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Language, Power and Reality TV: the dynamics of race, class and gender in the UK *Big Brother* Jade-Shilpa row

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Abstract: Reality TV is often presented as an unproblematic social phenomenon which is consumed and digested by an unthinking and unsophisticated general public. We, however, argue that Reality TV is both a pervasive and important cultural form, and as such it is vital that researchers and teachers engage with it. We return to the controversial UK *Big Brother* 2007 arguments involving Jade Goody and Shilpa Shetty. We explore how the dynamics of class, gender and race played out in this case. Using this example, we look at how celebrity culture, ideas of truth and dominant discourses of White working-class culture position both the housemates and their audiences. We further argue that the coverage of the event foreclosed any discussions of White middle-class racism by drawing on discourses that denigrate the White working-class.

In this paper we argue that Reality TV is an important social phenomenon as evidenced by the amount of controversy and debate that this genre generates. It is also a site of pleasure for both of us writing this paper and provides us with an intermingling of emotional pleasure and academic challenge. Given that Reality TV is both a pervasive and important cultural form, we suggest that it is vital that researchers and teachers engage with it. In this paper we discuss one such engagement drawn from our teaching on a third year undergraduate education module entitled Language, Power and Identity. We return to the controversial UK *Big Brother* 2007 arguments involving Jade Goody and Shilpa Shetty. We explore how the dynamics of class, gender and race played out in this case. Using this example, we look at how celebrity culture, ideas of truth and dominant discourses of White working-class culture position both the housemates and their audiences.

Why are we interested in Reality TV?

Reality TV proliferates on television and 'is an extremely complex concept that unites a variety of programmes and subcategories' (Aslama & Pantti, 2006, p. 169). Looking across the listings for 28th April 2010 for the UK's five terrestrial channels produces the following collection of such shows:

Priceless Antiques Roadshow, Mastercrafts, Great British Menu, Hospital Heroes, Homes Under the Hammer, To Buy or Not to Buy, Cash in the Attic, Bargain Hunt, Escape to the Country, Blue Peter Special, MySay, DIY SOS, Car Booty, The Edible Garden, Cracking Antiques, Monty Halls' Great Hebridean Escape, 60 Minute Makeover, Daily Cooks Challenge, Dickinson's Real Deal, Cops with Cameras, Supernanny US, Country House Rescue, Three in a Bed, The Air Hospital, Three Hungry Boys, Brighton Beach Patrol, I Own Britain's Best Home

This list is diverse, including crime, hospital, beauty, cookery, gardening, childcare, and property shows. It is lengthy, despite being compiled on a day when two of the five terrestrial channels featured extensive coverage of major sporting events and eight days from a general election that was dominating the schedules. Further, the exclusively digital channels (with the exception of those dedicated to children's programming, films or drama) devote an even higher proportion of their programming to Reality TV.

Reality TV is a troublesome genre: 'despite the fact that we all seem to have a notion of what we mean by *reality TV*, there isn't any one definition that would both capture all the existing genres and exclude other forms of programming such as the nightly news or daytime game shows' (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 64, original emphasis). Even the use of real people and of unscripted television are both routinely violated by Reality TV and routinely adopted by other programmes. Thus, it was difficult to establish the boundaries of the list and it omits many hybrid shows that draw on features of the Reality TV genre such as the documentary *Crimes That Shook the World*, the sporting competition *Grudge Match*, and the cookery/travel show *Jamie Does...* All of these programmes anchor their content in the personalities and lifestyles of the presenters and other participants in ways made popular through Reality TV. Reality TV has changed how producers make dramas and documentaries and what consumers expect from these genres (Biressi & Nunn, 2005).

