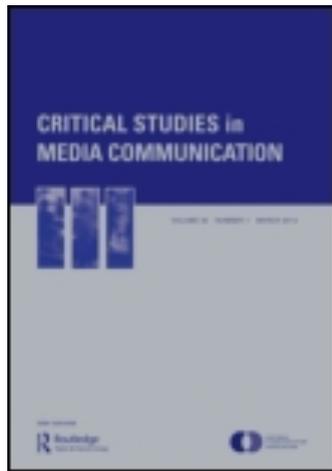


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“You are Not Allowed to Talk about Production”: Narratization on (and off) the Set of CBS’s *Big Brother*

Ragan Fox

In this autoethnographic account, I critically interrogate my experiences on and off the set of CBS’s reality show Big Brother. Pulling from phenomenological theories of time and narrative, I investigate how members of the show’s production, Big Brother viewers, and I performatively rendered gay identity in the immediate contexts of the program and its fan forums.

Keywords: Gay; Reality Television; Performance; Narrative; Phenomenology

Being there: June 4, 2010.¹ I sit in a café on the CBS Studios lot and silently eyeball 35 men and women. Each person in the sweet-smelling establishment has a doppelganger, or look-alike, who poses a threat. My doppelganger looks nothing like me, but his bright purple scarf, tight-fitting pants, legs crossed at the knees, and expressive hand gestures lead me to believe that he is gay. I have seen enough reality shows to know that television executives rarely cast two gay men—let alone two effeminate gay men—in a single season. True to mythological form, my doppelganger portends jeopardy in this final round of casting. Who will producers cast: my sexual mirror image or me?

Robyn, the person in charge of casting, informs us that the “head honchos” at CBS viewed our audition tapes last night and want to meet with some of the candidates. “These are the folks who have final say on casting for all the big reality shows, like *The Amazing Race*, *Survivor*, and *Big Brother*,” Robyn boasts, as her big, chestnut eyes

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widen. Nobody gets into the *Big Brother* house without first seeing the wizards behind CBS's reality TV curtain.

Being here. *Big Brother* is broadcast three hours a week on CBS, 21 hours a week on Showtime, and 24 hours a day on the Internet. *Big Brother* contestants spend three months isolated from the outside world in a CBS soundstage designed to look like a home. Fifty-two cameras and 95 microphones record 13 strangers as they battle for food, hot showers, comfortable sleeping arrangements, and weekly survival. Each week, one houseguest is evicted from the dwelling until the last person standing wins \$500,000. For years, I have told friends that *Big Brother* is the only reality show in which I'd participate; and, as luck would have it, I was cast on the twelfth season of the program in June 2010.

In this article, I offer a rare, first-person, and behind-the-scenes view of *Big Brother*. Inside the *Big Brother* house, whenever we discussed any aspect of production, a recorded male voice chastised us with the following declaration: "You are not allowed to talk about production." Several months after the show's finale and free from the immediate constraints of the soundstage, I talk about production, both the production of *Big Brother* and the production of my character/myself. Specifically, I investigate how the program's producers, fans, and I performatively rendered gay identity. I also analyze paradoxes of representation as they relate to gay male performance in the immediate context of reality television.

Storyliving My Reality TV Dream

Being there: June 28, 2010. *TV Guide's* Michael Logan and I sit in a drab hotel conference room. He takes out a beat-up Dictaphone, presses record, and asks, "What do you do for a living, Ragan?"

"I am a professor of communication at California State University, Long Beach."

"Why would a college professor agree to be on a show like *Big Brother*?"

Mr. Logan is the third consecutive reporter to pose this question. I smile and tell him, "I started this insane journey, in part, *because* of what I do for a living. In a bulk of my research, I look at how gay men perform their identities in different contexts, ranging from interpersonal interactions to theatrical stages."

"Are you suggesting that *Big Brother* is like a play?"

"Yes," I reply. "*Big Brother* is Shakespearian. The show takes place on a stage, albeit a soundstage; includes heroes and villains; features dramatic themes, like war, love, and loss; and may incite catharsis in its millions of viewers."

Being here. I am not the first person to suggest that reality TV functions as a type of theatre. Media scholars have referred to the genre as a "pornography of emotion" (Dubrofsky, 2009), where feminine emotionality verifies a program's authenticity; a hybrid of game shows and soap operas (Tropiano, 2009); and a "theatre of neoliberalism," where shows like *Big Brother* naturalize surveillance and contestants are governed by an "absolute external authority" (i.e., production) that cannot be seen or questioned (Couldry, 2008, pp. 9–10). Reality television has truly altered the media landscape, transforming even the most banal interaction into a grand

production, a spectacle watched by millions. “Everyday life performance” (Goffman, 1973, p. 73) is at a heightened theatrical state on the set of *Big Brother*, where knick-knacks glued to Ikea furniture, blinding lights, dozens of cameras, microphones dangling from the ceiling, and the voices of production highlight the merge between “reality” (whatever that word means) and television.

In this article, the term “production” has two overlapping but discrete meanings. Production may be conceptualized as an *act* whereby contestants on the *Big Brother* set perform characters. Like traditional TV actors, houseguests’ performances—no matter how humdrum—are turned into televisual entertainment and commodity. Emphasis on character production challenges a common misconception about reality TV, namely that reality contestants are not actors because they “play” themselves. The line between professional entertainer and reality TV participant grows increasingly tenuous as Hollywood’s elite participates in reality TV (e.g., Dione Warwick, Marlee Matlin, and Joan Rivers on *The Apprentice*); reality TV characters transition into professional performance careers (e.g., Paris Hilton, Kelly Clarkson, and Kim Kardashian); and reality TV “stars” become savvy to what behaviors make for compelling television (Andrejevic, 2004).

Production is also a native-language term that the cast of *Big Brother 12* used to reference the people responsible for producing the show. When we heard the recorded voice plead with us to stop talking about production, the automated message was reminding us not to speak about the group of men and women who cast *Big Brother*, talked to us in the contestant confessional or “diary room,” filmed us, and edited 168 hours a week into roughly two-and-a-half hours of network content.

