

**(IN)VISIBLE FISSURES AND THE
“MULTICULTURAL” AMERICAN:
Interrupting Race, Ethnicity, and Imperialism
through TV’s *Survivor***

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The blood of the whole world’ flows through us. . . . We are not a narrow tribe.

— Herman Melville

. . . Cultural identities are pivotal in this time of social and cultural change in order to understand and intervene in the national consciousness. . . .

— Johnella E. Butler, “Ethnic Studies as a Matrix...”

The experience of our century tells us that the old orthodoxies, the traditional ideologies, the neatly tied bundles of ideas—capitalism, socialism, democracy—need to be untied, so that we can play and experiment with all the ingredients, add others, and create new combinations in looser bundles. We know as

Hentges—(In) Visible Fissures

we come to the twenty-first century that we desperately need to develop new, imaginative approaches to the human problems of our times.

— Howard Zinn, “Introduction: American Ideology”

Acts of going native certainly reveal white America’s aspirations to hegemony, most specifically through that society’s attempts to obliterate Native peoples, cultures, and histories. At the same time, though, other questions arise. To what extent does evoking “nativeness” destabilize notions of race, gender, and history which the dominant culture seeks to naturalize? . . . Do these complex workings of culture reveal the conflicts and fissures at the heart of an Americanness imagined as *e pluribus unum*? If so, perhaps in these contradictions lies the potential for decolonizing knowledge and accomplishing social change.

— Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination*¹

One of the longest running reality TV shows, with 15 seasons as of 2007, *Survivor* is an important text for considerations of race and ethnicity, legacies of imperialism, and the idea of the “multicultural” America. *Survivor* provides an evolving adventure narrative—one that relies upon the legacies of the past, like colonialism and imperialism, as well as the myths of the present and future, like tourism as a means of survival in a globalized economy. As these imperial contexts are adapted *Survivor* provides moments for (mostly white or white-identified) privileged, “multicultural” first-world Americans to participate in neo-colonial cultural and economic imperialism and cultural tourism—all from the comforts of our living rooms. While participation in American imperialism and televisual cultural tourism are certainly problematic, such participation can also be disruptive of simplistic notions of American culture, economics, politics, and identities and can tell us much about the ways in which ideas about race are “sold” by the show and interrupted and negotiated by its racialized contestants.

An important part of this racialization and legacy of imperialism is embodied and evolved through the American frontier fantasy

described by critics who argue that in times of crisis, imperial dreams are played and replayed in American culture and the imagination of the colonizer.² This legacy is extended in "Self-Help for Savages: The 'Other' Survivor, Primitivism, and the Construction of American Identity" by Steven Vrooman (2003). In his article in *Survivor Lessons* Vrooman offers a compelling analysis of the first two seasons of *Survivor* and the ways in which the contestants were portrayed in ways that perpetuated the blatant racism of the adventure story legacy where the white man is portrayed as superior to the "Other." In the first season, racial politics are constructed and portrayed solely from within the pool of (mostly white) contestants, while in the second season the natives of the Australian Outback also provided this comparison. As Vrooman notes, "by *Survivor: Thailand* [season 5], the show is awash with primitives." (2003; 196) Vrooman connects this presence of the Other to the therapeutic, "self-help" function of the show for its contestants and viewers. He concludes that *Survivor* is, ultimately, a bad example of the adventure story as self-help. However, *Survivor* is steeped not simply in a history of American adventure stories, but also, for instance, legacies like world's fairs which promote the white man's "self-help" need to define himself through the Other as well as through his economic, political, and cultural exploitation. Such legacies of colonialism and imperialism necessitate the appeal of shows like *Survivor* that carry on these traditions in more contemporary and "justified" ways. These traditions, these "enacted rites of conquest" are used by the U.S. as Shari Huhndorf explains, to "extend its power over Native America . . . and these racial dynamics continue to shape contemporary American life." (2001; 15) But what Vrooman fails to articulate, is that the self-help angle is not needed to tell us how to be Americans.³ *Survivor* does this obviously, but also in more convoluted and contradictory ways, particularly as the show provides a powerful means for white America to do what Huhndorf describes as to "go native"—to act out the "Other"—which "articulates and supports other forms of imperial, gender, and racial domination within the broader American culture as well." (2001; 15) The "Other", thus, takes many forms and is juxtaposed against the power and privilege of

Hentges—(In) Visible Fissures

the “multicultural” (read: assimilated) American citizen—a loaded and propagated identity in post-9/11 America. But, as *Survivor* contestants perpetuate new forms of imperialism they also disrupt the character of such imperialism by interrupting essentialized models of race and racialization in ways that, perhaps, allow us to “understand and intervene in the national consciousness,” to “play and experiment” with ideas of identity, culture, and power, and to “decolonize[e] knowledge and accompl[ish] social change.” (epigraph)

The challenges are most effectively constructed through the gaps and fissures contestants and producers have little or no control over. In these invisible and visible fissures, ideas about race, ethnicity, nationality, and imperialism are constructed and negotiated. By reconsidering *Survivor*'s relationship to past and present legacies of imperialism and the importance these legacies hold for American culture, identity, and hegemony we can see how these legacies are complicated and contradictory. Further, considered as a whole, evolving text—especially in relationship to the contours of American ideology and politics—*Survivor* provides an imaginary world that tells us much about ourselves. For instance, as questions about U.S. involvement in Iraq infiltrated the public consciousness, *Survivor* provided the Palau setting, what host, Jeff Probst, described as an “island paradise,” a “remote and absolutely breathtaking” area of the Pacific, and “one of the most spectacular natural wonders of the world.” Not coincidentally, this “island paradise” is also described as a “watery grave” and is littered with the man-made remnants of WWII. Probst describes this as “an eerie mix of man’s explosive past and nature’s power to reclaim.” America’s hegemonic past, embodied in the scattered, rusting machines and weapons of WWII, creates a guilt-free narrative of America’s past triumphs—the inevitable outcome of a cultural, economic, and military superiority. Thus, Palau’s people and its history are not simply erased (and later paraded); they are subsumed by American hegemony. Hidden behind this “island paradise” is the fact that Palau’s official currency is the U.S. dollar, English is the official and predominant language, and tourism is its prime industry. Another season of *Survivor* (Fiji) provided a rich/

poor dichotomy, and the Cook Islands brought American ideas of race and ethnicity to the forefront. Most recently, as fear over China's growing economic power have surfaced in the public consciousness, *Survivor: China* reminds us of U.S. superiority in a variety of ways.

