

# Constructions of Reality on MTV's "The Real World": An Analysis of the Restrictive Coding of Black Masculinity

Mark P. Orbe

This is the true story . . . of seven strangers picked to live in a house . . . and have their lives taped . . . to find out what happens . . . when people stop being polite . . . and start being real . . . "The Real World" (Opening dialogue for MTV's "Real World").

In early 1992, the viewing public was introduced to MTV's newest form of innovative television programming: A series that promised to bring the real life experiences of a diverse group of young people (18-25 years old) into the homes of millions. Described by the creator/producer as a show about "real people, undirected, sharing their lives" (Huriash, 1996, p. C25), "The Real World" has now completed six seasons with the seventh season currently being underway in Seattle. The premise of the show is simple—especially attractive to television voyeurs with a specific fascination with Generation X—MTV chooses seven individuals,<sup>1</sup> representing diverse backgrounds, to reside rent-free in a house for three months while every aspect of their lives is taped by a multitude of cameras. The result is a Generation X fishbowl of sorts, one that is viewed by 60 million people in 52 countries every week and has become a cult hit for MTV (Sakurari, 1996). In fact, "The Real World" has launched an onslaught of capital ventures (several books, college lecture series, videos, specials, international counterparts, and commercials) and assisted in achieving celebrity status for many cast members.

For many viewers one of the most intriguing aspects of the show is the cultural diversity of each cast. In this regard, "The Real World" provides a glimpse into the social relations based on race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and religion. The objective of this article is to focus on one aspect of intergroup relations, those involving African American men.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, I give critical consciousness, via a semiotic analytical lens, to the totalizing representations of African American male cast members across six seasons of "The Real World". In this respect, a primary focus on how these images work to maintain the "typification" (Lanigan, 1988; Schutz, 1967) of Black men as inherently angry, potentially violent, and sexually aggressive is maintained. Three specific points speak to the conceptual and theoretical importance of such an analysis. First, it extends the growing body of literature that critically examines stereotypical media images of African Americans in general, and African American men specifically. Second, it critiques media images (and subsequently their potential effects) created through documentary filmmaking. Like "An American Family," the 1973 PBS series that serves as the prototype of the television docu-drama (Loud & Johnson, 1974), MTV creates a viewer expectation that "The Real World" is not about characters following a pre-determined script, but rather the real life experiences of young people negotiating a particular set of relationships in the 1990's. Third, the analysis calls into the question the self-defined

liberal tendencies of MTV and explores the potential impact of "hip" media images on viewers. As an alternative network fueled by the cutting edge inspirations of young adults, MTV has provided opportunities for media images that work to unmask and deconstruct racial and gender stereotypes (See, for example, Lewis, 1994). In short, the analysis represents an important point of inquiry in that it critically examines racial/gender images that are produced in a context, both in terms of method (documentary filmmaking) and source (alternative programming of MTV), that conditions viewers to expect "realistic images." Given this objective and rationale, the remainder of the article will give attention to the unique genre that MTV's "Real World" represents and the ways in which this programming format contributes to the hegemonic power of racial images in reinforcing a general societal fear of Black men.

### *African American Images in the Media*

In recent years, black representation in the media has received increasing attention from scholars grounded in the tradition of British cultural studies (Bailey, 1988; Hall, 1992; Julien & Mercer, 1997). Within the United States, critical/cultural studies research focusing on African American media images, both those in film (Bogle, 1994; Elise & Umoja, 1992; hooks, 1992) and television (Berry, 1992; Evoleocha & Ugbah, 1989; Gray, 1989; Harris, 1992; MacDonald, 1983; Orbe & Strother, 1996; Smith, 1993) have also appeared in the literature. Much of this work has called attention to the ways that images of Blacks in the media historically have remained largely invisible, marginalized to the point of insignificance, or been limited to specific stereotypes. The impact of such media representations has not gone unnoticed by scholars and layperson alike (Stroman, 1991; Gates, 1992). According to Kellner (1995), these images are a central beginning in how "many people construct their sense of . . . 'us' and 'them'" (p. 1) and therefore represent an important source of exploration for those interested in the impact that mediated images has on the substance of our everyday lives (Brooks & Jacob, 1996). According to Omi (1989),

Popular culture has been an important realm within which racial ideologies have been created, reproduced, and sustained. Such ideologies provide a framework of symbols, concepts, and images through which we understand, interpret, and represent aspects of our "racial" existence. (p. 114)

Many critics (i.e., See summary provided by Smith, 1993) have posited that the vast majority of African American media images represent portrayals of Black life as European Americans see it. In fact, Gates (1992) shares that:

Historically blacks have always worried aloud about the image that white Americans harbor of us, first because we have never had control of those images and, second, because the greater number of those images have been negative. And given television's immediacy and its capacity to reach so many viewers so quickly, blacks . . . have been especially concerned with our images on the screen. (p. 311)

Because of the power of mediated images, characterizations of African Americans are never neutral; instead each portrayal either "advances or retards the struggle for self-determination and empowerment" (Elise & Umoja, 1992, p. 83). Most media research has concluded that television programming continues to portray African Americans in stereotypical roles (Cooks & Orbe, 1993; Evoleocha & Ugbah, 1989; Gates, 1992). The programming format of television hinges on the success of defining characters in condensed form; this driving force has "led to the perpetuation of racial caricatures . . . [that often] serve as shorthand for scriptwriters, directors, and actors" (Omi, 1989, p. 115).

