

Running Head- 39 days, 20 people, 1 Survivor: 21 Years Later

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Opening

Throughout 40 seasons. 38 winners. 24 men and 14 women have claimed the title of Sole Survivor. In order to critique and analyze the complex game of *Survivor*, first there has to be an understanding of what *Survivor* is and how it works. *Survivor* premiered on May 31, 2000 and almost instantly became a national phenomenon. With the finale of the first season gaining 51 million viewers. The idea of people stranded on an island and being forced to take each other out, felt as though it was something straight out of Hollywood. However, it was, and still is, all real. *Survivor* is the cornerstone of all modern reality television shows. Without the success of *Survivor* most other reality shows would simply not exist. Shows such as *The Circle*, *Big Brother*, *The Challenge*, *The Amazing Race* and even shows with dissimilar formats such as *Project Runway* or *The Voice*. None of these shows would be as popular or maybe even on air, would it have not been for the popularity of *Survivor*. Ever since the finale of season one of *Survivor*, reality shows have been among the top-rated television programs (Christenson & Ivancin, 2006).

The show begins with a set number of castaways, between sixteen and twenty. Those castaways are then split into even-numbered teams, called tribes. There are typically two tribes with eight, nine or ten people; or three tribes with six people on each. These tribes then compete in challenges, and whoever loses must then vote out one of their own tribe members. The voting process takes place at what is called 'Tribal Council,' where each member will secretly write down who they want to eliminate and whichever person gets the most votes will be removed from the game. Eventually, the tribes will come together into one merged tribe. From that point forward, the castaways will compete in challenges to win individual immunity, that person will not be eligible to get their name written down at tribal council, and the voting procedure remains the same. This continues on until there are either two or three people left in the game. Once that number, depending on the season, of contestants is reached the show then hosts a 'Final Tribal Council'. During the final tribal council the finalist will talk to the jury. The jury consists of previously eliminated players in that season, typically only the most recently eliminated seven through nine castaways. Those players, as the jury, will then vote on who they want to win the game, of the finalist. Whichever castaway receives the most votes from the jury is then given the title of 'Sole Survivor' and the grand prize of one million dollars, that goes along with it.

Examination Through Criticism Devices

Auteur Theory

In layman's terms the auteur theory can be described as a creative's mark on a project identifying it as their own. In terms of *Survivor*, while I am aware that there are hundreds of people who work to create this show, I would identify Jeff Probst, host and executive producer, as the auteur of *Survivor*. Mr. Probst has been known to favor men in the show over women. In addition, it is clear he supports more typically masculine-styles of game play over more typically feminine-styles of game play. In interviews he often has said he thinks the winners of Amber Birch, Natalie White, and Michele Fitzgerald were some of the most undeserving in the history of the show. Something these women have in common is that they won mainly due to their social game. Their ability to make friends and allies with the people they were voting out. These women do not have many, if any, 'big moves' to their names, simply being more likeable than the people sitting next to them at the end of the game. Conversely, Jeff Probst has praised men who have won the game due to their physical strength or major strategic prowess. Even women who have won by being strategic powerhouses do not get the same praise from Probst.

Hero, AntiHeroes, and Journeys

First, to discuss J.T. Thomas, winner of *Survivor: Tocantins*. J.T.'s story to the *Survivor* crown most closely resembles that of a storybook hero, prince, or knight. The reason behind this comparison comes from how J.T. was able to claim the title of Sole Survivor. Early on in the game, J.T. and Stephen created a tight alliance. The two were able to stay under-the-radar as an alliance for a while as J.T. was a good ol' country boy while Stephen was a know-it-all nerd, two people that others would not suspect to be close. Through the entire season, J.T. was able to have everything go his way. People wanted to be a part of plans that included J.T. and someone even said that having J.T. win would be just as satisfactory as himself winning. Sitting next to Stephen in the final two, J.T. was able to claim victory as only the second ever winner to receive every single vote from the jury. A few seasons later J.T. came back to play on *Survivor*'s twentieth season subtitled 'Heroes versus Villains' and while everyone else on J.T.'s tribe was a heroic figure, no one could hold a candle to J.T.'s hero journey.