Part of this exploration of *Survivor's* role in promoting and interrupting legacies of imperialism and the social and cultural construction of race looks at how the idea of "survival" is sold through staged and constructed images and ideas about indigenous peoples and the lands they only partially inhabit. Another part is how *Survivor* sells race by exploiting racialized individuals and groups at the same time that these individuals and groups challenge both exploitation and racialization. Most of all, this piece considers how race is interrupted and contested, which requires that we understand at least some of the complexities of "race" in an American context that extends across time and place.

Beyond the Adventurer: A Legacy of Imperialism

In "On the Raggedy Edge of Risk," Bruce Braun notes the difference between those who "have the resources and the security to *take* risks, and those who are instead continuously positioned at risk (or imagined to be so)." (2003; 177)⁴ The risk culture that Braun describes is intimately connected to whiteness and racialization which reveals different dimensions to the racism that Vrooman begins to articulate. For instance, Braun argues that "many of today's ideologies of nature" retain "'hidden attachments'" to frontier ideologies and other "imaginative geographies." (2003; 196-7)⁵ Vrooman describes these frontier ideologies in depth, but only partially compares them to the function of the "imaginative geographies" of *Survivor*. These settings are, according to host, Jeff Probst, settings "we can all understand—a remote tropical island, a bunch of Americans making a world and then destroying their world by voting each other out one by one." In this way, not only is the "third-world" subject erased, but in a sweep of "imperialist nostalgia," the first-world subject's power as colonizer is reinforced.⁶ After all, the Americans on *Survivor*, despite their location, are "making a world" and it is perfectly within their

Hentges—(In) Visible Fissures

rights, according to a colonial model, not only to create, but to then destroy that world in a mad, individualistic, greedy dash. Toward these ends, the show constructs its setting from its own first-world location, with exoticized titles like “The Outback,” “The Amazon,” “Africa,” and “China” that erase cultural and geographic specificity. Other subtitles play up romantic attachments like “The Pearl Islands,” with its pirate themes or “Marquesas” with its frequent references to cannibalism. All of these are romanticized and exoticized locations with violent colonial pasts and are often current sites of contestation regarding issues of development, land-use, and sovereignty. For instance, the indigenous of Australia were not consulted prior to *Survivor’s* arrival⁷; however, the indigenous of Vanuatu and Palau participate in what appears to contestants and audiences to be pure authenticity—sharing rituals and traditions. Further, all of these locations are marginalized within the global economic system and rely mostly upon various kinds of tourism, including the televisual tourism (and advertising) that *Survivor* provides, for economic and cultural survival.⁸ Thus, *Survivor* locations are often decontextualized and disconnected from the region’s past, but they are also re-asserted as a tourist location through reward challenges and the show’s televisual form itself. This places them squarely within imperial legacies and the neo-colonial contours of the contemporary political economy.

Another “hidden attachment” in *Survivor* is to the legacies of world’s fairs that critics like Robert Rydell and Shari Huhndorf describe. Thus, *Survivor* becomes a more disturbing cultural phenomenon as we consider the ways in which the Other and colonialism and imperialism were presented to the fair-goers at the turn of the century—a period when the contradictions between American’s ideals of freedom and liberty for all were in stark contrast to its lust for colonial territories. In these days, world’s fairs “were rites of passage for American society which made possible the full acceptance of a new way of life, new values, and a new social organization.” (Rydell 1993; 15-18, quoting Victor Turner) These new ways of life not only meant accepting and even embracing empire, but they also meant accepting violence and subjugation of the “other” in exchange for a “culture of imperial abundance.”

Ethnic Studies Review Volume 31

(Rydell 1993; 18, 20)

Since we are now living this imperial future, an assumed inevitability is seen as forward progress, and shows like *Survivor* are more easily able to parade the “other” in many of the same ways as the colonized “other” was displayed at world’s fairs. This parading and display go beyond the tales of adventurer since these displays brought the adventure into the “first world.” Further, these displays embody the assumed place of white Americans as culturally and economically superior. And since, as Rydell argues, the exhibits were to be viewed from a comfortable spatial and ideological distance, “millions of Americans [got] first-hand experience with treating non-whites from around the world as commodities.” (22) Thus, it is normal for the natives to be paraded in traditional costumes as much as it is for them to be erased by kitsch representations.⁹ On *Survivor*, the natives often perform a dance or a ceremony for the winner of a *Survivor* reward challenge. In most cases the Survivors sit and watch indigenous dances, rituals, or natural wonders (usually while eating a spectacular meal). Rarely do the contestants join in the dance like two reward winners did on *Survivor: Marquesas*. Nor do they offer to share their “reward” with their Native “tour guide” as Julie and Chris (Vanuatu) illustrate on their horseback adventure as the “other” instructs and then watches from a distance as they feast. Instead, the juxtaposition between the first world subject as subject and the third-world subject as object becomes one of those “hidden attachments” that Braun describes.

As blatant as this cultural imperialism may seem, according to an interview with Jeff Probst regarding the Vanuatu season, *Survivor* doesn’t simply *take* from its locations. He states:

We try to follow the rules, we brought them in a lot of money and we utilized what they had, we were buying their time and their land. We tend to leave a place better than where we found it. We built a church and left money to finish that. I adopt a family everywhere we go and keep in touch with them, as long as we don’t misrepresent them.¹⁰

Such generosity is certainly consistent with imperialism and colonialism as Probst claims that they “tend to leave a place better than when we found it.” Not only does this “finding” connote the

Hentges–(In) Visible Fissures

attitude of the discoverer, but the disconnect between what has been “found” and what has been “left” are detached from what was found and left in the past. Further, money is used as the justification for “buying their time and their land” and “utilizing what they had” could mean a lot of different things. The fact that Probst “adopts” a family “everywhere [they] go” only further reinforces the show’s paternalism and individualistic approach. What kind of impacts might a cast and crew of hundreds, technological accoutrements, and other impacts have on peoples whose only resources include their “time and their land”?

