WOMEN AND REALITY TV IN EVERYDAY LIFE: TOWARD
A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BODIES

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WOMEN AND REALITY TV IN EVERYDAY LIFE: TOWARD A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BODIES (216 pp.)

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By moving beyond the representation of “women” in specific texts and locating the body as a critical site of meaning in a hybrid televisual genre—narrative reality television—this dissertation challenges assumptions about production, text, audience, and researcher. Drawing from existing theories of the body and political economy in the feminist and critical rhetoric literature and using MTV’s popular long-running program *The Real World* as a case study, this dissertation examines the interrelationship of the construction and consumption of bodies in an increasingly surveillance-based, commercial, hybrid media culture. Twenty college-aged women viewers of *The Real World* wrote brief journal entries to episodes of the program prior to participating in individual interviews. Additionally, the researcher conducted interviews with four creative directors of the program. Finally, the interviews informed a rhetorical analysis of the 25 episodes of the seventeenth season of *The Real World*, set in Key West, which aired from February to August 2006. Three general themes of women’s bodies on *The Real World* emerged from the concurrent methods: 1) the constructed nature of bodies in crisis, 2) the heteronormative double bind of college female bodies expected to party hard yet retain their dignity, and 3) the impact of these bodies and other *Real World* features on viewers’ daily lives whereby, despite their often fabricated nature, narrative bodies on
The Real World are ostensibly real for viewers. The author positions a conception of material, commodity bodies in hybrid television within the profit-motivated, macro-institution of television production and celebrity worship, as well as the micro-structures of peer relationships and meaning negotiation. Representations and interpretations of bodies as conflicted and starved for attention move beyond theoretical assumptions of bodies as power to bodies as sites of learning for real world relational exchanges within popular culture. Because the macro-structures and micro-practices of production happen simultaneously within a larger schema of cultural production that goes beyond the daily routines of creating a reality TV program, scholars should continue to link the capital with the cultural and reevaluate our roles as critics and interpreters of meaning.

Approved: 

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The Real World and Women Viewers as a Case Study

As a junior-high student when The Real World premiered in 1992, I became intrigued by the opportunity to see how “real” young people went about their daily lives. I was not yet aware of the narrow focus of reality that the series presented and therefore accepted what I saw at face value. As the first few seasons were heavy on race relations and young people coming into their own in the City, I developed a strong sense of accepting and appreciating differences in people and aspired to make it on my own one day in the City. I drifted away from the series sometime during high school, before The Real World became more sexually charged. Publicity surrounding the most sexual season to date, season 12 in Las Vegas drew me back to the series in 2002. This time I watched with the critical eye of a media scholar and as the older sister of a 16-year-old young man and fan of MTV. Like so many young people (such as myself from the ages of 12 to 17), my brother was a regular viewer of MTV at that time, with his television tuned to the network at various times throughout the day. Also like many teenage viewers, he watched The Real World. As such, I became increasingly concerned with the “reality” presented on the series.

As The Real World is the longest running program of its kind and continues to rank as one of MTV’s highest rated programs, it is important to understand how audiences, limited by fabricated, commercial reality programming, negotiate meaning and the body in this ever popular series. MTV targets a young male audience, but according to co-creator and executive producer of The Real World, Jon Murray, young women constitute more than half of The Real World’s audience (personal
communication, June 12, 2006) and deserve to be given a voice. And while the voices of male viewers are no less important, the program’s strong female viewer base and the heavy inclusion of personal issues close to women such as drinking, sex, and body image led me to limit this study to its female viewers. Attention on the female body became apparent as the women I interviewed spoke time and again of The Real World’s focus on the female cast members over the male cast members. Further, those involved in the production of the program told me of the centrality of women’s issues and the drama surrounding female roommates’ lives to The Real World narratives, given that the program is a “real world” soap opera with special focus on romance and relationships.

Reality TV for the MTV Generation

Since 1992 The Real World has invited young adults to share in the lives of “seven strangers, picked to live in a house, work together, and have their lives taped and find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real,” (Bunim/Murray, 2006, Feb. 28). The show is an unscripted, half-hour voyeuristic look into the lives of seven young people between the ages of 18 and 24 set in a different location each season. The producers originally intended to create a scripted soap opera for MTV, but cost prohibitive sets and talent fees caused the shift to the reality concept (O’Connor, 1992). Cameras follow the non-actors nearly 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The first season, set in New York, began a fifteen-year tradition of bringing diverse young adults to major cities such as San Francisco, London, Miami, Boston, and
Chicago. The show is currently airing Season 18, set in Denver and preparing for Season 19, set in Sydney, Australia.

When I first began studying the series, in 2003, it was in the middle of a ratings peak, with every season capturing MTV’s coveted 12-34 demographic (Aurthur, 2005; Dempsey, 2004; Weinraub, 2001). Approximately two to three million viewers had been tuning into The Real World weekly and it ranked consistently in Nielsen’s top ten cable programs. Season 16, set in San Diego, which ended its run in November 2005, offered episodes that were the most watched show in their time period of viewers aged 12 to 34, achieving higher ratings than broadcast networks in some cases (Kick off your shoes, 2005). Throughout these ratings accomplishments, The Real World has continued to up the ante on sexual displays and sexually suggestive situations. It appears that, as bedroom activities were revealed and more sexual behavior such as skinny-dipping and hot tub sharing became the norm, ratings rose, with each subsequent season garnering record ratings (Juarez, 2002). Despite the popularity of reality shows that rely on the body and bodily relationships, like The Real World and The Bachelor, research is lacking on the creation of and representation of actual bodies in reality programs.

The Feminist Media Body Project: In Brief

In designing this dissertation I wanted to move beyond trying to “fit” theories of political economy into spaces most often reserved for cultural studies and instead positioned myself among an emergent group of scholars who practice critical rhetoric through theories of the body. Critical rhetoric recognizes the power struggles inherent in
the creation and consumption of cultural texts. Embodiment identifies the body as the main site of this power play. However, by moving beyond the representation of “women” in specific texts and locating the body as a critical site of meaning in a hybrid televisual genre—narrative reality television—I have been able to challenge assumptions about production, text, audience, and researcher. Media scholars have noted the scarcity of television studies that combine political economy and feminism (Meehan, 2002; Riordan, 2004). Political economy critiques issues of ownership and control, whereas feminist critical rhetoric critiques power structures grounded in gendered relationships. The fusion of political economy and feminist theory seems a logical step toward a more complete understanding of the way, on the one hand, profit-driven media in the United States shapes television programming. On the other, feminist thought allows for female agency in the interpretation of television shaped by power structures of capital and gender. While the production process constructs a message at multiple determinate moments (Hall, 1980), audience members play a reciprocal role in the meaning of television texts. Meaning making, while a valid and substantial body of work, only goes so far. Scholarship on viewers’ identification with mediated images, specifically in the area of gender and sexuality (Gauntlett, 2002; Hall, 1996; McRobbie, 1991), provides a crucial point of departure to advance feminist media studies.

Gender and sexuality, a site of struggle for body politics, offers an intersection of television and feminist discourse. Scholars in as varied disciplines as media studies, rhetoric, philosophy, and sociology have progressed from studying simply constructs of gender and sexuality to more complex notions of the body (See Grosz, 1994; McKerrow,
1998; Weeks, 1996). It is important to acknowledge that the body, in all its forms, from sexual identity and self-esteem issues to eating disorders and fashion style, is a means of sexual power. Arthurs (2004) explained how cultural transformations of sexuality take place in front of millions on television and are linked to the “legal status of sexual behaviors and the recognition of identity rights arising from successive waves of political campaigning by the ‘new social movements’—bohemian, feminist, gay and lesbian, queer” (p. 3). Arthurs’ description of the current cultural climate helps explain the importance of understanding bodily representations on television. Those visual images and narratives of the body that seep into popular television help determine how we speak about bodies.

Today’s primetime portrayals of the body range from sitcoms and dramas such as NBC’s often sexually suggestive Scrubs, the safer sex-with-consequences themes on the CW’s Seventh Heaven and sex-charged programs like ABC’s Grey’s Anatomy. Reality television is no exception. In the 2006-07 programming season, dating shows and makeover shows that rely on beautiful bodies and often sexual themes, such as The Bachelor and VH1’s Flavor of Love, continued to find success with audiences. With the rapid rise of reality television to the fore of popular culture discourse, studies have begun to assess the genre’s intersection with audiences, media economics and its cultural relevance (See Andrejevic, 2004; Holmes & Jermyn, 2004; Kraszewski, 2004; LeBesco, 2004; Lewis, 2004). However, few studies have looked at how young women, a key audience of reality TV, identify with the bodies of reality programs on their screens. Even fewer have integrated production, textual, and audience analyses of the genre. Rockler
(1999) has argued for feminist analyses that balance critiques of patriarchy with explication of women’s lived experiences. Drawing from existing theories of the body and political economy in the feminist and critical rhetoric literature, this dissertation aims to explain the interrelationship of the construction and consumption of bodies in an increasingly surveillance-based, commercial, hybrid media culture.

From Terms to Theory

*Hybrid Reality Television*

Literature on reality television has exploded since the rise in popularity of programs such as *Survivor* (2000-present) and *Big Brother* (2000-present) (See Andrejevic, 2002 & 2004, Bignell, 2005; Biressi & Nunn, 2005; Hill, 2005; Holmes & Jermyn, 2004; Kilborn, 2003; and Murray & Ouellette, 2004), but scholars have struggled over the meaning of “reality television.” Andrejevic (2002) offers one definition: reality television is non-scripted programming that relies on the presence of non-actors and the absence of a script. However, here scholars run the risk of including talk shows, talent programs, true-life documentaries, game shows, and makeover programs in the same genre classification. Bignell (2005) noted the problems of defining what constitutes reality television, including production value, aesthetic issues, audience response, and blurred lines of the ordinary and celebrity. According to Biressi and Nunn (2005), reality TV is factual programming that “takes on the burden of making sense [sic] of reality” (p. 4) through a reliance on editing. They identified a “fly-on-the-wall” (p. 64) genre that includes programs like *Big Brother* and *The Real World* and some of the more recent MTV clones of young urban life, such as *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*, as hyperreal (here
they draw from Zizek, 2002) spectacle that feeds into a modern *culture of narcissism*. *The Real World* fits into a subclass of reality television that blends documentary techniques with soap opera. Through casting and editing, producers and staff members of *The Real World* dramatize roommates’ lives via narrative storytelling, hence my use of the term hybrid to characterize the type of narrative reality television articulated by programs such as *The Real World*.

### The Body and Embodiment

Grosz (1995) contended that while plenty of critical analyses exist on the “representation” of bodies, scholars need to focus on the body as “substance” (p. 38). She argued that because sexuality and desire—via the body—have been polarized as masculine, then we must reconfigure desire in terms of “surfaces and intensities” (p. 18). Desire is not a thing, but a production. Rather than looking to the body or sexuality as a product or end result, we should look to the nuances or “energies” as she calls it of the body’s sexuality. This dissertation attempts to interrogate the layers of the body politic in popular culture today, with reality television as the flashpoint. A project of this scope can be achieved through an attitude of “embodied rhetoricity,” (McKerrow, 1998) whereby we as media critics position ourselves subjectively within and around the text. For Minh-ha (1999), the ideal rhetor hovers somewhere between subjective and objective to challenge fixed identities, or “speaking nearby” media subjects. She identified the concept as a mode of indirectness, but not necessarily as a method of doing rhetoric. Speaking nearby, Minh-ha argued, is an “attitude in life, a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world” (p. 218).
The theoretical framework for this project draws on a number of interdisciplinary strands. Corporeal feminism calls for the exploration of how the body absorbs and reflects social, political, cultural, and geographical struggles. This work is represented by Foucault (1977), who first described this as a political economy of the body, which rests in disciplinary practices and a “collective coercion of bodies” (p. 169). Through constant training and surveillance we normalize our behavior. He argued that sexuality and femininity are in fact disciplinary regimes, with long labor processes that force bodies into compliance with a sexual and/or feminine ideal. How does this process unravel on reality television? The “panopticon” of automatic, invisible power is most certainly at play on reality television, especially for the women of *The Real World*, whose cast is taped all hours of the day, in the bedroom and in the shower.

My work involved the use of corporeal rhetoric to speak nearby the subject by creating a dialogue with *Real World* viewers and decision-makers (producers and other creative directors). To review, *corporeal rhetoric*, according to McKerrow, is an attitude toward rhetoric inclusive of the body, but not at the exclusion of the mind. A *reconfiguration of desire*, per Grosz, is a conceptualization that looks to the body as a multifaceted, nongeneralizable production. Finally, *speaking nearby*, as defined by Minh-ha, is the incorporation of multiple viewpoints. This theoretical design allowed for examination of the program’s display, as well as omission, of the body. This critical rhetoric is also grounded in feminist political economy as identified by Riordan (2004) as a feminist sensibility of media studies. Foucault is useful for feminists as both look to the body as the site of power. Scholars (Brooks, 1997; Riordan, 2004) have pointed to the
need for feminist studies that integrate multiple methods and theoretical perspectives. As such, this dissertation, grounded in feminism, links production, textual, and audience analyses through theories of critical rhetoric and political economy.

**Finding Real World Meaning in *The Real World***

This multi-layered research design seems appropriate given that the subject of study is its own hybrid. *The Real World* combines MTV’s slickly edited, quick-cut music video form with the dramatic overtures of soap opera under the guise of true life documentary. In articulating the rhetorical strategies in the construction of bodies on *The Real World*, my goal was to examine the visual narrative, but also to give the program’s viewers a voice. As my work is grounded in feminist theory and methods, I paid close attention to how female viewers spoke about young adult, specifically female, bodies as framed by reality television—but more to the point—how viewers’ own conceptions of the body intersected with those bodies found on *The Real World*.

Because the popularity of the program has stayed mostly consistent with its young adult base, and because those viewers feel such a connection to much of the onscreen lives of the cast members (Stern, 2005), it was fitting to include those very audience members in a relational rhetorical exchange about the program. The first phase began with twenty female *Real World* fans aged 18 to 22 writing journal responses to three episodes of *The Real World Key West*, which premiered in February 2006. Themes that emerged from the journal entries guided my question design for follow-up interviews with the women. The question guide can be found in Appendix A. The second phase
consisted of individual interviews with four top executives of *The Real World*, including co-creator and executive producer, Jonathan Murray, and the vice presidents of casting, stories, and editing. The third phase was the completion of a rhetorical, textual analysis of the 25 episodes of the Key West season, which aired from February to August 2006.

The Key West season unfolded unlike any other before it. A troubled 24-year-old woman from Connecticut named Paula was the central roommate figure. The first few episodes focused on Paula’s struggle with an eating disorder, as well as other body issues related to drinking and an abusive relationship. Much of the middle portion of the season had the seven roommates avoiding the high winds of three major hurricanes. The severity of these troubled girl and hurricane narratives left little room for the typical bar scenes and make-out sessions viewers had come to expect from *The Real World*. I had framed my study with the expectation that the Key West season, like so many *Real World* seasons before it, would consist mostly of beautiful people drinking, partying, and hooking up. While these elements were at play in Key West, they constituted a significantly smaller portion of the narrative than past seasons. Such is the nature of studying reality TV. Unlike the closely scripted process of drama and sitcoms, whose characters and plots can continue for years, the cast and storylines of reality programming change from season to season.

With the theoretical framework, methodology, and brief introduction of *The Real World Key West* described above, this project was guided by the following questions, which I elaborate on in chapter two:
1) How do consumers/viewers negotiate meaning and body issues in *The Real World*?

2) How do decision makers construct bodies on *The Real World* that equip viewers for living in a commercially mediated world reliant on female bodies?

3) What can we learn from the intersection of the *consumption* and *construction* of bodies of hybrid reality television?

These questions brought together the multiple aims of reception, textual and production analyses and suggest a trajectory for future analysis of reality television production and consumption.

Chapter Development

This dissertation consists of seven chapters. With the exception of the initial chapters (1-3) that frame the theoretical foundations, review the previous work in the field, offer background information on *The Real World*, and outline my methods, I have grouped chapters thematically because the themes that emerged from the individual methods overlapped in so many ways. Chapter one outlines the theories that ground the dissertation. I draw from political economy scholars such as Graham Murdock, Peter Golding, Vincent Mosco, Eileen Meehan, and Ellen Riordan before turning to theories of embodiment and critical rhetoric as explained by Michel Foucault, Elizabeth Grosz, and Raymie McKerrow. Chapter one also expands on critical rhetoric as a mode of investigation and methodological framework.
Information regarding the hybrid nature of and audience interest in reality television constitutes the first part of chapter two. I also provide background on the evolution of *The Real World* that includes information from my interviews with the decision makers of the program. In summarizing some of the major narratives regarding the body in previous *Real World* seasons, I hope to help the reader understand better the themes and concepts that emerged from the interview process and rhetorical analysis of the Key West season in later chapters.

Chapter three describes the methods of 1) selecting and interviewing *Real World* female viewers and decision-makers, and 2) conducting the textual analysis of *Real World* episodes. Qualitative research is not a linear process. I spoke with 20 viewers from a sorority at a large Midwestern state university as season 17, set in Key West, unfolded in the spring of 2006. Interviews with the co-creator/executive producer and three of the major creative directors of *The Real World* took place in early summer 2006, again while Key West aired. I then watched the season multiple times in its entirety after it ended in August 2006, all the while revisiting my viewer and producer transcripts to reinform and reinvigorate my analysis of the 25 episodes.

The body as fabricated and marked is the focus of chapter four, which describes the insecurities and problems of *Real World* cast members and viewer response to these troubled situations. The chapter explores a reliance on women’s bodies over men’s bodies to build drama in *The Real World*. Much of chapter four is devoted to eating disorders, as *The Real World Key West*’s Paula battled the disease on air. While a number of the women interviewed were hesitant to share specifics of their connection to anorexia
or bulimia, all of them explained how real the problem of eating disorders were to women they knew and a few offered candid accounts of their own or their friends’ experiences with anorexia. These stories help explain how body image and eating disorders should and must be addressed on television programs with a young female audience, especially those programs with a claim to the real.

Chapter five turns to the relaxed party and sexual environment fostered by The Real World and compares it to sorority and college life. I address the women’s concerns that the show has given young women—and young adults in general—a bad name. At the same time, the women recognized a truth value in the party and “hook up” scene represented on the program. Finally, this chapter explores the heteronormativity inherent in The Real World’s sexual displays. A near absence of lesbian women compared to the presence of gay men on the series has been eclipsed over the years by certain heteroflexible, bisexual behaviors. The women I spoke with identified an epidemic of young women, represented disproportionately on The Real World, who thrive on attention and often find that making out with other women achieves the goal.

The reality of young adulthood presented in The Real World is further explored in chapter six. Since a majority of the viewers began viewing in middle school or high school, I was able to uncover their younger viewing experiences of the show. Here, viewers shared their perceptions of what they thought college life would be like based on the lives of Real World roommates. Many viewers grew up with the show and, especially those women from small towns who have experienced less diversity in their everyday lives prior to college, have come to rely on it as a tool for socialization. The Real World
acclimates viewers to people of different backgrounds and prepares them, for better or worse, for college. The women acknowledge knowing that the presence of the camera may change *Real World* roommates’ behaviors some, but that most of what they do onscreen is essentially real, including relationship narratives, which the women found the most pleasure in viewing.

Finally, chapter seven brings together these findings to specifically answer the research questions I began with and offer a framework for future analysis of hybrid television and the audience, with a special focus on the status of bodies and critical rhetoric in feminist media studies. I situate my analysis among previous studies assessing media realism and explore more deeply the themes of women in crisis and attention-seeking by questioning the context by which real women today are recreated on hybrid television and juxtapose my arguments to the current crisis of womanhood fostered by celebrity media and surveillance culture. While I am careful not to lay sole blame on media institutions, the fact that millions of dollars are at stake for corporations who have time and time again flourished through the commodification of women’s bodies cannot be ignored.
Chapter 1
Political Economy, Embodiment,
and the Politics of Critical Interpretation

_A feminist political economy is committed to praxis, which includes dialogue across disciplinary boundaries._

_Ellen Riordan (2002, p. 11)_

Riordan’s statement offers a starting point for a critical, materialist conception of feminist media studies as a discipline. Although political economy theorists have not been so quick to identify the materiality of discourse (Riordan, 2002; Steeves and Wasko, 2002), in this chapter I argue that political economy and critical rhetoric are a natural fit, in that both are concerned with disrupting the social order by deconstructing sites of power (Cloud, 1994; McGee, 1990). Theory does not exist in a vacuum content to rest within the walls of a single discipline, whether communications, sociology, history, or literature. It must be enacted through language and action. In the case of hybrid television, a scholarly framework involves pulling from critical theories of political economy to explain the structures and practices involved in creating media texts that lead to the commodification of bodies and space as well as cultural, but also critical, theories of the interrelationship of bodies, texts, and audiences. Finally, a feminist view of power—in capital, bodies, and rhetoric—must run throughout.

This chapter explores the theoretical tensions, but ultimately linkages, among culture and capital and bodies and power to ground my analysis in multiple interrelated feminist frameworks. As my research intends to expand the theoretical trajectory of
feminist media scholars that have come before me, this chapter reviews the theories and summarizes key studies within these theoretical strands that further the feminist media project. Guided by Hall (1983), in 1989 Murdock reminded communications scholars that the economic is a “starting point for analysis but not a destination” (p. 229). It is with political economy, then, that I begin my theoretical foundation before moving onto theories of the body. The chapter then concludes with a summary of the key tenets of critical rhetoric, including those of McKerrow, Grosz, and Minh-ha, and connects them to ideological, Burkean analysis.

**Political Economy: Mass Communication and Social Change**

Scholars have looked to political economy to explain how capital affects policy decisions, culture, technological developments, and information (Meehan, Mosco & Wasko, 1993). The linking of the economic to the cultural, an idea central to political economy studies, was first identified by Horkheimer and Adorno in 1944. The materialist view that cultural industries place exchange value over use value is rooted in the Marxist theory that grounds the Frankfurt School, which countered the dominant paradigm of empiricism in mid-twentieth century mass communication research. The Frankfurt School’s theorists examined the influence of capital on the creation of cultural products. Bettig (2002) summarized eloquently the contribution of the Frankfurt School’s political economy of communications:

Horkeimer and Adorno recognized what political economists have determined to be typical behavior of concentrated industries. Whether a matter of selling
automobiles, consumer goods, or cultural products, the goal of oligopolistic producers is the same: to minimize risks by standardizing products and to maximize profits by creating demand through marketing and advertising. (p. 86)

Capitalism and culture are always already linked in the current climate of mass-produced texts and products.

Political economy is grounded in objective, realist interpretations of rigorous methods with the ultimate goal of social change (Murdock & Golding, 1974). Social change is the key phrase here that links political economy to critical theory. Murdock and Golding (see Murdock & Golding, 1974, 1977; and Murdock, 1982; 1989; 1995) have focused on the importance of analyzing the social processes through which media are constructed and interpreted. Specifically, they have stressed investigation of the contexts and pressures that shape and constrain these constructions. The stories created by institutionalized media practices, including advertising-driven, profit-seeking television are key in how audiences construct meaning according to political economy scholars.

Mediated stories are ideology made material (Hall, 1989). The ideological underpinnings of the media are best represented by Hall’s (1980) early encoding/decoding model, which recognizes the social, economic, and political factors simultaneously encountered in the construction, or encoding, and interpretation, or decoding, of media texts, as well as the text itself. Although Hall did not ground his research in the structural tradition of political economists of communications, he did make the subjectivities of the people in power (producers, directors, editors, reporters) within media institutions central to British cultural studies. Murdock (1989) called for this type of interdisciplinary research that
reestablishes links between communications and modern social theory as a step forward for communications scholarship:

At the very least, we need to find new ways of combining interpretive studies of people’s lifeworlds with attempts to map the contours of the wider formations that envelop and organize them. (p. 246)

In one of the works that focused specifically on the production side as encouraged by Murdock, Levine (2001) demonstrated the continued salience and relevance of Hall’s model in the twenty-first century. Levine described and analyzed five categorical imperatives for production research that coincide with Hall’s recognition of the influences on and culture of cultural production: production constraints, the production environment, production routines and practices, the production of characters and stories, and the role of the audience in production. Using the production of the popular ABC soap opera General Hospital, she looked to large scale network pressure and involvement, the emotional and social tensions within and among the writing, directing and production crew, the rigorous routines and hierarchies of daily studio production, the complex process of creating dramatic characters and narratives, and the handling of audience response as a template for industry-centered scholarship:

If media researchers seek to understand the paths through which media products come to exist, if they seek to understand the constraints that shape the products available to us, then this sort of rigorous, layered attention to production processes is vital. (p. 81)
Levine called attention to cultural studies’ tendency to overlook the economic underpinnings of cultural production, which scholars such as Mosco (1996) and Garnham (1997) have also noted.