Narratization as an Interpretive Model

Competition-driven reality programs, like *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race*, are filmed months before they are edited and aired. Story producers on those shows know who ultimately won the competition *before they begin editing the first episode*, which gives them the benefit of retroactive sense making. *Big Brother* is unique because the program is broadcast *as it is being filmed*. Producers on *Big Brother* are, therefore, not privy to who will ultimately win the game; nor do they know how other forms of game-related power will shift from one week to the next. Constructing narratives on the set of *Big Brother* is hard work because story producers can only anticipate (rather than definitively know) how the competition might unfold. Because *Big Brother*’s theatricality largely depends on how its contestants, story editors, and producers *perceive* potential outcomes of interactions and competitions, I turn to phenomenological understandings of narrative to explicate how the program’s tales and characters are produced.

Phenomenological explanations of narrative are significantly different from the oft-celebrated structural interpretation of narration championed by rhetorician Walter Fisher. According to Fisher (1984), people make sense of the world and share a common reality by projecting an arbitrary narrative structure—complete with temporal relationships, heroes, and villains—on chaotic phenomena, but, much

like a *Survivor* producer, we only do so *after* we have experienced a series of disordered events. Phenomenologists, on the other hand, claim that humans are “storylivers” (emphasis added), or that temporal expectations of a story shape the very way we perceive phenomena, regardless of whether or not we know the beginning of a tale or have witnessed its conclusion (Allison, 1994). If, for instance, I hear a woman scream in the halls of my apartment building, my brain fills in the missing blanks of her tale. “Maybe she’s being mugged,” I think. “I bet the perpetrator is male.” Regardless of why the woman screams in the hall, the narrative I create situates my consciousness in a particular reality and incites me to act in specific ways, like calling the police.

Narrative residue from the past and future narrative possibilities work in a concomitant, dialogic fashion to mold human perception while we are in the midst of making decisions. This phenomenological process is otherwise known as “narratization” (Jaynes, 1990, pp. 63–64). Edmund Husserl (1964), the “father” of phenomenology, claims that memory or phenomenological “retention” shapes our understandings of the present and expectations of the future, insofar as what has been perpetually echoes what may, once again, come to be (p. 111). “Protention” characterizes our expectations, or how the various stories that comprise our lives may conclude (pp. 120–121). A contestant on *Big Brother*, for example, may justify lying and backstabbing if he or she has seen those strategies work in previous seasons of the show (retention) and believes similar performances may increase his or her ability to win \$500,000 (protention).

I reference theories of narratization to help explicate the *lived* aspects of *Big Brother*. Storyliving, in this article, characterizes a phenomenological process by which *Big Brother* producers, the show’s fans, and I used retained information (i.e., the past) and anticipations of the future to narratize characters and storylines. Narratization functions like a perceptual toolbox, where everyone involved in the show found instruments with which to build, edit, and tear down *Big Brother*’s narrative and the players in it. Producers use editing to construct tales and characters, and, in the midst of participation, reality TV personalities edit themselves. Unfortunately, moment-to-moment acts of self-production are rarely explicated in scholarly terms. I am particularly interested in how producers, fans, and I referenced and co-produced feminized tropes of gay men.

Narratizing via Tropes of Gay Representation

Narratization presupposes absence, or character and narrative-related voids that retention and protention eventually fill. *Big Brother*’s production team played a significant role in rhetorically constructing the “missing blanks” of my sexuality. Their gay-erasure techniques are not new, nor unique to reality television. Gay characters on TV are “rarely shown in their own communities, homes, or same-sex romantic relationships but are depicted in terms of their place in the lives of heterosexuals” (Dow, 2001, p. 129). My symbolic isolation proved particularly salient on Thursdays, when producers regularly aired friends-and-family packages. In these

five-minute segments, loved ones of individual houseguests describe each competitor outside the context of the game. The taped features help humanize *Big Brother* contestants and show their connections to broader communities. Out of the final seven houseguests, I was the *only one* who did not receive a friends-and-family segment.

Isolation of gay characters is also rhetorically depicted by way of *symbolic impotence*, or lack of same-sex intimacy. Network reality shows tend to cast only one gay male character in 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. Early in the game, I, for instance, felt left out when my roommates discussed potential romantic pairings among the houseguests. Gay characters on TV are "often marked by a failure to communicate and achieve intimacy" (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002, p. 94). Take, for example, Will from the NBC sitcom *Will & Grace*. Will is rendered symbolically impotent, because, unlike his heterosexual counterpart Grace, viewers never see him in bed with other men or engage in any significant form of gay intimacy. Shugart (2003) notes that most depictions of gay men in the popular media "skirt the realities and implications of homosexuality by almost never depicting [gay men] in romantic or sexual situations" (p. 70; see also Gross, 2001). Likewise, gay men on mainstream reality shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* are only able to join the ranks of televisual representation "as long as they do not infer any sexual desires and practices" (Avila-Saavedra, 2009, p. 8).

Because gay characters are typically denied opportunities for romantic involvement and may not perform their identities via sex acts, producers, fans, and LGBTQ characters must find other ways to performatively render non-normative sexual identity, or, in phenomenological terms, "fill in the missing blanks" of gay sexuality. As media critic Alexander Doty (2000) explains, "Queerness is frequently expressed in ways other than by nude bodies in contact, kissing, or direct verbal indicators" (p. 5). Queer sexuality is commonly engendered by way of stereotypical, repetitious representations of gay people that the media constructs and propagates (Meyer & Kelley, 2004). Televised enactments of gay identity take the form of several tropes of representation, including the crying gay man; the villain motif (Walters, 2003); the trope of excessive gay femininity (Clarkson, 2005); the figure of "gay pretenders," or heterosexual people who perform a gay façade (Raymond, 2003, p. 107); the image of gay-by-association heterosexual characters, who are mistakenly marked as homosexual because they interact with queer people (Tropiano, 2002); and the trope of "gay-man/hetero-gal duos" that bolster heteronormativity by mimicking heterosexual couplings (Jacobs, 1998, p. 20; Shugart, 2003).