American “Survival” and the “Authentic” Other

Although *Survivor* invokes the difference between travel and tourism, sight-seeing and adventure, and comfort and risk most often the *Survivor* contestants are posed starkly against the “other” even as they are allowed some level of “authentic” participation. Contestants are far from the comfort of travel or sight-seeing, but they also cannot fully “go native,” because they obviously lack the skills to do so. Ironically and predictably, *Survivor* contestants most often lack even the most basic skills they need to survive (and those with the skills are often voted out quickly, targeted as “too much competition”). This lack of survival skills only reinforces the contestants’ first-world status, and reveals their ignorance. For instance, on *Survivor: Africa* one team dumped the water out of their clay pots (instead of drinking it) so that they wouldn’t have to carry the weight on their hike to their camp.¹¹ Perhaps more telling is the fact that escape is always possible for *Survivor* contestants in a variety of ways. So, for instance, when Michael (The Outback) passed out and fell into the fire, burning his hands and face, a helicopter was quickly dispatched and he was eliminated from the game. And when Osten (Pearl Islands) decided he couldn’t take it anymore, he was able to leave the game, but only after Jeff and his tribe-mates ridiculed him for his choice to be the first *Survivor* to quit. These instances of escape further distance the contestants from the people who inhabit these spaces and have no means (and, perhaps, in some cases no desire) to physically escape, let alone permanently or temporarily (or mentally) escape their real

circumstances of survival.

Because contestants are unable to embody the presence or skill of the indigenous peoples in these more “real” situations, particularly as opposed to the kitsch embodiments, *Survivor* cannot sublimate all traces of violent, colonial and imperialistic histories as much as it can try to control and frame them within new age contexts and demonstrations of first-world cultural superiority (especially in economic and material terms). For instance, the invocation of “nativeness” that Huhndorf describes as “going native,” will sometimes allow the privileged first-world subject attempts to erase the colonial past (and thus ease his white guilt) by holding up “Native” traditions and indigenous cultures as “better” than Western culture—as an alternative, or even a remedy, to the West.¹² In other cases, there is a certain level of “authenticity” to these inclusions of indigenous peoples and customs, but these are difficult to distinguish from the kitsch. For instance, the “gross food” challenges often include local fare like grubs, worms, and a variety of meats or, in the case, of *Survivor: Africa*, a sacred drink made from a combination of cow urine, blood, and milk. These gross food challenges appear on a variety of reality TV game shows like *Road Rules* and *Fear Factor*, but only on *Survivor* are these challenges “authentic,” as they are intimately connected to the food that the indigenous people of the region survive on.¹³ The food is not “gross” simply because it has been chosen by the producers; it is also “gross” because it is foreign, other, raw, and primitive. This “grossness” is further accentuated by this food’s juxtaposition with American favorites won in reward challenges like Doritos and Mountain Dew, Pringles and Mai Tais, donuts, pizza, and chocolate and peanut butter. On *Survivor: China* several contestants won an authentic Chinese meal—endless meat and vegetables—and later complained about how they “suffered” through this meal because of their lack of familiarity. What they really wanted, one *Survivor* remarked, was pizza. Thus, Americans are further defined by what they will and will not eat, as well as by what they prefer to eat.¹⁴

Perhaps most revealing of American privilege, is the fact that contestants know that they will have to brave the elements, but they also know that they will be provided with chances to win luxuries.

Hentges—(In) Visible Fissures

These luxuries appear in the form of food, pampering, sight-seeing, and for one or two lucky *Survivors*, a car. These luxuries are always in stark contrast with the weathered, dirty *Survivor* contestants, as well as their “primitive” surroundings. In some cases Jeff drives the car prize right onto the beach, and on *Survivor: Vanuatu* Eliza drove her and her guests to dinner and a movie. These luxuries reinforce the larger scope of capitalism as American symbols of capitalism are centered. For instance, while food must be scavenged from the land, it is also purchased by contestants as a part of the reward challenges—sometimes with cash (like during the food auctions), with local currency like on *The Pearl Islands*, and other times with Jeff Probst’s Visa card. These reward challenges allow one of the show’s sponsors (Visa), and a symbol of capitalism run rampant (the credit card), prime product placement, as well as reinforcement of its necessity in everyday life (not just for luxury).¹⁵ The fact that *Survivor* contestants can use Jeff’s credit card in even the most remote places on earth, is simply more proof that U.S. capitalism is alive and well in its inevitable influence as an arm of U.S. imperialism. Here the individual and the collective—the consumer and capitalism—are part and parcel.

In all of these cases of “survival,” cultural superiority is an acceptable excuse for both producers and viewers since this superiority is ingrained within an American ideology, identity, and culture that relies upon the legacies of colonialism and imperialism. Because of these authentic/staged exhibitions of culture, an American consumer of *Survivor* can easily marvel in awe and amazement at *Survivor*’s portrayal’s of indigenous peoples, customs, and locations, and they can appreciate these images guilt free. Like the past, the islands of the present are also presented as ripe for the taking. As Huhndorf argues, “culture . . . serves as the means of creating the necessity for dominating other groups even as it justifies this dominance.” (2001; 12) We are taking these islands and their peoples not militarily (though this is not improbable), but through culture and economy. These dynamics of “authenticity” and an imperial past/present clearly sell the racial, cultural, and economic superiority of the “multicultural” American.

(In)Visible Fissures: The “Multicultural” American

Each season, *Survivor* contestants are split evenly between men and women (and often between young and old), which offers a numerical gender equality, but also reinforces our narrow ideas about gender roles and representations (which are further contested as women’s ability to compete and to survive opens fissures in these mainstreamed representations)¹⁶. This equality would seem to suggest other kinds as well; however, amongst these men and women, there are, at most, three Americans per season who represent marginalized races, ethnicities, sexualities, and abilities. Thus, throughout the first twelve seasons there were several African American contestants—usually one man and one woman per season, often on the same “tribe”—a few Asian American contestants, two “differently-abled” contestants (both white), and few openly gay or lesbian contestants (all white). Through this “diversity,” an uncritical conceptualization of American multiculturalism is perpetuated as the crisis of non-white American identities are subsumed under a larger umbrella. The white, black, Asian, or Latino/a American is considered a part of what one lay critic considers “the first new TV show in years to generate something like a common cultural experience across the United States.” In fact, this critic goes as far as to claim that on the first season fourteen white Americans and two black Americans constitute a “geographically and ethnically diverse” group of “castaways.” (Streisand 2000) And another critic considers diversity in “age, experience, and background” as well as “race, religion, and sexuality,” as providing “plenty of interesting conflict.” (Godard 2003 quoting Denhart, 82)

