, eating disgusting food items, remembering the placement of objects in the house and the like. In other words, these contests do not necessarily favor incredibly athletic young men. If they did, all the young women would disappear early (there is seldom a contestant under 35 anymore). Since the demographic for this show is young heterosexual men, this would be unwise. In fact, it's exactly what happened in the first season. Lesson learned.

## Artifacts

The sub-contests award immunity from being nominated and/or voted out for a short period, or they grant privileges and prizes. These concepts are reified in physical symbols: the tribal immunity idol, the individual immunity necklace (or sword, or headdress, depending on the cultural context of the series) and on *Big Brother*, the Veto.

The immunity idol is awarded during the tribal, or team, part of *Survivor*, which usually ends with the merge, when around ten contestants remain. The idol is some sort of statue made to look like a local art or cultural object, and often has some sort of vaguely human attributes. The idol is displayed in the camp of the winning tribe and returned at the next immunity challenge.

The individual immunity symbol is not an idol at all, but may be a necklace or other wearable object. In the pirate-themed *Survivor: Pearl Islands*, it was a cutlass. The individual immunity item is placed on the winner by the host and worn back to camp, but otherwise is not worn again until the next immunity challenge.

After the merge, all contests are either individual, or in the case of reward challenges, may be played by small, random teams who share the prize. Some of the rewards also have some symbolic status, such as flint for fire, and the torches the members carry to tribal council. There are also the bandanas they all must wear in some fashion, as well as tribal flags which they carry and display at the challenges. Some shows introduce additional artifacts, such as the “Chief’s staff” and “spirit stone” of *Survivor: Vanuatu*, and sometimes contestants also



develop artifacts, such as Shane's driftwood "Blackberry" on *Exile Island* or Greg's coconut phone on *Borneo*.

Finally, a recent development, first seen on *Guatemala*, is the individual immunity idol, or two or more, hidden somewhere the players can find it, and for which clues are provided at intervals. This is one of many twists in the game, but so far the only one that introduces yet another permanent artifact.

All of the items are presented, except the hidden idol, in a ceremonial manner by the host who uses the same formulaic on every occasion. A typical reward challenge begins "Come on in, guys. X tribe getting their first look at the new Y tribe, (blank) voted off at the last tribal council. Want to know what you're playing for today?"

Someone always says yes, and Probst shows or explains the prize and lays out the game rules. Then he says, "Worth playing for?" and someone always agrees. He tells them, "We'll give you a few minutes to strategize," then he raises one arm and says "Survivors ready? Go!" and drops his arm. It never varies. It has not varied in 16 seasons. He always says the same words in the same order at every iteration of any given event, whether it's a challenge or the weekly tribal council, which always ends with the same snuffing of the torch and the same, "The tribe has spoken. Time for you to go."

No doubt the liturgy and the artifacts are meant to cue viewers and players, but they also establish the importance of these rites and the position of the male (in the case of *Survivor*) host as the authority figure, much a like a priest or a judge. They remind everyone that the show has a hegemonic aspect, and

that rewards and punishments are meted out by the producers and the host, who must be obeyed. People who perform well are rewarded, while those who do not are Otherved for some period. We are reminded of the emotion-vice-logic overdetermination when we feel good about the winner of a prize or artifact. At this point, it is probably not even possible to change the rote nature of these ceremonies, as viewers, similar to any other group, prefer routine and dislike change. Along with all of the other elements of the game, these have become set in cement and are part of the “fix” the *Survivor* viewer tunes in for. They’ve taught viewers what producers and sponsors want them to want, and now they want it. We want the “right” people to win not only the main contest but the sub-contests. Fans on group discussion often complain about memory, balance or puzzle challenges because there is less of a physical aspect and anyone can win, not just the expected brawny males. In these examples, the writers speak of several series, not just *Vanuatu*. Again, they are presented in their original state:

Vee, Jenna and Tina didn't do squat and won. Sandra Diaz rode ruppert's coat and never won a challenge and won it all.

ok..ok...Lillian gave it to sandra and colby gave it to tina. Ethan and Brian both won several challenges and won it all. At least 3 times the final 2 were people that didnt win physically or with mind games. At least 3 times the final 2 were heavy duty schemers that also won challenges. (Bugg, #777, Yahoo! SurvivorVanuatu)

Funny how abrasive people need charismatic liars to get thru game...and vice versa since the charismatic guy depends on others rubbing people the wrong way. Solid alliances to end works. Scout got final 3 without doin well physically or in mental challenges or telling lies. Then again sandra won riding coattails (won no challenges) and so did vee. (Bugg, #884 of 1543, Yahoo! SurvivorVanuatu)

The lengthy discussion from whence these are taken is about whether or not it is “fair” for those who cannot win physical challenges to win the game. The point missed is that Mark Burnett himself declares it’s playing the social game that makes the greatest difference (9-10). Another point is that it is women who primarily win the social game, men who win the physical one. When a woman wins socially, she is often tagged as a non-winner who sneaked in. A man who wins the social game is just clever.

*Big Brother* also has artifacts, most notably the aforementioned Veto. This has changed color and value from season to season, sometimes even within a season, but the shape has remained the same: a circle with a slash-through suspended on a ribbon. The symbol is similar to the “No Smoking,” “No Left Turn” or “No Cell Phones” signs we see every day.

Originally the winner could be nominated if it was used, and if a nominee won it, they could not use it on themselves. Now the Veto is always called “The Golden Power of Veto” and it is much more flexible than when it made its debut

as a twist. Early in the game, when there are over a dozen players in the house, only six people can participate: the nominees, the HoH and one person chosen by each of these three in a random draw. Once there are only six people in the house, all play. After the contest, the moderator of the contest, another contestant, places the Veto around the winner's neck. The winner then places the Veto beside their photo on the Memory Wall inside the house. A day or so later, a Veto ceremony is held in which the winner, once again wearing the symbol, either awards the Veto or puts it back in a wooden box. If a nominee is removed from danger, the HoH must nominate another player. The Veto then disappears until the next week.

Another artifact in the *Big Brother* house is the HoH room key. Except for the first HoH contest, the current HoH passes the room key to the winner of the weekly HoH contest. It is worn around the neck on a cord, and is used to gain access to another whole set of artifacts, the HoH bedroom. This is actually a suite with a large bed, sitting area and private bathroom. In this area the winner generally finds favorite snacks, items from home such as stuffed animals or a pillow, a CD and player, and photos of family, friends and pets. In some recent series, they have actually presented the HoH with a crown and scepter. Sometimes there is a bathrobe and slippers, and sometimes there's laundry service. Of particular note is the "spy cam," a hidden screen that allows the HoH and select friends to access some cameras in the rest of the house, although there is no sound. Although this has become standard, early HoHs try to keep it from others in the house.

A very large artifact in *Big Brother* is the Memory Wall. Every contestant's picture is displayed here, along with symbols to indicate who is the HoH, who is the Veto-Holder, and who is nominated for eviction. Each houseguest's picture includes a slot for a key with their name on it, so those two guests without a key are the eviction nominees. Thus this artifact serves to Other the nominees and separate them from those who are safe. The photos change from color to black and white whenever someone is evicted from the house, the final and ultimate Othering artifact.

The other major *Big Brother* artifact is the large drum which is displayed once a week at the nomination ceremony. The current HoH takes all the keys off the wall and inserts them into numbered slots in the big drum, leaving out the two of the guests who are nominated. There is then an elaborate ceremony at the dining table where the big wheel is spun around on a lazy susan from person to person as their keys come out. Then the keys are returned to the Memory Wall and the drum is returned to the producers.

None of this would be noteworthy except for the status of the whole grouping of items. Most games are played with artifacts such as cards, markers, dice, chips and fake money, so artifacts and games are commonplace. What is of interest in both cases is the heavy symbolism and ritual that accompanies the award or removal of an artifact. Some of the artifacts imply safety; others show power. People without an artifact are marked as outsiders, or Others. People in an alliance with an artifact-holder are safer and more powerful than those who

are not. Often, whoever has an artifact is reluctant to give it away and sometimes there is drama in the exchange.

Some interesting scenes have played out involving these artifacts and what they mean to individuals or groups. On *Survivor: Panama*, a very devout Christian woman was extremely offended by the concept of any idol, which is odd in a way because the show had been on for several series by then. Evidently, the producers wanted to film a scene in which the winning tribe all caressed the idol and she wouldn't touch it, but she did see fit to give a sermon on the subject. Either way, the producers got their drama.

On a fairly recent *Big Brother*, the outgoing HoH refused to hand the room key over, and instead flung it away into the grass of the backyard with a "Here you go, bitch!" On *Survivor: Vanuatu*, Rory destroyed the idol in a victory dance. In fact, on many iterations of *Survivor*, the entire winning tribe will often pass the idol around and stroke it, and will then pretend to try not to give it back at the next immunity challenge. In the last two *Survivor* series, in which an individual immunity idol has been hidden, clever contestants have fooled their rivals by planting a fake idol, only to have Jeff Probst throw it into the fire when they try to play it at tribal council. In fact, one player fooled herself by bringing along an object she hoped was the idol. It wasn't, and went up in smoke, along with her chances of winning.

Finally, although the idol guarantees the player immunity, and everyone is either in real or perceived danger of being voted out at least some of the time, several idol-holders have kept the idol until it was too late in the overall game to

play it, or they have been blindsided into not playing it at all. One left the game with two in his possession, convinced he was in no danger. What the players seem to miss is that the idol is worthless unless played, the idol makes them more of a target if anyone at all knows they have it, and the idol itself is not worth a million dollars. The thing has assumed such importance that it seems to eclipse the purpose for which it is intended: to keep a player in the game. Thus an item with the power to keep a person from being Othered causes them to be more Othered than anyone else. This usually earns a player induction into the Reality Hall of Shame at *Reality News Online (RNO)*, one of the more credible sites providing reviews of this television genre.

#### Contestants and Viewers, Again

Having described the main components of strategy-genre reality TV, I am prepared to turn my attention to a more confined focus, the constructed identities of contestants and viewers in relation with one another. In the next chapters, I will discuss the manner in which viewers see and use identity constructs in their understandings of contestants. I will argue that the audience writing communities I examine reflect the social forces of hegemony, which I concluded after membership on some of these boards and reading reviews of the shows since they first appeared on American television, or for the last eight years. In some of the forums I was an active participant; in others, I merely lurked. I examined some without having been a member while the show was airing. Unfortunately, some of the forums in which I participated are no longer available, but that is a

good thing, because my participation might have influenced other's responses. By the time I decided to analyze the series discussed herein, I was no longer participating for that very reason.

My examination of the writing communities of viewers has provided me with insights about how the viewers and reviewers read the text of the strategy-genre reality TV shows, *Survivor* in particular. Viewers feel satisfied when the shows go as they believe it ought to, and as they ought to means in accordance with classed hierarchies of values. Conversely, when the shows don't go as they ought to, viewers turn to one another, or their readership, for reassurance when the "wrong" person remains in the game, or even wins. In either event, the viewers receive reinforcement for their values and beliefs, even though there may be very little credible substance to what they see and how they interpret it.

I present in Chapter Two what is the most disturbing insight I came upon from my investigation: female gender identity is by far the most marked identity construct that defines a contestant as "Other." Consequently, having the "Othered" mark of "Lesbian" places a contestant in the most marginalized, disenfranchised position. In Chapter Two, therefore, I examine the gender construct with regard to, for the most part, the players themselves. Since it is very difficult to separate gender from the discussion of sexual orientation, that discussion will necessarily be intertwined with gender. Gender is, by far, the most frequently discussed identity construct in scholarship, in reviews, and in viewer response, and such discussions when focused on sexual orientation elicit the most emotional and forceful commentary.



Chapter Three will examine the viewer/writers we meet in online communities, and their perception of the gender/sexual orientation identity construct.

Chapter Four will discuss the responses of the expert amateur reviewers to the gender/sexuality constructs portrayed by the contestants.

Finally, Chapter Five will draw conclusions, and suggest ways to improve viewer perception and understanding of the phenomena they observe in strategy-genre reality television.

## Chapter Two

### Marking Players: Gender/Sexual Orientation

For several years, I have examined viewer forums devoted to strategy-genre reality TV programs, especially those devoted to the show *Survivor*. I have also examined scholarship on audience response to strategy game sub-genre reality television. Such research has led me to insights about how viewers react to identity constructs or interference with the norms of the current capitalist hegemony. Briefly, if a program doesn't evoke feelings of safety or comfort, or reinforce their values, they disregard it, no matter the credibility of the message. For example, a deeply religious person may have no problem ignoring evolution in favor of creationism regardless of fossil and other scientific evidence. That attitude can be found in all sorts of venues.

First, there is the venue of scholarly response to strategy-genre reality TV. These criticize the genre itself, in a variety of aspects. Although we are more concerned with viewer response, knowing what has been said about the genre by those in a position of academic authority lends credibility to my conclusions. Had they not already been questioning the usefulness of this genre, or its rather suspect effects on our culture, I might not have believed that further examination is needed. As we look at each identity construct, we'll see how these scholars evaluate them in the context of the game.

Second, there is the response of scholars to audience behavior. These discuss the impact of this genre on audience. Some scholars have moved beyond the genre itself and focus primarily on viewer response. They, too, find a

lack of critical thinking here, but concentrate more on the elicitation of the response by the genre, rather than the responses themselves.

Third, there are reviews published on a plethora of sites, such as *Television Without Pity (TWP)* and *Reality News Online (RNO)*. These are written by expert amateur reviewers, who are not paid, but often have day jobs requiring reading, writing and critical thinking. The articles are sometimes humorous, sometimes thought-provoking, often critical and frequently analytical. There is a discernible thread of disdain for posters on the less-intellectual electronic venues. However, these writers, though clever and insightful, often reveal the same prejudices and stereotype buy-ins as their less-articulate targets do. They are simply more elegant and subtle in their expression of these ideas, but I see no reason to believe they are aware of the similarities of their thought patterns, either.

Another way to consider these three levels of reading the strategy-game text is to remember Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding." The average fan, and forum member, is keeping the "dominant-hegemonic position," going along with all the meanings that have always already been made by the hegemonic makers of meaning. The amateur reviewers are giving the negotiated reading, probing around the edges and criticizing the presentation of the show without questioning the deeper meanings and values, and then the scholars and journalists present the oppositional reading, seeing those deeper meanings and exposing them to the light of criticism (Hall 174-76). We'll see all of this in some detail when we examine our identity constructs.

Finally, there are viewer forums in such diverse places as Yahoo! Groups and the aforementioned *TWoP* discussion groups. These last have no professional writing credentials whatsoever, except coincidentally. They need no level of any kind of expertise to post their opinions and responses. It is these responses, indicative of the impact of this genre on culture, via the replacement of the value of credibility with the reinforcement of emotional connection, that concern me in particular.

An examination of viewer participation in the phenomenon of hegemony building and maintenance helps make clearer how audiences and contestants construct themselves and each other to make the winners “fit” into the “us” category rather than the “others.” If they fail to fit, there are other responses and repercussions. Efforts will be made by many to assure the proper outcome of the next game show.

In this genre, generally speaking, we see an ethos/pathos conflation that is mutually supportive: viewers see what makes them feel comfortable, secure and normal, and they pay the happy sponsors to perpetuate these feelings. All values line up and mirror one another. No one gets hurt, nothing changes – or so we should all believe. And enough of us *do* believe it, for viewers prefer a stereotypical outcome if their letters to reviewers and their comments on bulletin boards and discussion groups can be given any weight at all. As touched upon earlier, one tendency viewers have is to distrust the social game. When women have to tell several promises and then break some, or “lie,” this, too, evokes that

need for emotional reinforcement, which reminds us that “bad” women make us, the viewers, feel uncomfortable, and we shouldn’t like them.

Thus the viewers can be expected to dislike a woman who appears dishonest, and react accordingly if such a woman wins, especially if she wouldn’t have literally “survived” a physically hostile environment on her own. This is part of the idea that a win by anyone who could not physically compete successfully in every challenge is tainted, and this taint is likely to fall on women. Oddly, it also fell on the gay, frequently naked Richard Hatch, who won the first series primarily by playing the social game.

Most viewers, even those of us who are critical thinkers and questioners of the hegemonic status quo, play our part by attending the circuses, so easily led that we pay for the bread ourselves, and announce to lurking sponsors our willingness to do so.

Some of the casual, although by no means occasional, fourth-category writers are very clever and amusing, and offer entertaining and useful insight into the impacts of the genre on culture. On the other hand, some of them spew hate and fear of the unfamiliar. Both are worth study. This is especially true because it is not so much the production of these game shows that is the problem as much as the uncritical consumption of them. In our current, politically polarized and paranoid culture, we distrust anything that threatens our values and our self-esteem, which are often based rather shakily on the norm. Thinking too hard might privilege credibility, or just bring it up even with pathos. Then questioning of

our value system might follow with that scary domino effect of growth and change that comes from learning.

Another interesting aspect of all this electronic chatter is, now that the internet provides newsgroups, listservs, bulletin boards, blogs, wikis and chat rooms, viewer response is even more accurately monitored by producers and programming is frequently adjusted accordingly. *Big Brother's* dismal first season ratings, as well as the antics of "Chicken George" and his family, led to a completely new vision for the contestants that included less age, less weight and more silicon. Fewer people over 40 have been included every season, dropping to one for the years 2003 and 2004 and none at all in 2005, although two over-50s were cast in the most recent series, *Big Brother 10*, and lasted far into the game. Many *RNO* reviewers complained about the shallow young people of season nine (which I did not watch because the season eight went very badly) There has not been an overweight person in several seasons, unless we now count the slightly pudgy, 75-year old Jerry of season ten.

One more concept that may lead to the strongly-felt and strongly expressed opinions on the viewer boards is that, most of us must control our emotions and tolerate less than pleasant behavior from those above us in the employment and social hierarchies. Therefore we might, as viewers, experience some catharsis either when the unpleasant people are expelled, or when someone other than us has to tolerate unpleasantness. We feel we ought to side with the "right" and vent our frustrations on the "Others." The concepts of being "right," being "normal," and using "common sense" reappear again and again,

without any critical consideration of what those terms mean. All of them, regardless, are emotional stroking masquerading as credible, strategic game play. If we feel it is right, it is credible. We believe it, and we want everyone else to do the same, rewarding those who agree, shunning or punishing those who do not.

### Identity Markers

As far as the issue of identity constructs in the sub-genre is concerned, what marking of players and viewers is going on with regard to race, gender, religion, and so on? This is important because, all science and logic to the contrary, viewers have strong opinions about who and what is “right” with regard to such constructs. A recent political example of this is the fellow who held up signs during Hilary Clinton’s presidential campaign in New Hampshire. Few people were truly alarmed or concerned about the “Iron my shirts” signs and chants, although a furor would surely have erupted had someone held up “Shine my Shoes” signs while Barak Obama was speaking. Although black, Obama is male, which is acceptable. Hilary Clinton’s gender, however, is a magnet for abuse and laughter. Mitt Romney’s religion, Latter Day Saints, was “wrong” for many people at that moment. Mike Huckabee’s Baptist faith, on the other hand, made him “right.” *Survivor* and *Big Brother* viewers have similar pathos-as-ethos issues with contestants. Nor is this sort of thing uncommon in our culture. As Stanley Fish explains this phenomenon, it’s very similar to identity voting.

An identity politics voter says, in effect, I don't care what views he holds, or even what bad things he may have done, or what lack of ability he may display; he's my brother, or he's my kinsman, or he's my landsman, or he comes from the neighborhood, or he's a Southerner, or (and here the tribe is really big) my country right or wrong. ("Politics" par. 2-3)

As with politicians, the player's ability or reputation matter little compared to their identity constructs, which are largely irrelevant to how well they play, at least socially. We have already examined how gender matters when it comes to physical challenges.

There has certainly been scholarship on identity constructs in television, and that is worth examining for precedents or trends. In his monograph, Jonathan Bignell points out how shows are no longer aimed at the entire potential audience, but at specific groups. "In this perspective," he writes, "[market] research is focused on how television is used instrumentally as an information source, as an entertainment, as a resource for constructing self-identity and/or group identity . . . (144)." He does not claim this form of research, which is also tied to casting and editing, is always successful, but the idea about "helping" viewers construct themselves in a way that is useful to the capitalist market is there. Bignell goes on to examine how sponsors and producers assume they are already reaching an audience which has been constructing itself in a certain traditional, capitalist "family" values identity, and welcomes reinforcement (147-48).



While race, religion and non-conformity do make an appearance on *Survivor* as identity constructs, the material produced by and about them is meager by comparison to gender and sexual orientation. One reason for this is simple mathematics. Fully half of all contestants are male, and the other half female. Therefore everyone is “marked” in this construct. Fewer than ten percent of all contestants have been people of color, even counting the series in which tribes were arranged by ethnicity. A second reason race is seldom an issue is that we have evolved, as a culture, to the point that denigrating one another based upon race is not only socially unacceptable, it is legally actionable. So, of course, is sexual harassment and discrimination, but as long as these practices remain socially acceptable, they are far less likely to be pursued.

With regard to religion, there have been *Survivor* contestants and *Big Brother* contestants of every, any and no denominations. Like race, while it comes up from time to time, in general there is never as big a divide or as big a controversy over it. Never have the members of a specific religion ganged up on members of another. Never have people with no real religion targeted someone who is devout or zealous. Sometimes very religious people have been annoying, but so have vegetarians, foul-mouthed people, actors and residents of a particular state. When people are playing for money, they can always find a reason to vote out an opponent. It needn't be on the basis of an identity construct, although on some occasions, it is, and that is the gender construct.

## Gender and Sexual Orientation Examined

Our cultural conditioning pre-ordains and guarantees that we think of ourselves and others in terms of major and obvious identity constructs. Once we identify ourselves in these terms, we are then taught, and sometimes learn, standard and stereotypical ways to behave in these terms. As we grow and experience various social situations, we orient and re-orient ourselves to other people in terms of these constructs. One reason may very well be that we can see them. We can tell gender, age and race at a glance. Sexuality is becoming more apparent as it becomes less fraught with danger. Of course it is still fraught with discomfort and danger under certain circumstances, but enough gay people are comfortable enough to let others see them. Richard Hatch was openly gay on the very first *Survivor*, in Borneo, in 2000. Ami and Scout were the first open lesbians on *Survivor: Vanuatu* in 2004. The present, and very recent past, have become safer times for homosexuals, which makes this gender construct far more visible than it used to be.

Nevertheless, homosexuality continues to be viewed as deviant, both in the sense of its being “not the norm” and, because of that, in the sense also of it as a perversion of the norm. For the values and beliefs of those who constitute the heterosexual “normal” majority are enacted in ways well beyond the “bedroom,” so to speak. In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler explains, “. . . the regulatory norms of ‘sex’ work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” (2).

Further, Butler claims, and I agree, that

As a result of the reformulation of performativity . . . the regime of heterosexuality operates to circumscribe and contour the “materiality” of sex, and that “materiality” is formed and sustained through and as a materialization of regulatory norms that are in part those of heterosexual hegemony . . . . (15)

It is a regime that begins at the moment of birth, as has been demonstrated by study upon study of the different ways new born baby girls and baby boys are treated. We are taught from infancy how to act our gender, and when we don't, Butler says, “. . . we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (*Gender Trouble* 178). The punishment in the case of *Survivor* and *Big Brother* is the loss of the game, or the disapproval of the culture which observes these games. Thus girls who build and boys who cry receive negative reinforcement until they don't do these things anymore, or until they disengage from the norms and find a niche where those things don't matter. People who act against, or outside of “hegemonic, misogynist culture” will find themselves ostracized at the very least, and will certainly be in no position to convince others to ally with them and later, vote them a gigantic cash prize (*Gender Trouble* 176). Win or lose, people who don't “do their gender right” should not be surprised when they are criticized by other players, reviewers, and the general audience.

Whether embraced or not, people understand what this gender-linked conditioning is, and depending upon individual goals, an individual may choose to conform to expectations, or reject them outright, or reveal them gradually. At

least the American cultural narrative of freedom of expression in the pursuit of happiness would lead to some belief that there is such a choice. I argue that women on *Survivor* who wish to win a million dollars feel they must assess the situation, must walk a very fine line between riding coattails and taking charge, and will seldom be themselves unless this self is culturally acceptable to most other players. Self-confident, feminist, professional women must downplay and hide these aspects of themselves to succeed in the game, even if they never do so anywhere else. Reports of such self-denial behaviors are not uncommon in American society and workplaces. The behaviors were, in fact, observable in the very first *Survivor* series, as several women whose only error was being women were eliminated instead of the homophobic and misogynist Rudy, who was protected by women and men alike. This set a precedent in voting patterns for many series that followed. However, some women are unwilling or unable to make these adjustments for the sake of the prize, and others claim they are just there for the experience and don't care if they win. They are usually, as the reviewers call them, "early boots."

Until 2004, no one knew how viewers would react to out-of-the-closet lesbians on *Survivor*, but there has certainly been enough public response to homosexuality to make an educated guess. On the one hand, Ellen DeGeneres has had two immensely popular TV shows and many lesbian relationships and even romantic scenes have been broadcast in prime time television. "Lesbian chic" became a cultural commonplace at the same time. Everyone had heard of "lipstick lesbians." On the other, hand, same-sex marriage has been a hot button

issue for at least a decade, with laws being passed, challenged, overturned and passed again in many jurisdictions across the nation. Therefore, love it or hate it, out lesbians on *Survivor* were bound to draw a large audience share. As luck had it, though, the first out lesbians found themselves on a tribe entirely of women, which changed the dynamics of the game considerably, in ways that had not occurred on the one previous series, *Amazon*, in which tribes were divided by gender, but no out lesbians were present. In this case, the women complained bitterly about the absence of men and one woman fell into a near comatose state, begging to be voted out, until a swap occurred that mixed genders in the tribes again.

However, now that viewers can see sexual orientation, and now that many people no longer assume everyone around them is heterosexual, the identity construct also assumes a much greater role and importance than it did before. And tied as it is to gender, and unevenly-treated as it is in this culture, gay people have to make case-by-case decisions about who can see them and when. Thus Todd, who won *Survivor: China* recently, told individual players one at a time as he felt they needed to know. But at the same time, and he knew it, he was telling the whole world at once. This was of no concern to him. He was out. But among strangers, with a million dollars at stake, he took it step-by-step.

Similarly, women, although their gender is obvious, reveal certain things about themselves step by step. Some wish to keep their age, or profession or marital status to themselves until they feel comfortable revealing such things. In *Survivor: Exile Island*, Misty let it be known she was an engineer, and was voted

off as soon as there was a Tribal Council. On *Cook Islands*, the female architect who built her tribe's shelter was immediately voted out. These women tell us in exit interviews and during confessionals that they know self-confident professional women are seen as bossy and obnoxious so they try to downplay these aspects of their identity. Women who are perfectly capable of building scamper off to collect clams while less-skilled men make structural errors, rather than expose their expertise and lose their chance to win the game. The women who have privately identified themselves as feminists bring this up at their peril. Even in single-gender tribes, they don't reveal this right away, if ever, as other women they don't know may well find it offensive or threatening.

On the other hand, men also hide their professions sometimes, but for different reasons. In *Exile Island*, Dan the astronaut, not wishing to seem a threat, kept his profession a secret until well into the game, as did Gary the former NFL quarterback in *Survivor: Guatemala*. They may have known that Carl the dentist in *Survivor: Africa*, Kel the Army intelligence officer in *Survivor: Outback* and Hunter the naval aviator in *Palau* were instantly eliminated when their professions were revealed. The men hide these things because, according to their confessionals, they don't want to seem to be physical threats, and they don't want their income levels known, because rich people are assumed not to need a million dollars and the less-affluent kick them out on those grounds.

## Some Reality Television Research on Gender

Several authors have addressed the gender construct, which first caught my eye as a novice viewer during the first *Survivor* series. I immediately noticed a difference between the treatment and behaviors of the genders, by which I mean the way they were edited, the way they were discussed by others, and what they did with themselves all day. Apparently I am far from the only one to notice this. According to media scholar Terry Toles Patkin, “[W]omen, when not . . . invisible, tend to be portrayed in relatively stereotypical and low status ways” (17). She also notes that assertiveness works for men, but not women (19). First, they fail at whatever activity they are doing, and they are voted out relatively soon after an assertiveness incident (Godard 89).

Media observer April Roth makes a related observation in her discussion of an event to which each tribe had to send a representative in the first *Survivor* series. The producers rejected these tribal selections and replaced them with “hot” young contestants, marking both, but especially the woman, as sexual performers (30). A very similar incident occurred on the first *Big Brother* when contestants were required to roast one another. The entire function was written for them (Andrejevic, *Reality TV* 132).

Even women who are not assertive, but merely older, and not necessarily stereotypically attractive are early casualties (Boone 105, 109). While the contestants themselves frequently claim this is a strategic move to keep the tribe strong for challenges, the older females are frequently as strong, if not stronger than, the younger ones who are retained, and are often more willing and able to

contribute (*Survivor: Borneo, Outback, Marquesas and Exile Island*). To be fair, weaker young women are eventually expelled ahead of men, but the older women generally precede them, and the assertive women go earliest of all.

Another area in which gender is marked is trust. According to R. Thomas Boone, professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts, men are not held to the same expectation for honesty as women are. Dishonest women are more shocking and less appealing (Boone 105, 109). Of course dishonesty evokes strong emotions, reminding viewers that “bad” women make others feel uncomfortable and therefore should not be liked. Thus the viewers can be expected to dislike a woman who is dishonest, and react accordingly if such a woman wins. But clearly this is a lose/lose situation, for the honest, assertive woman is voted out early and can’t win, either. Thus only one kind of woman can win, and if she does, she shouldn’t have been rewarded for her dishonesty and manipulation.

Even so, the corporate trainer who won the first *Survivor*, a gay male, fit the stereotype of the capitalist cut-throat that audiences love to hate; and he was pitted against, yet oddly allied with, the older, straight, male, homophobic, retired Marine (Brenton and Cohen 102). The gay man’s gender worked for him with viewers, but his occupation and orientation “proved” that nice people can’t win a game that calls for manipulation and deception (Thackaberry 153). It’s acceptable, even good, to have Others in the cast, so that the heroic folks can defeat them. This reifies the notion that Others, such as women, especially dishonest ones, can’t or shouldn’t be trusted.



