



7-22-2022

## Diversity Casting Within Reality TV Competitions

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### Recommended Citation

Moore, Maximus, "Diversity Casting Within Reality TV Competitions" (2022). *Media and Communication Studies Summer Fellows*. 27.

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## Diversity and Representation in Reality TV Competitions

Maximus Moore

### **Introduction**

When I was a kid, there was a show that aired on Cartoon Network called *Total Drama Island*, in which twenty-two unique and diverse teenagers competed for money by participating in challenges and voting each other off until there was only one left standing. Not only was it thrilling to see who would stay safe and make it through each round unscathed, but the competitions were wacky and over the top like most other cartoons, appealing to my childlike humor. It was only a few years later that I had gotten word of the show being a satirical version of a pre-existing show called *Survivor*, where the contestants are real, genuine people instead of fabricated characters. It was only a matter of time until my enjoyment of this genre sprouted into a tree full of other battle royale-esque shows where random people from across the country would try to ‘outwit, outplay, and outlast’ each other. However, none of these shows were as intriguing to me as one in particular, one that had the players not stranded on an island, but locked in a house completely closed off from the outside world, with every move they make and every word they say recorded and documented. This show, of course, is CBS’ infamous Reality TV show *Big Brother*.

*Big Brother* originally began in the Netherlands, with a man named John de Mol, Jr starting the franchise back in 1999. Eventually the show would start sprouting in other countries, and as of August 2021 has amassed 500 seasons across 62 countries, with the United States version having twenty-three completed seasons as of July 2022. The name is derived from George Orwell’s classic dystopian novel *1984*, with the phrase “BIG BROTHER IS

WATCHING” appearing throughout the story to describe how the people of the world are always being secretly viewed by people working behind the scenes. This is also how the main idea of *Big Brother* works, as the contestants all must co-exist together, with over 100 cameras littered throughout each floor of the substantially large house. The goal of *Big Brother*, like most reality television competition shows, is to be the last person standing to win the grand prize that usually amounts to a boatload of cash (as of Season 23, the prize money has increased from \$500,000 to \$750,000). To accomplish this, you must make sure that you are not evicted from the house, therefore being eliminated. While this laissez faire type of gameplay is entertaining to a degree, Jennifer Pozner writes in her book *Reality Bites Back* that, “On a more subconscious level, we continue to watch because these shows frame their narratives in ways that both play to and reinforce deeply ingrained societal biases about women and men, love and beauty, race and class, consumption and happiness in America” (Pozner 17).

*Big Brother*’s episodes “frame their narratives” by editing in a way that gives the audience people to root for and root against, i.e. heroes and villains. With *Big Brother* villains, we see a wide range of antagonistic characters like Evel Dick from *Big Brother 8*, who purposefully tried to make everyone’s lives as miserable as possible while he lived with them. We also see strategic masterminds like Dan Gheesling who puppeteered his season and betrayed most of the house, but did it in a way where viewers praised him for it as Gheesling would keep it strictly about the game and not about the houseguests personally. Unfortunately, many *Big Brother* players end up getting edited as villains when in reality the only mean things they do are racist, sexist, and homophobic. These people make watching the live feeds and episodes unbearable as they treat the other houseguests as if they aren’t even human. Race has always been somewhat of an issue for reality television series, and one of the biggest issues has to do

with an imbalance of ethnicity in these show's casting, especially when it comes to *Big Brother*. But what do I mean by this? To make sure we're all on the same page, I'm going to give a brief overview of how each week of the game is formatted.

### **The Rules of *Big Brother* (US)**

Every week begins by crowning a new Head of Household (HoH), and this is done by competing in some form of challenge, whether that's mental, physical, etc. Once somebody wins the challenge, they are cannot be evicted for the rest of the week. They are also given the sole responsibility of "nominating" two other houseguests for eviction. In other words, they must decide which two people they would like to see go home. However, this does not mean the nominees have no way of saving themselves. The Power of Veto (PoV) Competition sends the HoH, the two nominees, and three randomly selected houseguests into another challenge where the winner gets to decide whether or not they would like to change one of the two nominees. If the PoV Holder does decide to change one of the nominees, (this could happen if they want to save an ally or even themselves) the HoH must nominate another Houseguest from the pool. Once this is over, the two nominees are locked and the rest of the house must decide which of the two they would like to send home. On Eviction Night, which is a live episode of the show that airs every Thursday night on CBS, everyone in the house barring the HoH and the two nominees privately cast their votes and one of the nominees is subsequently evicted from the house. With every eviction, a new HoH competition is held shortly afterwards, and the new week begins with another person earning the power. The outgoing HoH is not allowed to compete in the next HoH competition, which means no person can win twice in a row. This makes for some interesting gameplay, as power can constantly shift from one side to another. A houseguest may be powerless one week, but that can all be flipped upside down at the drop of a hat. This

