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Pretending to Be "Postracial": The Spectacularization of Race in Reality TV's *Survivor*

Emily M. Drew[1]

Abstract

While race is usually an implicit discourse in reality television, making it an explicit discourse seems to have little effect on challenging the prevailing representations of race in prime-time television. This research demonstrates how *Survivor*'s "race wars" season attempted to reinforce a "postracial" narrative that race no longer matters in contemporary U.S. society while simultaneously perpetuating the familiar representations that reproduce racial ideology. Using data derived from a systematic content analysis, the author argues that *Survivor* spectacularized race by (1) using racial logic to explain the success and failure of teams as well as the failure of individuals to survive within their teams, (2) essentializing people of color's racial identity as biologically and culturally bound while simultaneously making whiteness invisible and normal, and (3) promoting color-blind and postracial assertions that contradicted the clear salience of race in shaping contestants' "survival." The author considers what this explicit racialization of the program reveals about the potential for—and pitfalls of—addressing race in reality television.

Keywords

race, reality television, postracial, identity politics, essentialism, whiteness, "new racism"

During the thirteenth season of the reality show *Survivor* (CBS, 2000–), one of television's most consumed programs, the producers made an unprecedented move to draw the "color line" explicitly and to use race as a central organizing principle. The

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program's creators explained that their decision to divide the show's twenty contestants into four "tribes" based on racial group membership was part of a larger attempt to grapple with the seemingly unspoken issue of race in society as well as race in reality television. They acknowledged that producing a season in which racial tribes compete against one another would result in criticism. But the producers stood by their "good intentions" to depict a wider range of people of color in prime-time television, to increase the racial diversity of applicants for reality television programming, and to boost and diversify the consumer audience for their show. And despite protests from communities of color and media watch groups and a decrease in corporate sponsorship, the show enjoyed some of its highest ratings ever and won its time period every week (Carter 2006). *Survivor*'s executive producer insisted that he "knew people would never judge each other by skin color" (Carter 2006, 2).

In fact, it seems that *Survivor: Cook Islands* producers were so confident that race would not play a role in people's interactions or survival, they spectacularized it by imposing racial segregation on the cast and required that the racial tribes compete against one another to literally and metaphorically survive. By quickly desegregating the competition in its third week, producers hoped to entice viewers with the "postracial" premise that race would be insignificant in shaping the politics of competition, survival, and reality television. Even the program's first-ever Asian American winner said the show proved "that people's individual values, not ethnicity, make up what kind of people they are" (Crooks 2007).

On its surface, this season's metaphor for the "race wars" told an explicit narrative of a postracial society in which race was not important to forming relationships or shaping life chances and that race would lose its currency if we would just choose to not pay it any attention. Presumably, when humans are stripped to the bare essentials of life and must work for their survival, race will not emerge as a salient means of doing life together. However, by digging beneath the program's racially enlightened veneer, viewers got a glimpse into the failure of "postracial" logic in reality television.

By exploiting and spectacularizing race on reality television, the season exposed how the "old" problems of racism—and of racial representations in television—still reveal themselves in the post–civil rights era. The show did not have to draw explicitly on the myths of racial superiority and inferiority, nor did it have to pit races against each other for an entire season to reproduce the racial ideology commonly found in media representations. Through what Herman Gray (2004) calls the "production of racial difference," *Survivor* was able to exploit division, racialize success and failure, essentialize racial group membership, and dress it all up in a discourse of how insignificant race and racism are in contemporary U.S. society.

In this article I show how this "race wars" season of *Survivor* attempted to reinforce a "postracial" narrative that race no longer matters in contemporary U.S. society while simultaneously perpetuating the familiar representations that reproduce racial ideology. Using data derived from a systematic content analysis, I argue that despite its stated intentions, *Survivor*'s spectacularization of race drew on the "old" weaponry of U.S. racism, including (1) using racial logic to explain the success and failure of teams as

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well as the failure of individuals to survive within their community, (2) essentializing people of color's racial identity as biologically and culturally bound while simultaneously making whiteness invisible and normal, and (3) promoting color-blind and post-racial assertions that were clearly contradicted by the salience of race in shaping contestants' "survival." I then consider what the season reveals about the potential—and pitfalls—for addressing race in reality television.

How *Survivor* Works

For nearly a decade, CBS has assembled a cast of twenty people who are relocated to a remote location where they build a micro society together and compete to be the last person standing to win the prize of one million dollars. Each week, "tribes" compete in physical and mental challenges against each other, ranging from rigorous athletic activities or puzzle solving to eating local foods or being tested in knowledge about fellow contestants. Teams that lose the competitions must face a "tribal council" in which they vote off a team member, using a variety of rationale, including who caused the loss, who contributes the least to community life, or who poses the greatest help or threat to individual success later in the competition. Once these eliminations have whittled the cast to half, people then compete as individuals to "survive" to the final week, when a winner is voted on by contestants eliminated previously.