Kristen Hatch, professor of Film and Media Studies at UC Irvine, examined the McCarthy Hearings in the early 1950s, in which many Hollywood celebrities were accused of Communist activities and leanings. Although her article work covers some of the earliest “reality TV,” the McCarthy-HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) hearings, her “Daytime Politics” still has some interesting implications six decades and many genre developments later. It could even be that the coverage of this hysteria set the stage for further gender marking. For example, male watchers identified with the accusers, while females empathized with the accused. The networks were concerned that the politics would fry the brains of everyday housewives and distract them from their roles (and possibly also the household products the sponsors were peddling).

They tried to reassure the public that the female viewers saw the hearings as a soap opera, did not really understand the hearings and thus would not get involved with government as a result of watching them (Hatch 75-88). As I will address later, similar notions appear among viewers and sponsors of strategy-genre reality TV, when women’s participation seems to fly in the face of emotional reinforcement (What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?) and thus threatens the hegemonic order of our culture.

Scholarship on other forms of reality television has also considered genders. Any number of shows about decorating, cooking, the legal process, wildlife and more are categorized as reality TV. These include shows on dating, weddings, childbirth and child-rearing, on many of which we simply observe how others live, without any game-play element. According to Jennifer Gillan, these

shows portray women in dependent, decorative ways that reinforce 1950s values (63-65).

Media scholar Rebecca Stephens of Carlow College examines *A Baby Story* and *A Wedding Story* to demonstrate that these shows “ignore complexities of gender, race and class in favour of a fantasy vision of some mythic past where gender norms were absolute, the nuclear family serenely solved individual and social ills, and consumption is the ultimate normalising rite” which brings in the issue of capitalism as well as gender (192-93). Stephens goes on to interrogate the “male as provider” image promoted by these shows, which puts more emphasis on income and less on the woman’s ability to earn it, more on her role as recipient and spender. Extra emphasis is placed on the bride’s losses of name, home and religion (196-97). All of the reinforcement, in turn, maintains emotion as a higher value than credibility, hegemonic/ governmental control and growth through marriage, reproduction and increased consumption.

Estella Tincknell and Parvati Raghuram of Nottingham Trent University, who specialize in cultural studies, examine gender in *Big Brother* in the UK. Unlike the US version, the UK version depends on the viewing audience to vote out losers and select the winner. Granted, each week the audience is limited to the nominations of the houseguests, but it’s still a choice, as well as the obvious fact that houseguests also share viewer values which are reflected in nominations. Indeed, according to Tincknell and Raghuram, not only is masculinity favored by viewers and contestants, but youth, stereotypical beauty, and heterosexuality are preferred as well (265-67). This may be due to the

demographic of reality viewers in England, young women 18 to 25 years of age in general, and people between 16 and 34 for *Big Brother* (Andrejevic, *Reality TV* 9; Bignell 43). Although I do not see statistical evidence for the demographic beyond these claims, my research in newsgroups and chat rooms reveals a greater number of men than women in that age group, as well, as many men who are older. This in turn may be skewed by the numbers of men vice women who pursue reality TV activities on the internet.

Annette Hill, Professor of Media at the University of Westminster, also observes a gender gap. She finds that shows like *The Bachelor* and *Joe Millionaire* absolutely “[reflect] traditional social attitudes toward men as social predators” (119). Even shows that seem to reverse roles, in which a woman chooses from a group of men, portray the female as a “gold digger” (119). The woman is at a disadvantage even when she is the star playing by the rules of the game.

Players’ views of their own gender identity - *Vanuatu*

Of necessity, the first people to notice identity constructs in a strategy-genre reality television game are the players themselves. Granted, the producers have always already noticed them, which we know because there are equal numbers of males and females, and most of them are young, white, straight and physically attractive. There are a couple of minorities in every season. In *Vanuatu*, out of 18 original players we had two lesbians, an amputee and a black man. In *Exile Island*, of 16 original players, we had one black man, one Asian

man, and one black woman. *Vanuatu* also had a player over 60, and she was one of the lesbians. *Cook Islands* had twelve minority members out of 16, because they were divided into tribes by ethnicity (Caucasian, black, Hispanic and Asian). This was the exception to the rule. Casting returned to its original proportions the next season, and has not changed since.

However, as discussed in Chapter One, the race, class, religion, differently-abled and other identity constructs make almost no difference in how people play, whether they are members of the minority or the majority. Gender, sexual orientation and personality (which is not an identity construct) impact the players, reviewers and viewers the most in their quest to provide compatibility with one another as the game is played, or to extract emotional reinforcement, rather than intellectual stimulation from the game as it is viewed.

We can easily examine how the players view themselves, because after each player is voted off (or in the case of the winner, once the game is over, *Reality News Online (RNO)* and other media outlets do exit interviews. In addition, players frequently talk about themselves in confessionals while they are in the game. For our purposes, it is both unnecessary and too voluminous to examine every player in every game. Since we know the outcomes of the games, it will be more efficient and more revealing to examine the perceptions of a few players, people who lasted well into the game, or who were the most often and exhaustively discussed. We can also sample some of the “early boots,” for they, too, have self- and other-concepts very much embedded in the gender and sexuality identity constructs.

On *Vanuatu*, the major non-winning player was Ami, the lesbian barista from Colorado. The winner was Chris, the straight male highway worker from Ohio. Once out of the game, they were asked about their strategies, and immediately they answered in terms of identity constructs, not only their own, but those of other players in the game.

Ami and Chris, though, were interviewed far into, and after the game. Even the first person out, Brook, knew the importance of gender. In his exit interview, he said

In a mixed tribe scenario, physically strong members of the game have an advantage before the merge, but a contrastingly opposite disadvantage when the teams merge for the individual part of the game. The weak members of the tribe have a disadvantage early in the game in this situation and an advantage of having less of a target on there [sic] back. When it's men vs. women, the strong members of a male tribe seem to always have a disadvantage! (Bloomberg, "Strong members." par 22)

This points up both the fact that people have expectations of certain interactions based upon gender and also, that everyone is well aware that the early challenges in the game frequently demand physical, especially upper-body, strength. Brook feels that, when competing against all women, nearly any male will be strong enough so that exceptionally strong men aren't needed.

Nor is Brook alone. The first woman voted out also had expectations based on gender. Dolly said several things along this line in her interview.

Well I guess there was this eternal hope that the nice girl could finish first. You know, change the precedent. Oh well. One thing I didn't expect was to be in a tribe with eight women!!! (Bloomberg "Eternal Hope" par 10)

Basically, there was no real plan. With women the plan changes on a second to second basis. First it was Twila, then Eliza, then Leann and well, then DOLLY. (par 13)

When those tribesmen separated us into an all-woman tribe, I knew I had about three days left. With women, I've come to expect the worst. And this was no different. But when written in Chinese, the word "crisis" is composed of two characters: one represents danger, the other represents opportunity!! (par 21)

With these remarks, Dolly lets us know she thinks little of women despite being one herself. This is common, as women, along with men, are conditioned to believe that women are not as good as men. Additionally, she employs stereotypes about women, and finally, she tells us how well she gets along with women. All these tropes are based on the gender construct, in which she is fully invested.

A somewhat later casualty of the game was Leann, and her plan depended on the gender construct as she understood it.

My original plan, before I knew the tribes would be split by gender, was twofold. First, I would try and team up with a strong male... and try not to make it obvious... then make suballiances. Secondly, I would try not to stand out either positively or negatively to the other tribemates. I would not be the hardest worker, or the laziest. I wouldn't be the best at challenges (easy for me!) or the worst at challenges. or the laziest.

For the most part, I was able to stick with my strategy; however, with the gender split, I obviously had to adjust the "strong male" thing. Instead, I teamed up with a strong female, Ami. (Bloomberg "Huge Mistake" par 4-5)

Leann apparently intuited from watching pervious series that a strong woman who stands out has no chance to win. Lacking a male, she chose a lesbian! But she certainly did not become that strong person herself.

Now as Ami was edited to be the villain, and because she was in the game until the final six, her perception of herself is critically important to the preconceptions people have of themselves vis-à-vis the gender/sexuality constructs. Here is her exit interview in part.

RealityNewsOnline: Hello, Ami, and thanks for taking the time to answer these questions from RealityNewsOnline. Going straight to something that provoked a lot of discussion, you took a lot of heat (from both viewers and

male players) for the way you came off as appearing anti-man. How would you respond to those who have said that?

Ami: Come on, I love men...

RNO: Coming into the game, before you knew that the tribes would be divided by gender, had you always planned to attempt an all-female alliance?

Ami: I knew I wanted to stay close to the ladies. Honestly though, I got the all-female alliance idea from Eliza and Scout.

RNO: Was there any point in the game when you considered taking on a male ally?

Ami: Yes, I thought if one of the ladies was voted out of Lopevi then I would work something out with Jon K.

RNO: When Rory was the only man left in Yasur, why did you decide to keep him around and get rid of Lisa?

Ami: Sometimes the female alliance had to vote out another lady because they were seeming to drift from the goal. Rory, although testy, was really nice to be around!



RNO: Many viewers were impressed at the way you seemed to keep in control of the voting throughout most of the game – how did you manage to do that?

Ami: Logic. (Bloomberg, “Too much input,” pars 4- 12)

This is a gold-mine of self-and other-identity beliefs according to the gender/ sexual orientation construct. We, as observers of the phenomena, have her impressions of herself, other players' impressions, the impressions of fans and in all likelihood those of this interviewer, if his other writings are used as evidence. He demonstrates a certain bias against women, and definite gender expectations of them, which will become more and more apparent in the later chapters of this work. For one thing, Ami calls women “ladies,” which is fairly unusual for a lesbian, and may mean a less than common perception of herself as a homosexual, or possibly some uncertainty about her orientation, or even a lack of familiarity with the jargon used within the lesbigay community. She likes men and gives examples. She even says the all-female alliance for which she was so famous was not originally her idea. She knows what people expect both of women and of lesbians in their relationships with men, and she tries to meet their positive expectations while refuting the negative ones. However, by the time this interview appears, editing and expectations have already firmly cemented Ami in the public mind as a misandryst, because that's what she's *supposed* to be, and her behavior on the show “proved” it.

Ultimately viewers and others read the winner's interview. Chris was the last male standing and beat six women to take home the million-dollar prize. Among other things in his exit interview are the following exchanges.

RNO: Did you have any particular strategies coming into it?

Chris: My strategy coming into the game was to team up with a middle age [sic] woman and play the Tina-Colby game. But that got shot down when they created the gender war. (Bloomberg "I Knew" par 5-6)

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RNO: You seemed pretty certain that you were going home when you were the last man standing. How much of your ability to turn it around at that point was due to your own play, how much was due to others, and how much was just plain luck?

Chris: The approach I took was to play the sympathy card, and Julie was my infiltration into the woman's alliance. No harsh words to her after she jumped back over to Yasur. That was completely due to my ability to play. With Julie campaigning for me, Leann and Ami had a weak moment and decided to vote out Eliza, so looking at it that way; part of my success came from other people's play. I think the only lucky aspect in the game was the day of the mix-up. Scout had complete control. Luck played a roll [sic] that day, for sure! (pars 9-10)

Chris thought about gender before arriving in *Vanuatu*, and even planned a gender-based strategy. When that didn't work, he had another gender-based strategy, which was to gain the sympathy of women, rather than eliminate them. Obviously this was a successful move, and it is one of the few times a male winner has demonstrated respect for women in advance of and throughout the game. Of course Ami and Scout also had gender-based strategies, but lacked the will to pursue them consistently, and Chris won.

#### Players' views of their own gender identity – *Exile Island*

It's far more common for players to have a more stereotypical view of genders, and for them to use those stereotypes to try to advance in the game, or eliminate other players, or both. Let's examine the strategies of some *Exile Island* players in their exit interviews. The major players who didn't win were Cirie and Terry, and the winner was Aras. But some of the players who were eliminated early can still offer interesting insights into the ways the gender construct worked, or was used.

Misty was an early ejection, and she explains how that came about, along with her strategy.

RealityNewsOnline: What was your original strategy going into the game – and was flirting part of that plan?

Misty: Flirting was not part of the original strategy but it was apparent that I needed to take drastic measures to stay in the game.

RNO: When the tribes were reshuffled so soon, did you feel it put you into a better or a worse position in the game?

Misty: Initially I felt it put me in a much much better position in the game. I was so nervous when we started the game when I noticed I was with three younger women. I work with men, a lot of my friends are guys, and all of my female friends are in their 30s so it was nerve-wracking, and searching for a shelter location would have driven me bonkers. They turned out nice though. (Bloomberg “Misty Interview” par 3-6)

Like every other player we have studied thus far, she thought in terms of how being a woman might hurt or help her, and tells how she was forced into a stereotypical act in order to stay in the game, although it didn't work. Michel Foucault points out that this culture is obsessed with gender and sexuality, indeed, to the point where we are permeated with it and scarcely realize it (*Sexuality* 1: 1, 11). It would be hard to find a better example, although we have seen many, and there are many to come, and many we must leave for other critics to wrestle with.

Ruth-Marie was the next off *Exile Island*. While her exit interview is different from many others with regard to gender consciousness and her understanding of how it worked against her in these circumstances, it still shows that she succumbed to the same gender dynamic, even when she didn't know she was doing it, or even when she saw it as something else.

RNO: Did you feel like you had any power at all within the tribe, or was it completely obvious that the decision was out of your hands?

Ruth-Marie: The decision with the young girls I didn't feel was out of my hands and we were hoping to make it to the merge. I didn't feel like there was a crack to overturn Terry's decisions and he was the one ultimately calling the shots. It was in my best interest to stay with the original plan and make that work.

RNO: Looking back, what, if anything, do you think you could have done differently to change the outcome?

Ruth-Marie: The difference between Sally and I the last day and a half, she was slightly hungrier than me. And I broke the cardinal role of *Survivor* because I got a little too comfortable, especially with Terry being gone. It had nothing to do with laziness but I grew a bit more comfortable in the tribe. Possibly, I could have been working Nick as hard as Sally was working Austin because clearly she "outgamed" me with that decision.  
(Bloomberg "Ruth-Marie Interview) par 9-12)

The significant portions of this segment show that she accepted that Terry, a male, was running the tribe, and assumed there was nothing she could do about it, and that the only way she could have stayed was to work on the other men. The fact that she was more comfortable with Terry gone does not seem to have made an impression on her. Working with the other woman was not an option,

getting rid of Terry was not an option. Ruth-Marie saw exactly what hegemonic capitalism would want and expect her to see: power concentrated in male hands with no alternative.

Cirie left the game in fourth place, and she was not voted out, but rather lost a fire-making tiebreak competition. Here are some of her observations relevant to the gender construct.

RNO: How did you go from being the next person to go on Casaya to having an alliance with the very people who had promised to send you packing? (11)

Cirie: When they told me that [I was going next], at that point, I wouldn't have been the first person voted off, and *Survivor* was so much more than I thought it would be. So after Tina went, I figured I could go and it would be okay. But then, I just started working really hard. Shane was pretty much a dictator. He thought he did a lot, but all he really did was the fire. He would ask me to get this and that. I was running around like a maniac, doing anything anybody needed. . . . I was like Shane's secretary. Whatever he needed, I got it for him. . . . I hated getting water, but I had to do what I had to do to stay around. (Bloomberg "Un-fricking-believable!" par 11 – 12)

In this first instance, she accepts that she must be subordinate to a male to stay in the game, so she fulfills those expectations. Later, when she discusses Terry,

we see that again she felt she had to maneuver a man to take her to the final two.

Cirie: Around camp, Terry was there and kicking our asses. We couldn't stand him. . . . Then Shane said he was going to get rid of Aras, and then he would take Courtney to the final two. I felt like that was my spot and she was blocking it. . . . I thought it would be Terry going to the end, bringing whoever he thought he could win with, and that's who I wanted to get rid of. I had to tell Aras what Shane said, and I had to tell Danielle about the Courtney trust issue thing, and it worked out. (par 33-34)

She didn't like him, but she was willing to use him, and she was willing to play any game she had to play to get herself to a place where Terry had no choice but to face off against her. Cirie demonstrated that she was a bright, strong woman. She pulled off several strategic moves, and in real life, she's a surgical nurse. However, like Misty, she put some of herself aside and played the stereotypes to stay in the game. And the men bought what she was doing without examining her play with a critical eye.

Terry finished third, and he certainly had gender construct concepts firmly in place in his strategy. First, he expected to lead, and he expected to lead men to the end.

When Dan and I and Austin and Nick made our alliance, it was basically to the final four. Little did we know it was going to be our *tribal* final four. As strong as I felt about Dan, I felt that strong about Austin and Nick by that

point. . . . {Dan] said, “you guys should just vote me off, I messed up three challenges.” At that point, kind of as a team leader, I thought there might be one more challenge before the final nine. I looked at Dan as possibly the weakest of us. . . .

Then watching Sally perform on the balance beam, she was running with Austin. I thought, “we’re going to need her on the next challenge.” I put on my managerial hat and tried to do the best thing for the team. (Bloomberg “I’m Good” par 6-7)

Beyond his leadership expectations, he didn’t expect to challenge his decisions. While he intended to go to the end with men (his men), he planned to keep and use women (his women) as long as he could before cutting them loose. Although none of this worked out as planned, had he been thinking far enough ahead and with logic, he should have realized it would have been more to his advantage to eliminate the physically strong in anticipation of the individual challenges. As luck had it, he won all immunity challenges except the last, which cost him a chance at the final two. But there was no way he could have anticipated that.

Finally there was Aras, the winner. Inexplicably, *Reality News Online* (RNO) did not do an exit interview with him, and the other available interviews, of which there were few, were short and shallow, or concentrated on his yoga practice. However, other players had ideas about Aras, and he had impressions of them as well which came out during the course of game play. Near the end of the second portion of this chapter, we’ll see what other players’ thought about



Aras vis-à-vis identity constructs. One of his earliest moves demonstrates the gender construct to a particularly clear and problematic effect for one player, and served as a taste of things to come for the rest.

Players' views of one another's gender identity: *Vanuatu*

On *Vanuatu*, as has already been intimated, the players were divided into gender groups, or tribes, by the indigenous peoples during a “welcoming” ceremony that completely ignored the women. Since the tribes are split by gender, there is not a lot of gender discussion of the opposite sex in either tribe. The men know a woman will leave if the male tribe wins, and the women know a man will leave if the female tribe wins. However, there are some discussions about the split and what that may mean as the game progresses.

Very early, in the first episode, Chris announces he's glad about the gender split because he believes it's easier to outsmart men than women. This meshes with what he said about women in his exit interview, that he thought he should pursue the sympathy vote. In the Tribal Council for the men on that same show, Sarge and others express frustrations at being beaten by women. This is worse than being beaten by men, or a mixed tribe, and host Jeff Probst beats it to death as well. Of course, the game is set up to play the genders against one another, and the producers have to milk that for all it's worth in this binary society in which men are expected to remain ascendant and powerful, while everyone buys into it and

believes, in false consciousness, that they are all benefitting from this dubious hierarchy.

In the second episode, the men lose again, and we hear about it from Rory this time, who is really chafing about the women's victory celebration. A victory celebration is a commonplace on *Survivor*. Everyone gets excited when they win, but in this case Rory claims it's inappropriate. Lacking both genders on the men's Lopevi tribe, the vote to expel a player is based on age.

On the women's Yasur tribe, they are glad to all still be together, and Ami thinks this is nice because women are more nurturing and kind. Since we already know she is the producers' pick for villain, and that a man beats all the women, I feel this is producer-directed irony which again is supposed to reinforce the status quo, albeit at the end of the game. However, the women lose the next competition and must vote someone off. Since everyone is the same gender, the issues are personality and work ethic. Therefore, because the tribes remain divided along gender lines until the fifth episode, there is little talk on either side about gender until then. The men lose two more immunity challenges and fret over how they will go into the merge down in numbers against the women, but this is more of a strategic exercise than an expression of gender constructs.

The tribal swap in the fifth episode generates a host of discussions by players about one another with reference to the gender construct. Immediately Twila, who ends up on the new Lopevi with mostly men, is ecstatic because she

works with men and gets along better with them than with women. She doesn't know the men yet, but she has high hopes based on her previous experiences in life. After *Vanuatu* was over, a rumor about Twila's sexual orientation circulated, anecdotally, on the internet, but at this point she was firmly entrenched in the "straight women who likes guys" camp. She had certain beliefs and expectations based on gender.

On new Yasur, however, Bubba is very nervous to suddenly be in a male minority. He came from the "older male" majority on Lopevi, and had certain expectations of how the men would treat one another. His uncertainty about women reveals his own gender-related expectations. At the same time, Ami is not happy to have men there, nor to have lost some women to the other tribe. Suddenly gender matters to her, too. She doesn't expect things to go well for the women now on Lopevi, nor does she want to keep any men in Yasur. However, we need to remember that overall, in tribal switches, original tribe members bond and don't wish to be separated, regardless of gender, which is almost always mixed. In fact, Scout, the other lesbian wants to keep some men for tribal challenges, so she shows her preconceived notions about men, along with her lack of connection to the women, which was not apparent earlier. However, they do vote along tribal/gender lines, and Bubba goes home.

Thus, for the first time in *Vanuatu*, there is evidence of how the gender construct is recognized by all the players and makes an impact. However, the initial division of tribes by gender clouds the issue. Neither viewers, nor other observers, can be sure if tribal or gender loyalty is the determining factor.

Regardless of this, it looks like gender, and that's how the tension and interest in the program are maintained, hooking the viewers to pursue emotional reinforcement, buy the products and maintain the hegemonic order.

The sixth episode reveals Rory sniping at the women of Yasur for the way they treat men, and the men at Lopevi admiring the women's bodies as they tan. Two of the men talk about how nice it is to have pretty women around. So the gender construct rears its head early and often throughout the show. Lopevi then wins a pig-catching challenge and everyone on both tribes laughs at Eliza of Yasur for being weak and prissy, bringing another stereotype right to the foreground. Twila especially makes remarks about how foolish it was for them to have voted Bubba out.

Yasur then loses the immunity challenge and in a strange twist, Rory is not eliminated because he did so much although they lost, but Lisa, a woman who had nothing to do with the loss is voted out. While keeping Rory affirms the cultural need of women for men to do hard tasks, the woman who left was purely the loser of a popularity contest. And if that isn't a gender-construct trope, nothing is. Two for the price of one, in the same contest on the same day.

It's no coincidence that David Bloomberg, the *RNO* recapper for the seventh episode titles his article "Surviving *Vanuatu*, Episode 7: Men vs. Women?" I'll examine his thoughts in greater length in the chapter on the work of expert amateur reviewers, but it's an excellent foreshadowing of what is to come in *Vanuatu*, not just in this episode, but in every one from this one through the finale and reunion.

In the seventh episode, as luck has it, Rory almost single-handedly carries Yasur to a win in an immunity competition that involves slingshots, cementing yet another cultural trope as most of the women don't shoot well. This sends Lopevi to Tribal Council, and they maintain their original voting pattern of eliminating young men, leaving the women untouched. This absolutely does not match gender-related expectations, but it does demonstrate that sunbathing naked in front of men may have some effect, which saves gender related expectations from being completely ignored. The Lopevi men make a statement for themselves as straight men who like to look at women who in turn will use their bodies to manipulate male behavior.

Whether it's accurate, or whether it's editing, almost every conversation and almost every scene in the next several episodes is about the gender construct. The eighth begins with snuggling and semi-nude sunbathing on new Lopevi. Conversations among the players indicate this is manipulative behavior by women. Next is an exchange of remarks by the tribes about male and/or female alliances. Soon, we find the tribes are merging to become Alinta, and they engage in their first individual immunity challenge. Sarge wins, but the merge at this point means there are more women than men, which is all they discuss until Tribal Council. There, Rory is voted out by the women because he seems the next strongest man after Sarge, and because he is always angry and the women don't want him on the jury.

It's all about gender and numbers until Sarge mentions Ami's magical lesbian powers at Tribal Council. It's not at all apparent in the game, but this sets

off a firestorm online, both in discussion groups and by review writers, both of which will be examined in the next two chapters. Rory is voted off and claims to be the “victim of a gender war.” Even if this were not true, and even if there is more to it, this is exactly what the audience is led to believe, reinforcing the trope that life in our culture is a never-ending battle of the sexes which men must win for the good of the many. False consciousness allows many of us to agree, and the hegemonic oligarchy marches on.

Episode nine is about nothing but women against men. The reward challenge plays out entirely along gender lines. Two women win and bring back goodies for only the women, while the men are all out fishing. Sarge refers to the women’s alliance as “Estrogen City.” Everyone talks about the gender alliances until the tribal council. Ami has immunity and the women vote Sarge out.

In the tenth episode, there is a reward challenge with random teams in which the men and strong women must physically maneuver a small woman around a course. The team with the men wins. The immunity challenge is won by Eliza and the two remaining men spend the rest of the day trying to convince the women to get rid of Ami, but the women vote Chad out, leaving only Chris, the eventual winner, as the last male. Chad blames his fate on Ami’s women power again, which feeds the online gender and sexual orientation discussions, which were doing fine on their own.

For the next five episodes, Chris manipulates the women into picking one another off until only he and Twila are left, and he wins. There is still plenty of gender construct discussion going on, because some of the women do not wish

to participate in the demise of their alliance. The eleventh episode is the loved ones' visit, which foregrounds the two long-term lesbian relationships. Although there is no discussion among the players about it, online discussions rage. Ami wins immunity, but the first crack in the women's alliance appears, and Chris is saved while Leann is voted out. Chris skillfully turns the women against one another, using every gender stereotype he can find to convince each one that the others hate her, and she will be off next unless she accepts his protection. All but Ami fall for it, but she is eliminated as soon as she doesn't win immunity, and Chris keeps pecking away, leaning on their insecurities and working on their sympathies until he wins. In his confessionals, he calls them wildcats and laughs at the way they are clawing each other to shreds. So whatever tropes Chris doesn't use or mention, editing shows to us in the women's interactions with one another.

In the two-hour finale, the remaining players are whittled from four down to two, Chris and Twila. At the final tribal council, he tells the jury he should win because he was the last man standing and beat five women in a row so far. There are only two men on the jury, but he still thinks this is a good argument, and for all viewers know, he's right because he wins. Thus he uses gender stereotypes about women against them, and they buy into it. Our culture conditions women to think of themselves as second-class citizens, and they seem to agree. This is exactly how hegemonic elements would have made it end if they had control of the game. In fact, the power structure could do nothing, but it still ended in their favor.

Later, at the reunion, in a response to a question from Probst, Ami explained that the women weren't able to stand firmly together because they don't know how. While that's an oversimplification, it does point to the fact that women are culturally constructed to prefer bonds with men, and they have less experience in teamwork than men do. This, again, is an example of the game giving people what they expect. Probst's question, and Ami's answer, remind us that women aren't supposed to work well together, not even when there is only one man left among seven players. Despite the understandable booing and cat-calling from the audience whenever she spoke, Ami maintained her composure and again, said nothing to the effect that she, or other lesbians, hate men.

Subsequent editions of *Survivor* do not always end well for the members of the hegemonic forces of this culture, which proves the game is not rigged, but it works out in their favor most of the time without any manipulation. This provides relief and reinforcement to the many viewers who watch *Survivor* to get their dose of comforting emotion, and encourages them to feel they are in the majority, which is running the world and doing everything properly. The winner of the game gets a million dollars (before taxes) but capitalism continues to win the grand prize.

Players' views of one another's gender identity: *Exile Island*

The most interesting twist of this season was revealed on the first day: There were four tribes, instead of two, and they were divided by gender and age. Although most of the identity construct comments from the players are about



age, there are a couple of observations about gender right away. Immediately Austin, a young man, is disappointed with the lack of women on his team with whom to flirt. Right after this, as the younger women are looking for a good site for their camp, Courtney says, they were “being women” and couldn’t decide what to do. Very early then, players establish stereotypes according to the gender construct.

Early in the second episode, the four tribes are merged into two via schoolyard pick, mixing the ages and gender. The first chance he gets, Terry calls the four men in his tribe together and demands they make a pact to the end, eliminating the women first to “stay strong.” The younger women, although they don’t know about this pact, try to counter by offering an alliance with the younger men, but the younger men already see the women as a liability. They promise nothing. So, even though they started out in age/gender groups, age quickly goes by the wayside and gender takes precedence in alliances. However, relatively speaking there is much more conversation about personalities than anything else.

Then Casaya loses an immunity challenge, and Aras, a young man, announces they must vote off an older woman to keep the tribe strong. He claims he is making this decision and announcement in the interest of honesty and unity. This is the move to which I alluded above when I said that Aras makes a very obvious and very gender-construct related effort to vote out women. Further, he says, whichever older woman stays this time will be voted off next time! In addition, Aras tells them this will happen even though one of the men has

repeatedly asked to be voted off. He convinces this man, Shane, to stay, because they need him. Several people briefly object, but neither older woman does any campaigning, and one of them goes home. It's very telling that Aras felt free to announce what he was doing, and why, and that neither older woman challenged him, openly or behind his back. This is the culture in which that doesn't happen, even at the cost of a million dollars. Emotion instead of credible, strategic play reigns because the ones in power in the game are representative of those in power in the culture at large.

La Mina, the tribe with the solid men's alliance, loses the next immunity challenge and the four men vote out one of the three women with little discussion and certainly no apparent consultation with the women. However, during the Tribal Council that precedes the vote, Jeff Probst pursues the gender issue with two of the women. He comments on the fitness of the men and asks the women if they have to live up to the men's standard. This privileges men, puts the women on the defensive and in this case, doesn't allow them time to think that they are buying into this concept and thus perpetuating it. Misty agrees with Jeff and hopes the men see how hard she's playing. Responding to the same line of questions, Melinda goes so far as to call herself "the odd man out," highlighting her apparent lack of belief in herself as a separate entity, and her acceptance that she is some sort of flawed male.