everchanging flow of gameplay is one of the reasons I haven't been able to stop watching ever since I stumbled across the series for the first time.

*Big Brother* is split into two phases, the Pre-Jury and Jury Phase. The Pre-Jury Phase are the first five houseguests that are evicted from the house, and these players go straight back to their normal lives. The Jury Phase begins when there are eleven players remaining, and everybody that gets eliminated before the final two gets sequestered off to a special house where they live with the other jury members until the finale where they each cast a vote for who they'd like to win the season. Out of the 23 seasons so far, 19 winners have been white and 13 of those 19 winners have been male. With almost 60% of the *Big Brother* winners making up the same demographic, it becomes very telling that there's an inherent problem with how the casting is set up, and CBS adopted a new policy to increase diversity in its casting in 2020. In this paper, I will examine the different playstyles and uncover certain biases that players may exhibit in a more diverse vs less diverse season of reality tv competition shows. This includes analyzing both *Big Brother US* as well as *Survivor US*. The way I hope to achieve this is by dividing the seasons into two categories, pre and post-policy change, so the differences can be easily digested and understood. I will reference many of the articles and books I read in preparation for this paper, and even relay first person experiences from POC contestants that competed in the latest season, *Big Brother 23*.

As of November 2020, CBS had enacted a policy change to their casting process for future seasons. CNBC reported "On Monday, the network introduced an initiative that requires these shows to ensure that 50% of their casts are Black, Indigenous or People of Color, or BIPOC. Additionally, the network has committed to putting at least 25% of its development budget towards creators and producers who are BIPOC" (Whitten). This would allow for seasons

of *Big Brother* to have much better representation in their casting, which is something they have struggled with for decades and that I will touch on later. George Cheeks, CEO of CBS Entertainment group, added on that “The reality TV genre is an area that’s especially underrepresented, and needs to be more inclusive across development, casting, production and all phases of storytelling” (qtd. in Whitten). While CBS does a better and better job of making their channel more inclusive, we should also see better representation behind the cameras.

### **Casting Its Characters**

One of the reasons that *Total Drama Island* stood out from other shows at the time was the eccentricity of its characters. While most of them were one-note personalities that imitated stereotypes of players you’d see on other similar shows, every character had something about them that separated them from the other characters. It was easy to remember everyone’s names because they were all so different from each other, in both personality and design. Real *Survivor* for the most part also casts people that are distinct from each other, with people from all types of ethnic and social backgrounds appearing on season after season. One of the core ideologies of Reality TV Competition Shows is arranging people who would never interact with each other in their normal lives, put them under one roof, and see how they function together. In a way, these shows are like a social experiment with every season producing results that contrast the one prior. This “melting pot” of people also gives way for an abundance of representation that other shows may not be able to highlight as strongly. For example, Audrey Middleton was the first transgender contestant on *Big Brother 17* and was able to give a lot of insight on trans identity to not only the people on the show but to the fans outside of it. Moving to the cooking competition side of this genre, *MasterChef* Season 3 contestant Christine Hà was blind and ended up winning the entire season.

My point is, shows like these cast people from all walks of life and inspire younger generations that see people that look just like them. Speaking from personal experience as an African-American male, I would always find the Black male contestant and project myself onto them, hoping they would do well every time. With a show like *Big Brother*, whose purpose is to bring every kind of person around America to co-exist together, you would expect to see a diverse group of people ranging from different races, sexualities, religious and political beliefs. However, viewers are given the exact opposite of a diverse cast, with most of the seasons sheltering an overwhelmingly large majority of white players. The only semblance of diversity viewers *do* seem to get are the token black male/female characters, one LGBT contestant that is most often than not a gay male, and a singular Asian contestant as well, just to top it off. This unbalance of ethnicity sets a precedent for how the season will run, with most of the players of color getting eliminated before the Jury Phase even begins. The Pre-Jury eliminations further silence minority players from not even getting a chance to vote for the winner, like majority of the cast does.