Despite, or perhaps because of, this expansion and influence, Reality TV is positioned as low culture and trivial. Pile (2001) surveyed viewers and found that they placed documentaries at the top as their favourite genre to watch and Reality TV at the bottom. However, Pile's findings would seem to reflect self-conscious perceptions of what is correct taste for his statistics conflict with ratings data showing Reality TV as the most viewed genre. As recently as March 2010 actor Philip Glennister complained in the press that:

It's getting harder to find programmes to watch. I notice especially for my generation, with children, who don't go out a lot any more and want to watch a good drama and be taken on a journey. One problem is money. We have so many reality and chat shows because they're cheap.
(London Evening Standard, 2010)

Glennister, like others, positions Reality TV as unwatchable; irresponsible programming (he brands it 'bullying') that takes space from more serious, and more expensive, work, epitomised as 'good drama'. This raises questions of what is valued in television. Reality TV is constructed as being watched by those with poor taste: the uneducated and unsophisticated viewer. In this way, as Bourdieu (1984) documented extensively, taste is used to make distinctions, to mark out what, and who, is valued from what is not. Reality TV is read as working-class and female. Like soap operas, the other TV genre associated with working-class women, Reality TV is a devalued space (Geraghty, 1990). It is largely seen as deserving derision rather than serious critical attention.

We do not want to suggest that there are no problems with Reality TV. For example, Oulette and Hay (2008) have argued convincingly that Reality TV is part of contemporary forms of governance in the US and in particular, is implicated in the privatisation of welfare; and work in feminist media studies has shown how Reality TV reproduces inequalities of class, gender and race (Skeggs, 2009; Tyler & Bennett, 2010). However, we do want to suggest both that Reality TV texts require critical attention and engagement and, as audience research suggests, that they are more open to multiple readings than is often assumed (Allen & Mendick, forthcoming; Skeggs & Wood, 2008). We now turn our attention to perhaps the most iconic, successful, controversial and contradictory of all Reality TV programmes: *Big Brother*.

Big Brother UK

Big Brother UK is a multi-platform event. For many it is most strongly associated with the daily compilations of action from the last 24 hours in the house. However, it is also consumed through: satellite magazine-style shows *Big Brother's Little Brother*

and *Big Brother's Big Mouth*; newspaper, magazine, radio and TV coverage; official and unofficial websites, YouTube channels, Twitter feeds, and online discussion spaces; the night-time and early afternoon television live feed and the online streaming facility. An event on *Big Brother* must be understood through the ways it is given meaning within all these overlapping forms (Hill, 2004).

The association of Reality TV with the unsophisticated viewer, discussed above, is justified partly by the argument that it dupes its audiences through editing so that the authenticity of what is being screened is dubious. In contrast to these arguments, Peter Bazalgette, creative director at Endemol who owns the *Big Brother* format, argues that *Big Brother* democratizes the audience's relationship with the 'real'. Through live streaming, viewers are able to form a view of how editing is working. Bazalgette maintains that Reality TV enrages traditional documentary makers because:

we expose all their tricks. We're completely upfront about it. When we want (the contestants) ... to talk about their first love, you hear Big Brother say 'hey- would you talk about your first love?', but documentary filmmakers have, always manipulated their material both in the ways they edit it, and in the ways they shoot it. (quoted in Holmes & Jermyn, 2004, p. 12)

However, this denies how even live feed is edited. Further, the main daily *Big Brother* shows use a range of editing and aesthetic techniques, such as the diary room confessional and the regulation of time, to conjure a sense of intimacy and authenticity (Aslama & Pantti, 2006; Kavka & West, 2004). The show's UK producers have also increasingly adopted narrative editing techniques, including shot reverse shot for dialogue and montages for tasks.

Reality TV has made us question the notion of 'truth'. As Corner (2002) contends we now live in a post-documentary culture accompanied by a move to a broader and more subtle culture of viewing, with a revised approach to television's 'real' and 'factual' content and with different ways of seeing. Allen and Mendick (forthcoming) found that viewers take up 'practices akin to detective work seeking out evidence of contestants "acting" and "being fake" for television, making judgements of what is real and what is not'. Following Biressi and Nunn (2005, p. 107) we understand: 'Media imagery offer[ing] a 'fantasy zone' for generating rolling identifications which enable the subject to think through their relationship with self and media'.