But even amongst this limited version of “diversity,” the diverse American “others” are still often white, politically and ideologically if not visually. Thus, it is necessary to complicate “whiteness” within the context of *Survivor*. In this context whiteness becomes connected to and disconnected from “American” identity through Americans’ first-world status, particularly through Americans’ roles as consumers as well as their juxtaposition to the presence and absence of “others,” as I have described thus far. And the “American” values of competition, greed, and individualism represent whiteness on *Survivor* as much as skin color, at least in

Hentges—(In) Visible Fissures

most cases.¹⁷ Thus, political “whiteness” becomes the lens through which this show is presented and, often, consumed. Further, people of color who exhibit these characteristics, like Equity Trade Manager, Osten (Pearl Islands), who encourages his female teammates to use their sexuality to barter with the “horny old men” in a small fishing village off the coast of Panama, apply for and are chosen for *Survivor*, just like the white contestants are. In this way, “multicultural” space is connected with American ideas of equal opportunity and democracy as well as ideas about capitalism and nationalism, and structures like patriarchy and heteronormativity. In this “multicultural” context, *Survivor* does what Karen Mary Davalos describes: it articulates a certain version of nationalism by “representing the ideologies that make nationalism a success, specifically, patriarchy, homophobia, and essentialist visions of ‘race.’” (2001; 59) However, gaps interrupt these narratives, if only sometimes. Thus, Americans are, ironically, presented as they are seen by many “othered” peoples—as “white” despite their American-defined, visually or culturally determined, race or ethnicity.¹⁸ These elements, even as they change and evolve, strictly reinforce an American identity, ideology, and culture. In these ways, whiteness is positioned as more than a visible identity. After all, the first-world subject is “diverse,” even if *Survivor* provides an inadequate, though commonplace, version of “diversity.”

However “diverse” *Survivor* contestants may (or may not) be, such uncritical multiculturalism erases the violence not only of the internal history of the U.S. and its imperialism thrust upon the “other” abroad, but also the continuous struggles of minority groups to gain more than superficial “multicultural” inclusion in American culture, economics, and politics.¹⁹ And because black, white, Latina, and Asian American contestants are pitted against each other in the ultimate game of survival, what binds them together as Americans is their difference(s) from their surroundings, and their desire for the million dollar prize. They are a “tribe” of American *Survivors*, but they are also individuals playing a game for the monetary prizes, and the other prizes that also come along with their fifteen minutes of fame. This is the “common cultural experience” that *Survivor* provides—a space where Americans can compete for the

Ethnic Studies Review Volume 31

ultimate title of sole Survivor from within an evolving legacy of the adventurer. Thus, despite Bruce Braun's argument that "to place the black or Latina subject in the frame, as the adventurer, would produce a kind of crisis within the ideological fields . . .," (Braun 2003; 199) the black or Latina on Survivor is placed squarely within the frame of American adventurer and American individualism. This identity both cements and undermines notions of American identity as whites, blacks, Asians, and Latinos/as are implicated in a legacy of American whiteness which "articulates and supports other forms of imperial, gender, and racial domination within the broader American culture as well." (Huhndorf 2001; 15) However, even this legacy is challenged to a certain extent. For instance, in the first fifteen seasons not only has Survivor seen almost as many women win as men, it has also seen an African American and a Latina winner (both women, Vecepia and Sandra) and an Asian American man (Yul) and African American man (Earl) win. In fact, Earl won every vote on the jury. In these cases, as well as in smaller examples, the legacy of the white, male adventurer is significantly (though not consistently) challenged.²⁰ And in this challenge there is also a challenge to "multicultural" American ideology, identity, and culture.

The thirteenth season of Survivor provided a "twist" that brought discussions of "ethnicity" to the forefront of the show. Perhaps because of slumping ratings, or the fact that about eighty percent of the people who apply to be on the show are white, the thirteenth season of Survivor purposefully attempted to include a more diverse cast.²¹ But despite Survivor's hype about dividing tribes along the lines of "ethnicity," it is race and not ethnicity that divides these tribes. The language chosen to describe tribal divisions is telling: Latino, Asian American, African American, and Caucasian. These are not ethnic groups; they are racial groups, a fact that can be most clearly seen in the Latino and Asian American tribes which include several different ethnicities. The Latino tribe reflects this racial category through the contestants' whiteness—all three of the men can "pass" as white and no contestants reflect the visual markers of indigenous or African ancestry that is part of the Latino umbrella. (In fact, this omission reinforces these racial

Hentges—(In) Visible Fissures

categories and, once again, erases Native Americans who not only don't have a tribe, but are also not represented within any of the tribes. The indigenous who are so often evoked during the show are once again erased from the American context.) On the second episode, only the Latina women speak Spanish (but only in a brief instance) when they plot against the men and both women embody the stereotypical Latina image that is rampant throughout American media and popular culture (brown hair, brown eyes, light brown skin). However, in this tribe we also experience some of the contradictions that these racial groups create. For instance, Billy talks about his Dominican parents paddling away from an island and wonders if he must be crazy as he is now paddling back to an island. He also remarks how well he thinks his team will do since they are all from geographical regions similar to the tropical islands where they will "survive." However, not only does Billy reflect his own ignorance about the diversity of "his people," but he also disproves his own stereotypes as it quickly becomes clear to his tribe mates that Billy has no idea how to survive on an island and that his laziness will not help to dispel the stereotypes so many of his tribe mates set out to disprove. And on the second episode, where he is voted out, Billy remarks more than once that his culture is "heavy metal" and that he would have been much better off if he was on the heavy metal tribe instead of the Latino tribe.