During this *Cook Islands* season, producers placed the twenty competitors in distinct "tribes" (teams) organized by racial group membership. People from diverse ethnic groups were lumped into major U.S. racial classifications, resulting in four racially classified groups, each with five people: Latino, Asian American, African American, and white.[1] Each racial tribe had a near gender balance, and other social identities, such as social class, sexuality, ethnicity, and occupation, were strategically revealed by contestants over the course of the season. Although the tribes were organized by racial groups, the host of the show used only the word *ethnicity* (and sometimes *culture* or *color*) to refer to what was clearly a *racial* classification.[2] As the producers had intended, racializing the production for this season indeed diversified the cast. In Wright's (2006, 110) research of the first ten seasons of *Survivor*, he found that only two contestants were Asian American, two were Latino, and four identified as multiracial; these racial groups made up only 5 percent of the contestant pool, despite being 18 percent of the U.S. population. Although the number of African American contestants on the program matched their proportion in the United States, he was critical about the quality, not quantity, of these representations. This season, by contrast, not only reflected the most racially diverse cast in reality television but also marked the first victory by an Asian American man in the series.

Each tribe built its own shelter, provided its own food, and competed for three weeks against other racial tribes for rewards and the ability to avoid a teammate's elimination. During the third week of the season, the program's producers desegregated the racial tribes and created two racially diverse tribes that continued in the competition. Despite the white contestants making up only one-fourth of the cast, only

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one white person was eliminated during the first three-fourths of the season. Conflict within and among people of color groups allowed white people to remain in the competition relatively unnoticed and eventually represent equal numbers with people of color in the final weeks.

Race, Representation, and Television

Very little discussion of race takes place during the reality programming of prime time. Although race often informs people's strategies and shapes their relationships and trajectories in this genre, its explicit practices are rarely brought into light. Characteristic of the new racial structure of the post–civil rights era, what Bonilla-Silva (2001) calls "new racism," most reality television deploys strategies of color blindness and postracial politics in which race and racism are not explicitly addressed yet often run as undercurrents shaping production and content. As Hill Collins (2004, 32) argues, "The problem of the twenty-first century seems to be the seeming *absence* of a color line. Formal legal desegregation has been outlawed, yet contemporary social practices produce virtually identical racial hierarchies as those observed by DuBois."

Media research commonly analyzes how "visual forms of rhetoric function to reinforce notions of racial identity without overtly speaking race" (Chidester 2008, 157). According to Entman and Rojecki (2000, 6), racism in a post–civil rights era is held together by representations in the mass media that convey impressions that people of color and whites "occupy different moral universes and that [people of color] are somehow fundamentally different than whites." Racism shapes how people of color's realities are made invisible and "distorted" in reality television (Lichter and Amundson 1997). As Perez (1997, 142) argues, "Media exclusion, dehumanization and discrimination are a part of the cultural domination inherent in unequal power relations, and a key feature of the historical process by which people of color have been and continue to be subordinated."

The social problems facing communities of color are frequently ignored in television, as in the case of Asian Americans being touted as "model minorities" whose apparent success serves as a cover for the serious social problems the group faces (Li 1999; Wu 2002). Or alternatively, the problems in communities of color are spectacularized and blamed on the people themselves, as in representations that "construct the ghetto" as a place of deficit, overrun by a "culture of poverty" (Kelley 1997). And even when race is addressed, as in *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (ABC, 2003–) where people of color are represented as model citizens and deserving families, it is not accompanied by a discussion of racism. This allows producers to celebrate pluralism yet "obfuscate existing structures of racial discrimination and presents the neoliberal solutions as equally beneficial to all" (McMurria 2008, 321). Thus, politics of difference can be commodified to "publicly declare and perpetuate the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference" (hooks 1992, 21).

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The Racial Rules of Reality Television

While racialized representations in television, in general, have consequences that are worth scholarly attention, it is worth noting that "reality television" requires specific attention given that it is consumed as more "real" than what viewers understand as "fictional media." The mass appeal of reality-based television has moved it "from the margins of television culture to its core" (Orbe 2008, 345). Thus, it has a larger impact precisely because of the hegemonic power to name it as "reality" and to be consumed as more real or authentic by the viewing audiences (Crew 2006; Friedman 2002; Murray and Ouellette 2004).

Crew's (2006, 67, 72) study of *Survivor* audiences concluded that "regular viewers watched *Survivor* to see real people in challenging situations" and that they in fact found the program to be "real" (not entertainment) because they believed that the competitions and living conditions "brought out the true character of the participants." The consumption of reality TV as "real" is confirmed by Larson (2006), who argues in her analysis of *The Apprentice* (NBC, 2004–), viewers are more likely to accept the "bad black" stereotype, as embodied by Omarosa, because she was a "real person" in "real situations" than they are to accept the same stereotype in film, television, and other media not purporting to be "reality." However, as critical media analysis suggests, "reality" television is as heavily produced as scripted "fictional television," and its products are ultimately subject to the same rules and logics of the producers and parent company (Andrejevic and Colby 2006).

The racial rules of reality television promote a politics of difference that emphasizes "conflict and division by positioning race as a point of contention among cast members" (Bell-Jordan 2008, 353). While the rules are usually defined, policed, and represented in seemingly nonracial ways, this "race wars" season of *Survivor* defied several commonly held racial rules of representation in reality TV. To begin with, people of color in this season were not invisible or *under*represented. Chidester (2008) argues that the invisibility of people of color is not simply an absence but a "presence of absence" in which whiteness and the racial status quo is normalized, and maintained.