As stated earlier, there was a recent policy change concerning the future of reality TV casting on CBS. Ideally, this would result in reality TV programming being less tokenistic and offering better representation now that they weren't casting four/five people that all lived in California. With the change happening a little over a year before writing this, we have been able to see two *Survivor* seasons, 41 and 42, and one *Big Brother* season, 23, air with a happy and healthy difference that was immediately present. These seasons will be the main focus of the post-casting policy change terrain, meaning every season before these fit in the pre-policy change category. Do not get me wrong, most of the *Big Brother* seasons are not more uninteresting than the recent ones just because of a shallow diversity pool. There is still excellent

gameplay, enjoyable characters, and I can't forget the constant screaming matches. Most hardcore fans of the series still believe that the best era of *Big Brother* was in its initial stages with the first seven seasons of the game. However, there was definitely an "unfairness" that the minority players have had to overcome every time they set foot into the house.

Many critics on Twitter and other forms of social media have said that there didn't need to be a change in how casting worked because white people are the majority in America, so they should be the majority in the house, as the show is supposed to be a microcosm of the country. This is shown in the statistics of players by race throughout the seasons. Robyn Kass, who used to be the woman behind *Big Brother's* casting, had been in charge for almost two decades and was probably the one to get all of the infamous characters we love today. Ragan Fox, a past houseguest on the show writes that, "Since Season 2, Robyn Kass and her team have brought together a diverse group of players who mirror United States' demographics. [As of 2016], Black and Asian people, for example, maintain 12.3% and 5% of the US population, respectively, and account for 13.3% and 4.6% of previous players" (Fox 7). Even if the statistics reflect how America looks, no player should have to enter the game with an immediate disadvantage solely due to them being the only minority in the house. It is basic human instinct to surround yourself with people that are similar to you, which makes it difficult for the token black characters to garner strong allies in the early weeks and not get picked off early. This doesn't just happen on a race front, though, there are many LGBT contestants in the past that have felt similarly ostracized from their peers.

### **The POC Experience on *Big Brother* (US)**

Ragan Fox, a contestant on *Big Brother* 12, notes in the book he published about his experience in the house that he was always aware of the fact that he was representing the entire



LGBT community on that season, as he was the only player that was gay aside from the woman who was evicted first. Even before coming onto the show, he says that he felt like he was “competing” for the sole gay spot. He wasn’t just vying for a spot on the cast against everybody, he knew that because of *Big Brother*’s tendency to cast only one gay character, he was also against all of the other LGBT people that applied as well. “I am auditioning to be Season 12’s sole gay character. To win a spot on the show, I should play the part,” Fox says when describing what it was like in the meat of the casting process (Fox 33).

Alison Hearn states that, “Characters on reality tv are lyophilized images of various types of ‘modern individuals’, versions of the everyday self, generated inside the structural limits set by reality television show producers and editors” (qtd. Fox 14). We can see this tendency to reduce cast members to types in two southern female contestants, Aaryn Gries from *Big Brother* 15, and Haleigh Broucher, from *Big Brother* 20. Aaryn, who played in her season first, was shown to be a very stereotypical version of a white, Texas girl, which is being unapologetically racist. This had *Big Brother* fans assuming that Haleigh, a girl who gave off similar first impressions to Aaryn, and also being from Texas herself, would be another carbon copy of these girls and was rated fairly low in the pre-season rankings across different forums online.

For some context, Aaryn was infamous on her season for the amount of derogatory comments she would hurl at her fellow housemates in front of their faces and behind the scenes. Judd, another houseguest on the season, comments on her behavior to his peers by saying, “Does she not know we’re on TV and shouldn’t say stuff like that?” Howard Overby, the sole male black houseguest, admits in a Diary Room confessional that, “I heard Aaryn say some derogatory comments to a couple people in the house in certain situations. Granted, it does affect me indirectly, but it’s not directed toward me.” When he says this, he is referring to her racist

remarks towards not only the African American people in the house, but to the Asian people as well. Helen Kim was the only Asian contestant on the season, which made her even more isolated than anyone else. Eventually she would catch wind of Aaryn saying that she should, “Shut up and go make some rice.” She also told a fellow houseguest that she looks, “probably, like, a squinty Asian right now.” Aaryn would even make homophobic remarks about season’s victor Andy Herren, saying that “no one (America) is going to vote for whoever that queer puts up.”