However, years before Levine’s paradigmatic analysis, a number of feminist scholars had contributed to the study of the creative process of media texts centered in and around women’s everyday lives, such as soap opera and romance novels (See Ang, 1982; Brown, 1994; Hobson, 1982; McRobbie, 1991; Radway, 1984). Radway’s (1984) parallel textual and reception analyses of romance novels and their readers was perhaps the first major study to attempt this interweaving of feminist theory and methods on such a grand scale. Radway began with questionnaires before conducting interviews with twenty readers to assess the appeals and meanings of romance novels. She also read and analyzed a number of romance novels for their content and themes and traced the historical and institutional antecedents of the publication of romance novels. Radway concluded that while romance readers’ oppositional readings included pleasure and escape from their mundane lives, their empowerment was temporary until they read the next romance.

Ten years later, D’Acci (1994) built upon Radway’s model to investigate the creation and consumption of the women of Cagney & Lacey. D’Acci found that the producers of Cagney & Lacey struggled to balance femininity with the title characters’ tough cop images due to pressure from network executives, who were in turn buckling under the weight of advertisers’ scrutiny. Concurrently, she found that despite production’s focus on the look of the starring actresses and their lesser status in the law
enforcement community compared to male cops, female fans of the show participated in counterhegemonic readings of strong female friendships. Another empowering element D’Acci identified came from her institutional investigation, in which she argued *Cagney & Lacey* made a prominent space for women’s issues and alternative discourse as well as the employment of numerous women writers and producers. Not only was D’Acci’s analysis crucial to advance feminist media studies, she also paved the way for future production and reception research. On the other hand, studies are still few and far between that embrace production, text, and reception.

Theory/Praxis: A Feminist Sensibility in Media Studies

According to Riordan (2004), economic conditions lead to different experiences. As such, she reaches out from political economy to cultural studies to stress the importance of multiple theories and cross-disciplinary methodologies for a “feminist sensibility” of political economy studies. In cultural studies, Riordan finds value in reader subjectivity and researcher self-reflexivity in analyzing the intersection of capitalism and culture. Riordan calls to mind how economics is sutured into our smallest, day-to-day experiences and how, because of our classed and gendered lives we respond in multiple ways. Similarly, television producers’ lived experiences and responses to commercial, institutionalized media impact their production choices.

Mosco (1996) explained that feminism and cultural studies are linked to political economy in that these modes begin with gender to analyze the specific ways women have responded to patriarchal structures of communication and information. He recognized the importance of subjectivity when analyzing the economic and political organization and
operation of the mass media. However, he argued, capitalism has always deestablished these positions and offered three entry points for political economy of communications analysis as evidence, commodification, spatialization and structuration, which were in turn interpreted by Riordan (2004) toward a progressive feminist political economy. Two of these entry points, commodification and structuration, are relevant here.

**Commodification**

Commodification attempts to explain audiences’ use value and media producers’ and financiers’ exchange value of commodities. This Marxist view looks to the “logic of capital” (Bettig, 2002, p. 81) in the formation of cultural products, such as televisual texts, as well as their interpretation. The economic does not stand alone. Commodity is the site of both production and consumption (Riordan, 2004). However, according to Mosco (1996), and Murdock (1989) before him, the exchange value—the economic imperative of capitalist media—comes first.

In an extensive analysis of the Batman franchise, Meehan (1991) demonstrated how mass-produced culture is a profit-driven business controlled by markets. Parent company Warner Communications Inc. used its conglomerate status to integrate the Batman product line into a synergistic machine that included film, action figures, a soundtrack, clothing, trading cards and so much more. A larger than life superhero that represented the triumph of good over evil was the commodity for Meehan’s study, but all media texts are embodied by a commodity to be sold and purchased in one form or another, whether superheroes or sexuality.
Structuration

Structuration is concerned with the impact of human agency on macrolevel structures. Riordan (2004) made the case that feminist analyses of microlevel events, such as media texts, can indeed change the nature of their macrolevel structures, such as how the industry represents women. On the other hand, the linking of mass media structures with human agency, may be more important as theory first, praxis second, in that mass communication scholars must reconcile the two strands before embarking on the critical/cultural media studies project. Summarizing Murdock’s (1995) attempt at linking political economy and cultural studies by way of the humanist Raymond Williams and the structuralist Stuart Hall, Meehan (1999) made the case for continuity of the perspectives:

[P]olitical economy provides the context for media products as cultural artifacts, while cultural studies examines how particular creators, particular artifacts, or particular consumers operate within that context. (p. 156)

Meehan identified political economy’s traditionally critical perspective of media industry practices and structures and cultural studies’ historical embracing of a populace resistant to dominant ideology and cited the work of numerous scholars who had contributed to the debate for decades (See Carey, 1995; Garnham, 1995; Grossberg, 1995; Murdock, 1995) and concluded her argument by citing a large body of literature that has brought political economy and cultural studies perspectives together (See, for example, Anderson, 1995; Byars and Meehan, 1995; Gitlin, 1993; McAllister, 1996; Murdock 1978, 1989, 1993; Stabile, 1995).
If power, operated at the structural and the individual level, is simultaneously productive and prohibitive, scholars can appreciate Meehan’s (2002) discussion of television as an instrument of oppression—despite the pleasures viewers obtain from it. She stressed the importance of the white, 18-24, heterosexual, English-speaking, upscale male demographic, as well as the commodity audience, whereby television, advertising, and ratings industries manufacture commodities, often marginalizing women. However, a counter-argument rises from studies on women-centered soap operas and situation comedies which state that women take pleasure in the power of creating their own stories from their daytime soap operas (Hayward, 1997) as well as of participating in the ritualized space of friendship built around fan groups (Baym, 2000). Nonetheless, Meehan, as well as Riordan (2004) remind us that pleasure and resistance to television can be both empowering and oppressive. This struggle to enjoy the social, cultural, and individuality of the viewing experience and concurrently resist the ideological, commodity messages add yet another power dimension to the relationship of producer, text, and audience.

Hybrid Television and the Panopticon

According to Foucault, the many power dimensions discussed above operate often unseen in our everyday social institutions. For this reason, in Discipline and Punish, Foucault (1977) argued that it was not important who exercised power. It is organized at multiple points, invisibly and anonymously. He described this type of power using Bentham’s panopticon, which Foucault (1980) identified as “the eye of power” arranged
in such a way that a tower placed in the center of a building, with large windows in the
tower overlooking the open area and the cells of the building, much like a prison, factory
or boarding school (p. 147). The spatial arrangement creates and maintains a power
structure that limits the actions of those who may or may not be under watch:

   It is an important mechanism, for it automatizes and disindividualizes power.

   Power has its principle not so much in person as in a certain concerted distribution
   of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms
   produce the relation in which individuals are caught up. The ceremonies, rituals,
   the marks by which the sovereign’s surplus power was manifested are useless.
   There is a machinery that assures dissymmetry, disequilibrium, difference.

   However, in the History of Sexuality Volume 1, Foucault (1978) stressed the
importance of analyzing who is speaking about the body—what institutions have the
power to prompt people to speak about the body. The deployment of sexuality is linked to
the economy through many ways, but mainly through the body, “the body that produces
and consumes” (p. 107). It is useful to look to the body as commodity for two very
important reasons. First, commodity analysis has been articulated by Meehan, Mosco and
Wasko (1993) as necessary for our increasingly surveillance-based media culture:

   Political economists of communication are well positioned to research the
deepening divisions between communication haves and have nots, the growth of
the panopticon, and the role played by entertainment in the creation of hegemony.
(p. 109)
Second, both feminists, such as Grosz and Butler, and Foucault look to the body as the site of power, where power is no longer a hierarchical system of control among the ruling and the ruled but a fluid, corporeal conception. In effect, power is a relationship, a process that is played out via the body: “[P]ower relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Foucault 1977, p. 25).

A political economy of the body rests in humans’ adhering to rigid disciplinary practices—constant training and surveillance—that normalize our behavior. The bodily disciplinary regimes Foucault spoke of, including dieting and fashion, could be both empowering and constricting. Bodies come to be governed by various codes of dress, movement, location, and physiological appearance. The proliferation of reality TV and the rise of public video cameras on busy street corners and in private institutions and places of commerce has only intensified our surveillance-based culture (See Gumpert & Drucker, 2001, for a detailed discussion of privacy in the digital world). Mills (2003), via Foucault, has argued that forms of self-regulation are characteristic of modern societies.

Feminism and Foucault

Foucault has been both scorned and venerated by feminist theorists. According to Fraser (1989), Sawicki (1991), and McLaren (2004), Foucault’s lack of a normative framework—how power should be exercised—is problematic for not focusing enough on the power of macrostructures. Because Foucault reframed the top-down approach of state power to a pliable, multidimensional biopower, structuralists have had a hard time reconciling his ideas with the feminist goals of improving opportunities for women and
other marginalized groups. For example, Ramazanoglu (1993) has argued that Foucault’s idea that power is everywhere encourages scholars to overlook systems of patriarchy and classism. Ramazanoglu and Holland (1993) argued that a persistent point of contention between feminists and Foucault involves the intersection of material life and social life—how docile bodies become materially embodied—and how this contradicts feminism’s goal:

Young women’s accounts of their sexuality can be interpreted as supporting the view that men have appropriated desire, and that sexuality is, in variable ways, both socially and materially embodied. There is a complex interaction between grounded embodiment, the discourses of sexuality, and institutionalized power. Women’s sexuality is contradictory in both contesting men’s power, and contributing to its continued success, through women constituting themselves as acceptably feminine. (pp. 259-60)

Their discussion adds fuel to the argument that Foucault lacks a normative stance—he accepts societal restrictions but insists that individuals can alter these power restrictions. According to Ramazanoglu and Holland (1993), this is problematic in that a “whole range of sexual practices is socially produced in the interests of men” (p. 260).

Despite the challenges posed here, feminists have also been quick to incorporate Foucault in their work. McLaren (2004) has encouraged feminists to embrace Foucault for his account of social norms. She recognized the damage norms could do “through the process of marginalization and exclusion of those who do not conform to them” (p. 228). Butler (2004) appears to agree:
If we understand the norms by which we are obliged to recognize ourselves and others as those that work upon us, to which we must submit, then submission is one part of a social process by which recognizability is achieved. (p. 193)

However, as Mosco (1996) argued, powerful media structures form these norms and limit the diversity of creation of and responses to televisual bodies. Regardless, as Foucault (1978) has noted, we speak about sex more than anything else. Butler (2004) reminds us that Foucault’s attention to sex and power allows discussion of sex and desire at borders not often crossed, “The question that Foucault opens, though, is how desire might become produced beyond the norms of recognition, even as it makes a new demand for recognition” (p. 193). It is likely meaning will shift according to who is speaking about the body and desire but also according to the social, political, and economic struggles surrounding the speakers and speech situation. Reality television is ripe with sexual interactions and discussions and provides a perfect example to study issues of bodies and power. And, as Haraway (1991) has driven home, communication technologies continue to recraft bodies (p. 164). The hybrid technology involved in the production and consumption of bodies on *The Real World* is no exception. The 24-hour bedroom cameras, the small-camera crew that follows roommates day and night, as well as the “private” confessional room cameras all capture and shape bodies in distinct ways.

In *Discipline and Punish*, as well as the *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, Foucault explained the significance of confession in identity construction and truth formation. By confessing our sexual nature, he argued, we thereby constitute our identities and come to truth. However, this construction of truth actually creates yet another limiting power
structure under which to operate. While Foucault spoke of confession in the context of Catholicism, this self-disclosure has been taken to new heights by the 24-hour lens of the reality TV video camera. The panoptical eye invisibly scrutinizes our every move and bodily act via power structures of government, commerce, and social organization that form a “collective coercion of bodies” according to Foucault (1977, p. 169).

*Discourses of the Body Politic*

Foucault’s discussion of fluid identities and biopower has been furthered by feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz. Grosz (1994) challenged established notions of power by calling for a reconfiguration of the body. She argued for an unstable, continuous model of sexuality that looks at various levels and forms of sexuality. Through “embodied subjectivity” we can avoid a rhetoric that assumes a mind/body split. Bodies and likewise identities are volatile sites of power and struggle whereby only one or a few dominating perspectives prevail. While the body and identity are certainly not one and the same, understanding the volatile nature of the body helps us to understand the fluid nature of identity.

Grosz (1995) identified a “civilized body” as grounded in utility and fragmented, purchasable commodities. This is useful in that we can investigate the body as an entity in itself, wrapped around and intertwined in the political and social struggles of the day, with reality television the present site of popular culture. She explained a social inscription of bodies that produce particular objects, where bodies speak without talking as they become encoded with and as signs: “They [bodies] speak social codes. They become intextuated, narrativized; simultaneously, social codes, laws, norms and ideals
become incarnated” (p. 35). Her discussion of coded, political bodies is an extension of Foucault’s (1977) notions of bodies discussed earlier in this chapter.

Looking to the body as socially coded means recognizing the ways we use and dress our bodies via clothing, jewelry, makeup, cars, and living spaces, among others. We can also mark our bodies via surgery and tattoos. However, as Grosz (1995) would have it, how we dress and where we live mark our bodies as deeply as any surgical incision. Grosz looked to the city as the body’s home. She called the city the “site for the body’s cultural saturation.” A city is a complex, interactive network that brings together social activities that might otherwise be unrelated through architecture, geography, and civic relations. The city brings together economic flows, political organization, interpersonal, familial and extra-familial social relations, as well as the aesthetic and economic organization of space and place.

“Extra-familial social relations” is most useful for my purpose, in that The Real World, while contained in the confines of a particular city, also relies on the constructed apartment environment housing of seven strangers who come to live together as an extra-familial social unit for four to six months. And like The Real World, urban landscapes, Grosz maintained, evolve constantly in a reciprocal process facilitated by an ever popular, mass-mediated visual culture. If cities and bodies have a reciprocal relationship, we must look to the connections between bodies and/or subjectivities and, therefore, speak in terms of desire rather than sex, Grosz maintained.

Sexuality is but one dimension of the body politic. As such it is imperative to recognize desire as an important attribute of biopower, where desire is a relationship
between bodies (Foucault, 1979). This reconfiguration of desire, or bodily wants, in terms of surfaces and intensities (Grosz, 1994) explains desire as not a thing, but a production, much like Foucauldian conceptions of power. Bodily notions such as sexual orientation or eating disorders are not products or end results. We must look to the nuances or energies of bodies. Here, Grosz again draws from Foucault’s (1977) analysis of power that rests in bodies and surfaces.

In investigating the motives of commercial media, the interpretations of the primary viewing audience of one of the most popular hybrid programs and analysis of the text of The Real World, I hope to demonstrate that the Huxleyan vision Foucault embodied in his early works utilized here is inextricably intertwined with modern political economy theories of capitalist media. While D’Acci (1994) demonstrated capital’s impact on the creation, representation, and reception of femininity on prime-time television, scholars have yet to extend this examination to non-scripted prime-time offerings. Similarly, Levine’s (2001) model of analyzing the multifaceted production process, which includes the audience’s role in the creation of the text, is a start, but I want to go further. Answering Riordan’s (2002) call, I am reliant on cross-disciplinary perspectives to inform my research. Where D’Acci explored femininity, I turn to discourses of the body. Where Levine set up a model of production research for soap-opera narratives, I extend this to constructed reality programming. Here I have discussed the contributions of theories of mass media, philosophy, and history to my goal of examining the construction and consumption of bodies of hybrid television. In the next
Embodied Rhetoricity: Speaking Nearby the Body

A major point of departure for body research has been rhetorical studies. Traditional rhetoric, while useful for many scholars, has failed women and “the other” through what Grosz (1995) has boldly termed a “crisis of reason.” She argued that traditional rhetoric has historically privileged the mental over the corporeal, the mind over the body, where men are associated with rationality and women with sentimentality. McKerrow (1998) explained corporeal rhetoric as, “embodied rhetoricity,” a rhetoric of the body where the body, as an object, has no sex, no gender. I want to make clear that while the women who watch and star on The Real World are the ultimate focus of my case study, the concept of a sexless, genderless body is important in that the power structures at play are what code bodies as sexed and gendered. How we come to mark woman, man, feminine, and masculine is often an unseen process that takes place through years of socialization and the influence of multiple power structures, including growing up with particular television programs. On the flipside, if we look to speech and action of bodies as power, then bodies are trapped inside power, inside culture. A critical rhetoric as described here is more of an attitude than a method that looks to explain how the body exhibits acts valued and promoted within the culture—and power structures—it exists. By articulating mediated communication as a rhetorical text, scholars must look to media
in its fragmented parts, or stories that often contradict themselves (McGee, 1990; McKerrow, 1995).

McKerrow (1998) referenced Burke in explaining how we have privileged the mind and reason over the body and emotion via “trained incapacities” whereby through daily narratives and power structures we essentially learn to accept these misgivings. A particular misgiving that has fostered a trained incapacity to privilege the mind over the body is the acceptance of a male/female binary, which understands sex in dualities with no room for difference or subjectivity. If rhetoric is an expression of power, then a critical rhetoric seeks to uproot this binary and offer a more inclusive interpretation of bodies and sexuality, thereby undermining power that has been in male hands for most of Western history (McKerrow, 1998).

“Speaking nearby” is Minh-ha’s (1999) term for an attitude of rhetorical analysis that comes from her earlier notions of feminism as a “politics of everyday life” (Minh-ha, 1991, p. 163). For Minh-ha, feminist theory and media studies constitute a fluid body politics that questions the dominant system. Her feminism is distinguished from previous works in that she explicitly argues for seeing the other in ourselves and ourselves in the other. And for Phelan (2003) we can only perceive bodily identity through relation to another: “which is to say, [identity] is a form of both resisting and claiming the other” (p. 112). Harkening the aims of feminist criticism defined by Foss (1989), Phelan has called attention to recognizing difference and similarity simultaneously.

While I recognize the ongoing debate among feminists regarding cultural difference and biological essentialism (See Brooks, 1997; and Hare-Mustin, & Marecek,
2001, for a complete discussion of this issue), I am not favoring one political, psychological, biological or cultural foundation over another. Instead, I stress Minh-ha’s inclusiveness in carrying out the feminist rhetorical project. For her, difference is not other per se, not a distinguishing factor between man/woman, straight/gay. Difference is a relational dialectic about “effecting change on the privileging state of things” (Barringer, Tyler, Williams, & Pohatu, 1994, p.22), which becomes a feminist sensibility of doing media studies of the political economy sort, where “effecting change” on the status quo is the same thing as bringing about the social change that political economists of communication have worked toward for decades now (Murdock & Golding, 1974).

Minh-ha (1991) saw the need for a “political attitude” that scrutinizes an “ideology of visibility kept invisible in its mechanism” (p. 198). Here she focused on the presence of particular bodies and subjectivities that have established a presence in our daily lives, as well as our mediated lives. More specifically, Minh-ha looked to communication as merchandise, making yet another tie to critical media studies. For example, embracing a “political attitude” toward bodies on The Real World reflects the increasing visibility of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities and scrutinizes these displays by acknowledging what images and discourse seep through the cracks of the cutting room floor. For a timely example, Walters (2001) has explored the popularity of gay themes on American television and identified these representations as exploitations for commodity purposes:

Far too often, gay access to cultural visibility seems predicated on an acceptance of two possible modes of representation: the exotic but ultimately unthreatening
“other” (the cuddly cross-dresser), or gays as really straights after all, the “aren’t we all just human beings” position that reduces cultural specificity to a bland sameness that ends up assuming and asserting the desirability of the mainstream.

(p. 15)

This statement from Walters complicates the visibility of alternative images of the body in popular television by highlighting the commercial value of this screen time.

A critical rhetorical analysis via Minh-ha, then, by recognizing the cost of visible bodies—of commodity bodies—accounts for the commodity analysis focus of political economy studies (Meehan, 1991). It revisits Foucault’s (1978) stress on understanding who is speaking about the body. We must analyze what gets said, what images are visible, which are invisible, and who has the power to make this so. According to Minh-ha (1991), the mediated real is often equated with the visible. “The photographed image not only assures a new hold on the visible…it also functions as an authentication of the identity of the visible. Reality thereby is redefined in terms of visibility, and knowledge in terms of techniques, information and evidences” (p. 192). Speaking nearby the real, then, becomes recognizing absence as well as presence, a key component of rhetorical analysis (McKerrow, 1995). If reality television is a hybrid of documentary and soap opera, then a feminist, corporeal rhetorician who “speaks nearby” to examine the genre’s rhetorical practices would indirectly look at what the body does not do via its onscreen existence. Revisiting Grosz (1994), who identified the “civilized body” as grounded in utility and fragmented, purchasable commodities, we see that bodies on *The Real World* are no exception. Like all hybrid television, but more crucially—like the wave of reality
television programs popular of late—The Real World has become a brand. Moreover, the program airs on the youth-oriented MTV network, a cable channel founded on commodified youth resistance (Pettegrew, 1992). For, as Minh-ha (2004) has suggested, “Reality is more fabulous, more maddening, more strangely manipulative than fiction” (p. 231). This statement emphasizes the implications of the constructed nature of reality television and the ideologies of the body at work in The Real World.

A Critical Perspective on Production, Text, and Reception Analyses

According to White (1992), the complex set of practices and relations that constitute ideology require equally complex modes of investigation in television studies. Sillars and Gronbeck (2001) have identified three tenets of ideological, or critical-cultural, research that uses narrative/rhetorical methods. First, research of this sort, which includes feminist media studies, should be grounded in rich theory. Theory, however, should be a guide through the data collection and interpretation stages. According to Sillars and Gronbeck (2001):

The ideological critic, however, must always be careful to avoid a particular kind of reductionism: a reduction of critical study to a discourse wherein the textual analysis simply illustrates the theory. (p. 275)

Second, ideological critics use the tools of narrative or rhetorical analysis when talking about identity issues or the body to draw conclusions about power relations. Issues of gender, race, class, and other socio-economic factors must be dealt with in critical methodologies. Finally, certain moral and political imperatives are inherent in
critical research. Critics should not speak for their research participants. Rather, the researcher should work diligently to reconstruct different viewpoints (See also Mason, 2002), for critical research must borrow from the humanistic perspective that distinguishes the contributions of multiple voices and experiences to the research process. Similarly, van Zoonen (1994) has argued that feminist research is characterized by a radical politicization process whereby the researcher must interrogate power relations of research in general but also acknowledge the feminist agenda at hand. This argument provides another link from media studies to critical rhetoric in that this type of rhetoric interrogates not only the fragmentation of culture that make up media texts and the ideology of reception but also the rhetor’s role in making sense of that discourse, which is a constant process (McGee, 1982; McGee, 1990). The role of language, spoken and acted out through the body as an instrument of power, is crucial to drive this point home.

The Role of Burke

According to Burke (1966), language is an act. In other words, we speak volumes with a single word, for language is representative of who we are, what we do. His dramatistic perspective explains that the form of drama is the form of life, the form of rhetoric. As such, media is a symbolic drama that either brings us together or drives us further away in the absence of mutual understanding. Burke termed these the principles of continuity and discontinuity. Where meaning exists, so too does rhetoric. Bodily action compels meaning, for here action translates to motion conflated with the subjective significance attached to that motion. It is through terministic screens—filters that direct
our attention in specific ways of reflection, selection, deflection—that we attach
significance or meaning to bodies and motion (Burke, 1966). We see ourselves in certain
cultural forms and participate in a symbiotic relationship of self/culture reflection.
However, culture is not inclusive of all reality and must select components of reality. By
selecting certain cultural forms and messages as real, it rejects or deflects other forms and
messages.

Swartz (1996) has noted that a Burkean-informed criticism consists of identifying
“the social forces constructing the national literature by which a people live” (p. 316). In
other words, cultural critics study the artifacts of society as if they were a rhetoric, “a
strategic structuring of community values, beliefs, and, ultimately, behaviors” (Swartz,
1996). If we look to the body as an artifact of society, this rhetorical attitude is near to
Grosz’s (1995) description of the body as a historical substance intertwined in current
social and political struggles. Continuing the lineage, Grosz’s account of the body comes
directly from Foucault’s (1977) description of the body as commodity and a site of
power. Cultural critics must analyze which bodies have power and why.

As useful as Burke is, scholars have often taken definitions of rhetoric and culture
from his many essays that may or may not have moved us closer to a more critical
perspective. For example, his pentadic analysis of act/scene/agent/agency/purpose has
been applied to various rhetorical texts (Brummett, 1994). His notions of trained
incapacities and terministic screens and metaphors of representative anecdotes, or the
fundamental motives of texts, and how texts function as equipment for living have also
been paramount (Brummett, 1984). But some scholars have pointed to problems of
isolated Burkean analysis. The first major problem of traditional, rhetoric dominated by male ways of seeing and speaking (Foss et al., 1999; Grosz, 1994; McKerrow, 1995 and 1998), has been discussed earlier in this chapter.

A second major problem with traditional, Burkean-inspired criticism has been articulated by Mahan-Hays and Aden (2003). Taken out of context, they have argued, Burke provides merely a snapshot approach to single rhetorical texts. Instead, Mahan-Hays and Aden have envisioned a connection between rhetoric and cultural studies. They suggested a wholistic, sociological Burkean criticism that looks at what the stories we tell reveal about our outlook on others and their ways of living. They looked to the compatibility of cultural studies and “post-Burkean” rhetorical analysis, where scholars can draw from cultural studies’ horizontal terrain metaphor for culture instead of Burke’s definition of society as a vertical hierarchy. This revised point of rhetorical departure emphasizes how rhetoric situates individuals at multiple levels and locations. This attitude, which is less limiting than traditional methods, draws attention to power but leads scholars to movement around or through the cultural terrain as opposed to Burke’s conception of up/down language. This intersection of rhetorical and cultural studies also reinvigorates the emphasis Burke placed on the role of stories, as cultural studies is concerned with “popular” everyday narratives and mediated texts such as reality television. In addition, cultural studies intends to draw connections between everyday practices/texts and larger cultural narratives.