These differences of ethnicity are seen less in the Caucasian and African American tribes, both of which reflect the ways in which these racial categories have suppressed difference even as they don't reveal the historical processes of racialization that have caused such racial cohesion. But some of these historical processes are just below the surface. For instance, one member of the African American tribe describes her tribe as five "city kids"—a fact that reflects the legacies of American segregation as much as their lack of knowledge and ability for island "survival," even if these associations are not at the immediate surface of the narrative. Further, this tribe more than any other tribe, has the pressure to represent their people against the stereotypes that have been propagated through racist American culture, including past seasons of *Survivor*. This tribe also reveals the ways in which

Ethnic Studies Review Volume 31

gender tensions can play out within a racially cohesive group. When the tribe loses the first immunity challenge they have to send someone to exile. Immediately the two men step away from the women and discuss who they will send. They make their decision and step back to their team to announce the decision—a move that Jeff comments on immediately. Clearly annoyed, the women let the men have their moment of power. Later they vote off Sekou in the hopes that without his headstrong leadership the team will function better as a unit. This fissure—when gender dynamics supercede racial dynamics—is one type of fissure that interrupts dominant narratives.

Despite *Survivor*'s lack of attention to the complex issues behind all of its plot lines, competitions, characterizations, and product placements, the producers cannot contain all the dimensions of the game or the characters' identities or interactions. They cannot make people's identities—their race, class, gender, and sexuality—disappear. Thus, these gaps can also, potentially, do what Shari Huhndorf poses: "destablilize the notions of race, class, gender, and history which the dominant culture seeks to naturalize." (14, epigraph) The differences that have exploded from gaps of race, gender, and sexuality in subsequent seasons, have made for interesting, explosive material for the show, but has left little room for reflection within the confines of the show. All of these differences of race, class, gender, and sexuality may do more to cement ideas about race than they do to interrupt these ideas.²² However, they also help us to realize the range of American identities. The identities that don't fit into preconceived categories for "multicultural" Americans begin to challenge the ways in which *Survivor* sells race. Fissures where class, gender, or sexuality disrupt this narrative provide one means and contradictions and interruptions in constructed ideas of race and ethnicity provide another.

(In)Visible Fissures: Interrupting Whiteness through Race and Ethnicity

Because the invested producers of reality TV still have much control (cultural and economic capital) over who appears on these

Hentges—(In) Visible Fissures

shows, their choices often correspond to “character types” and to audience demand (or perceived audience demand). And these types are often organized and packaged, and they are clear both to audiences and to the contestants themselves. As Ziauddin Sardar writes, “there is nothing ordinary about these ‘ordinary people’; they have been carefully selected, selectively edited and expertly packaged.”²³ They are what the fans/consumers want and expect. And, as Vrooman and others argue, the contestants on subsequent *Survivor* seasons have watched the show and are not simply there to win the million dollars, but to have the “*Survivor* experience”—in some cases, a real experience they are not always prepared to survive. Despite Jeff Probst’s claims that season thirteen is different in that many contestants have not watched the show and are just “up for the adventure,” these more ethnically and racially diverse Americans are still selected, edited, and packaged. They still represent American “diversity” and dialogs and conflicts about “ethnicity” are highlighted by editors and producers making such issues impossible to ignore. Further, *Survivor*’s ability to “sell” us essentialized ideas of race or ethnicity are interrupted not only by its own contradictions, or through the contradictions of its characterization, but also by those contradictions within the “multicultural” American experience that cannot be contained, measured, or fully explained. After all, as Huhndorf argues, “the dominant culture’s ways of seeing are by no means natural or inevitable,” (13) even in such tightly controlled and edited spaces.

Thus, what the producers have less control over are the “burning topics that conventional programming treats as unmentionable—like class, status, success, and, of course, money.” Tom Carson continues, “in its relentlessly shoddy, callous way, reality TV is filling a considerable gap. . . . [It] exposes the class distinctions that the rest of the medium sweeps under America’s magic carpet.” (2003) The gaps, especially those related to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, are forced open, even when the producers might want to keep them closed. But these gaps, in many cases, are still only as subversive as the mainstream will allow. Some gaps make for great TV material and some provide more progressive ideas about (American) identity, but they do not challenge the shows’ tenants

Ethnic Studies Review Volume 31

of racism, patriarchy, nationalism, and colonialism. For instance, one way notions of, for instance, gender and race are reified is through the patriarchal expression of (especially young, white female) bodies. Camera angles, hot weather, and strategy allow for plenty of opportunities to expose (mostly white) skin in contrast to the present/absent bodies of the natives.²⁴ Contestants also play right along, like when Jenna and Heidi (Marquesas) stripped for chocolate and peanut butter during one of the challenges or when they told the camera that the older women on the island were jealous of their “better bodies.”²⁵

In some cases, black bodies also provide opportunities for exploitation, but with far different historical baggage. For instance, like Braun writes of the black body (and its citationality) in the pages of adventure magazines, Osten (The Pearl Islands) was often on display in similar positions and postures that recall “the visual economies of slavery.” (2003; 184)²⁶ After selling all of his clothes for the sake of his team, this corporate drone was left in only his boxer briefs, which he could hardly keep on his body. Again and again Osten was on display, though often pixelled out. Further, as a young, muscular, black man, his team relied on him for strength and stamina in reward and immunity challenges. And again, and again, the tribe was defeated, which began to defeat Osten’s self-confidence. In one of these failures Osten buckles under the weight of an increasingly heavier pole supported on his upper back and neck—a pose reminiscent of an auction block—and his teammate goes on to secure the victory. This failure leaves Osten exposed for the predominantly white viewers to evaluate “the body of the other in terms of quality and value,” (Braun 2003; 184) especially since he is outperformed by his older, white teammate. However, despite Osten’s displays of (black) masculinity, he blamed his body for his desire to leave the game on his own terms. He didn’t think winning/“surviving” was as important as his health, which he felt was in jeopardy. Osten’s decision was made at the awe and disgust of his tribe mates and host, Jeff Probst, who couldn’t understand why he would quit. However, several (white) women on different seasons have expressed desire to leave and have not been ridiculed in the same ways that Osten was, which reinforces stereotypical

Hentges—(In) Visible Fissures

ideas about masculinity and black masculinity.²⁷ And further, no one could understand the subversive nature of Osten's decision—why should he sacrifice his health to play a game? Perhaps Osten's quitting wasn't so much a surrender as it was a refusal to play the white man's "game" once again.²⁸