Borrowing terminology from Gerbner and Gross (1976), Fejes and Petrich (1993) liken negative and limited portrayals of homosexuals in the media to a "symbolic annihilation" of gays and lesbians (p. 409). Paradoxical interplay between symbolic construction and "annihilation" is precisely what pulls gay characters into a perhaps inescapable web of representation, where their communicative moves are read, anticipated, and reworked to fit into pre-existing roles that "not only define them, but define as well an oxymoronic gay sexuality which is puritanical, self-regulating,

and willing to sacrifice itself in the protection of heterosexual integrity” (Brookey & Westerfelhaus, 2001, p. 151).

Producing Self via Autoethnography

Communication scholars have utilized qualitative research methods to map webs of stereotype-driven representation and conduct oppositional readings of reality TV shows. But these critical and sometimes autoethnographic accounts are typically told from the viewers’ perspective. Robin Boylorn (2008), for instance, details her response to representations of black women on reality TV shows and, using autoethnography, tries to reconcile the sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory, roles of reality television fan and media critic. Like Boylorn, I turn to autoethnography to explore multiple characters that I performed in 2010, including performance scholar, educator, and the only gay male character in the twelfth season of *Big Brother*. Other research methods would not provide immediate, ongoing, and in situ access to the *Big Brother* house, nor would CBS likely permit non-affiliated investigators to enter the show’s immediate contexts (e.g., soundstage, casting interviews, and sequester house). Positioned inside the representational machine, I critically investigate how, in the absence of gay sex acts, producers and I performatively enacted gay identity in the *Big Brother* house. In other words, how did we sometimes consciously and sometimes unwittingly use tropes of gay identity performance to narratize my character?

Tropes of gay representation are residual, retention-oriented performances that inform and distort current and future perceptions of gay subjectivity. Because TV viewers rely on mediated stereotypes of sexual orientation to fill in the strategic absences, or ambiguities, of a character’s presumed sexuality, I also consider the ways in which audience members cited tropes of gay representation to narratize my sexual identity, regardless of how I acted on the show. I analyze fan-generated messages left at one of *Big Brother*’s most active viewer forums, SurvivorSucks.com. The fan site is a hotbed of rhetorical activity. Users visit the Web site, where they note house events and debate about the season’s characters and developments. The *Big Brother* forum on the *Survivor Sucks* Web site contains 1,025,859 posts about the show and daily recaps in which alternating members author textual representations of the program’s 24-hour Internet feed. These fans create “secondary texts” (Fiske, 1987) that “function intertextually to favor selected readings of [a] primary text” (Brookey & Westerfelhaus, 2002, p. 22), like *Big Brother*.

I use spectator commentary in this article to triangulate my autoethnographic observations and theorize how some audience members interpreted my character. The methodological act of comparing my story to viewer response helps me establish a dialogic relationship between performative *enactments* and performative *readings* of gay identity (Fox, 2010). The narrative I construct in this autoethnography works like a mosaic in which my personal reflections, the CBS edit of the program, viewer feedback, and theories of narratization comprise a bigger tale about how gay identity may be constructed on a reality show and understood by viewers.

(Re)producing an Identifiable Gay Character

Not everyone who reads this article will have seen an episode of *Big Brother*, nor will many understand the competition’s rules and structure, let alone its nuances. I, therefore, present the following *Big Brother* crash course:

- Each week, houseguests participate in competitions, like the Head of Household or “HoH” contest, and a Have/Have-Not game.
- The person who wins Thursday’s HoH battle wins immunity for the week and is responsible for nominating two houseguests for eviction.
- The individuals who lose Friday’s Have/Have-Not game have to undergo food, water, and sleep restrictions for the week. As I will soon explain, the Have/Have-Not contest is sometimes integrated into the week’s HoH competition.
- At the end of the week, players vote to evict one of the two nominated houseguests.

In any given moment, I had to anticipate numerous game outcomes (e.g., HoH winner and alliances). Those anticipations affected my in-the-moment strategizing and in situ performances of self. When editing 168 hours down to three episodes a week and building narratives, producers are constrained by similar anticipations. Characters on the show and producers *live Big Brother’s* narrative. In the following section, I describe how acts of narratization shaped my social game, and how this phenomenological process affected the production and reception of my character.

The Trope of the Crying Gay Man

Being there: July 15, 2010. Twenty-one days ago, we entered the house; and 25 days ago, I sat in several different hotel rooms and promised entertainment reporters that I would not spend time in the house crying like previous gay *Big Brother* contestants. “I won’t be a big gay cry baby, like Bunky from season 2,” I pledged. These words echo in my ear as I participate in the season’s first endurance competition, which will determine the summer’s third HoH. We balance our weight on shifting mechanical surfboards as a stream of cold water falls on our heads and large industrial-sized fans cough frigid air on our bodies.

Ten minutes into the competition, *Big Brother* host Julie Chen’s voice booms over loudspeakers in the backyard and announces that the first five people to fall off their surfboards will not have food, sleep, or hot water restrictions for the week, meaning second through fifth place competitors will be the week’s “have-nots.”

“So, basically, the people who suck in this competition are rewarded for poor performance and the people who excel are punished,” I note.

“Except for the person who wins, because they become Head of Household, and the ‘HoH’ never has food, sleep, or water restrictions,” my roommate Andrew points out.

Only minutes after Julie makes her announcement, several people fall off of their surfboards, until only four players remain. The final four competitors include Matt,

my closest friend in the house; Andrew, a divorced father; Brendon, a man involved in the first “showmance” of our season; and me.

In an effort to stay on the selected apparatus, it has become customary for competitors in *Big Brother* endurance challenges to reference loved ones. Today’s competition is no different. Matt repeatedly claims that he is “doing it” for his wife Stacy. Andrew periodically yells out “Gila,” the name of his daughter. Brendon perseveres because winning the challenge is the only way he can guarantee that Rachel, his love interest on the show, will survive one more week.