With Burkean analysis in mind, Mahan-Hays and Aden (2003) defined a cultural rhetoric as one where critics identify a text’s representative anecdote, explain how it
functions as equipment for living, and the frames it represents. Finally, critics should also reveal how the intersection of representative anecdote, equipment for living, and frames suggest a particular attitude toward others and *their* rhetoric. For *The Real World*, analysis rests first in identifying the frames through which bodies are constructed and in turn responded to by viewers, then elucidating how these frames convey an attitude of embodiment, and ultimately examining the mutuality of attitude and body. The “post-Burkean” cultural rhetoric identified by Mahan-Hays and Aden intersects with McKerrow’s and Grosz’s corporeal rhetoric and Burke’s and Minh Ha’s attitude for a much needed subjective, hybrid method of critical rhetoric grounded in theories of feminism, critical rhetoric, and political economy. In the next chapter, I position *The Real World*’s 15-year history of producing “real” life and bodies as commodities within the genre of hybrid television.
Chapter 2

Hybrid Programming for the MTV Generation:

The Real World Fifteen Years On

Since the premiere of the first Real World on MTV in 1992, broadcast and cable have benefited from the idea that truth is stranger, more entertaining, and often more profitable than fiction. Beginning with crime shows such as COPS and Rescue 911 and on to the narrative soap-opera style programs like The Real World and celebrity-themed fly-on-the wall programs, reality television hit its stride with the likes of competition-based series such as Survivor, American Idol, and Project Runway. Reality has made its mark as one of the most popular, highest rated television genres, second only to procedural dramas such as CSI or serial soap opera dramas such as Grey’s Anatomy and Desperate Housewives. This overwhelming popular response to all things “real” has translated to billions of dollars for television producers and network executives, who have been able to pool their resources and advertising revenues to make full-fledged brands out of reality programs. Moreover, the type of hybrid reality television that draws from soap opera and documentary techniques introduced by The Real World has influenced many of the most popular fictional and non-fictional programs listed above. For example, the casts of Survivor and Project Runway participate in an exhaustive selection process and are made to be in constant personal opposition—not just the professional opposition intended by their participation in the programs—through editing techniques first used by Real World creative personnel.
The evolution of *The Real World* from a mirror on reality to a branded commodity is the main focus of this chapter. In the introduction, I defined the use of hybrid reality television as texts that blend documentary video techniques with narrative storytelling. This chapter expands on that definition of constructed narrative to include specific examples of how reality, celebrity, and bodies have been appropriated in hybrid television of *The Real World* sort, supported by the casting and production processes from interviews with the *Real World* creative directors, who are employed by Bunim/Murray Productions, the company that produces *The Real World*. I also summarize hybrid television’s appeal to audiences, especially teens and young adults. I discuss briefly some of the major narratives tied to body that have been featured on *The Real World* prior to Key West and revisit my research questions in detail by which to contextualize body narratives from the Key West season in future chapters.

“Real” Television

The roots of the narrative “fly-on-the-wall” approach to hybrid television that *The Real World* made so popular and recognizable—and profitable—actually has its roots in public television. In 1973 PBS premiered *An American Family*, a 12-part special event which has been widely recognized as the first television program to combine documentary and soap opera storytelling (Ouellette & Murray, 2004). Since this exploration of the evolution of the family, with the middle-class Louds of Santa Barbara as a case study, producer Craig Gilbert’s format of “calculated casting” (Kompare, 2004) to attempt a particular narrative structure has become a very profitable venture.
According to a special report in *Variety* (Dempsey, 1991), reality programs are successful because they are cheap to produce, appeal to a wide portion of the market, and are often more gripping than fictional television. Reality shows are licensed at $500,000 to $1 million per episode, while scripted dramas go for $2 to $3 million each (Albinia, 2003). The half-hour format of *The Real World* is no exception. In 2001, it cost about $300,000 an episode compared to the $1 million price of an average 30-minute sitcom (Weinraub, 2001). As I reference information shared with me by *Real World* creative directors throughout the rest of the dissertation, I list their names and titles below:

- Jon Murray, executive producer and co-creator
- Joyce Corrington, co-executive producer and vice president of creative affairs
- Sasha Alpert, vice president of casting
- Mark Raudonis, vice president of editing

While Bunim/Murray staff would not disclose specific figures, *Real World* roommates receive a “modest” wage that could be considered the equivalent of an “inexpensive car” according to casting vice president Sasha Alpert (personal communication, September 15, 2006). According to co-executive producer and vice president of creative affairs, Joyce Corrington:

During production the cast members are employed at a job we arrange for them that requires about 20 hours per week of work for a modest hourly wage. In addition, after production is over they receive a fee for their story rights…They do receive free housing and utilities and use of a car, but they must pay for their
telephone usage, food, gasoline, and other personal expenses. (personal communication, September 15, 2006)

In addition to the absence of a script, the use of non-actors is a major factor in cost cutting for hybrid television, but also one of the key identifying features of the genre that distinguishes it from dramatic and comedic television (Andrejevic, 2002). More specifically, reality programs are distinguished by “the fact that they are not based on the documentation of exceptional moments, but on the surveillance of the rhythm of day-to-day life” (Andrejevic, 2002, p. 259). In the case of The Real World, MTV has created a viewer looking to tune in to “real life experiences of young people negotiating a particular set of relationships” (Orbe, 1998, p. 32).

**The Reality of The Real**

Despite this claim that the recording of everyday occurrences is a key factor to the success of reality television, other scholars have recognized that viewers have become bored with the mundane, causing a shift to a more dramatic interpretation of the real. Holmes and Jermyn (2004) and von Feilitzen (2004) have recognized a turn in reality television away from “real life” toward the capture of celebrity and extraordinary events. Display and performance are now more important than “ordinary” people. This shift complicates what constitutes the real, with Holmes and Jermyn concluding that the discursive, visual, and technological claims to the real have become a marketing tool. In the case of The Real World, creative directors rely on an enhancing of the real via casting and editing to build tension, which will be discussed shortly.
Kilborn (1994) asserted that the desire to create drama leads reality television producers to distort “the very reality they claim to be presenting...in a way that makes it impossible for the viewer to decide how much is based on factual evidence and how much is essentially imaginative fabrication” (p. 431). Ouellette and Murray (2004) defined reality television as just that—a claim to the real. Phelan’s (2003) two laws of representation, which “always conveys more than it intend” and is never “totalizing” (p. 106) is helpful in the analysis of reality television, for, as Butler (1990) explained, “the real is positioned both before and after its representation; and representation becomes a moment of the reproduction and consolidation of the real” (p. 106).

In his research on the reality presented in The Real World, Bagley (2001) argued that while the use of documentary techniques establishes the text as unarguably real, the admissions of cast members and executives of a “manipulated production environment” (p.74) compromise reality in its truest sense of the word. Living quarters, for example, are far from twentysomethings’ real conditions, as cast members are treated to free board in lavish apartments with basic living expenses covered by Bunim/Murray Productions as discussed earlier in this chapter. The first season featured a roomy Manhattan loft with $30,000 of furniture (O’Connor, 1992). Season 12 raised the bar with a 2,900-square-foot suite in Las Vegas’ Palms Casino Resort (Bloom, 2003). An even more striking example from the departure of young adult reality and experience, Real World cast members are not allowed to watch television, since it takes away from interaction, or listen to music, because it inhibits sound quality of the video (Murray, personal communication, June 12, 2006). More recently, as season 18 in Denver was unfolding during this writing, reports
surfaced that because of increased publicity and Internet coverage of *Real World* happenings, producers enforced a new rule forbidding roommates from attending concerts and other mass public events (Gonzalez, 2006).

The placement of certain conversation starters, such as books about sex, in roommates’ living quarters in the 1992 and 1998 seasons, set in New York and Seattle, respectively, have also been raised as a counterpoint to the producers’ neutrality defense (Bagley, 2001), but *Real World* producers stand by their claims that after the first season they learned not to manipulate cast members to behave in particular ways. In the special commentary on the DVD release of the first season of *The Real World*, co-creator and executive producer Jon Murray said producers learned their lesson of putting “pebbles in the pond,” as he termed it: “They’ll throw boulders back at you” (Bunim/Murray, 2002). In that first season, staff placed an art book, *On Bare Pond*, in which roommate and model Eric was featured in sexually suggestive poses, in the loft to elicit interesting conversation. The producers chose not to use the recorded footage out of respect of angered roommates, who felt they had been taken advantage of when they had first been led to believe producers would not interfere with their daily lives as much as possible. However, the producers did decide to air footage of the blind date producers set up for roommate Becky. I include the above details to highlight some of the early examples of the constructed nature of *The Real World*. In other ways, however, the producers maintain their detachment compared to other programs in the reality TV genre, which I detail below.
Confession and Conflict

According to co-executive producer Joyce Corrington: “You know [how] some other reality shows that you hear about sort of soft-script or produce the show? We never reshoot anything. If we don’t get it on camera, we don’t get it” (personal communication, June 13, 2006). Corrington pointed to the program’s use of individual, single camera interviews, as well as the private confessional rooms, to help create a story flow:

We do interviews once a week, and if something has been missed on camera, we have to cover it in the interview for continuity, but generally we try to cover it on scene. The best way to use interviews is sort of like when you’re reading a novel and the author jumps into stream of consciousness of the character—that’s how I prefer to use interview quotes, to say what the character is thinking or feeling. We’ve never narrated our shows, though. (personal communication, June 13, 2006)

The use of combined confessional and interview footage with “captured,” fly-on-the wall video give The Real World its hybrid narrative style. The captured shots give the visual backdrop to the voiceovers from the interview and confessional sequences for a cohesive, dramatic narrative. More than anything, confessional material appears to serve to build the emotional connection between the roommate who is venting/narrating and the viewer.

Corrington’s above admissions reflect the importance of dramatic visual and interpersonal components to build what she and other creative directors termed as the greatest component of the show—conflict. According to executive producer Jon Murray:
Look at the differences between our show and *Laguna Beach*. *Laguna Beach* is about shopping. It’s about sort of high school jealousies. It’s not a show that involves substantial conflict, conflict over race, or conflict over sexual orientation, or conflict over how we live our lives. And I think that’s what makes *Real World* good. It’s a show that’s propelled by conflict. (personal communication, June 12, 2006)

Stories often revolves around what Corrington admits is the appeal of any other televised drama: sex and violence. “Those are the two core issues that give you the most,” she said (personal communication, June 13, 2006).

Stories are finalized in the editing room. A full season of *The Real World*, usually from 20 to 25 half-hour episodes, is selected from more than 3500 hours of material according to vice president of editing, Mark Raudonis (personal communication, June 13, 2006). *Real World* story developers and editors package individual 30-minute episodes into a three-arc narrative structure, five for the hour-long premiere and some final episodes. Corrington continued with this theme: “The first act you set the scene, the second act you climax it, the third act you resolve it” (personal communication, June 13, 2006). According to Raudonis (personal communication, June 13, 2006), it takes anywhere from six to 10 weeks to create a single 30-minute episode. These figures account for sending the initial “rough cut” to MTV, who then sends it to a standards and practices department before any necessary changes are made and approved again. One of the main goals in this lengthy process, according to the creative directors and producers, is to not lose the conflict that drives each episode.
The Importance of Casting

However, good stories, good conflicts, begin with good casting. According to Corrington, “You can only find the story in the material.” Producers sift through as many as 35,000 applications to fill seven slots with the goal of achieving maximum drama via roommate differences and tension (Weinraub, 2001; James, 1999). According to casting vice president Sasha Alpert (personal communication, June 14, 2006) roommate applications have leveled off at 20,000 in the past few years as more and more reality program offerings have become available. Cast members are carefully selected to appeal to MTV’s target demographic of 12 to 24. The process is multilayered and rigorous. According to Alpert, potential roommates have two ways of auditioning. The first is to send in a videotape. “And this is a strange but true fact that every single tape that is sent is watched,” she said. The second way is to attend an open call held at various locations nationwide. These calls are usually held in the fall, when most Real World hopefuls will be on their college campuses.

If casting directors like what they see on the videotapes or at the open calls, they require applicants to complete a thorough application, which results in many cuts before these are even filled out. According to Alpert:

You’re filling out something that, if you’re not interested, you’re not going to fill it out because it is time consuming, and it is a lot of writing, and a lot of questions. So that’s already weaning people out who aren’t really interested.

(personal communication, June 14, 2006)
With either of these approaches, potential cast members must pass a round of three interviews, typically, before final selection. Despite the thousands of applications received, Alpert said the final selection is a fairly civil process achieved by consensus of herself, members of her staff, the executive producers and producers for that season, and MTV executives.

Casting directors have had to become more discriminating over the years, as young adults who grew up with *The Real World* have come to better understand what types of people get cast. As Corrington pointed out:

[Y]ou get to know a little bit about them during casting, but the kids in casting are sort of like doing job interviews. They’re putting on their best face for you. They’re giving you what they think you want to hear. (personal communication, June 13, 2006).

Producers agreed that “charisma” is the number one quality potential roommates can have. They also agreed that this concept is hard to define but that casting directors should know it when they see it. Sasha Alpert, vice president of casting, claims:

It’s very important that someone has a strong point of view, whatever that point of view is. It should be strong, because that makes them memorable…Often it’s the type of person that you’re attracted to when you walk into the room…That’s usually the person you want to put on the show, because it means they’re very engaging. (personal communication, June 14, 2006)

According to Jon Murray, “We’re looking for cast members who first and foremost have charisma—someone who, if you were switching through the TV dial, you would stop for
a moment because there’s something about them” (personal communication, June 12, 2006). Intense emotional openness is also a requirement. According to Alpert:

People who are fearless, who aren’t afraid to explore all the emotions they might have. The kind of person who will tell you in vivid detail about when a guy dumped them instead of just saying, “Oh, it didn’t work out.” The type of person who’s going to tell you, “I checked my Myspace page and suddenly he was listed as single (personal communication, June 14, 2006).

Alpert’s recognition of openness tellingly coincides with teenagers’ and young adults’ embracing of technology to make themselves available at all hours of the day, globally, via sites like Myspace and blogs. This postmodern availability and intertextuality is indicative of teen culture and teen television, which is discussed in the next section.

**Branded Bodies**

According to Jon Murray, close to half of *The Real World*’s audience may be above the age of 21, with some well into their 30s because so many began viewing years ago, but the program still secures a large 12-24 demographic, Murray said. He acknowledged that teens are the target market: “I’m aware that 12- to 20-year olds are watching, and I probably make the show for 15- [and] 16-year-olds.” According to Osgerby (2004, citing Teen Research Unlimited), the U.S. teen population stood at 31.6 million in 2000, up six percent from the baby boomer peak of 29.9 million in 1976. Also, between 1996 and 2002 teen spending jumped to $172 billion from $122 billion. These numbers identify teens as a major market sought by television executives. Wee (2004)
distinguished three markers of teen TV brought on by increased media conglomeration and cross-media marketing:

- synergistic connections between teen TV shows and other teen-specific media texts
- cross-over dimension of creative personnel and teen stars
- post-modern intertextuality and pop culture referencing

While *The Real World* is not specifically of the teen TV genre, its heavy teen audience and young adult viewers who began watching in their teens as identified by Murray makes Wee’s findings relevant in situating the program as a cultural marker of young adulthood. The “stars” of *The Real World* have exploited the synergistic connections Wee described, as former roommates have surfaced in other MTV productions such as the *Gauntlet* and *Inferno*, game shows that pit *Real World* cast members against cast members of its sister reality program, *Road Rules*, in physical challenges. According to *The New York Times*, the creators of *The Real World* and the *Road Rules*, Jonathan Murray and Mary-Ellis Bunim, not only conceived of the “contemporary reality series, they also were the first producers to reunite their stars for series after series” (Aurthur, 2004). In 2003 *Real World* executives also produced a reality movie around sexual teen exploits, *The Real Cancun*, and marketed it heavily during *Real World* commercial breaks.

Some roommates have also cashed in on the cross-over potential characteristic of teen television. For example, Jacinda Barrett (*RW London*) was a successful model and aspiring actress when she joined the season four cast and has gone on to star in many

Finally, *The Real World* adheres to Wee’s discussion of teen television’s ties to other forms of popular culture. Each season is built around current hip spots, such as Las Vegas and Denver, while producers present cast members’ lives against a soundtrack of the latest music, and popular actors and musicians are known to intersect with the lives of cast members during production. For example, the roommates of *RW Philadelphia* worked for the charity arm of the Jon Bon Jovi-owned arena football team the Philadelphia Soul, while famed Olympic swimmer Amanda Beard made an appearance at a fundraiser for the Mystic Tan tanning salon the Key West roommates ran in season 17.

As von Feilitzen (2004) has suggested, studies are few and far between that assess young adults’ perception of the realism of reality television. Those that do exist often conflict with one another. What is known, she stressed, is that young people watch reality programming in record numbers:

> Generally, what young people choose to watch are programs and elements that relate to their own lives, which is why their readings of the programs often are deeply rooted in the contexts in which they live. (p. 42).

Likewise, Ouellette and Murray (2004) found that audiences are aware that reality television is constructed, often with “fictional” elements, but that this has proved to only
engage viewers even more. Because of young peoples’ high interests in reality television, scholars must strive to understand the cultural, social, and personal contexts within which viewers perceive these programs.

Hobson (2004) argued that teens are sophisticated viewers who understand the entertainment value of reality television. Hill (2005) agreed that teens are critical viewers of reality television and that they in fact enjoy the “staged reality” of the genre (p. 177). Hill also pointed to teens’ reluctance to associate learning from reality television. Exploitation has become the norm on reality television some scholars have argued, including Brenton and Cohen (2003) who cited The Real World specifically, and MTV in general, as evidence of what Klein (2000) termed “lifestyle branding,” or the “strategic incubation of a homogenous global culture” (Brenton and Cohen, 2003, p. 38). They argued that The Real World surpassed simple observational docuseries techniques by “creating a setting for the lives of the viewed” even as cast members continued life outside the confines of the walls provided by MTV. According to Kraszewski (2004), many seasons of The Real World specifically threw together naïve, white young Americans from rural settings with urban African-Americans to create narratives of cultural racism.

Real World Sexuality

The same can be said of selecting roommates of varied sexual orientations and backgrounds to create “coming out” conflict and narratives of homosexual acceptance (LeBesco, 2004). By selecting cast members specifically to create conflict among archetypes such as the innocent Southern belle, the inner city youth, and the outspoken
urban intellectual, and across racial and sexual lines, *Real World* executives tapped into a youth market craving this fabricated environment of conflict. In my own research on the series, much of this conflict has revolved around issues of sexual identity, including so-called “deviant” behavior of pseudo-lesbianism (Stern, 2005).

Sexual exploitation is surely not limited to *The Real World* for MTV executives. In addition to MTV’s grounding in what Pettegrew (1992) argued as commodified youth resistance, Lewis (1990) found that this resistance was decidedly male and argued the cable network was established on the objectification of women’s bodies (Lewis, 1990) in music video programming. In *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers*, Alissa Quart (2003) pointed to MTV—its logo, programming, and brand—as one of the largest influences on teens today. Young women, Quart argued, are most susceptible in that this demographic has never before been exposed to so much skin and sexual imagery, likely weakening teens’ body images and self-esteem. She cited cosmetic surgery statistics to further her point:

“In only one year, from 2000 to 2001, the number of cosmetic surgeries on teens eighteen and under has jumped 21.8 percent, from 65,231 to 79,501. Almost 306,000 of the 7.4 million plastic surgeries performed in 2000 in the United States were alterations of teens and children.” (p. 114)

According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 74,233 people under the age of 18 received cosmetic surgery in 2003, a 14 percent increase from 2000 (Duenwald, 2004). These figures pose questions about the influence sexual media displays might have on young women’s body image. Theorizing from the increased incidence of
women’s plastic surgery, as well as the use of advertising images to normalize women’s beauty, Bordo (1999) described bodies today as cultural plastic, where bodies have become a product. Mass media forms have helped sell this product.

Kilborn (1994) found that reality television of The Real World sort depended on producing “a style of programming which is light, easily digestible and guaranteed to bring back viewers for further helpings in the weeks to come” (p. 426). For The Real World, this appears to translate to sexual discussions and activities. Kilborn (1994) argued that reality television executives, like television executives of other genres, are faced with economic pressures to produce programs suited to pleasing advertisers. In turn, this leads to exploitative reality programming that serves commercial interests above all. Currently, sex appears to be the exploitative reality for sale. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation (Kunkel, Eyal, Finnerty, Biely, & Donnerstein, 2005), 77 percent of prime-time broadcast programs in the 2004-05 season had some sexual content, ranging from talk about sex to depictions of sexual behavior, a figure double that of 1997-98. The study also found that one out of every nine shows featured sexual intercourse in some manner. In 1999 that figure was one out of 14 shows (Stanley, 2003).

Sex also extends to sexual identity being used to make a profit on television as well. In addition to open displays of heterosexual bodies, The Real World has paved the way for an increased presence of homosexuality on cable television, as most of its 18 seasons have featured at least one gay, lesbian or bisexual roommate. According to LeBesco (2004), the program has made it “ratings safe” to feature gay characters on mainstream television. One unidentified MTV executive admitted that to “be real” reality
programs must account for the diverse nature of their audiences: “We consider it the same as heterosexual relations. If we don’t show homosexual relationships, our viewers would complain” (quoted in Stanley, 2003). With this realization, MTV has crossed into the terrain of sexual citizenship (Kachgal, 2004). While this dissertation is not aimed at the representation of heterosexual versus homosexual or bisexual bodies specifically, recent seasons of The Real World appear to have evidenced not only a precedence of gay visibility but also that of public sex and female sexual experimentation. For example, prior to season 17, set in Key West, and the focus of this study, The Real World had featured 12 gay men, three lesbians, and two bisexual women and has played host to intoxicated straight women experimenting with kissing other straight women or bisexual women since season eight in Hawaii.

Pullen (2004) examined gay identity on reality television, with heavy focus on the third season of The Real World. Set in San Francisco, season three followed Pedro Zamora, a gay man with HIV who married his uninfected partner toward the end of the season. Pullen looked to this season as a “groundbreaking representation of non-Caucasian gay men in love” (p. 227). While praising this portrayal, Pullen also established a case for a “reflexive reality environment” where both producers and performers have the ability to define what is “normal,” “extraordinary,” “entertaining,” and “everyday.” In this case, producers found power in non-traditional representations. However, Pullen acknowledged that reality program producers (and participants—or performers) can also use this power to exploit sexuality.
Kachgal (2004) argued that *The Real World* supports a liberal view of homosexuality as a necessary feature of self-actualized identity. Through heavy use of the confessional room, whereby roommates can vent to the camera away from their roommates, *The Real World*, according to Kachgal, problematically enforces a truth-telling, liberated ideal of sexuality evocative of Foucault (1978):

> Yet, confession is enacted within power relations that render this liberation problematic, not only because it is compelled but because power is exercised by the interlocutor to authenticate the knowledge generated from confession. (p. 363)

Citing Andrejevic (2004), Kachgal countered executives’ claims that reality television encourages interactivity and engagement in that these actions take place under the “panopticon of a broad network of corporo-state objectives” (p. 363). In the end, as discussed earlier in this section, sexuality—whether gay, straight, lesbian, in the shower or in the bedroom—via the body may be no more than a pawn in plot development. The next section summarizes this development over *The Real World’s* 15 year history.