This absence of people of color in media representations is well documented and often sets them up for a "cultural blackmail" (Lewis and Jhally 2001) in which they are either invisible, or reduced to narrow and limiting roles. When people of color are present in predominantly white series in prime time, there is usually a slot for one, which leads to heavy tokenization and reduction of communities of color to a monolith. In this way, one member of the minority group comes to symbolically represent the entire racial group; this can lead viewers to believe, as Churchill (2003, 189) notes, that if they have "seen one Indian, [they have] seen 'em all." Tokenization tends to flatten the differences within communities of color and produces an image of the group as monolithic and without a diversity of experiences and views (Riggs 1995; Smith 2008). Racial representations in prime time also promote a conflation of race with ethnicity, in which every Latino person is assumed to be Mexican, or any Asian

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American is assumed to be Chinese. By creating a diverse cast, with 75 percent people of color, the season avoided both invisibility and tokenization and presented the diversity of experiences *within* racial groups.

In the rare cases in which more than one person of color is represented in primetime TV, they are often shown to be "opposites" in their personality and engage in conflict so as to clearly juxtapose one another, offering a clear "good–bad" binary. As Larson (2006) found in her analysis of reality television, the person of color whose behaviors and culture most closely matches that of the dominant white society will be shown to be reasonable and an "exception to the rule," while a "negative" image will be produced about the person whose behaviors most mirror the racial caricatures of that group.

In reality television, race is rarely spoken about as an explicit strategy for competition, as a factor in forming alliances, or as a reason for keeping or eliminating competitors. Whether it is the contestants who vote, the judges who eliminate, or the bachelors who select their mates, the rationale provided in reality television is often a racially codified (white) discourse that explains people of color's value (whether to keep or eliminate) in explicitly nonracial terms. So while people of color make up the smallest percentage of contestants in reality programming, they are often the first eliminated, though this gets explained as simply not "fitting in," not being a "team player," or making others "uncomfortable." In elimination-based reality television, the contestants' survival in the competition relies on developing strategies and alliances that contribute to their success as much as, if not more than, their actual merit. Therefore, because these competitions are eminently a *social* activity, they are susceptible to being influenced by the dominant ideologies of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The contestants define the mainstays of "everyday life," such as comfort, safety, danger, beauty, amicability, hostility, laziness, hard work, and trustworthiness, by bringing their own epistemologies into this media-constructed reality. In this way, the program's contestants bring racialized worldviews from their lives outside of the competition into this socially constructed life on the island; thus, they do not start from scratch. Television creators and producers have also been socialized into the dominant ideologies of their society and reproduce them subconsciously in their construction of television. As such, they also actively participate in the political economy of the mass media and play on—perhaps prey on—racial, class, and gender ideology to generate conflict to increase the show's profitability (Croteau and Hoynes 2006). The racialized production of *Survivor* allowed (or perhaps forced) contestants to talk explicitly about how race factored into their performance, interactions, and decisions. Contestants revealed to one another, and to the camera through "confessional" narrations, the role race played in their strategies.

When race does overtly surface in the reality genre, it serves very few narrow functions, all of which reproduce television's politics of racial representation. As Hasinoff (2008, 326) found, shows such as *America's Next Top Model* (UPN/CW, 2003–), make race "hypervisible as a malleable commodity, yet simultaneously invisible in terms of historical and structural inequalities." So when they do address race, racial

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identity transformation is promoted as a "valuable commodity." And when race is explicitly represented, whiteness will almost never be considered. As Dubrofsky and Hardy (2008, 379) found analyzing *Flavor of Love* (VH1, 2006–8) and *The Bachelor* (ABC, 2002–), "White subjects are not framed as speaking on behalf of their race [and] their authentic identity is not contested."

To understand how television represents race and racism as we move into postracial discourse about them, I recorded the fifteen episodes of the season and took in-depth qualitative notes about the racial representations and discourses that emerged in each episode. To test for reliability, two research assistants viewed the season in one sitting, also making qualitative notes about racial representations. After reading these three sets of analytical notes, I developed a set of codes using the emergent themes from season. Through a second review, I analyzed the season systematically for its reproduction and transgression of the prevailing representations in media research.

Racial Spectacle as Tool to Reproduce Racism

By explicitly drawing the color line in prime time, *Survivor* sought to conduct what its host described as "the greatest social experiment ever conducted on national TV." This social experiment, I argue, exploited racial difference and spectacularized race to promote a postracial logic that eventually proved only the significance of race. This "race wars" season (1) used racial logic to explain the success and failure of teams as well as the failure of individuals to survive within their community, (2) essentialized people of color's racial identity as biologically and culturally bound while simultaneously making whiteness invisible and normal, and (3) promoted a color-blind discourse despite the clear salience of race. Such representations fuel the mechanisms of the new racial structure that are covert and institutionalized yet denied and minimized. Making race intentional and overt in reality TV, rather than its subtext, emphasized only how far television is from transcending racism in prime time.

The Racial "Logic" of Winning and Losing

Since every episode of *Survivor* involved two competitions, producers provided ample opportunity for the contestants and host to reflect on which factors accounted for each success and failure. The players often invoked racial reasoning to explain other teams' wins and losses but rarely applied the same logic to explain their own performances. Whether or not these racialized logics were the *primary* or the *only* rationale given by the contestants is not known to the show's consumers. However, they were produced as the primary discourse, not giving consumers an alternative frame through which to explain success and failure. The program's host often used seemingly neutral explanations for the teams' performances in competitions. But characteristic of the new racial structure, the discourse reflected a racially codified and invisible articulation of race, in which race and culture came to account for performance, through seemingly nonracial language.