I cannot help but notice the extent to which my opponents’ self-encouragement is grounded in performative enactments of heteronormativity, in which my participation is, at best, constrained and, at worst, not allowed. *Unlike Matt*, I live in a state where I am not legally allowed to marry. *Unlike Andrew*, my sex acts are not procreative, and I do not have the financial resources to acquire a child by way of unconventional methods. *Unlike Brendon*, I was not put in the house with “showmance” opportunities, let alone *six* potential romantic partners. I endure the admittedly ridiculous elements of the surfboard competition “for” my recently deceased father, whatever “for” might mean.

As my size-eight feet struggle to stay on the surfboard, I remember the last line of the letter my father wrote me after I told him that I was gay. He said, “I will always try to find the wisdom to guide you through stormy seas which lay ahead, the compassion to understand who you are, and the love to be at your side when the world seems heartless to you.” Gallons of near-glacial water pouring on my head mask tears that tango down my cheeks; tears that, 25 days ago, I promised I would not cry; tears that performatively enact the trope of a crying gay man.

More than two hours into the competition and only Matt and I remain on our surfboards. Jumping off the surfboard early in the game would have guaranteed the comforts of food and hot water, but here I stand and shiver. I have something to prove to the little boy inside of me, the one who kids chased across the school football field, as they screamed, “Die, fag!” My childhood was an exercise in endurance. I withstand the elements in part because I do not want to be “that gay,” the weak one, the “faggot” who is unwilling to endure. I playfully and triumphantly announce to the cameras, “This is for all the bullshit I had to endure in high school.” Most of my roommates respond by cheering me on and laughing.

Masculine bravado aside, I have to make an important strategic decision. Is it more important for me to win an endurance competition and prove my strength or lay low and improve my chances of making it to the end of the game? If I throw the competition, Matt will become HoH and will have to select two houseguests for eviction. Feeling safe from possible elimination due to my close friendship with Matt, I decide to jump off the surfboard and let him get proverbial blood on his hands. Have-not restrictions begin the minute my feet leave the surfboard. I walk into the kitchen, where I see the five poorest performing participants gobble up warm pizza, crack beers, and discuss the competition.

“Wow, Ragan! I didn’t expect you to last as long as you did,” Andrew exclaims. “You really impressed me.”

For the next hour, Andrew repeatedly tells me that he can’t believe how well I performed in the endurance challenge. I wonder *why* he is surprised. I feel like his repeated and, as I read them, backhanded, belittling compliments have something to do with my sexuality. I, of course, may use a history of homophobic abuse to narratize, or fill in the missing blanks of our interaction.

I finally make my way to the have-not bedroom, where I find my new bed for the week: a broken pool lounger. Take second in the endurance competition → have-not. Growing up gay, I am intimately familiar with the cruel repetition of not having.

Prom → have-not, cannot bring a boy as my date.

Equal rights → have-not, cannot marry in my state.

I wallow in self-pity, as I reflect on a life that seems trapped on the wrong side of the “→,” a one-way flow that paints me as subhuman, less than, and in a perpetual state of having not.

In my life outside of the *Big Brother* house, I turn to poetry and scholarship to work my way out of self-indulgent moments, put things into perspective, and remind myself of all the things I do, in fact, have. *Big Brother* is designed to keep me in a frenzied emotional state. I am currently undergoing torture in its most literal sense. I consume fewer than 500 calories a day, when average adults typically require 2000; am sleep-deprived; cannot use hot water; am taken away from and not allowed to communicate with anyone I love; and am not permitted to read and write. So I cry. I cry like I did the day my father died. I cry until my eyes burn and turn a rich crimson. I bawl until thick strands of snot clog my nose. And with each tear I become the very character I promised I would not portray. To modify Descartes, I cry, therefore I am gay.

Being here. Almost everyone in the *Big Brother 12* house cried, but, by the time I was evicted, production featured crying as one of my defining characteristics. In the final have-not challenge of the season, we played a game of bluff, where the remaining contestants drank shots, and our opponents had to guess whether we consumed a tasty or revolting blended beverage. Fake tears filled my eyes each time I revealed my poker face. My roommates, who narrated the scene, highlighted how my performance of crying in the have-not competition had become a definitive characteristic of my persona. Matt claimed that, “Ragan just went total theatre queen: big, flamboyant, dramatic, crying and whining the whole time” (Grodner & Meehan, 2010). “What’s new,” described Hayden, *Big Brother 12*’s eventual winner, “Ragan’s crying. He’s been crying for the past two or three weeks. Why stop now?” (Grodner & Meehan, 2010). A year after the finale, Hayden admitted to me that a member of production prompted him to make the connection between my fake tears in the shots game and more genuine instances of crying in the house.

Commentary on my crying did not end in the house. E!’s pop culture show *The Soup* featured a clip from *Big Brother 12*, in which I sat alone in a hammock and cried to a sock puppet designed to resemble me. As tears glazed my face, I whimpered to the sock puppet and said, “Rough day.” The camera then cut to the puppet on my hand, as its mouth quivered and appeared to mimic my sobs. In this “pornography of emotion” (Dubrofsky, 2009), tears are a part of my behavior meant to represent the

whole of my character. Tears provide the proof of the truth of gay stereotypes, namely that gay men are weak and less than men. My tears were symbolically more potent than two second-place finishes in endurance competitions, where, in both contests, I lasted longer than a Texas Tech football player and Arizona State University baseball player, nicknamed Beast and Animal respectively.

“Flamboyant,” “flaming,” and “overly emotional” gay men affirm hegemonic masculinity by representing what masculinity is not, namely demonstrative about feelings (Donaldson, 1993). Crying gay men are the have-nots of masculinity. The catch is that gender in this scenario affirms a synecdochical relationship, wherein *gendered* behavior is a *part* of identity that stands in for the *whole* of *sexuality*, despite the fact that gender and sexuality are distinct categories. Those who performatively enact heteronormative masculinity are expected to repress all emotions with the exception of anger (Eguchi, 2009). Other emotional displays might be used to critique a person’s character, where “character” represents both my character on the show and heterosexual *ethos*, or heteronormative credibility. In the absence of gay sex acts, tears synecdochically represented the whole of my sexuality in the *Big Brother* house.