*Big Brother 15* would go down as one of the most controversial seasons in the show’s history, and most of it was due to the constant harassment of the POC players, who ended up leaving fairly quickly in their season, which is less surprising than it is upsetting. Howard Overby became the final Pre-Jury evictee while Candice Stewart, the sole female Black contestant, left the week after him, becoming the first juror of the season. Helen Kim, the only other POC contestant besides Howard and Candice, left two weeks after Candice, although many *Big Brother* superfans have speculated that she was “pushed” out of her season, meaning that she was rigged out of one of the competitions and eliminated because of it. Andy Herren, winner of the season, was the only gay contestant from the cast, and ended up winning next to GinaMarie Johnson, another player who was known for her questionable viewpoints across the season similar to Aaryn.

What’s interesting to note is that while Andy received homophobic comments from his peers, he was still able to make it well through the jury phase of the game, while other minority players like Howard, Helen, and Candice were voted out before the halfway mark. So how is this possible? One of the main factors definitely has to do with the fact that Andy is one of the white players, meaning that he will always have that one connection with the majority of the house and

can 'blend in' much easier, whereas the minority players are always going to have that obvious difference in skin tone. It certainly makes you question the integrity behind the production team's casting decisions and what goes into it. Going back to Ragan Fox's book on his experience, he notes that the producers base their casting criteria partially on current trends going on in America. "*Big Brother's* production team is plugged into the United States zeitgeist and often follows trends started by other popular reality TV programs. It is no coincidence that Enzo was cast on BB a mere six months after MTV's Italian American-oriented reality show *Jersey Shore* became a headline-catching, ratings hit" (Fox 44). You can also see this ring true with Donny Thompson, an old kind soul with a large beard from *Big Brother 16* (2014) that aired around the peak of *Duck Dynasty's* popularity. Also, one of the driving forces behind CBS' decision to update their casting policy was definitely due in part to George Floyd's murder that occurred in May of 2020, half a year before the change was enacted.

With the early 2000s of reality TV still being quite unfiltered, it seemed as though they could get away with a lack of diversity as back then its importance wasn't as heavily emphasized in our society. Due to this, the portrayal of many minority characters were treated more stereotypically than the other contestants. In Fox's book, he describes his season's intro packages where you get a 1-2 minute introduction to each player, and how his portrayal differed from the rest. "Britney tearfully hugs goodbye to her father, Matt kisses his wife, Lane embraces his mother, Enzo holds his baby daughter, the gay guy bids farewell to his dog" (Fox 49). Fox makes the claim that due to his sexuality, production would have rather shown him with an animal or without a same-sex partner rather than with his family or a loved one like the other contestants on his season. "Network reality shows tend to cast only one gay male character a season, so it is rare to see sexual minorities involved in a romantic coupling (or 'showmance'), or engage in any

sex act that might be marked as gay” (Fox 54). Kristen Warner, on the subject of fictional programming says that, “Casting addresses difference explicitly because no two actors are the same. The difference between them has to be contemplated so that the ‘better’ actor will earn the role” (Warner 7). For veterans in the casting process, there’s a term that’s thrown around fairly commonly called “blindcasting,” which is casting people of any race to fill the role of a character. In theory this sounds like a great idea, however it strips the foundation of ethnicity and culture if you are making a black actor play the role of a white guy. Warner explains, “Blindcasting became a useful tool because it allowed showrunners and television writers to avoid explicitly writing race into the script with the confidence such actions could create equal opportunity for actors of diverse backgrounds” (Warner 13). So, it seems that the easy solution to this problem would just to be to increase the diversity and make sure that there are people from every part of the country. However, this begins to raise even more questions, like “are they casting the people with the best application or are they just trying to fill a quota?”