*The Real World*: A Summary of Bodies

In the first four seasons, *Real World* roommates had their own jobs or were either high school graduates about to start college or college graduates beginning a career or looking for work. Typical twentysomething struggles of economic independence and formation of lasting friendships were key in these early years, as were the tensions that came from throwing diverse young adults together in a single living space (Kraszewski, 2004). Job visa struggles for the Americans in London encouraged the producers to
introduce the element of the roommates working together, a tool that has been in place ever since (Jon Murray, personal communication, June 12, 2006). Prior to the Denver season, which premiered during this writing in November 2006, MTV had aired 383 original episodes of *The Real World*, featuring 123 cast members, in three countries and 12 states. Figure 1 provides a listing of the locations of the 16 seasons and major body issues prior to *The Real World Key West*. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to undertake 15 years of analysis, it is important to look back at how *The Real World* evolved to its current form. I do this by highlighting some of the major body narratives over the years in this section. My previous viewing of *Real World* seasons and subsequent reading of individual episode summaries revealed major body themes of body politics (such as abortion, race, and violence), sexuality, sexual behavior, eating disorders/self-esteem issues, and alcohol issues. As such, my summary of how *Real World* has articulated bodies is organized around these themes.
Figure 1. *The Real World*, 1992-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Body Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>abortion, race, sexual exhibition, sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>AIDS, abortion, alcohol, eating disorders, race, sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>HIV, gay unions, race, sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Miami</td>
<td>sexual exhibition, sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>rape, sexual exhibition, sexuality, suicide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>alcohol, race, sexuality, violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>alcoholism, eating disorders, self-esteem, sexual exhibition, sexuality, suicide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>race, sexual exhibition, sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>alcoholism, self-esteem, sexual exhibition, sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Las Vegas</td>
<td>alcohol, eating disorders, pregnancy, race, self-esteem, sexual exhibition, sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>San Diego</td>
<td>alcohol, cutting, race, rape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>alcohol, eating disorder, race, sexual exhibition, sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Austin</td>
<td>alcohol, sexual exhibition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Body Politics*

The first New York cast marched in a pro-choice rally in Washington, D.C. and campaigned for a candidate in the New York primary. They also participated in intense racial debates, a theme that has all but disappeared in the most recent inceptions of the series. That first season taped during the riots in Los Angeles. In season two’s Los Angeles, AIDS care specialist Tami had an abortion during taping. That season also featured the first early departure of a roommate, David, at the request of the other roommates, stemming from Tami’s feelings of being sexually harassed by David when he pulled her covers off to reveal her wearing only her bra and underwear. The San Francisco cast was one of the most diverse to date, including Cuban-American Pedro who
ends up joining his partner Sean, who is Black, in a civil union. Seattle brought a now infamous slap on the face from Stephen to Irene. The two roommates had struggled to get along for much of the season when Irene decided to exit taping early. Boston’s Syrus shared with his roommates that he had been accused of rape in the past and admitted onscreen that he dislikes most women. The Back to New York cast brought race to the fore again with heated discussions between Mike, who is White, and Coral, who is Black. The two ended up becoming good friends. However, Black roommates Nicole and Malik fought over Nicole’s not understanding that Malik liked dating White women. In Las Vegas, boy-next-door Frank, who is White, called Arissa the “Black bitch of the house.” Black roommate Alton stepped in to calm the situation. San Diego brought The Real World its first onscreen arrest when a drunk Robyn shouted racial slurs outside a club. Earlier in the season, Robyn shared that she had been raped by a Black man. In Philadelphia, the performance of gayness crossed racial lines, as for the first time a gay Black man, Karamo, negotiated his identity. I turn next to sexuality.

Sexuality

Although season one’s New York featured an openly gay man, Norman, MTV may have not been ready in 1992 to let him be out on network television. Not one storyline featured him discussing his sexuality or ever proclaiming he was gay. The next season in Los Angeles, lesbian roommate Beth came in midseason to replace a female cast member (Irene) who married halfway through taping. This time viewers saw a non-heterosexual roommate speak on camera, though briefly, about her sexuality. However, it was in season three’s San Francisco that The Real World gave us AIDS activist Pedro,
who was not only gay and out in a happy relationship, but also suffering with HIV. The season featured his commitment ceremony to partner Sean as well as his illness. Pedro’s death to complications from HIV shortly after the season aired became the subject of an MTV special. London’s Neil never announced he was bisexual, but viewers witnessed a flirtation between him and another man (This, while fleeting, was in fact the only body issue dealt with in that season). Boston introduced Genesis, the first lesbian roommate to be as fully focused on as gay roommates had been in earlier seasons. Hawaii was the first season to feature more than one non-heterosexual roommate. Ruthie was bi, Justin gay. This has happened only twice since, in Chicago and Philadelphia. Miami’s Dan struggled with his closeted boyfriend, who would not allow his face to be shown on camera. In Seattle, cast members positioned Stephen’s hypermasculinity as evidence of his closeted homosexuality or bisexuality. In the same season, David, who originally identified as straight, begins a flirtation with a man at the gym. However, soon after, he changed his mind and showed roommates Lyndsey and Irene his penis to prove his heterosexuality. In New Orleans, Mormon roommate Julie came to accept gay roommate Danny. Chicago’s Aneesa struggled with her lesbian identity. In Las Vegas, bisexual Brynn shared that her father is gay. Simon was a happily out gay roommate in Paris. Philadelphia was the first—and only—season to feature two gay men. Producers picked the stereotypically flamboyant former child star Willie and private, more manly Karamo, the first Black gay roommate on the show. The summary now moves from sexuality to sexual behavior and exhibitionism.
Sexual Behavior

During the New York cast’s vacation to Jamaica, the women went topless—private parts were blurred on camera, as they always are on the show—and Becky began a sexual relationship with one of The Real World’s directors, which resulted in his forced resignation. The same season featured honest discussion of Julie’s sexual inexperience. A similar situation took place for Los Angeles’s virgin Jon. Miami brought Real World viewers their first gratuitous sex scene through an audible, but not visible, shower scene shared among two roommates, Melissa and Mike, and a waitress he invited to the house. The following season in Boston roommates Genesis and Jason participated in a peek-a-boo session of their private parts. The next year, in Hawaii, Ruthie and Teck, the first roommates to arrive to the house, stripped down and jumped in the swimming pool naked on the first day of taping. It was also in Hawaii that straight female cast member Kaia drunkenly kissed bisexual roommate Ruthie one night and apologized, sober, the next day. In New Orleans, Melissa comically performed a striptease early on for some of her roommates at a local strip club. Exhibitionist Aneesa spent numerous scenes in Chicago in the nude. The Las Vegas cast capitalized on life in Sin City, as the season was the first to feature all of the roommates, most of them naked, sharing a hot tub on the first night. Trishelle, who identified as straight, was also the focus of a kiss with bisexual roommate Brynn. Like Kaia before her, Trishelle apologized on camera the next day. Much of the Las Vegas season revolved around Trishelle and Steven “hooking up,” including a possible pregnancy scare, which also happened with Alton and his girlfriend back home. None of the roommates ended up facing parenthood. Frank famously had sex in the
confessional room with a woman he met at the bar. Although half of the Paris cast enjoyed naked hot tub fun on their last night, no major tension ensued regarding body issues then or on the rest of the season. A number of San Diego roommates casually made out after consuming large amounts of alcohol. In Philadelphia, Sarah proudly displayed her breast implants, including letting her male roommates touch them, as well as proclaimed her love of sex. The Austin men bragged of their “groupie drawer” full of phone numbers of women they had met at the bars. That season also continued the tradition of female exhibitionism, with straight roommates Melinda and Rachel getting drunk and kissing in the hot tub on the first night. The next theme in this summary concerns eating disorders and bodily insecurities.

Eating Disorders and Self-esteem Issues

Los Angeles’ Tami had her doctor wire her jaw shut so she would not gain weight. In addition to its heavy party scenes, Las Vegas also contributed to previous narratives of eating disorders. While Trishelle never admitted to being bulimic, Arissa and Irulan both said they battled eating disorders previously, and verbally announced their concern for Trishelle, whom they thought may have purged during taping. However, for the first time since L.A.’s Tami, body weight issues took a more central role in Philadelphia where Sarah openly discussed and battled bulimia. In Boston, lesbian Genesis shared her feelings of wanting to commit suicide when she was younger. Hawaii’s Amaya openly discussed her poor body image and that she struggled with bulimia while in college. In Chicago Cara admitted to a deep lack of self-esteem. Brynne’s insecurities got the best of her in Las Vegas, where her emotional outbursts
nearly led to the roommates requesting her to leave the show. Brynne admitted she may be schizophrenic. Frankie of San Diego was a cutter who also had cystic fibrosis and occasional panic attacks. Her feelings of isolation led her to exit taping early. Finally, we turn to a discussion of the relationship between alcohol and the body on *The Real World.*

**Alcohol Issues**

Dominick from Los Angeles was the first roommate featured to have a drinking problem. In Seattle, Nate admitted he may have a drinking problem. While Dominick’s alcoholism consisted of him passing out a handful of times and not progressing to a complete alcoholism narrative, Hawaii’s Ruthie gave viewers the first roommate encouraged to seek help for addiction. The first episode of Hawaii featured a drunk Ruthie passing out at the bar after numerous drinks. The next episode picked up with the alcohol narrative, with Ruthie not remembering what happened the night before and questioning whether her drink was spiked, which the roommates denied and then encouraged Ruthie to practice moderation. She agreed, but much of Hawaii was devoted to her battle with the bottle, including an emergency visit to the hospital, a drunk driving incident that led to producer intervention and counseling, and a alcohol-influenced contemplation of suicide. In Chicago, gay roommate Chris attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. More than any season before, the women roommates of Las Vegas drank heavily. While the males drank nightly, too, the camera did not appear to position them as less in control of their inhibitions as it did the women (Stern, 2005). In San Diego, Robyn was not the only one arrested under the influence of alcohol. In an unrelated incident, roommate Brad is also arrested for public intoxication, which would
also happen on the Austin season to Johanna. Philadelphia’s Landon was prone to binge drinking until soon before taping ended, when he “jokingly” pulled out a sharp knife in a drunken outburst. His roommates did not get the joke and encouraged him to ease up on his alcohol consumption.

While I have provided basic body storylines that producers focused on prior to Key West, this is by no means an exhaustive account. The nature of hybrid reality television, with its revolving door of cast members and narratives from season to season, does not allow for a standard summary that scripted television affords. I could devote individual chapters to each season. Instead, I hope I have demonstrated the body issues The Real World has dealt with up to now. From this summary, body issues played important roles on every Real World season. Sexual exhibitionism and sexuality were the most prevalent. For all the attention race discussions have brought the series, based on this brief analysis, sexuality was afforded more explicit discussion than race. Sexuality was a factor in 13 seasons and race, nine. However, I recognize that race and sex always play a role in a cast comprised of diverse races and sexualities. My point here is that while race was surely a factor in roommates’ interactions, sexuality figured in key narratives. To more closely examine the sexual bodies of The Real World, I turn now to my research questions.

Research Questions

My focus in this project is on the Key West season, as it aired during my interviews with Real World creative directors and female viewers. Moreover, the season unfolded
during a critical juncture in the discourse of bodies, popular culture, and hybrid media. Lightweight cell phone cameras capture images of and online blogs have feature stories of celebrity women in distress that have in turn led the entertainment news media into a feeding frenzy of stories of women in crisis, such as Britney Spears and Lindsey Lohan. Sadly, this culminated with the February 2007 death of former model turned reality TV star Anna Nicole Smith. While this dissertation does not, on the surface, appear to situate new media as a primary component, reality television, like the new participatory media forms of today, is hybrid in form and function. This chapter has established the various narrative techniques that make *The Real World* a hybrid brand of entertainment.

According to executive producer Jon Murray, young women account for 65 to 70 percent of *The Real World’s* audience. The need for understanding how these women respond to the commercial, constructed bodies of hybrid reality programs, as well as how these narrative images are formed, led to the following questions:

- How do consumers/viewers negotiate meaning and body issues in *The Real World*?
- How do decision makers construct bodies on *The Real World* that equip viewers for living in a commercially mediated world reliant on female bodies?

Here the focus becomes the political economy exploration of the study by examining specific practices by producers and creative directors of the program. The textual element of the study is also at play, where the narrative nature of the program is key.
• What can we learn from the intersection of the consumption and construction of bodies of hybrid reality television?

Where the previous two questions look to *The Real World* specifically, this question furthers theoretical assumptions about the audience in the age of 24-hour surveillance, with the body as the site of critical materiality.

These questions address the gaps in reality television scholarship and attempt to contextualize them within broader theories of feminism, embodiment, and political economy discussed in earlier chapters. Not only do the questions synthesize multiple research methods of production, textual, and reception analysis, but they also bring together cultural theories of televisual narrative structure and audience interpretation with critiques of microlevel power structures of reality television production. While the questions framed here are explicitly revisited and answered in the final chapter, the triangulation of methods—reception, production, and text—necessary for this dissertation are summarized in the next chapter.
Chapter 3

The Methods: Reception, Production, and Text

As the methodological cannot be separated from the theoretical in critical rhetoric (McKerrow, 1995; Minh-ha, 1999) I turn now to explicating the methods by which I approached my rhetorical subjects. Feminist scholars have taken up the task of challenging traditional rhetorical theories (Foss, 1989; Foss & Griffin, 1992). Foss (1989) identified two major aims of feminist criticism: “(1) women’s experiences are different from men’s; and (2) women’s voices are not heard in language” (p. 90). Through my study of hybrid television, I incorporate Foss’ criticism by turning to the visual as well as the spoken and by giving the young women who watch *The Real World* a voice. Critical rhetoric, which gives women agency to express their connection to and around the text and the researcher, also parallels Riordan’s (2004) feminist sensibility regarding political economy analysis. The reception portion of my study provided the backbone from which interviews with producers and examination of the text grew and took shape in order to make greater sense of the audience’s relationship to the constructed nature of the text. This section outlines the critical rhetoric framework by which I completed my analysis of commodity bodies of *The Real World*, including the methods by which I conducted interviews of *Real World* decision-makers, selected and interviewed the consumers/viewers, and viewed the episodes, in an attempt toward what van Zoonen (1994) has called necessary for the feminist media project.
Reception: Rhetorical Analysis of Real World Consumer Narratives

Because a deeper understanding of the audience of hybrid television is of top priority, I framed my analysis first around the young women who consume The Real World. By conducting rhetorical analyses of text and audience around a single season of The Real World, I hope to have created a sustainable dialogue about bodies and hybrid reality television. In an attempt to not compromise the trust and openness of the female viewers of The Real World, I tried to give these young women as much privacy as possible and turned to research on self-narratives for theory to ground my methodological direction. Byrne (2003) drew from Foucault to argue that narratives are key entry points into techniques of the self: “Narratives have long been of interest in accessing an individual’s subjectivity, experience and reflections of the past” (p. 31). Byrne cited numerous studies (See Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; & Wengraf, 2001) that look to narratives and the construction of narratives in qualitative interviews as “increasingly sophisticated (and, at times, prescriptive) methodological tools” (p. 31), including research grounded in feminism and attempting to give women subjects agency (See Smith, 1993). The use of this method is described next.

From Journals to Interviews

To investigate female viewers’ interpretations of The Real World I set out to conduct a narrative analysis of journal entries and individual interviews with young women between the ages of 18 and 24—the same age as the roommates of the program—who watch the program. Twenty women from a single sorority at a large Midwestern university agreed to write weekly journal responses to each episode of The Real World
Key West and participate in individual interviews about the program. Much like Radway chose her romance novel readers from a single reading group, Real World viewers were selected from an already existing pool of women who often viewed together from the sorority house. I recruited participants in January 2006 by speaking at a general meeting attended monthly by representatives from each sorority on the campus.

One sorority member was particularly excited by the project and invited me to speak at her chapter meeting the following week. Twenty-five sisters initially showed interest and met with me as a group after their meeting. I provided each woman with a journal and instructions to simply write their reactions to the first three episodes of the Key West season, which was set to debut three weeks from then. Their only guiding question was, “What did you think of this week’s episode?” I intentionally made the question vague so as not to guide the women to particular responses, as the purpose of the journals was to guide me in constructing a more detailed interview guide. When it came time to collect the journals in March, busy academic and work schedules got the best of a majority of the women. I received 12 journals back, which is still nearly a 50 percent return rate. Each entry was approximately one handwritten page, for about 36 pages of data.

Upon reading the entries I was overwhelmed, but not surprised, by the proliferation of discussion of the female Real World roommates’ appearance and emotional states. During the first reading, I took notes describing the subject responses. Using Glaser’s (1965) constant comparative method, I conceptualized and grouped responses into themes based on four readings of the journals to aid in the construction of
my interview guide (see Appendix A). Twenty of the women participated in the interviews, which demonstrates that nearly all of them were willing to give an hour of their time for a one-time only interview but found it more difficult to give two or three hours—the time it would have taken to watch three 30-minute episodes, whether alone or with their sisters, friends or housemates—to write open-ended journal responses. I emphasize again that they were able to choose where and when they wanted to journal, but found it difficult to keep the original time commitment of a three-episode long journaling process. Nearly half of the women had been watching since the Seattle or Hawaii seasons, which aired when the women were in middle school. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality. Figure 2 is a listing of the women’s pseudonyms, ages, and their viewing history. An asterisk next to the name of a season indicates that it was during that season that the woman became a regular viewer, meaning that she began watching at least weekly or semi-weekly. However, in the same line, the name of seasons that viewers had seen before identifying as regular viewers are included to highlight those viewing experiences. Interviews were transcribed for a total of 80 single-spaced pages of data. I took notes throughout four readings of the transcriptions then, as with the journal entries, analyzed per Glaser’s constant comparative method for themes of the body. Important to the rhetorical analysis, notions of absence and presence—what viewers did not share about each week’s narrative and visual thrusts—also provided telling information.
### Figure 2. Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Watching The Real World since</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>San Francisco (1994), Seattle*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonya</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>San Francisco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Seattle (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Seattle, Hawaii (1999)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Hawaii (1999), San Diego (2004)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natasha</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Las Vegas (2002), Austin (2005)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>San Diego (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Philadelphia*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Austin (2005)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* indicates season primary viewing began

Production: Interviewing Real World Executives

According to Ang (1991) media studies cannot be dominated by a singular mode of reception analysis for full conclusions of the power structures at play in the negotiation of meaning: “Audiences can never be completely free, because they are ultimately
subordinated to the image flows provided by the institutions” (p. 6). To investigate
production of *The Real World* I conducted in-depth interviews with four of the program’s
top decision makers in June 2006 at their offices in Van Nuys, Calif. The interviews took
place while *The Real World Key West* was just past the season’s halfway mark. I first
interviewed Jon Murray, the show’s co-creator and executive producer, as well as three
vice presidents: Joyce Corrington, vice president of creative affairs and a co-executive
producer (Corrington retired in January 2007). Mark Raudonis, vice president of editing;
and Sasha Alpert, vice president of casting. Each interview lasted approximately one
hour. In-depth interviewing relies on a flexible interview structure built around a theme
toward what Burgess (1984) has called a “conversation with a purpose” (p. 102). Rubin
and Rubin (1995) and Mason (2002) have also stressed the importance of flexibility and
evolving interview designs, whereby the knowledge from this method is actively
constructed by interviewer and interviewee. In keeping with this style of an informal
interview structure, interviews were guided by a flexible set of questions, available in
Appendix B. Responses were transcribed, read through four times and grouped by themes
per Glaser’s constant comparative method, which I then analyzed using the rhetorical
methods discussed earlier in this section.

Text: Rhetorical Analysis of *The Real World Key West*

*The Real World Key West* ran from February to August 2006 for a total of 25
episodes. Appendix C lists the episodes and their original airdates. I viewed the first-run,
weekly half-hour episodes concurrently while conducting the interview portions of my
study. I struggled with the decision to include multiple seasons in a rigorous textual analysis, but as the themes from the women’s responses kept growing and taking shape around the Key West season’s roommates and narratives, I opted to explain the significance of the women’s viewing experiences of *The Real World* as a whole, while using Key West as a specific case study. The season that was unraveling during the interview process revealed intimate notions of the body regarding eating disorders and mental health unprecedented in the reality TV genre, let alone *The Real World*. Here it is important to mention again that rhetorical analysis of the text is peripheral to the rhetorical analysis of *Real World* viewers’ responses to the text. However, it was no less important to view the text systematically in order to pull out the proper scenes and narrative structures to aid in thorough audience analysis.

A post-structuralist, critical-cultural textual analysis recognizes that a text is any cultural artifact from which we make meaning (McKee, 2003) and that many interpretations and realities exist.

No single representation of reality can be the *only* true one, or the *only* accurate one, or the *only* one that reflects reality because cultures will always have alternative, and equally valid, ways of representing and making sense of that part of reality. (pp. 10-11).

Textual analysis, then, is a way of measuring texts against reality. While a textual analysis of *The Real World* grounded in feminist rhetorical theory will be never be *truth*, it attempts the best interpretation of the reality of how bodies are represented on the program and become useful as a balance for the viewers’ interpretations and the
producers’ intentions. A more accurate approach to textual analysis involves knowledge of the “relevant intertexts” about the text under study that rests in understanding 1) other texts in the series; 2) the genre of the text; 3) intertexts about the text itself; and 4) the wider public context in which a text is circulated (McKee, 2003, pp. 92-93). For *The Real World* this means understanding previous seasons’ handling of bodies, the current state of reality television of domestic living situations, popular press discussion of the program and the status of young adult bodies in a media saturated United States. Following the season finale I viewed the Key West season four times on recorded DVDs, focusing on what was displayed and not displayed, what was said and not said. The viewing portion involved taking notes on the different story arcs, which I define as storylines—or narratives for the purpose of the dissertation. These were determined by the different situations the cast members encountered in each episode. I also took notes on themes throughout each viewing in line with the constant comparative method outlined by Glaser (1965). I viewed the episodes enough times to be sure themes and frames were saturated. By saturated, I mean that viewings stopped revealing unique themes. The findings of all three modes of analysis are integrated and grouped thematically in subsequent chapters.
Chapter 4

“We’re not all size zeroes”: Bodies as Constructed and Scorned

*It’s about cutting and chopping what they want people to see.*

—Natasha, 20, Real World viewer since 1999

The emphasis on and framing of women’s bodies in *The Real World* is the focus of this chapter. The women of my study discussed a reliance on women’s bodies over that of men’s in the program and described variations of how *Real World* women respond to negative body image, mostly via cosmetic procedures, dieting, clothing choices, alcohol consumption, and sex. While I have devoted a later chapter to a discussion of alcohol use and sexual behavior (chapter five), the constructed, often wounded, nature of female cast members on *The Real World* is so inextricably intertwined with alcohol and sex that I address the issue, if only peripherally, in this chapter. The proliferation of beautiful people is tied to what the women of my study recognized as the constructed nature of the program. It is important to note that within the context of sharing their thoughts on how women portrayed themselves on *The Real World*, interviewees were also quick to point out that female roommates are cast to type. This chapter begins with an introduction of the female roommates of the Key West season, then moves to viewer response to the images these women offered up on *The Real World*, and concludes with an analysis of the major body issue on the Key West season—that of bodies in crisis. The story *The Real World* Key West spent the most time with involved Paula’s eating disorder, which the viewers described as uncomfortable because they were all too familiar with anorexia and bulimia. I argue that while a timely, crucial topic for young women to face, Paula’s story
served an economic imperative. Throughout, I interweave examples from the text and interview responses from Real World producers where appropriate to create a more complete picture of the construction and consumption of bodies on hybrid reality television.

An Introduction to The Real World Key West and the Importance of Female Bodies

Real World producers selected Key West, or rather a small island just off of the main island of Key West, as the temporary home of the seventeenth season’s seven strangers. The four men and three women lived for four months in a lavish beach home with bright, comfortable furniture, a pool, and an indoor hot tub. I list the roommates in the order we are introduced to them on the casting special (2006, Feb. 21) that aired one week prior to the season premiere: Svetlana, 19; Jose, 20; John, 22; Paula, 24; Zach, 22; Janelle, 22; and Tyler, 23. Since the focus of this dissertation is on women and reality TV, I provide a detailed description of the female roommates here. Descriptions of the male cast can be found in Appendix D.

Svetlana: As in previous seasons, a woman is positioned as the youngest of the roommates. However, in Svetlana’s casting tape, the focus is more on her body and emotions than her age and place in life. Svetlana wears her thick dark hair smooth and straight, with heavy eyeliner emphasizing her dark eyes. She tells the camera that she is originally from Ukraine and of Jewish heritage, not Russian. She is very clear about the distinction. She holds up a poster board with a list of five reasons Real World producers should pick her. The first is her “Tig o’Biddies,” emphasizing her large breast size.
grabs her breasts and says, “They’re real.” The second reason is that she is a drama queen, demonstrated by her pale pink T-shirt with a gold crown that reads, “Queen.” Third, she loves nudity. Fourth, she is a “Bitcch” [sic] and, finally, men are her pets. Her edited tape concludes with her explaining that she is missing friends in her life and that she has a boyfriend.

**Paula:** In Paula’s audition tape we see that she is lean, very thin in fact, with chiseled, yet delicate features and long, curly blonde hair. She playfully exposes a unique butterfly tattoo on her lower back. Next she tells us about her life from a bathroom, where she sits on the bathtub ledge leaning toward the camera directly in front of her, with her eyes averted to the side: “I recently became kind of, a little bit bulimic. I always had issues with food. I always thought that I’m going to get fat or too ugly or too something.” In the sequence immediately following the bathroom confession, Paula is seated in front of the camera and, as she is turned to her side, appears to be speaking to a casting director and/or producer: “I need to be loved. So I think, ‘I’ll say it and they’ll say it back.’ So I think it’s like a needy thing. I cry a lot.”

**Janelle:** Janelle is the only non-white woman. She has light, mocha skin and full, curly dark hair. She introduces herself by saying that she is “somewhat” passionate about law school but really has a passion for her job as a make-up artist for M.A.C. Cosmetics. She mentions having an anger problem then declares her preference for dating Black men: “Because I’m half-Black, I pretty much stayed within my race. For the majority my friends are all Black. My best friend is mixed, just like me.” She says she is a “bit nosy”
and that she had her “boobs done.” She is wearing the same queen/crown T-shirt as Svetlana, but in a baby blue color.