Next, to discuss anti-heros in *Survivor*. Someone like Parvati, winner of season sixteen, was able to gain the respect of her jury while playing a cutthroat game. Additionally, my favorite winner, Sophie Clarke, also fits this category very well. She was an anti-hero who joined forces with villains in order to sit with them at the end in order to win the million dollars. She played deviously but knew she was the best amongst the people she played against. Sophie was able to be feisty and sharp-tongued, was even called spoiled during the final tribal council, but had the self-awareness and intelligence to drag more unlikeable players with her to the finale of her season. Finally, Sophie Clarke was able to play a 'masculine' style of game through a feminine looking glass. She was the leader of her alliance, without ever appearing as so; dragged two villainized contestants with her to the end, a concept aggressive male players have been credited with designing; all while being a young woman (twenty-two) and playing the anti-hero role perfectly.

Mike Holloway is the winner of the thirtieth season of this show. Mike exemplifies the concept of journeys through his incredible story to being named the victor. Holloway was in the majority alliance post-merge but decided to change alliances to the minority after someone in his alliance bullied a member of the opposite group. Bullying, as in a man told a woman that her boyfriend and parents probably don't actually love her, and that no one at all loves her back home. Mike was appalled at his words and how no one else from his group took action or spoke up. While it gave Mike a more difficult path to win, he decided to join the minority alliance. Eventually, Mike made it to the final tribal council and was voted the winner of this season.

Sexism in *Survivor*

Patriarchy

An example of a patriarchal mindset comes from the show's eleventh season, *Survivor: Guatemala*. The final two of this season were two women, Danni Boatwright and Stephanie LaGrossa. Danni was a scrappy underdog who made her way to the end through social manipulation, and Stephanie was the leader of the majority alliance through the entire game who used her strategic prowess to achieve her spot in the final two. The game seemed like it was up in the air, Danni and Stephanie played dramatically different games, but equally impressive. When the jury went to question the finalist, they ripped Stephanie apart. Despite Stephanie being a strong, strategic player all season, her most trusted ally was a man. The jury claimed that Stephanie's male counterpart, Rafe, did all the work in the alliance and Stephanie did not deserve the credit. Meanwhile, Danni was alone for the latter-half of the game and the jury praised her for making it to the end. Stephanie only gained one vote to win, from Rafe, and Danni was

crowned the winner. The jury saw Stephanie as less than because she was a woman working with a man, and the jury had assumed that Rafe was the real brains behind Stephanie the whole game. Seeing men as superior, specifically smarter, is something believed to do the patriarchal mindset that many people have, because they were raised in a society that taught them to think in that certain way.

Stereotypes and Gender Performance

Next, to take a look into stereotypes and gender performance, and how they affect the women playing *Survivor*. For stereotypes in particular, the final tribal council is an excellent example on where stereotypes are seen. Dawn Meehan, finalist on *Survivor: Caramoan*, made the final tribal council along with her closest alliance partner, John Cochran. While Cochran was praised for cutting throats and being deceitful, Dawn was not. The jury members talked about how hurt they were by Dawn, how they saw Dawn as a mother and they felt as though their own mother backstabbed them. Dawn was told she hurt people and was weak, meanwhile Cochran was told he was a stand-up guy and that he grew as a person.

Objectification

In season thirty-nine there was a major problem with a male contestant inappropriately touching the women that were playing with him, specifically Kellee Kim. Kellee repeatedly asked this male contestant to stop touching her, and yet he continued. Kellee told the problem to the producers of the show, and instead of removing the male contestant from the game, the producer asked her what she wanted to do in this situation. Kellee said she could handle the situation, that she did not want him removed from the game. Since *Survivor* is a social game at the base, having this contestant removed from the game would have caused many riffs in the social dynamics. After Kellee was eliminated, the other women in the game talked to this male contestant about how they did not feel his touching was inappropriate, making the situation worse, as they had been seen telling other contestants it made them uncomfortable. Eventually, this contestant was removed from the game at the final six, and did not receive a spot on the jury. In the time frame of the show, the audience did not learn why the contestant was officially removed, only that there had been an “off-camera incident” (*Survivor: Island of the Idols, Just Go For It*) After the season wrapped, it is released that this contestant touched the leg of a woman who is a producer on the show. Unfortunately, this behavior was “a pattern” as said by Kellee Kim (Scott, 2019), he only viewed the women he was around as objects and there for his pleasure.

Crowning a Sole Survivor

Survivor is marketed as a family show. During the live reunion episodes that occur at the end of every modern season of the show, Jeff Probst often comments on how great it is that people sit down and watch this show with their entire family. He will typically also say something ‘directly’ to any kids watching that in a couple of years they can play *Survivor* and be just like *insert fan-favorite male player here.* The issue with all of this, and why the increased marketing tactic as branding *Survivor* as a family show leads to the influx of male winners is mainly in part to catering the show to a younger audience.