Other research, however, has focused on the potential of specific media images in advancing beyond traditional stereotypes (Berry, 1992; Brooks & Jacob, 1996; Cloud, 1992). In this regard, attention is given to the potential that television has to promote images of African Americans that represent anti-essentialist and non-stereotypical portrayals (Brooks & Jacob, 1996). The opportunity to advance the complexity of African American media images has been greatest outside of the traditional networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC). While the number of "minority-lead" characters on these network powers has shrunk in the 1990s (Atkins, 1992), other programming—most notably on BET, UPN, WB, and HBO—has provided an increasingly diverse number of African American images. As MTV has extended its programming beyond music videos, they have also served as a media source, especially for young adults, for alternative images that typically are not available on network television. In this regard, "The Real World", as well as other genres of MTV programming, holds great potential in advancing beyond the stereotypical media images most often associated with underrepresented group members. The creators/producers of the show have contrived a method for viewers to see the intricate complexities inherent in the lives of seven young people. These people are not simply actors following a script produced by others; viewers seemingly get to see real people in the context of the real world. The potential to utilize this emergent genre of alternative programming in advancing the traditional slot-casting of underrepresented group members is extremely promising. Images of Black masculinity, for instance, can be signified through non-essentializing codes and work to represent the great diversity of Black maleness that exists in the United States. It is within this conceptual backdrop that this analysis offered.

#### *The Signification of Black Male Media Images*

How are African American men represented on MTV's "Real World"? One avenue of inquiry is to critically examine the construction of black male representations within or across a specific genre. Semiotics represents a critical studies method to reveal the ways in which meaning is created and realized within mediated images (Orbe & Strother, 1996). According to Eco (1976), meaning is created and maintained through an associative process of signification where a signifier (name/image) is intentionally used to signify a specific concept. Semiotic analysis works to increase the consciousness of the process by which initial (paradigmatic) relationships between signs are made more prominent through a redundancy of associations within and outside a specific text (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). In other words, a semiotic framework focuses on how some signifiers are foregrounded with such consistency that they come to be associated naturally with certain elements. In fact, a redundancy of these images creates a certain level of predictability that is structured into the text. The ultimate goal of a semiotic study is to increase the reader's understanding as to how seemingly straight-forward signs pick up connotative meaning (Barthes, 1972) within a preferred [dominant] reading of the text (O'Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, & Fiske, 1994).

Recent work in the areas of film and television has established semiotics as a productive lens from which to explore visual mediated images (Orbe & Strother, 1996; Stam et al., 1992). A semiotic analysis of media representations promotes scholarship that works to deconstruct the indexing function of signs—how particular interpretants come to stand for (define) something else (Peirce, 1958). In addition, such inquiry reveals how the signification process of images inherently communicates the themes and values of a media text (Saussure, 1966) and ultimately affirms the ideological systems of the status quo as natural/normal (Barthes, 1972). Within such a tradition, this analysis will utilize a semiotic framework to deconstruct and interpret the signification process of Black masculinity on MTV's "Real World". Given the broad array of diverse

interactions across six different seasons, this innovative genre of programming constitutes a rich and meaningful text (Cheney & Tompkins, 1988; Ricoeur, 1976) for exploring social relations in contemporary North America.

The focus of the article will revolve around how the images of three Black men (Kevin, David, and Syrus) from different casts (New York, Los Angeles, and Boston) function to signify Black men as inherently angry, potentially violent, and sexually aggressive. Like Ang (1985) and Fiske (1994), I situate myself as a fan as well as a critical researcher of the show. As a faithful viewer, I have watched each season of "The Real World" since 1992 and have viewed each episode (depending on the content) anywhere between 4 and 10 times. Because MTV has aired each season in its entirety, as well as in special formats,<sup>3</sup> I have had ample opportunity to view each episode individually (within the sequential context of that particular season), collectively (within and across specific seasons) and reflectively (viewing earlier episodes with knowledge of subsequent episodes/seasons). On March 7, 1998, MTV presented a daylong special titled "MOST DANGEROUS "Real World" EPISODES." In short, this special featured the most intense conflicts experienced by each of the six casts. My consciousness as to the potentially problematic nature of Black male representations on the show was raised during each independent season. However, within the context of this special the consistency of portraying Black men as dangerous became glaringly apparent. The focus of this analysis, therefore, will be on the significant process of Black men on these "dangerous" "Real World" episodes (within the context of events in each particular season). Through the process of cast selection, editing footage, and the creation of "documentary/soap opera," I argue that these images—presented as "real life"—work to strengthen the justification of a general societal fear of Black men.

At this juncture it is crucial to recognize that some scholars (i.e., Hall, 1989) posit that several readings of a text may supersede the dominant codes within the signification process, including the substitution of an oppositional code. Others, like Condit (1989) and Cloud (1992), contend that the interpretative openness of popular texts are largely bounded and "responses are contained within a binary meaning system" (Cloud, 1992, p. 314). The analysis generated here acknowledges the potential of a variety of possible readings (Siegal & Carey, 1989) of Black masculinity in "The Real World" but focuses on revealing how these powerful images, if interpreted within the preferred reading, maintain a "typification" of Black men consistent with general societal perceptions.<sup>4</sup>