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For example, using the scripted narration of the host, producers framed Asian American success as being the result of their "work ethic," "ability to operate as a cohesive group," and "strategic rather than physical" choices. Conversely, during the second episode when the Latino tribe lost the competition (on purpose), the host explained this as a failure of self-help ideology, rather than a strategic choice; he noted that lack of work ethic and distrust of one another accounted for the loss. This came on the heels of an African American team loss that was similarly explained away as their failure to get along and work together. Given the program's imposed racialized context, explanations that appeared nonracial took on racialized meanings. Asian Americans were lifted and valued as successful minorities, while African American and Latino tribes were chastised for their failure to work together and take advantage of the neoliberal opportunities for self-help. Since the competitors were literally representing their race, wins and losses were ascribed to racial groups' ability and willingness to take advantage of the supposed level playing field and equal opportunity with which all teams were provided.

In addition to the racial reasoning used to explain *team* wins or losses, a similar discourse emerged in over half of the contestant eliminations to explain *individual* failings. Competitors were presented as rationalizing their decisions to retain or eliminate group members based on the person's racial authenticity. The clearest example of this came from the decisions group members made about who would be the first person eliminated from his or her racial tribe. So the first Asian American to be voted out was an elder, who articulated his feeling as an "outsider" saying, "I don't feel accepted by the Asian American community because I don't fit the stereotypes; [I] feel like I fit with a hippie community." Group members articulated his lack of "fit" in nonracial terms as in describing him as "not all there" or "on medication" or criticized his "traditional" (Eastern) medicine. Not fitting the stereotypes also explained the elimination of the first Latino from the season, who told his tribe that he "doesn't feel Hispanic." He explained to the camera that "metal" is his culture, not Hispanic, and that he would have fared much better had he been placed into a tribe based on heavy metal music. And the first African American woman was eliminated because she did not "fit" or "bond" with the other two black women, who were—not accidentally—lighter skinned and shown articulating color-blind racial politics. In these instances, *Survivor* contended that failure to demonstrate racial solidarity is grounds for elimination.

Failure to represent a racial group "positively" was presented as another central rationale for eliminating same-race competitors. The first African American man voted off of the show was called "lazy" by other African American tribe members and was shown often as the indolent black male, not offering any help at the campsite. One African American woman explained that she voted against him because he was a "negative" representation of blackness to the (presumably) white viewing audience. Similarly, the younger Asian Americans, whom the elder described as "Americanized," were shown scolding him for making "racist jokes" about Asian Americans in "mixed settings." (Although the physical setting was not in fact racially "mixed," this comment presumes the contestants' concerns about the non–Asian American *Survivor*

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viewing audience.) In fact, one pleaded with him to stop, saying that "it's good to have a sense of humor but not at the expense of an ethnic group." Others used this failure to offer the viewing audience a "positive" representation of the group as reason for his elimination.

Failure to perform race through narrow "racial scripts" was not limited to people of color. The only white person eliminated during the first three-fourths of the season was a white woman who herself noted that she did "not fit with the beautiful white people." Through footage from her interview commentary, producers had her enumerate the stereotypes within whiteness—jock, sorority type, study type—and had her reflect on her failure to meet any of these racialized roles; as such, she marked herself as a racial "outcast." Interestingly, it was more her role as a "race traitor" of whites than her being "alternative" or "punk" that got her kicked off the show. As soon as the racial tribes disbanded and became integrated tribes, she was the only white cast member to leave her racial alliances and align with people of color. In this new alliance, she noted that she "likes the new energy because [she is] no longer the 'outsider' amongst the white group and can find a place to fit in." When the host and competitors were not linking race to success and failure, they were essentializing it as biologically bound.

Representing Essentialist Notions of Race

Central to *Survivor*'s racial representations was an assertion of the biological and cultural primacy of race. People of color, as individuals and group members, were presented as essentialized Others by the program's host, white tribe members, and, very often, one another. The show's narrative attributed individuals' feelings, interactions, and chances of survival as rooted in an essentialized racial identity. Despite creating a social experiment to demonstrate how insignificant race is, every racial group was represented in ways that are consistent with dominant racial ideology in the United States and with the prevailing representations in television.

Black Culture: Keepin' It Real

After being divided along racial group membership, the African American tribe was presented as feeling no awkwardness about being separated along racial lines and did not seem to be bothered by being black together. They began their time as a racialized tribe by cheering for themselves and lifting up a desire to "keep it real" and to "represent" (yelling this word loudly as a cheer). Having a language to speak about their racial identity, tribe members discussed their desire to represent blackness to the viewing audience in ways that could offer alternatives to the negative stereotypes that the media frequently portray. One of the men noted how pleased he was to not be "the only token black brother anymore," commenting on how unusual it was to be among other black people rather than an "only" in a reality show competition.