### **Racial Division on *Survivor: Cook Islands***

Like I’ve mentioned previously, *Survivor* has done a good job in their casting process, and the best example of their achievement ironically deals with their most controversial season, *Survivor: Cook Islands*. In this season, the castaways (contestants) were split into four tribes (teams) all separated by race: African-American, Latinx, Asian-American, and Caucasian. At the beginning of the first episode, once they are all on their boats, there are confessionals where the new castaways describe their feelings towards their newfound realization of the tribes being split between races. Ozzy, one of the finalists of the season says, “My first thought when I saw the tribes were split along racial lines was...’God, this is gonna be hard.’ Just because I feel like as a people that have the same ethnicity, maybe we’ll kinda clash on things.” Immediately the season

is set up to be a clash of different races, with the notion that just because of their different skin color there is an instinctual rivalry among humans. Sundra, an African-American woman, disregards the racial divisions as nothing more than a part of the game. “I could care less about divisions of ethnicity. When it comes to surviving, it’s a human effort” she says in a confessional. Cecelia, on the other hand, sees the division as a chance at something more, claiming that “this is a unique opportunity to represent our community in a positive way.”

Once the castaways are all with their team, the viewers begin to see the internal and external issues that arise on each tribe. The Puka Tribe (Asian-American Tribe) is still paddling to their designated island, and Cao Boi begins making stereotypical remarks about Asian people’s height and weight. This upsets some of the members who tell Cao Boi to stop making assumptions based on race. He continues on, saying that it’s due to all of the rice they eat. Cao Boi is set up to be the pariah of the tribe and is edited in a way that makes him seem like a crazy, potentially racist old man. He goes on to say in a later confessional that “Nobody suspects these little people with slanted eyes to see anything or to be strong enough to do anything or maybe not even speak English. People always underestimate the Asian.” Cao Boi continues to paint this narrative about how Asians are represented in the world, and while he may think that wording it like this is okay, it allows more ignorant people watching to assume that that’s what the majority of people are like. In a later episode, Yul, the winner of the season tries to explain to him by saying that “If you’re making jokes based on racial prejudice or stereotypes, it’s just going to confirm it in people’s minds that don’t know any better.” This is confirmed in many seasons of *Big Brother*, with certain contestants growing up in isolated parts of the country and never really learning about what anything outside of their little bubble is truly like. Rebecca, on the African-American Tribe, furthers this unfortunate thinking by saying in a confessional “It makes me feel

like because we are divided by race now we have to step up to the plate and show that yes, Black people can swim, Black people can get on a boat and paddle. I mean, we don't just run track!"

While the concept of dividing people into different races is an interesting idea, *Survivor* chooses to instead withdraw the concept fairly early into the season, when they swap tribes at the beginning of Episode 3. When it comes to balancing diversity in casting, it's important to make sure that certain groups aren't underrepresented or misrepresented. Just looking at the Asian-American Tribe, Jenny says that "I'm Filipino, Yul is Korean, Becky is Korean, Brad is mixed-Filipino-Hawaiian, and Cao Boi is Vietnamese. We're a mixed group ourselves within the Asian community." A side effect of poor diversity is the feeling that many minority players have when they enter the game. The feeling of doing well not only for oneself and one's family, but for one's entire race that's watching and possibly projecting themselves onto the cast members they see, hoping that a win for them is a win for everyone. Stephannie furthers this idea by saying "I believe we all feel the pressure to represent and that just means it's just being able to represent us, our people, the African American Culture."

### **Diversity and Controversy**

David Alexander, the sole African-American male player of *Big Brother 21*, went into the game wanting to be an inspiration for young black viewers watching to see that, yes, somebody that looks like them *can* win a season of *Big Brother* and it's not impossible. Unfortunately, he was not only eliminated first, but all of the minority players of that season were eliminated back-to-back, all in the Pre-Jury phase. David Alexander, Ovi Kabir, Kemi Falknule, and Isabella Wang were the only semblance of minority in the cast, and they were all eliminated right at the beginning of the season. That season is widely regarded in the *Big Brother* fan community as one of the worst due to the sheer number of instances involving some form of

racism and sexism. Jackson Michie, the winner of the season, was called out by Julie Chen-Moonves, host of the show, on his questionable comments throughout the season. He is just one of many of the same archetype of winner that most of the seasons get, and that season is just another reminder of the importance and necessity that is diverse representation in shows like these.