#### A RESTRICTIVE CODING OF BLACK MASCULINITY

Over the course of six seasons, MTV viewers have been introduced to 45 different cast members, representing a cross section of cultural diversity in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Among this diverse group were four African American men: (a) Kevin, a 25 year old writer/part-time teacher from Jersey City, New Jersey who appeared on the first season in New York City; (b) David, a stand-up comic from Washington, D.C. who was part of the second season filmed in Los Angeles; (c) Mohammed, a cast member from the third season (San Francisco) who was a 24-year old musician/singer; and (d) Syrus, a 25 year-old self-defined "playa" from Los Angeles who appeared on the most recent season located in Boston. While this analysis of African American male representation on the show will draw from each of the episodes within each respective season, the focus will be on the images that were highlighted among the "most dangerous "Real World" episodes" aired on March 7, 1998. Of particular interest to the analysis provided here is that, while African American men constituted less than 9 percent of all cast members, they were featured in over 50% of the "most dangerous" segments presented in the seven-hour marathon. The highlights of these shows reproduced a series of intense conflicts centered around three Black men: Kevin, David, and Syrus.<sup>6</sup> When positioned in close proximity of one another, the redundancy of restrictive codes of the Black male

images on "The Real World" become undeniably real. What was once negotiated by viewers as subtly negative portrayals of each individual African American man (representing the possibility for an elaborative code) is now replaced with a clear restrictive coding mechanism that maintains the visibility of negative images presented as consistently inherent to Black masculinity. The collective re/framing of these "most dangerous" episodes made apparent what had existing in the background throughout the series: The paradigmatic signifiers of the Black male as inherently angry, physically threatening, and sexually aggressive.

### *Black Male as Inherently Angry*

While the creators/producers of the show adamantly deny "slot casting" (Huriash, 1996), the opening episodes of the debut season reveal an ensemble of cast members representing a variety of stereotypical characters depicted in various media forms. In no uncertain terms, the cast includes a young, innocent [virgin] Southern woman (Julie); an African American [ghetto] female rapper (Heather B); a long-haired aspiring rock star (Andre); a bisexual artist (Norman); an all-[European] American jock—turned professional model (Eric); a sexually free budding musician (Becky); and the young angry Black man (Kevin). For the next 13 episodes<sup>7</sup> viewers get an up-close-and-personal view of these characters; for many of the characters we are able to see beyond the stereotypes that they initially represent and learn some of the complexities of their lived experiences. However, this is not the case for Kevin and the other Black men featured on "The Real World".

From the outset, all that we learn about Kevin reifies his characterization as an angry Black man. Throughout the course of the New York season, viewers catch a glimpse of the Jersey City (NJ) neighborhood where Kevin was raised, complete with images of young African American men hanging out amidst the omnipresent presence of police. These signifiers are contextualized within Kevin's explanation that a pimp lived in his apartment complex when he was little. Kevin manages to escape the streets for the ivory towers of Rutgers University, only to later get kicked out for his "radical politics." His persona, as signified by a troubled home life, radical politics, "black revolutionary" poetry, and interactions with other cast members all give credence to his status of an angry Black man. In addition, "codes on non-verbal communication play a vital role alongside [this] restrictive code" (O'Sullivan et al., 1994, p. 102). This is made most apparent within the editing of episodes and the juxtaposition of certain images with excerpts of specific dialogue. For instance, certain interactions between Kevin and other cast members—especially when involving some sort of conflict—are intermeshed with images from Kevin's world: A poster of Malcom X, shots of inner city life, as well as various Black and African artifacts. These signs are repeated and subsequently extended, in what viewers are shown in regards to the other African American male cast members. All wear clothing (i.e., baggy pants, gold chains, earrings, or leather jackets) associated with inner city young Black males. Syrus' shaved head and Mohammed's dreadlocks present two versions of a similar anti-establishment code; the music associated with each person (often times this included gangsta rap), also reflect this typification of Black male power/resistance.

Throughout the New York, Los Angeles, and Boston season, viewers are given some insight into the source that fuels Black male anger. Most often, this comes from instances when the African American male cast members strive to educate the others on "what its like to be a Black man in America." In each season, we see attempts of the lone Black man in the house to enlighten his roommates (and subsequently the television viewers) as to the various problems that Black men face on a daily basis. In this regard, other members of the house learn—some, for the first time—the impact that societal stereotypes have on the life experiences of Black men (i.e., being harassed by

police in areas where they do not "belong"). In different instances, we see these attempts to educate take a variety of forms. Kevin uses his poetry, confrontation of others, and less volatile means like posting provocative thoughts on a bulletin board. David uses rap lyrics and his comedic talents to drive home some issues. Finally, Syrus uses a number of "teach-able moments" to enlighten his housemates. For example when a close European American male housemate, Sean, innocently suggests using a white background for a bulletin board, Syrus jokingly questions, "What's the matter with a BLACK background?" Through this interaction and others like it (i.e., a discussion as to the symbolism of the black ball in the game of pool), Sean gets a glimpse into a perspective that lends insight into the negative connotations with being Black in America.

The information shared by the African American cast members provided insight into the sources that contributed to feelings of anger experienced by some Black men. However, these very insights, shared as a means to educate non-African Americans also seemed to contribute to the credibility of the angry Black male stereotype. In this regard, these self-disclosures, intended as a means to enlighten others, were negotiated by the cast members as additional evidence for existing stereotypical images of African American men. From a viewer's perspective, this appeared especially to be the case with non-African Americans as seen in their interactions with their Black male housemates. For instance, in one particularly intense conflict involving Kevin and Julie, she accuses him of "having a lot of misdirected anger." In another interaction, Norman attests that "all he knows of Kevin is a pattern of aggressive behavior." David experiences similar responses from the Los Angeles cast. Irene, a Los Angeles deputy sheriff, articulates her fear of David explaining that "He has something up inside of him that's building, and building, and building." The "something," it is inferred, that Irene and others sense is the Black man's response to a history of racism in the United States.

