

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

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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,¹ 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.² 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,³ 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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 episodes⁷ 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