Richard Kilborn states that, “In *Big Brother*, you have this brilliantly formatted balance of power at the core of it, where I as a producer can intervene only to a certain amount; where the people in the house can determine their fate only to a certain point; and the audience controls things, but not completely. So, there’s this strange triangle of control which makes everyone feel they participate in it much more” (59). This quote begs the question on the exact amount that production can intervene in a certain season without the audience classifying their intentions as “rigging.” In Season 19 of *Big Brother*, Paul Abrahamian was the sole returning houseguest as he had lost the season before as runner-up. With most returnee seasons, unless the cast is only returning players there’s usually four players that come back to compete, as seen in both *Big Brother* 14 and 18. When the first day of Season 19 aired, we were told that Paul was able to give eight people in the house ‘friendship bracelets’ that gave them safety for the first week of the game. To anybody watching, this gave off the impression that the one person that returned was able to gain half the house as a potential ally solely because production gave them the opportunity to. This seemed incredibly unfair to give this type of power to *any* type of player in the house, and we soon were made aware of how game-breaking of a power this was, with Paul taking over the entire game and once again making it all the way to the Final 2, two years in a row. Production tried to give Paul their “deserved” win (which is a privilege they have never allowed to anybody black), but not only did he end up becoming the head of a mob mentality

that formed in the house that would isolate and bully their intended target for the week, but he ended up losing *again*. In the same spot, with the same score, 5-4, in the same chair. The audience wasn't even included on whether or not we wanted to see him again to begin with, which is what they did for Season 7, where the viewers could vote on which houseguests they'd want to see return for the All-Star season.

Now, it's not like playing antagonistically isn't allowed in the game of *Big Brother*. In fact, part of what makes it so entertaining to people is that normal things that are taboo in our society, like lying, manipulation, backstabbing, are rewarded. Once again Kilborn notes that, "Acts of betrayal are, in other words, par for the course in reality game-docs! This introduces an additional measure of drama and suspense to the proceedings – not unlike the one that spectators of earlier gladiatorial combats presumably experienced – as viewers begin to anticipate which contestant will be the next to suffer the ignominy of rejection and defeat" (Kilborn 76). There are many iconic villains across the seasons that are known as villainous for their gameplay moves, not the rude comments they make to their peers. The sole African American woman of Season 19, Dominique Cooper, had a very controversial eviction at the Pre-Jury phase of the season. It wasn't uncommon for black players to get eliminated during the beginning of every season, however because of making each eliminated contestant a social pariah in the house, her treatment was much worse than many other players that suffer similar fates. There was even discussion of wearing 'black-face' to the eviction night. CBS' decision to fix how casting is handled for their reality shows seems like it was too little, too late for most minority players. Personally, I am glad that there even *was* a change in the first place, as now the increase in diversity has also increased the entertainment from both *Survivor* and *Big Brother*.

### **The Impact and Importance of *Big Brother* 23 (US)**



Following the policy change in November 2020, we were granted the newest season of *Big Brother* a few months afterward in July, with *Big Brother 23*. Off of first impressions alone, viewers would have seen a major difference between this season and the other with the amount of diversity. Instead of there being only two black players, viewers saw six of them with a few being biracial. We were also given four LGBT contestants as well as our first ever Indian houseguest. It was surreal to see that *Big Brother* had been able to amass such an interesting looking cast, and when the game started the fans knew that this would be a season that nobody would be able to forget. On Day 1, all of the black people got together and told themselves that an opportunity to have all of them work together for the first time wouldn't come every season, and that if they were going to crown the first ever Black winner of the show, they were going to need to do it then. Tiffany Mitchell, Derek Frasier, Hannah Chaddha, Kyland Young, Xavier Prather, and Azah Awasum created the "Cookout" alliance, and secretly ran the entire game until they successfully reached the final six and confirmed that an African-American would win the season. It was fantastic to watch, and the way that each member of the alliance had to play almost three different kinds of games in the house to shield this secret alliance is a testament to how amazing and influential this alliance will continue to be for years. Even with the start of the newest season, *Big Brother 24* which aired at the beginning of July 2022, we have already seen black players from this season explain that their reasoning for signing up in the first place was due to the Cookout's success.

While researching this paper, I had the opportunity to interview a couple members of the Cookout alliance and ask them what it was like to play, as well as getting insight on the future of *Big Brother* and what the landscape would look like for the black players that get cast. Hannah Chaddha, the youngest player on her season, said when asked about what it was like during the

casting process, "There's not a lot of diversity behind the camera. There's only one black person that's an executive producer. So, I guess that made it extra intimidating going into my final rounds of the interview and casting process. Because I felt like, 'Well, what if I say something and they just can't relate? Or they don't understand, or they feel like I'm being *too* black. What do they expect from me as a black woman?' So there were definitely a lot of questions and worries there. But what I did appreciate was the fact that they were like, 'No we want to show that you are unlike anybody we've ever had on the show.'"