In the brief video sequences of the casting special, Real World creative directors have already set the trajectory of how the women will deal with their situations and each other throughout their time in Key West. Svetlana is the attention-seeking baby looking to prove herself and find herself simultaneously. Paula is the emotionally unstable “crazy” girl, and Janelle is the no frills, no nonsense beautiful Black woman. Most important for our purposes here is that each of the three women spoke openly about their bodies in their casting types. Svetlana and Janelle discussed their breast size. Paula shared her body and eating disorder issues. All three women can be described as beautiful. The centrality of women’s bodies to the program cannot be ignored. In fact, the logo for the Key West season, which varies with each location, is displayed on a woman’s body for the first time. The Real World logo, the title of the show in a graffiti-like print, is the only non-tan area on the back right shoulder of a very tan woman. She is lying on her side with her back to the camera and her long brown hair slung over one shoulder, next to the logo.

During their interviews, women of this study described male roommates as the nice guy, the frat boy, and the jock, but also pointed out that they notice female roommates getting more screen time. According to Amanda, “The guys don’t get a lot of air time probably because they don’t create as much drama.” Executive producers Jon Murray and Joyce Corrington, as well as casting director Sasha Alpert, admitted that female cast members do tend to provide better drama, often because women may deal
with conflict better than men, and since the show is built around conflict it makes for better story arcs. According to Murray:

I would just say that overall I find that women make better cast members. I find that they are more interesting people generally. They’re not afraid of conflict the way that men are, women have had to some extent live in a world that’s biased against them in some ways, and I think that a lot of the minority, whether it’s racial or sexual orientation, a lot of them have been challenged in such a way that the White kid in the suburb hasn’t been challenged. Usually the most interesting cast members have had some kind of challenge in their lives. It’s given them, it’s just given them more depth. They’ve been forced to think about things, and they’ve been forced to make some decisions in their lives. You know the hardest cast members, we get a lot of suburban young women who apply who have had an uneventful life—not very interesting. (personal communication, June 12, 2006)

Murray’s statement reinforces my own viewing experience growing up with and now researching *The Real World* in that storylines revolve around female cast members more often than male cast members.

The reliance on women’s bodies was also indicated by the textual analysis. Of the 72 narratives, or storylines, throughout the Key West season, 32 featured the women, while only 21 featured the men. The other 19 were other or group centered: six focused on work-related situations, eight centered on the roommates getting to know each other or team-building, and five were specific to the hurricanes the roommates endured. Of the 21 storylines devoted to male roommates, 10 of those involved Tyler, the openly gay male of
the cast (more on that in chapter five). For the other two males, John had five storylines, while Zach and Jose each had three. These numbers lose significance when we see that John's screen time is always in relation to other roommates rather than his own situations or personal life. Zach is a little more fortunate in that two of his three storylines involve a romantic involvement with a Key West local and one as an extension of Paula's story. Jose's narratives include improving his life and coming into his own, with one romantic narrative as well.

Constructing the Stereotyped Female Body

The women I interviewed discussed the constructed nature of Real World’s female roommates’ 1) appearance, such as body type or dress, and 2) emotions, with a few even acknowledging later that not only are the main stories in The Real World built around the female roommates but especially around female insecurities that negatively portray women’s emotional nature. According to the women of this study, an exaggerated realness of the female body, represented by various stereotypes, is offered up by The Real World. Executive producer Jon Murray said it is human nature to try to stereotype and characterize people but that Real World producers do their best to cast people who are “complex, that have multiple layers to them” but that there are usually “prominent features” that stand out in individual roommates (personal communication, June 12, 2006). The responses below are an example of the majority of what the women said about the “prominent features” of Real World women. (While the quotations below are from individual interviews, I have grouped them thematically to make for a more
coherent read—a tool I use throughout these findings chapters. Material from the viewer interviews is indicated by italicized font.)

Natasha: They actually take on a certain role. It’s not necessarily their role, like their actual personality... There’s always the bitchy girl, the slutty girl, the drama-causing. girl... They’re always good looking—usually good looking.

Andrea: With the whole casting thing, I understand there’s reasons for why they pick who they pick. Sometimes I wish they’d just pick—well, I don’t know. I guess you do need certain types to add certain chemistries... There’s always a gorgeous girl and a gorgeous guy. It’s always the same people. If you look at all the cast you can say, “Oh that’s them,” and like place them.

Tonya: I feel like the women are a lot more focused on than the men are. Sometimes they take women who have mistakes and characteristics. Like they’ll be very open with their sexuality or they’ll be very open about their heritage or their ethnicity, and they’ll kind of bring that to every confrontation.

Katie: I know they try to pick people from different backgrounds, but usually there’s like, most of the women on each season are usually very pretty, except for maybe like one or two, and very fun and outgoing... We’re not all that perfect. We’re not all size zeros.

These responses speak to executive producer Jon Murray’s description of viewers bringing their own biases to the viewing situation. However, the women could not
explain the stereotypes if these characteristics had not been represented so many times over the years on the program.

In line with critical rhetoric’s call to notice presence and absence, it is telling what factors the women did not discuss. They do not say, “There’s always the smart girl, the ambitious girl, the friendly girl.” As discussed in chapter two, roommates of this sort may exist, but these qualities are not conducive to high drama, which is another factor the women cited as important to screen time for female roommates. Occasionally, the women did point out that Real World seasons have a “strong one” now and then, usually in reference to an African-American female or woman of mixed ethnicity.

The Constructed Black Bitch

Not only does one of the most popular cable programs for young women today feature just pretty women but also emotionally damaged pretty white women and angry pretty African-American or mixed-race women. The point about emotional issues is expanded on later in this chapter, while the latter point is further supported by the narrative constructed around Key West’s Janelle. Janelle is barely another beautiful face and body throughout most of the season. In the textual analysis, together the three female roommates accounted for 32 distinct narratives throughout the 25 episodes. Of these, Paula was the focus 17 times, Svetlana, 12 and Janelle only three. Each of these three storylines brought Janelle’s feisty personality and/or anger to the fore.

Despite many peripheral “roles” as a listening ear for Paula in the first half of the season, Janelle does not get her own storyline until episode 14 (“Janelle and Jose’s Fight,” May 23, 2006). A major narrative convention The Real World borrows from
fictional drama is the “previously on” tag at the beginning of each episode. These brief
segments function in two ways. First, in storylines that continue sequentially from one
episode to the next, the “previously on” introduction highlights the most pertinent clips to
get the viewer caught up with the narrative. They are often the most dramatic or visually
stunning clips no less. But a second use of these tags reveals the importance of editing in
hybrid reality television production. These other types of summaries remind viewers of
information about the roommates rather than particular storylines and function to set the
scene for a newly introduced storyline. These usually include clips from casting tapes and
interviews as well as scenes from earlier episodes when the roommates introduce facts
about their lives and personalities via confessional voiceovers. After a long stretch of
episodes focused mostly on Paula, we are reminded in one of these previously on tags
from episode 14 to not overlook Janelle as a source of drama.

In a voice-over as she waits with her luggage to be picked up to go to the Key
West house for the first time, Janelle says, “There will definitely be a little clashing. I can
intimidate people at times.” This sequence is paired with a confessional scene
highlighting Jose’s response to Paula’s most recent outburst: “You know, enough is
enough. I have to say what I feel and stop being in the background.” In the beginning of
the episode Janelle expresses to Jose that he needs to take on more responsibility in their
job running the tanning salon. The drama between these two roommates is revisited near
the end of the episode as the roommates leave the bar per Janelle’s pushing. The scene
illustrates Janelle’s positioning as a demanding, in-your-face character. Like many of the
other scenes analyzed throughout the dissertation, the word “bleeped” is used whenever
MTV chose to insert an audio censor. (Material from the textual analysis is indicated by indented, single-spaced text.)

Janelle [to the confessional]: It’s a good day. I think we’re all pretty happy, but we have to get home. So I’m trying to just get everyone to sort of pick up the pace and move it along.

Janelle [outside the bar]: Come on, do we have to be dramatic 24/7?

Paula walks up to her: You call us dramatic and then yell? That’s dramatic.

Janelle: I’m not [bleeped] dramatic.

Paula: Well, what the hell?

Janelle: I’m not.

Paula: What is it then?

Janelle: If you think this is dramatic, I’ll show you dramatic.

[Svetlana and Jose enter scene.]

Svetlana: Janelle, drama center.

Jose: I know.

Svetlana: Instigator.

Jose: I know.

Janelle calls back: What the [bleeped] are you guys doing? Come on.

Jose [loudly]: Can you hold up and wait. We’ll walk at our pace and that’s it, yo. I’m over your [bleeped] yo. Stop please.

Janelle, walking toward him: Don’t talk to me like that.

Jose: Please. Who do you think you are?

Janelle: Don’t talk to me like that.

Jose [walking past her]: Stop. I’ll talk the way I want to talk
Janelle [following him and grabbing his shoulder]: No. Do not talk to me like that.

Jose [turning around]: No, don’t push me.

[They continue walking with the rest of the group.]

Janelle: I will push you. Do not talk to me like that.

Jose: Janelle, do not push me. Stop.

Janelle: Jose, no.

This continues with Janelle demanding he not talk to her like that and him demanding she get out of his face. Zach steps in, then Svetlana, Tyler and finally Paula. Nothing is accomplished before the commercial break. The fighting persists in the car. Back at the house Janelle is telling her roommates to not encourage her to make up with Jose, “You better believe you’re going to see the [bleeped] ugliest side of me you’ve ever [bleeped] seen. ‘Cause I haven’t shown you stuck up yet.” To the confessional, Tyler explains that Janelle thinks she is like Mariah Carey or Beyonce, but without “actual talent.”

After having watched the Key West season multiple times, on one hand it is hard to believe that this was the best material Janelle gave the editors to work with for a cohesive narrative. However, her anger at the situation was filled with the conflict that the producers described works best for them. They relied on it again in episode 19 during an argument between Svetlana and Janelle. Svetlana is upset after finding out Tyler has created a “burn book” about her that includes some of the childish statements and exaggerations she has made to her roommates. During a conversation with her mother,
Svetlana talks about her roommates. Tyler overhears the conversation and tells Janelle, who wastes no time approaching Svetlana:

    Janelle: I just want to know, while you were on the phone, did you say anything negative about me?

    Svetlana: All I said was you guys had a book, and it just wasn’t nice.

    Janelle: Because I heard something about me being a lowlife.

Svetlana explains that her mom was just “being a mother” and trying to make her feel better. Janelle explains that Svetlana needs to not embellish so much and things will be easier to handle. This edit identifies Janelle as the aggressor and Svetlana the victim. However, the third and final focus on Janelle does not establish her as the angry roommate. Rather, her ex-boyfriend, Kasib, comes to Key West for a visit and takes on the role of the angry Black man.

    Janelle and Kasib had been at odds during the season when she finally agrees to a visit from him. They argue most of the time before he decides to leave the house and stay at a hotel. He curses at her multiple times over the phone when he realizes all of the hotels are booked and demands she come to pick him up, which she cannot do since it is past the roommates’ producer-imposed curfew. Kasib ends up arriving at the house in a taxi despite Janelle’s claims that she will not let him in, as she tells him he is disrespecting her. Security turns him away. Janelle tells the confessional it was an embarrassing situation and that she is done “playing vulnerable.” After analyzing the first six seasons of *The Real World*, Orbe (1998) found that narratives of black males as inherently angry, violently threatening and sexually aggressive appeared consistently on the program. Similar analysis of the representation of African-American women on
reality television has yet to be approached. However, misogyny against the “black bitch” has been a staple of popular rap and hip-hop lyrics (Adams & Fuller, 2006), another regular feature on the video rotation of MTV. This season of The Real World appears to be no different. However, with barely any narrative afforded to Janelle, viewers have few references to build a positive reference to her.

Constructing the Scorned Female Body

While the creative personnel of The Real World may not attest to an agenda of creating specific persona of young women whether based on race or otherwise, viewers clearly recognize recurring roles, which often revolve around finding the emotionally unstable or insecure, yet always physically attractive, woman. The responses below are examples of the first reactions to my question asking the women to describe the women of The Real World.

Elaine: Well, I guess you always have the girls that are not very confident. I feel like this season it’s more that the girls are less confident about themselves.

Elizabeth: There seems to always be someone with some sort of major self-esteem disorder.

Jennifer: All of them seem unstable, like anorexia, bulimia.

Jessica: They all have something really special about them or they’re a weirdo or real crazy person.
Michelle: They all seem to be outgoing and usually having some sort of emotional problem or eating disorder.

Sometimes the troubled role is the alcoholic, such as Ruthie of the Hawaii season, Trishelle, the “slut” of Las Vegas, Brynne, the “drama queen” of Las Vegas, or Frankie, the cutter of the San Diego season. Key West, brought us Paula, who the women of the study identified as problematic in many ways.

*The Scorned, Damaged Goods*

By the time taping in Key West begins the already slim Paula is somehow even thinner, seven to eight pounds thinner according to executive producer Jon Murray (personal communication, June 12, 2006). In addition to the roommates getting to know each other and checking out the Key West scene, much of the first three episodes—which set the stage for the season—feature Paula and her body issues on full display, in the house and at the bar. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, a full 17 narratives are centered on her. Three of these are devoted solely to Paula, the only cast member of Key West to have episodes built exclusively around her. The roommates learn of her emotional problems on their very first night together.

In episode 1 Paula and Svetlana dance on the bar. John says to the group, “Paula is a beautiful girl, but she seems to be extremely thin.” He asks Jose if he would like to see Paula with 10 to 15 pounds more weight on her. Paula is standing right there. She tells the confessional camera she is hurt by her roommates bringing attention to her eating disorder. She admits she “may not like” herself. Holding back tears, she takes Zach outside the bar to the side of the building: “I don’t think I’m pretty. I don’t think I’m
good enough. I don’t think I’m big-boobed enough. I don’t think I’m smart enough. I
don’t think I’m anything. I don’t want anybody to look at me…I feel so sad.” He hugs
her. He tells the confessional, “I’m really concerned about Paula. I’m thinking we’re
going to have this wonderful family of a house and now we’re dealing with an issue.”
Zach is concerned but burdened at the same time by Paula, a recurring theme throughout
the season and one demonstrated by the women I interviewed, which I elaborate on later
in this chapter.

However, this theme could only be prominent because of the repetitive physical
manifestation, captured on video, of Paula’s emotional problems. Early on we see that
Paula’s insecurities came out most when she was drinking. Since the next chapter
discusses the relationship of alcohol to Real World narratives, as well as young women
today, I have saved a more contextual discussion about this topic for then. For now, it is
impossible to not include examples from the text that demonstrate how the body, Paula’s
in this case, becomes the main site of drama for The Real World Key West. The body has
become a site of crisis. In fact, in the casting special, when former Real World Back to
New York cast member Coral—who is hosting the special—introduces Paula in the
middle of the set she does so in a way that parallels Paula’s drama with that of the
hurricanes faced by the roommates during the Key West taping:

There may have been stormy seasons before, but none of them were because of
the weather. The Key West roommates may hold the record for being the only
cast to survive not one, but three hurricanes: Katrina, Wilma and Rita. (Alpert,
2006)
Following this statement, she tells us that the next cast member doesn’t “black out,” referencing the occurrence associated with extreme amounts of alcohol consumption, she “grays out.” This was the first of nine instances where either video images or voiceover metaphor linked Paula to the stormy weather that so often struck the roommates during taping in 2005. The most overt of these was episode 18, devoted entirely to Paula’s troubled relationship with her abusive ex-boyfriend as the roommates are evacuated from Key West due to Hurricane Wilma.

By this time in taping the roommates have weathered a number of alcohol-induced panic attacks, which had all but stopped after Paula entered counseling in episode 11 (“Clarification,” May 2, 2006). However, we learn in episode eight (“John’s Got Game,” April 11, 2006) that her emotional problems cut deeper than the roommates—and the producers—knew. Keith is Paula’s ex-boyfriend, whom she has seen on and off again for three years. Paula tells the confessional and Svetlana—in vague terms—about how he put her in the hospital before, which led to her parents refusing to support their relationship. It is also during this episode that the roommates take responsibility for helping Paula, which they had first tried to attempt in episode four (“Svetlana’s Tough Times,” March 14, 2006).

Previously, in that episode, Svetlana had looked up information on eating disorders. The episode begins with scenes of Paula lying in her bikini on the hammock outside, as Svetlana researches eating disorders inside the house on the Internet. Janelle and Zach join her at the computer. The title of the article on the computer screen reads, “When Dieting Behavior Becomes an Eating Disorder.”
Svetlana: I’m making a thing for everybody to read. It’s like simple facts about it.

[Tyler walks in.]

Tyler: We’re not doing a research paper on anorexia. We need to look up a [bleeped] psychologist…

Svetlana: I did.

Tyler: … and send her there.

Svetlana: Oh? Because it’s that simple?

Tyler: Don’t speak to me like that. I went through a lot when I was younger.

Svetlana: Ok, I understand, but nobody else has. I just want everybody to know the basis of what an eating disorder is.

This scene, though telling of the complicated undertaking of dealing with an eating disorder, was in vain, as the roommates’ need to focus on their job efforts of converting an art gallery to a tanning salon delayed any real action on the matter. By episode eight, when the roommates have learned of Paula’s past with the abusive Keith, they realize they have to do something:

John: The biggest misconception that all of us have is we weren’t going to be able to help her.

Janelle [to the confessional]: I don’t want to see her have to live her life always constantly thinking about food and her body image. Because she’s such a sweet person.

After talking to Keith, Paula walks out of the phone room but away from her roommates.

Zach: She lived on her own. She could have been a lot thinner, yes. But I’m sorry, I don’t buy that whatsoever. By her telling us that she’s getting better, then make us go, “Okay, let’s let her alone,” and she’s going to get better. This is a lie and a fallacy that she’s telling herself.

Zach [to the confessional]: We have completely dropped the ball on dealing with any potential eating disorders and her addiction to her pills.
Zach is referencing Paula’s dependence on diet drugs to suppress her appetite. His confession that the roommates “dropped the ball” on helping Paula highlights the collective, community-like efforts often required of repairing what are otherwise recognized as intimate, personal body issues.

According to Jon Murray, after much research the producers were under the assumption that Paula had dealt with her eating disorder and was not in an unhealthy state when they chose to cast her:

We knew Paula had [an eating disorder] in her history, and that she was aware of that. She knew she had eating issues, she knew she had it. She was aware of them and she was very insightful. And so we felt that it was appropriate to cast her in the show. We weren’t sure what was going to happen. (personal communication, June 12, 2006)

While Murray stood by the decision to cast Paula, co-executive producer Joyce Corrington opposed the decision at the final casting meeting, “In truth, I did not want her as a cast member because I thought her too emotionally fragile, but I was overruled” (personal communication, June 13, 2006). However, Corrington’s early reservations gave way to gratification over Paula’s subsequent recovery later in the season, which will be discussed later.

I asked Jon Murray why Paula’s story of food issues took center stage, when so many other former cast members also dealt with anorexia and bulimia. Tammy from *RW Los Angeles* had a dentist wire her jaw shut in order to stop eating for a short time. Trishelle from *RW Las Vegas* and Sarah from *RW Philadelphia* both struggled onscreen
with bulimia. Trishelle never admitted it, but her roommates suspected. Sarah spoke
about coping occasionally with vomiting over her poor relationship with her mother and
low self-esteem issues. He responded that previous women on the show were not as ready
to deal with it onscreen or in general:

Well, because I think Paula was very brave in her openness to showing it, and
because, at that exact moment in her life, those eating disorders were playing out
in a way that were just screaming for help. And her roommates answered that call,
and there was an arc of a story. With Tammy, it was an episodic thing, sort of a
crazy thing, with wiring her mouth shut. With Sarah in Philadelphia, it was part of
the texture of who she was but it wasn’t in a crisis moment the way it was with
Paula. And that just happened, we didn’t plan for it, we didn’t know that’s what
was going to happen—we liked Paula for a lot of other reasons besides her eating
issues, and we didn’t expect necessarily that they were going to be the subject of
the story. When we interviewed her, she was seven or eight pounds heavier, and it
seemed to be under control. So we thought a very different Paula showed up than
the one we expected. And as is the case with all of our Real Worlds, we go with
what happens. (personal communication, June 12, 2006)

The producers’ decision to “go with what happens,” while perhaps an easy excuse in a
genre dependent on non-actors and editors to create a cohesive, dramatic narrative, is an
important one. Previous seasons’ headings of eating disorder stories could not be
developed because the roommates did not reveal their struggles onscreen in the way
Paula did. But in a world more obsessed than ever before with the bodies of female
celebrities, be it anorexia, pregnancy or plastic surgery, Paula’s body may have had no choice but to “be real” during taping.

The Viewers Respond to Paula

This section attends to the responses the viewers gave regarding their perceptions of the level of reality afforded by Paula.

Marie: *I feel like everybody’s typecast. Except this season I think Paula’s a little crazy. She seems very weak.*

Laura: *Like I understand she has problems and stuff but it’s kind of annoying to me almost how she came on the show knowing she had problems. But it’s almost like she’s giving this burden to the other roommates to take care of her constantly.*

Carla: *I think she is one of those people who would try to get people to notice her.*

Marie’s reference to typecasting came up over and over, with girls discussing cast members as stereotypes that *The Real World* has come to rely on, such as the bitch, slut, ditz, or nice girl. Laura’s statement about Paula not being considerate of her other roommates demonstrates that not only is Paula not concerned with her own well being, she has also ignored the interests of her roommates, which was a clear violation of the living situation to my viewers. Carla looks down on Paula for using an eating disorder as an attention-seeking tool. Later in her interview, Marie cuts deeper:
But like what is she? She obviously has an eating disorder. But she has like homosexual tendencies too and she has bipolar? She’s like four times of crazy. She’s a very mixed up girl.

Marie is referencing narratives in episodes eight and nine, which call Paula’s sexuality into question while also reinforcing the constructed nature of the body—in real life and in The Real World. Both scenes are described in detail in chapter five.

After clarifying that homosexuality is not in itself an act of deviance or mental disorder, Marie explained that Paula’s “scamming on a girl” and “flipping out” were done out of the cast member’s need for attention. The characterization of Paula’s bisexual leanings as a form of emotional instability is revealing in so many ways in that it trivializes women’s sexuality in the same way The Real World has done over the years.

While The Real World claims to be about bringing people of different backgrounds and lifestyles together, the women of this study were quick to point out those outside the status quo. Other women I interviewed were more forgiving and hopeful:

Hannah: Even though every one looks at Paula like she is really messed up, well, she’s at the beginning of what’s going on. She’s trying to work it out, going to counseling or whatever.

Heather: I definitely feel for her.

I do not want to impress upon the reader that these two comments were the only ones of support for Paula, but they were in the minority. Many viewers pointed to the publicity afforded by The Real World as a good outlet to make teens and young women aware of the severity of eating disorders:
Katie: At first I was really shocked they would put that on there. But it’s kind of a good thing. They’re getting it out there. I read an article that living in the house helped her [Paula] deal with it. She’s like fine now or something. I think people with eating disorders will watch that and be like, “If she can do it, I can do it, too. I really do have a problem.” And they can relate to it. It’s a good approach MTV picked to it.

Laura: With the eating disorders. I guess I can have more understanding for somebody like that because I’ve gone through that with one of my friends. At first I thought, “This chick’s crazy.” Then my friend got one, so watching from the show, I could kind of like help her.

Amanda: I thought it was good when they brought it up. I thought it was good that Paula openly talked about it. You can obviously tell that she’s so thin. I thought it was so good that they brought it up, like getting it out there.

Heather: Maybe it’s a good thing that she’s on the show. I give her props for being on the show with this issue. They say she gets help throughout the season. I hope she does because I think other girls who are going through that now it will be something to help them.

Elaine: I think it is a good thing just because I don’t think any show that I’ve ever seen has really brought attention—well past seasons of The Real World they’ve
just mentioned here or there people who maybe had a slight eating disorder but not the extreme...I think it’s being portrayed from what I’ve seen in my personal life, I guess it’s bringing awareness to that. I know that if I had seen more, read more, knew more about it, because I’ve never had issues like that. So I didn’t know anything personally about it. But if I knew more about it, maybe I would be better to help. [My friend and I] have been watching. She kind of is blind to herself and how she acts, so when she sees somebody else doing the things she does, it’s helping her. We can always talk about it. And that’s a good way for us to bring it up.

These comments again reflect the duality of dealing with the body in the 21st century—the idea that the body is in crisis and needs to be dealt with but “I don’t want to be the one to deal with it” mentality.

However, other girls were more skeptical and pointed to the exploitive value of Paula’s eating disorder:

Tonya: Paula’s on it because she has an eating disorder, and that’s marketable.

Julie: I think she has deeper emotional issues that it might be getting kind of exploited. They [the producers] knew all her issues when she was going into the show. Now they’re trying to help her deal with them, and maybe they should have tackled that before.

Natasha: I guess they’re trying to kind of make them [eating disorders] look bad, but I think that as they’re doing that they’re kind of glorifying them. If some
younger girls were watching and there’s already a girl prone to maybe thinking of the idea of an eating disorder, “Oh, look at her. She’s doing it, and look at all the attention she’s getting.”

As real as they see the issue portrayed on The Real World, the women still don’t seem ready to see it at the center of such a popular staple of young adult pop culture. The Key West season’s primary focus on Paula’s eating disorder and psychological issues, while representative of the viewers’ lives or the lives of their friends may have been too close for comfort:

Marie: Like Paula, she just gets annoying. I just want to turn off the TV.