African Americans' comfort with one another was shown as being a comfort with an essentialized blackness. Right away, four of the five tribe members made reference

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to their group as "family" and often to being "the black community," even calling themselves "blood." The tribe was shown deploying what they essentialized as "black humor" and laughing a great deal with one another, from cracking jokes about "having a dream," to building their shelter on the island and referring to it as "low-income housing," to commenting on one another's inability to swim. After their first loss in a boat competition in the water, the remaining team members called themselves "a bunch of city kids," and the producers cut to an image of them struggling to use their boat. After they eventually gave up, one remarked that "our people had bad experiences with boats," and the group laughed about this reference to the Middle Passage of the slave trade. Blackness got culturally defined by the producers and black tribe members themselves, as being "headstrong" ("black people don't like to be told what to do"), "tough" (in their resilience and ability to survive), and having musical talent (from one woman praying over the group singing "Amazing Grace" to a man's comedic dance performance to the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* song).

Latinos as Hardworking and Animal-Like

During their first week on the island, the Latino tribe was also represented as having an awareness about the significance of being racially categorized and quickly launched into discourse that essentialized themselves, biologically and culturally. This began with a claim and subsequent agreement about how equipped they were to do well in the competition since they are "used to Caribbean environment and heat." In fact, one shared that his family came to the United States on boats, so the survival experience was nothing new. After the tribe worked together to establish a comfortable campsite, in advance of the other teams, one member heralded that Latinos were good workers because it was in their blood and heritage. Similarly, the Latinas were reduced to essential identities in which they were named as "hot tempered" and always "clashing"; both racially gendered markers were used as the justification for their elimination.

Since four of the five Latino competitors were eliminated during the first third of the season, the diversity within the Latino community, in terms of ethnicity, culture, class, generation, and other axes of identity, was not adequately represented. However, the one remaining Latino survived the entire season and captured a great deal of essentialist and dehumanizing attention from the host and fellow competitors. He was described early in the season as a "picture out of jungle book and Mogley climbing the tree." The cameras showed at least one shot each week of him climbing up a tree with bare hands or single-handedly accomplishing a task that likely required several people. He dominated most of the competitions physically, and because of his hard labor at the team's campsite, he was primarily responsible for their ability to eat and drink each day. Meanwhile, the host biologized him through animalistic frameworks, saying he was "a dolphin" or noting that he was standing in a "monkey pose." One white contestant referred to this Latino as a "little jungle boy," while another white player commented to the camera, after this Latino won an individual competition, that he was "half animal, half man" and in another episode called him "part fish and part monkey."

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Asian Americans as "Model Minorities" and "Perpetual Foreigners"

Upon their racial grouping, Asian American tribe members were not initially shown discussing the racial segregation of the teams. Instead, their focus was largely on the one team member: an elder and immigrant from Vietnam. (He was also the producers' focus, receiving more camera time than any other competitor, despite being on the island for only six weeks.) *Survivor* fetishized Asian identity by highlighting his behaviors, while giving very little airtime to the other four Asian Americans who seemed to do only "American" things. This elder Asian American man was shown essentializing Asians as having "slanted eyes, small bodies, and refugee status"; he was presented dancing "wildly" with fire sticks (getting labeled a "Zen fire master" by a white woman) and as a "healer" who cured two teammates of ailments using Eastern medicine. He was shown celebrating his broken English (which appeared to be done intentionally, as it was otherwise perfect) and berating the younger Asian Americans for their emphasis on technology, hailing this as a marker of their being out of touch with their homelands.

The season's Asian American winner was represented as several major racial archetypes, being depicted simultaneously as the brilliant model minority, the untrustworthy foreigner, and the asexual male. The host and competitors were shown commenting repeatedly on his hard work and intelligence, as he was called "smart guy" or the "Harvard Stanford brain guy." He also contributed to the viewers consuming him as a "model minority" in characterizing himself as a "very complex, intellectual guy who came out of [his] shell" and was shown to pass the time on the island by doing things such as calculating the total surface area of his feet for "fun."

Asian Americans were also represented as "perpetual foreigners" (Wu 2002), as not being from the United States, as having cultural practices that are not "American," and as embodying loyalty to a home country over the United States. This was shown when the host asked the perennial question of "where are you *really* from" to one and when another explained to the audience that most people do not believe he speaks English. During the concluding episode of the show, many players revealed that they believed the Asian American man was untrustworthy, that he was secretly "calling the shots," and that he manipulated everyone else as "puppets." While he worked to counter his racialization as a "perpetual foreigner" by repeatedly pointing out how "American" he felt, he could also not escape being feminized in the representation. His masculinity was called into question as he sat awkwardly in a hot tub with young flirty heterosexuals and wanted to use this luxury "reward" time to strategize rather than have fun. Another Asian American man was also feminized by a white woman and a black man, who referred to him using the emasculating term of "Nancy boy."

Making Whiteness Invisible and Normal

Unlike the explicit racial discourses that emerged in the people of color tribes, members of the white team began their time in a tribe together without even noticing that

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they had been grouped by race. It was not until the entire cast of twenty members was called together for a competition that they are shown observing the racial categorization of each team. In this way, they played out racial scripts that demonstrated the ability of whiteness to mask itself (Dalton 2008) and to become so normalized (Brown et al. 2003) that it took "encountering" people of color for white tribe members to notice their own race. One white competitor's initial reaction to this lumping was to note that racial grouping "wouldn't make a difference . . . that people don't live their lives according to race." White tribe members used the language of normalcy to articulate how being among only white people felt to them. However, one disagreed, noting that that she felt strange to be separated by color and that she did not like being segregated. The white tribe spent almost no time discussing race, their own racial status (with the exception of a white American Jew who often noted his own liminal status in the group of whites), or the significance of this grouping in the game of *Survivor*. The show's white host reinforced blindness to and silence about whiteness by narrating that "ethnicity has nothing to do with how alliances are formed, kept or broken in this game."