As he did when he covered *Vanuatu*, recapper David Bloomberg says it all in his title. We'll examine his work in greater detail later, but the title is worth knowing now: "The Man in Charge." During this episode, all of Terry's

teammates, including the women he is trying to get rid of, talk about how wonderful he is. La Mina loses another immunity challenge and the remaining women complain that “the almighty men” are running the show. Editing or not, this is what viewers expect to see, and they are getting a good dose from this series. We also see the men deciding which woman to vote out, which they base on age. This helps to reify the idea that women, who are already of questionable value, become even less valuable as they age.

Indeed, Sally, the lone woman on her tribe, quickly announces how proud she is to be the “last girl standing,” on her tribe, which she feels is a compliment to her from the men, which she values. This can be a hard thing to comprehend, but apparently it is a commonplace in a culture in which women will pursue male approval at one another’s expense, or even their own expense. Therefore it is important to the producers that we hear Sally’s analysis of the situation, which reminds us about what the source of our credibility should be.

Partway through the season, the regular series goes on hiatus for three weeks, but they do show a recap episode in which new footage is also revealed. One very important clip shows Danielle complaining, in the first episode, that there are no men available to help the young women open coconuts and do other hard labor. I’m not sure why that didn’t make the cut the first time, as it is extremely hegemony-reinforcing. Yet, it wasn’t left on the cutting room floor, either. The producers found it valuable enough to show as soon as the chance arose. However, they undermine their emotional credibility a little when another

woman comes over and easily opens the coconut, citing her summer jobs in construction.

Another new scene is the women of Casaya berating the men for getting hair on their soap, and that they must now segregate all soap by gender. This is a wonderful way of demonstrating that women's priorities are inexplicable, and they're all just so silly! Shane then pretends to use the "female" soap on his male parts, which causes still more screaming. Since there is no conversation going on at all about the gender construct with regard to strategy, the producers have to make the best of what they have to continue their support of hegemonic values.

After the merge into the Gitanos tribe, with former Casaya up six to four, the only discussion is which strong male will be voted out first. In Casaya, there's almost no gender discussion anyway, so this is far more strategy-based. Because there is no strong-willed lesbian in this series to act as a lightning rod, gender seems to fall by the wayside as well. Again, it's all about personality. Cirie works subtly to eliminate her rivals, while Terry goes on an immunity challenge streak which is the only way for him to stay in the game. However, gender does come up once in a while. One day, Terry tries to dazzle everyone with macho fighter pilot stories, which he characterizes as a male occupation. He speaks about being a man as a very important part of his identity. Because he's not in a position to influence anyone, though, it falls on deaf ears, except we hear a lot about it his confessionals for the rest of the game. Perhaps he doesn't have

much else to say, or perhaps it's editing, but in any event, it's unavoidable. No one else discusses their own gender very much, if at all.

On another occasion, Shane develops a rash in his crotch and discusses it with Cirie, a nurse. No one really seems to care if he talks about himself in this rather graphic manner, or if he goes naked for a while to relieve the chafing. Under the duress of the show's primitive conditions, at least some normal social taboos also fall by the wayside, along with serious gender discussions, leaving the audience with laughable gender-related conversation instead.

Near the end of the game, during a reward challenge, there is a big argument over game rules, and Aras brings gender in. It seems out of place to the viewer because it appears out of nowhere, and with no prior stage-setting that we know of, Aras demands of Terry, "Are you going to say something bad about women now?" The men get into an intense argument, which seems to be the continuation of an earlier argument that we never saw. Later in that episode, however, Aras admits Terry never did say anything mean about women, and he was just agitated. He claims there was actually no logic or continuity to the remark at all. But still, we are left wondering what would motivate Aras to accuse Terry of male chauvinism, instead of bad personal habits, or racism or any other thing that others might find offensive. Indeed, from the time the tribes merge, there are numerous references to Terry's misogyny by Aras and others, yet there is no sign of it in the footage of the broadcast episodes, for example, week 13 (Bloomberg "Make Friends" pars 19 and 37). This calls into question the editing of this show. Is it possible Terry's misogyny was edited out, in a reversal of the

way Ami's man-hatred was continually implied (also without evidence) in *Vanuatu*? Regardless of what happened in either case, questions are raised about the presentations of these players by the producers, so that a hegemony-maintaining, emotionally-fulfilling viewer diet was the result. If nothing else, the gender construct seems to become entangled in many situations, even when there is no basis for it at all.

In the final episode, Danielle discusses gender in a confessional, saying the men are constantly one-upping one another due to testosterone. This is both ironic and amusing because Danielle wins the final immunity challenge and votes Terry out of the game. At the reunion, we discover that, no matter which man Danielle had taken to the final two, that man would have received enough votes to beat her. We also discover that Danielle had made some strategic game moves, but these were never highlighted, so she had the appearance of riding coattails and therefore not deserving to win, according to other players, and as will become obvious, reviewers and the audience in general.

In the next two chapters, we'll revisit some of these scenes, but from the angle of how they elicited texts produced by the reviewers and on-line fan groups. In so doing, we'll realize how the same speech acts can be used to reinforce Halls dominant-hegemonic reading of texts and emotional reinforcement long after they have been said, indeed, up to the present time, for they are still available to be read by anyone with an interest in the game.

## Chapter Three

### Expert Amateur Reviewers

The role and work of expert amateur reviewers

Here might have been the potential for the reviewers, who are expert amateurs, to take the role of public intellectual. Analysis will demonstrate that they either can't or won't. None of them, I'm sure, with the possible exception of Professor Sadow, knows what that is, but such writers can still be a sort of narrator/interrogator without that sort of esoteric knowledge, if they are simply able to maintain balance, perspective and objectivity. Unfortunately, these observers appear to have an agenda of their own, as will be seen. When they vilify the mass of viewers for lack of critical judgment, there's only a matter of degree separating the writer from the simple viewer. While the reviewers are more sophisticated in their expression, they are no less likely to bring their prejudices into their experience, demanding from the shows what they want to see, and seeing things they expect to see even if they aren't there. So, rather than accepting the mantle of public intellectual from Gramsci, they put on the hat of negotiated decoder from Hall. They poke around a little bit in a rather superficial manner, commenting on the interest level of the challenges or the make-up of the tribes, or the effectiveness of host Jeff Probst. The deep issues of such concepts as gender performance remain buried, except that they unconsciously reveal the extent of their own cultural conditioning, and others', through their analyses. They criticize the players, or praise them, for their refusal to conform, or their success at conforming, but the questionable cultural

commonplaces themselves are left virtually untouched. Because of their level of erudition and analysis about every other aspect of the game, including using the local cultures as props, or the environmental impact of the show on the land, it's difficult to grasp that they don't question stereotypes, or at least take notice of them.

In short, both groups misinterpret the text, or worse, they ignore the underlying text; the reviewers just sound more intelligent. They are, by far, the more polished writers. They do think more deeply about the various concepts they discuss; however, I believe they could, and should, go further. I think the reason they don't is that they are too constructed by the current culture to see beyond binaries, for one thing. Another reason is that these writers, like anyone else, are looking for the good feelings and reinforcement most viewers seem to need from their entertainment, or the replacement of credibility with emotion.

First, let's look at a few statistics. For *Survivor: Vanuatu*, seven authors, one woman and six men, wrote 121 articles. Of these, 73 discussed identity constructs of some kind in positive, negative, or neutral terms or in some combination. However, of these 73, 72 contained at least one negative comment and/or negative value judgment about an identity construct. Of the 72, 70 were negative comments about women, and two were racial. Of the 70, at least half were a combination of negativity about women as women, and about women as lesbians, even though only two participants out of 16 were lesbians. Many articles include more than one negative remark, and they may address more than



one construct as well. Only a handful of articles made positive remarks with regard to an identity construct.

All six authors made negative comments in terms of identity constructs, even the woman, although she made fewer. Two of the five men made only occasional remarks, but three were extremely active in this regard. This is interesting because these shows are, after all, games, and they are strategy and social games. While the internal contests heavily favor men, the same rules apply for both genders. It should also be noted here that different writers examine different aspects of the shows. One is the university professor who writes about strategy. One is a recapper. Another picks the Most Valuable Players. Another one examines why individual contestants lose. But all of them make their observations in terms of gender, when gender may not be the most important issue, or even an issue at all. Thus, as negotiated decoders, they merely question the superficial aspects of the performance of gender, rather than asking why the so many of the contests are skewed in favor of the dominant gender construct in our culture, maleness.

There were 161 articles about *Exile Island* compared to 121 for *Vanuatu*, but there was only one additional writer. Of these 161, only 57 were about gender, compared to 73 for *Vanuatu*. They discussed both men and women but most were anti-female. More were about and against women, fewer were about and against males. Three of the male writers were particularly hostile to women, the same ones who wrote with such vehemence on *Vanuatu*: Bloomberg, Sadow and DeGeorge. The new woman, Ford, was also extremely male-oriented.

Other identity constructs were barely mentioned on *Exile Island* despite the original division by age, which came up four times, and race was mentioned only once. Again, some articles have more than one comment against the female gender construct, or deal with more than one construct. All of the males made anti-woman remarks and were responsible for nearly all such remarks, although the women made at least one such remark each.

The order in which I present the material will be first, by show in chronological order, with *Vanuatu* first. Within each series, I'll present the articles in chronological order, with some exceptions. In some cases, it is more illustrative to show several remarks by one author, in order to show a trend. Further, several authors might either agree or disagree on a point, in which case presenting their work together is more effective. Finally, and this is frequent, authors contradict themselves from one series to the other, and I will call attention to this as it occurs.

#### Expert amateur reviewers of *Vanuatu*

The first example for *Vanuatu* comes from a round table discussion, in which the authors who cover the series talk about the players and make various predictions. The game has yet to start when they meet, but the players have been introduced in various media, and the location is known. They are discussing a particular contestant:

Twila Tanner, 41-year-old highway repair worker from Marshall, Missouri.

Betsy: And here's the other person who irritated me on that *TV Guide* special. What she considers being "strong willed," the other members of her tribe will find "abrasive" and "bossy." If Scout's not the first to go, she will be.

Jeffrey: I don't get good feelings from Twila. What her [sic] and many others don't realize is that lying and cheating are a level of degree, and the more important thing is to scheme and consider it the context of game strategy. I think she'll be eliminated before the jury phase.

David: Goodbye, Twila. It might be a battle to see if her attitude annoys her tribe more or if they consider Scout to be a bit "out there," as I mentioned. It could depend heavily on how they do at challenges. Still, I don't see Twila making the jury. (RealityNewsOnline Staff, "'Survivor: Vanuatu' Predictions" pars. 71-74)

Immediately the writers make stereotypical remarks about an older woman being "abrasive" and one is *by* a woman. Of the 18 players this was the only one mentioned in the sense of gender. One thing this highlights is how women are constructed right alongside men in this culture to think men are greater and women are lesser, beings, and the writers don't interrogate it. In many cases, they don't even negotiate it. To have Twila succeed, or even to suggest that she might, would be in direct opposition to the dominant-hegemonic position of Hall.

A program in which an older woman outperforms anyone but another older woman (the aforementioned Scout), will make viewers uncomfortable. Further, this exchange points up the recurring honesty issue already dealt with herein. Women are not expected to be able to lie successfully, and apparently Twila has already admitted this is not part of her skill set. Therefore the reviewers expect her to lose. In the interest of fairness, the roundtable also expects some of the men to lose, but not because of their gender.

This brings the first opportunity for comparing the writers as they cover the different series. An article was also published ahead of the first episode of *Exile Island*, discussing favorites and first impressions. This, too, is in round table format, in which five of the seven authors comment in turns.

In “RNO Roundtable: ‘*Survivor: Panama – Exile Island*’ Predictions,” the five male authors love the alpha males and predict one of them will win, but fear they will be voted out and a woman with modeling experience will win. The female writers did not participate in the discussion.

A sampling of the remarks easily illustrates this attitude. About Dan the male astronaut, the male writers say:

“If Dan can emerge as a leader, and one that is willing to listen, I could see him making it to the end. I want him to do well.’

“Who would vote against this guy? I see Dan in the final four.”

“Others will be impressed by his astronaut background. He’s final four material, possibly the winner.”

About Terri, the male fighter/airline pilot, they say:

“I think Terry will probably be liked by most of his tribe, and he’s another guy I could see making it to the end as long as he doesn’t show people that he is too much of a threat.”

“As long as he doesn’t run into a cache of knuckleheads like Hunter did in *Survivor 4*, he’ll go far. Final four material.”

“Plus the self-proclaimed geek in me can't help but admire that he's served aboard the USS Enterprise. He's Final Four material and my pick to win it all.”

Of Danielle, the female media sales representative, the writers think:

“She probably won’t be around long, since her tribemates will probably dump her for not pulling her weight.”

“Again, young females without extensive modeling or pageant experience usually don’t do well and I don’t see that she has the wisdom or smarts to be one of the few exceptions. Won’t make the jury.”

”Out before the jury.”

And of Melinda, the female former singer, they predict:

“I think she will come off as quite annoying, and get the boot faster than even Danielle!”

“I’m suspecting an early trip to Loser Lounge, possibly even the first boot.”

“She's going to get on her tribemates’ nerves too. I see an early boot.”

In the interest of fairness, I must also report that there are remarks about some men not doing well, and predictions that some women may do well. In general, though, the predictions about men's success, and desire to see that success, are common, as are the beliefs that women will do poorly, although they are nice to look at ("RNO Round Table" 1-5). All these predictions serve the dominant-hegemonic position well.

In another predictive *Vanuatu* article, chief editor David Bloomberg immediately goes for the athletic guys as favorites and picks women he likes to look at. He doesn't expect a woman to win, but rather chooses three or four men. He particularly favors the older, athletic men, but also chooses the ultimate winner. It's definitely slanted to favor men, which is no surprise based on his earlier round-table writing ("Panama . . . Revealed" 1-2)

The next example comes from David Bloomberg, who also does some of the recapping. He is simply reporting on the opening episode of the *Vanuatu* series, but he neatly points out how the entire series is set up. Before we, as scholarly observers, examine it, though, it's very important to remember that, by the time viewers see the episodes, the producers already know who won, and they can set the stage any way they want by selecting from miles and miles of footage. For one thing, in this episode, there is a cut to the winner's face when Jeff Probst says, "a million dollars." For another, the producers know the gender of the winner and the exact order of departure for everyone else, as well as the circumstances under which they left, and the gender ratio of the game

throughout. Chris, the last man standing, manages to defeat the remaining six women in the game.

Thus, Bloomberg reports:

Rory tells us that everybody had spears jabbed at them – except him, the only black man. Then some of the natives start pulling the women out to one side, where they have to kneel on a mat. Meanwhile, the guys are closer to the center and have a place to sit. . . . One of the tribesmen uncovers a bowl of liquid. . . . Ami says the women were waiting for their turn, but it never happened. I'm thinking I wouldn't be too upset about not having to drink that stuff, but they're more upset at being ignored. . . . The chief takes the pig's blood and puts it on the faces of the men, which Travis says makes them Vanuatu warriors. Once again, the women are ignored. . . . Probst takes center stage to say the final part of the ceremony involves a spiritual stone that is supposed to ward off evil spirits. He notes that, as they've seen, men and women are treated very differently and the chief is inviting the men to have the stone. But they have to get it from the top of a pole greased with pig fat. If they fail, the women get it. (Bloomberg, "Off-Balance?" pars. 11-13, 15-16)

This scene suggests how clearly the game program is a text to be read, and written, and re-written, and re-read. Moreover, there is an inevitable intertextuality among the parts and players, because prospective contestants

read the articles written about the game, and then they are interviewed by the writers, after which the producers, sponsors and other players, as well as future players, who are also fans, can then read those texts and comment on them in internet groups.

Moreover, there are many things we, as scholars, can't know, but which we may question. For example, the native Vanuatu islanders treat the women in an unequal manner compared to the men. But we don't know if this is prevalent in their culture, or if there are other ceremonies in which women have a higher status. Neither viewers nor scholars know if we see the entire ceremony, or if the entire ceremony is performed for the visitors. Viewers don't know how much the producers may have manipulated the indigenous people, or the footage. Later in the show, there is another native get-together attended by several players, including both genders. In it, the women are not kept aside, and they are offered all the same things the men are offered, and in no particular manner or order.

In any event, the producers, with the help of the local peoples and the agreement of the players, write a text that creates a mind-set for the rest of the series. The viewers can read it in various ways. The problem is, by and large, we don't. Viewers don't read it oppositionally; they tend not to question it at all. They see what they expect to see and what the binary-driven hegemonic elements of our culture want to reinforce; in this case, the idea that one man is better than half a dozen women. Then, these expert amateur reviewers, who have been reporting on *Survivor* and other reality programs since 2000, and therefore have credibility with their readers, reinforce the binary, culture-driven, identity



constructs, either because they believe in them, or because they don't give them any thought. Either way, the manner in which they analyze and discuss the episodes impacts the thought processes of the reader-viewers. As will be seen in the analysis of fan and viewer postings, very few of them approach the oppositional decoding of Hall, either, although they do get closer than any of the expert amateur writers.

Because we, as scholars, are interrogating these texts with regard to how identity constructs turn emotional appeal into credibility, we must examine additional instances. To examine every one provided by *Survivor: Vanuatu* and *Exile Island* would be exhaustive and exhausting, therefore I'll select some of the more interesting examples, in terms of subject matter, and discuss the rest in terms of trends. Many messages are greetings to one another, personal conversations or simple "Me, too!" agreements that add little to the conversation.

One time-worn tactic is to make comments about the women's bodies, although they are usually incidental to the plot. There wouldn't be any exploitative element, for example, to discussing Scout's artificial knee or Chad's artificial leg. Those would be simple statements of fact that don't give emotional reinforcement about being in the majority, which is "right." Instead, we'll examine discussions of body parts and dominant- hegemonic concepts of beauty.

Here are some excerpts from articles about episodes of *Vanuatu*:

Before the vote, there is one more thing they have to address, Probst says. I'm thinking he's going to talk about Chad's leg. Nope – he wants to talk about the women. Bubba (Travis) says to never underestimate a

woman. They mean business. There is more discussion about how they expected to win but the women raised the level. And of course Probst manages to get one of them to say a couple of 'em are good-looking too. (Bloomberg, "Vanuatu 1 Off-Balance?" par. 51)

Throughout the reporting on this series, the male writers either use, quote or reinforce the use of phrases such as "cute girls" and "hot chicks." They regularly refer to the women as "girls" while the males are called "men" and "guys." They may be called "strong" or "big" but the terms used to describe them seem more descriptive and less fraught with stereotypical labeling and value judgments. The remarks on appearance are often coupled with the use of appearance as a strategy, like this one by Professor Sadow: "This is a group one could work over well behind the scenes, and brings a decided advantage to a younger female when going into a merge. Look at it this way; at a merge with men, is Dolly going to appear more charming and attractive to those men, attributes she could use to influence them . . ." ("Dolly Madness" par. 5). He means that, in camp, in scenes we don't necessarily see, the women could be using their sexuality to distract or manipulate the men. He expects this and considers it a legitimate form of play.

A further example of this sort of text is available the very next week, from the same source. "This reduced flexibility and naked (oops, better not use that word around *Survivor* hotties, never know where that will lead) obvious ambition would make her a pariah to both groups" (Sadow, "Switches" par. 6). Again,

strategy and physical appearance always mix well, and are unremarkable to Sadow

.The other male writers, Kellam, Clinard, Bloomberg and De-George, join Sadow in the reinforcement of this trope, although they don't necessarily link it to strategy. Kellam says, "Will Lisa be missed? She certainly will be, by me at least. For one thing, she was one of the more attractive women in the game. Usually, it's the younger ones whom the male viewers ogle as eye candy. But, for being 44 and having had six children, Lisa looked great in a two-piece" ("Wrong One?" par. 15). Jeffrey Clinard advises the women that their tactic of undressing to tan will get the men's attention, although he suggests trying other strategies, too ("Advice . . . Remaining 11" par. 17). All you need to know about Julie that matters is presented by Mike DeGeorge: "Her breasts look bigger than her head" ("Insider . . . Episode 6 . . . Pig" par. 6).

In fact, Professor Jeffrey Sadow even presents a series of fits and starts in which he crosses out direct clichés full of sexual innuendo, replacing those phrases with "acceptable" ones about women's bodies and strategy. Except, of course, readers can still see all the stereotyping and insults, and they are meant to ("Clichéd Result" par. 1). There is a special level of insult to this particular strategy because he implies average viewers, or readers, especially women, won't "see through" his alleged "strategy analysis" to realize it is little more than an elaborate put-down of women as strategists themselves. Thus, by implication, since there are female viewers of the show and readers of his column, they are all too dull-witted to grasp his message. And moreover, if they did grasp it, what

could they do about it? The *RNO* site has archives full of articles with sexist remarks in them. Those few who notice, and the fewer who care to complain about this, are ignored. My evidence is my own unanswered messages to the various writers. Sadow makes it clear that the only real strategy he expects from women is the flaunting of their bodies and thereby, the manipulation of men. Of course, he gives the male players no credit for not falling victim to these strategies, either. Further proof of his attitude appears in a later strategy article in which he refers to one player as “naked Julie” throughout, because apparently he, and others, find this the only way to differentiate one woman from all the others in the game (Sadow, “Swing Votes” par. 3).

If this sort of language were used toward women in a professional setting, harassment suits would be justifiable, even were they not brought. But in this culture, misogynist texts are not only the norm, they are expected, even welcomed, by reader-viewers. If not, writers would not continue to use them. But they give the majority of reader-viewers their emotional fix, reminding them they are the majority, and might makes right. If male readers didn’t see enough of this sort of thing from male writers, they would look for their fix elsewhere. Again, the target demographic of these shows, and therefore of these articles, is young men aged 18 to 35. Some of the writing quoted herein shows that the authors have on occasion heard from angry female readers, but that does not change their style, their focus or their priorities.

Another trend here is the sexist joke, which again demonstrates that in this culture, women are fair game, because “everyone does it” and “it’s no big deal.”

There is credibility in numbers, and good feelings in belonging to that number.

These examples are from *Vanuatu*.

Eliza is unhappy with this turn of events, blaming Ami, Dolly, and Scout for insisting they stop. They all discuss what to do, but nobody wants to make a decision. Women – it figures. (Kidding! Please don't e-mail me!) Eliza says she didn't want to be too pushy (smart), but luckily others agree and they decide to head off under the light of the full moon. (Bloomberg "Vanuatu 1 Off-Balance?" par. 24)

Several hands go up. Lea speaks up and says yes, it was easy; he just needed to get his butt across so they could light a fire and beat these... *females*. He says "females" kind of like the Ferengi on *Star Trek* do – and Ferengi keep their females locked at home and don't allow them to wear clothing. (Bloomberg "Vanuatu 1: Off-Balance?" par. 47)

Ami Speculates: Ami thinks the treemail note means that they're doing a series of things, taking all the strengths of the team and putting them together. She has no idea what it will be specifically, but thinks it will bring fire. It is SO important that they win, they froze again last night and no one wants to do it again. You know how easily women get cold! That's not me bashing women, that's just a fact. (De George "Vanuatu 1 Water and Fire" par. 9)

While these remarks may fail to invoke hilarity among feminists and scholars, they seem to go over well with most of the readers, whose silence must be taken as approval and encouragement to write more of the same. Throughout the *RNO* site, in articles on a wide variety of reality programs, these snide digs are endemic. Women are supposed to tolerate sexist jabs. It is a cultural commonplace that leads to tropes such as the “humorless lesbian feminist” and other women who “take themselves too seriously” refusing to be merely decorative. Texts like this help to entrench hegemonic forces in a constant and insidious manner every day they are published and read.

Other sexist jokes throughout this series had to do with women talking too much, gossiping, cat-fighting, changing their minds, spending a lot of time grooming even in primitive conditions, giggling, hogging the bathroom, flirting, and being “emotional” or “illogical.” All of these provide solid evidence that our culture requires strong feelings, rather than proof of credibility, to feel entertained, and through it, reinforced in hegemonic values, which are then reinforced by the review writers. From the way the writers discuss what is good and bad, and from examining the viewers’ attitudes in discussion boards, we can see they feel angry and upset when a stereotypical “knight” doesn’t step up, and the damsel rescues herself. The need to feel part of a “correct” majority is strong. If the “wrong” person wins too often, the viewers will eventually feel betrayed and pursue their entertainment/reinforcement elsewhere. A “bad” win once in a while is okay, because there’s reinforcement in commiseration among like-minded

viewers. But if too many people win who don't send the "right" message, there'll be trouble in paradise.

Then there are simply unkind remarks about women, the commonplace putdown no one notices. Not meant as a joke, not about appearance, but just a way to remind us that, in this and so many other cultures, women have less value than men.

First episodes are the hardest to write about concerning strategy since there's not much opportunity to observe the dynamics among the players - especially when several minutes of the presentation are consumed in showing a *yaqona* ceremony that might well make Fr. Lini roll over in his grave if he knew it was for the benefit of *Survivor*. At least propriety wasn't violated, by having the women sit it out. (Sadow "Overview Survivor 1 Authority" par. 2)

Here Professor Sadow manages to devalue women in two cultures at once. It's hard to know if writers do it deliberately, or if they are unconscious of the several layers of meaning in their work, but in any event, they never expect to be criticized for it, and if they are criticized, nothing changes. I have directed inquiries about this sexist style to various writers at this site in years past, and I received either no response, or replies ranging from patronizing to defensive. Needless to say, there is little point in pursuing that line of inquiry any longer. It is simply too accepted and too commonplace. Most readers apparently approve, or are unaware, or don't address the issue at all. This is what transforms good

feelings into the new credibility; this is how the hegemony of culture is supported and reified by the reviewers in their barely negotiated decoding of the shows. The sheer repetition and weight of texts all doing the same thing have done their job, as Mike DeGeorge shows us in this example: "Fire Starter: Replay the immunity challenge. It was not very nice of the women to taunt "fire, water, immunity." [This chant indicates they won flint, which is necessary for fire, which in turn is needed to boil water, and immunity from tribal council in this case was part of the reward.] Pretty stupid, especially for the ones laughing and pointing. That's something people remember, Leann" ("Insider Water and Fire" par. 31). It goes without saying that never has an immunity victory gone by without the victors celebrating, yet the writer seems to chastise these victors because those losers are male. First, women are not supposed to win, because they are not strong enough. Men ought to win, and they are humiliated when women beat them. Then, women are not supposed to celebrate doing something wrong, that is, triumphing over men. These cultural commonplaces are reinforced here, and when the women go against the norm, their credibility is damaged. But the emotional value of the program, and of the text, is preserved.

While I have spent a good deal of time pointing out the work of only a few writers, it's important to remember that there aren't that many writers per site, and some will write more than one article per episode. There's more than enough material at *RNO* and many other sites, as well as many other reality games to evaluate, which would be a vast source of information for others in the humanities to mine. Another interesting point is that there is only one female



writer among seven for this series. Chances of getting gender balance in writing are therefore unlikely. In order not to overwhelm the concept with examples, then, here is a list of the topics on which there were hostile remarks not tinged with the least bit of humor to redeem them. The writers are apparently being stereotypical and unpleasant because they and their readers seem to need and enjoy it.

“Many (most?) women claim men are pigs” (Kellam, “By Hook” par. 3).

Women don’t want each other to succeed (Kellam, “Goodbye, Dolly” par. 11).

Women are irrelevant when men are available to do strength-related tasks (Bloomberg, “Generation” par. 43).

Women lack strategic ability. (Kellam, “Mama Mia” par. 23).

Women can only find resources with a man’s help (Sadow, “Spare a Clue” par. 9).

Women will always find something to complain about (DeGeorge, “Feudin” par. 27).

“For the love of Rupert, I loathe these women” (DeGeorge, “Losing Means Winning” par. 17). Rupert was a macho and very popular player in an earlier season.

“. . . women truly are from Venus” (Sadow, “Rumors” par. 5). This introduces a passage about why women are different from men, but in bad ways only.

It's amusing and normal when women get any quiz answers wrong, but tragic if the men give a wrong answer (Bloomberg, "Estrogen City" pars. 17, 35). Note the name of the article!

". . . and the rest of the women could disappear tomorrow for all I care. I don't see it as a gender thing, either. I've talked to a number of women who hate the former Yasur tribe as much as I do (DeGeorge, "Not Bitter" par. 37).

Women who follow a female leader are "lapdogs" (Sadow, "Scout's Honor" par. 9).

"Every time it looked like a fracture approached in the grrls group, Ami held things together by chanting this mantra (all together now, 'girls rule, boys drool')" (Sadow, "Flexible Knives" par. 6).

"Let's address Leann's comment about coming this far on principle. Which principle is that: Women good, men bad?" (Kellam, "C.S.I." par. 23).

"I sincerely hope you're not this much of a domineering bitch in real life!" (DeGeorge, "Long Time" par. 30).

"However, due to the incredibly vicious nature of the women, emotions blocked a lot of potential combinations of voting coalitions" (Clinard, "Final Four" par. 3).

"This article was a chore at times, especially when it looked like the men would be Pagonged out of existence and the winner would be someone hateful (Ami), dull (Julie and Leann), or obnoxious (Eliza). But all's well that ends well" (DeGeorge, "The End" par. 71).

Voting the men out will make the women seem less sexist (Clinard, “Advice for 8” par. 11).

It is wrong and/or impossible for women to try to stay in the game while and by voting men out. This concept appears 13 times and is expressed by four out of five of the men, but never the lone woman.

These very few examples, relatively speaking, provide a picture of what the stereotypical, dominant-hegemonic picture of a woman really is: she is frivolous, decorative, inconsequential and physically puny. She is useful for sex and housework. She can't fend for herself, or if she can, it should be in stereotypically feminine ways, such as gathering, but not hunting; healing, but not fighting. She should never attempt to do better than a man, especially in direct competition with him. Women who refuse these stereotypes are ostracized, marginalized and Othered.