Michelle: This season Paula definitely shouldn’t be on the show. It aggravated me in the beginning. She has way more problems than should be advertised on TV right now. I don’t think it’s a bad season by any means, it’s just not something I’ll clear my Tuesdays for.

Part of the disconnect stems from the centrality of Paula’s issues, which the women find disconcerting and sad for a young woman to face on national television.

The Troubled Body

All of the women of this study, in one way or another, have some connection to bulimia, anorexia, or both. While only one of the 20 sisters opened up about her own personal struggle with anorexia in junior high school, the rest shared their experiences of having seen a friend or acquaintance battle an eating disorder. Within Elizabeth’s circle of friends, one had an eating disorder that she was aware of, while four of her
acquaintances did. Hannah’s roommate was recovering from bulimia-anorexia and a recent co-worker denied it, but Hannah said she felt strongly the girl was battling an eating disorder based on what she had seen other people go through. None of Amanda’s friends had “actually been anorexic” in her words but they all struggled with their weight, Amanda included. Marie personalized the weight worries: “I’ve never had an eating disorder, but I’ve looked at myself pigging out with a candy bar and been like, ‘You should not have eaten that.’” Similarly, Victoria said her roommate obsesses over fat content and “always watches what she eats,” which has led Victoria to think the girl is on the path to anorexia. Carla spoke of a good friend from elementary school with whom she remains close who never wanted to discuss the friend’s eating disorder. Nicole experienced a similar situation from a non-disclosing high school friend:

She was obviously anorexic, but she never would let people know. We would hang out on the weekends. She was a very private person and would never flaunt any of her problems. She got really thin. Obviously there was something wrong. I’m not sure if she was anorexic or not, but there was obviously something wrong with her.

The sister of Andrea’s best friend suffered from anorexia until she got help. One of Rebecca’s high school friends dropped down to an alarming 70 pounds at one point.

When I asked the women to compare how Paula’s problems played out on television compared with their own experiences of eating disorders, they said The Real World has done a good job of humanizing the disease. Some of these narratives were heartbreaking. All were eye-opening. Elizabeth estimated more than half of the girls in
her high school class battled some form of an eating disorder. While this is probably a high estimate, Elizabeth’s struggle may have made her more perceptive to others’ problems. She said she realized she was anorexic in eighth grade:

I’d always been in elementary school chubbier. I have a sister now the same age. It was all baby fat. My mom, because she thought I had a tumor on my throat, took me to the doctor, who said it was just baby fat. My mom never meant for it to be harmful. I remember being teased for being fat. When I started losing the weight, because I was coming out of puberty or whatever, and naturally losing the weight I grabbed hold of it and cut eating way back. Now I know if I want to lose weight I know how to do it quickly, like unhealthfully. I know once you work through your first hunger pains, that’s the worst part and then it will start going away. Then you start eating less and less. I was athletic. I played basketball at the time that it came to a head. I was having trouble keeping up just because I didn’t have enough energy. I was always crying. I don’t cry usually, but out of exhaustion. My mom everyday would yell at me everyday about how I had knobby knees. And we’re very blunt with each other. This is how we handle things with each other. And it works. She would say, I don’t have time to visit you in the hospital. You can’t be sick. So she knew I think. I think she was trying to get me [to admit it].

On the outside Elizabeth finally appears to be a healthy weight for her build and age, but she still struggles with her body image. She pointed to the glamorized thin stars
with overexposure on *Entertainment Tonight, Access Hollywood,* and celebrity magazines as the primary reinforcement of the unattainable beauty ideal.

Participants like Elizabeth viewed women in their late teens and early twenties as insecure beings inundated by media images of airbrushed celebrity perfection. These pressures often manifest beyond the body as self to the body as a social activity.

Julie shared a particularly alarming story, but not her own:

*I worked with a professional cheerleading company for four years, and I would say 90 percent of the people I worked with were anorexic or bulimic or combinations of the two and had all kinds of weird eating disorders. There was one girl only who would only eat cotton balls with salt on them, to keep her stomach full. She was bizarre. Girls were so sick that if we would try and help them or try and say something to them—even to the people like our bosses and stuff—they would just brush it off. That would be the one issue I would really connect with because these people didn’t think they had a problem because they were professional cheerleaders and they needed to be that small and needed to work out that much. Well, they think they needed to because I didn’t—clearly.*

*Two of Heather’s friends in high school the previous year had eating disorders.*

She referenced an early scene in Key West where John kept encouraging Paula to eat pizza as a parallel to her own story. Throughout my conversations with the women the theme of helping was juxtaposed next to associations of numbness and desensitization to eating disorders, which I elaborate on in the next, final, section of the chapter.
Seeking Help

Throughout the Key West season we see each of the roommates play the role of friend and supporter despite also at one time or another (with the exception of Svetlana) being the culprit of Paula’s drunken, emotional rages, which I describe more of in the next chapter. It is Paula’s roommates, without the coaxing of producers according to Real World executive producer Jon Murray who helped her recognize talking to a counselor would help her:

It seemed at the time that we cast her that she seemed to have them under control, but then it seemed like they were back out of control because she had lost some weight between the time that we cast her and when she showed up. And so we went with it, and very quickly they started to manifest themselves. And there were various questions as to whether her anxiety level was related to the particular diet drug that she was taking, and her roommates did what you would expect roommates to do who don’t know someone. They were like, ‘What’s going on? This isn’t normal. You don’t have to live your life this way.’ They were saying things to her that I guess her own friends weren’t saying to her. Her own friends, I guess, just accepted, ‘Hey, she’s got these problems.’ But her roommates on the show thought, ‘this is not normal.’ And they were very encouraging to her to get some assistance, and so we worked to find someone who was willing to assist her. (personal communication, June 12, 2006)

Yes, the producers helped her find a qualified therapist nearby—as they should have in this situation—but Paula ultimately made the choice to improve her situation.
“Her path to improvement was not always linear but over the season she did achieve a positive result, “ according to Corrington (personal communication, June 13, 2006). As uncomfortable as the women of my study said they were in viewing the in-depth narrative of Paula’s eating disorder, I have not seen any other popular television program deal with the issue so vividly and with such candor.

With the approval of both Paula and her doctor, Real World producers taped Paula’s first and last counseling sessions. In her first session, Paula is visibly nervous and picking at small scabs on her arms. In the final session, her doctor notices that the scabs are gone. In a session not taped, the doctor had requested that Paula deal with her drinking issues in order to improve her mental well-being. While we do see Paula out with her roommates, we do not see her taking shots or drinking in excess the way we did in early episodes. A poignant moment comes after Paula has left her counselor for the last time, when Paula confesses to the camera while fighting back tears, “Some people came to Key West to get lost. I came to get found.” She credits her roommates, who were essentially strangers when they intervened so early during taping, and the experience with saving her life. Just as the women of my study were uncomfortable in watching Paula experience her eating disorder onscreen, Paula mentions that her own friends were uncomfortable in intervening.

Here I must point out that, while perhaps helpful to young women who chose not to change the channel, Paula’s struggle brought profits to MTV and Bunim/Murray Productions. Nonetheless, ratings were down slightly (Nielsen Media Research) from the previous Real World seasons midway through Key West, which I think demonstrates the
viewers’ discomfort with the main narrative of the season. Instead of the Key West season ranking in the top ten cable programs after about two months of airing, *The Real World/Road Rules Challenge: Fresh Meat*, which pits former *Real World* and *Road Rules* cast members against non-stars in *Survivor*-themed competitions, brought in higher ratings in 2006-2007 for MTV. Viewers appear more ready to watch the lighter, less controversial fare than *The Real World* had to offer in Key West.

On the other hand, it is a bold move *Real World* producers have chosen. Just as the series opened up the first space for honest portrayals of gays and lesbians on television, which Jon Murray said he still believes many *Real World* viewers remain uncomfortable with (personal communication, June 12, 2006), in sharing Paula’s battle with anorexia and bulimia, *The Real World* has broken the silence on an issue that millions of young women deal with daily. Just as the body is a complex, inscribed text, so were the multiple issues Paula faced in the Key West season. With the exception of the brief discussion of Janelle as the stereotypical Black bitch, much of this chapter has been devoted to the corporeality of eating disorders and low self-esteem. However, much of Paula’s situation, including her drinking behavior and subsequent counseling are described in greater detail in the next two chapters.
Chapter 5

One of those girls: Hybrid Bodies and the College Female Double Bind

*Do not do that ever. Don’t do what they just did.*

—Hannah, 19, Real World viewer since 2004

As explained in chapter four, the women of my study described an exaggerated female body regarding appearances on *The Real World*. In this chapter, this rhetoric of hyperbole is extended from bodily appearance and emotional state to the behaviors of women on the program and turns the focus to the lived experiences of the women of my study. Here the focus is on how the constructed nature of bodies on *The Real World* described previously conflates with the women’s real lives in college and in sorority life. Analysis of the women’s responses is again interwoven with responses of *Real World* creative directors, this time through three major themes: the relationship between alcohol consumption and sexual behavior, the effect of celebrity and the cameras on women’s bodies, and finally, how bodies and sexuality on *The Real World* are normalized as heterosexual. The bodily constructions maintained in the text, while acknowledged by *Real World* viewers for most other aspects of roommates’ lives and personalities, barely registered for that of non-heterosexual behaviors with the viewers. Additionally, for these viewers the construction of sexuality is linked to a need for attention. I begin now with one of the most popular of these attention-seeking behaviors, “hooking up” under the influence of alcohol.
Sex and Alcohol in *The Real World* and Real Life

As Michelle put it, *Real World* roommates cannot “party all of the time.” They also cannot “hook up” all of the time, but it appears to these female viewers that much of *The Real World* revolves around the roommates hooking up with each other or people they meet at the bars. In fact, the notion of female roommates needing male sexual companionship or approval—as in the case of bisexual make out sessions—especially under the social lubricant of alcohol, was a common theme throughout the interviews.

Katie: *It’s always more dramatic when they’re drinking. That makes good drama.*

Laura: *I don’t think girls would make out with girls if they weren’t drinking. I don’t think girls would go home with some of the guys if they hadn’t been drinking.*

Again, a major point the women acknowledged concerned the fabricated nature of women’s personas on the program. In this case they point to the need for drama and the presence of alcohol as the main variable in this dramatic formula. Drawing from previous seasons, which the women were all familiar with, this formula is dependent at least somewhat on the presence of women’s drunken bisexual behavior. As will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, this behavior is merely a reinforcement of female roommates’ heterosexuality. In addition to the women admitting being drawn to the “drama” that comes with drinking, the ratings of the Las Vegas and San Diego seasons demonstrate the attention the party lifestyle brings to *The Real World*. Both seasons, described by the women here and by critics as having a higher party quotient than most other seasons, brought record ratings for *The Real World* (Feiwell, 2003; Dempsey,
“I think they really like to watch the drunken shenanigans,” co-executive producer Joyce Corrington admitted (personal communication, June 13, 2006).

Although the creative directors of The Real World shared that while drunkenness may fuel certain storylines, drunk roommates actually hinder the storylines overall. According to Jon Murray, “Drunken romance isn’t a good story” (personal communication, June 12, 2006). Joyce Corrington agreed, “We don’t like drunken stories honestly. It doesn’t make a good story” (personal communication, June 13, 2006). Both executive producers went on to say that, despite the parallel of increased drinking behavior and ratings on The Real World, they have actually been trying to cast people without obvious alcohol issues and have encouraged more responsible drinking among roommates. So how do they explain the ever increasing presence of roommates spending much of their time at the bars and storylines revolving around drinking problems or drinking related issues?

Again, the producers are in agreement that college-aged adults are simply drinking more than they used to. “I think that the college kids have gone wild,” Murray said. “I think that from ’92 until today that college kids in that age group are much wilder than they were, and I think that the show reflects that” (personal communication, June 12, 2006). Vice president of editing Mark Roudanis explained that The Real World and television in general reflects reality. Trained in documentary production, Raudonis cited Real World cameras as capturing the truth of the situation, in this case young adult drinking behavior and college party culture:
Have you been to Daytona for spring break recently? Do you think that they make this stuff up? … Does everybody in the U.S. get drunk on a daily basis and go out and party all the time? No, but does it happen? Yes. We are aware of the trend, and over the years it seems like getting on Real World is looked at as another six months of vacation before they actually have to get into the real world. Again, we don’t direct it. We can’t tell them what to do or what not to do. We can’t say, “Do you think it’s responsible to a younger audience to act this way every night?” We can’t do that. So what I would say is that the show is a reflection of society. And there’s a certain element of society that finds that behavior acceptable. (personal communication, June 13, 2006).

Raudonis’ use of the television as a window on the world perspective, while plausible to an extent, neglects both the macro- and microstructures of powerful media institutions and practices of casting and selecting stories and camera shots to complete an entire visual and textual narrative. He defended Bunim/Murray’s selection process and explained that unlike other popular reality programs Real World executives are actually very cautious about the role of alcohol. A New York Times’ article from October 2006 discussed the importance of a tipsy, if not drunk, cast on dating programs such as ABC’s The Bachelor and former Fox shows Paradise Hotel and Joe Millionaire. About The Real World, MTV spokesman Graham James told reporter Heather Fletcher (2006), “Drinking is never glorified; consequences are shown (p. 32).”

Raudonis shared that producers do not purchase alcohol due to liability and “moral” issues (personal communication, June 13, 2006), while Corrington spoke in
further detail about how, despite *The Real World*’s alcohol policy, drinking continues to be pervasive on the program:

I think it has to do with the kids of this age and what they’re doing, because we’re not selecting, in fact, we try to select against drinking. One of the questions that we ask is, “Do you pass out? Do you have DUIs?” We try to avoid people who have drinking problems. I just think kids are drinking more. I haven’t seen statistics on it, but they seem to drink to pass out rather than just drink to have fun. (personal communication, June 13, 2006)

Corrington’s observations are partly true. According to Seaman (2005) while alcohol consumption among college students has actually remained steady since the 1960s, the margins of the bell curve have actually increased. In *Binge: Campus Life in an Age of Disconnection and Excess*, Seaman explained a barbell effect of college drinking, where moderation is disappearing, as well as a shift from beer to liquor, both signs of trouble in the college community. As highlighted in chapter two, this was especially relevant in the Hawaii season, when Ruthie was rushed to the hospital after a night of binge drinking on her first outing with her roommates. We saw a similar situation in Paula on Key West, in which editing helps establish Paula’s “crazy” nature, albeit through the influence of large amounts of alcohol.

After a number of alcohol-induced outbursts, Paula's roommates nickname her "Paula Walnuts." Although the first reference is a casual one in episode eight, it becomes explicit in episode 10 ("Gettin’ Stormy," April 25, 2006). After one of Paula's "scams" on him and a girl he is flirting with at the bar, John tells the confessional, "Unfortunately
when Paula begins to drink, she no longer is Paula. Her alter ego, Paula Walnuts, is born." In the next episode, episode 11 ("Clarification," May 2, 2006), the roommates are at the bar again. This time editing enhances the relationship between Paula's erratic behavior when she drinks alcohol. A slow motion effect is added to a scene of Paula drinking beer and dancing and jumping around. The camera also has a blurred effect. When Paula finishes off the beer, the motion is edited in twice. Outside the bar she jumps around, hugs a large electrical box on the curb, and makes silly faces. Back at the house she shouts playfully, "You're all bitches! Ahh!!" She makes a mess of the markers in the office then jumps around demanding someone make her some food. She playfully kicks the cabinet and continues shouting, when John makes a second reference to Paula Walnuts. To Jose he says, "When Paula gets in this mode, she's not Paula. She's Paula Walnuts."

Here, in the span of three episodes, viewers, who, according to my interviews with them, spoke repeatedly about grasping the centrality of Paula’s story, have come to accept and expect the repetitive nature of storylines and character types on The Real World. While audience response to Paula’s “crazy” nature was featured in chapter four, I bring it up again here to reinforce the centrality of alcohol to her onscreen personae. The women understand that Paula Walnuts is an important contribution to the Key West season and used the same themes of “crazy” to describe her as the roommates did. Later in the same scene, Paula pulls too hard on the phone and separates the cord from the wall. "Bitch, you broke the phone," Janelle tells Paula. Her eyes fully blackened from running mascara, Paula angrily flips up her middle finger to Janelle as Zach says, "Paula, you're
going into Walnuts right now." To which Paula replies, “Really, is that what Walnuts looks like? Or is this what Walnuts looks like?” She exposes both middle fingers and leans over the balcony as her roommates laugh.

Zach: Careful, careful babe.


She returns to the phone room, taunting the roommates and telling Zach he has a small "wiener."

Paula begins counseling later in the episode. That session focused more on her eating disorder, discussed in chapter four, than on her alcohol consumption, which we learn comes in a later session. Although the middle counseling sessions were not taped, in episode 13 (“Opening Day,” May 16, 2006) Paula tells her roommates what her doctor had to say about her drinking behavior, which often resulted in her forgetting the outbursts like the one described above. Dr. Covac said her blackouts mean that alcohol is at toxic levels in her brain. To the confessional Paula says, "Who wants to get blacked out drunk and be everybody's entertainment for the evening? I should start charging money for those shows."

The women of my study saw similarities between the drinking behavior of women of The Real World and college women in real life. The women are intelligent about the effect alcohol has on their actions and inhibitions. For example, the relationship between sex and alcohol is prominent for college women today. The need to drink large quantities of beer or liquor to have a good time is also established in peer groups. Some sample responses:
Lisa: *I have really good friends—I watch them. They go out every single night and drink as much as they possibly can. [But] I know they have a good head on their shoulders.*

Elizabeth: *I know girls who haven’t had sex sober in a year.*

Jennifer: *Greek life has always revolved around drinking. Very few people don’t drink in this house...Tuesday night is a big night to go out to the bars. It’s called Blackout Tuesday, so a lot of people go to the bars, hang out, meet people...Everyone’s out to meet people and get drunk.*

Laura: *I think that they drink as much as any college student. But they only show when they are drinking, so it makes it seem like they drink all the time...From my friends and personal experiences, stuff you’re going to do when you’re drunk is not what you’re going to do when you’re sober.*

Victoria: *I personally don’t like random hookups. I would never do that, disrespect myself like that. But I’ve heard the stories, like, “Oh, I brought this guy home last night.”*

While some of the comments, such as Elizabeth’s about women not having had sexual intimacy without the presence of alcohol for a long period of time, do not represent the statements of all the women I interviewed, they are nonetheless relevant to college students today.
Jennifer went on to describe how drinking plays a large role in how college students, and sorority sisters especially, bond with each other:

*It’s like your memories of college, of high school, of going out and drinking—well not always drinking, just going out. It plays a big part in how you click with other girls, especially in this house. It’s something you can relate to here.*

If, as the producers explained, *Real World* roommates are representative of real college-aged adults, then the ease of getting to know one another through the social lubricant of alcohol in college settings is perhaps not all that different from how alcohol functions, at least in the first days of taping, on *The Real World*. The first thing the *Key West* roommates did after settling in to the house on the first night was go to the bar. In fact, out of 25 episodes, bar scenes were featured 24 times. As explained in chapter four, Key West’s storylines revolved heavily around Paula’s issues, most of which emerged in the first few episodes while she was intoxicated. Once Paula entered counseling, the bar scenes became much tamer, with her only having one drunken outburst (showed onscreen at least) after meeting Dr. Covac for the first time and none after he asked her to cut out hard liquor. By coming to terms with alcohol’s impact on her behavior, Paula’s story reiterates the interrelationship of women and drinking in *Real World* narratives. Despite creative directors’ claims that they prefer sober cast members, a large portion of the narrative on *The Real World* over the years has included storylines that developed around intoxicated women, whether roommates or guests of roommates.
Drinking may add to the women’s narratives onscreen, but if, according to executive producer Jon Murray, the figures regarding an increased screen presence of women on *The Real World* discussed in chapter four are the result of women’s collective experiences leading them to be better “characters” so to speak it is important to distinguish characters of *The Real World*, which brings together women (and men) from all over, to a show such as *Laguna Beach*, another successful MTV reality hybrid, which focuses exclusively on a group of privileged residents of Southern California. According to Murray (some of which was already shared in chapter 2 but appropriate here):

*Laguna Beach* is about shopping, it’s about sort of high school jealousies. It’s not a show that involves substantial conflict, conflict over race, or conflict over sexual orientation, or conflict over how we live our lives. And I think that’s what makes *Real World* good. It’s a show that’s propelled by conflict. And as I said, women aren’t afraid of conflict, therefore, they tend to be the more interesting cast members. There are biases that if a woman is not afraid of conflict, then she’s a bitch, but I don’t think our cast members see themselves that way. They see themselves as standing up for themselves. So the viewer always brings their own biases for how they view something. (personal communication, June 12, 2006)

While Murray’s stake in the success of *The Real World* may no doubt have biased his privileging of its narratives over that of a rival program, the conflict he spoke of came up again and again in my interviews with the viewers. On the other hand, and I argue this with caution since I have viewed much less of *Laguna Beach* than I have of *The Real
World, the conflict presented on both shows, while different, are just as real to their respective viewing populations, as indicated by the success both have brought to MTV (Abcarian, 2006).

According to Carla, “They are a lot of girls who love attention.” The phrase “looking for attention,” which was repeated over and over—in my interviews and onscreen—is a multi-faceted expression that characterizes young women today as seeking approval via their bodily actions and appearances, which I elaborate on near the end of this chapter. For now the focus is on the camera’s presence. College-age women are always on according to my interviewees. The following statements reveal their thoughts on how the camera may influence the already established desire for attention:

Elaine: When you get there you don’t want to be that shy girl who’s reserved sitting in the corner, so they just throw themselves out there all at once.

Lisa: I think girls are a lot more comfortable with that then any guy would be. No girl could tell two guys to make out…A guy could tell two girls to make out anytime, and the guys will hoot and holler for them.

Victoria: Maybe you just have to watch your actions even if you’re not on camera.

Jennifer: I think more on The Real World it’s more on their own. I feel like they’re doing it. Maybe it’s the pressure of being on TV, so it’s a different type of pressure. The pressure here [in the sorority] is the guys want you to do it and you’re drunk and stuff.
Victoria has attributed an increase of self-monitoring to heightened levels of other-monitoring. As Jennifer explained, the comparison between real life and *The Real World* rests in who is doing the watching.

Laura: *Sometimes they look processed to me. I’ve always noticed they’re all pretty. I think that most of the time they all know they’re pretty, act like they’re pretty all the time. When they go out it’s always like really revealing outfits.*

Lisa: *Watching it now, Svetlana’s the youngest. She’s 19. I don’t think I’d ever go on there and act the way she does, but I think cameras in front of your face totally change you. You would never act like that. You know you’re on TV. You know people are going to be watching.*

Rebecca: *It seems like some of the girls go on and act one way they wouldn’t normally.*

Andrea: *Some people might go out of character when they know they’re being watched...Maybe like the first month they’ll be trying to do certain things for the camera, but then maybe they’ll forget about the cameras. But with Real World they have those big guys following them, so it might be a little different.*

Natasha: *Everything is in excess and it can’t be that much.*

Lisa is referencing Svetlana’s tendency to embellish stories about getting along with her roommates on the telephone to her boyfriend Martin. The other comments reflect an
exaggerated performance of femininity for the cameras. Today’s young men, according to the women interviewed here, have learned from the success of the cameras and men behind the scenes of the *Girls Gone Wild* franchise. As such, pressures by men in real life are compounded by the presence of the cameras on *The Real World*. If the producers point to women being more dramatic, then the viewers point to the presence of the camera as inviting and encouraging this drama. The women of this study saw *Real World* women, while often caricatures of their own devices and manipulated via the editing process—whether related to alcohol or not—representative of real women in that playing to the camera is in some ways equivalent to impressing men in real life.

But *Real World* executives have stressed the autonomy of cast members by explaining that early on roommates’ insecurities and awareness of the cameras usually subside shortly after taping begins. Editing vice president Mark Raudonis stressed the absence of executive and crew involvement in roommates’ daily recorded lives but then compared it to *Girls Gone Wild*:

> Have you been to the *Girls Gone Wild* Web site recently? Do you think that somebody goes down and says, “Go take your top off and show everybody?” You don’t have to make that up. It’s there. It happens. (personal communication, June 13, 2006)

Raudonis’ estimation of the involvement of *GGW* crew in their taping at spring break locations and college campuses is problematic. *GGW* has faced multiple legal battles about the intoxication level of the girls who sign consent forms to strip and participate in sexual posturing and same-sex kissing, and sometimes more advanced sexual behaviors,
which points to more complex issues regarding the production of bodies in hybrid texts addressed in my viewer interviews (For a thorough analysis of *Girls Gone Wild*, see Pitcher, 2006).

**From Heteroflexible to Marketable**

The term heteroflexible was first coined by Yale University sociology professor Laurie Essig (2000) to describe a new form of fluid sexual identity that allows a person to claim preference for a heterosexual lifestyle while also acting on sexual and emotional attractions, and sometimes having relationships with, persons of the same sex. What Essig failed to explain in her article, however, was the primary identification of this sexual identity with young women as opposed to young men. As Zylbergold (2006) argued, a rejection of bisexuality in favor of a male-friendly heteroflexibility is more acceptable, and even encouraged, today. In our interview, viewer Jennifer drew upon the example of college males encouraging college women to make out with each other and, while she identified this as pressure, Katie saw it as harmless when she admitted to participating in heteroflexible activities for fun:

*I come from a Catholic school back home and people always say, “Catholic girls are really crazy and out of control.” The more I’m in college the more I think that is true because me and my friends have made out with other girls, and I have too, but it’s not a big deal. And you’ll say like something to one of my friends now and they’re like, “That’s disgusting. Why would you do that?” And you’re just like,*
“Oh, you don’t do that?” Like, “That’s never happened to you?’ And you feel like you’re different. But that’s how my friends were at home.