Even after the racial tribes integrated, the white players continually used the word *they* to describe a now dispersed and amorphous group of people of color. Three of the four whites, in talking about strategy and their own positions, constructed an "us versus them" dichotomy, despite the fact that both tribes included multiple races. This us–them divide was shown through white players giving hugs and high fives only to other white players, despite racial "integration" and no longer constituting a white "tribe." Ironically, these same whites who were allied with each other on the basis of race articulated that it was the people of color who "play[ed] the race card." One white woman described the Latino tribe as "fiercely loyal," despite that fact that 80 percent of the team has been voted out (usually by each other) before the season was even one-third complete. If "fierce loyalty" was measured in outcomes rather than intentions, it would be only the whites who demonstrated it.

The most salient feature of whiteness that surfaced during the season was a narrative of white fear and white perceptions of victimization by people of color. Consistent with the characteristics of the new racial structure—not a postracial society—in which whites came to view whiteness as a disadvantage and social liability (O'Brien 2000; McKinney 2003), white people were shown to be angst-ridden about being outnumbered and fearful about being dominated in competitions, and they perceived themselves as victims of the racism people of color unleashed on them. After one white man stole food from a tribe of color, he was confronted and articulated being "shocked" (his word) that they would "gang up" on him; in this way, he reveals feelings of victimization, despite having been the perpetrator of theft. For the duration of the season, white people either were not asked or were not shown speaking about the significance of race in shaping their strategic choices in the competition. They were largely silent about the subject of race, until the end of the season when people of color coalesced and united against them. Only then did white people pay explicit attention to race. The last white man standing criticized people of color's unity and elimination

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of white players, saying that they "have blinders on" for using race as a determinant. Such comments to the camera highlighted the white imaginations of the contestants but also of the white producers and audiences who view white racialized behaviors as decidedly "nonracial."

The Insignificance and Significance of Race: Color Blindness and Wounded Whites

While asserting the insignificance of race, *Survivor*'s contestants were shown using race to organize their relationships, daily life, and competition strategies. Despite people's articulated hopes—or illusions—that race does not matter in survival (both on and off the island), the program developed a metaphor for "race wars" in which racial groups competed against one another for limited resources. In this supposed postracial reality, the playing field was leveled, race did not matter in people's chances for survival, and whites did not harbor any racialized thinking about skin color that led to an unequal distribution of resources. In fact, in *Survivor*'s metaphor, race was so insignificant that it seemed to matter *only* to people of color, who reproduced it through racial reasoning and coalescing against whites to turn themselves into winners of the war.

Color-Blind Assertions: The Insignificance of Race

Each episode's "tribal council" (the gathering where a member of the team gets voted off) became the site for *Survivor*'s testament to the color-blind ideology that guided life on the island and in society in general. Through these representations, the program purported to use its own social experiment to demonstrate the declining significance of race, the erasure of a color line that supposedly exists only when we force it (Gallagher 2003a), and the presence of a desired color blindness in which all people are treated as individuals and race is not "seen" as a significant factor in society's everyday operations. Using Bonilla-Silva's (2003) "frames" of color blindness to operationalize its salience, I uncovered eighteen color-blind comments, 89 percent of which were made by people of color. By presenting racial minorities as the champions of the insignificance of race, *Survivor* offered proof positive of a postracial society, in which even the racially oppressed hail the insignificance of a racialized stratification system.

Most of the contestants' color-blind testimonies about the insignificance of race were made at this weekly council meeting and contradicted the comments the people made while living together and competing against each other. For example, the "color-blind" words of one African American woman got replayed at the introduction of every episode: "It's not about race, it's about survival." Yet she was eliminated precisely for her unwillingness (in her words) to "play the race card or focus on race in situations." (Perhaps more careful attention to the racial dynamics of the competition would have allowed her to survive!) One Latino echoed this color blindness, remarking that he "does not see the color, [he sees] the heart of the individual." Such color

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blindness, shown to represent his lack of racial group loyalty, also became grounds for elimination. One white man, who was shown to have become a "race traitor" and been the white vote that shifted the competition's power to people of color, commented that race had nothing to do with how the "chips fell" in the game, despite it being *the* factor for his elimination. One Asian American contestant, seeming to not want to be left out of this color-blind narrative, used his on-camera interview to stress the importance of interacting with each other as "humans, not as races."

One the most pronounced characteristics of "postracial" logic is that it is explicitly self-contradictory. This was evident in the concluding episode of the season when the final three competitors (all people of color) pleaded their case for victory by using an explicit racial reasoning. They were presented as playing on racial loyalties and requested that racial reasoning be one of the considerations of the voting jury. Although the Asian American female finalist was shown to say very little (reproducing her silence and invisibility throughout the season), both men of color centered their pleas around the "lack of positive representation of minorities on TV" and "wanting to represent in a way that disproves those stereotypes." In fact, the season's winner called it a "great morality tale" that only people of color made it to the final four competitors. Yet after winning and watching his season on television, he asserted that *Survivor*'s racial experiment "was successful because it showed not the color of your skin but your insides." The contradictory basis of postracial logic is that its overemphasis on the insignificance of race can function to prove its significance.