When I heard this, I was thankful that she wasn't stereotyped due to her skin color, but instead praised for her interests, like her education and her passion for dancing. This was unlike Ragan Fox's time during the casting process, as he felt as though exaggerating his "gayness" would increase his chances of getting cast. One of the main issues that people feel will affect the future of *Big Brother* is that every contestant from here on out will play it as a "race game," and potentially assume that because all of the black people last season secretly worked together and were successful, that it would continue to happen season after season.

With this in mind, I was worried that future black players would be targeted even harder than they were previously, as people would want to nip the chance of it happening twice in the bud. When I brought this up to Kyland Young, he said that, "'I think that is absolutely gonna be a factor, at least in the near future for Season 24. I'm very curious on how they're going to approach it. The one thing we (The Cookout) were adamant about in interviews was that we would never have done that for the fact that they (*Big Brother*) had never had a Black Winner. Another byproduct [of the Cookout] could be that immediately people distance themselves from each other strategically and be advocates for trying to get each other out.'" While the new season of *Big Brother* 24 has only just begun, the first week's nominations have already been revealed

and we can see the old African-American contestant had been nominated. Even though the intention of putting Terrance up for eviction had nothing to do with race, you can see fellow Black players are hesitant on keeping him in. Ameerah Jones, another black player this season, said to a fellow houseguest, "I don't know if anyone is working with Terrance. He never tried to speak game with me at all. I think the people of color are afraid to talk game with each other, 'cause of last season." We are already seeing the consequences of the Cookout in future seasons, however this is just a tiny blip so far and may not have any lasting implications, as said before this is only happening in the first three days of the new season.

### **Modern Day *Survivor*(s)**

Following the end of a *Big Brother* season at the beginning of Fall, we are treated with a brand new season of *Survivor*. *Survivor* usually airs two seasons in a year, with one airing in the Fall and the other in the Spring. For the Fall season, we were given *Survivor* 41, and once the merge portion of the game hit (when teams are dissolved and it's everyone for themselves) we saw the four black players remaining in the game try and create their own version of the Cookout. The most interesting thing about this is that this season was being filmed before Season 23 of *Big Brother*, which means that in both seasons the black people felt the need to work together for a greater cause. To me, this speaks volumes about how black players and other POC are treated in reality games like these. The key difference between the two black alliances is that the Cookout alliance prospered in the house while the *Survivor* version was swiftly destroyed and we saw three of the four players get eliminated back to back. So what was the issue? Kyland Young agreed with me that it had to do with the duration of knowing each other in the game, as well as the fact that *Survivor* had already crowned Black winners in the past. He says that "My belief is that it literally comes down to the history element. For us, no matter how somebody was

feeling it always came back to, 'Hey guys, we have an opportunity to make history here in a huge way,' and I think that trumped everything. Because in *Survivor*, they already had Black winners.”

When it came to *Survivor* 42, while the Black players weren't aligned together we did see a unique development arise in one of the Tribal Councils. This is the *Survivor* elimination area, and when the two black women on the other tribe got word that one of the other black players was blindsided at the tribal beforehand, they both knew that they couldn't vote each other out anymore, regardless of what the original plan was. Not only would it be much harder to navigate their way through the game when they so obviously stand out from the rest, but as African Americans themselves they knew that if they voted each other out it would set an example for future players watching the seasons. So both female players have an iconic moment of walking up to Jeff Probst, the host of the show, and giving him their immunity idols which would grant them safety for the Tribal and make them unable to be eliminated. It was a very powerful scene, and one of the two women involved in it, Maryanne Oketch, was later crowned the winner of the season, making her the first black female winner of *Survivor* since Vecepia Towery, who won in Season 4.