This attitude toward women is significant for at least two reasons. First, in every previous season, men have at least tried, even if they did not succeed in, eliminating women. Second, it's the meta-theme in the next series we examine, *Survivor: Exile Island*. Because there were two lesbians in this series, there was a lot of discussion of women-as-lesbians, which viewers almost never saw because until *Vanuatu*, there were no out lesbians in any previous cast who had self-identified in advance of the broadcasts so that the audience would be aware of their orientation. Therefore the category of heterosexist tropes and commonplaces is added, which usually places a negative value on

homosexuality. Oddly, though, the number of complaints about women as feminists or as lesbians is very small. All but six of the 72 anti-female remarks are purely that, and not generally homophobic. However, the number of anti-Ami-as-feminist/lesbian is enormous: 39. Some of these 39 statements were also counted under hatred of women in general, because they would mention women and single out Ami. For the writers, Ami seemed to embody homosexuality, and the vitriol they heaped on her was remarkable.

In fact, there is an extremely strong insistence throughout this series that Ami, the younger of the lesbians, hates men, and (as our culture has overgeneralized) therefore all lesbians, and all feminists, who are mostly lesbians, hate men. The writers say it, and the other players say it in interviews. Yet, I have twice reviewed all the broadcast footage from all 14 episodes including the finale and reunion, and never once did Ami say she hated men. She did say, on many occasions, that she wanted a woman, preferably herself, to win, and in the process, she wanted to carry as many women as far into the game as possible. She said they had to get rid of the men because of their superior strength. She said she preferred women as friends or as a mate, that she expected equal treatment and thought well of herself, and that she didn't need male approval for quality of life.

Here are several examples, and they are the most negative ones I could find about men, specifically or in general, from her broadcast appearances. After the welcoming ceremony, she complained, "I'm not used to being put second behind a man." When two men joined their tribe, she said, "I'm sticking by the

ladies. So, they really have to prove themselves. Otherwise, they're outta here" and "I got irritated because I saw kind of a little bit of our bond disappear. The girls were so excited to show them everything. . . . we're definitely still five women strong." Shortly thereafter, when Bubba tried to send a message to his former (and likely future) tribemates at a challenge, she declared to her alliance partners, "He's out. I'm done with him." When she actually voted Bubba off, she whispered, "Sorry, Bubba. You know why." She was completely honest with Rory in camp, telling him the women's alliance excludes him automatically, and she is loyal to them. At another point, after there is only one tribe, she answered Eliza's question about whom to vote off, "I don't know. One of the guys. Just get rid of them. I think it's the best thing to do." A few moments later in a confessional, she elaborated, "I really wanted to just start voting out the guys one by one and have all women at the end." At the Tribal Council that night, she whispers, "Sorry. I have to stay true to my alliance and my word. You're the next one to go. Sorry about that." As will be seen further along, because it is suggested by the more sophisticated viewers, these remarks and actions are not necessarily misandrous. Ami's tribe was all women, and the other tribe was all male. In almost every season, tribe loyalty has remained strong after the merge. Replace "guys" or "men" with "other tribe members," and suddenly it's not as discriminatory against men as it is loyal to the original alliance.

In addition, the family reunion episode showed that she was close to her father and still deeply mourned the loss of her younger brother in an accident. She certainly did not say she hated men. They were simply not relevant

to most of her game-play and her real world way of life. In fact, due to their superior physical strength, she wanted them gone because she could see, as any watcher could, that the game is heavily loaded with demanding physical challenges. Reassuring Eliza, she said, “I’m not about ready to go down because there’s [sic] a bunch of muscles on the other team.” In a confessional, she explained, “I’m voting for Sarge. He’s a strong physical threat. . . “ and further, “Let’s kind of stick to game plan and not have to worry later that there’s [sic] two strong men that could win immunity . . . “

As Ami left the game, she appeared to have made a vulgar gesture to the jury, Jeff Probst and the remaining contestants. While that was a pretty low-class act if it indeed occurred, it wasn’t directed at men specifically. In fact, given the fact that her previous alliance-mates voted her out, it was probably directed at women, if anyone. There has been anecdotal speculation that she was just adjusting her hair or swatting at a bug, and the editors added a blur to make it look like something it really was not. On the night she was voted out, she also made some very unpleasant remarks about Scout and Twila in confessionals. These were hardly going to endear her to anyone, including her fans. In fact, they may well have established her as hateful, and hate-worthy, and have reinforced the idea that she was a man-hater in the minds of those who already thought so. But again, none of this demonstrated she was a hater of men in particular. In fact, I would posit that she accomplished the very opposite, which was to demonstrate she disliked anyone who got in her way.

Understanding exactly what Ami said about men throughout the show and after it, is absolutely critical to the dominant-hegemonic concept, which is reinforced by so many appeals to emotion, because in our culture, for women, preferring women is tantamount to hating men. This does not by any means make it a fact. The word “misandry” didn’t even exist until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, so until fairly recently, Western cultures didn’t even have a specific term for the concept, although “misogyny” has been around for three and a half centuries. The reverse concept is certainly not true. Men who prefer to ally with men, ousting women, are called team players, pragmatic, logical and so on, but not woman-haters. In other words, this cultural commonplace was overlaid onto Ami’s game play and speech acts, even though it never occurred, and even though it is far more an unfounded belief than a proven condition.

It is also important here to note that, since this is a broadcast show, there are no live feeds or other records that were not broadcast, the way *Big Brother* does with non-stop live streaming videos. An internet show called *Survivor Insider* did webcast some clips that were not aired, and to which I did not have access. However, had Ami ever done anything as offensive and controversial as declaring she hated men, it would have been broadcast, as reality television thrives on conflict and controversy. If they could have caught her dead to rights, in the act, they would have. In addition, one of the writers, Mike DeGeorge, covered this webcast for the length of the series, and he did not report that Ami said she hated men in that medium. He would not have missed such a chance, because his writing indicated that he hated her: “I sincerely hope you’re not this

much of a domineering bitch in real life!” (Long Time” par. 30) and “. . . the winner would be someone hateful (Ami)” (The End” par. 71). Finally, her alliance-mate, Julie, was interviewed and she confirmed that Ami didn’t hate men, and never said so in her hearing.

One particular quote about Ami concerning her hatred of men came from Lea, better known as Sarge. After he was eliminated, he was interviewed by David Bloomberg, during which this exchange took place:

“RNO: Was Ami’s apparent hostility towards the men as bad in person as it seemed on the show?

“Sarge: Yes it was real ugly and it felt cold at the camp at all times. She stated it’s just simple, you are a man and I am a woman and I have no purpose for a man.” (qtd. in “I Feel Good” pars. 18-19)

There are several things to consider here. First, that the question was asked at all is of interest, because it foregrounds the lesbian’s interactions with the straight males. This was considered as important by the reviewer (and the other male writers) as strategy, conditions, challenges, other interpersonal relationships, or anything else. In fact, Bloomberg only asks about Lea’s interactions with two other people, both male.

Second, we don’t know if this was a direct quote from Ami, or a paraphrase, or a conclusion Lea drew about her relationships with men. Even though he uses the phrase, “She stated,” that doesn’t mean she spoke those exact words. But even if she did, that doesn’t automatically translate to hatred.



Finally, there is the question of what she did mean by “I have no purpose for a man,” if she did indeed say it exactly that way. In fact, that is an unusual way to express the concept, because the usual phrases are, “I have no use for,” or “I don’t need” or “I don’t like.” Therefore this is a very strained use of lexicon and unlikely to occur in everyday speech. However, most of us have no use, or purpose, for things we don’t carry as far as hate. I have no use for a cat, because I’m allergic to them, but if I am greeted by a cat, I will still respond with touch rather than offend the cat! I like cats. I further have no use for high-heeled shoes, but I don’t hate them, because they’re inanimate, and they can’t make me wear them. Now I could easily say I have no use for a given political figure, and by that I might very well mean I hate this particular politician, but if that were the case, I would simply use the word rather than dance around it.

The conclusion anyone might logically draw here, and it is a common phenomenon, is that Lea believes that lesbians do hate men, which he does not differentiate from preferring women. As shown above, writers Mike DeGeorge and Jeffrey Sadow clearly believe this of Ami. When they write about her the way they do, they are feeding a mistaken idea that has worked its way into our culture and which heavily contributes to emotional manipulation of viewers, reinforcing the dominant-hegemonic position. In fact, many lesbians like men as people, but not as intimate partners. A good example of how people may like someone of the opposite sex without any physical relationship is Twila. She is a highway maintenance worker, and said several times that she preferred men as friends

because she had little in common with women whose interests didn't coincide with hers, yet she wasn't trying to develop a romance with anyone.

Another reason Ami was able to quickly bond with all the women was that she was on an all-female tribe. From the very first series of *Survivor*, viewers saw alliances form because of propinquity more than any other reason. Anyone who plays *Survivor* as an individual is lost. A partner will help you stay in the game in many ways, from not voting against you to being an extra set of eyes and ears. For that reason, getting into an alliance immediately is an absolute must. Logically, a player will turn to someone nearby to do this, and when a tribe is all one gender, a female player can't wait for a male to come along. Within a tribe, people will ally based on gender, age, ethnicity, shared interests and many other things. In the women's tribe, there was a split along age and interest lines immediately. In the men's tribe, it was all about age. In previous editions, it has been about work ethic or income. Sarge, and the writers, seem to have forgotten that the women, for the first several weeks, had no opportunity to ally with men, and by the time they did have that chance, they felt no need to do so. In fact, any such attempt might have made them the target of their previous alliance. Even after a merge, in any series, the people from one tribe tend to stay allied with their original partners. Usually only people outside alliances will cross tribal lines. Therefore, the fact that women allied right away and stayed together was not remarkable. Yet producers, through their editing, and writers, through their analyses, seemed to want viewers to think the female alliance was an absurdist notion, doomed from the start, and a tremendous social aberration, which, of

course, is a cultural trope with which we are indoctrinated from the cradle. Such a successful women's alliance also works to disprove the stereotype that women can't just be friends, the way men so often are, without eliciting negative commentary on such relationships.

However, Ami's speech acts and behavior presented a text to Sarge that he could not comprehend. He had no one to ask about it but other men, even if he had wanted help, and that was not his inclination. His acculturation and military career tell him that women, by and large, are not leaders, and that lesbians are abnormal. Therefore Sarge interprets Ami the best way he can, and in so doing, he creates a new text for writers and viewers to read and interpret, which they then do according to their own acculturation, which greatly overlaps his. And though it goes without saying, this, too, is the dominant-hegemonic position of which we are informed and warned by Stuart Hall.

Incredibly, viewers and readers can see that Ami's ability to create and direct a female alliance as far as she did was considered magical. Both writers and other players made mention of this dubious phenomenon:

"Sarge tells us that Ami has control of the women, which is dangerous. He wants Ami away from Julie, because Ami is using her magical powers on Julie, apparently. Actually, he hints that she's using her magical *lesbian* powers on her, which Twila finds amusing" (Bloomberg, "Stupid People" par. 37).

“Trying this little trick was a good idea, but Ami’s magical powers over the other women held sway” (Bloomberg, “Chad Lost” par. 21).

“He and Chris were trying "like hell" to get Twila and Scout and one of the other women that Ami had under her spell to vote their way. Right up until Tribal Council, Eliza was gone. But Ami single-handedly convinced everyone to vote ‘women power’ ” (DeGeorge, "Kava Hangovers" par. 3).

“Sarge: I see everyone scared of Ami and the power she had over most of the women” (qtd in Bloomberg, “Feel Good” par. 17).

Until I saw this series, I was completely unaware of any such idea, that lesbians capture and control unsuspecting women by means of magic. In the early 1980s, when I was in the Air Force, many people at one assignment referred to the “lesbian ring” they believed was functioning in a clandestine manner. Certainly lesbians were present, but there was no hint of magic, just a sense that these women were pathetic, immoral renegades devoid of power or value. But that was over twenty-five years ago, when the concept of same-sex faithful love was generally unrecognized. Today, we hear a lot of anecdotal beliefs about homosexuality, but nothing equating it with magic. Many a religious fundamentalist has connected homosexuality with evil and the devil, even blaming it for terrorism and natural disasters. But still, I have not heard lesbians accused of performing magic, and considering my own orientation and interest in current events, it is likely that I would know if it were being discussed.

There is also, in our culture, the popular belief that one lesbian can “turn” a straight woman gay, hence the long-running “toaster oven” joke on *Ellen*, for the prize a lesbian gets for accomplishing this feat; but again, not by magic, rather through fantastic sex. On *Survivor: Vanuatu*, of course, there was no physical sex going on. Both lesbian contestants were in faithful, committed relationships. Upon further examination, the first person to voice this theory was Lea/Sarge, a retired Army NCO. Next, two male writers use the same or similar language, and then Sarge mentions the concept again in his departure interview.

Since another cultural commonplace is the invisibility of lesbians, and since Sarge was primarily a military person, viewers and scholars might gather that he is very unfamiliar with lesbians, and in that he is not alone. In his particular circumstances as a career soldier in an organization where even knowing a gay person may lead to punishment under Articles 125 and 134 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, he isn’t supposed to have associated with known homosexuals for at least twenty years. Therefore he might be excused for his lack of knowledge. What is interesting is that two more people, whose experience may be broader, pick it up. Now, is this because they really believe it, or are they playing along for fun and the furtherance of the hegemonic cultural elements? No one may ever know, but the most important thing in this event is that Sarge first is unfamiliar with homosexuality, which is the way the hegemonic forces would like things to remain. Homosexuals, especially lesbians, have been outsiders for a very long time. Second, as soon as Sarge mentioned magic, two more men were quick to reinforce the concept. All three men were willing to

believe, or pretend, that no woman, or at least, no lesbian, had enough leadership ability to convince others to remain in an alliance with her. Could her alliance not have been maintained through strategy, trust or convincing argument? Could it have been even through threatening to eliminate weaker players who wouldn't go along with her plan? Apparently not.

No matter how many other Svengali-like players have appeared on *Survivor*, this was the first time magic was proposed as a reason for their success. Both Richard, who won the original series, and Brian, who won *Thailand*, were charming liars. Even though Richard is gay, no one suggested magic in his case. In Brian's case, his success was attributed to his ability to sell used cars. And the list of charming male liars who maintained alliances to the end or close to it is very long, yet magic was never an issue. Only in the case of a charming lesbian was there ever such an idea. I believe this is because there had to be some "good" reason for her to pull off such a feat, other than innate or learned abilities unrelated to sexual orientation, because if she could do it, any lesbian could, and that would bring them in from the margins of society and give them agency. What Sarge and the writers saw didn't fit their world as they understood it, so they placed Ami in a special "magic" box, which showed everyone that this was a unique phenomenon, and there was no cause for alarm among the population. Following a lesbian, or a female leader, is still not a majority desire; in fact, it is a fear, but it was successfully contained here. Not only did she not win, she was alone. A later look at viewer response to Ami will show how she was viewed by a larger audience.

Of course I cannot be sure of exactly how Sarge got the “magic” idea, but the problem with it is, if something is said often enough, and with enough conviction, by credible (to a given audience) speakers, it can translate into the emotional frenzy that is overrunning text credibility today. The quest for the feeling of rightness overcomes science, logic and reality. The fact that, if lesbians had magical powers, they would be making far more widespread use of them, is irrelevant. The need to belong to a majority of like-thinkers overwhelms critical thinking. When people think deeply or differently, cracks appear in their belief system in which their form of “good” triumphs over their brand of “evil” and that feel-good sensation drains away.

A huge theme, mentioned above, is the complete wrong-headedness of women allying to remain in the game, while eliminating men. In *Exile Island*, this theme completely disappears. On *Exile Island*, the tribes are again divided by gender (as well as age), but there are no lesbians, and the men immediately make pacts to go to the end together. I will examine how that is treated by writers and viewers as well. Before that, it is important to reinforce why Ami wanted to eliminate men as quickly as possible: she knew the game incorporated many physical challenges, and she knew the men would have a physical advantage, especially after the merge when all challenges are individual. Thus, she was thinking ahead for herself and the members of her alliance.

## Expert amateur reviewers of *Exile Island*

As demonstrated in the commentary on *Vanuatu*, the expert amateur reviewers have a great deal of input, and have the potential to influence general viewer opinion. While the website and therefore the values and priorities are the same, the membership changes somewhat, although the core of the writers is almost the same. The exact differences are covered below.

One major difference between *Vanuatu* and *Exile Island* was the “Exile Island” twist. In addition to the other rewards and punishments incurred during the game, the winning tribe chose a member of the losing tribe to be exiled on a tiny islet, alone and with no shelter. In fact, all this person had was the rags on their back, a machete and a pot, but no way to make fire. However, there was a silver lining: on the little island an individual immunity idol was hidden, and the player sent there received a map and a clue to its whereabouts. Subsequent exiles received additional clues. While marooned, they could search for the idol, and if they got it, they could play it if they felt threatened at Tribal Council.

Another major difference was the division by age and gender into four tribes: older women, younger women, older men and younger men. But an obvious similarity was the division by gender, a variation that had met with an enormous response in *Amazon* and *Vanuatu*. However, *Exile Island* had no openly gay players, which may have been a major factor contributing to the responses from viewers and writers to the alliance-building that took place.



Although they began with four tribes, these lasted only into the second episode, when the four tribes were merged into two, not by gender this time, but by schoolyard pick. Thus each tribe had all ages and both genders. Rather than get ahead of the way the game played out, I'll begin with an examination of the commentary by the expert amateur reviewers, six of whom also covered *Vanuatu*, and one of whom is new, for a total of two women and five men.

Since the pre-season round-table articles have already been examined, in which the male writers overwhelmingly predicted male winners and female losers, we'll look now at a set of articles covering the first episode, in which the gender and age divisions are announced, and a challenge is held immediately for tribal immunity. Because they begin with four tribes, three earn immunity and one does not. The losing tribe chooses its own exile in this instance.

David Bloomberg begins with a pair of stereotypical remarks. Granted, one woman helped him out by making one herself, but he gleefully jumped right on it with:

Will the younger women have better luck? They are looking around for a shelter site and eventually find a tree with branches that splay outwards and might make a good shelter base – but no, they decide to keep looking. As Courtney says, they were “being women” and couldn't decide what to do. I'm glad she said it instead of me – it'll save me the nasty e-mails. (“Leafophobia” par 23)

He later adds, while describing a challenge, “There is a diagram on how to do it buried in the sand, but the dilemma is whether to hunt for the diagram or just go to it. Prediction time: The guys will go to it, the women will read the directions” (“Leafophobia” par 31).

The first quote is an absolute gem, with an example on every facet, of stereotyping. Not only does a woman put herself down as the member of a group of indecisive women, a very common trope in this culture, but the male writer is glad she saved him from saying it because obviously he wanted to. Note how he expects to be called out, but does it anyway, because in this culture, everyone should expect and accept gender-biased remarks about women.. The second quote is yet another “acceptable” stereotype, but he’s wrong: both groups read the directions. However, the men win anyway and for the second time in two challenges, a woman will be voted off.

The main point is that women and men both put women down and no one thinks anything of it. This is one more example of the way we all think we are part of the ruling class, through false consciousness, but in fact we are all contributing to the endurance of the hegemonic elements comprised of the few rich, straight, white men who profit from our way of thinking, or failure to think. This is exactly the emotion that most viewers require for the credibility of the shows and their favorite players, as we’ll see when we get to their posts. *Survivor* and the reviewers show them life as it should be, and so the viewers watch the show and support the sponsors, perpetuating the cycle.

Bloomberg isn't alone in his assessment of the women. Mike DeGeorge joins him with this:

Lots to comment about, as usual for the first episode. The tribe dynamics are a HUGE plus in my book, and I hope they keep them around for a while. What I like most of all, and as I predicted to anyone who would listen, is that it conclusively proves the best *Survivor* player is usually (not counting *Amazon*) the older guy. Just look at how they got along and how much work they got done. One of these guys should win, and I'll be rooting for that to happen. "(Inside Exile Episode 1" par 2)

Everyone is entitled to their favorites, but this paragraph sets the tone for DeGeorge's entire corpus on this series. Granted, he's rooting for and expecting an *older* guy to win, but DeGeorge has already established that women are not to be taken seriously, in his opinion, and this sort of thing is acceptable and necessary to the readers, or they wouldn't keep seeing it. At this point, someone could question why the challenges, especially the early ones, are all so heavily skewed toward upper-body strength, but no one ever examines that. No one ever says, "Why don't they make the challenges more even so that older women can compete?" No one ever offers an oppositional reading of the game. They acknowledge the set-up that makes it hard for women to win, but this seems right to them, and is not subject to further scrutiny.

This is how texts form thinking among readers. If they see it frequently enough, and believe it, they will see nothing wrong and will fail to resist. This is

how they get their feel-good fix, after all. The more a concept is repeated and presented as correct, the more the people who are advantages by such a concept will feel secure and superior. If older women began to remain in the game, and won it as regularly as younger men, surely someone would speak up, especially if it suddenly happened after the previous run of strong men and attractive young women. Since the writers and viewers have been thoroughly conditioned to expect certain outcomes, a drastic change would call the new procedures into question, not the old ones. Indeed, this is why, when women go far into the game, they are accused of flying under the radar, rather than praised for engineering a successful strategy.

Bloomberg's recap of the second episode gets immediately into the heart of the matter for this series: who is powerful and how power is to be used. In this case, Bloomberg simply reports what is happening, but without the criticism we saw all the time when the women made their strategic moves.

Terry talks to the other guys and wants everybody to look each other in the eye and promise to stick together. They'll try to get everyone in the tribe to the merge, but if they can't, they don't want to drop one of the guys. Nick and Austin agree and hands are shaken all around. Nick says it makes sense for the short term since the four guys are in the majority, but you never know what will happen. ("Psychotic Detox" par 23)

Why isn't this sexism? Why isn't this woman-hating? Why isn't this discrimination? It can't be, because the ones in power are men, and that makes it

acceptable. This is precisely the opposite of the reporting on *Vanuatu*, and the men are not called to task. In the next chapter, it becomes obvious that it's okay with the audience, too. Men are expected to stick together and be a team. This is just the beginning. It is important from now on, especially, to remember how the male writers at RNO treated the female power players of *Vanuatu*.

It is also important to note that the behavior reported upon here is the exact same behavior, but carried out by men against women. Divided by gender on *Vanuatu*, the women sought to remain united. Forced from all men into a mixed tribe on *Exile Island*, Terry gathers the men in his tribe and seeks to remain united. Interestingly, at this point, Jeffrey Sadow notes that women would be better partners for the young men of the newly-reformulated tribe because they would be more easily beaten later, in individual competitions. However, this obvious strategic concept is never considered by the men of Terry's La Mina ("Disaster Waiting" par. 5).

Lest anyone think the female contestants and writers are not playing their part in dominant-hegemonic decoding, here is a selection by Betsy Wasser, describing a strategic move. What the women do is hegemony-supportive in its own right. What is left unsaid about it, in that no one ever questions the women's "strategy" of throwing one another to the wolves, perpetuates the myth.

Just about as soon as they arrived at camp, Terry started plotting. He suggested an all-male alliance of him, Dan, Austin, and Nick. But wait! Sally had different plans. She suggested an alliance of younger players –

her, Misty, Nick, and Austin. Nick and Austin are going to have to make a decision soon, but they're in the good position of having everyone want them to be part of an alliance. As long as they act decisively and don't waver, the two of them should be safe. ("Giant Zombie Head" par. 3)

Because I mentioned this text early in this work, further analysis isn't necessary, but it was important to show that both genders do buy into the male dominance trope, and thoughtlessly perpetuate it to their own detriment.

However, it's mostly men-against-women at *Reality News Online*. I'll include some more examples here of activities and commentary further and further into the game, to demonstrate that it isn't a passing fancy. It doesn't go away. It is a concrete demonstration that, in the current culture of the United States, the only reason we can call this period a "post-feminist era" is that we have abandoned feminist precepts, not because the movement has succeeded. This form of "post-feminism" is as pervasive, if not more so, than the woman-bashing during *Vanuatu*.

These segments come from Bloomberg's article on episode three:

Probst says the guys appear to be in good shape – is there pressure on the women to live up to their standard? Misty says they have to step up to the plate and play as hard as they [the men] do. Does she believe all seven people are playing for the tribe? Yes, she does, which she didn't expect – she figured people would form little groups and play for themselves, but they really are a team. ("Playing for Keeps" par 37)

Probst declares the men are the standard and no one calls it sexist. Not only that, but a woman verifies that it's normal. She's also clearly in denial, as the viewers already know from observing the confessionals of the men in the tribe. And the audience can easily believe a male standard is right because it's on TV.

Next, the older woman acknowledges that women are a lesser form of men. This saves the writer from having to say it.

Probst points out that Ruth-Marie is the only person in the tribe who came in without a partner from the original tribes. She says she's definitely odd man out and that may make her vulnerable. ("Playing for Keeps" par. 39)

Misty votes for Ruth-Marie, saying it's just team play. Terry follows the plan and votes for Misty, saying she's a smart girl and he wishes it didn't have to be this way. We don't see who Nick votes for, but he talks about voting based on the strength of the tribe. ("Playing for Keeps" par. 41)

Misty's vote against a woman helps to make it acceptable for the men to eliminate the women, and for the other women to pile on. In this world-view, for which viewers reward the sponsors with their money, it's not sexism, it's logic, and therefore, normal. Everyone voted against a woman, even if they voted for different women. The ousted (and shocked) Misty showed no more loyalty to her gender than the other women did.

Jeffrey Sadow, hardly a champion of women, and with only the episode to work with, has to point out the poor, or lack of, strategy on the part of the women of La Mina, too. "And the women certainly showed a great lacking of strategic

thinking by championing the ouster of Ruth-Marie when they should have been arguing to break up the main threat” (“Power Play” par. 6).

Frequently, the only option apparent to women is men’s coattails. The three women and two younger or older men would have been better off splitting a male pair. But viewers are given the impression by the show and the writers that our culture and their own passivity don’t allow them to think that way. It looks as if they don’t expect a reward for that in any form, either as a prize or the approval of others.

However, after Misty is ejected, she is interviewed, and readers learn more of the truth, which shows the manipulations of editing. This is telling indeed, and in view of the way it violates most of the writers’ beliefs, it’s surprising to discover it on the same site. Here is Misty’s explanation of what really happened. “I discussed strategy with Ruth-Marie, Nick, Austin, and Sally. The three women really didn’t have much of a shot unless we could get on board with some of the guys. The older men seemed to have paved their path and weren’t going to budge. The younger men were still wishy-washy so we were working on them” (Misty qtd. in Bloomberg “Misty Interview” par. 12). In retrospect, it looks as if they *were* thinking strategically, and only used flirting as a last resort when logic failed. Obviously the women’s efforts at strategic play didn’t make the editors’ cut. But the basic problem remains: when the men band together to eliminate women, our culture okays it. Let women try it, and you have *Vanuatu*. When you have *Vanuatu*, you have a lot of anger about the rejection of the hegemonic status quo, and emotional, majority needs are not fulfilled.



This next series of quotes comes from an analysis of an online show. DeGeorge seems to be paraphrasing a good deal of the time, or summarizing what the player said in various clips. However, it is possible to determine when he is speaking for himself.

She was very shocked. She knew there was a boys' club, but didn't think she'd be the first to go. She's disappointed, but "time to move on." Good attitude. Ironically, I think she looked better in the episodes than she does here, "cleaned up." ("Misty-fied" par. 11)

Hindsight is 20/20, and she can think of ways she could have played differently, but it's clear that the guys were going to pick off the girls and she got the short straw. She did her best, had a good time, contributed, but unfortunately, it wasn't well recognized. Again, I think she gives herself too little credit. I think the guys considered her more of a threat than the others. (par. 12)

Like many of you, I was left wondering why the tribe didn't vote out Ruth-Marie. Then I figured it out – the older guys are playing for the long haul. The younger guys, I dunno, I thought maybe they're the types who would rather pump iron or work on their cars than get a backrub from a hot woman, who knows. (par. 28)

But the older men, they know that Misty, aside from looking pretty, serves absolutely no purpose in their grand scheme. In fact, having her and her

back rubs around could serve as a distraction and temptation when the next vote comes around. Sure, the young guys are with you now. What about in three days? Or six? (par. 29)

Apparently there was a “boys’ club” but not a “girls club,” making the male alliance acceptable. And apparently, DeGeorge believes there is no hatred of women in this instance, it’s just male bonding. Remember, this is the writer who was totally hateful to the women of *Vanuatu* for doing the same thing the *Exile Island* men are doing now. DeGeorge does a complete about face from the way he wrote about *Vanuatu*. However, he also continues to foreground women’s appearance, as opposed to their play, and backhandedly compliments them when they accept their loss like good little girls.

It isn’t possible to know if he, and the other male writers, realize what they are doing. The massive number of anti-female remarks about *Vanuatu* and *Exile Island* carry enough weight on their own, so that the writers don’t have to decode their own work. It’s transparent as it stands.

Further into the season, nothing changes, except to accrue more and more misogynist remarks. However, while that is going on, some of the writers begin to focus on the other tribe, Casaya, of which viewers have seen little to this point, because they win all the challenges and never need to discuss strategy because they never have to eliminate anyone. Suddenly a writer makes a startling observation:

Picture if you will, a game where the women were the first four gone, but in one tribe, the women, despite being outnumbered, took control of tribal council, and ousted one of the men with no help, vote-wise, from the other men. Such a bizarre occurrence could only happen in the Casaya Zone.

(Kellam "Casaya Zone" par 22)

This is very telling: women gang up on a man and it's not remarkable at all. Is it possible this is because there are no lesbians involved, and/or the women don't present themselves as trying to get rid of any and all men, just Bobby the athletic, black, male lawyer? Is this behavior acceptable if they call it "strategy?" In fact, the color of Bobby's skin makes no difference at all. He's a big, strong, guy, and thus an individual immunity threat. He's also a lawyer, and that means he's not short of wealth. These are all the reasons anyone needs to eliminate him as soon as possible. Contestants have historically taken no notice of color, even though the producers have tried to foreground it in many of the series. The point here is, without an Ami-character, and in the absence of an alpha male, the women can take temporary control to eliminate a man who annoys everyone, including the other men. This writer, at least, is not disturbed by a concerted action by women, nor are the men of Casaya.