The Trope of the Gay Villain

Season 12 was dubbed *Big Brother*’s “Season of Sabotage.” Upon moving into the house, Julie Chen announced that one of the contestants was a saboteur. “Their [sic] mission is to sabotage your game and wreak as much havoc as possible. This person can sabotage an individual, a group, or all of you.” Before the thirteen of us moved into the house, producers selected *Big Brother 12*’s only lesbian houseguest Annie to be the first saboteur of the season. She was ultimately eliminated from the competition in the first week. In week five, U.S. viewers voted for me to become the season’s second saboteur. The saboteur role extends a history of gay antagonists in film and television. Media critics have documented how gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters tend to be depicted as villains (Gross, 2001; Raymond, 2003) in Disney movies (Dundes & Dundes, 2006; Morton, 1996), witches and psychos in canonical films (Doty, 2000), and perverts and child molesters in the news (Streitmatter, 2009). Not surprisingly, both production and viewers cast the only gay and lesbian characters in season 12 as villains who, by default, had to disrupt gameplay and antagonize their roommates. Regardless of producers’ and audience members’ motives, homosexuality has been used throughout TV history to “establish an additional level of deviance for [villainous] characters” (Dow, 2001, p. 129). Annie and I, like so many gay and lesbian characters before us, were situated as “a problem disrupting heterosexuals’ lives and expectations” (Fejes & Petrich, 1993, p. 401) and an “evil to be destroyed” (Fejes & Petrich, 1993, p. 398). Everyone in the house knew about the saboteur and wanted him or her gone, but none of the contestants knew his or her identity.

Most of my saboteur duties involved simple and silly pranks, like hiding a note that read, “I know your secret,” under a competitor’s pillow. Despite the saboteur’s

frivolity, playing the role augmented my feelings of isolation. I was not allowed to tell any of my allies that I was the person responsible for shenanigans that kept everyone up at night. Many of my roommates began to target my allies in the house as the saboteur, and I certainly did not want to be responsible for a friend’s eviction. I walked around the house in a perpetual state of guilt and shame. Each time production called me into the diary room and asked me to perform a task, I cried. After successfully completing two weeks of sabotage, I was awarded \$20,000. By the end of my villainous stint, *Entertainment Weekly* dubbed me *Big Brother 12*’s “sob-oteur.”

Many fans of the show rightfully complained that I was not a very exciting saboteur but found other aspects of my character to vilify. Part-for-the-whole relationships—between tears and character, and one gay man and the entire gay community—may be used to help interpret a viewer’s process of narratization. Anticipations of how gay characters should or typically act on a reality program limit and enable a viewer’s perception of who I was on *Big Brother*, even when my performance of self disavowed expectations.

To demonstrate how some viewers relied on tropes of gay representation to narratize my character, I entered a world that producers, casting directors, and the show psychologist beg *Big Brother* participants not to visit: *Big Brother* fan Web sites. Several fan bulletin board contributors are especially brutal in their assessments of *Big Brother* houseguests. Fan commentary on the Internet tends to take a particularly nasty turn when viewers discuss contestants who come from historically marginalized groups.

Nowhere did homophobic rhetoric emerge more salient than in the *Survivor Sucks* community, a fan forum that proudly flames or makes fun of reality show participants. The tone of the board is dark, mean-spirited, and sarcastic. *Survivor Sucks* members titled the discussion thread about my character, “Fagan: ‘Awesome’ Representative of the Gay Community” (emphasis added). Viewers in the thread refer to my character as “Crygan” (Victoria79, 2010) and “Ragonorrhoea” (Garblue, 2010), and say things like, “Fagan HATE! Die, motherfucker!” (BBjXavier, 2010) and “DIE FAG!” (Buttsecks, 2010).

Explicit homophobic messages are mixed in with statements of support for my character and a few posts that bemoan the amplified and unapologetic homophobia espoused by many of the forum’s contributors. Other viewers justify their homophobic behavior by suggesting that gay characters on *Big Brother* are bad representatives of the gay community. FLgirl (2010) writes, “I love the gays, but why do 99% of the gay guys they have on *BB* suck?!” Some members of the forum self-identify as gay when rationalizing their own anti-gay hate speech. Fisherman39 (2010) writes, “Most of the guys posting Fagan hate are gay anyways, so we can use the word fag all we want. Ragan is the true definition of a fag.” Similarly, Xrealitydotnet (2010) claims that, “As a gay guy, I condone all use of the word ‘fag’ to describe Ragan.”

Gay bashing on the site also takes pictorial form. The *Survivor Sucks* fan forum includes a “photochops” thread where some of the board’s more creative members

use software called Photoshop to alter, manipulate, and “chop” images of *Big Brother* cast members. Fans who modified my images tended to narratize a sex life for my character. Jaynes (1990) explains that people narratize others, as much as they do the “I.” “A stray fact,” he argues, “is narratized to fit with some other stray fact. A child cries in the street and we narratize the event into a mental picture of a lost child and a parent searching for it” (p. 64). Narratization allows a *Big Brother* viewer to fill in missing blanks when he or she perceives that there is more to a situation, scene, or character than what is shown in a broadcast.

In the absence of my character performing gay sex acts on the show, some fans relied on tropes of gay representation to narratize what they assumed to be my essential characteristics. In other words, they creatively rendered aspects of my sexuality that were absent from *Big Brother* broadcasts. *Before the show even premiered*, members of *Survivor Sucks* altered my pictures and both pictorially and verbally narratized what they perceived to be my sexual proclivities. ArtMaggot (2010) posted Figure 1 to the *Survivor Sucks* “Official Photochops Thread” on July 3, which was *five days before* the premiere of *Big Brother 12*. In Figure 1, the viewer placed my head over a gay porn actor, who is anally penetrating another man. *Big Brother 12* houseguest Enzo’s face is positioned on top of the penetrated actor. The photo’s caption reads, “How to tame a Stallion [sic]”; “stallion” is most likely a synecdochical reference to Enzo’s Italian heritage (i.e., “Italian stallion”), and my gayness is presumably what “tames” him.