While a number of mechanisms of dealing with this inherent anger are given fleeting attention (i.e., Kevin's poetry and radical politics), what is foregrounded for the viewers are the violent ways that African American men express this "pent up rage." Most often, cast members fear that the anger of Black men will be "misdirected" at "innocent" bystanders. This point is made apparent in a conversation between New York cast members Kevin and Andre.

Andre: It seems like you're taking this out on us.

Kevin: It all came out yesterday. This country is as racist as hell. That's the reality. The way that I was accused of spitting in someone's face, and picking up something that I don't even know what it is and threatening to hit somebody . . .

Andre: I don't think that had anything to do with you being Black, though.

Kevin: Andre . . .

Andre: No, seriously, do you think that that is the cause for all of this?

Kevin: Listen, Andre. From my perspective, whenever a Black person, including myself, has an opinion, and is assertive about it, we become threatening to White people.

Andre: There is racism, but you can't go about it . . . by posting signs. You're telling the wrong people, man . . . who here is racist?

Clearly, Kevin's attempt to explain how most European Americans unconsciously tap into the racist stereotypes that pervade their thinking is met with clear resistance. Racism is not constructed as a problem for most, only those most overtly associated with extreme ideologies (i.e., KKK or Aryan Nation). In one poignantly revealing exchange

between Kevin and Julie, she responds to his claim that "racism is everywhere," by shouting "BECAUSE OF PEOPLE LIKE YOU, KEVIN, NOT PEOPLE LIKE ME!" Racism, therefore, is not only a problem most salient for African Americans; according to some, it is also a problem perpetuated by African Americans.

### *Black Male As Violent Threat*

So, a primary signifier contributing to a justified societal fear of Black men is clearly maintained: Black men possess an inherent anger triggered by a past, present, and future of racism. Interposed with images that signify this intrinsic tension are self-disclosures of other cast members as to their fear of potential violence stemming from Black men with so much internal rage. In fact, several non-African American cast members confidentially<sup>8</sup> explain their discomfort around Black men whom, in their eyes, clearly have great *potential* for violence. Interestingly, comments taken from each of the three casts that featured an African American male cast member are strikingly similar in the ways that this fear is expressed. Their articulation of a general fear of Black men is particularly compelling since—with the exception of one incident involving David and another male housemate in Los Angeles—viewers never see any violent outbursts from the Black male cast members. What appears to be happening, at least as it is deconstructed through this semiotic analysis, is that specific cast members unconsciously tap into long-established stereotypes of African American males in framing current perceptions of Kevin, David, and Syrus. Then based on these underlying stereotypes, cast members—most often European American women—work to persuade others to adopt their interpretation of certain behaviors enacted by African American men.

In Los Angeles, for example, a playful exchange between David and Tami (an African American woman) escalated to a full-blown conflict (featured as one of the "most dangerous" "Real World" episodes). Before the incident is resolved, viewers witness how this conflict triggers images of the capacity of violence by Black men. We hear from Irene, a Los Angeles deputy sheriff, who described that, "During the two days before we had our talk with David, what went through my mind was . . . how I was feeling. I had this unsafe feeling . . . I had this threatening feeling." During this time, small groups of housemates (mostly divided by sex) discussed the incident: Some agreed with Irene's perceptions while others clearly did not. When David attempts to discuss the incident with each woman individually, they refuse citing their fear of being along with him. David can not understand their reaction, especially since several crew members will be present recording the interaction, and jokingly asks: "You all are acting like I'm Freddy Krueger or something . . . what's going on here?" After finally convincing the entire house to sit down and discuss the incident, a consensus is achieved: The women in the house do not feel comfortable with David, so he must move out (and subsequently be replaced on the show).<sup>9</sup> Whereas not everyone in the house agrees with this extreme measure, they seemingly are convinced by two of the women, Irene and Beth, that no other alternative is possible. The images that follow this decision are especially revealing as to the process by which Black men are signified on the show. Viewers are exposed to a series of edited clips—presented in strikingly haunting black and white film—that show David in a series of aggressive interactions (i.e., arguing with housemates, physically going after another male housemate). With these displays of aggression, the final members of the house are convinced of David's potential for violence. In close proximity, so are "Real World" viewers.

A similar pattern is witnessed in the "most dangerous" NYC episode. Following an off-camera conflict between Julie and Kevin, Julie confesses that "I think that it's really obvious after living with Kevin, that he was capable of some physical violence." Viewers are then presented with Julie's perception of the conflict and witness how her story convinces other housemates of Kevin's potential for violence. "Julie was really upset and

hysterical . . . for her to be like that something serious really must have happened," explains one roommate (Eric). Only after confronting Kevin with these accusations do some roommates recognize that Julie's perception of what happened greatly differs from Kevin's recollection. While discussions reveal that both parties had some responsibility in the intense conflict, Julie's perceptions remain unchanged. When discussing the incident with another housemate (Eric), she states, "You can believe whatever you want or stay totally out of it." And then adds, "All I know is that I don't ever want to be left alone with him again. Ever." Later, she privately shares the following thoughts:

I really like Kevin . . . and could never deny that. I respect him a lot, and I think that he is really intelligent and has a lot of important things to say . . . That doesn't mean that I ever want to be alone with Kevin again . . . in my life. I will never be comfortable, and don't really understand how I can expect to be.