However, when the women of *Vanuatu* ousted men without help or approval from other men, it was sacrilege. The only apparent difference here is the absence of an assertive lesbian. Cirie, the "older" (35), straight, female, black nurse, is calling the shots, and she is applauded. On the other tribe, women who merely try to save themselves are castigated, not by one another or the men, but

by the writers of these reviews we're examining. Soon the reason will be obvious. It's not just the lack of a lesbian, it's the presence of the straight male pilot, Terry. This was alluded to earlier in our reading of the *RNO* round table: the male writers love the pilot. They are obsessed with him, if all of their writing is carefully examined. Nor are they alone. Many of the contestants admire him, as do other commentators on *Exile Island*.

Let's move on by studying the evidence of this. The other players on his tribe, La Mina, gush over him even as he is trying to remove them from the game. These comments are taken from a recap by David Bloomberg, who simply reports the action:

When La Mina returns, they are not exactly in high spirits – as might be expected. Dan steps in as the assistant leader of the tribe and tells the other members that when Terry comes back, he will be proud of the way camp looks. When he returns, they won't just be getting by, but will be thriving. Austin, however, isn't so sure. He wants a nap before working, and tells us that without Terry, it seems like nobody is in charge and things are not working in the usual orderly fashion. He wants Terry back! ("Man in Charge" par. 14)

A dejected La Mina returns to camp, but at least they have Terry back. Ruth-Marie says they were all comforted to have Terry return and take over again. They talk about his time on the island, and he claims the clues were difficult and he only spent about two hours looking. However, nobody

directly asks him if he found it, so he doesn't volunteer that information.  
("Man in Charge" par. 32)

The next piece comes not from a writer, but from the host, Dalton, of an on-line show about *Survivor*. The writer, Brian Towers, describes the action and commentary as he reports on the show:

Dalton runs the clip of camp life without Terry, and what Dalton calls "Austin's 'man-crush' for Terry." Dalton thinks he's setting [co-host] Jenna up for another rant, but she fools us by giving props to Terry for his strong play and also for finding the hidden immunity idol. However, his over-confidence bothers her. ("*Survivor Live*" Episode 4 par. 30)

In addition, the hosts ask the ejected player, Ruth-Marie, to make up a poem about her time in the game. Here are a few lines: "I did not have the opportunity to strut my stuff in front of 'Terry, the decision-maker' so he would choose to keep me" ("*Survivor Live*' Episode 4" par. 19). Again, this shows lack of respect for her own worth, in that she felt she only had to prove herself to men, and lacking that, she was out of options.

Writer Jeffrey Clinard gives advice to the remaining players after each episode. Here's what he tells Dan the astronaut:

You and Terry have a better position now that Nick and Austin decided to accept your deal over that of the younger women. I'd suggest you try to steer the alliance into getting rid of Sally next if you go to Tribal Council,

as I think Ruth-Marie is more likely to join in a tribal alliance if you make it to the merge with five members. You'll need Terry well into the game, as he's emerging as a power player that can take some heat off of yourself later. For now, your position looks good. ("Advice for 13" par. 20)

Thus Clinard continues the adoration of the Terry fan club at *RNO*. And he is praising Terry for the very behavior the male writers there, by and large, castigated Ami for during *Vanuatu*.

This comes from another "Survivor Live Recap" by Brian Towers:

Dalton asks about the *Survivor: Insider* clip where Austin talked about Terry and the bad blood directed toward him by Casaya. Austin thinks it was partly due to Terry's overt actions when they first merged. Apparently, he didn't take it well that they were in the minority. They called him "chauvinistic" and "condescending." Austin insists Terry is not a jerk and says, "I have utter adulation for him." Jenna asks if Terry is chauvinistic and Austin says, "Not even remotely, I don't know why they didn't see it." To me, I'm thinking this means that if Terry can somehow get to the final two, he's in trouble in front of the jury and won't be getting many votes from former-Casaya members. ("*Survivor* Live Episode 8" par 30)

My guess here is they mean "male chauvinistic," and the women didn't like it, which may have been edited out. As a young, white male "Christian," Austin's concept of male chauvinism, or gender-bias, could easily vary from what women

think, which harks back to *Vanuatu* where the men said Ami was a man-hater and the other women said she was not, and Ami never said she was.

Perceptions seem to vary by gender, and the producers account for that in editing. This makes me even more certain that, had Ami actually made anti-male remarks, they would have been shown to make her look more villainous. Terry is getting the sweetheart edit for the same things Ami did while getting the villain edit.

The female review writers are hardly immune to Terry, either. Here Heathyr Fields Ford takes Courtney to task for refusing to adore Terry while she was still in Casaya:

Courtney: See above [criticism of Sally]. Look up the words you don't understand. And add on some additional fathoms [sic] for your bizarre belief that you could beat Terry in the final two. Honestly, you're one of the Casaya members I think Terry could beat hands down. Add on some more for being offended by guys sharing stories. They're guys. It's what they do. There is nothing wrong with cool fighter pilot tales. It's even better if they strip off their shirts and play beach volleyball after, but I digress. ("Shane's Nuts" par. 12)

Ford may want the women to take charge of the game, as we will see in more of her commentary to follow, but she is still unhappy when Courtney refuses to play by the "rule" of always admiring men. I'm just not sure how a woman can think less of herself and take control of the game at the same time.

It is clear that there are many texts as evidence for the extremely obvious story-line of adoration for Terry, who behaves exactly as Ami did on *Vanuatu*, but who can do no wrong. Further, if it were only about Terry running his tribe, that would be evidence enough of the double standard between straight men and gay women, but Cirie, who is doing at Casaya that Terry is doing at La Mina (and later, trying to do at Gitanos) also gets the sweetheart edit. I admit I was surprised, and couldn't figure out why, until I realized Cirie is straight. This advice is an example of her treatment.

Cirie: If you aren't in a solid final four like Terry believes, then you should be making moves now before it's too late. You were the next Casaya to go, remember? While that may have changed, your counterparts are too freakin' psychotic to really know for sure. Gather the women and overthrow the men entirely. (Ford "Episode 8: MIA" par. 10)

This is so very different than what *RNO* writers said about the women of *Vanuatu*. Heathyr Fields Ford wasn't covering that one, though, and again, there are no lesbians, and no women in the game are actually attempting to ally against the men just yet. And in fact, that never does happen. The women and men formerly of Casaya are much more interested in picking off former La Mina, especially Terry, than each other.

Later, Ford also criticizes Sally for her failure to unite with women to get rid of Terry while she could. During *Vanuatu*, that would have been a hanging offense, and no *RNO* writer would ever have suggested it, not that they needed



to. The women thought of it themselves, and having thought of it, they were soundly berated for it.

Sally: You played hard, so you're not getting this [weekly Missing Intelligence Award]. It's a shame you didn't think to go for an all-girls' alliance to match those knee high "all girls' school" socks. Or if you did, it wasn't shown. All the women should band with Terry and get rid of one guy. Then they'd have the numbers, and quicker than you can say "alpha male," Terry is out the door when he doesn't have immunity. Why do I have that *Hee-Haw* song stuck in my head right now? "You met another and pfft, you were gone!" ("Shane's Nuts" par. 8)

Here it is again. Women are advised (in retrospect, for they obviously cannot read these advice articles while they are in the game) to unite to get rid of a male. However, they don't and thus uphold the dominant-hegemonic goal of men remaining in control, which the audience pays to see because it gives us our dose of belonging to the majority and all being right together. This in turn replaces critical thinking about good or bad strategy and just makes viewers feel good instead.

These next comments from Jeffrey Clinard further point up the fact that all-male or all-females alliances are acceptable as long as a lesbian isn't in charge of any of them.

Sally: With Terry holding the hidden immunity idol, you are probably the next target. That means you either need to win immunity or find a crack in

the Casaya alliance. I'd suggest trying to talk to the other women in the game and see if there is room for a deal. Otherwise, you'll need to hope that Terry isn't wearing immunity and votes get bounced to a Casaya member. You need to play for time, but time is running out. ("Advice for 8" par. 11)

"Bruce: You're in a problematic position as you aren't really a part of the Casaya alliance but Terry can't make the numbers work for you to get into a new one. Your best option might be to play for a little time and approach Terry with the idea of an all-male alliance once there are seven. If not, your vote might be useful to the Casaya women. ("Advice for 8" par. 17)

The references to "Casaya women" are frequent because there are simply more of them than men at this point. But Cirie the mastermind, is running the tribe subtly, and, like Ami on *Vanuatu*, is trying to misdirect attention to other people. She has no issues with men except Shane, and she manages to remain friendly with him. She's fine with the other men, and so are the other women. The men of former Casaya are as much a part of the strategy planning as the women are. When women are trying to vote out a man, or men are trying to vote out a woman, there is no suggestion by any writer of gender hatred. It seems as long as there are no lesbians in sight, it's all about strategy, nothing more.

Further examination of Ford's articles indicates extreme favoritism toward Terry while continuing to berate the women for not uniting. In fact, Ford does two other things of interest. First, she repeatedly claims that she likes very few

women as friends. (“I Heart Shii Ann” par. 3) Next, she repeatedly accuses Aras of calling Terry out for being a misogynist, even though Austin swore in a post-show interview that Terry wasn’t misogynist (Ford “I Heart Shii Ann” par. 6; Ford “Whambulance” par. 4; Towers “*Survivor* Live Episode 8” par. 30).

Having examined and re-examined these two series twice since they originally aired, I must admit I found something quite different from what I originally believed. I didn’t realize the amateur review writers ever approved of an all-female alliance. I thought their attitude was entirely pro-male and all anti-female. Instead, I discovered that it’s all about sexual orientation. Masculinity in the manner of Terry certainly doesn’t impair the general adoration of men, but the leadership of Cirie in no way calls down criticism of women. In fact, women are chastised time and again for failing to unite, and praised if they as much as give the appearance of doing so. Of necessity, this discovery will greatly impact the conclusions I draw from this study.

## Chapter Four

### Fan and Viewer Posting

#### The Role and Work of Fans and Viewers

It is critical to understand what is meant by a fan or a viewer. It's not so much a matter of what makes them different, but of understanding the sub-categories that comprise this group. Fans are people who like the show, but if they don't post on the internet, we can't examine their ideas. Some viewers are not fans. They dislike the program and enjoy criticizing it, so they post frequently. Many viewers are also fans, and post enthusiastically about every aspect. More importantly, though, there are types of posters to be examined here, and it's important to know who they are. Different forums attract different kinds of people, and to examine all of them, even for one series of one program, would be humanly impossible for one person or one work. The potential for much more research, however, is obvious. Therefore I examine a sampling, or cross-section. For example, there are *Yahoo!* forums, which have basically no standards of quality. As already seen, a poster may be all but functionally illiterate but may still join the discussion. *Yahoo!* Forums also have a wide range of opinions, some of which might be considered offensive by other posters. Of course, the lack of a writing standard makes a lot of these posts not only incomprehensible but very difficult to read, because they employ a non-standard orthography as well as non-standard mechanics. However, because *Yahoo!* is so unrestricted, I feel the level of honesty is very high.

Unfortunately, the level of honesty in expression is reduced as the various kinds of standards rise. Forums such as *Television Without Pity (TWP)* do not tolerate poor grammar, spelling and punctuation. They are heavily monitored and posts which violate standards are removed, and sometimes the posters themselves are removed, too. Because of their high writing standards, these boards are very easy to read, quite interesting and entertaining. On the other hand, because so much material is removed or edited, only certain kinds of commentary remain. *TelevisionWithoutPity* was recently bought by the Bravo! Network, and so their disinterest is questionable and their credibility is consequently reduced.

The other standards they enforce are less easily quantified. For example, the moderators are allowed to remove posts by and ban posters who engage in “drama.” The definition of drama is uncertain, and unevenly applied. The problem is that, whatever the reason, many people won’t, or can’t post certain ideas at all for fear of punishment. A further problem is, obviously, the redaction or alteration of text. In one case, a post was adjusted because the poster had mentioned how many previous pages they had read in the forum. In another case, a post was removed because one poster had wished another a happy birthday. This means that either a single moderator or a group of moderators can change the meanings other people are making, or trying to make. Unfortunately, determining either the original text or the damage done is impossible, because typically, moderators ban people who ask these questions by e-mail, and one is not allowed to ask about it in the forums either, because that will lead to the loss of

the post and often, the poster will be banned as well. Here is a sampling of the site rules:

### **Warnings, Bans and Trolls Dos and Don'ts**

- **DO** take any mod warnings you get seriously
- **DON'T** bug the mods to remove warnings
- **DO** help us out and report trolls, flame wars, and troublemakers in the Troll Patrol thread (*TWoP* "Dos and Don'ts")

### **How long do warnings last?**

It may be permanent, or not. Assume it will last forever; that way, if a mod happens to reduce your warn level down the road, you'll be pleasantly surprised! Don't email us or post on the boards to protest a warn or to ask us to reduce your warn level; it doesn't work that way and will probably just end badly.

Think of your warning as sort of like getting out of a traffic ticket. You could have been dinged with a big penalty, but instead you just (hopefully) got scared straight. (*TWoP*, "Warnings, Bans and Trolls")

In the course of my research, I e-mailed a long-time poster (through the site, and thus there is no record) to inquire into the reasoning behind the level of discipline on the site, and next day, I was banned myself. It is a situation very like that which Winston Smith encountered in Orwell's *1984*. Fortunately one doesn't have to be a member to access the site and read the posts. For academic purposes, scholars may learn more about the values of text to the site than the

values of the people who post there. We'll examine *TWoP* posts below and discover both what is being said and what is being left out.

Because *TWoP* is so heavily controlled and is now vulnerable to charges of a severe conflict of interest, other, anti-*TWoP* boards have sprung up, of which *Bitter But Brilliant* (*BBB* or *B3*) is only one. Their purpose is three-fold. First, they provide forums in which to discuss television programming, the same as *TWoP*. However, they are independent of networks and allow far more freedom of discussion in general. Secondly, they serve as a watchdog upon *TWoP*, posting, as they describe, “. . . examples of hypocrisy you see as you peruse that board, giv[ing] examples of contradicting statements by the staff and posters at *TWoP*, cut[ing] and past[ing] stupid posts and stupid responses” (T-Sucks, Jr. ~ Forum Decorum). Finally, they provide a space in which members can discuss anything else they wish, such as politics and pet peeves.

*TWoP* had appeared to be fertile ground for the public intellectual of Gramsci or the oppositional decoder of Hall, except it turned upon itself and demanded a single line of inquiry: whether or not the television program was acknowledging diversity, and whether or not it was empowering the powerless. Therefore, anyone proposing an alternative view, that might have sparked dialogue, was censored out of the conversation. In order to develop awareness and then to create social progress, the opinions of the opponents have to be heard, because in conversation with them, posters clarify their thinking and strengthen their reasoning. Without those voices, the conversations lose their vigor, and end up repeating “Can't we all just get along?” ad infinitum, without

providing the reasoning and logic that might move at least the undecided to a different position. The entrenched, as Stanley Fish tells us, aren't going anywhere, but there are those who may be reminded of a core value they had neglected, and which is suddenly forced to the forefront of their thinking (Fish *Trouble* 279-84) Unfortunately, only *BBB* remains as such a possibility for genuine exchange among non-professional writers and viewers, and it is vanishingly small compared to the powerhouses of *Yahoo!* and network-hosted forums. However, there is still potential for such life-changing conversation in the blogosphere, and the internet, if no other medium, may finally provide the diversity we need as a culture if we're going to survive.

One last condition must be explained before looking at the text provided by average viewers with internet access, it's important to note that posters do not move en masse from old group to new at the start of every new *Survivor* season. Rather, they break apart and re-form like the colorful globules of a lava lamp. In addition, some groups that were devoted to certain series have been taken down, while others remain. The groups I participated in during *Vanuatu* and *Exile Island* are gone, yet the one I study here remains, possibly because it is for all *Survivor* seasons, but, it is new enough that it did not exist during *Vanuatu*. We cannot expect to see the same participants as those we examined for *Vanuatu*.



Fan and viewer posts on *Vanuatu*

### *Yahoo!* Groups

To begin, I'll present the rough and tumble of *Yahoo! Groups*. There is an immediate parallel between this board and the writers on *RealityNewsOnline*, although expressed in a far less elegant manner. I selected a group at random for study, looking only for a sufficient number of posts and a large enough membership to provide adequate material. The name of this group is simply "Survivor Vanuatu" and it contained 1543 posts and had a membership of 321. That number is somewhat deceiving, because not all members post; many just come to the group to lurk without participating in the conversation. It was established in May 2004 and is still in existence but posting ended in January 2008, when members were asked to move on to more current groups. I think it's important to note here that, although I have been a member of many *Yahoo!* groups, including *Survivor* groups, I was never a member of this one. Indeed, I only looked for it after the *Vanuatu* series was long over.

The group begins its life innocently enough, with members discussing the upcoming show and the castaways who will play the game. There are the usual "where are you from?" discussions, along with sightings of former cast members and discussions about their physical attractiveness. Some of these reveal group members' attitudes toward women (but usually not toward men) as players. For the most part it's rather superficial material delivered in a joking manner, as in this case: "it's no secret that i slobber over Amber. she's not my own choice as #1 catch on the planet, but it's somewhat astonishing how many of the things-

that-guys-want qualities she has (Wright “Ambuh & RobM,” #64). Steve Wright will prove a major player in this group. His writing ability is above average, which makes him unusual.

Then, as always happens in these groups, things change sooner rather than later. With message #201, we see the first message posted after the first episode is shown. “time to WAKE UP! The show has aired! Who are the two lesbians?” (Julie “Ok people,”). While this is indicative of many a poster’s priorities, the replies are simple, straightforward and unremarkable. The topic goes away for a brief time, replaced with a series of discussions about the physical and social attributes of the women, such as this,

But after watching the characters, I have picked as to who I like so far:

MEN: Brady, JP & Johnnie. Brady for sure. I have to see more of the other two to see if I still like them. I liked Chris until her [sic] started mouthing off. (I did find one thing cute about the guys this year though. There was one named Lea and one named Brook) – lol WOMEN: Dolly. And that’s pretty much it for the women. lol Maybe things will change as they show the women more, but right now it just seems that there are two crabby old women and giggling little school girls. I liked Dolly because she accepted with cool and calm the ritual slaying of the pig. I just liked that. (Fox “The Show,” # 205)

ladies whats with all the boob implants on this show? couldn't help but notice! I think it was Twila on the shoulders of 2 girls hacking away at a bunch of bananas...i thought her implant was gonna pop out from under her armpit! Man!!! too bad for Dolly with the boot...she got caught up as the go between and they all saw it! This is gonna be a great show...some good personalities! can't wait for next thursday! cdancer57. ("Boob Implants," #246)

There is also a thread of women disliking female castaways throughout this entire group. It starts off just liking men better, but it becomes angrier when the women's strategy becomes more defined. This is a clear case of the viewing public not liking the hand they're being dealt, and joining together to vent their frustration. For one thing, they don't like the women for various reasons (noisy, silly, old, cranky) but they also resent the handsome young men being voted out.

I am happy for the men. They should be proud now since they won something (forgot the name) that starts the fires. Now they can have water and won't be dehydrated. When the Yasur (sp?) tribe found a chicken I can't believe they tried to catch it. It is very hard to catch a chicken (Snow Bunny, #230).

i was soooooooooo happy to see mia go!!! :) that little b\*\*\*\* deserved to get the boot! Lol terri ("WOW!" #270)

I will say survivor is my favorite show and I too am having a hard time finding someone to root for (warm up to) The girls make me CrAZyY..... way too much bitching for me. I am missing Rupert..... I am just happy I get see Jeff each week. he always seems to make a good point at the end of every tribal council.... Jeff makes the show I think. Well, thanks for reading this. Peace Kelly (“Re: Wow! My 2 cents,” #276)

. . . Amie - I think is being edited as a sweetheart. Scout - I may be one of the few but I don't care for her. Eliza - oh my goodness – could she talk any more?? Am I missing anyone? They just seem blah on the ladies side. Maybe mixing it up with the guys will bring out better personality. (Diehr “Agree,” #290)

yeah....it is time to mix the groups up! for more stimulation! Can you just imagine the film crew...filming all these women...LOL Man they must be rolling there eyes and can you imagine the film crews coffee break conversation . . . LOL!!! cdancer57 (“Re: Agree,” #289)

Awe Man!!! from a female point of view Brady was good Eye Candy!!! LOL..Oh well maybe Eliza next time!... and that native name Dah...I was most curious to see if he was wearing anything under that grass skirt!!! Funny none of the ladies even commented as he was climbing up that coconut tree! snicker..snicker! cdancer57 (“Brady's,” #322)

So far these are two predictable threads that work to support hegemonic values: men are more popular than women with both men and women; women are there to be seen and not heard. The poster called “cdancer” is an especially interesting specimen of traditional values: she particularly likes to discuss male physical attributes, while criticizing the women. These are the kinds of posters who ensure that the bulk of contestants will always be young and physically attractive by stereotypical Western/ized standards, and also why *Survivor* will always be filmed in tropical, or at least hot, climates. They are also obviously dominant-hegemonic decoders of the text they are presented. They are seeing the program in exactly the way they are intended to see it by producers and sponsors. Selections such as these are more than enough to show how “post-feminism” has come to mean widespread anti-feminist, or unequal, values in this culture. Equality may be written into some laws. Overt misogyny may be unacceptable in certain public speech acts, but anti-feminism is alive and well at the grass-roots level of this culture.

Next, another concept emerges that takes over almost the entire group. It’s important to remember here that the gaps between messages which I present are taken up by greetings, irrelevant remarks on other topics, repetitive material similar to that which I have demonstrated, and a lot of back-and-forth about a *Survivor*-based game some of the group members are playing for prizes elsewhere on the internet. While the bulk of the posts may not be on controversial subjects, the most lengthy and heated exchanges are the most noticeable for their intensity. It begins here:

. . . 3) Ami makes me want to puke. I know that she's a lesbian, but she is SO anti-men its insane. And the comment that Sarge made that Ami hangs all over Jules telling her she's hot and kissing her on the head and stuff...oh, brother . . . (Fox "Thoughts," #523)

I didn't realize she was a Lesbian...now its all coming together!  
(cdancer57 "Re: Thoughts," #528)

I knew Scout was a lesbian...but I did not realize Amy was also...it just makes her personality fall into place for me! No offense to anyone who is a lesbian! (cdancer57 "Re: Lesbians," #532).

I am not a lesbian but a 70 year old Great-Grandmother and I don't recall Amy saying she is a Lesbian I just think it is discusting to put labels on people I don't understand why you can't just say you think Amy is nasty maybe she isn't a Lesbian. Rita (Rizich "Lesbians," #533)

Rita gives us a double whammy here because she considers the description an insult and hopes it isn't true. And thus there is evidence of yet another distortion or interpretation of the original text of the game, which is already a distortion, but leads us around in a circle to where the dominant-hegemonic elements want viewers to be. As noted above, this may not even be a majority opinion on a given group. Judging by the number of participants in the

“lesbian” discussion this opinion belongs to fewer than 10% of the members. But the length and fury of the conversation easily lead people to believe there’s nothing else to discuss and no other way to interpret the program. Further, it points out the intense homophobia of certain elements in our culture. While anti-gay behavior and language is illegal under some circumstances, in the same way that misogyny is, that doesn’t mean it isn’t a widespread phenomenon. No punches are pulled on *Yahoo!* Forums. There is no requirement to “play nice in the sandbox. “ People who don’t like what is going on in a group are welcome to leave.

i hope the slit lickers are gone real soon. problem is even if a man makes it to the final 2 , the women have the say as to the winner, so you can plan on a woman unless one of them get's mad and votesa otherwise. if ami is round scout will ride her coat tail and go along way. this is my opinion. (Pruitt “Rethought,”#537)

Many sources, including herself, identify Ami as a Lesbian...hey great-grandma, is being lesbian disgusting to you? I truly hope not--for the sake of some of your granddaughters. Best wishes, LL. (Lindstrom “diisgusting” [sic], #545)

Also it may not be that Ami is "a man-hater" per say. While she is a Lesbian, it just may be she is just trying to make sure that the old tribe

stays loyal to it's original members, as we have seen tribes do in past survivor shows. I think Julie & Twighla would have gone back to the "Yasur" tribe regardless if Ami & the others had talked with them or not. I do see Ami as the "villian" of this show. However we have to keep in mind of 2 things. 1. We are judging Ami's actions by what the camera shows, and there might be more to what's going on with her then what we are allowed to see. 2. As it's been said before, these are just parts that people are playing. I'll bet in real life Ami is a very nice person, but right now she is doing what she can to stay in the game. Much like Jeri did in outback & all-stars, and I've heard people say that Jeri is a nice person in real life. The same might be true of Ami.

However, I don't like the "Ami" character either, and if she can proceed in getting the other women to vote off the men, then I can't wait to see what will happen when it's every woman for herself. I agree with Denise. I don't see Ami getting as far as Boston Rob, but it will be interesting to see what will happen when it's all women in the game. (Gordon "Lesbians," #553)

I don't like Ami's personality. It's my preference to not like the contestants I don't want to like, just like it's yours to like who you want. I will always feel that her personality comes across as anti-men and that will always be my opinion, and it will never change. And I don't just say that because she is a lesbian. Even if she was straight, she still would come across anti-men to



me. Even if she was on a tribe of all men, she still would've come across that way to me." (Fox "Re: Thoughts," #555)

While there is some balance here, these are just a small minority in the discussion. Note that one poster, "Gordon," who thinks it's just Ami's personality, which earlier posters attributed to her orientation. This is very important as it may include the explanation for why people see Ami as "man-hating." In fact, when we move on to the *TWoP* boards, there is not only a lot more of this, but almost nothing *except* this.

The conversation takes an interesting turn with the episode featuring the visits of loved ones from back home in the United States.

the way they were looking at each other, didn't you think they were gonna lock tongues right there on TV? Imao (terri, "Amie's Chrissie," #614)

yeah...thats what i thought too...was waiting for it to happen!!! LOL (cdancer 57 "Re: Amie's Chrissie," #617).

I was waiting for that...and crossing my fingers that they wouldn't .both of my kids were watching and I didn't want to have to explain that one...LOL (Rebecca "Re: Amie's Chrissie," #664).

Of course there are the usual juvenile references to sex that are so common at this level of communication, but the last quotation above is very

interesting because this is where the group's administrator, Rebecca, joins the conversation, and the point at which she becomes a major player. There are a few logical voices crying in the wilderness at this point, such as "They probably did lock tongues, but CBS knows better than to show that (Olesky "Re: Amie's Chrissie," #516). However, they quickly dwindle to nothing shortly after:

Oh...I could tell that they probably did...it was all in the look of their eyes. Even later, Scout had mentioned about kissing her partner, and they had obviously edited that as well. Survivor is on primetime, which means that there are a lot of families, or at least kids, watching the show. I know that, personally, I was very relieved that they didn't show it. My son would've been asking questions about it for weeks to come...He actually got the heavy giggles when Eliza's mom had taken her shirt off. (Rebecca "Re: Amie's Chrissie," #664)

And

At this point I am deleting these posts...Religion and politics should never be discussed in grps, cause it just starts hard feelings towards one another. Bob did present his views, just as others have. But have you seen how this has turned out? Lets try to end this now, please?

Thanks,

Rebecca ("Response to BOB," #660)

This very telling message appears after a series of gaps following the “lesbians kissing” discussion. Over a dozen posts are missing, but pieces of some of them remain quoted in the posts of others. Although I said earlier that I believe the *Yahoo!* Groups posts and posters are more honest, that did not account for this kind of censorship, which I have rarely seen. When I said “honest,” I meant the posters were unlikely to censor themselves and their prejudices would be manifest. Further, the responses to these expressions would also be honest, and sometimes arguments would continue for days, if not weeks. However, in this case, the moderator has not only asked for the conversation to desist, she has also elided it.

In fact, however, the discussion does not end, nor does she delete any further posts. It’s not long the religious interpretation appears, or perhaps to be more accurate, the religious distraction. Further, many points of view are represented, and the discussion deteriorates at several points into name-calling and wild accusations. Further probing reveals that one of the posters involved, Wiliberto Olivera, had, in fact, collected many of the missing posts into one mega-post, #684. It is lengthy in the extreme.

Including this large post and others, there was a lengthy homophobic diatribe, followed by a fight between the putative Christians and everyone else. Several people quote the Bible and some leave the group. There is a lot of ill-will all because of the lesbians on the show, and some people love it and some can’t stand it. But the point is, the orientation brings out the controversy. These exchanges are valuable in themselves,

because it shows the degree of investment these viewers have in the show, and it tells any lurking producers that these are hot-button issues. Whether they are resolved on any given *Survivor* series to the satisfaction of the majority, or the supporters of hegemonic values, or both, or not, these issues will draw an audience. If anything is certain, it is that any depiction whatsoever of homosexuality will lead immediately to a demonstration of virulent homophobia. Those of us who inhabit academia and other progressive institutions, and who avoid the bastions of conservative media, are likely to be very shocked at the level of hatred in these groups. While there is a veneer that all is well and getting even better for the lesbian community, and while some laws are enacted to protect us, we are far from safe and secure. There is a very good reason that anti-marriage amendments and referenda were passed in the most recent election, and that reason is unchecked, and often unacknowledged, intolerance.

Because the intensity of the argument is relevant to my ideas about the maintenance of the cultural hegemony, I am going to quote just a few representative segments here. They are from the composite post and have disappeared from the group in their original form.

It is stated in the Bible in Romans Chapter 1 what the Biblical views are on Homosexuality. If you choose to believe the Bible then you have to believe ALL of it. You cant just pick and choose the parts you like.

Like I said yeah GOD spoke 2 u bout this,n whoever wrote that was defintiely god,or someone associated w/ him,gimme a break u n Bob r probably boyfriends anyway,lol!! I do know that GOD doesnt judge anyone, so how can he dislike what he himself created? Hmmm..

I usally don't get involved in these sort of debates and can only see it getting worse, but I agree with Bob. He is not judging anyone, he is only passing along what God has said about the homosexual lifestyle. If you don't believe me, read Romans chapter 1 and you will see what God thinks about this

wow BOB..... Ya know I feel sorry for people like you. To judge another human being the way you did in that e-mail to the group makes me sad. I am not gay nor do I ever judge anyone who has a different lifestyle then mine. I love survivor because you can see many different people of many different lifestyles.