Also during these live reunion episodes, Probst will often point out the typical ‘physical-game’ focused man (Joe Anglim, Woo Hwang, Malcolm Freberg, the list goes on...) and how kids who watch the show are often drawn to this type of player. As the people the show seems interested in catering towards children, the show obviously wants more physically gifted men to become winners. However, this is making the show less compelling and more predictable to watch as a viewer, as the show is becoming fairy-tale-like. If Disney villains are all women,

then *Survivor* villains must also be women. Since the knight in shining armor always saves the day, he must be the one win over the jury.

Shows like *The Circle* on Netflix and *The Challenge* on MTV are also season-long reality competition shows. The difference is these two shows cater to the prime eighteen through thirty-four age-range audience. These shows are just as interesting and dynamic as *Survivor*, and are basically the modern equivalent to water-cooler television. *Survivor*, in its early days, was the pinnacle of water-cooler tv. Yet, has chosen to stray away from that in replace of simpler storylines and easier to disgust champions.

Representation and Diversity

As written previously, six of the most recent winners are men, and five of those men are cishet and white. There is nothing inherently wrong with a cishet white man winning *Survivor*, the problem is that so many have won in such a small period of time. Looking deeper into this has revealed some truths about structure and format changes of the show that have left BIPOC and women at a disadvantage.

Announced in early November of 2020, CBS vowed that at least 50% of their casts on unscripted series will consist of BIPOC, and this includes *Survivor*. This has obviously been a fantastic announcement and change that has been implemented in the current season of *Survivor*.

I was actually lucky enough to be able to interview a *Survivor* contestant recently and pick her brain on topics such as this. During my interview with Mrs. Lauren Ashley-Beck, a black woman who played on season thirty-nine and finished in fourth place, we had a fantastic discussion on this topic. She talked about how she hoped that this change will lead to more people of color wanting to play *Survivor* and result in more POC winning and excelling in the game. She also told me how she hopes this will someday extend to the people behind the camera. Lauren told me how she wants to see more women and more black individuals specifically behind the camera, especially in the editing room. Ashley-Beck spoke on how the editors of *Survivor* are 30,40- something aged white people. People who have never lived or experienced situations similar to hers. She said that those people had no clue how to tell her story, but knew how to tell Tommy's story. Tommy Sheehan, a twenty-six year old white man, was Lauren's partner-in-crime on the season, but received most of the credit for the duo's game moves. In our conversation we talked about other male-female duos in the show's history. In every example, the show painted the man as the better player of the two people. Meanwhile, a duo of two men are more likely to be seen as equals through the editing of the show. Lauren had no idea why it was so "unfathomable" that she could have been controlling Tommy throughout the game. All around, the playing field needs to be leveled for women and people of color. We are lucky to live in a time where we are seeing that in front of the camera, and now it is time to live through the time where it is the same in all aspects behind the scenes.

Finally, in my second-semester of freshman year I wrote a research paper numerically calculating the diversity and representation rates of *Survivor*. These numbers strongly back up all the points I have made throughout this paper. Also, I have barely touched on LGBT+ players and winners of *Survivor*. The show has not had a gay winner in over ten years. This problem could be caused by the fact the greatest number of LGBT+ people on one season of *Survivor* was three. I am a bit surprised that the show has not tried to increase that number as the devastating past it has in dealing directly with LGBT+ storylines. My hope is that more members of the LGBT+ community will be cast, specifically trans individuals as they have the most troubling experience, as a community, with the show currently. In addition, as noted in my previous study, with more diverse casting, it directly results in more diverse winners. Having a diverse range of winners is

so important since they are the figureheads for each season, who people will gravitate towards the most in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, yes *Survivor* has its flaws. But, *Survivor* exists through real people in the real world, who are not perfect. *Survivor* is still the cornerstone of reality competition shows and is still the number one show that airs on Wednesday nights. It is important to be critical of the shows we love, as we want them to get better and stay on air for as long as possible. Should anyone associated with *Survivor* read this essay, I would hope that they see my words as love and admiration. I would hope they see how thankful I am for this show. Finally, I would hope they see my criticisms in ways to make this show better. To me, making the show better means getting back to what made me, and I'm sure many others, fall in love with it to begin with. Anyone can succeed on *Survivor*. This show has taught me that strength does not have a singular definition. Currently, *Survivor* is "talking the talk" as the saying goes, but not "walking the walk."

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