The third "most dangerous" episode of the Boston season also featured a confrontation between the African American male cast member (Syrus) and his housemates. The episode dealt more generally with a series of conflicts surrounding Montana (European American women), however, it included a confrontation between her and Syrus. The conflict erupts over a late night call that Syrus gets while other housemates are attempting to rest. Viewers witness an exchange of words between Syrus and Montana—intense in some ways (Syrus calls Montana a bitch), but largely uneventful since both people were quite a distance from one another and leaving the room. The next day, Montana and Syrus talk about the brief incident:

Montana: I think that you came across a little too strong last night . . . you know what I'm saying . . . and it was like BITCH. And I got the idea that you were about to hit me, and got the impression—

Syrus: Never. Never. I'm not a physical person like that at all . . . If I came across like that, I apologize . . .

Within the show, the visual representation of Syrus' persona is quite different than the other Black men on "The Real World". Syrus does not portray the social consciousness or radical politics of Kevin. Nor does he play the role of comedian like David. Syrus is a self-proclaimed "playa," one who loves to party, kick back, and "spend time with the ladies." In no episodes are viewers exposed to any hint of violence; in fact, we see that Syrus' strategy for dealing with conflict largely involves sitting down and sharing a "brew." Regardless of these personal characteristics, however, a similar sign is invoked: Black men represent a threat (especially to European American women). Although Montana and Syrus resolve the brief conflict over the late night calls, we see her confess to the camera:

He can apologize until the cows come home, and I can say, 'fine, I accept your apology,' . . . but I'm not going to forget what happened. In the back of my mind, that will always be there.

Even when the possibility for violence is slim—and relatively less than any other person—case members articulate that the perceived potential for violence remains a salient issue for them in their interactions with Black men. In two different instances, for example, Julie and Kevin (NYC cast) are involved in a conflict when Julie makes her perceived fear of Kevin apparent by asking him if he was going to physically harm her. In one scene, Julie asks Kevin, "Why are you getting so close? Why are you getting so emotional? What are you going to do, hit me?" Kevin attempts to explain how proximity and emotional expressiveness are culture specific; Julie's response is to emphatically assert her perception that "It's not a black-white thing." Kevin then gives consciousness



to the larger question in the minds of those that recognize the subtle influence that racism has in this interaction when he confronts her perception by asking: "Do you assume that because I'm a Black man that I'm going to hit you?"

### *Black Male as Sexually Aggressive*

A restrictive code is comprised of a system of signifiers that explicitly or implicitly governs the interpretations of the members of a using culture (O'Sullivan et al., 1994). The third interlocking signifier, one that solidifies a clear justification for societal concern/fear, involves the sexual aggression associated with Black men. Whereas this signifier works more on an inferential level with Kevin and Julie's interactions (i.e., Kevin's disclosures about his sexual fantasies in response to a light-hearted discussion on issues prompted by a "book of questions"), it is foregrounded in the ways that Syrus and David's "Real World" images are constructed.

From the onset, Syrus' persona is most clearly represented by his love for women; in fact, his life (as signified by "Real World" images) revolves around "his theory that women are like potato chips . . . [you can't have just one]." Within the first three Boston episodes, viewers witness a barrage of clips with Syrus "macking"—hugging, holding, flirting and dancing with—several different European American women. In fact, his behaviors become a house issue when he continues to bring different women home into the wee hours of the morning. Kameelah, the lone African American woman on the Boston cast, is self-admittedly annoyed because Syrus is bringing home White women (who she describes as "groupies" and "hoochie mommas"). The other women agree that he does not appear to have much respect for women; however, the larger house issue is one of courtesy. Syrus' responds to this issue by invoking his [sexual] "freedom to do whatever he wants." "I feel like I'm in a damn prison," he contends.

Questions regarding Syrus' sexual freedom to pursue a variety of women is juxtapositioned within a more problematic context during the third episode when cast members (and viewers) learn that Syrus was accused of rape while in college. Syrus adamantly denies the charge; he describes the woman as being the aggressor ("she took my clothes off") on the night in question. Whereas he appears to convince some of his housemates that, in fact, some women do "cry rape," others remain unmoved by his emotional arguments. Regardless of Syrus' guilt/innocence, the producers of the show have chosen to foreground an image that signifies him as sexually aggressive, a Black man who potentially may use rape to satisfy his sexual needs. In fact, the sign of Black male sexual aggression is made more problematic by extended images in later episodes that signify Syrus' need for sexual pleasure as largely uncontrollable. In two different scenarios, he is portrayed as succumbing to his sexual needs even when such actions put him at great risk. First, he jeopardizes his standing in the house by continuing to bring women into the house and even "doing some blonde" in his room while housemates confront his other drunk guests. Second, Syrus risks losing his job at a community center by continuing to "date" one of the child's parents'—hours after assuring his supervisor and housemates that he would no longer see the woman if it represented a conflict of interest.

Whereas Syrus' sexual appetite was foregrounded in the creation of his "Real World" persona, David's sexuality was signified in a more subtle manner. First and foremost, David is a comedian, always joking and "playing the fool" for the camera. Through his comedy, however, signs of his sexual aggression are alluded to as he jokingly discusses his love for masturbation and amusement in pulling his pants down in front of the cameras. His playful joking with housemates becomes increasingly problematic during one episode when a prank between he and Tami, an African American woman, escalates into a heated conflict. In the most replayed LA episode, David playfully attempts to pull the blanket off of Tami who is in her bed for the night wearing

only her underwear and bra. For a couple of minutes, there is a light-hearted struggle; this drastically changes when David continues to try and pull the blanket off of Tami as she gets up to take a phone call. The latter part of the interaction is filled with screams of "STOP!, DON'T!, DAVID, STOP!" from both Tami and Beth (a European American woman). The line has clearly crossed when Tami escapes to the bathroom, dons a robe, and immediately begins to retaliate against David. The following excerpts illustrate the conversation that ensued:

David: You guys were laughing, giggling, playing—

Tami: You can take off your pants in front of the camera, but I am not like that. It was NOT funny, okay?