Peace

Kelly

Although the consolidated post is #684, other posts preceding it refer to the deleted posts and the controversy rages both before and after the collective post. The major players are Steve, Bob and Wil, with Rebecca chiming in every so often to ask them to stop, and peripheral players making comments in support

of acceptance, but these are largely ignored., This is a shame, because they are far more comprehensible than Wil's, who lets the discussion become too personal to maintain his own credibility. Thus the posters give the impression that those who support gay rights are highly emotional and illogical, while the opposition is calm and sensible, even kind-hearted. Rather than examining any of the animosity further, though, a more productive study would be of the posts that are primarily religious in nature, because religion, in the guise of proffering salvation, is the primary motivation for intolerance.

The first begins innocently enough, and refers to the fact that previous series had shown a lot of praying and testifying, and hymn-singing, which was not evident in *Vanuatu*: "What surprised me this year is that there is so little religious talk, prayer and ceremony this season compared to previous seasons" (Killer Queen "Little Religion," #719). To this, Rebecca quickly replies, in part,

On the contrary, though. Think back. Both Rory and Bubba would pray, as well as Lisa and Scout. I remember there being more...but this whole season has been kind of a blur to me. Also, there has not been that much showing of the guys back at camp too much. It seems like they are hiding a lot of that this season, and focusing more on the challenges. ("Re: Little Religion," #720)

Of particular interest here is not so much the correction of the perception, but the hint that she believes religion may be censored out of the show, in much

the same way she censored a discussion of the lesbian player and homosexuality in general. Whether she is right or wrong, the discussion of religion ends here, perhaps because there really is nothing more to discuss. But this is only a deceptive pause, as will become apparent.

Then, at almost this same point in the game, Ami is eliminated. There is a brief flurry of posts celebrating this milestone, and one last salvo from a viewer who knows his rhetorical strategies well. Victor Bugg writes, "The more you tell someone they are wrong and try to prove it the more you end up egging them on to comment back. Best way to irritate someone arguing is to drop the topic and ignore anymore discussion on the matter.....it then dies out. play nice" ("Re: Digest Number 100," #736). No one answers him, nor do they take his advice, but it's still worth noting that there is one potential public intellectual in the group. There are more writers similar to this in other forums, but as has been noted, sometimes those forums themselves present different problems than those we encounter in *Yahoo! Groups*.

Although Scout remains in the game (she is also a lesbian) the gay discussion stops dead, and talk turns to men vs. women without the aspect of sexual orientation. Many of the men, along with women who had previously not been supporting female contestants are now anxious for Chris, the lone remaining male, to pick them all off, and he does, ultimately winning the game. This is a big victory for hegemonic values, as evidenced by a long group of posts of which these are but a few:

i hope chris wins, it would be awesome (bocafastball "will chris go, #760").

why are you for all the girls because now chris is guna beet them all  
and all and all and all and all and all and all and all and all and  
all (3 centuries later)...and all and all and all and all and all  
and all and all... (2 b continued) (bocafastball "Re: will chris go," #763).

. . . He was supposed to be the first man out because of his screw up on  
the balance beam. Now the weakest man is gonna end up in the final  
four. I can see it happening this way...Next one out will be Julie, followed  
by Scout, followed by Twila - this leaves Eliza and Chris in the final two.  
The men will ALL vote for Chris and so will Twila and Scout. If Ami,  
Leann, and Julie have not forgiven Eliza for breaching the alliance ... they  
will vote for Chris too.

I think this is a great comeback and I actually believe he deserves to win  
because he has "played" this game better than the others - he has pitted  
the women against each other and watched as their alliaice crumbled. I  
would not be upset if he took home the million. (St Onge "Re: will chris  
go," #678)

Oh...If Chris gets voted off.....there will be so many cat fights tonight... I  
love that!!! OUT OF MY WAY!!!! I hear the song starting already...my cue  
to stop what I am doing...LOL (Rebecca "Re: will chris go," #857).



As charming as these sentiments must be to ruling hegemonic elements, and as much money may go into the coffers of American capitalism as a result, this pales beside what happens in this group once the series is over. Simply, the religion and homosexuality discussion returns, and with a vengeance that carries on for almost 300 posts.

This is the first shot over the bow of the rest of the group. Bob has posted on this issue before, and some of his posts were deleted by Rebecca. Perhaps he believes that now that the season is over, her oversight will be less frequent or less strict. But no matter his internal thoughts, he makes sure to get in one good volley before everyone else, assuming correctly that people are still reading the group.

don't forget an iced drink and your easy chair because since I am involved, everyone in line will start slamming me left and right. Especially since I will now say that God loves everyone whether they apply to get on Survivor or not ....all 60,000 of them. Gay or straight...God loves the person, just not the act :-)

BOB Here comes controversy (BobBobc  
"Re: As a Contestant," #953)

Clearly this is intended as a challenge, and Victor Bugg's advice notwithstanding, the gauntlet is soon taken up by Wil.

U know u had 2 F\*\*\* things up didnt u, I sooooo take what I said earlier back,I dont know what I was thinkin,sidin w/ u,pleaz,I cant even stand u.I must hav been drunk,Terri stop givin me beer,b/c it is makin tell people i dont lik that i like them.lol. God loves the person,not the act-BS. As i said b4 if he didnt like it,he wouldnt hav made them that way.U mariqita!!!  
(Olivera "Re: As a Contestant in the Semi-Finals for Survivor 11," #684)

Because the orthography here is beyond non-standard, I will attempt a translation. Wil is asking other posters not to give him any more "pretend" beer because it is making him agree with someone he can't stand. He is replying to Bob's message above about homosexuality and giving his own interpretation of God's wishes. So many messages passed between the two in question because Wil is also involved in a completely different exchange with another poster concerning the likelihood of getting selected to appear on *Survivor*. However, Wil suddenly becomes aware of Bob's beliefs and in the midst of his other issues, he responds, at which Steve Wright leaps into the fray:

alright, I cant stay quiet on this one. God didn't create gays, he created them as people but they CHOSE to be gay. God condemns those that are gay to an eternity in hell. That is in the bible. In fact God destroyed 2 entire cities (Sodom and Gomorrah) for their sexual immorality and the bible specifically mentions men having sex with men as one of the sins.  
God loves the person but he hates the act. If he didnt, he wouldnt have

condemned it in the bible and destroyed those 2 cities in the old testament.

If in the bible it says that God condemns them to hell then why would he create something that he later condemns ? That would be saying he made a mistake and that is impossible.

If homosexuality is normal then it would be throughout the entire animal kingdom. Well I have a bunch of animals and never once have I ever seen them confused about who was the female and who was the male. Animals are about as natural as they get and never once has one of my animals "came out" and decided they were gay and just went after another one of their same sex. ("Re: As a Contestant in the Semi-Finals for Survivor 11," # 981)

In fact, Steve goes on in this vein for quite some time not only in this post but in many others, but this sample serves to define his point of view.

It isn't within the scope of this work to dissect or refute individual posts or beliefs. Of interest here is the extraordinary length of the conversation, well over 300 messages in less than a month! The other discussion about eligibility continues parallel with the one on sexuality, but the argument over the gay issue goes on for just as long, if not longer. Therefore about half the nearly 300 messages until January of 2005 concern this identity construct. Many of them

are contributed by "Hung Lo" also known as "Legend41xxx" and "Vincent", who enters with this:

Steve, I had to repond to your religious rantings regarding Gays. I personally beleive you have been miss informed and or take out of context what god has "said" and what "man" has writen in the bible. The bible is an account of events and writen by men who were "inspired" by what they beleive to be God. First..God has never "Condemed" a single soul to "Hell"..(Lucifer was cast out), personaly i don't beleive that the God would send any of his children (which we ALL are) Eternally to hell to burn in a never ending unimaginal excruciating pain for all eternity!...get me a break! I believe that we are given free will to choose to if we want to spend eternity in his kingdom or apart from which "Hades" or "Hell" is infered. It's people like you that give God a bad name. We have so called "Holy wars" for many centuries that men have killed millions (if not BILLIONS) in the name of GOD. If it (Homosexuality) is sin, then let god be the judge...not you or i....or do you choose to "notice the speck in your brother's eye but ignore the PLANK in your own"?....and of course my favorite from Jesus himself "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone". By the way...i happen to be "Straight" ...but get annoyed with all the Self righteous radical religious "right" who wish to not only impose their delusional views (apart from gods TRUE teachings)on the rest of society but to FORCE others to conform to their beliefs or Die. Remember the christian crusaders who killed hundreds of thousands of men, women and children

who didnt convert to christianity and today some islamic fundamentalists doing the same all in the name of God?.....we all should show a little more tolerance to the difference in others and to let god be the judge of or sins, "Live and let Live" ....Happy "Holy"days!..to ALL! ("Re: As a Contestant," # 985)

While this is lengthy, it serves to encompass what "Hung Lo" says again and again throughout this argument, and in the same style. Oddly, the next to check in is Rebecca, with a complete reversal of her previous position: "Hi Hung Lo. I agree with you totally. I have no idea why BOB had brought up the religion again...he did before, and all it brought was many arguements. I really hope that this ends here, with your words of wisdom. Thank-you again" ("Re ;As a Contestant," #989). She never explains her change of heart, but she, too repeats herself while trying in vain to end the argument.

Other posters check in to agree or disagree with the major players, or to register their objections to the entire argument, or to quit. The argument continues until Bob leaves the group about halfway through January 2005. The group lives on in sporadic discussions for over two more years, but none of them deal with identity constructs. Regardless, it was an extraordinary production of text and a huge expenditure of time by the participants, which indicates, again, that they are consumed with and invested in this ongoing conversation that permeates our culture. It may even be fair to say they are obsessed with it, since

they reiterate their beliefs and opinions of the issue itself, and of each other, until one of them leaves the group.

Most astounding of all things about this discussion, is that the belief Ami might hate men is never raised, not once, let alone as much as it did on *Reality News Online*. It's all about the issue of sexual orientation in general. Ami is really incidental to the plot. In turn, this sort of thing tells the producers and sponsors, as well as other viewers, that this identity construct, sexual orientation, is more important than any other, even though, like the weather, little can be done about it. The conservative, capitalist hegemonic elements of the culture get their desire: women, especially lesbians, are not liked, and seeing them in a position of power makes viewers uncomfortable often enough to write about it repeatedly. The reading that they do is entirely hegemonic. It isn't even negotiated. While it seems someone ought to be questioning why there is such hatred for lesbians, no one does. There's plenty of discussion that lesbians are bad, but no interrogation. Women as females are not so continually discussed in any group I examined, unless they are also lesbians. Men are discussed as males (as opposed to players, strategists or contestants) even less than that, as is apparent in the posts about *Exile Island*.

### *Television Without Pity*

The next posters are members of *Television Without Pity (TWP)* groups for the same series. As discussed above, their standards and rules are very different indeed, especially in terms in mechanics and inter-poster relations and

conversation. And, as mentioned above, *TWoP* has been owned by Bravo! since 2007, which means they were independent during the posting period for *Survivor: Vanuatu*. Even so, certain discussion topics were not permitted, either by the moderators, who delete messages and people, or by other posters, who overwhelm certain concepts. For example, racism, sexism and homophobia all meet with heavy opposition. The only way any of this can be found is if it has been quoted in a message by someone else, and was not found and removed by a moderator.

When I first discovered the *TWoP* forums, I hoped I had stumbled upon the public intellectuals of Gramsci, or the oppositional readers of Stuart Hall. I might indeed have done so if not for the heavy censorship. Some of what the posters are saying could be considered anti-hegemonic, anti-capitalist or oppositional, except that the conversations are very narrow. If anyone wanders too far afield or challenges anyone else's beliefs, they are thwarted.

Unfortunately, the forums devoted to each episode are no longer available, but the ones devoted to individual players are, and Ami of *Vanuatu* has 50 pages, which amount to several hundred posts. The last thirteen or so pages pertain to her appearance on a later *Survivor: All Star* series, but the rest are about the current series.

The very first message on Ami's board regarding her sexual orientation is this one: "FIRST IMPRESSION: A lesbian who doesn't look like a butch. Should be a keeper" (It Does Not Follow "#11"). Posters here use a wide range of identifiers, and there is no way to be sure of gender unless they mention it

themselves. Moreover, the posts are not titled, only numbered. At *TWoP*, the biggest issue from *Reality News Online* reappears: is Ami a man-hater, and are lesbians by definition man-haters? For 39 pages, the argument persists to the exclusion of all else about Ami. However, this is not particularly indicative of a worse obsession than anywhere else, for two reasons. First, each episode in the *Vanuatu* series had its own forum, and it is evident from *TWoP* forums in general that moderators move posts and chase posters from episode forums to individual player forums, and vice versa if they manifest in the wrong location. Further, all players have forums devoted only to them. The longer a player is in the game, the longer their forums are likely to be. Ami was the 13<sup>th</sup> player of 18 to leave (finishing 6<sup>th</sup>), and she was both active and controversial in the game, so her forum is the longest, even longer than the winner's.

By far the most-discussed issue was this: was Ami playing to beat the men because she hates men, or because her tribe was women, and the other tribe was men? There are several schools of thought, which I'll demonstrate, but the most interesting aspect is, while some people think Ami hates men, they do not say they don't like gay people, or that all lesbians are like Ami. Here's a typical entry in Ami's favor:

I believe Ami explained her feelings toward the men in the voice-over they played during the show. I thought that she said that she was disappointed that the women were so eager to show-off to the men, because she felt the women had built a strong bond together prior to the re-shuffling and



didn't want that bond weakened.

Obviously, she wants to keep the women together and does not want to give the men any advantage. She also doesn't want the women to become to [sic] close to the men for fear that it would threaten the women's alliance. I agree that she did not use much tact when explaining her position to Lisa. Lisa was just excited and wanted to show-off, and Ami sorta rained on her parade. However, I didn't get any "man-hate" vibes from her. I just thought she was playing the game. (Stuck in Cincy #100)

The opposing argument is typified by this:

Her behavior towards them men sure did back up the "lesbians secretly hate men stereotype." Although her attitude could have partially been the editing, I would complain the editors are enforcing the lesbians hate men stereotype but the majority of the viewers I am sure don't know she is a lesbian since it hasn't been mentioned on the show. She certainly wasn't trying to use her charms to manipulate the men this week.

You know I really can't figure her out. Almost everything she does could be the result of her being a strategic person who is playing the game hard, or they could be the result of the fact she has a screw loose. Her actions can truly be explained either way.

I mean what was with her not wanting to show the coconut thing to the guys? Sure there is some logic to the fact if once they merge they will be

going against them again (assuming the girls stick together, which is a big assumption.) so why help them out. But she sure had a snotty and bitchy attitude about it when she argued against it. Did she really not want to show them for strategy, or did she not like that “her women” were suddenly giving the guys attention. From what we saw she really seemed to think they should just tell the guys what heavy objects to lift and then sit them in a corner because they are as good as gone do who cares. Again, either reason could explain it. (DanKnight #96).

This last one is especially interesting because even though the viewer acknowledges there may well be editing going on to strengthen the lesbian man-hating stereotype, he still buys into it. It would, of course, be helpful or enlightening to know the gender and orientation of each viewer, but the forum names may not be accurate in those regards. One thing *TWOP* posters often have in common is that they are reasonably literate and write at length, or repeatedly in the same forum. They make some mistakes and typographical errors regularly, but nothing like what occurs in unmoderated groups. However, this, too, may be misleading because the site demands correctly edited English, and doesn't allow anything it defines as hate speech. Therefore this alone is not a good cross-section of the viewing public. In fact, I doubt anything is, thus the need to examine a wide variety of forums, in order to create a clear picture of how the many texts are interpreted, how they are produced, and how they aid hegemonic elements to gain and maintain power.

As mentioned above, the Ami discussion goes on for almost 39 pages, or nearly 600 posts, before switching to discussions of her *All-Star* season. Most of it concerns man-hatred vice strategy, with a fairly large majority of the posts on Ami's side; that is to say, most people who wrote felt she was not a man-hater, but edited to look that way in a situation that pitted women against men. There are no posts in this forum to the effect that being gay is wrong, or that Ami is a bad person because she is gay. There are, however, numerous posts from people disliking Ami and/or her play, but blaming this on personality, immaturity or some other individual flaw.

Ami irritates me. She has this superior attitude that I really don't like. Normally I like someone who's a little bit bitchy but she just seems so....cold or something. (katymo #94)

She's really a huge bitch whose kind of hides it under this let's-all-get-along hippie love vibe up until the moment the fangs come out. And she keeps talking about trust? I don't know why the women trusted her over Lisa. For one thing, they'd all be better off if they followed Lisa's lead and voted for Eliza. For another, Lisa seemed a lot more willing to play for the team (as last night's vote showed). Ami managed to manipulate the tribe into executing her own personal grudge against Lisa in a vote that made no sense at all for the tribe. (Mabdul Doobakus # 180)

Other posters prefer to comment on Ami's physical attributes, which indicates to me that, lesbian or not, a woman's body is the first thing, and sometimes the only thing, that impresses some viewers:

She scores points with me for that body (which, yes, is always a top criterion), and she has kind of a Martina Hingis look. She doesn't lose points for being gay. It'll be fun to see when she joins forces with the guys: They'll notice that body. (petros # 34)

I'd be flattered if she was looking at me. She's one hot lesbian. I also like that she's a schemer without being obnoxious or braggy about it. She also seemed to describe everyone and their groups pretty accurately. (Hoola # 38)

Sub-topics of the physical attractiveness category are "real or fake breasts" and "nude model/stripper." Again, a substantial number of posts are devoted to these, such as:

I think Ami looks great, though surprised she's only 31, I had her pegged for late 30's at least. She looks older than Leadnn, who's 35.

Since I first caught a glimpse of Ami in her blue bikini I've been wondering if her breasts are real. Perfect shape and size. Is the consensus they're fake? (vanimpe # 121)

And, unquestionably? They are fake. Absolutely. Large breasts simply do not march forward like that, without any softness or downright motion, in small bikinis not offering support. Blech. Fake breasts are just gross, IMO.  
(Angus # 122)

This one in particular offers an unusual insight into why Ami “hates men:”

It hasn't been mentioned on the show but Ami was a stripper when she was younger. It has come up several times on various websites and the like. She also was a swimsuite model who posed for playboy.

Of course I don't know if that was why she got implants or not. Although I am betting that being a stripper may hold some answers on why she apparently hates men. But it is possible that she got them for professional reasons, as she did work professions where they would have helped.

(DanKnight # 339)

Although there is no proof that Ami does hate men, or that she hates them because she was a stripper, it's not at all uncommon for such comments to be presented as though they are, or may be, provable facts. Indeed, this turns into a telling conversation with two other posters when the credibility of DanKnight's statement is disputed. The italicized portions were originally DanKnight's, here quoted by tarheel for the purpose of responding:

*Of course I don't know if that was why she got implants or not.*

It doesn't matter to me why she got them, I'm just glad she did. They're spectacular and I will miss them (and Ami).

*Although I am betting that being a stripper may hold some answers on why she apparently hates men.*

I still don't understand where the notion came from that Ami hates men.

Any discontent for the men on her part came off more as a tribe issue rather than gender hate, imo. If Ami really hated men she would've never voted for Lisa and Eliza over Rory and Chris, and she certainly wouldn't have been all huggy and feely with Rory during the coffee reward (and been all weepy about seeing Dah leave.). (tarheel #340).

Then this poster agrees with DanKnight:

I get the feeling she is a man hater. Can I prove it, no, I just get the feeling that she doesn't like men. As for Lisa, I believe Ami went after her because Ami was concerned that Lisa was siding with the men.

Remember Lisa wanted to share knowledge with Chris and Ami didn't. As for Eliza, Ami wanted to vote for Chris but went along with Leanne.

(sissykay #342)

Not only interesting in and of itself for highlighting Ami's past, her enhancements, and her "man-hatred," this exchange leads directly into the most important Am-related topic outside of her personality, orientation or strategy: the

belief that editing was intended to make us dislike Ami, lesbians, women or any combination thereof. At this point, in 2004, *TWoP* was still independently owned. Since the motto of the site is "Spare the snark, spoil the networks," this argument was permitted unimpeded. However one judges the credibility of *TWoP* in 2004, or since 2007 when Bravo took over, here the posters interrogate the issue of editing at length and with considerable evidence of critical thought. There is no question that this is an oppositional reading that questions the status quo and the company line we are being fed by the networks. The following example from BMinor is a response to DanKnight and sissykay.

Editing can do wonders can't it? The negative things about Ami are all implications, and innuendos IMO. I haven't seen her do anything really that horrible, like insulting the guys, or the girls, or saying anything bad about anybody, in her confessionals as well as in the game. You can argue that editing can't show things you haven't done and all that jazz. Well I would use this exact argument in defense of Ami. I haven't seen her actually do and say things that are all that horrible. The editing implies that she did, but never actually shows her doing "villian" like things. For instance it shows scenes of her cracking cocunuts as the men are talking about her perhaps planting seeds of "ball-buster" in the audience's mind. Then they show her making smug faces at the right time. If she's guilty of anything, it's making faces. Ooooh that evil Ami, how dare she make faces, she must be an evil witch. Funny the conclusions we come up with

by seeing scenes cut in a certain way and order, with voiceovers taken out of context. They plant the seeds in the mind, then the mind sees things through that murky coke bottle they created, without actually looking at the events the [sic] occur. . . . (# 343)

BMinor goes on to dispute another poster's anti-Ami remarks:

. . . Well, I could see the possible "villian" in Brian because he talked bad about others behind their backs. Ami hasn't done that. I could also see the "villian" in Jerri because she picked fights with some people which Ami hasn't done either. JFP for lying which if anything, Ami has been honest to a fault, a factor that may lead to her downfall. These people actually had actions that could be construed as "villianous", but Ami's "villianous" actions are merely subtle smirks and twitches. That's why I think the "villian" label is created by the editing more than the actual actions of Ami. I could very well see them edit her to be a hero if they wanted to, with the footages I've seen. (# 346)

Although these are both from the same poster in one exchange on the same day, editing discussions appear throughout the Ami forum, with numerous participants, several more of which are noteworthy. DanKnight himself mentioned editing, above, even admitting he is a victim of it.



AMAI writes:

I try to remember that this show is HEAVILY edited, in order to manipulate the audience to feel a certain way. That Lisa & Ami segment certainly feels very heavily edited now that I think back on it. It just seems to make sense to me that you wouldn't blurt out everything you obtained from a reward, the very first day, which is what Lisa wanted to do. Possessing information is something to be shared bit by bit, with some give & take. (136)

A short time later, Lady Chardonnay says, "A season is more fun with a villain, and the editors, in the absence of a real villain, are doing their best with Ami, IMHO" (# 144). I believe it is significant that, no matter how other people feel about the players or the game, no one ever argues that there is no editing, or defends editing. They would certainly understand, as do I, that some editing is necessary for length, to avoid repetition, and to make sure that the really important elements of the story are told. However, in this case, viewers feel the editing has a more sinister purpose, as evidenced by their posts.

mad typist observes,

I still like Ami, for now. She's entertaining, though she treads the line of self-righteousness on occasion. It's hard to tell with the editing just how

well or poorly she's governing her alliance. Clearly she's in control of her group, which I find impressive. I also agree that she's talking up the "girls versus the boys" partially because the game was set up that way to begin with. (# 237)

and in so doing acknowledges the apparent set-up to make the women bond and form alliances, only to have the audience and male players brand them as sexist, man-haters, and so on. On *Exile Island*, there is a completely different edit for the same behavior, and a completely different response to it.

Meanwhile, DanKnight has had a change of heart, and it has to do with Ami's edit. It's hard not to think this forum didn't sway him, because he posts here quite a bit. This is a possible example of the effect the public intellectual may have. Even though *TWoP* has since been co-opted by a network, some intellectuals may remain and influence other posters and readers to some extent, although there's no way to prove this is true. The italicized portion comes from another post, to which he is responding.

*Boy oh boy, does Ami really hate men or what? "I don't care who goes. Just any one of the men." She doesn't even care to single out Rory as the first target. I sense a lot of anger in this woman.*

Well as far as her hating men do keep in mind how the alliances formed. After all the assumption (seemingly a correct one.) by her and the other women of the tribe is that the alliances are men vs. women. So saying one

of the "men" she doesn't care who could just as easily be interpreted as one of the other "alliance" she doesn't care who. . . .

As for her seemingly hanging onto a female alliance at all cost. It is understandable that with the tribes starting as men vs women. As a whole people tend to stick with their original tribe members post merge at least initially. In Ami's case her original tribe is "all the women."

Ami does seem to be all gung ho on girl power, and considering her sexuality and stripper past it is an easy jump to think she just hates men. (and yes I know not all lesbians or strippers hate men. I know most don't hate men.) Maybe she does hate men, it's certinally possible. I just am not completley sure how much of her apparent sexism is real and how much of it is the editing. . . . (# 251)

The savvy viewer of Mark Andrejevic both grasps and objects to the manipulations, while continuing to watch the shows. This, in turn, convinces the producers and, sponsors that no matter what they say, the audience wants more of the same. The most insidious problem is this emotion – becomes credibility – drives capitalism – maintains hegemonic dominance cycle is that we as viewers knowingly support the entire machine while claiming the sophistication of having recognized it (*Watched*, 132-36). The only ways to remove oneself from the machine are to stop watching, or to stop posting, or to announce a personal boycott of the sponsors' products. Having watched these formats for over eight years, I find the first the most tempting, but I have often chosen the third out of

some sort of masochism or the hope that my on-line commentary will induce other savvy watchers to join my boycotts.

The editing phenomenon and discussion reappear constantly in this forum, although not in every sub-forum. For example, the forum on Scout, the other lesbian, is only 19 pages long, compared to Ami's 37 pages. Not only is editing not an issue, Scout's sexuality is not an issue, either. The viewers certainly have issues with her, but her orientation is unremarkable to them, as it was to the posters on *Yahoo! Groups*.

If any of the *TWoP* posters is homophobic, they don't express it, or if they did, those posts are gone. *TWoP* has a separate forum for posters to tattle on each other so the moderators will edit and discipline as they deem necessary. Each post is tagged with a "report" link so that the moderators can track them down easily and quickly. It is unfortunate that so much effort goes into censorship, because it renders anything that seems truly critical suspect (one wonders why it was allowed, or if it was overlooked) and because it has a chilling effect on others who may wish to post a thoughtful criticism or take issue with any point of view. In fact, although most of these examples come from other forums on *TWoP*, or from discussions of her moderation on other boards, such as *Bitter But Brilliant*, they are indicative of the thought-policing that has become their hallmark. Their apparent concern with appearing "politically correct" has in fact shut down the honest exchanges that characterize forums that really do encourage plurality. One of the trademarks of *TWoP* is that members cannot discuss the boards on the boards, so the conversations about *TWoP* must of

necessity take place elsewhere. The italicized portions are quotations to which the poster is responding:

*Alli or Alki or whoever is busy snotting at people who say they don't want to watch reality TV over on the Studio 60 boards. There should be a gulag for those snotty folk, Alli! Prop their eyes open and make them watch "Paradise Island" til they DIE!* ( (kingdead @ Nov 7 2006, 02:22 PM, BBB)  
Gee, that sounds almost off-topic for the S60 boards.

The funny thing is that I generally agree with Alli's views on a lot of subjects. (I don't read her recaps any more, but it's not as if she doesn't restate her opinions ad nauseum in the forums, too.) E.g., I think that people who sneer at "reality TV" are only one step up from the ones who sneer that they "only watch PBS and documentaries," who in turn are only one step up from those who brag about not owning a TV at all (see the classic Onion article). I'm annoyed by reality contestants who yammer on about playing with integrity, etc. I think S60 is smug. I could go on, but you get the idea.

But her high-handedness and arbitrary modding just annoy me to no end. The whole "people, please. The whole less filling / tastes great thing has been discussed to death. It's less filling. Move on, please." And until I heard about this board and its predecessors, I didn't even know the half of it (the arbitrary bannings, the mass purgings, the banning of TAR contestants).... (Larry Dallas, BBB, 7 Nov. 2006).

Just one more example should suffice. There are hundreds of posts of this nature about thousands of posts by Miss Alli, and she is only one of dozens of moderators at *TWoP*.

Yep--she's going after the pro-Lyns. I posted that I was shocked that they lifted a Lyn quote from another ep about another team in the Lyn thread, the editing thread, and the ep thread once each (and perhaps two responses to posts in the Lyn thread). Alli warned me about posting in more than one--so I went to the editing thread and responded to a couple of posts. I then went to the Lyn thread and saw that she told me to drop it--which she didn't do in the warning message. I shrugged, didn't go back and delete, but posted no more--but now I'm suspended until Dec. 2. I guess it wasn't my pro-Lyn, but my criticism of her darling, darling, perfect, fabulous show. I'm sorry, but I really do see a difference between lifting lines from previous eps by one team about another, and just switching lines around to apply to other teams.

But, yes, defending the Lyns is pointless, inane, repetitive drivel, and posting that they are hypocritical bitches ad naseum is perfectly o.k. Love the mini rebellion going on right now--can't remember seeing anything like it before. (Forestranger BBB, "9:01 PM")

The next example contains two quotations from a *TWoP* forum, followed by commentary from a BBB poster:

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>■<br/>Gifted</p> <p>Group: Members<br/>Posts: 56<br/>Member No.: 233<br/>Joined: 3-November<br/>06</p> | <p style="text-align: center;"><b>QUOTE</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Hound BB<br/>Channel Surfer</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Today @ 5:57 pm<br/>Email · Report · Post #454</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Miss Alli, thanks for clarifying the boards on boards issue. That will take vigilance &amp; proof reading (for me) prior to posting to ensure compliance.</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>But, I read all 30+ pages and didn't come across any sarcastic snottiness directed toward other posters. I read some sarcastic posts that I found humorous, but none that I found snotty or directed toward other posters. Would you share part of the post in question (or give an example) so we know the difference between acceptable sarcasm &amp; unacceptable sarcasm. Thanks.</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>QUOTE</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Miss Alli<br/>Network Executive</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Today @ 6:16 pm<br/>Email · Report · Post #457</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Don't be sarcastic or snotty, and it won't be a problem. I've gone as far as I'm going; I'm not writing a manual. You know what sarcastic is; you know what snotty is.</b></p> |
|---|--|

What's up with Alli not deleting that? Does she see that she's wrong? Seems impossible...