Before we move on to the Jade/Shlipa events, we discuss one other key aspect of the *Big Brother* phenomenon: its role in the manufacture of celebrity. Traditionally 'stars' have achieved their status through skills in areas such as sport, acting and music, and some Reality TV is oriented around seeking this out, for example, *X Factor* and *Britain's Got Talent* (Holmes, 2004b). However, unlike these shows, *Big Brother* emphasises and celebrates those who are known simply for being known. Celebrating this, Bazalgette (2001) again, argues that the only way 'ordinary people' made it onto television in the past was 'wedged into some convenient sociological pigeonhole by the likes of This Week or World in Action' (quoted in Holmes, 2004a, pp. 112-113). As Bazalgette's use of the word 'ordinary' suggests, the talentless Reality TV celebrity is coded as working-class (and usually female) (Tyler & Bennett, 2010). Reality TV generally, and *Big Brother* specifically, is linked to discourses of media-ocracy, in which Reality TV is understood as opening up opportunities to 'ordinary people' to attain wealth and adulation for being themselves (Biressi & Nunn, 2004). This so-called democratisation of celebrity remains a controversial site. There are widespread concerns that young people increasingly prefer achievement through fame rather than hard work or talent; as incoming culture minister, Barbara Follett

(quoted in Chapman, 2008) put it in October 2008: 'Our society is in danger of being Barbie-dolled'. Jade Goody and Shilpa Shetty were differently positioned within these classed and gendered discourses of an opposition between talented and talentless celebrities (Allen & Mendick, under review).

Jade Goody and Shilpa Shetty

Jade Goody and Shilpa Shetty were participants in the fifth series of *Celebrity Big Brother* in 2007. Jade was a *Big Brother* created celebrity with a growing reputation for being a shrewd business woman. Shilpa was a successful Indian film star, lauded for her many Bollywood roles. The photographs below show them entering the house and then how they were regularly depicted after they entered the house: Jade, a gobby out of control TV star from Bermondsey, her mouth wide open, screeching and swearing, her face screwed up with anger; Shilpa, a glamorous Indian film star showing grace under fire and at all times dignified and respectful.



They had a number of high profile rows in the house that were nearly always over food, whether it was the compilation of the shopping list, or the daily processes of who cooks and eats what, when and how. The 'Oxo Cube row' was the most publicised of their clashes in the house and acted as a catalyst for the tensions building up between Jade and Shilpa. The row began with Shilpa in the kitchen looking for chicken stock cubes. Jade and fellow housemates Danielle Lloyd and Jo O'Meera were sitting on the nearby sofas. When Shilpa asked if they had used any

stock cubes they said that they had used three for their cooking the previous day. Shilpa complained that they did not need to use three and claimed that the stock cubes were the only thing she had ordered from the shopping list. Jade reacted to this claim by shouting at Shilpa, swearing at her and using a range of insults including repeatedly calling her a liar and a fake (the ultimate Reality TV insult). Shilpa responded to this by telling her to shut up, suggesting she take elocution lessons and finally leaving the room with the words: 'You know what? Your claim to fame is this - good for you'. During this row Danielle and Jo were shown laughing quietly. While Shilpa is in the bedroom, Jade, Danielle and Jo discussed the event. Shilpa returned and Jade confronted her again. At the end Danielle said she should 'fuck off home' and 'she can't even speak English properly'.

Channel 4 have removed all online videos of this but extracts in the news coverage remain available, for example in [US's CNN](#) and [UK's Sky News](#). As these news programmes demonstrate, the media coverage was marked by an obsessive focus on the question: Is it racism, or just bullying, or just misunderstandings? As Gillborn (2008, p. 3) notes racism is a controversial term:

To be labelled a 'racist' is generally a highly derogatory slur ... racism is such a harsh word that some people feel uneasy about using it. In addition, the term is so forceful that most people react very defensively against any suggestion that they might possibly be involved in actions or processes that could conceivably be termed as 'racist'. Such reactions show a failure (sometimes a refusal) to engage with the different ways in which racism can operate.