Another example of contradiction and interruption of imperial legacies can be seen through Sandra on *Survivor: The Pearl Islands*. When the contestants are let loose in a local fishing village Sandra, fluent in Spanish, is able to barter for her team. While the other tribe acts like typical Americans arguing, rushing, overpaying, under planning, and being rude and ignorant—her team leaves for their island well-fed and well-equipped. In this case, Sandra's ability to relate to the natives gives her team a huge advantage initially and she is praised by her teammates for her ability to speak "the language." While this seems to be a rare *Survivor* moment, the way in which this plays out may suture the gaps that are opened since Sandra's Spanish is never featured again, and she goes on to win the ultimate game of *Survivor* without needing this tool. Further, Sandra may have spoken "the language," but this language is really the language of the colonizer. Thus, some could argue that Sandra was really acting like Columbus as she, a first-world American, came strutting into this small fishing village and plunders their food, literally providing gold in its place. The fact that Sandra had been colonized in the past and is now working as an "insider" agent for the colonizer is obscured. However, she is also presented as a sneaky saboteur later when she finds subversive ways to punish her tribe for voting out people she had alliances with—like throwing out fish that Rupert caught before being voted off and planning to hide tools and dishes until her inevitable end, which becomes not a vote out, as she expected, but enough votes to win a million dollars. So, in one aspect of the show Sandra is a hero—her brown skin and Spanish language skills give her and her team an advantage. But when the going gets rough, Sandra is portrayed through negative stereotypes—as a sneaky saboteur. But, then, she ends up the ultimate *Survivor*. While this example of a gap may or may not provide the reader with all of the nuances described above, it does interrupt the seamless narrative of the American

adventurer, and thus the American subject, as white and male.²⁹

Survivor does not paint American identity as racially or ethnically monolithic, but rather as individual Americans whose differences make them a “tribe” despite their differences, and make them competitors because of their similarities. On season 13, when the previously segregated tribes merge, race is again at the forefront as Jeff says that it’s time to “integrate” and each contestant must pick someone from a different tribe, and thus a different “ethnicity,” to be on their new tribe. Since most don’t know each other’s names yet, one member of the Caucasian tribe picks “the sister on the end” while most everyone else avoids such loaded language. And later, when the tribe members start plotting, one of the white men tries to convince an old tribe mate (through patronizing language) to vote with him and two of “the Asians.” This “integration,” is also used to reinforce the “multicultural” American dream. As the newly integrated tribes get to know each other, Nate (the only African American male left in the game) remarks that “it’s like they took us out of the ghetto and took us to Bel Air.” Stephannie, not coincidentally, engages her new tribe in conversation about how they felt being segregated. After the Caucasian members say it was “weird” and one then remarks that “good or bad it makes people think” Stephannie is shown in an interview saying, “you really don’t see color.” Of course it is crucial to the audience’s understanding of “multicultural” America that a black woman say this just as it is key that one of the white women says, “We’re back to America. We’re a melting pot. I love it.” All of this attention to race also spurs conversation in on-line forums and at the proverbial water cooler. For instance, when an Asian American contestant, Yul, finds the hidden immunity idol on the second episode he is compared to the great white Terry from the previous season. In one on-line forum discussion about this comparison a fan writes: “yul is awesome. hes my favorite from this season. before i was rooting for a white person to win just so everyone will be pissed off but i have such a respect for yul that he has to be my favorite. GO YUL!!!!”³⁰ If Survivor offers stereotypes and renewed “multicultural” versions of imperialism, then it also provides material for individuals and groups to begin to challenge essentialized versions of race and

Hentges–(In) Visible Fissures

ethnicity. Who is this “everyone” that would be “pissed off” if a white person won? At the very least, conversations about race are brought into mainstream American television in complex ways.

To return to the quotes I began with, it is important to consider how shows like *Survivor* can be used to accomplish social change and to envision “new imaginative approaches.” The “human problems of our times” are deeply implicated in imperial histories as well as in the modern contours of the globalized political economy. Since popular culture is such a powerful transmitter of these values and can sustain them across time and circumstance, shows like *Survivor* that replay these values and sustain them for capitalistic and imperial futures are key sites of intervention in larger systems of social, cultural, and political control. The ways in which we might disrupt, let alone restructure cultural, political, and economic systems are not as easy as we might like them to be, thus they are of the utmost concern for cultural critics and theorists, despite some skepticism regarding the potential transformative power of popular culture, let alone reality TV.³¹ We are not a “narrow” tribe even if our “tribe” is still marked by differences in power and privilege. The gaps that surface in American “multicultural” identity may allow us to think about new, more fluid ways to understand American culture and the role of the U.S. in the global political economy. There are many possible ways in which we can interrupt, intervene, decolonize, and play and experiment, not only to affect reality TV and U.S. culture, but dominant patterns and paradigms as well. These ways are not, of course, limited strictly to reality TV or popular culture; this is only one front where national consciousness is constructed and contested. The ways in which I have contextualized and critiqued *Survivor* here are only a small disruption which may help us to “understand and intervene in the national consciousness” and “create new combinations in looser bundles.” This oppositional disruption is ultimately a function of both literal and figurative survival.

Notes

1 Melville as quoted by Ronald Takaki in *Iron Cages*; Butler (2001); Zinn (1991); Huhndorf (2001)

Ethnic Studies Review Volume 31

2 See, for instance, Shari Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the Cultural Imagination*. (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2001); Karen Mary Davalos, *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001) and Robert Rydell. *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993)

3 Vrooman fails to fully consider the complexity of “American” identity and ideology as well as the contemporary implications of *Survivor*’s historical legacies and its implications in a post-9/11 America. In many ways, this was not an argument he could fully make at the time that his article went to press, but it is an argument he begins to make, mostly by considering *Survivor*’s decline in self-help narratives.

4 Braun also notes the difference between “embodied” and “virtual” risk, following Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1988). In this distinction he notes the “racial discourse” that connects the white subject to adventure travel “while the ‘virtual’ belongs properly to the poor, racialized subject whose relation to the world is thought to be completely mediated, passive, and lazy.” (201) While this is true of Braun’s discussion of “risk culture,” considering the role of the reality television show in U.S. culture, this “divide” is muddled.

5 Braun notes that he borrow this term from Edward Said (1994) and notes, “see also: Derek Gregory (1995).” Other critics have done important work toward these ideas like Ella Shohat.