David: Here, hey, here you go . . . I'll take off my clothes [drops his pants to his ankles exposing himself]

Irene: [calls from the bedroom, where she is still in bed] I'll call the police and scream rape!

Beth: We should file charges against him . . .

During this exchange, John (a young European American man from a small town in Kentucky) theorizes, "It's all about rap music, and the violence and tension that builds up . . . and this is what happens . . ."

Two salient issues are signified during this exchange. First, John associates David's aggression to the violence portrayed in rap music; in essence, his comments enact a sense-making mechanism for understanding the violent nature of Black masculinity. Second, and even more central to the fear of Black men is Irene's threat to accuse David of rape. Interestingly, Irene's comments, contextualized within her identity as a deputy sheriff for the LA police department, invokes another powerful code from an African American male perspective. Accusations of rape, however, become more intense as Beth confronts David directly:

David: You're going to press charges for me pulling a cover off of her??? For playing??? You guys were on the floor screaming [mocking their playful tone] 'Stop . . . stop . . .'

Beth: Yeah, and that is what a rapist says too—

David: Rape??? This hasn't anything to do with rape!

Beth: [Imitating a rapist] Yeah, you wanted it baby . . .

David: I didn't try to rape—this hasn't nothing to do with rape!

Beth: No means no, okay?

David: Wait a minute . . . who? . . . when? You're taking this too far; I wasn't going to rape the girl . . . I was playing . . . I was just pulling the blanket.

The power of a European American woman conjuring up metaphors of the Black male rapist is not lost on David who obviously recognizes the power of such accusations. "In the old days," he tells the group, "I would be hung. Because a woman said rape . . . not rationally hung, just hung."

Later, as the group decides to remedy the situation, David reveals his wish that the housemates could rewind the tape and review the incident. Whereas the LA cast was not privy to such an opportunity, the producers do utilize this juncture to re-play the

incident for the viewers who can come to their own conclusions as to the seriousness of David's offenses. When David confronts Beth about her usage of the term, rape, she readily "takes it back." However, the signification of David as a sexually aggressive potential rapist can not be easily erased from the minds of the female housemates. The signifier, Black male as rapist, has been successfully invoked and remains in their consciousness as they contextualize David's other behaviors (i.e., talking about masturbation, pulling his pants down, aggressively confronting other housemates). Without a doubt, David—regardless of his small physical stature and joking persona—is a person to be feared. Even the men in the house who disagree with the decision to make David move out are swayed by the intensity of these images. "I guess other incidents have occurred that I'm unaware of," explains one man. Another adds, "They [the women] explained to me that it wasn't just this one incident, but a culmination of things." Those viewers with a critical eye are left wondering if the other "things" are related to David's behaviors in the house specifically or the underlying stereotypical beliefs about African American generally that seem to unconsciously permeate their interactions with others.

## DISCUSSION

### *The Hegemonic Power of "Real World" Images*

Much has been written on the role of hegemony and the ways in which the general public utilizes mediated images in its constructions of reality. Despite its positioning as an alternative, oppositional media outlet, MTV's "Real World" contributes to a strong media tradition of signifying African American men as potentially dangerous, and in turn, intensifies the signification process of promoting a genre that strongly encourages an active "spectator-positioning" (Heath, 1979) for viewers. Based on the images presented on the show—and contextualized within the existence of a larger societal stereotype of Black men—many viewers, especially European American women, can identify with the fear articulated by some housemates. The paradigmatic signifiers (Black men as angry, violent, and sexually aggressive) work toward the reification of a syntagmatic code: Black men are to be feared. Within the context of this semiotic analysis, I argue that the mediated images of Black masculinity on "The Real World" represent a powerful source of influence because they, in fact, are presented not as mediated images, but as real-life images captured on camera. The African American men chosen for the show are passed off to the general public as—in the words of the creator/producer of the show, Mary-Ellis Bunin—"real people, undirected, sharing their lives" (Huriash, 1996, p. 35). In fact what is displayed for the millions of viewers who watch the show each week are selectively filtered images of Black masculinity as determined by non-African Americans. The remainder of this article will explore this idea in regards to two crucial elements of the show: cast selection and editing.

For the first several seasons, the process of cast selection for the show remained largely a mystery. For the sixth season of "The Real World", however, the creators/producers began with an hour-long "casting special" episode that documented the rigorous process by which tens of thousands of applicants were narrowed down to seven "lucky" persons. Within this hour, viewers are given insight—albeit through media images selected by the producers to represent their own efforts—into the lengthy process of reviewing videotapes, individual and group interviews, and final decisions. I argue that this special provides some important information directly relevant to the arguments presented in this article. First, viewers learn that none of the major players associated with the show (creators, producers, casting directors, assistants, and so on) are African American. Whereas this insight alone does not directly correlate to any specific conclusion, it does allow some additional contextualization of what may occur when outgroup

members are responsible for decisions regarding diverse lived experiences.<sup>10</sup> Second, something that has long been suspected, becomes increasingly apparent: The producers of the show select cast members who have the greatest potential for cultural clash and conflict. Within the process of cast selection, for instance, viewers hear comments like, "She has a personality that polarizes others, we have to keep her." It appears that the African American men chosen for the show, in part, qualify because of the potential tension that their presence in the house will facilitate.