ArtMaggot uploaded Figure 2 to the site on July 7, *one day before* the first episode. Figure 2, “The Ass Whisperer,” features my CBS press photo back-dropped by a larger-than-life butt with a screaming mouth transposed over the anus. In both photographs, ArtMaggot narratizes my character by focusing on what he may assume

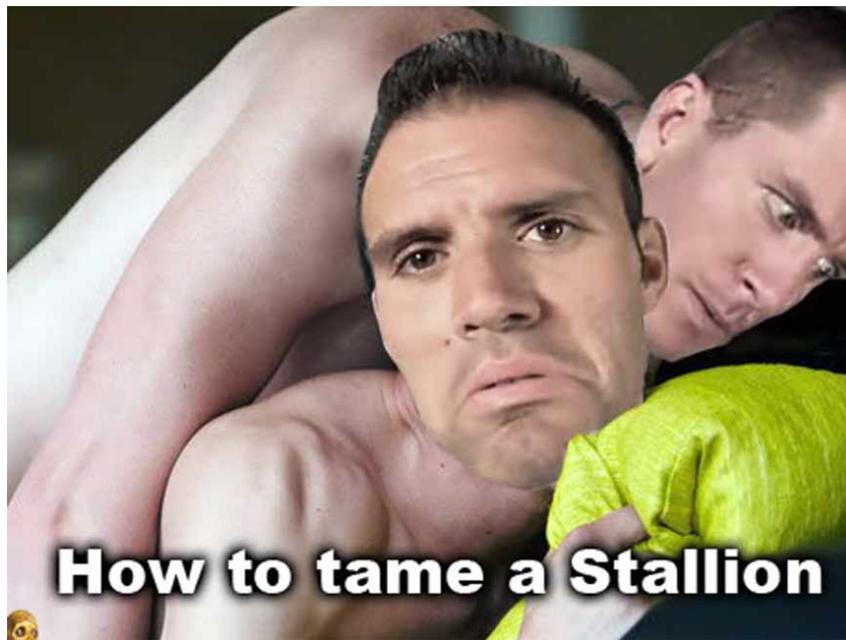


Figure 1. “How to Tame a Stallion,” from ArtMaggot (2010), SurvivorSucks.com.

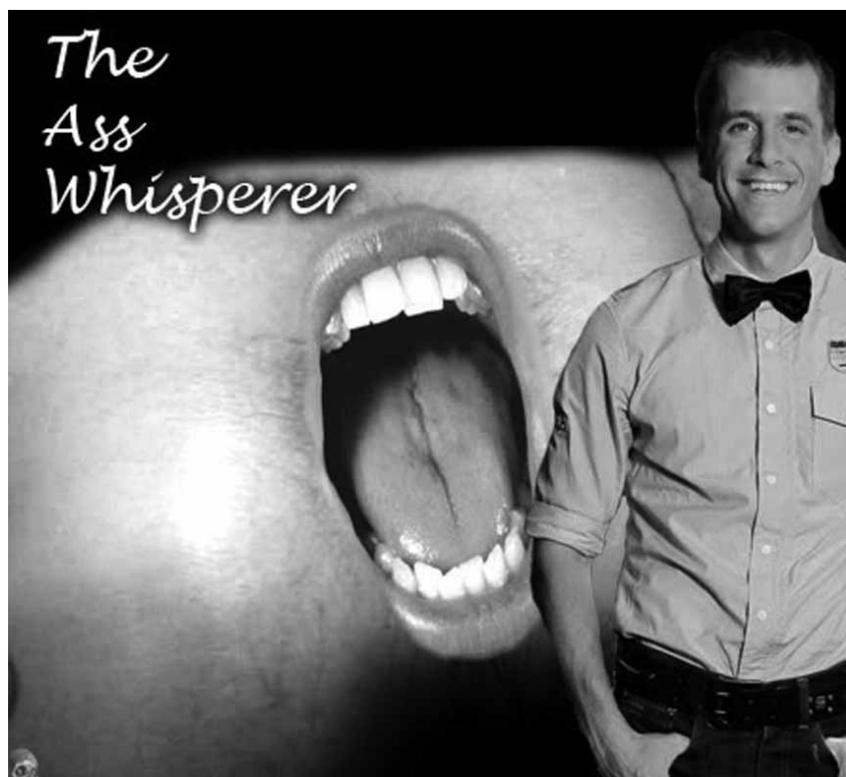


Figure 2. Ragan as “The Ass Whisperer,” from ArtMaggot (2010), SurvivorSucks.com.

is the most significant characteristic of my identity as a gay man: anal sex. These images demonstrate how some viewers infused my character with sexuality, even when they were not exposed to gay sex acts, or, at that particular time, *any* of my behaviors.

Other Photoshopped images in the *Survivor Sucks* forum reference viral and predatory tropes of gay representation. Many of these pictures humorously call attention to my friendship with Matt Hoffman, *Big Brother 12*'s self-proclaimed “diabolical super genius.” Our roommates and members of production joked that we had developed a “showmance,” or romantic pairing. *Big Brother 12* contestant Andrew read our relationship as queer in the first week of the game. After production suggested that two people in the house were lifelong friends, Andrew went into the diary room and claimed, “From the beginning, I thought Matt and Ragan [were the secret friends]. I think Matt is gay, and I think them two are in a relationship” (Grodner & Meehan, 2010). Andrew narratized a sexual component to my friendship with Matt and then narrated his theory in the season’s third episode.

Hints of my sexuality infecting Matt took center stage in episode 20. Matt admitted to two other houseguests that he had a dream about Hayden, a hunky, young Arizona State University baseball player.

“I dreamt about shirtless Hayden,” he confessed.