Katie’s story is important on two very different levels. First, her story was a rarity in my interview group in that other responses concerning both heteroflexible making out and heterosexual hooking up behaviors involved the other. Second, these “othered” stories revolved around the women’s perceptions of this behavior as prompted by male attention, which is absent from Katie’s description. Since she was the only woman to acknowledge heteroflexible behavior I think it is important to underline that Katie stressed her pleasure and that of her friends in participating without mention of males’ encouragement of the behavior. This is key in that perhaps other women did not admit their own heteroflexible curiosities, if they occurred, since more often than not it is prompted by males, which may have led to a certain level of embarrassment at disclosing to an outsider such as me.

Like Katie, on *The Real World Key West* Paula was not shy about being open about her comfortability with women. Paula tells the confessional in episode eight, while we see Paula laughing and smiling with her roommates at the bar, that she doesn’t want her roommates to worry about her (referencing her drinking behavior described in chapter four) every time they all go out: “That’s why I fake being okay, because that’s the person everybody likes to be around.” In the next bar scene Paula is approached by Paolahni, whom she has just met, to dance and do shots. They dance close to each other then go to the bar as Paula explains in a confessional voiceover that she thinks Paolahni is a lesbian. At the bar Paolahni feeds Paula a cupcake. Paula tells the confessional, “I feel comfortable with girls at bars because they’re nice. They don’t want anything from me.”
Paula grabs Paolahni’s face and kisses her. The morning following the kiss the roommates seek the details of the affair.

John: So you were really making out with that chick?

Svetlana: Oh, Paula.

Paula [as a replay of the kiss comes onscreen]: No one saw it.

Paula [to the confessional]: I find women attractive, and I don't think that makes me gay to say so. Women are beautiful.

Jose: Paula, just confess and admit it. That’s it.

Paula: I can’t admit or not admit. I can’t [bleeped] remember.

This scene demonstrates the value American society of the MTV generation places on confession and the “truth” today. The actual use of the confessional camera footage and voiceovers are so seamlessly blended on The Real World however, that the cast members and viewers, who have all by now grown up with the show know the significance of revealing personal struggles of the scope of something as intimate as sexuality. This theme of revelation of knowledge as power is continued in the next segment of the episode.

John asks Tyler in the car if he thinks Paula could be a lesbian.

John: Dude, she was into it. I was like “Yeah, Paula. At a girl!” Save me some.

Do you think she has it in her?

Tyler: To be a lesbian? I thought she was a closeted bisexual chic from day one.
Tyler [to the confessional]: I think Paula will take affection wherever she can find it. Do you think it’s a little more than coincidence that she always gets attention from the lesbians or she will drop hints when she’s drunk?

In addition to reinforcing a truth-telling assumption, the roommates’ reflection on Paula contributes to the trivialization and commodification of women’s sexuality. John is excited by the opportunity to witness lesbian encounters. Tyler is proud of his self-proclaimed earlier hunch. Tyler also attributes Paula’s kiss with Paolahni to attention-seeking behavior, which will be expanded on later in this chapter.

Following this scene we witness an intimate telephone conversation between Paula and boyfriend Keith that expands on her sexuality narrative:

Keith: You promised me you would call me last night before you went to bed, and you didn't. This is the [bleeped bleeped] I go through every night. Like you have not been honest with me about a lot of [bleeped]. You've lied to me about a lot of [bleeped]...

Paula: Like what?

Keith:...that I recently found out. You know what you lied about.

Paula: No, I don't

Keith: Janet.

Paula: What about her?

Keith: You lied.

Paula [to the confessional]: Janet was there for me when I really, really needed her to be. It was soon after I went through that whole thing with Keith.

Keith: You know you know what I'm referring to.
The scene cuts to Paula's casting tape, where Paula confides: “Janet likes girls and guys, so whatever. So I was drinking one night and I pulled her into the bathroom and I started making out with her. She loves me, likes wants to be with me and now there’s like feelings and stuff.” This segment highlights the complicated nature of sexuality, especially that of women, on The Real World, when you consider that it followed immediately after two scenes intent on revealing Paula’s “true” sexuality,” which in turn followed the scene with her kiss with Paolahni. For all of the discussion with the women of my study about sexual bodies on The Real World, lesbianism was never discussed, nor was bisexuality. Despite Katie’s admission earlier in this section, she never used the term bisexual. An assumed heterosexuality existed. In addition, for all of the accolades attributed to The Real World for featuring gay men, very few lesbians have been featured on the program. Throughout the 17 seasons that had aired in their entirety at the time of this writing in early 2007, The Real World had starred 12 gay men, three lesbians, two bisexual women (three if we include Paula) and one man who identified as straight but began questioning his sexuality in the Seattle season.

Casting director Sasha Alpert explained two major reasons for the absence of lesbian women on the program:

First of all, not nearly as many lesbians have applied and many gay men have applied. And secondly, and this is just a thought, I could be wrong about this, but I think sometimes women come out later than men. I don’t know if you find that to be true, it’s been a while since I was in college, but they’re not quite owning
their sexuality yet. And it’ll be a few more years before they do. Guys, maybe because they’re more sexual beings, they tend to come out a little earlier.

(personal communication, June 14, 2006)

A casting story from co-executive producer Joyce Corrington coincided with Alpert’s reasoning for lesbians being less open than their gay male counterparts to being out on national television. Corrington shared that the producers and casting directors were specifically hoping to cast a lesbian roommate from an Ivy league university on one recent season but the woman (for privacy and publicity matters the season shall remain undisclosed), who was not out to her family, backed out at the last minute (personal communication, June 13, 2006). The data in the sexuality literature indicates consistently that non-heterosexual women recognize their identities, whether lesbian or bisexual, at later times than their male counterparts (Bell, Weinberg & Hammersmith, 1981; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Grov, Bimbi, Nanin & Parsons, 2006).

According to the most recent coming out data available, conducted by Floyd and Bakeman (2006) on 767 participants who self-identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual, lesbian women were, per the mean, four to five years older, at 15.3 years old, than gay men, at 11.4, when they first became aware of same-sex attraction. Lesbians were also three years older, 21.3 years old, than gay men, 18.5, at their first consensual same-sex experience. However, disclosure to friends and family—or coming out—took place at approximately the same age, 22.6 years old for lesbians to their friends, 24.1 years old to their mothers, and 24.2 years old to their fathers. Gay men averaged 23.0 years old when coming out to their friends, 24.6 to their mothers, and 24.5 to their fathers.
After excusing the lack of lesbians on the program, Alpert went on to discuss that roommates’ engagement in drunken heteroflexibility is representative of a trend today of young women’s sexual empowerment:

A subject that I find very interesting apart from this is women owning their sexuality to a much greater extent than they did when I was in college. I think the curiosity is part of that. It’s definitely a different zeitgeist. I interview women who are like, “I won’t sleep with a guy who does this, who does this, who’s out. And I think that’s good. Guys used to have the ability to be totally insensitive, and now they have to step up. (personal communication, June 14, 2006).

Alpert may mean well in her analysis, but it only demonstrates the heteronormative expectations young women face today, in real life and on *The Real World*. She moves seamlessly from hypothesizing that the pressures faced by lesbians are so great that they typically come out later than gay men to applauding young women for being more assertive in their relationships—with men. I do not mean to imply that *The Real World* is at fault for not soliciting more lesbians for the program. I only hope to highlight the heteronormativity embedded in commercial television. If casting is key, especially in reality television, then these practices, both intentional and unintentional, of executives of such a high status program as *The Real World* play at least some role in continuing this skewed view.

While lesbian self-identification data (but not coming out findings) may support Alpert’s initial reasoning, her subsequent explanation of women “owning” their sexuality is problematic when one accounts for the enormous pressures of the camera and men to
participate in heteroflexible behavior, as demonstrated earlier in this section regarding Paula’s kiss with Paolahni, but also reflected throughout the many years of *The Real World*. The ratings success of the Las Vegas season, which began with one proclaimed bisexual woman, Brynne, and an intoxicated straight woman, Trishelle, kissing in the hot tub touched on a particular nerve in pop culture concerning women locking lips with each other on popular television programs, including *Sex and the City, Friends, Will & Grace,* and *Ally McBeal,* and perhaps culminating on the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards with the infamous kiss between Madonna and Britney Spears (and to a lesser hyped degree, Christina Aguilera). According to Diamond (2005) this imagery not only plays to a heterosexual male gaze but also validates the participants’ “authentic” heterosexuality (p. 106). The aftermath of the kiss between Paula and Paolahni drives this point home, as the roommates need to know, “Is she or isn’t she?” referring to her sexuality status. Here I want to briefly summarize another potential heteroflexible encounter that took place in the episode following Paula and Paolahni’s kiss that I hope further demonstrates popular media’s reliance on the “straight girls making out” theme.

In episode nine (“John and Paula’s Fight,” April 18, 2006) at the bar an obviously drunk Paula invites to the house a girl, Kristin, with whom John had been flirting. Paula interrupts the moment by warning the girl about John’s “player ways.” John tells the confessional that Paula is sabotaging him. As they leave the bar, Kristin and Paula get playful at the door. Kristin wraps her arms around Paula’s hips and lifts her up to do pull ups on the door frame. The women laugh. John tells the confessional that he tried to “bow out gracefully” and say good bye to Kristin when we see Paula announce to the women
that they will have do the slumber party another night. She tells John he’s not invited, but that he can watch or tape it. Back at the house a major argument ensues between Paula and John as a storm brews outside. Paula explains to the roommates that John is upset that she is stealing his women when he says, “This bitch over here is a [bleeped] lesbian.” They shout at each other while scenes of lightning and sounds of thunder fill the screen and speakers.

This scene not only contributes to the equation in chapter four of women’s emotional and sexual (mis)behaviors with the stormy hurricane imagery of the Key West season, but also highlights the ways Real World executives hoped to continue to build tension around Paula’s sexuality as one marker of this emotional trouble. Unfortunately for them, the only other on air occurrence was in the next episode, 10, the day following the argument between Paula and John. After the roommates have arrived at a hotel away from Key West to avoid Hurricane Rita, Paula and Svetlana go to eat at a café and discuss the fight in joking terms.

Paula: Do you know how hard it is to be a bulimic, anorexic lesbian?

Svetlana: That’s a full-time job right there.

Whether or not the producers would have liked to continue the storyline, Hurricane Rita interfered, as did Paula’s decision to go to counseling, which appears to have contributed to her drinking less and having less emotional outbursts and, perhaps, drunken same-sex flirtations.
The *Girls Gone Wild* Effect on Bodies

While the women of my study never admitted to giving into fraternity men’s catcalls of kissing their female friends and sorority sisters, they all spoke of feeling the pinch to look good and project the right image, which was discussed in the previous section. The women I spoke with said young women today face enormous pressure to have the perfect hairstyle, perfect smile, perfect skin, perfect body. According to Wright (2003), sorority women often face increased expectations of a “superficial appearance” even (p. 153). This body, the young women here said, is the nearly nonexistent thin yet curvy physique that somehow appears in every season of *The Real World*. The same image of women being projected over and over has troubled the show’s viewers.

The very reason the women cite often as the program’s appeal—drama in the house and at the bars and often how female roommates’ bodies and identities play into these—other interviewees pointed to as getting tired. Here are some examples of responses to the question, “What do you like about the show?”

Jessica: *I just want to see what happens between the people when they’re hooking up or that kind of stuff.*

Lisa: *I really like the drama that’s not mine. I don’t know if I’ll be watching Real World till I’m 35, but for now I really enjoy watching drama—the petty drama between the girls and the guys and the girls.*
Laura: *I know it sounds bad but* [I like] seeing who’s going to get in the fights, what girl is going to be the drama maker, what guy is going to be the guy that tries to get all the ladies.

Jennifer: *It’s bad to say, but the drama.*

What the viewers identified as drama, the creative directors named conflict. Most of this conflict revolves around soap-operaesque storylines built around potential relationships and bar arguments, again with a woman usually at the center of the narrative. On the flip side, other interviewees identified this type of drama as problematic and uninviting.

Elaine: *Pretty much with every season it’s the same things, about the girls’ insecurities. I feel that’s what the show portrays the most.*

Victoria: *Like this season, Paula and anorexia. They always seem to focus on just that about her and not anything else about her. She probably has more to offer.*

Marie: *Obviously, you need drama for ratings, but I think it gets boring.*

Marie’s statement was spoken within the context of a discussion about Paula’s contribution to the Key West season, which was a major focus of analysis in the previous chapter. Paula aside, the comments here reflect reality television audiences’ simultaneous appeal and revulsion of the female form and resulting drama. The functions of Bentham’s panopticon, the all-seeing, ever-present eye are shared by the self, the camera and society to assist the sorority women I interviewed here in learning how *not* to behave.
Speaking of female roommates on *The Real World* who get drunk and overly emotional or flirtatious, Hannah provided the quotation that began this chapter: “*That makes you think to yourself, ‘Do not do that ever. Don’t do what they just did.’*” Carla compared *Real World* bar behavior to her expectations of young women today:

> *Like this season so far they go out to the bars and Svetlana is dancing on top of bars. I would never dance on top of bars. My friends haven’t really either. We’ll be in a bar and see girls dancing up there and be like, “That girl—she definitely wants attention.”*

The amount of narratives that included bar scenes has already been discussed, but here I would like to emphasize Carla’s discussion of bar dancing. While bar dancing as an act in itself was not a major theme, with the (female) roommates only being shown dancing on the bar five times, random shots of non-cast members dancing on the bar were woven throughout the season. For all the negative connotations offered up by the popular press and the women of this study regarding female bar behavior, random hook-ups and girl-on-girl heteroflexibility in *The Real World*, this imagery, at least to the women interviewed here, serves as a reminder to stay sober, or at least limit consumption to a few beers, so as not to lose control and be “one of those girls.”

Carla’s earlier statement about the typical *Real World* women’s behavior at the bars as an attention-seeking mechanism was repeated by other viewers throughout the interview process. With the exception of references to the emotional state of women, the focus of chapter four, attribution of that behavior to the desire for attention was discussed over and over again. Keep in mind that each statement below refers to the type of women...
seen consistently on *The Real World* or at the bars in real life or, on some occasions, both.

Carla: *They are a lot of girls who love attention.*

Nicole: *They want attention from people.*

Natasha: *In a lot of cases they’re doing it for attention.*

Hannah: *[They dress that way] to get attention. But also, just being on the show, they probably feel even more pressure to get attention.*

Marie: *They say eating disorders are a big cry for attention.*

Victoria: *[They act like that] for the attention of the guys. They were probably intoxicated.*

Lisa: *I think they do that to get attention.*

Heather: *[Many situations involve] making out, whether it be one of their friends, a girlfriend, for the fun of it or for attention.*

These statements attribute nearly every theme discussed in these chapters as representative of female bodies as a means for being looked at: relational conflict, clothing style, eating disorders, hooking up, and alcohol consumption. While Hannah’s statement is the only one that specifically references the presence of the camera, a
number of the women discussed this theme of the pressure to look good and perform for this reason.

_The Real World_, once a show that brought people of varied backgrounds together as a learning experience, now capitalizes on the party scene made famous by _Girls Gone Wild_. Female viewers may still learn from onscreen interactions, but more often than not in recent years, especially on the Key West season, women are consuming a heteronormative, alcohol-induced hyperfemininity that leads to extra attention and not the good kind they say. Still, the women I spoke with saw these behaviors in real life, not just on their television screens. The “real” life factor of young adulthood that has made _The Real World_ so successful over the years is the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter 6

“That’s real life”: Growing Up With and On The Real World

*I think a lot of reality television does teach certain aspects of life. I don’t think you should get your teachings from reality television. It’s just interesting to see how people do react and respond to situations in life.*

—Tonya, 19, Real World viewer since 1994

As much as *The Real World* formula of alcohol-fueled fighting, emotional turmoil and “hooking up” has made the program a success with its young viewer base, according to the women of this study, those same viewers have also found deeper themes of young adulthood. While the previous two chapters touched on elements of learning from and negotiating reality of *Real World* storylines, the focus of this chapter is a closer examination of the impact the program has made on the viewers’ daily lives. Some of the women I spoke with had been viewing the show for nearly 10 years or more. In that time, the women saw that *Real World* roommates do more than drink and have sex. Cast members have come together for the past 15 years from various socioeconomic, geographic, ethnic, and family households, and their time spent getting to know each other has included overcoming not only religious, racial, and sexual differences, but also typical growing pains within their families. The women consistently compared many of the situations dealt with by *Real World* roommates to college life. This chapter brings together my findings on how the women used *The Real World* as a vehicle for learning about different lifestyles, negotiating relationships, and becoming an adult. Examples from the text intersect with the women’s stories. In addition, I briefly address how the current generation of *Real World* cast members have also grown up with the show—meaning they, like the viewers I spoke with, know its conventions, which I argue has
changed the nature of their interactions onscreen, and in turn, viewer response. I direct
attention first to the program’s role in opening up a space for difference on popular
national television.

Learning to Accept and Overcome Difference

While the alcohol-induced drama may be the most exciting to viewers—
evidenced by the women’s and producers’ comments as well as ratings data in chapter
five—but women also shared with me their appreciation of the more complex narratives
of coping with being different and likewise accepting people unlike themselves, a theme
that has been central to The Real World’s previous 16 seasons. As in earlier chapters, I
have grouped comments from the women about this appeal of The Real World below:

Jennifer: You’re always going to work with people or live with people. You have
to get along.

Lisa: When they have the gay guys, I think it’s good for the diversity and learning
and understanding gay life. This season, how they all went to the club. They tried
it out.

Elizabeth: I think it is part of the way the world is saying that we have to accept
or at least be understanding of homosexual things. The girls kissing each other
are usually not homosexual. They’re not going to edit it out. In fact, they’re going
to put it there for people to get comfortable with so we have to face it.
Tonya: I didn’t come from a very culturally diverse community, so it’s interesting to see how the jock would interact with the very ethnic woman or even like a white country girl would interact with the Black football player. Then I came to college and I kind of kept in mind those sorts of things, being thrown into the living situation. It wasn’t that it helped me through it, but it was kind of interesting to see beforehand how people adjusted.

Lisa and Elizabeth’s inclusion of sexuality and Tonya’s mention of race as factors of accepting and appreciating difference are two key values of learning viewers placed on their Real World viewing experiences. More than half of the women explained to me that they were from either small towns or racially homogenous neighborhoods and/or school districts in large cities. They said that while growing up watching The Real World they appreciated seeing people of different races interact and actually discuss race politics. Key West, like most Real World seasons in the past five to seven years, according to the viewers and my own viewing experience with and analysis of the show, was admittedly light on race relations but that does not make the women’s earlier experiences with The Real World any less important or influential. However, this fact does implore questions of how the show’s storylines have shifted over the years to less politics, more party, which has been discussed throughout the dissertation. Nevertheless, discussion of sexuality continues to play a major role in The Real World.

With the exception of the heteronormative narratives surrounding most female roommates already discussed in chapter five, The Real World has informed a generation
about sexual difference and encouraged viewers to embrace these differences through frank, honest discussion. Elaine and Andrea’s comments help drive this point home:

Elaine: I’m from a really small town. Not a lot of stuff goes on there. Everybody knows everybody. You just don’t see stuff like that. I’m like way behind everybody else here because everybody has seen it all. I can’t relate. I just watch and am drawn to it. I watch it to try to understand it.

Andrea: I grew up in a small town. People don’t talk about it in our little area. It’s realistic. Our culture is changing...More and more it doesn’t bother me. I’m walking around campus and I see two girls holding hands—and before it would—now it doesn’t really bother me.

Andrea went on to say The Real World has stretched the boundaries of sexuality in society and her own perceptions. Again, small-town life has limited many viewers’ encounters with gays and lesbians, which has led them to value mediated experiences of sexual difference.

As compelling as some of the discussions about sexuality and other cultural issues have been over the years, viewers do recognize the less prominent role these talks have played on The Real World over the years. According to Julie:

I think in the beginning I thought it [The Real World] was more ethical issues. They talked a lot about homosexuality, AIDS, and racism. [Even now] I think that you do learn how to live with people because these people do need to adjust to the way people react to different people.
Julie went on to describe her summers at cheerleading camp, when she would spend four days at a time living with strangers in dorms and hotel rooms, and partly credited *The Real World* with preparing her for the challenge. “I think that really opened me up to being real accepting.” Her reference to *The Real World*’s earlier days is important to acknowledge as a factor in the show’s simultaneous success with and alienation of viewers. Longtime viewers remember that the show used to include more storylines about discrimination of race and sexuality. While the women still say they value those types of discussion, they have come to rely on *The Real World*’s use of alcohol-fueled arguments and sex. However, narratives about acceptance of homosexuality are evidence that *The Real World* is still an outlet for sexual citizenship and race talk, though race did not play specifically into this particular season.

A narrative concerning *Key West*’s gay cast member Tyler and straight roommate John from episode 10 (“Gettin’ Stormy,” April 25, 2006) helps contextualize viewer comments about *The Real World*’s role in sexuality discourse. John tells the confessional that he thinks everybody is getting bored with the “same nightlife” and he is looking forward to a new scene offered by the gay bar Tyler recommended the roommates visit. The roommates get dressed up to go out. We see Tyler talking with a man, Bobby, who he has met at the bar. John approaches Tyler and his new friend saying, “Uh oh! Tyler met a nice young female.” Tyler says to the confessional that he is tired of John making so many gay jokes. He explains that John continued to make offensive remarks. Back in the scene, Tyler throws a drink at John, who reciprocates. Tyler leaves the bar to avoid a potential fight, should the situation escalate. With everyone back at the room, Jose and
Zach talk to Tyler, who explains that he is mostly mad at himself for letting John get away with his derogatory remarks. “He says the word ‘fag’ more than anyone I know,” Tyler says. Then, to the confessional: “I chose not to set a limit on gay jokes and comments on homosexuality amongst the roommates because I didn’t want to be seen as the sensitive gay guy, but it crosses the line when the word ‘fag’ is used.”

Zach reminds Tyler that he and Jose are on his side and that they support him.

John peeks around the corner and tells Tyler that if he has a problem he should address John directly. At lunch the next day with Jose and Zach, John tries to explain that he doesn’t know what he did:

John: He thinks I’m too loose when I say fag and gay and that [bleeped], dude. Everyone is though, dude, not just me.

Jose: You’re the only one in the house that makes those comments to him. And he doesn’t like it.

Jose [to the confessional]: John does a good job of kind of convincing himself that he is always right, but he’s not always right. He was wrong that night.

Zach: His concern is that he’s allowed you to use certain terms around him that are offensive to the gay community.

John: If we’re going to start censoring what we say all the time, then we gotta do it across the board, dude. We can’t do it just because Tyler chooses, you know, whatever.

Zach [to the confessional]: Gay and faggot and homo. These words should not exist in this house, and I know Tyler takes offense to it, and he should.

John says he thinks Tyler is trying to justify throwing a drink on John by turning the situation around. Back at the room, Tyler is again talking to Zach, when John comes in and says Tyler should just talk to him. John tells the confessional that he likes Tyler and their friendship. Tyler tells the confessional that John reminds him of his brother, with
whom Tyler has struggled to have a healthy sibling relationship. This scene reminds viewers that sexual citizenship, defined by Arthurs (2004) as a national form of belonging or legitimacy of sexuality, has not been achieved across the board for people outside the accepted norm of heterosexuality. Along with race and class, Americans have a hard time discussing sex in general, let alone sexual identity (Foucault, 1978).

Learning how to Negotiate Relationships

Another major type of narrative that viewers have come to expect and look forward to on The Real World are stories of relational conflict among family members, significant others, friends and/or roommates. In recent years these stories have included loss, illness, and incarceration, among others.

Amanda: The one when Danny’s mom died made you really appreciate your parents.

Laura: I really liked following Danny also last season because of the whole thing with his mother dying and stuff. I wanted to see how that worked out. With Paula, I want to see how she gets help. When they start and there’s that initial problem or relationship or something, I want to see how it turns out in the end.

A number of women I interviewed brought up the death of the mother of The Real World Austin’s Danny as one of the most recent examples of the deeper emotional issues they participated in as viewers. Not long after taping began in Austin, Danny received word that his mother, who had battled substance abuse in the past, had passed away, and he left for a short while to be with his family in Boston. According to Andrea, some of the most
“real” moments are when the roommates call or write home. Other narratives viewers described as genuine include the healing process many of the roommates participate in onscreen, of which Paula’s will be described in more detail at the end of this chapter. Sometimes that process involves repairing relations within the house. However, conflicts within the house often parallel roommates’ relationships back home.