6 Huhndorf, citing Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth*, connects “imperialist nostalgia” to the phenomenon of “going native.” (76)

7 Before filming *Survivor 2: The Outback*, the “indigenous owners of the land. . . were not consulted”; further, the Aborigines who appeared “in kangaroo skins and wielding spears were paid under-award wages” (Cooper). This is certainly not the only case where *Survivor* has taken advantage of loose international laws, corrupt governments, U.S. economic and political clout, or desperate post-colonial peoples. Further, *Survivor*’s technical requirements alone require accommodations for over 300 people and the production crews regularly use power boats and helicopters, even in the most remote areas.

8 One notable example, as previously mentioned, is China. However, tourism is still employed as, for instance, *Survivors* dine and camp overnight on the Great Wall of China.

9 As Braun notes, this role of entertainer is a typical role for the “Other” in a variety of contexts. And as Shari Huhndorf argues, gazing upon “displays of nativeness” viewers find “both entertainment and confirmation of white America’s dominance.” (201)

Hentges—(In) Visible Fissures

10 Interview w Jeff Probst. reaitytvrules.com
<http://www.tvrules.net/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=5854>
(accessed September 28, 2006)

11 And on *Survivor: The Amazon* Jenna and Heidi decided to wash their underwear and buffs in the pots designated for food (about 24 hours into their *Survivor* experience) instead of boiling water for drinking.

12 Despite the show's ironic parading of the natives and the landscapes as both sacred and important to the game, some contestants, like Scout (Vanuatu) or Tom (Palau) recognize, albeit in a new age kind of way, the beauty and importance of the spiritual traditions and peoples that inhabit the islands they are lucky enough, or rather privileged enough, to experience. It is luck, not privilege that is discussed. Thus, when the Red Berets come to show the *Survivors* how to live off the land in Thailand, or when a single indigenous man teaches similar lessons to the all-women tribe on *Survivor: Vanuatu*, or when the English-speaking fishermen of Palau teach the tribe to fish, this knowledge is needed for both immediate survival (or "survival") as well as to perpetuate the idea that the natives not only know more than Americans in this setting, but also know more about nature and control it in their own "mysterious" ways, ways that the colonizer cannot understand, but can take advantage of. More often, however, these invocations lead to shallow appropriations that become *Survivor*-specific rituals like "tribal council" and "immunity idols."

13 One notable exception here is the award-winning *The Amazing Race*, a reality TV game show that rivals *Survivor*'s longevity and trumps *Survivor*'s exploitation of peoples around the world. Contestants in this game must race to get back to the U.S. through a variety of challenges. Even when, like on *Survivor: Vanuatu*, some of the most authentic, though staged, rituals are included within the narrative of the show (as contestants were, for instance, included in a welcoming ritual and a festive meal and dance ceremony with real local fare and rituals), these attempts at authenticity are shadowed by the clearly tourist-oriented prizes like a helicopter ride for a picnic lunch on a volcano (where the contestants only ventured a few feet from the helicopter) and a horse-riding adventure to a prepared, and relatively luxurious, camp site. Both of the latter not only lack "authenticity," but are already pre-packaged in tourist-friendly forms like the contestants' trip to Jellyfish lake on *Survivor: Palau*. These are the "luxuries" for *Survivor* contestants and other first-world travelers/adventurers, including those viewers who will never undertake such expensive, ostentatious travels or adventures. Further, these are modern representations of the Other that first-world Americans can understand, accept, and fit within their fantasies.

14 In another example, "Asian" difference is marked, stereotypically, by food. For instance, when Shii-Ann, (one of the few Asian-Americans and first Chinese-American to be a *Survivor* cast member, and who returned as one of the only people of color on *Survivor: All-Stars*) ate a chicken neck in order not to waste food she was met with many disapproving words, sounds, and stares from her

Ethnic Studies Review Volume 31

tribemates. Perhaps she too closely resembled the people who eat the exotic fare of bugs and grubs that the contestants are often forced to eat on the “gross” food challenges, though she was certainly not the first or last Survivor contestant to be an outcast because of food preferences, nor was she the first or last whose difference made her a target. In fact, in the “American” context of the show, any difference is a reason for tribemates to be suspect of each other; they are, after all, only individuals competing for a prize. And in a twist to American individuality, the better one blends in, the better chance one has to go further in the game.

15 American products are used to provide “comfort foods,” even if these foods offer little or no nutritional value like the prize of Mountain Dew and Doritos, for instance, or Pringles and beer. This is a deliberate effect by advertisers; as Henry Jenkins argues, reality TV is “one of the primary testing grounds” for “new models of advertising that can grab the attention of commercial-skipping consumers,” especially since “early research suggests that actively engaged consumers recall advertising messages better than more casual viewers do.” In all of these ways, consumerism is intimately connected both with the show’s narrative, the game’s characteristics, and the show’s (and its related products’) consumption by viewers. “Digital Renaissance.” Resource Center: Convergence is Reality. Survivor Phoenix. 6 June 2003.

16 While I will discuss some such fissures in this paper, these gaps in gender are not my primary focus. However, it is worth noting that on many occasions the individual and collective performances of women in challenges has caused male contestants (and no doubt male viewers) to reassess their opinions of women as the “weaker” sex. Most notably, Stephanie of Survivor: Palau, was the only tribe member left after her team lost every immunity challenge (a first in Survivor’s history). Her last teammate, Bobby John, a fierce (but not so bright) competitor repeats several times what a great competitor Stephanie is and how she could beat any of the men. And she beat all the men on her tribe before getting voted off after the tribes merged.

17 This claim is contested starting in season 13, which I will describe shortly. Because season 13 divides contestants by “ethnicity” there are not only more Survivors of color, but there are also more Survivors who challenge narrow ideas about what it means to be an “American.” Case in point is the winner of season 13, Yul, and audience favorite Yau Man who will appear on season 16. Then again, as Asian Americans, both of these men could also be seen as “model minorities.”

18 It is “common sense” in America that one’s race is visible, even if it is visually indeterminant. In other words, race—a socially constructed idea with real implications—is defined in relationship to whiteness and is assumed to hold some essential character trait or traits.

19 In other words, “multicultural” often equates superficial inclusion of ethnic

Hentges—(In) Visible Fissures

minority/s traditions.