“With no shirt on,” asked Lane, an oilrig salesman and former Texas Tech football player. Later, in a diary room confession, Lane stated, “In Texas, if you do have a dream like that, you do not tell anyone.”

The gay contagion sequence ends with a diary room segment featuring Matt, who joked, “This place is crazy. It messes with your mind. I’m in some homosexual showmance. And now I’m dreaming about shirtless Hayden.”

Our close relationship was performatively constructed as Matt’s downfall in the game. “Matty’s getting too close to Ragan,” a houseguest named Enzo claimed only days before he devised a plan to evict Matt. Enzo’s heteronormative narratization is par for the course in television, where homosexuality is regularly presented as an obstacle for heterosexual characters. Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) argue that when a “program explicitly deals with the question of sexuality, it falls back on the convention of treating homosexuality as a problem, especially for straight characters in the narrative” (p. 99). On August 26, 2010, Enzo’s plan came to fruition, and Matt was eliminated from the competition. In a post-eviction interview, he sat across from Julie Chen, who grilled him about our friendship and the Brigade, a secret all-male alliance of which I was not a member.

“I was hovering between the Brigade and my little showmance,” he quipped. The live studio audience seated behind Matt and Julie chuckled.

Julie continued, “You and Ragan were best friends in the house. Why didn’t you tell him about your [other] alliance? Why did you ‘throw him under the bus?’”

“Ragan’s my little boy toy,” he replied. As if cued by a placard, the audience once again laughed. “It was a matter of playing with my heart or my head. My heart was with Ragan but my head was with the Brigade.”

By the time Matt was evicted from the house, audience members had grown accustomed to laughing at suggestions that our friendship was more than platonic. Production sanitized the joke of our “showmance” by featuring clips of and repeated references to Matt’s wife. The comedy of our friendship functions as “antirhetoric,” or discourse that “simultaneously promotes and disavows itself—renouncing its intent even as it amuses audiences and advances agendas” (Gilbert, 2004, p. 12). The “straight-mistaken-for-gay trope” is commonplace in television and “derives much of its humor from the audience’s knowledge that the character(s) is/are *not* in fact gay” (Raymond, 2003, p. 108). My homosocial relationship with Matt may have been palatable to some viewers, because our coupling constituted a performative enactment of gay subjectivity without Matt ever having to “go gay” in the house.

My friendship with Matt became a popular topic of conversation among viewers, some of whom used their Photoshop skills to narratize the assumed missing elements of our “gay” relationship. EgregiousPhilbin (2010) referenced tropes of gay predators when he reworked the film poster for *Single White Female* so that it pictorially depicts a narratized interpretation of my friendship with Matt (see Figure 3). *Single White Female* is a 1992 movie in which a bisexual sociopath obsesses over, stalks, and brutalizes her roommate. The image includes a gender-bashing and homophobic play on the movie’s title, wherein EgregiousPhilbin (2010) trades “female” for “shemale.” Shemale is sometimes used to describe transgendered women in the sex-trade industry and is considered to be offensive by most people in the LGBTQ community. EgregiousPhilbin’s comedic rendition of the movie poster also features a collage of four photos strategically placed to make it seem as though I am secretly staring at and

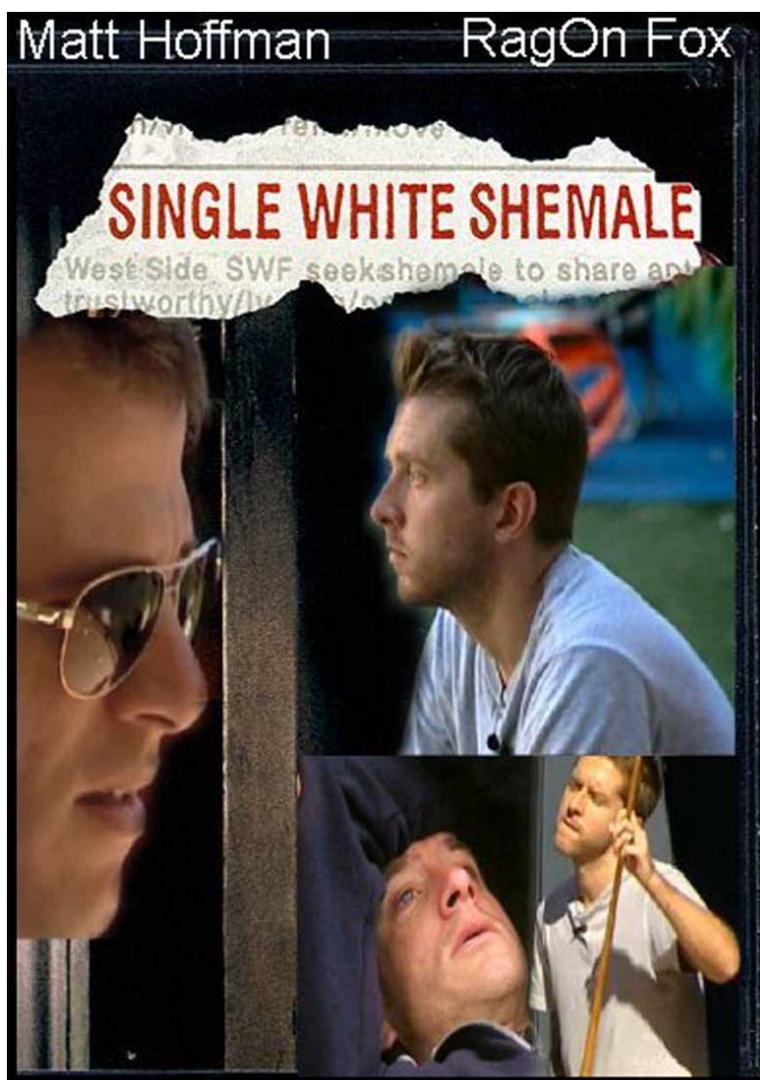


Figure 3. "Single White Shemale," from EgregiousPhilbin (2010) at SurvivorSucks.com.

of course crying over Matt. The image cites and repeats myths that suggest gay men are predators, especially in their relationships with heterosexual men. The doctored photographs also play into a trope of gay psychosis, where gay men are depicted as mentally ill, desperate, and lonely—compulsively sabotaging all things "pure" and "good" (Fejes & Petrich, 1993).