We can see that failure (or refusal) operating within the response to the Jade/Shilpa events. Racism is linked to individual actions and to the use of particular language - to discussions of ways of living and eating, terms like 'paki' and 'poppadom', and the suggestion that Shilpa should 'go home'. This limited understanding of racism obscures structural aspects and the everyday-ness of racism. In particular, racism is constructed as something that (some of) the White working-class does but not the White middle-class. In contrast, research into 'White flight' demonstrates how middle-class White parents remove their children from urban schools (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000). While, work on the minority of White middle-class parents who do send their children to urban schools shows how most view and use this experience as capital for their children enabling them to gain further advantage within the higher education and employment markets (Reay, 1998). These actions are far more damaging and widespread than the individual insults hurled within the *Big Brother* house. Yet in the public reaction, racism was expelled onto others as 'the British public' made a record number of complaints to the broadcasting watchdog and disassociated further by voting for Shilpa to win. In so doing, they othered the main perpetrators.

The coverage obscured issues of class and gender. For example, Jack Tweed, Jade's boyfriend, was not included in the public humiliation even though in an unbroadcast scene he was involved in the composition of a limerick about Shetty which alluded to her ethnicity. While, ex-government minister Edwina Currie, on TV political discussion show *Question Time*, used pointedly gendered and classed language when she counterpoised the 'beautiful lady' Shilpa to the three 'slags' - Jade, Jo and Danielle - who she described as 'witches with a capital "B"'. It is in the intersections of class, gender and race that we can understand these events, and in particular, in the opposition between talented and talentless celebrities discussed above.

The blurring of public and private is central to Reality TV celebrity. Work by Dyer (1998) on Hollywood stardom has shown how it too relied on this blurring, accompanied by the illusion of intimacy, as magazines, interviews and other intertexts circulated in relation to primary film texts. However, '*Big Brother* is not an intertext positioned in a contradictory dialectic with a more glamorous performance text: it is essentially the primary text' (Holmes, 2004a, p. 116). *Celebrity Big Brother* did originally function largely as an intertext. But as the show got longer and featured ever more esoteric (Z list) celebrities its status shifted. In 2006, when the *Celebrity Big Brother* housemates featured a non-celebrity Chantelle Houghton, who upon winning the series ironically achieved a greater celebrity status than most of her housemates, this intertextual position finally broke down.

Jade and Shilpa however are differently located in relation to the show. As we argued earlier, *Big Brother* contestants generally epitomise the idea of the talentless celebrity and perhaps Jade does this above all, as the most successful of all the show's contestants. During Jade's first appearance in *Big Brother 3* in 2002, much was made of her stupidity, her excessive behaviour (taking off all her clothes during a game of strip poker) and her excessive body (which got larger as the show progressed). When she was up for eviction the UK tabloid newspaper *The Sun* urged its readers to 'Vote off the pig'. Graham Norton, who hosted a Channel 4 talk show immediately following the weeknight *Big Brother* highlights shows, constantly joked about her behaviour and also likened her appearance to a pig. In this we can see a hatred towards Jade and the working-class womanhood she represented. Contemporary subjectivity requires mobility and transformation, the ability to change and develop - to become a 'better' person - and so to accumulate capital and value within the self. In this early media coverage Jade was presented as stuck, unable to do this. This positioning of Jade exemplifies Skeggs' (2004, p. 116) argument that working-class femininity represents the constitutive limits of contemporary subjectivity:

There are some strangers who are beyond embrace. Their differences cannot be made user-friendly. They only hinder the development of cosmopolitan dispositions. They are beyond appropriation, because they do not offer any cultural value to the self that accumulates or plays with others.