(forestranger, BBB, 27 Nov. 2006).

Again, although none of the above posts are about *Survivor* directly, they are indicative enough (and easily available despite the change of management, the changes of personnel, and the multiplicity of programs) to demonstrate a hostile environment for critical thinking and thus for public intellectualism.

Some examples of censorship from one of the *TWoP* groups we will examine later on are available. I place them here because they point to the suppression of ideas and exchanges that render *TWoP* less than credible as a safe place for public intellectuals to express themselves. In this case, there is a very heated discussion going on about one of the *Exile Island* plovers, Terry the fighter/airline pilot. All but the last come from the aforementioned Miss Alli, followed by a complete excision courtesy of her colleague, Erin.

Just a reminder that telling other people why they think what they think, or what they would think in other hypothetical situations, is rude and off-topic, and it will get you booted. (Miss Alli # 316)

Please don't make these debates more heated than they have to be. The posts are getting awfully sarcastic, and unless somebody is saying "big Burnett conspiracy" as opposed to simply "falls right into Terry's



wheelhouse, which is nice for him," you don't have to take that tone with people. (Miss Alli # 427)

Please don't pick fights. The point is that in past seasons, wealth has been used as a reason for booting people, and the only thing that was expressed was that it was surprising nobody tried it. Please don't try to start arguments about race and religion in situations that have absolutely nothing to do with that stuff. (Miss Alli # 681)

Clipped for off-topicness and back-talking.

This post has been edited by Erin: Jun 11, 2006 @ 7:38 pm. (#683)

The nearest to an internet forum encouraging public intellectualism that I have been able to find is *Bitter But Brilliant*, but it's a young forum and lacks the breadth and depth of *TWoP* so far. This is why there are no posts on *BBB* about the moderation of the two *Survivor* series we examine here. Fortunately, there is potential for expansion.

Fan and viewer posts: *Survivor: Exile Island*.

### Yahoo! Groups

This *Yahoo!* group, with a very large number of posts, is heavily influenced by *Reality News Online (RNO)*, by which I mean a moderator posts all the *RNO* articles as messages on the site, so that all the members have a fairly good chance of reading them. With this direct link to the expert writers, observers may learn even more about how fans and viewers think and respond to what they read as well as to what they see. We already know this is not the sort of forum where public intellectualism takes hold, but it's an excellent source of the dominant-hegemonic reading of the program.

This *Exile Island* group discusses the series for 2139 messages over a period of about three months, including pre- and post-show messages. There are about 75 members, not all of whom post. Some are very regular posters, others are sporadic. Some post mostly as the show begins. Then, when there is a two-week hiatus in broadcasting, quite a few disappear and a few new people join in.

Because they begin to post before the first episode airs, they cast about a bit for something to discuss, and settle upon sexual orientation. At this point in real life, *Brokeback Mountain* is up for an Academy Award. Inevitably, this sparks a discussion of all previous gay *Survivor* cast members. It doesn't ever become truly hostile, although one person does quit the group, but the topic points up how obsessed we, as a culture, are with homosexuality. Thus, it should not be

much of a surprise that a player's sexual orientation strongly influences audience reaction to them, regardless of anything else they may or may not do or say.

Further, through the first couple of hundred posts, there are a lot of discussions and polls about who are the most attractive male and female players from various seasons, and then overall. Right in the middle of the series, when one male player exerts a lot of influence on the game, there are two more discussions that I think are quite indicative of our gender bias. One is "hairiest female ever" and the other is "greatest male player ever." There are no corresponding "hairy male" and "great female" discussions to balance these. Immediately following the hair topic, a discussion of women's looks and weight gain, by women, takes up the next several conversational exchanges.

In fact, male appearance is seldom discussed, likewise female strategy. I say "seldom" because there is one very interesting exception to this, which we'll cover when it is brought up by the posters.

Of greatest interest to me in this series of posts is the very surprising way in which the women are discussed when they try to vote out men, or simply stay in the game themselves. Here's the first of that kind of post.

I'm not sure but I think this is the first time in Survivor history that the first three people to be voted out have all been of the same sex. The first three out were all women and there isn't even a men's alliance. The women on La Mina are now outnumbered four to two. The women on Casaya are outnumbered four to three (I think). That can't be good for the women

down the road. I would have thought the three women on La Mina would have seen that before tribal council tonight and tried to even things out.

(Anderson #1559)

Of course there was a men's alliance even at this early stage and I thought it was fairly obvious, but I found this poster unusual in that he was interested in the women in the game and wanted them to do something on their own behalf.

Then there are the women and men who still have totally stereotypical expectations of the players and want to see stereotypical behavior to validate their emotional concerns and needs. Here is a woman who wants women to play dumb. At the same time, she points out Terry's misogyny, which is a bone of contention in this series the same as Ami's "man-hatred" was on *Vanuatu*. Ami was accused of behavior for which we saw no evidence, and Terry is also accused of behavior that we later discover may have been edited out.

You know, Gary from Guatamala lied about his profession, and was smart about it. Why didn't these people do that...Misty could have said she's a student or waitress instead of telling people how smart you are. Glad Terry caught on to that. I would have voted Sally off. Ruth Marie will perk up once she gets some food into her. (wipawatson "Icebreakers")

This is interesting because both Terry and the poster apparently buy into the trope that men don't like smart women. Terry earlier said he wanted to vote Misty out because she is an engineer and "smart as hell." While Terry clearly

never intended to keep any women around if he could help it, he did prefer to be rid of the potentially smart one (and not the stronger ones) first.

Here is some peculiar reasoning based on Western/ized social norms. This writer seems to think there is an official hierarchy and players have to defend their votes, but in this case, only to men. Had one older male player been voted out, instead of a woman, there'd have been only one left to explain to, and four people on the other side of the vote!

I thought that voting for Misty was the right choice. If the boys stuck between two alliances (i'm still shaky on names) had gone against the guys and voted for Ruth Marie...they'd have the girls on their side but would have been having to try to explain themselves to the guys. By voting for Misty, there is only one girl to explain things too...and she's just an individual now, so not too much of a threat. cory :) ("cory's 1 1/2 cents LOL")

Yet, the sentiment of answerability somehow prevails, even to the detriment of strategic game play.

As I mentioned earlier, there is a whole thread in which physical appearance makes a frequent, if not continuous, appearance, and here it is: the "Terry is sexy" phenomenon. Paula writes. "LaMina has shown who they think is a threat my sending Bruce to exile island, Casaya did the same last night with Terry, he will definatly need it at the merge and it will only get him through onevote, too bad 'cause I love that sexy Navy pilot ;)" ("Re: Terry's Fate"). And a

couple of weeks later, she follows up with "I've yet to meet a military wife who doesn't like Terry lol, count me in that group! As a Navy wife myself I am doubly lovin' him ;) I agree about Shane, he is a WACKO, but he does keep the entertainment level up this season" ("Re: Confessions").

Jen chimes in next:

I didn't know you were a military wife Paula! :o) cool beans! I will say off topic, very surreal seeing him in desert camies when He is a SAILOR! I tend to like the Military guys on Survivor \*wink\* and usually that makes them a teensy bit older (like me) Shows the training they get that they can still kick rear on Survivor after retirement. "Re: Confessions" #1691"

The military wives continue in this vein as long as Terry remains in the game, which is quite a while since he finishes third. In fact, they are joined by other admirers, such as Margi.

Speaks well of our military men I think. As the Mother of a soldier and the Sister of an Airforce pilot, I know that they are trained to think on their feet and keep themselves in good physical shape. Of course there are exceptions to the rule... But I have observed that the "cocky" behavior of my Brother and Son is a result of training they recieved to give them stability and confidence to face whatever situation that might arise in a military situation. My Son and my Brother, my Uncle and my Cousin as

well, all of them have displayed that sort of behavior after being in the military. I forgive them for it because I understand that it is necessary for them to be strong...and that's what we want in our military. (Chambers "Re: Is Terry" #2439)

Not much later, she adds this

Is Terry the greatest male Survivor player ever? I think it does to a certain extent come with the territory, maybe some see it as cocky, they see it as confidence. Oh and let's not forget, Terry is mmmmmm mmmmm SEXY! I love them Navy men!

\*\*\*\*\*

I agree, he IS A SEXY MAN!!!! (Chambers "Re: Is Terry" #2460)

I find these posts especially interesting because she is describing the exact same behavior, which, by Ami on *Vanuatu*, made so many people so angry.

Opposite this train of thought is the very surprising "women's alliance" thread, characterized by this exchange:

Someone may have mentioned this in a post when I was on my self imposed sabbatical but I thought I'd bring it up again..

It kind of appeared last week that the three woman on Cassaya (Cirie, Courtney & Danielle) were thinking about starting a womans alliance and turning the game on it's ear.

Since there are only four woman left in the game they had better do it quick if their going to do it at all. Even in Cassaya they're out numbered 4 to 3 (I think). It looks to me that if they're going to do it they're going to have to convince Bruce, who, I think, isn't in an alliance to join them. If they're all still around at the merge, which may very well come in the next two weeks, they'd be smart to bring Sally in right away, assuming she's still around. (Anderson "Womans Alliance?"")

And wipawatson replies:

I would definitely try for a woman's alliance. But first I would see how the men are handling the merge. They will probably start doing the alpha male thing and start voting off each other. When the male numbers are down, then I would pull the woman alliance. Stephenie tried to do that in Palau. But those women were so helpless, and hopeless, they couldn't leave the comforts of Tom's provision. ("RE: [CBS~Survivor:AllSeasons] Womans Alliance?"")

Again, a woman's alliance seems to be acceptable as long as no lesbians are in the game. No one says that in so many words, but it's *the* difference between this game and *Vanuatu*. Moreover, male alliances have not only been correct but expected all along, since *Survivor* began in 2000. Alpha males don't always eliminate their best competition, by any means. Some of them enjoy being



together and others want to “beat the best.” The usual alpha male strategy is to get rid of the women before the merge. Equally frequently, everyone else gets together to eliminate the alpha males right after the merge, but this includes weaker males, along with women.

After another episode or two are aired, Bill Anderson is back with his women’s alliance idea:

Last week it looked like the three women left in Casaya were considering a womens alliance, but there was no mention of one tonight, although there was no need for one since they didn't go to tribal council. Still, they'd be wise to form one and Sally would be wise to go straight to them if she makes the merge. She need feel no loyalty to the three guys left on La Mina, since they'd conspired to get rid of her next if they could have and she knows it. If no merge comes on the next show La Mina almost has to win immunity for her to make the merge. (“SPOILER 3-9-06 EDITION”)

He also mentions it after the merge. The reason we hear from Anderson so much is that he writes a sort of blog for the group, and gives his opinions about the strategies being employed, or that he thinks the players should consider.

The merge has come and that appears to be good for Sally, at least for a while. She may want to try and build a womans alliance. She figures to be

the final La Mina target and she'll have to use that time wisely to build up a case with the other three women. ("SPOILER 3-30-06 EDITION")

Elizabeth echoes this sentiment in a discussion of Sally, the last remaining woman from the LaMina tribe after the merge.

If Sally plays her cards right, she survives thru all the guys on her tribe getting voted off. Then she lobbies the players left to vote off annoying Shane. Then she works a "girls alliance" to get rid of the "too strong" Aras and the only guy left (Bruce). Then she bonds with Cirie to agree to go to the Final 2 together. Sally gets lucky and wins a crucial immunity challenge and boom, she's Final 3. It really could play out this way!

("Sally")

I show all of this because there are quite a few people, including men, pressing for the women to unite. But at the same time, another, overlapping conversation is occurring. Although this current group of messages is about *Exile Island*, the name of the group is "Survivor All Seasons," so it's permissible there to discuss previous seasons if the topic arises. *Survivor* is in syndication on various cable networks, and several members alert the rest that *Vanuatu* is being shown. This exchange is quite fortuitous, especially occurring as it does, at the same time as discussion of a possible *Exile Island* women's alliance, because it demonstrates how differently the two seasons under consideration here are viewed.

Cindy, the first poster says, "Either they'll re-run All-Stars in order to keep them in order or they'll go to Vanuatu, the one season I absolutely hated. At least I hated it until the shake-up that got rid of Lee Ann and broke up Ami's little all-girl alliance. That was classic" ("Pearl Islands" #2013). To this, Tina replies, "I'll watch Vanuatu again just to finally see that smug look wiped off of Ami's face again, I loved that, hated her" (Marcum "Pearl Islands" # 2016). So, although this group didn't exist when *Vanuatu* was aired, the same sentiment about Ami's alliance is expressed as in the other *Yahoo!* Group. And in this case, women are criticizing the all-female alliance of *Vanuatu*, while others are suggesting the very same strategy here on *Exile Island*.

Speaking of strategy, Cirie is the next woman whose strategy goes under the microscope:

I agree that Cirie is going to make it to the final 4 flying under the radar. She doesn't have the ability, IMO, to win individual immunity and no one dislikes her. Her strategy to fly under the radar is a good one and her inability to win isn't her strategy just reality. (Jean "Re: The Chance!")

i would under absolutly no circumstances refer to the game cirie is playing as the perfect game, she's flying under the radar big time, i have no respect for that style of play. besides that even if she makes it to the final four, i doubt very seriously that she would make it to the final four.

especially if one of the challenges is one of endurance. (Steve "Re: The Chance!")

She's playing a perfect game in that she hasn't had the spotlight turned on her yet. I understand what you mean about not liking that kind of playing, but if it gets her to the end, and works for her, it will be perfect *to her*.

(Miles "Re: The Chance!")

I respect any style of play, even if it's Johnny Fairplay style sneaky, Colby style dominant, Ambuh style riding someone else's back, whatever. If Cirie can get herself farther along by hardly being there then more power to her. I wouldn't want to see a lot of players do that but there's always one each season it seems. (Anderson "Re: The Chance!")

This series is illustrative of more than one concept that serves emotion over credibility and supports the hegemonic status quo. First, there is the frequently mentioned concept of "under the radar" winning that some viewers disdain. Second, there is the misunderstanding that physical prowess is necessary for a respectable win. Finally, the fact that Cirie is getting support for the exact opposite style of play from Ami is very interesting. It's as if we are being told it's better for women not to win at all, but if they must, they shouldn't be forward. Of course, this is a *Catch-22* situation, because one of the few ways a woman can win in this game and in this culture is by being unobtrusive, yet when she does that, some viewers still call it tainted. That said, when a woman does win by any

means, I'm doubt she concerns herself with the approval of viewers. Winning a million dollars would quickly take the sting, if any, out of that.

As the season progresses, Terry, his back to the wall, reels off a truly impressive string of Immunity Challenge wins, without which he would be voted off. Although he has the hidden Immunity Idol, he doesn't take any chances because it's insurance that he remains in the game. He is left as the last La Mina member among six Casayans, which makes him the quintessential underdog and gives him exactly the same odds as Chris had on *Vanuatu*. This in turn, elicits another flurry of admiration from the viewers.

If Terry does get to the final 2, they're going to have to pull an All Stars, and have viewers vote. I think the viewers will be really upset if Terry makes it and doesn't win. I think they'll be upset any way, if he doesn't, the same way they were with Rupert. My opinion is that Terry's played an awesome game. (Poersch "SPOILER 4-13-06 EPISODE")

Before I read any posts about the latest show, I just wanted to make a comment before I forget. How in the heck can Aras think Terry is the one least likely to survive on his own? Come on!! It seems to me like jealousy or fear of Terry has taken away Aras's ability to think clearly. Not only do I think Terry shouldn't have been listed by Aras as the least likely to survive on his own, but IMHO Terry is the one who I believe is the mostly likely to do the best on his own. How can Aras not really believe what he said?

Terry has been to exile island more times than I can remember and he's done great. Jean ("Aras's Opinion")

Let me tell you that comment ticked me the heck off. He's a former Navy pilot, they are TRAINED to survive in case they get shot down, that little sh\*t Aras was just taking pot shots to try to break Terry down and get in his head, I'm glad to see it didn't work. GO TERRY! (Paula "Re: Aras's Opinion")

actually, aras' comment about terry ticked me off a bit too. and you are correct, navy fighter pilots are trained specifically in survival techniques in case they are shot down or have to land in an emergency. Terry could survive in the wilderness better than anyone out there in that group, including cameramen, etc. Steve ("Re: Aras's Opinion" #2692)

I forgot about the [car] curse! I wish they would let US the VIEWERS vote. Because [Terry] is the most deserving. I love the way he plays the game! (Joya "Re: SPOILER REWARD CHALLENGE")

Although most are the self-identified female relatives of male military members, Terry's fan club includes men, too, and these few examples represent scores more, even eliciting an argument between two women because one of them failed to adore Terry enough. It's quite a reaction to any suggestion in the show

or out of it that Terry might be less than God-like. The point here is that men are expected to be aggressive and go for broke. There is definitely good reason to be competitive, especially in a game to win a million dollars, but compare this attitude with anything women do to try to win, whether passive or aggressive, and we see what is needed to reinforce the dominant-hegemonic reading. Terry, trying hard, makes a certain segment of the population feel good. It seems to be the same segment that prefers to see women only as accessories, and lesbians not at all.

The best, most representative proof of the opinions and attitude of the majority of this group is that, when Terry is eliminated during a balancing contest, which is won by a woman, posting all but stops. Without their alpha male, their show is done. It has been rendered meaningless and no longer delivers what they need. But for two brief “sour grapes” posts, they don’t even return to complain. All his supporters disappear on or about May 15, 2006 and the few remaining members discuss the final two, in a mere 32 posts, until the game and reunion show are over a week later.

#### *Television Without Pity*

This is the last group of fans and viewers. It’s the same forum which saw so much discussion of Ami, where there was a fairly balanced conversation about whether she hated men, or whether she was simply trying to vote off members of the opposing tribe, who happened to be men. However, this is also the forum where “political correctness” rages so fiercely that some voices are

never heard. In addition, there is almost no overlap in posters between the two groups. There was only one person common to both, and she posted very little about Terry, but a great deal about Ami. Before looking into Terry's group, which will be compared with Ami's, some statistics are of interest. Neither Ami nor Terry won their games, but Ami had 50 pages of posts and Terry had 46. The winners of *Vanuatu* and *Exile Island*, respectively, were Chris with 13 pages and Aras with 22. Ami and Terry were far and away the most discussed players in the *Television Without Pity (TWO P)* groups in their seasons. For the record, Cirie's forum contained 79 pages, but only 26 of those were for her *Exile Island* season. The rest were for her *Fans vs Faves* season.

The most notable trend in Terry's 46 pages (and 686 messages) is the switch in attitude that occurs after the merge, but it's important to set the stage for that by first looking at trends in earlier posting.

The very first trend is hero-worship of Terry, which is also the dominant-hegemonic reading we saw both in *Yahoo!* and *Reality News Online*. This takes place during the tribal play portion of the game, and is very similar to the kind of posting in the *Yahoo!* Group about Terry. In fact, there was really only one topic in the *Yahoo!* Group, and that was topic was Terry, either writing in his favor or opposing other players seen as his enemies. *Television Without Pity* postings are more articulate and more detailed, but the early sentiments in Terry's favor are roughly the same; Here are some examples, which show the similarity of sentiment.



He's a current favorite of mine because he's a former naval aviator like my son is now, cruising to Bahrain for 6 months. (Hapless #7)

There's something about Terry (maybe he's related to Mary). Maybe I'm crazy, but I think he's one of the hottest guys I've ever seen on the show. (DanHDan #8)

I'm really liking him. Mr Bayliss said, "Oh, that dashing handsome older guy?" Well yes indeed. Gotta love that man strength and lack of younger man jack-assery. (Ms Bayliss #10)

Terry = Man Strength. I wonder if there will be a shark for him to kill. Maybe a bear? Or Godzilla? He'll take it down with his bare hands and then congratulate his tribe for the "team effort". Yeah, he's definitely my favorite. Of course, I was a Tom fan as well. (BubbaCat #25)

I really like Terry. I think he's definitely a team player and a genuinely nice guy. And he's HOT! (kelldeyy #35)

Seriously, can Terry get any more awesome or sexy? His Competency didn't have too much trouble finding the immunity idol, and a guy like him is really going to need it. (hegellite #48)

In addition to the competence and the natural leadership skills, he's getting all grizzled and sexy and stuff. Yay, man strength! (Raguel #56)

There are dozens more like this through the first hundred-plus messages. It's worth noting that the admiration for Terry is not limited to one small demographic but seems to include both genders, more than one orientation, and a wide age range, which I estimate based on writing styles, references and screen names. However, sprinkled among them are perhaps a third as many of this kind:

I have to disagree with the overall sentiment. Something about him strikes me as him turning into a giagantic overbearing jerk when thinkgs don't quite go his way. (Wildcard28 #11)

I actively (and possibly irrationally) despise Terry. I just thought I'd throw that out there. (rach el #31)

I'm really glad to see there are a few Terry dislikers. I thought for sure he'd be loved by all. (rach el #37)

rach el's second post above demonstrates that she is seeing what I also saw, and questioned, which is overwhelming support for Terry in a forum where many points of view usually surface unless they are adjudged hate speech by *TWOP* moderators, in which case they disappear, along with their authors, leaving no

trace. The only way to know that this might happen is to be present before such a post disappears, or to find evidence of it as a quote by another poster.

However, the forum remains unbalanced in Terry's favor for some time, because the few anti-Terry posts immediately elicit an overwhelming number more like this:

I can't say I'm too surprised at Terry's competence on Survivor, because he is a former fighter pilot. . . . training included several weeks of water survival in the Gulf of Mexico, several weeks in a mock prison camp and one exercise where he was given a compass and a knife and dropped in the middle of the woods for two weeks; preparation for possibly getting shot down, in other words. Also, great training for Survivor.

Seeing that Terry was a fighter pilot in the Navy, I think it's fairly safe to assume he got all that training, probably more and almost certainly more water survival training . . . . (gogiggs # 90)

Terry standing on top of the skull hut should have been an eye-roller, but I thought it was surprisingly cool. (DanHDan #84)

I was so startled to hear Mr. Perfect use the term 'whoop-ass', a big grin spread across my face. I wish we saw more of \*that\* Terry on the show. \*DanHDan # 91)

Every single week I love Terry more.

I thought it was so nice that he just sat down and was straight with Dan.

I'm sorry to see Dan go, not really for himself so much as I just thought his friendship with Terry very genuine, which is rare for this show. And I think the way that they handled Dan's boot was very classy and gracious, and I don't think anybody can fault him for playing the game.

I am also finding Terry more and more attractive as we go along here.

Yummy! (watchergirl # 96)

I don't know if I've missed anything regarding this guy to date (last night was my first episode of the season, as I've been otherwise occupied with Dancing with the Stars!)...but, wowza! Loving the StrongHunkyOlderGuys that Survivor has been finding & casting lately! This guy's my new Tom! And they both remind me of Mr Flicka, which is always a good thing...

(Svenska Flicka # 97)

Oh, and I do think it was hard for Terry. Like a lot of manly men, he's not the most articulate guy when it comes to expressing emotions. So I think he managed to come off as being pleased with himself for his honesty, whereas I thought he was genuinely distressed about what he had to do. But being the kind of guy he is, he just sucked it up and did the hard thing without any whining or hand-wringing. (Ambi #101)

As I read through this forum, the praise increased and the criticism of Terry died out until I concluded that his detractors had withdrawn and perhaps moved to another group within the forum where they could discuss someone they liked better. Then, suddenly, with the merge episode, there is a drastic change. I deliberately quoted DanHDan three times under “praise” because he leads the reversal with this:

His speech to Cirie was terrible. His comments at tribal council about wanting the merge to wait because he wanted to beat Casaya at more challenges was laughable.

He took a big step backwards for me in this episode. I cringed almost every time he spoke. (DanHDan #109)

Nor is Dan alone, because Ambi joins in immediately, as do many more. I can only show a modest sampling here, but it is absolutely the tip of the iceberg compared to what lies beneath the surface.

I think it's his arrogance coming out. He couldn't humble himself enough when coming to Shane, Cirie, etc. I'm not sure what he could have said, but he came to them like he was in a position of power, and it just made him look like a dumb, arrogant asshole. (Mojetaro # 110)

What a fucking moron. I didn't think it was possible for a person to combine the strategic stupidity of Lex and Rupert in one episode, but he did. I'm surprised he didn't tell Shane and Cirie that finishing in 5th and 6th place in HIS adventure would be places of honor, or say my gut tells me I need to win this challenge. Stupid stupid Terry. (joem # 113)

After all that posturing, Terry decided to keep his ass covered. What a shock.

Studly, yet so dim.

At least he can now stop his feeble attempts at strategy and just play for himself. Could be fun to watch. (Ambi #144)

The major issue here seems to be lack of strategy, with a little hubris thrown in. This doesn't signal anything like a new balance, but rather a total shift away from Terry. Although they begin with criticism of his poor strategy, they quickly add his arrogance and pushiness, along with anything else negative they can find.

Shane and Aras at least know a little about how to play the game. Terry's only goal seems to be being big stud challenge guy and absolutely refuses to look at how his game is hanging by the slimmest of freaking threads.

UGH! Such hate for this ass! (svarlo #152)

I wouldn't care if Terry was only interested in himself, and in keeping the Idol 2 as long as he can to help himself. That is the name of the game, after all, to be the LONE Survivor. What irks me is all the comments he makes about being a team player, and all this "All for one, one for all," crap from the Naval Academy or what have you. What kind of a team player lets his team mates go down when he has the power to save them? If he would just admit that he is in this just for himself, then we would all respect him a lot more. But by claiming to be trying to help his "team" and failing so utterly, he just looks stupid. (JodithGrace # 161)

As with so many things Terry says and does, the flag thing came off to me as insular and off-putting, as if he lives in a bubble of Terry Awesomeness and has no idea there is a world outside the bubble. Or he just doesn't care a whit about the non-bubble world. So when he tries to communicate, everything just sounds self-important, even if he doesn't mean it that way. (Miss Quail # 178)

Eventually, however, the posters settle on particular faults. In the *Yahoo!* Group for this series, there was some discussion of Terry's alleged misogyny, without any true resolution of how he might really have behaved versus what was edited and shown. In this group, the topic comes up again, but these people are much more certain of his dislike for women.

I don't think Sally's a lock for Terry at all. He'll have to answer for his pre-merge chauvinism. (joem # 191)

Danielle and Cirie are very likely, since she gets along with them both. Courtney is possible from the Bayonetta alliance of ep. 1, especially if she wants to stick it to Terry for voting out people on the basis of possessing a vagina. (joem #193)

If I remember correctly though, and as others have posted, Sally has other reasons (chauvinism and pettiness come to mind) to not vote for Terry if she chooses. (allgeetoo #203)

Yeah, but he went directly for those guys. I do think there is a definite "men are more solid and dependable" thing with Terry, although probably not consciously. Had Terry aligned with men after getting to know everybody, then maybe. But in this situation, it seemed to be pretty much of a snap judgment, and I'm not sure what basis he had for it other than, "Guys! Guys are awesome!" (Miss Alli # 251)

I do think there is sexism in Terry, but I don't think he's a full on "Woman should stay at home, clean the kitchen, make babies" kind of guy. He's more of the guy who goes for the "Men are strong, women aren't as



strong" stereotype. Both of those thoughts are wrong, but the latter isn't as bad as the former, IMO. (thuganomics85 # 259)

These posts are of particular interest because they display the same kind of pro-woman/anti-male attitude for which Ami was castigated so thoroughly on *Yahoo! Groups*, and by some people in the Ami group here on *TWoP*. Again, there is no lesbian on *Exile Island*, thus it appears acceptable for posters and players to express their doubts about Terry's commitment to gender equality. As we'll see further on, not everyone agrees, of course, but there proportionately few defenses of Terry's behavior, and no attacks at all on posters for their opinions.

In fact, although there's a huge shift away from Terry to nearly anyone else, he still has his fans and followers. They continue to admire him for every possible reason, regardless of the arguments presented for not doing so.

I really think Terry's way is better than most of the people left on the show at this time in earlier seasons. He has a united enemy he can work against, instead of having to worry about his own alliance imploding, or worry about betraying anyone. He also knows none of them can beat him in the challenges.

Those shots of him working out at Exile were hot. I think some dirty-minded editor put those in cause they were totally gratuitous. (JustKay #214)

I like him because he's aggressive and hot. Even out there all filthy and busting his ass he still looks hot. None of the survivors I've seen (which I think is 9 or 10 on, first one with Steph) has anyone looked that good this late in the game. Shallow? Maybe.(ThatPoshGirl #236)

From this point until the end, the conversation swings back and forth, an overdetermined mixture of anti-Terry and pro-Terry postings with his critics far in the lead. There are several points at which posting crescendos, and these come whenever Terry does something that either upsets the critics or excites the supporters. If he bullies someone, or appears to, the knives come out. If he wins one of the many competitions, the applause breaks out. More people turn the further the game progresses. In the interest of fairness and academic integrity, I recorded all the posts that support Terry, but they were from fewer and fewer people, and they basically point up how the supporters like the same behaviors that his critics despise. In other words, if Terry celebrates a win by shouting and jumping, the critics call it arrogance while the supporters call it confidence, and neither side will budge, except the supporters dwindle while the critics' ranks swell, aided by many former supporters.

There are hundreds of posts that say virtually the same thing again and again, back and forth, with one enormous exception. One small group, not in any organized way, but because they are looking more critically at the big picture in an oppositional act of decoding, asks questions and presents new insights. They begin to decode the text oppositionally. Here are some implicating Mark Burnett

(and sometimes Terry) in the possible manipulation of, if not the outcome, then at least the message sent throughout the show. These are presented in chronological order, and while sometimes they are answering each other, at other times they call other acts and procedures into question. Some are never answered at all, but they still demonstrate a higher level of analysis that we have seen on any other forum about *Survivor*.