Despite fan narratization, I was particularly careful not to come off as a sex-starved gay predator. In the first week of the game, diary room producers regularly asked me to describe male contestants in sexual terms.

"Do you think any of the men in the house are hot," one interviewer asked,

"Sure, Hayden is cute," I replied.

"Would you like to make out with him?"

I told the producer that I did not feel comfortable sexualizing the male houseguests, most of whom were the age of my undergraduate students. The

production team quickly learned that I would not “go there,” so, after the first week, they stopped asking me about in-house desire. Fans of the show, in turn, filled the void.

Each of the aforementioned photos references tropes of gay men, even when certain motifs were absent in *Big Brother 12*. Fan-produced images display the reiterative force of gay stereotypes. I never had sex on the show, nor did I fall in love with a straight man. Some viewers, nevertheless, narratized an explicit and hypersexual story for me. When looked at through a lens of narratization, character production is not simply a matter of *representation*. Character production also entails a complex process of *perception*. Residual understandings and protentional anticipations of gay subjectivity constrain and enable who gay characters on reality television may be/come. Tropes work in an interconnected web that trapped me, anticipated my actions, and narratized my defining characteristics and behaviors. Production helped facilitate this process, as did audience members. These tropes were entrenched and reproduced, even as I actively worked to resist them.

Narrating in a Scholarly “Diary Room”

Being there: September 2, 2010. Julie Chen announces that I am the ninth player eliminated from the game. I hug the remaining four houseguests, and eagerly make my way out of the house and into a cheering crowd. Sweat drenches my armpits as I approach Julie. I offer her my right hand, which she rejects in favor of a tight, warm hug. We sit down on her post-eviction couch.

“Ragan,” Julie says with a warm smile, “we saw a very emotional side to you in the house. What did you learn about yourself?”

“I learned that I’m an emotional person, but being emotional isn’t weak. I was able to go up against athletes and strong-minded people, and really hold my own. I learned that, in my darkest hours, I dig deep for resources and do what I have to do to get to the next day.”

Being here. Throughout *Big Brother*, I found myself ensnared in a web of gay representation. The more I resisted the constraints, assumptions, and projections that preceded and shaped my ability to perform sexual identity, the more the web trapped me. These conventions, or tropes, “work to confine homosexuality within its paradoxical position in dominant heteronormative discourses; homosexuality can only be represented through heterosexist categories and language, while at the same time it is marked as a deviation from the norm” (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002, pp. 101–102).

My performance of gay identity on *Big Brother* represents a “burden of synecdoche” (Taylor, 2000, p. 70), or an expectation for one member of a marginalized group to “properly” represent the implicated community’s genius, talent, and best qualities. This burden exemplifies what Eve Sedgwick (1990) characterizes as minoritizing logic. Sedgwick (1990) uses “minoritizing” and “universalizing” as an “*alternative* (though not an equivalent to) essentialist and

constructivist” (p. 40). The terms underscore how essentialist rhetoric uniquely complicates the lives of gay people. Burden of synecdoche is minoritizing logic in two key ways. First, burden of synecdoche is a paradox, because no gay man or lesbian can meet the conflicting standards and impossible demands that comprise exemplary representation of a racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse community. Second, the burden is a form of tokenizing logic. Take, for example, the following statement made by my housemate Hayden: “Ragan, you are an awesome representative of the gay community” (Grodner & Meehan, 2010). While I certainly appreciate Hayden’s sentiment, I question its rhetorical implications. I, unlike Hayden, have to serve as an exemplar of a historically marginalized group *and* play a game known for lying and backstabbing. Hayden’s statement also indirectly implies that the gay community lacks awesome representatives. Keep in mind, my self-presentation in the house was relatively mundane. If eating, sleeping, showering, and competing are the sole criteria for performing the role of “awesome representative of the gay community,” I wonder what Hayden and perhaps many viewers may think is a more typical representation of gay men.

Gays on primetime TV intervene to alter many of the misrepresentative myths upon which homophobia exerts itself. More than any other time in TV history, gay people have been present in primetime and exert control over how their characters/selves are portrayed. Conversely, the burden of the synecdoche paradox that partially shapes how these characters are read. When viewers tokenize gay characters, they expect for them to be exemplary representatives of their communities; and, if they fail to exemplify greatness, their failures and character flaws—no matter how mundane—are regularly used to justify bigoted attitudes and narratize the assumed worst elements of a gay person’s character.

Theories of narratization may help media scholars explicate *performative readings* audience members create when they visit fan forums and provide commentary of shows they watch. Typically, performativity is discussed as a method of enactment. This article situates performativity in phenomenological terms and emphasizes unique ways that audience members play a significant role in constructing characters and narratives they view on television. I describe this phenomenon as a “performative reading” to highlight how reception is also an act of production. Theories of narratization situate audience members as co-producers of mediated events, which in turn challenges the idea that media texts simply “reflect their relationship to one another more than they reflect reality” (Bell-Jordan, 2008 p. 369). Scholars who suggest that reality TV producers “should not claim to reflect reality” (Bell-Jordan, 2008, p. 369) because “by definition, they mediate” (Grindstaff, 2002, p. 249) may fail to recognize the extent to which *all* forms of narrative—both on and off TV—are mediated. Bifurcating reality and television, while privileging “reality” as more authentic, misses the point of critical theory. The interpretive model proposed in this article provides a more nuanced way to articulate how performative enactments and performative readings of identity undergo a complex process of phenomenological mediation.

Note

- [1] To help distinguish between reconstructed moments of the past depicted in the present tense (“being there”) and instances of scholarly reflection (“being here”), I borrow Tami Spry’s (2001) “being there”/“being here” sequencing from her essay “Performing Autoethnography.” Spry’s organization is an adaptation of Geertz’s (1988) celebrated distinction of “being there” and “being here.”

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