Within the casting special, viewers are privy to the process by which Syrus emerges as the lone African American man selected for the sixth season. Based on the footage that we see from his taped interviews, it is clear that Syrus' persona (a ladies man from the streets of LA who loves to party and play basketball) will provide ample opportunities for conflict with the others selected. These persons, in short, include a European American self-affirmed feminist from New York (Montana), a Mexican/European American 18-year old who had led a sheltered life in Texas (Elka), and a 25-year old lumberjack who has had no real contact with African Americans (Sean). What is especially interesting in regards to the critical analysis offered here are the other African American men who were *not* selected for the show. In fact, in addition to Syrus, two other men of African descent advanced to the final round on interviews. One man, Q'wan was a college student in Georgia who appeared to have a healthy attitude concerning success, love, and relationships. The other applicant strongly considered for the show was Jon, a fun-loving musician with a multi-racial background. The argument posited here is that the creators/producers of the show, in attempts to make for the greatest potential for tension in the house, selected the African American man that would be perceived as the largest threat to other cast members.<sup>11</sup> In doing so they selected Syrus, someone who they could count on for supplying the cameras all that they needed to make a compelling docu-drama. However, their decision also worked toward the perpetuation of a restrictive coding of African American men in the media, one that signifies them in a totalizing manner.

Whereas the selection of certain African American men to appear on "The Real World" fosters a certain visual representation of Black masculinity, the process that involved editing three months of footage into a series of half-hour episodes appeared to facilitate the producers conscious or unconscious desire to signify these Black men as inherently angry, potentially violent, and sexually aggressive. The power of editing worked to force certain aspects of the African American men's lives in the foreground while others remained in the background. In order to construct a more convincing [powerful] storyline, the sequence of events or syntagmatic ordering (Stam et al., 1992) was also manipulated during editing. For example, a close reading of several conflicts involving African American male cast members reveal that the scenes did not in fact always occur in the sequence presented by the producers. Instead, as evidenced by subtle changes in individual's appearance (clothes, hair, body positioning), it becomes clear that producers have placed comments from past or future interactions within another context in order to make that conflict more inflammatory.<sup>12</sup> Manipulation of the syntagmatic ordering of "Real World" events results in a construction of reality that reflects a storyline as created by the producers of the show, and not necessarily a reflection of the reality of the three months taped for the show. The same process, it can be argued, was followed in creating the characterizations for all cast members on "The Real World". However, it appears that the show has realized its potential for advancing non-stereotypical images of certain underrepresented groups; this especially seems to be the case with its representations of diverse Latino and gay/lesbian/bisexual cast members. Such is not the case for the African American male mediated images included in the show. In short, the signifiers that were selected to be associated with Black masculinity did little to counter the existing media stereotypes of African American men.

It is commonly understood that, despite the "hype" promoting the show as characteristic of the real world, most television viewers are discriminating enough to recognize that the interactions occurring amidst a sea of cameras and microphones are *not real*. Instead, what is seen can be deconstructed as an elaborate show put on by cast members with a clear consciousness of the millions of viewers who will have access to their lives. Following the fourth season of "The Real World", MTV brought all of the casts together for a special reunion that, in part, asked the following question: "How real is 'The Real World'?" Not surprisingly, some cast members discussed how MTV manipulated the footage by editing it in a way that portrayed them in certain ways. Others focused on the *unrealistic* nature of the three months of taping: Being surrounded by cameras, living rent-free in a beautiful house/apartment, and having access to special events and places. However, other cast members maintained that the initial novelty of the cameras wore off and explained that no one could maintain a certain media persona without revealing their real selves. In responding to one comment regarding how MTV's editing worked to portray certain people in specific ways, Heather (a NYC cast member) countered by affirming the reality of the images, "They [MTV] only used what you gave them . . . they couldn't show something unless you did it." Heather's assertions are supported by the significant number of comments, behaviors, or interactions that are caught on tape by the cameras—these are things that the viewing public is convinced that cast members (like the rest of us) have done, but would not want taped and shown repeatedly to millions of viewers. The inclusion of such clips enhances the credibility of the "realness" of the show.

The most crucial element, however, in terms of how realistic viewers perceive "The Real World" lies in the viewers' desire for it to be real. The primary attraction for the show is its efforts to show real people in everyday interactions, not to portray "characters" closely following a pre-determined, externally created script. Television viewers can get such contrived mediated images from countless other types of programming. The most exciting aspect of the show is the unpredictability that comes with reality; it is this very notion that draws televisual voyeurs to the show and keeps them (us) coming back for more.

As viewers, we are privy to every detail of the cast members' lives . . . When they scream, fight, laugh, and say unfathomably, stupid things, we are there. Because the show is pared down to half-hour episodes, most of what the producers film is edited away. And so in the end we only trust what we see on television . . . what happens off-screen might as well as never happened at all. It is the perfect existentialist production—being in nothingness, life is television. (Sakurari, 1996, p. 17)

Understanding a text, according to Gadamer (1975), consists of examining the enduring messages of the text within a larger context and apart from the creator's original intentions. The reiteration and reinforcement of similar signifiers across the various "Real World" casts, or the textual volume of such images (Bellour, 1977), connotes a fundamental truth: Black masculinity is inherently dangerous and to be feared. This stereotypical depiction of Black maleness simply adds to the hegemonic images in film and television. So, in addition to the negative characterizations of African American men in countless films and various genres of television programming, viewers now can draw from additional "real world" examples in legitimizing their discomfort around Black men. Instead of using the real life experiences of young African American men to advance viewers understanding of the complex diversity within this large, heterogeneous group, this popular series merely cultivates the perpetuation of existing stereotypes. In making this problematic process of media signification apparent, I hope to deconstruct the arduous representations of young Black men in the media, and in

doing so, challenge the cyclical process by which these images are transferred to and from the context of interpersonal interactions and accepted as accurate, natural, and true.