I've thought for a while that Burnett has been casting surrogate Burnetts--older, physically strong, alpha male types--so that he can play the game and win the money vicariously. Terry fits well within that category. What got under my skin even more than his sanctimonious 'when you grow up you'll understand what I mean' speech to Aras was Mrs Terry's comment about how she wanted to get him back to his 'handsome studly self'. Now I could be wrong here, but that's not something I would expect a woman to say. She might come out with something that had the same meaning, but I don't think it would be likely that she would say it that way. 'Stud' isn't generally a word I've heard from any woman describing any guy. I strongly suspect that Terry scripted that and had her say it. (quaintirene #411)

This may have been debated already, but does anyone think that CBS has given Terry such a sympathetic edit because they want to extol the "virtues" of the military during these times of war with Iraq? We did see Terry drone on and on about how automatically superior he is because he

was in the Air Force [sic], etc. Plus, he seems to always lead the poll numbers at CBS.com, leading me to think that lots of viewers are buying into this bullshit about Terry being such a "hero."

Due to this, I am starting to believe that the producers rigged most of the immunity challenges in his favor. We've seen ONE mental challenge...and even then it was combined with physical demands. (Granted Casaya were stupid to sit out of that one...grrrrr!) They want to see a military dad win this thing.

While I think that serving in the military is an honorable thing, I refuse to believe that it makes one automatically superior or better than anyone else--and I think Terry truly believed that spinning himself as this superior hero was a viable, failsafe strategy to use on his tribemates. With the exception of Austin (and maybe Sally), everyone else wasn't THAT stupid to fall for it. (mrscellophane #421)

Every once in awhile it seems as if MB [Mark Burnett] falls deeply in love with a candidate and edits him to be this total hero when she/he's an arrogant asshole or at least not as great as MB thinks he/she is. The grossest example of this would be Rupert. Another example would be Elisabeth from S2, who was edited as this total America's sweetheart. Now she's on The View and she's a total harpy, and even then the contestants who were voted out alluded to her being irritating. I think MB is doing the same with Terry. It wouldn't surprise me if Mark Burnett pulls

and "America votes and gives a million", and Terry gets the million. Of course, part of Rupert's appeal was that he was supposedly this poor, salt-of-the-earth hard worker, while commercial airline pilots like Terry make a hefty salary.

I agree that the challenges seem heavily tilted towards Terry. Also, it seems very fishy that Terry was allowed to win a car without Probst going on about the car curse and in Cindy's case actively embarrassing her. MB definitely has a hard-on for Terry. Too bad I don't. (growsonwalls #424)

. . . Terry gets upset about one thing, gets all wound up, and ends up going off about something else. Foiled at the vote again, he yells at Cirie. Losing at the challenge, he bitches about the rules. Pissed off about losing, he freaks out over Aras's remark about him and women. I think he has an incredibly difficult time dealing with how much he can't stand losing, because he knows about the obligation to be a good sport, and he's upset that he can't be one, so he channels the anger elsewhere. (Miss Alli # 519)

Ahhhhh. There it is. That was the missing piece for me. I couldn't see how he could fit his sore loser behaviour into the ethos he's supposed to be living in according to his own mythology about himself, and that explains it perfectly. Thanks! (bunny777 #525)

I think Aras calling Terry sexist didnt come out of nowhere. Austin's addressed this issue specifically, so I have the feeling that Terry's made some comments at camp that the women took issue with, and so whether Terry's sexist had been debated before the reward challenge. Not saying Terry is sexist, just that I don't think Aras was pulling "sexist" out of the air. But something about the way Terry seems to rank people from high to low, about everything, makes me think that he is sexist, because anyone who thinks people belong in a certain place and only that place is inherently discriminatory. Just the way Terry ranked husband/wife above mother/son, and "46" automatically over "24" makes me think he also ranks "men" over "women." (growsonwalls # 548)

Finally, the most telling of all exchanges:

Terry remains the most popular survivor on CBS.com's viewer poll because...

Granted the polls are historically non-sensical, but he's got double the second most popular (a far more understandable Cirie). Why do they (I refuse to say we) like him so much? His lack of team play? His crafty strategy? His humility?

Aras said at the reward challenge that nobody liked him, so why oh why is he #1? (benthorot #231)

To these queries, the poster receives a quick response:

Because he is All American. He was a white military man, he is married and has kids. He isn't an asshole and he is strong. Basically, he is the American Ideal.

Oh, and he is hot. That too. (Carter # 243)

And here is my theory in a nutshell, unwittingly represented by these two writers two years ago. Strategy is easily trumped by All-American manhood, doing almost anything, even if it's unkind or poorly-considered, because America is still very frightened of the unknown and the unusual. Anything that threatens the All-American male threatens the rest of us, and it must be thrust down and away from any position of prominence, anything that would cause us to question our values and our reasons for being. Even as benthorot, above, wondered why so many people like Terry so much, he pointed up that few people dislike him. True, there were a few (relatively speaking) on this group in this forum, but we have seen that on other groups, and in the CBS popularity poll referred to above, Terry was America's favorite. Most viewers read the text from the dominant-hegemonic perspective, and received and assimilated the message the capitalist producers and sponsors wish to convey. Some people even wanted him to win a special award, and were sure the producers would bring this about. They could not believe he didn't win, and they found this enough of an injustice that they wanted

him compensated. In the conclusion, I will make suggest some reasons for these extreme feelings and reactions.



## Chapter Five

Conclusion: Rhetorical oatmeal and other comfort food

*Survivor* is now airing its 17<sup>th</sup> iteration, and the first four people voted off were women, a fairly common trend from the earliest to the most recent seasons. Although women have won seven of the previous 16 contests (less than half) they remain the most likely to be voted off early in any given series. *Survivor* continues supreme as the most successful example of strategy-genre reality television, although it has been joined by many others, perennials such as *American* and *Canadian Idol*, *Dancing with the Stars*, and the Emmy-winning *Amazing Race*. *Big Brother* is on at least once a year, more often if there's a writers' strike. The more esoteric shows such as *The Mole* appear sporadically. Many shows get one shot and disappear, like *Treasure Hunt*, or sometimes finish their only season on-line, such as *Pirate Master*.

Because this cultural study was grounded in the context of the popular culture at its point of origin, May 2000, it will conclude with a snapshot of the culture of Fall 2008. In the wake of Barack Obama's decisive election as President, George W. Bush will soon leave office after his 2000 appointment by the Supreme Court, followed by an election victory in 2004. The internet has yet to realize its full potential, with new uses springing into existence every day. *YouTube* and *YouPorn* have both gained immense popularity. Facebook and MySpace are the networking sites not only of students but of almost everyone with access to a computer and the internet. Many people have more friends in the ether than they do in their physical surroundings.

Vacations are still perceived as a frill, for those fortunate enough to have jobs with benefits such as paid time off. In 2000, vacations were a frill because extreme devotion to work kept people from recreation. In 2008, people are less likely to have jobs with benefits such as paid time off. Jobs with benefits are increasingly rare and health insurance has become a perquisite for a privileged few. Much manufacturing has disappeared overseas, although many foreign corporations own property and facilities in the United States. The stock market has tumbled, recovered and tumbled again, with many a peak and a valley yet to be negotiated. Analysts are loath to make predictions about our financial future. Banks have collapsed following the credit and mortgage disasters, and repossessions are almost as common as new home contracts. The government is trying to rescue the failing banks, insurers and auto manufacturers.

Serious professional people still work 60 hours a week or more; they just have less to show for it. The money they make is used to buy necessities, the prices of which have shot up. Employed people are able to keep their houses and cars. Real estate values are so low that people could buy extra houses for investments, but there is very little investment capital available to average Americans, whose retirement plan values fluctuate wildly on a weekly basis, if they don't disappear altogether. The rich and poor grow ever further apart. The diminishing middle class slides into the burgeoning lower class. Many people work more than one job, and the elderly often choose among food, pet food and medication. And still the notion persists that capitalism works for everyone, and

we could all be rich if we would work more hours, staying electronically connected to everyone else, especially at work, every waking moment. Obesity rates continue to rise, so now there's a reality show for that phenomenon, called *The Biggest Loser*. The Summer Olympics were held in Beijing amid charges of cheating, repression and corruption, while the Red Army sought to dispel heavy pollution by firing cannon in the air. Simultaneously, China dealt with major earthquakes in the South and uprisings in Tibet. Professional male athletes continue to be paid astronomical salaries while firefighters, police and teachers receive subsistence wages. However, the phenomenon of male professional athletes being arrested and jailed in increasing numbers for violence and drug abuse has caused them to spend more on legal fees than ever before.

Born-again, Evangelical Christianity, along with Islam, grow rapidly in the United States and the nation is ever more polarized by religious differences. Some of the major movies released so far this year include *The Dark Knight*, *Indiana Jones 4*, *The Incredible Hulk* and *W*. These might point to the never-ending quest for escapism, or it may just point to a rather easily-amused audience. But the biggest entertainment phenomenon continues to be "reality TV" which takes over more of the schedule every season. If one fails, another is waiting in the wings to take its place.

America continues groping for heroes. Police, firefighters and the military, still male-dominated, fill that breach to the point that a male member of any of these professions becomes a favorite on reality television games. Conservative, patriotic, traditional values continue to dominate the culture and media. Viewers

still want winners to match that ethos. Whether as a result of the still-unhealed wounds inflicted on 9/11, or simply because of the politically polarized culture in which that event occurred, acceptable credibility today has to include a big dose of emotion, the appeal to values we admire and the feelings we need to maintain our sense of safety, security and moral rectitude.

With regard specifically to the effect of reality television on Western/ized culture, the Emmy Awards are worth examining. In 2000, the year *Survivor* and *Big Brother* debuted, there was no category at all for such programming. However, in 2001, a special award was developed: Outstanding Non-Fiction Program (Special Class), won by *Survivor* (Burnett Picture Pages). Then, in 2002, another new award appeared: Outstanding Special Class Program. *Survivor* was nominated for this award in 2002 but did not win. In 2003, yet another category was invented, Outstanding Reality/Competition Program. Again, *Survivor* was nominated but didn't win, and the same was true for 2004 and 2005. Then, in 2008, yet another category appeared, Outstanding Host for a Reality or Reality-Competition Program, won by Jeff Probst ("Emmy Awards"). It can easily be deduced that *Survivor* parented the genre and many an effort was made to ensure its recognition and thus its staying power. *Survivor* has a valuable message to deliver to our culture from the point of late capitalists, who of course wish to perpetuate themselves. The nominations and awards demonstrate that the program has found favor within the hegemonic aspects of our culture, probably because it is easily decoded from Hall's dominant-hegemonic position. Either the winners are representative of the late capitalist

group, or there's a convenient villain, not of the group, against whom the viewing public, in false consciousness, can unite.

From the very beginning of this work, I have examined dichotomies: truth and reality, female and male, awareness and oblivion, watcher and watched, acted and acted upon, homosexual and heterosexual, powerful and powerless. From the beginning, it seems as if the female/male binary has influenced everything else, while the straight/gay binary has thrown a large portion of our culture into rage and fear. We as a nation, or a culture, or as a Western/ized society, seem unable to move beyond an either/or to a both/and approach. Our binariness demonstrates its entrenchment in the bipartisan system that governs American politics to the exclusion of any and all other possibilities. The concept of choice beyond two alternatives seems to baffle us. So far we have proven unable to consider an array of ways of being. Of the unacceptable, the worst is the homosexual, and because lesbians are women as well as gay, that makes them least acceptable, most untouchable, of all, as *Survivor: Vanuatu* vividly demonstrated..

When I first began to watch *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, I thought I noticed a trend of sexism, which I simply attributed to our Western/ized culture, in which women continue to struggle for equal rights and recognition. So far, laws don't force anyone to treat everyone else as equals socially. Therefore, in these closed and isolated made-for-TV societies, women are often ignored or targeted by men, and unless they are either very strong or very skillful, they leave the games quickly. A strong woman with fewer social skills will leave before a weak woman

with well-developed social skills especially in the area of getting men to like them and do things for them. For several years I watched simply as an interested viewer, until the trend annoyed me enough to pursue it as a scholarly study, to view it as a text, and to see how the text was interpreted by others. The reason I perceived these programs as texts was my study of Foucault, Hall, Horkheimer and Adorno, Marx, Gramsci, Butler and others who showed me how we, as a culture, are influenced by texts, and how, in turn, we ask for texts that are familiar, meaningful and reinforcing of our values.

Almost concurrent with the inception of strategy-genre reality television and my studies in rhetoric and analysis was the tragedy of 9/11. On that day in 2001, more than three thousand people died in separate attacks in the eastern United States, and so far, the enormity of this tragedy has changed the way Americans, and those who share values with Americans, see themselves and their world. Troops were sent to war in two countries and Executive Orders were passed limiting the freedoms of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, and expanding repressive and invasive police powers. Both wars are still in progress, and the emergency executive acts implemented because of them have been passed into federal law by Congress. Never a fully open society, in that the United States has for centuries had an “us/them” mentality complete with xenophobia and monolingualism, we retreated even further and entrenched ourselves even more deeply in what many conceptualize as our core values. “My country, right or wrong” and “Love it or leave it” resurfaced as national mantras.

As my spouse and I did on 9/11, the nation as a whole went in search of reassurance. As the towers fell, I turned to Joyce and said, “Let’s make soup.” We as a culture have been making soup, oatmeal and other comfort foods in our rhetoric and responses to texts ever since. Strategy-genre reality television and our engagement with it, and with one another about it, is indicative of that.

It didn’t take long to realize that emotional attachment to a character type in place of a player’s abilities in the game has become the rhetorical comfort food of the decade. In a wounded and frightened culture, people look for the familiar. They cocoon with their families, return to religious worship and watch classic TV and movies. *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Father Knows Best*, *Leave it to Beaver* and *Superman* put Band-Aids on our scrapes and make us feel better. But those are old standbys that can’t tell us that we’re okay now and will still be okay as we face an uncertain future. We needed something current to tell us our current values are right, we’re safe, we’re taking care of our children and our nation is strong, wise and eternal.

Into that breach, and incidentally into the breach created by the 2000 writers’ strike, came reality television in the format we still watch avidly in 2008. And oddly, even though the first *Survivor* was won by the “wrong” person, an overweight, gay and frequently nude corporate trainer, it did provide a focus: someone most people loved to hate. The final three in the game were Rich, the winner; Kelly, an athletic young woman, and Rudy, a curmudgeonly old former Marine who captured the hearts of many fans. In fact, homosexual Rich made an unlikely alliance with homophobic Rudy that they both expected to carry them to

the final two, but their plans were upset when Kelly won the final challenge and tossed Rudy out. Rich was clearly the superior strategist. Kelly was clearly the superior athlete, but Rudy, the angry old former military man, was “supposed” to win. This result gave the viewers two villains and a “wronged” hero, and thus, emotional reinforcement, displacing credibility in game play as the preferred rhetoric, was born.

From that point forward, the discussion boards were alive with conversation about the players and their play as each series progressed. A hierarchy of “correct” winners and “proper” play developed. The proper player didn’t always win, but because the series is never-ending, there’s always hope, and the “right” person does win often enough to keep viewers enchanted. Moreover, among two *Survivors* in spring and fall and *Big Brother* in the summer, one show or the other is on virtually year-round. Opportunities for reinforcement by the capitalist, white, male, wealthy, straight power structure are all but seamless. Even more reinforcing is the fact that the players provide virtually the same performance every time, without a script! No one is telling them what to do, and yet, they at least strive to do what viewers want to see, even if the outcome is “spoiled” by a woman, person of color or homosexual.

As I admitted above, I thought I had the hierarchy of behaviors completely analyzed, and the kinds of players who ought to win predicted. To some extent, I was right, but the details proved me wrong in some respects.

Although Mark Burnett meant the social game to take precedence over the physical game, and it does, that is not what most people want to see. My original



assessment was that the proper winner should be the smartest, strongest, most attractive white male. Everyone else in the game, and all the viewers, should like him (and if they don't, they're mistaken). He shouldn't lie, and because he is so heroic, he shouldn't need to lie anyway. The rest of the people in the game should help him win and bow out gracefully when their time is up. The people who stay in the game shouldn't lie, either, and they should behave in a certain manner that is pleasing to the hero and the audience. Therefore the women should gather food, cook it, keep the camp clean, and respect and praise the hero. The men should hunt and fish and build, and win all contests requiring strength. The oldest people should leave first, women, then men. If there are any homosexuals (but there shouldn't be any) they should keep quiet about their orientation and be useful until they become redundant, then go away. The last people in the game should be the heroic male, a male sidekick and an all-American girl, who is possibly the hero's love interest, or just eye-candy. Sometimes a mother figure may remain to keep all these others fed and well-cared for, but if not, her absence is not a deal-breaker.

In some regards I was right. In visiting the discussion boards and reading the expert amateur reviews, I learned that most viewers, indeed, want a strong male to win. They want the women on the show to be pretty and silent except for praising men. If a woman is strong, she's wrong and must be removed. Women may stay if they are unobtrusive, young and attractive, or motherly and unthreatening. If they are manipulative of the men, or anyone else, this is unacceptable, and a woman who wins by being strong, strategic, manipulative or

any combination thereof is also wrong. However, this leaves no acceptable way for a woman to win, which is fine with the majority of posters in the discussion groups.

The male who wins does not have to be white. However, only one black man and one Asian man have ever won, in part because, except for the ethnically-cast *Survivor: Cook Islands*, there are seldom as many as two people from ethnic minorities in a cast. The most popular winners with on-line group members have been:

Ethan, the white, straight, male soccer player

Chris, the white, straight, male construction worker

Tom, the white, straight, male firefighter

Brian, the white, straight, male used car salesman

On the other hand, the most strategic winners have been:

Rich, the white, gay, male corporate trainer

Yul, the Asian, straight, male management consultant

Todd, the white, gay, male flight attendant

Sandra, the Hispanic, straight female office assistant

Parvati, the Asian, straight, female boxer

According to the reviewers and fans writing articles and posting messages, Brian was acceptable because he was the best of a bad lot. He cleverly made alliances with everyone and they never talked to one another. Brian was both the hero, having the proper identity constructs, and the villain, because he sold used cars, had a lot of money and had been in pornographic videos. But he was “better” than the two older women and the older man he took to the end of the game as his support system. As we already know, Chris of *Vanuatu* was especially beloved because he beat the last six women by standing back and letting them destroy their own alliance.

Of the strategic winners, Yul was acceptable because he, although Asian, was young, good-looking, straight and male. He also beat out a group of people who would have been unacceptable as heroic winners, such as women and other people of color. All of the male winners have been far more popular than the female winners, because all of the women were accused of sneakiness, manipulation, coattail-riding and dumb luck. While all of them won the social game as Mark Burnett intended, they were unacceptable to the audience based primarily on identity constructs, and substantially on their lack of physical ability or “survivability.” All but one (Danni, *Guatemala*) were adjudged incompetent, by on-line discussion group members, of surviving in a real wilderness, which tainted their success. In most cases the winners agreed, but said that is not how the game is played.

In fact, we, as scholars, should take a moment before closing to consider the winners of *Survivor* since *Exile Island*, as well as the series between the ones

we examined, *Survivor: Vanuatu* was number nine in the series, and *Exile Island* was number eleven. Number ten, *Palau*, was won by Tom Westman, the white, straight, male, firefighter from New York City. He is one of the most popular winners of all time, which should come as no surprise with air dates in Spring 2005. He was one of the first responders in the 9/11 disaster. The next two series were won by women whom the viewers thought had been deceptive in their game play. Numbers 13 and 14 were won by the straight men of color mentioned above, and 15 was won by a “villain,” Todd, the gay male flight attendant. Number 16 presented us with the first ever female final four, and was won by a young woman the viewers found manipulative. Of all the 16 series now complete, only six were won by people who could have survived on their own, by viewer standards, including two anti-heroes, Brian and Rich. Only four were won by those considered “deserving” by the audience. But as long as there is a heroic character in the game for a long time, the emotional appeal keeps the fans interested.

One last interesting statistic is who the winner beat for the grand prize. In the case of the nine male winners, they beat nine women, a white male racist, a young white male (in which case the final three included a woman), and another Black man (by a Black man). The numbers don’t add exactly because sometimes they end with three players before the jury, and sometimes only two. In any event, there is a strong trend for men to be voted the money over women of any ethnicity or over men of color. When women win, the tendency in the audience is to believe the jury made a mistake. Of the seven female winners, only Danni of

*Survivor: Guatemala*, was considered remotely worthy by the audience. She beat another woman, herself.

Although we didn't examine any *Big Brother* series in detail, types of winners, players and responses to them have been the same. The first series ended with three young men in the house and was won by Eddie, the white, straight, male student who had lost a leg. That was the only series in which the audience voted for the winner. After that, the "proper" male winners were popular and praiseworthy and any other winner was "wrong." Seven winners out of ten have been white males (of whom six were young), and the three women who won were all considered flawed either by their gender or whatever strategy they employed to win, or both.

The general overview and assessment brings us to the two series we have looked at in detail. *Vanuatu* had a "correct" winner, and *Exile Island*, although it was won by a young, white, straight male, had the "wrong" winner. Both had plenty of villains. One had a "wronged hero." But in addition to these outcomes, several other trends came to light of which I had not been aware, and which I think are significant, especially when we look at the rhetorical comfort food viewers expect them to provide.

There were two surprises. One was the homophobia toward Ami that overshadowed the usual sexism toward women. Women aren't supposed to win, and gay men aren't supposed to win, so a lesbian is the worst potential winner of all possible choices. Because she was running her all-female alliance, the usual anger toward women was channeled almost entirely to Ami. The other women

were considered her dupes, minions and familiars, who would never have misbehaved so badly if not for her evil influence. Ami was surely flawed, but her personality flaws were assumed to be a direct result of her sexual orientation. Watchers and reviewers were terrified that she might win, and overwhelmingly relieved when she was voted out. No winner has ever been more popular than Chris.

Until I watched *Exile Island*, I didn't realize the issue on *Vanuatu* had been sexual orientation. I found out I was wrong when writers and posters expressed disappointment and concern for the women when they clung to the men and failed to ally against the men. While a male winner remained preferable, it was fine for the women to try to stay in the game by working together. With no lesbians on *Exile Island*, there was no lightning rod among the female players for viewer rage. A villain did emerge, in the form of everyone but Terry, but it was never a gender issue, except that Terry was male, and military and white, which, in our current cultural state of mind, constitutes credibility. When the person with these identity constructs wins, rhetorical comfort food is produced because so many people feel good about it. When that person loses, the feeling of moral rectitude is lost. The only way to get it back is to commiserate with one another and hope for a better result next time. Any other time, a young, white, straight man, such as Aras, would have satisfied the requirement, but he was not military, he was a yoga instructor, and he lived with his parents. Terry's identity constructs were not only better than Aras', they cancelled them out. Aras' strategy cancelled Terry out, as did Danielle's (the runner-up), but good strategy provides no

emotional oatmeal. It simply does not leave enough people feeling satisfied about their cultural values.

Therefore, the hierarchy of acceptable winners changed slightly. White, straight males still top the list, followed by any other straight male, followed by pretty women of any color who could survive on their own without manipulation, such as Danni in Guatemala. The implication of the postings is that more such winners would be acceptable, but this kind of woman is frequently voted out so early we never get to see her emerge. Unacceptable winners are manipulative straight women, gay men and lesbians. Those few viewers who care primarily about strategy don't care at all about identity constructs, but they are hard to find.

The second surprise I discovered was that anyone was willing to criticize Terry and not desire him to win. Although the number is vanishingly small, it exists. It is measurable. We can't pretend Terry is a universal hero, although he may as well be. Although he didn't win, he provided the same comfort food for his series that Chris provided on *Vanuatu*. Several straight, white men who didn't win have provided enough of this rhetorical oatmeal to satisfy viewers for nine years.

Regarding Terry's sudden loss of popularity on the *Television Without Pity* forum, scholars must consider the source, or the posters. It is obvious that this forum has very high standards for mechanics, and that it is highly censored. Therefore, the posters (especially when these two series aired) had to mimic the values of the forum's owners. The owners were able to create a very narrow definition of hate speech and then enforce it. People who posted that Terry ought to win because of his dominant, hegemonic identity constructs were likely to find

themselves shouted down or even banned. If their reasons for supporting him (military, father, husband, physically attractive) met forum standards, their posts stood. However, the majority of the posters in this forum are looking for strategic play, not identity constructs at all. This, along with the management of the forum at that time, tended to weed out less educated, more conservative, less critical thinkers. We found them in great numbers on *Yahoo!* Where they made their preferences known, and where they demonstrated their majority status. They, along with the writers of the highly popular *Reality News Online*, provided ample evidence that strategic play is secondary to identity constructs. The correct combination of identity constructs produces emotional validation, and good strategy does not. This is not to say that a “proper” winner can’t be strategic, but his identity constructs and physical ability are far more important to the masses who watch, looking for specific heroes among scores of strategic villains.

Terry managed to have credibility with the strategy-minded members of the *TWoP* forums up to a point. While he was helping his tribe win challenges and keeping them out of Tribal Council, while he was a physical monster and president of the boys’ club, *TWoP* posters loved him as much as *RNO* writers and *Yahoo!* members did. The complete reversal of opinions occurred when Terry demonstrated a lack of understanding of both strategy and people. Even though he was still the very same person he had always been, which included being ready and willing to sacrifice women for men, all that became irrelevant when he was unable to successfully approach people of the former Casaya tribe looking for an alliance.



At the same time, he became more arrogant about his challenge wins and more sanctimonious toward the other players. His *TWoP* popularity plummeted like a stone, with people defecting to the anti-Terry camp with a speed that amazed me. At the same time, there were no changes of allegiance on the *Yahoo!* Group, and his fans in both groups became more and more defensive. On *RNO*, writers criticized his lack of strategic play, but they still preferred him to be the winner, although they predicted he could not be, and they were right.

One other set of behaviors surfaced at *TWoP* which is worth recounting, because it looked, for a brief moment, like the rise of the public intellectual Gramsci hopefully predicts, but which for the most part has yet to occur. That *TWoP* inquiry into the methods and motives of Mark Burnett and the production staff was only a very small portion of thousands of posts, and even that is tainted on one forum by censorship, while *Bitter But Brilliant* is too new and unknown to make a serious impact on the cultural consciousness. The conversation on *TWoP* happened at the very end of the group's life, and didn't spark an ongoing discussion that continued to interrogate hegemony and demand that people reconsider how rhetorical oatmeal has somehow slid into the position formerly occupied by strategic credibility.

Finally, it is critical to remember who does *not* post. In fact, I can't really identify who that is, as much as I can suggest who does post. Scholars may speculate that people without internet access, or the time and interest to post, don't participate. All we can know of them, for our purposes here, is what posters and writers report about the responses of their acquaintances and readers. That

information was too sparse to base predictions or trends upon. Moreover, it would be unfair to call the groups examined here representative, although it is fair to say *Yahoo!* runs one of the largest forums on-line, with thousands of groups on innumerable subjects. Perhaps, if we want to understand the trend of emotional comfort over good strategic play better, and inquire into its underlying motivations further, in the hopes of calling it into question as a legitimate measure of cultural values, future research should delve into groups run by networks and non-*Yahoo!* groups, and non-English speaking groups. Perhaps we will then find a way to propose to the Western/ized world that alternatives to group-think in lockstep at our own expense are viable.

This study, and the discoveries and inquiries it generates, matters because in our false consciousness we, as viewers, think we're winning when we're losing. Viewers ask for chicken and biscuits but they are given gruel, and think it's what they want. By supporting a hegemonic culture that doesn't support them, they doom themselves to failure. Straight white men aren't the majority. Most of us are something else. As far as *Survivor* and *Big Brother* are concerned, maybe we need to stop asking to be patronized and exploited, and start demanding a representative cast with challenges that allow anyone to win. That would be a small step, but a step in the right direction.

However, the greater question is far larger than the cast and procedures of reality television programs. The real question is what is going on in a culture where emotional attachment to a mediocre white, male player is allowed to overwhelm the credibility of intelligent, strategic individuals with different identity

constructs, and where specific identity constructs are allowed to be the standard everyone is expected to strive for but a majority can never reach. In our cultural quest for rhetorical comfort food, we as viewers have allowed ourselves to be tricked into accepting, and worse, asking for gruel when other forms of sustenance and nutrition would serve us better, and are obviously available. We should be demanding equal rhetorical treatment as we demand legal and social equal treatment.

Most of us have no representation, and women and minorities are repeatedly placed in circumstances in which they cannot win unless they are willing to be punished for their success with societal disapproval. But before viewers, and the rest of us, can do that, we first need to interrogate what is happening, and reject it. Once we refuse the gruel of emotional reinforcement of questionable constructs, we might find we can feast on a banquet of the fairness and equal treatment in the media that can only result from applied critical thinking. Right now, as I write, we continue to fail to realize we are not “post-feminist,” but anti-feminist, caught in a backlash of Faludian proportions. More of us, rather than fewer, seem to revel in the secondary status of women, and the abuse of homosexual people. Not only do we not think it’s wrong, we seem, as a culture to enjoy it, to prefer it, and to see no alternative to it, and this is reflected in the rhetoric of our entertainment texts.

As John Lennon wrote in 1971, “Woman is the Nigger of the World.” In some areas, yes, we have made progress. In many other ways, more subtle and more deeply-woven into the fabric of the culture, we have not. In fact, the

second-class citizenship of women has become so entrenched, most people don't even notice it anymore, women perhaps least of all. For now, the recipe for rhetorical oatmeal is simple: to a large portion of drivel, add a heaping measure of misogyny, spice with homophobia, and allow to stew indefinitely.

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### About the author

L. Elizabeth (“Liz”) Zollner lives near Tampa with her spouse, Joyce Halstrom, and their canine children, Nick, Stella and Ollie. She has published a variety of non-fiction work in pedagogy and linguistics, as well as pseudonymous fiction. Her other interests are politics, history, travel and outdoor sports; especially kayaking. She enjoys yoga, internet and channel surfing, which is how she stumbled into, then became horrified by, viewer response to strategy-genre reality television. Liz was an Air Force officer for 13 years until her dedication to feminism and human rights ran afoul of military policies. Liz holds degrees in sociology, education, linguistics and, now, at long last, rhetoric and composition. She has lived in Germany, Italy and England, and has traveled extensively on five continents. She speaks German and Italian and will attempt any language she encounters. She thoroughly enjoys teaching first-year composition to enquiring young minds, because it’s fun.