Nevertheless Jade was not voted out (although she came last of the final four in the house). Instead she was transformed into a 'national treasure'. This position was cemented by the actions of Graham Norton; he who had once labelled her a pig, now came to the final to greet her as she left the house and gave her regular appearances on his show thereafter. Rather than being portrayed as fixed, Jade's re-education and the transformation of her body and mind took place in public, mediated through magazines, newspapers and a range of Reality TV shows (for example, *Jade's Salon*, *Just Jade*, *Jade's Shape Challenge*). Jade was presented as a subject who 'was rough round the edges but with the potential for learning' (McRobbie, 1991, p. 215): 'She was a stark signifier of the possibility of self-transformation and social mobility in spite of class origins and limited social skills' (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, p. 150). However, while working-class authenticity enabled Jade to achieve celebrity status it also carried the threat of a constant unmasking. Her fall from fame to infamy in *Celebrity Big Brother* can be read as such an unmasking, a return to her true self, the 'chav' or 'white trash' celebrity (Tyler & Bennett, 2010):

Classed cross-dressing then involves always the danger of discovery, of passing as one of a 'higher order' and the attendant pleasure for the audience of unmasking someone's hubris. (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, p. 152)

As Shilpa said to Jade in the heat of the argument 'your claim to fame is this – good for you'. In this way Shilpa drew on the discourse of the working-class talentless Reality TV or 'chav celebrity' to make distinctions between herself as deserving of fame and Jade as undeserving. Similarly, Katie Price (Jordan), like Jade a working-class woman who had achieved fame through Reality TV, called Jade a 'talentless pig'. In this way Katie, who is herself vulnerable to the label of talentless celebrity, is able to mark out her distinction from Jade: 'these white trash celebrities function to generate celebrity capital for 'real' stars, providing them with opportunities to differentiate themselves as comparatively skilled' (Allen & Mendick, under review; Tyler & Bennett, 2010).

Following the Jade/Shilpa events, there was a return in Jade's portrayal to animalistic, excessive imagery. For example on the internet you can play [Whack-a-Pig](#), a game where you use a mouse to click on images of Jade's face that appear and disappear randomly on screen. In an [uncyclopedia](#) entry about her, there are multiple comparisons to pigs and other animals ('pig ugly feral beast', 'warthog', 'pitbulls'), references to bodily excess (having a 'fat arse' and weighing 'three times her bodyweight in pork scratchings') and comments that express pleasure in her untimely death from cancer.

Epilogue

After *Celebrity Big Brother* Jade visited India and then went onto *Bigg Boss* (*Big Brother* India) hosted by Shilpa Shetty. It was on this show that she received the news that she had cervical cancer. The cervical cancer killed her but her dying was made very public - through magazine features, Reality TV and other media coverage - and she again was subject to negative discourses about the white working-class. In the run-up to her death, Jade Goody was compared to *University Challenge* middle-class quiz show winner Gail Trimble. Many commentators questioned why, as she fought cancer there was so much celebration of Jade and so little of Gail when it was the latter whose achievement was based on intelligence and application and so deserved attention (Mount, 2009). A few days after Jade's death, journalist and television presenter Michael Parkinson (quoted in BBC, 2009) said, she:

has her own place in the history of television and, while it's significant, it's nothing to be proud of. Her death is as sad as the death of any young person, but it's not the passing of a martyr or a saint or, God help us, Princess Di. ... [She] came to represent all that's paltry and wretched about Britain today. She was brought up on a sink estate, as a child came to know drugs and crime, was barely educated, ignorant and puerile. Then she was projected to celebrity by *Big Brother*.

Michael Parkinson continued by bemoaning that, while the media first recommended we all hate Jade Goody as 'a slapper with a face like a pig' and declared her after her row with Shilpa 'the most hated woman in Britain', 'shortly thereafter [the media] tried to persuade us to celebrate her'. Thus, even in her final days as she sought to secure the best possible future for her sons, her social transformation was still questioned, never quite accepted by the representatives of high culture and so remained just out of her reach. Parkinson's much reported comments by attributing her trajectory to the

workings of the media, denies Goody agency. This raises questions about the limits of social mobility in contemporary Britain.

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