### **Two Steps Forward, Three Steps Back**

As of writing this, the 24<sup>th</sup> season of *Big Brother* had begun at the beginning of July and has already been at the front of countless articles detailing the controversy that has befallen the new cast. Taylor Hale, an African American woman has been shamelessly mocked, bullied, and scrutinized for actions she falsely committed. Thanks to contestant Paloma Aguilar, the house developed a mob mentality against Hale and would spout constant microaggressions about her. Racquel Gates believes that, “The strategy of casting participants from diverse backgrounds in order to create an interesting program carries with it opportunities for moments that do not

adhere to the expected norms or conventions concerning performance of racial identities, and that cannot be wholly controlled by the very sophisticated production methods that these shows employ” (143). The term “expected norms” in the previous quote is the nice way of calling them stereotypes, which is something that black women face the most out of any marginalized community. There are entire shows centered around the “angry black woman stereotype,” as seen with the many *Real Housewives* series as well as more competition-based shows like *Flavor of Love*. The *Big Brother 24* house has been spouting different “worries” they have about Hale that stem from nothing but their own subconscious biases. Do I believe that anybody on this cast is wholeheartedly racist and the casting team dropped the ball? Of course not, but whatever types of racial bias training that CBS and *Big Brother* give to the incoming players cannot be enough to cease this incessant occurrences.

For added context, fellow houseguest Joe “Pooch” Pucciarelli assumed that, “Whoever puts her [Taylor] up, it's gonna be a loud week. A loud f\*\*\*\*\* week.” As of Pucciarelli saying this, not even a week had passed in the game and Hale had given no signs of reacting aggressively in non-beneficial situations. Daniel Durston, first HoH of the season and one of the ringleaders of the tirade, says the most disheartening things compared to the rest of his castmates. He says to his alliance that, “I know people like her, and if it’s similar experiences, someone like that, as you guys probably know too, is only gonna try to stir up more shit on purpose.” Durston also admits that he dislikes Hale to an uncomfortable extent, saying that “I can't stand her cause she's stalking me and I don't trust a thing she says. So forgive me if I throw her on slop. She doesn't deserve to live normal right now. I'm not living normal, cause she's stalking my ass.” When the entire point of *Big Brother* is a social game confined in one house for three months straight, seeing the same person all of the time is not “stalking”. If he, along with

the other houseguests on the season, actually got to know Hale instead of chocking it up to “knowing people like her” and that being the reason for so much hesitance, all of those negative rumors surrounding her could begin to fade. Nevertheless, the first week of *Big Brother 24* ended with two black people sitting on the chopping block, which was extremely disappointing to see considering this season is coming off the back of such a historic moment for the series.

In my interview with Hannah Chaddha, she touched on the concerns of black players that are trying to get onto the show. She says that "*Big Brother* is supposed to be a microcosm of the real world. So all social and socioeconomic factors that impact us in real life also impact us in that house. What's the purpose of leaving my life home if I'm not gonna make it past jury? Because historically minorities don't even make it to jury." Taylor Hale and Terrance Higgins, the two black players on eviction night, ended up being saved that week due to Aguilar's unforeseen exit. If it had not been for that, we would have repeated this cycle of mistreated POC in this game. When speaking with Kyland Young, I asked him what the consequences of the Cookout may look like on the future of *Big Brother*, and if black players should be more worried about working with each other going forward. Young says, "I think that is absolutely gonna be a factor, at least in the near future for Season 24. I'm very curious on how they're going to approach it. The one thing we (The Cookout) were adamant about in interviews was that we would never have done that for the fact that they (*Big Brother*) had never had a Black Winner. Another byproduct [of the Cookout] could be that immediately people distance themselves from each other strategically and be advocates for trying to get each other out." While the situation this season has turned into something sour, seasons down the road should hopefully see the mistakes and build upon them to make for a better environment.

## Conclusion

All in all, I believe that diverse representation in reality TV shows is a necessity to be able to impact future players, as well as to make it so that minority players in the game themselves aren't immediately targeted for something they cannot control and never be given the chance to actually succeed. In a game that is meant to be a microcosm of society, it's almost unsurprising how the dominant players are mostly straight, white, male players. As the rest of *Big Brother 24* plays out, viewers and live feeders alike will have the opportunity to see what Taylor Hale's fate will be, and we can only pray that it is free of torment. I am hoping that this trend of better diversity in these casts continues for years, and I have a feeling that it will start to look better behind the scenes as well in their production department. I have been inspired time and time again by rooting for my favorite players on the screen, and that lets me know that there are thousands of other people like me, just waiting to see a version of themselves they can project onto.

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