Within a semiotic analysis, it is important to recognize "that what is absent from a text is as significant as what is present" (Fiske, 1994, p. 422). As attended to throughout this article, I argue that what is strikingly absent from the first six seasons of MTV's "The Real World" are any substantial images that signify Black masculinity in a positive, healthy, or productive manner. Certainly, there are some African American men whose life experiences do reflect those represented on the series. The redundancy of associating Black masculinity with potential violence, however, works to negate the great diversity of experiences of African American men in the United States.

Individual subjectivity is denied because the black [male] subject is positioned as a mouthpiece, a ventriloquist for an entire social category which is seen to be 'typified' by its representative. Acknowledgment of the diversity of black experiences and subject-positions is thereby foreclosed. (Julien & Mercer, 1996, p. 454)

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the seventh season of MTV's "The Real World" is currently being filmed in Seattle. Will the producers of the show continue in their restrictive coding of African American men or will a more elaborative code—one that promotes a foregrounding for the diversity of Black men—be offered? Unofficial previews, based on a number of "Real World" sightings by Seattle internet users, describe one cast member (Steven) as "A Black guy, not much more [known] yet." Drawing from the redundancy of signifiers assigned to African American men selected for past seasons of the show, I would suggest that the viewers have all the information that is needed to get a solid grasp on how Steven will be represented on "The Real World".

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For each season, seven persons are chosen from a large diverse pool of 10,000-25,000 applicants (Sakurari, 1996) who "apply" via personal videotapes, letters, or open calls held in various cities across the United States.

<sup>2</sup>Throughout this article, I interchangeably use "African American" and "Black" to refer to those persons of African descent. However, it is important to note that when discussing the stereotypical depictions that justify the fear of "BLACK" men, I consciously use Black (and not African American) because of the connotative power associated with the term.

<sup>3</sup>For instance, MTV will often preempt regular weekend programming and show "Real World" marathons, which in essence air all of the episodes of a given season within several continuous hours. During other times, MTV will present special programming that airs a single episode from each show around a common theme (cast introductions, vacations, or farewells).

<sup>4</sup>Given that my interpretations of the show are undoubtedly tied to my field of experience, some identification of the cultural standpoint(s) that I bring to the analysis is appropriate. In this regard, my reading of the images of Black masculinity are inextricably linked to my identity as a non-African American thirty-something man who was raised in an ethnically diverse East Coast public housing complex. My cultural standpoint is further defined by my experiences as a: (a) researcher of intercultural/interracial communication, (b) "heavy user" of television, and (c) participant/member of various African American communities (residential, social, familial, religious, and professional) over the course of my life.

<sup>5</sup>Throughout the various seasons, three aspects of diversity appeared to be foregrounded: sex/gender, race/ethnicity, and affectional/sexual orientation. To a lesser degree, other cultural elements such as religion and socioeconomic status, were present but not explored with the intensity of other elements.

<sup>6</sup>Mohammed maintains a marginal presence (at best) within these "most dangerous" episodes. This came as no surprise to "Real World" fans who watched the San Francisco season and noticed the lack of attention given to his role in the house. In fact, while Mohammed was part of the cast throughout the entire season, his prominence within the final [edited] footage is reminiscent of the invisibility of Black men described by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1947).

<sup>7</sup>For the first season, three months of footage was edited down to 13 half-hour episodes; subsequent seasons were expanded to 19-22 episodes each.

<sup>8</sup>One of the features of "The Real World" is the confessional room. Over the three months of their stay in the house, cast members are required to spend time alone in this room self-disclosing (only to a camera) their personal reflections of the events that are going on with others. Often times, footage from the confessional is edited into actual interactions, so that viewers gain insight into how each person perceived the interaction as it unfolds.

<sup>9</sup>Several of the incidents portrayed within the "most dangerous episodes" marathon are marked by gender, as well as racial, dynamics. The "rape" scene analyzed here is primarily marked by gender (a man accused of raping a woman); however, it is critiqued specifically in terms of race and gender (a White woman accusing a Black man of rape). In this regard, my intentions are not to privilege considerations of race over those of gender, but instead to locate my focus on analyzing the media images used to signify African American men.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, the analysis of ALL-AMERICAN GIRL, a short-lived situated comedy that featured a Korean-American family but did not have any Korean-American producers or writers (Orbe, Seymour, & Kang, in press).

<sup>11</sup>Such a clear manipulation of cast members did not only involve the African-American men. Within the same season, viewers witness the selection of Elka, someone whose stereotypical views of gays and lesbians are apparent through her comments about her strong Catholic and relatively sheltered upbringing, is selected as part of a cast with a "very out" lesbian (Genesis) and anti-religion feminist (Montana).

<sup>12</sup>This editing technique is common practice throughout the six seasons of the show. For instance, in the scenes where the conflict between David and his LA housemates unfolded, the producers take some of David's comments to housemates from earlier footage and place them within the context of the present conflict. In doing so, a more compelling drama is created, but the meanings of the comments are re-defined apart from their original context. No attention is given to identifying the specific context from which the comments were made; instead the editing team achieves their primary goal: to create a "natural" flow of events with little or no evidence of their manipulation. Through a close examination of David and Beth's dress and positioning in the house, however, some viewers may notice several inconsistencies (i.e., Beth wearing shorts when confronting David, cut to David's response, and then returning to Beth who seemingly responds directly to David but now has on long pants) that reveal how some comments made in a joking manner earlier are re-defined as hostile and threatening by inserting them into another context.

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