A Weapon Against Whites: The Only Postracial Significance of Race

For the first half of the season, people of color were shown engaging in identity politics that ultimately worked toward their demise. After the racial tribes were "integrated," producers highlighted people of color's divisions within and among one another as well as their repeated questioning about who was an "authentic" group member. Meanwhile, white people were never depicted as participating in "racial bonding," despite their collusion as an unspoken alliance. People of color's "infighting" was presented as being extremely consequential, squandering their original numeric majority of fifteen people down to four, the same number of remaining white competitors. However, these remaining four competitors of color, realizing the ineffectiveness of fighting against each other, made an explicit decision to form an alliance against the white competitors. This intentional coalition changed the remainder of the competition. It also changed *Survivor*'s racial discourse for the second half of the season. The alliance symbolically embodied white fears of "reverse racism," in which people of color "take over" and exact revenge against white society;[3] and on the *Survivor* island, as metaphor for the survival of the fittest in society, this was precisely what happened.

For the second half of the season, people of color's decisions about who to align with to advance in the competition were shown to be based in racialized sentiments that they should "team up" against white people. These representations reflected and confirmed white people's heightened beliefs that people of color close ranks with one

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another and that they are "taking over" numerically, politically, and socially (Gallagher 2003b). For example, producers showed one African American man attempting to save an African American woman from being eliminated by encouraging others to vote off a white man so as to "keep it family." They also provided viewers with a storyline in which an Asian American man attempts to rally people of color against white contestants (a strategy he called "plan voodoo"); he is shown pointing out what none of the contestants seems to have noticed: that no white people have been eliminated and that racial minorities could be powerful as an alliance.

The producers carefully narrated a (white) apocalyptic reality in which people of color closed ranks and began actively working against white people. They showed countless images of a segregated tribe (despite it having been "integrated" during the third week), with the people of color celebrating their unity by holding hands in a prayer circle, cheering together as a unified force, and chanting promises of "black, brown and yellow power" (a multiracial reminiscence of Stokely Carmichael's calls for self-determination in the 1970s). The people of color alliance fueled white fears as they decided to stop feeding the white people. Since whiteness had been largely invisible in the first half of the competition, white contestants flew under the radar by doing very little work around the camp and instead sat around, flirted, had fun, and "got fat" (literally and symbolically) from people of color's labor. However, the new alliance of color decided that everyone would catch, prepare, and eat their own food; in short, they would feed one another, but not white people in the tribe. Consequently, producers constructed sympathy for the white people who were shown starving and feeling victimized by the people of color alliance. Without food and strength, and perceiving themselves as "beaten down," white contestants attempted to curry favor with the coalition of color or work to divide them. During their weekly commentaries, each white person noted nervousness about *which* (not whether) of the white people would be eliminated. And as metaphor for white racial fears about reverse racism, white contestants were completely wiped out of the competition as soon as the people of color coalition formed.

Conclusion: "Race Wars" in a Postracial Society?

For ten years *Survivor* has represented race, produced racial logics, and promoted what Hunt (1999, 9) calls "raced ways of seeing" that perpetuate the new racial structure. In all of its seasons, both before and since this decision to make race an explicit organizing principle, the television program uses the power of representation to "both promote and mask the complicated social realities of the inequitable distribution of political power" and has done so with significant consequence (Wall 2008, 1044). It is not clear the extent to which racial logic guided the actual competitions or life on the island; after all, race could have played an insignificant role in survival. However, in this season, *Survivor* produced race as the primary—at times the only—frame of analysis through which to interpret competitors' ability to outwit, outplay, and outlast one another. Although the content is presented as simply reflecting "reality," producers'

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interview questions remain invisible, hundreds of hours of footage go unused, and all of the images and commentary that do not fit the season's narrative remain invisible. It is quite possible that the competitors used other narratives such as gender, education and social status, or sexuality to guide their strategy in the competition. For example, the sexuality of one openly gay Asian American male receives one cursory note throughout the whole season. Yet *Survivor* deployed a sexuality frame to interpret much of its all-star season, in which the first season's winner (Richard Hatch) was said to have used an "all things gay" strategy to achieve success in the game. So while the diversity of discourses the contestants used to frame their experiences is not known, what is apparent is the significance that *Survivor* placed on race as the central organizing principle, all the while espousing a postracial politic.

The media in general, and television specifically, have the power to represent "reality" in ways that can reproduce or transform social inequality. Yet Taylor and Willis (1999, 40) remind us that "No cultural representation can offer access to the 'truth' about what is being represented, but what such representations do provide is an indication about how power relations are organized in a society, at certain historical moments." This is why challenges to cultural hegemony are often made through the power of representation (Hall 1997; Lippard 1990), as it has meaningful implications for defining who exists and what characterizes a group's political and social reality.

Santos and Buzinde (2007, 323) argue that "it is through representational tools that social agents produce cultural meaning among themselves and to outsiders. Such representational practices have the power to reorganize people's sense of self, build alternative conceptions of realizable futures, and consequently function as agents of social transformation." So how did *Survivor*'s "race wars" season produce cultural meanings, reproduce racism, and provide alternative conceptions for the future of reality television? How did spectacularizing race redraw the "racial rules of reality television" in new and complicated ways?