20 For instance, the winner of *Survivor: Palau* (season #10) Tom, very closely fits the archetypal American adventurer as well as the self-help model Vrooman describes. Further, Tom's eventual victory only reinforces the argument that women's "equality" is only a "self-congratulatory story of progress." Since Tom, a New York fire fighter, fits this mold, and since he is able to control and dominate the game in ways that no woman *Survivor* or *Survivor* of color has been able to do, his win only reinforces ideas of white supremacy and the white American as ideal. Of course, Todd's win in *China* shows that small, young (white) men can also dominate the game, albeit in very different ways.

21 The fourteenth season began with even more visual diversity than the thirteenth season; however, without the specific attention to race and ethnicity that framed the previous season, the "multicultural" American is posed in a different way—along a "first-world"/"third-world" or rich/poor dichotomy. After 19 *Survivors* built the most luxurious, equipped camp to date, the group was divided and the tribe that lost the immunity challenge went to a beach with only a pot and a machete while the winning team stayed at the shelter with plenty of food and water in addition to a couch, hammocks, and a toilet. While this split is representative of the growing class divide within the U.S. and around the world, it also harkens back to the colonizer/colonized dichotomy. But with fewer white *Survivor* contestants this season, is the "multicultural" American even more entrenched in the legacies of the past, or do the visible markers of racial and ethnic difference create a new American character? Regardless, *Survivor* contestants continue to disrupt their constructed American character. For instance, Dreamz, an African American cheerleading coach who speaks frequently about being homeless and how easy *Survivor* is compared to his real life, and Yau Man, who grew up in a "similar climate," both speak about being nearly "Native" to Fiji. Yau Man says he is "nearly native" while Dreamz says he's practically a "native Fujian, or Fijian." And this nativeness is contradicted by Lissi's claim that she is "Latin" so she knows that in Liliana's "little Mexican mind" she is "cooking something up." Perhaps it is contradictions such as those discussed here that reveal the true character of American "multiculturalism."

22 While *Survivor* continues to naturalize these notions; within its seemingly seamless narrative, fissures, such as those previously discussed, disrupt these notions. For instance, on *Survivor: Marquesas*, Matt worries that his ability to speak an "other" language might set him apart. Unlike his conversation partner, Daniel, who "looks Asian," Matt has white privilege that makes it easier for Matt to hide the things that make him different, like the fact that he was raised in Hong Kong. And Daniel notes that this fact makes Matt "more Asian" than him since Dan was born and raised in the states. As it turns out, Matt's desire to not make himself stand out is a smart move since Daniel is voted out relatively early while Matt makes it to the final two.

23 This fact is frequently noted in critiques of reality TV, including *Survivor*.

Ethnic Studies Review Volume 31

24 Of the few women of color on the show, none have been sexualized in the ways that the white women are sexualized. With the exception of Alicia and the women from season thirteen, most women of color are in their 30s or 40s, and are often professional women, mothers, and/or wives.

25 These bodies might be “better” for patriarchy and capitalism, but they are not better for surviving. This is an irony not lost on the audience, or even on Heidi, since she referred to herself as “Skeletor” and had to be hospitalized following the show. However, since both Heidi and Jenna’s bodies were rewarded by capitalism and patriarchy when they posed for Playboy, this irony is, perhaps, undercut. This narrative was extended throughout the show and in the commercials and was repeated and debated often. This episode (number 3) was not only expertly edited around the issue of youth/“beauty” versus age/jealousy and men versus women, but it was also spliced to perfectly match the commercial breaks that interrupted the narrative. For instance, one segment focused on the all-male tribe fishing and bonding. The commercials that followed this segment were for products like Coors Light, Outback Steakhouse, and the movie Old School. All of the commercials featured men. Another segment focused on the skinny, pretty girls bathing partially naked (which was heavily promoted) and the commercials featured products (make-up, clothing, hair products) that matched this narrative. All of these commercials featured women.

26 Braun, citing bell hooks (1996), notes that while “this is not the only way that the black body is represented within present-day visual cultures, it is surprisingly prevalent” (202). We might argue that season 15’s James, the gravedigger, was used in similar ways. Since James is also credited with the biggest strategical blunder in Survivor history—being voted out while holding both immunity idols—the physical prowess of Black men over their mental prowess is reinforced.

27 There are, however, many ways in which contestants can be humiliated and ways in which they can participate in their own humiliation. For instance, when Susan freaks out and accuses Richard Hatch of sexual harassment on Survivor: Allstars, she is ridiculed in different ways. Many contestants comment on her overreaction and no one talks about whether she was sexually harassed, at least not on the camera footage the audience sees.

28 Conversely, (white) bodies are also used to disrupt homophobic, if not patriarchal, racialized, or capitalistic posing. For instance, season one’s Rudy became notorious for his comments about winner Richard Hatch, the “fat, naked, queer,” a title Richard used to describe himself (and several other cast members used as well). Many viewers may have had their opinions about gay people challenged by Rich’s character or by Rudy’s ability to work with Rich. But this gap did little to challenge, for instance, Richard Hatch’s position of privilege as a (large, white, corporate, often naked) man who can afford to claim his “queer” identity, while also vying for mainstream approval and acceptance. And this gap especially did not challenge the corporate strategies that Hatch used to

Hentges–(In) Visible Fissures

manipulate people, and to win. Because of his race and class Hatch could be “queer” and not be a threat, but others do not have the luxury to control the ways in which their sexuality is portrayed and understood.

29 In “On the Raggedy Edge of Risk” Bruce Braun discusses “risk culture” as “a site of cultural politics” (179) and as a realm that is almost exclusively white and male. He notes that white women are permitted in this space of risk as a “self-congratulatory story of progress” (203), while the “black adventurer” is not allowed. Here, I am considering *Survivor* as a site of cultural politics and complicating the racial lens we use to determine who is and is not allowed to claim the identity of an American adventurer.

30 TV.com. Forum-Survivor-you & exile island (spoilers) (accessed on September 28, 2006)

31 From her research, Annette Hill (2005, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television*) argues that there is much skepticism surrounding the potential to learn from reality TV shows. I also encountered such skepticism when presenting a version of this paper at the National Association for Ethnic Studies conference. However, learning from reality TV is not different from learning from any other form of television, culture, or art.