To begin with, the season did resist some of the prevailing representational strategies in prime-time and reality television. Instead of racial "tokens" that come to represent their entire race in monolithic and narrow ways, having five competitors from each racial group suggested that there is ethnic and cultural difference—and even disagreement—*within* races, not just between them. While television often highlights the differences and disagreements among racialized groups, having multiple competitors from each racial group illuminated the differences and diversity *within* racial groups. For example, almost without exception, Latinos and Asian Americans are represented in prime time by one person whose ethnicity, class, generation, and social status are minimized or erased to narrowly represent the *racial* group. This season of *Survivor* demonstrated the ethnic and generational hierarchies within racialized groups and the complex ways in which identity politics and internalized racism operate inside racialized groups, particularly the Latino and Asian American communities, neither of which gets represented as complex, diverse, or dynamic in television depictions. Similarly, African Americans, while shown to unite around blackness, were revealed to have real fissures within the community, based on social class, skin

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color, and perceptions of a narrowly defined authenticity. Since an "us–them" dichotomy is so often drawn in television, the dividing lines were shown to be far more complicated than television usually presents.

By producing a season with explicitly racialized tribes, *Survivor* also defied the significant and normalized practice in prime-time television of making whiteness invisible. Through constructing a "white" tribe and calling attention to whiteness as an identity, a worldview, and a set of cultural norms, the program named the reality that white is not simply the universal, neutral, or default state of being. Competitors and the viewing audience alike were forced to grapple with the "reality" that white is not simply "unraced" but that the group itself has "tribal" affinity and racialized ways of seeing, experiencing, and articulating life. Unfortunately, the only times *Survivor* represented whites as grappling with whiteness in any meaningful way was once group members began to experience their whiteness as a liability, as the reason for their perceived victimization by people of color. In this way, the white contestants ceased their color-blind rhetoric and began constructing their racial group membership as a liability, conceiving of themselves as victims, rather than beneficiaries, of the status quo (McKinney 2003, 39).

Despite the significance of showing intraracial diversity and making whiteness visible, *Survivor* made race into a spectacle and (re)presented "race relations" in familiar ways that ultimately varied little from other racial representations in the mainstream media. At the outset, it appears that *Survivor* did something new by articulating race explicitly. However, its images and discourse of race resonated with the old and familiar representations in prime-time television. Using race to explain group success and failure taps into a familiar logic of U.S. racism in which a group's disparity in wealth, health, or educational achievement is ascribed to deficiencies in the racial group's culture and/or their failures to work hard enough to bare fruits; William Ryan (1971) refers to this as "blaming the victim." Reducing race to a set of cultural or biological fundamentals has the consequence of naturalizing and reifying it; and if race is natural, then the inequities between the races are also natural, normal, and the "order of things." And asserting the insignificance of race (by promoting color-blind ideology and articulations of racial transcendence), while simultaneously producing representations that perpetuate racial ideology, reveals deep contradictions at best, delusions at worst.

However, most of these timeless racial tropes do not profess to be "postracial"; they reproduce the racial ideology without claiming to transcend racial meanings, and often do so unapologetically. But *Survivor*'s producers, host, and competitors were insistent on framing this season as a social experiment that could serve as proof of U.S. society's arrival at an era of racism's end. Rather than showing society's transcendence of race, *Survivor* demonstrated its own reliance on the significance of race for exploiting conflict to attract audiences, consolidating white fears regarding impending "race wars," and emphasizing the postracial logic that racial categorization, not historical racial formations and unequal access to institutionalized power, causes racial inequality in the United States. Furthermore, it blamed the problem of race on people of color, whose insistence on racial solidarity and racialized ways of seeing the world keep racism in place.

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After stripping individuals down to the bare essentials of life, *Survivor* produced representations that both reflect and maintain racial misunderstanding and inequality, in exchange for the higher ratings and profits derived from this televisual spectacle. Its producers sought to create a television program that could demonstrate the postracial premise that a society could "get beyond" race and racism if more important things such as "survival" were what really mattered. Through this veneer of racial enlightenment, they claimed that race was so insignificant its significance could be mocked. Such spectacularization ended up backfiring since racial groups (whether segregated or integrated) were presented as always in competition with one another for limited resources rather than in cooperation with one another about how to use resources responsibly. If the goal of *Survivor* was to represent an unscripted reality in which race and racism did not matter, what the program actually produced was a narrative about the durability of the "racial contract" (Mills 1997). In fact, the season represents a bit of a "cautionary tale" about what *not* to do, about how *not* to deal with race in reality TV, if the goal is to use representational tools to transcend—or at least make less damaging—the realities of racial inequality in society.

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Notes

1. Characteristic of the invisibility of indigenous people throughout media outlets, American Indians were not represented, invisible, and thus further considered "vanishing" in the popular imagination. The absence of American Indians reproduces dominant racial ideology that suggests indigenous people are *historical* peoples and ignores their contemporary realities, including struggles to gain sovereignty.
2. Although Latino is not a legal racial classification in the United States, diverse ethnic groups have been classified together, racialized into the social category "Hispanic" that ultimately functions as a racial group.
3. White people's fear of people of color "taking over" and exacting revenge has been satirized throughout the media, found in movies such as *A Day Without a Mexican* and *Confederate States of America* as well as in new media such as the "Bureau of White Affairs" web site and the spoken word artist Boa Phi's "Affirmative Action."

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