The comparison Tyler made between his tension with roommate John and his taxed relationship with his brother and the subsequent resolution of sorts near the end of the season demonstrates how viewers and cast members alike can learn from onscreen events. Like the rest of the roommates, John and Tyler got along most of the season but lack of personal space over a prolonged time is sure to get to most people. In Episode 21, (“Jose Gets Stranded,” July 18, 2006) the two men discuss how best to handle a fundraising event for Mystic Tan. The situation escalates to a shouting match with nothing resolved. Later, after the unsuccessful event, Tyler and John decide to sit down and talk.

Tyler: I think we’ve all had our moments where we’ve lashed out in the house, but to me I’m very tender about the way people speak to me. And it’s more just the way, some things in my past that I’m really sensitive about. My brother and I don’t have a relationship you know, for a reason. So people in the house when I say why it doesn’t necessarily bother me sometimes that when you like run up and like do annoying [bleeped] to me. And I’m just like because that’s the brother I always wanted. It’s just hard because the way you sometimes explode at me it just takes me back and I’m like, “Whoa. This isn’t what I wanted.” I thought I was going to get all the perks and not have to deal with that.

John: I want you to know that the reason I got so mad was because I care about you so much. [Tyler’s eyes are red as he fights back tears.] I really need to apologize and I’m really sorry that it brings back all these other memories.
John [to the confessional]: He is close to tears talking about how he’s been treated in the past. I don’t think Tyler needs anymore negativity in his life. I don’t want to be someone who’s going to contribute to that.

Tyler [to John]: I usually would not admit this but hearing you guys say, “I see him as one of us” means a lot because it’s so hard to have people see me for not being just “gay Tyler.” Our relationship, between you and I, has been enough for me to kind of want to start a relationship with my brother.

The scene ends with a hug. On one hand, this type of scene represents a somewhat simple resolution to a complex scenario that television so regularly provides. On the other hand, the resolution involves communication and openness. John and Tyler have demonstrated the possibilities available to adults who sit down and work out their problems. Moreover, by relating his issue with John to his relationship with his brother, Tyler provides viewers with tangible ways of relating to their own roommates.

The women I spoke with saw profound relevance in the type of narrative described above and enjoy finding similarities in their own lives with those onscreen.

Elaine: *I just get caught up in how people evolve. I try to relate, to see how I would react and much it would change my life and other people’s lives...I’ve always found the exchanges or the realizations that they [the roommates] made— I think that stuff is all real through their experiences on the show and based on their relationships with each other.*

Sometimes these relationships become deep, long-lasting friendships. As Carla explained, “I’ve learned you always have these people with really strong bonds.” During *The Real World Key West*, much of these bonds concerned the roommates’ handling of Svetlana’s positioning as the youngest of her family and *The Real World* house. While many of the roommates took advantage of Svetlana’s inexperience and teased her over her numerous
tantrums and mishandlings of her relationship with boyfriend Martin, Paula, already in
counseling for her own relationships, took Svetlana under her wing. In episode 20
(“Spanish Getaway,” July 11, 2006) the other roommates think that Paula at times
isolates herself by spending so much time with Svetlana, but Paula will not let Svetlana
feel as if she has no support system in the house. “I would never want anybody to feel
completely alone,” she says.

The types of friendships formed on The Real World like the one shared by Paula
and Svetlana are very important to the program’s female viewers, who value their own
friendships even more, including in their viewing experiences.

Andrea: *Here you can hang out with your friends until two o’clock in the morning
just laying around talking. You [form] really great friendships when you’re with
them that much. I think in The Real World they are with these people all the time.
That’s what makes the show.*

Nicole: *I always watch with my roommates...We look forward to Tuesdays. We all
sit down together and watch it. It’s kind of a social thing.*

Nicole spoke of enjoying her move to college from home, where she did not have MTV.
A theme of communal watching was common and contributes to the importance of the
theme of friendship built around The Real World. According to Elizabeth, “*I like that
almost anyone enjoys watching it—in my age group. We do it a lot with our friends.*”
Amanda said she valued seeing people her own age deal with life onscreen and then
discussing it with her friends: “*Everyone that I’m friends with likes to watch, so it’s a
good social situation. You can talk about it.*” As vice-president of editing, Mark
Raudonis, explained about *The Real World*’s place in its fans’ lives, “We wouldn’t be on the air on MTV, the most fickle audience in the world, if we weren’t relevant to that audience” (personal communication, June 13, 2006).

Learning to Recognize the Difference between the Party Life and Real Life

In addition to the major forms of relational learning and appreciation discussed earlier in the previous section, *Real World* viewers also have been able to turn to the program for examples of everyday living and relating. The women spoke of the “real” factor in watching *Real World* cast members not only deal with the broader social and cultural differences of their roommates, but also going through the motions of sharing space and daily routines.

Rebecca: *I just thought it was neat to see how people reacted toward each other. It wasn’t just all of them living in the house. They had to get things done. Living in a sorority house is the same thing—being around people with such different personalities. Doing what you have to do every day is hard, but theirs is for public display.*

Tonya: *I think it’s a good representation of how people interact with each other, especially when they’re thrown into situations. I especially focused on it when I came to college. I have never lived with anyone. I’ve never had to share anything. I’m not a single child, but I have a brother. So I’ve had my own bathroom and that kind of thing. These people were kind of thrown into the situation I was...*
because I was thrown into a quad freshman year with three people I didn’t know and on a floor sharing a bathroom with 50 people I didn’t know. When I watched it was interesting to see how seven people who don’t know each other and don’t know anything about each other are thrown into a household and forced to live among each other.

Nicole: I like that it’s realistic. These are people that you know. They’re not acting. It seems real. It’s like watching a group of people in our house or me and my friends in a dorm.

The women readily compared *Real World* roommates’ shared living situations with dorm life, which is one of the major reasons I believe the show’s female fan base has continued to relate to it over the years. They have fought over bathroom space and refrigerator shelves and can find candor and humor in viewing similar experiences onscreen. In addition, the women enjoy seeing narratives of roommates discussing dating and love/lust interests that are so common among sorority sisters and *Real World* roommates.

A scene that is representative of the women’s discussions as relatable to college and sorority life is from the first episode of *The Real World Key West*. On their first afternoon together, the roommates unpack and settle into their home for the next four months. John and Zach discuss their past relationships, while the women talk about their specific guy “types” and try to get each other to express if they think any of the guys in the house are worthy of their affections. In true frat boy form John brings his life-size, blond blow-up doll out to the pool. The doll, which John has named Judy, has a red circle for a mouth and is greeted to many laughs from the other roommates. Next the
roommates prepare for their first night on the town in Key West and proceed to talk among drinks and dancing. Contrast this with the first ever “getting acquainted” sequence of *The Real World*, where, in New York, the seven roommates gathered around a table in their loft and discussed issues such as race and class.

Co-creator and executive producer Jon Murray described *The Real World* as a “grand social experiment” that became more commercial in the editing room replete with a popular music score and beautiful living spaces. Over time, the variables in the experiment can become repetitive, which is why it is crucial to cast dynamic roommates who are willing to be open about their lives and relationships. In fact, onscreen relationships and sexual chemistry are the most appealing narratives to viewers. Besides seeing how different people come together as described above, viewers are drawn to stories of innocent flirting and relationship talk such as that in episode five (“Troubled Waters,” March 21, 2006). The roommates are discussing Svetlana’s relationship with her boyfriend Martin.

John: How’s Martin?

Svetlana: I don’t know. He’s just doing the same [bleeped phrase] he promised he’d stop doing, which is being dumb with his friends.

Jose [to confessional]: I think that Svetlana is needy and she loves the attention. That’s why she’s with Martin. But deep down I don’t think she’s happy and she may be looking for an outlet.

Jose [to roommates]: Is he worried about the guys in this house?

Svetlana: I don’t know. He doesn’t say. He just keeps acting like…

Jose: He’d [bleeped] himself.

John: Does he know that you want my [bleeped]?
Svetlana [sarcastically]: Yeah.

John [to the confessional]: I take my cues from the girl. If everything she says about the relationship is negative, that’s usually a pretty good sign that she might be looking for something else.

Svetlana [back in scene]: I cried so hard before I came here. He didn’t show one…

John: Is this the first time you had to be in a long-term relationship and you’ve been away.

Svetlana: I’ve been on vacation with like my parents for a week.

John: No.

[A little further into the conversation the phone rings. It’s Martin. Svetlana goes to talk to him in the phone room.]

John [to the confessional]: I think at this point Svetlana is very dependent on Martin, and she has no better option.

Jose [in scene]: She’s brave for coming out here.

Zach: Why? That’s not brave, that’s actually a cop out.

Paula: A cop out?

John: Yeah, dude. If something here’s better than what I got, then something is gonna’ work out. If not, then I’m just going to stay with that. So it’s almost like, “have your cake and eat it to.”

John [to the confessional]: I think Fitz is confused at this point. The first thing that she said to us when she came her was, “I have a boyfriend.” But her actions and a lot of the things she says contradict that.

Paula [in scene]: I don’t think she was looking to find somebody here. Maybe she could learn something from this experience and he’s just not the person that she wants anymore. Or she could learn something about herself and be like this is the kid that’s perfect for me.
This scene functions in two distinct ways. First, John’s playful but sexist and obtrusive flirting is familiar to viewers as the single “jock” or “frat boy” trying to use humor and trash talk to move in on a woman who is already taken. Second, the other roommates discuss Svetlana’s relationship troubles, with Jose and Paula defending Svetlana against John. This type of support system among roommates and friends is a major draw for *Real World* viewers. For most of the women I interviewed, leaving home to attend college was the first time they were far from home for an extended time. They left family and love relationships behind and relied on the small networks of friends they met in class and in the dorms to cope with the stress of long-distance love and other college stressors. The women appreciated seeing these types of bonds played out by real people on a show they have to come to find a second home in. While *The Real World* is not a surrogate family, it is a tool to see how people of similar age and background manage life problems.

The women found comfort in seeing that not only the relational drama but also some of the more frivolous, party action offered up on *The Real World* often play out similarly in their own lives. However, they recognized that *Real World* roommates have less overall responsibility and can therefore afford, emotionally and financially, to play harder than most young adults.

Elizabeth: *I think it’s a true representation...I think it needs to be realized that not all people that age are doing these things. But I’ve definitely seen it here and on vacations.*
Marie: *It just seems to me like it’s college life without having to study. You don’t have very many responsibilities…They want a break from life, so they go on The Real World.*

Heather: *There’s just so much more to life than going out and having fun. There’s this whole other part of my life, like school, getting a good job. When I was younger watching the show because they didn’t show them in school, I was like, “Life’s a party when you’re 20.” It can be.*

On one hand, these comments about partying in college are nothing new, considering the ubiquity of the teen and college film genres, with films like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High, Animal House* and the *American Pie* series. However, when fictional comic narratives are coupled with visual and textual elements of the real, pre-pubescent viewers come to know a limited mediascape of college-age life. Chapter five discussed that college students on average are actually drinking less than in recent times but that binge drinking, like that seen in *The Real World*, has increased. My emphasis here is not on *The Real World’s* influence on drinking behavior, for that requires large-scale survey data and isolation of a number of outside factors. Rather, the women’s discussion of their early perceptions of young adulthood based on their viewings of *The Real World* point to the importance young people place on their media experiences in negotiating reality. When these media texts are part of the reality genre, the idea of reality perception becomes even grayer. In the next section, I examine more closely how viewers have noticed changes in their perceptions of *The Real World* over the years, including changes to the show overall.
Learning to Make Adult Choices

With the centrality of narratives built around women’s bodies and relational conflict established throughout the dissertation, it is important to remember that *The Real World* was conceptualized as a show first and foremost about the transition into adulthood. Yes, this televised transition under the guise of the “real” has leaned toward exceptional moments that are more often than not influenced by the camera and the idea of instant celebrity, but the seven strangers do grow during their time on *The Real World*. Viewers have seen these growing pains change over the years.

Heather: *It does a good job of portraying [real life]. I guess it’s conflicting. Yes it portrays the way life can be but at the same time they love to get all these people that are going to clash.*

Andrea: *I think in the beginning when they first started The Real World they didn’t look for somebody that has baggage they could bring to the show to keep people wanting more. They kind of just picked kids to live together and just saw what happened. That’s what it came out to be for me when I was watching. Ever since, they’re trying to replicate things that have happened.*

Rebecca: *They used to have people who were doing things with their lives. The people now spend their life on The Guantlet.*

Carla: *I think they’re lifestyles are a little unrealistic. Like in the Chicago season, I feel like they’re very cut off, like from 9/11. They brought in that TV.*
Rebecca is referencing the proliferation of former *Real World* stars who have found continued success on the challenge shows such as *The Gauntlet* or *The Duel*, which pit former *Real World* and *Road Rules* cast members against each other. Carla, who had earlier in our interview spoke of taking away an appreciation of the real friendships from the show, also sees the less than real ways of living on *The Real World* sets. Andrea agreed, but found solace in the free spirited living *Real World* roommates have inspired over the years:

Yeah, I party on the weekends and stuff, but they seem like they are crazy all the time. Realistically, I feel like I’m kind of there. I have to deal with problems. I have to work. We’re kind of at the same point in our lives—well obviously some of them are done with college. Some are going through college. We’re just getting ready with what we’re going to do with our lives. It’s kind of like your last chance for fun. I’m not saying you won’t have fun when you’re older, but just kind of being an adolescent and having a good time and not having to worry about too much responsibility.

Co-executive producer and vice president of stories, Joyce Corrington explained that potential cast members’ own experiences growing up with *The Real World* have changed the dynamics of the show: “So they think they know what we’re looking for, and they try to give it to us during casting…We don’t want the people who can put up the façade, but it’s hard to tell.” Given the complex nature of weeding out the actors in the casting process, it is just as complicated to tell what behaviors happen naturally or may be induced by the presence of the cameras, or for that matter by the fact that cast
members have also watched the show for years and seen which behaviors get the most screen time. Corrington observed that after the first few tapings of each season, roommates become more relaxed and natural on camera.

Katie: \textit{Everyone makes mistakes. You have to own up to it and stuff. Things that happen to you, they happen to other people. It’s not just you that goes out and does stupid things.}

Laura: \textit{It is fun going out. They’ll show people having fun, but they won’t show sometimes what happens afterwards. There’s always consequences.}

Here Katie is referencing the cavalcade of drunken embarrassments that have become a cliché on \textit{The Real World}, while Laura points out the common absence of taped consequences of this behavior. However, as discussed in chapter 5, previous seasons have featured hospital visits, therapy and arrests as results of excessive drinking. But Laura’s point is helpful in understanding the suspension of disbelief required of \textit{Real World} viewers and reality television fans in general. We only see a portion of seven young adults’ lives, and, as casting director Sasha Alpert stressed, this is a \textit{distilled} version that features only the most compelling moments in a four-month period (personal communication, June 14, 2006). Katie’s comment about people not being alone in making mistakes is a key component of \textit{Real World} popularity and deserves further clarification.

Jon Murray explained that the time captured for people on \textit{The Real World} is a distinct phase in life. “It’s a time when you’re out on your own making your own
decisions. You’re living with your own mistakes.” Just as viewer Katie pointed to seeing people work through their mistakes onscreen, Murray is in tune with this component of growing into adulthood. As young people continue to spend more hours of their day with media, and TV specifically (Freierman, 2006), they value making connections between their own lives and what they see onscreen. However, as evidenced by the sensitive-nature of Paula’s story on Key West, some conflicts cut too deep.

*Changing of the guard*

Though the creative directors consistently named conflict as the major ingredient of drama on *The Real World*, the story begins with protagonists that young women, as the largest audience, can identify with and root for throughout the season. In past seasons, the most relatable female roommates may have had personal baggage they brought from home, but they managed to not let this interfere with their romantic possibilities in the house. *The Real World Key West* is distinguished as the only season without any single, romantically unattached female roommates. As the roommate with the most screen time, Paula was unlike any of her *Real World* predecessors. Not only was she trying to overcome an eating disorder and alcohol issues, she was often on the phone trying to rebuild her relationship with Keith. Svetlana, though not struggling with psychological or physiological distress, was going through her own growing pains and also often spent time on the phone arguing with or complaining to boyfriend Martin. Janelle was not seen on camera nearly as much as Paula or Svetlana, but she too was in an on-again, off-again relationship. Moreover, as discussed in chapter four, one of Janelle’s few storylines focused on her strained relationship with Kasib, much of which was dealt with on the
telephone. Also touched on in earlier chapters is the fact that the women of the study did not respond favorably to Key West’s storylines, as they were focused mostly on Paula. Key West began a small, but obvious downward trend in the ratings that eventually recovered in the current Denver season, away from the discomfort of Paula’s story and back to business as usual. However, the Denver season is outside the scope of this study.

A comment from Zach in the Key West season’s first episode that I also included in chapter four summarizes the change Paula and Key West brought to the expectations people have come to have of The Real World. Upon realizing the severity of Paula’s problems, he tells the confessional, “I’m really concerned about Paula. I’m thinking we’re going to have this wonderful family of a house and we’re dealing with an issue.” Like his fellow roommates and former fellow viewers, Zach has hoped Key West would be an escape from the pressures of college while also providing new relationships. Instead, Zach, like the women of this study, has pointed out that Key West will be unlike most Real World seasons. While the “issues” the cast and viewers dealt with were described thoroughly in previous chapters, I have chosen to end this chapter with an analysis of the last episode (“Time To Say Goodbye,” August 15) of the Key West season and subsequent conclusion of Paula’s narrative to illustrate the potential that The Real World—despite its reputation as an extended spring break—still has to share arcs of personal growth with its millions of young female viewers.

The roommates go to a final dinner together and share how much they care about each other. “I will love you guys for the rest of my life,” Paula tells them. To the confessional, John says, “I’m going to miss all six of these people. I guess all good things
gotta come to an end.” Back at the house, they have gathered their blankets and pillows to fall asleep together in the living room. Paula wakes up and talks to Keith on the phone. She tells the confessional that the two of them plan on living together and going to couple’s counseling. Hanging up the phone, she looks out over at her roommates, who are sound asleep, but she is too restless to sleep and decides to begin packing. While doing so, Paula finds a poem she wrote a month after arriving in Key West. In the poem, Paula expresses feeling broken but being lifted up by her strangers—her roommates. She types it up and titles it, “My Strangers” and prints up copies, which she decorates with markers and lays next to each of her roommates as they sleep. Below is the text of the poem:

My Strangers

Falling apart
Pulling together
Too late, it’s here
I’m broken down
Way down
To where it is hidden
Hidden even to myself
Fake laughter leaps from my mouth
Can they tell?
Happy enough to fool them
All of them
And by them I mean only myself
Stop staring at my charades
Let me breathe
Help me breathe
We turned to the problems
That never lose me
So I am lost
I am a stranger
But my stranger is still sick
They see me hurt
So you are not leaving me in here
As Paula reads the poem, we are treated to a montage of clips from the season. First, Paula is meeting Jose to go to the house for the first time, then talking to Zach on the first night out. “I feel so sad,” she says to him. Next, Svetlana is carrying Paula and setting her in the back of the van on the roommates’ second night out. “Let’s carry her,” Svetlana announces to the group. In a scene from the third episode, still within the first few days of taping, Janelle asks Paula if she wants help and Paula breaks into tears, “This is so hard.” Then from episode 10, closer to when Paula begins counseling, John tells her that being in Key West is like starting a new semester in school, “You start off with a clean slate.” The final scene is from episode nine where Paula tells Tyler she has been so grateful for the experience. “The greatest love is the one you have inside yourself.”

Throughout the poem/montage scene, a soft acoustic song shares: “Every move that I make is to get closer to you.” Paula is crying while speaking to the confessional about how indebted she is to the experiences and relationships she formed in Key West. “I love you guys,” she says.

The next morning, Tyler tells Zach he thinks he took the experience for granted at times. He tells the confessional he is leaving with six friends. They all read their poems, thank Paula and tell her how great she is, then finish packing. Zach is the first to get picked up by the cab to go to the airport. The tears begin. Janelle is next. “She might be a diva on the outside, but Janelle is a true sweetheart and a beautiful woman on the inside,”
Paula says. And Svetlana, “Janelle, being able to learn from you was one of the greatest accomplishments for me in this house. I thank you immensely for that.” Jose takes Paula to the side to talk. “I just want to tell you you’ve come a long way. I want you to be strong. If you ever need me I’m there for you. I love you. You’re a great girl, Paula,” he says. They both cry and hug. Tyler and Jose say goodbye. Jose goes next. To the confessional, Jose offers three words describing his time in Key West: “Amazing, challenging, and real.” John leaves next: “I’ve learned more than I could have ever asked for. There isn’t a school in the world that could teach the type of information I think we all gained here. And I feel like I’ve grown.” The boat arrives to pick up Tyler and Svetlana, leaving Paula alone.

Tyler: What I learned from Paula is to let people in.

Paula [about Svetlana]: She was the one person who didn’t let me fall all the way down.

Svetlana: Paula, you were my comfort.

Tyler: This isn’t the end. This is the beginning of a relationship with these people. We’ll always be a family.

Paula cries on the dock, alone. She walks through the house, carrying her torn blanket, of which she cut pieces to put with the copies of the poem. A taxi picks her up and we hear her voiceover: “I fell in love with seven people—six roommates and myself…I owe the world to them. I don’t think they’ll ever know that they saved my life.”

Despite the lower ratings that came with the heavy focus on Paula, the producers told her story as they have with any previous major storyline—with a beginning, middle and an end (Jon Murray, personal communication, June 11, 2006). It is fitting, then, that
the final episode would include a montage of scenes with Paula discussing her problems with each roommate separately and being the last person to leave the Key West house. For all of the storylines devoted to Paula, ultimately the thematic narrative of the season—that of growing up—was not that much unlike previous Real World seasons. The final episode featured the roommates discussing their brief time together and how they have grown and changed because of the experience. Even John, the “frat boy,” arguably the most obtuse—or at least insensitive—of the group for his abuse of words such as fag and crazy, has discovered the benefits of letting people unlike himself into his inner circle. Although Real World roommates essentially “grow up” in four months, their struggles and triumphs are no less meaningful to the viewers who take four years to achieve the same types of relationships and self-knowledge in college, elements that for 15 years have made The Real World essentially real to its millions of viewers.

A comment from executive producer Jon Murray summarizes what this chapter has explained about the place of The Real World in the lives of its viewers.

That’s the wonderful thing about The Real World. We’re never quite sure what we’re going to get. I mean we cast the seven best people with the guide that they have to represent a diverse group of people and represent the diversity of our audience. I know that if I wanted to just get good ratings, everything would happen in the hot tub, and it would all involve threesomes…But I think the reason the show has lasted as long as it has is because it is both the hot-tub craziness of youth, but it is also, whether it was Pedro, whether it was Ruthie, whether it was some of the other difficult issues we’ve dealt with…I think there are those times
when the show becomes something more important than just a bunch of kids
having fun living together. (personal communication, June 12, 2006).

What Murray explained rang true throughout my discussions with the women regarding
learning and accepting other people, forming and maintaining relationships, and
becoming an adult. In addition to the laughter, tears, anger, and “hook ups” that often
result from the over consumption of alcohol and lead to the drama most popular with
viewers, *Real World* cast members’ abilities to be open—to themselves, their roommates,
and the camera—has provided viewers with a 15-year example for how to negotiate
young adulthood.
Chapter 7

Looking for Attention: Commodity Bodies

In the previous chapters I focused on three general themes of women’s bodies on *The Real World* that emerged from the concurrent methods of textual and interview analysis: 1) the constructed nature of bodies in crisis, 2) the heteronormative double bind of college female bodies expected to party hard yet retain their dignity, and 3) the impact of these bodies and other *Real World* features on viewers’ daily lives. In the following sections I position a conception of material, commodity bodies in hybrid television within the profit-motivated, macro-institution of television production and celebrity worship, as well as the micro-structures of peer relationships and meaning negotiation. This final chapter of the dissertation revisits some of the key tenets of bodies on and realism of *The Real World* to answer my research questions and complete the critical rhetoric outlined in chapter two. I call on Mahan-Hays and Aden’s (2003) interpretation of a post-Burkean cultural rhetoric through identifying three key frames of bodies on *The Real World*, including the hungry body, the heteronormative body, and the real body.

Representations and interpretations of bodies as conflicted and starved for attention move beyond theoretical assumptions of bodies as power to bodies as sites of learning for real world relational exchanges within popular culture. But as McGee (1990) argued, culture exists in fragments, and it is the critical rhetor’s job to make sense of these fragments, which include not only analyzing culture, but also the critical process. At the end of this chapter I summarize some of the constraints of this rhetorical journey and offer suggestions for future research, including a reconceptualization of our roles as
academic cultural critics. To begin the sense-making process, I turn first to the production of *Real World* bodies and their presence and absence in the text of the program.

**Constructing Bodies on *The Real World***

The part of the multi-modal analysis of this project that I conducted second, but conceptualized first, involved scrutinizing the production processes inherent in reality TV development. This section provides a summary of what I learned from talking to Bunim/Murray’s Jon Murray, Joyce Corrington, Mark Raudonis, and Sasha Alpert. However, because the knowledge I gained from our discussions informed my interpretation of *The Real World* text, in this section I reference textual elements that demonstrate specific production practices shared by the creative directors and, therefore, also review the textual analysis portion of the study. While one focus of my study has been on the commercial imperative of bodies on reality TV, I have approached my subject from a rhetorical perspective. As such, I designed my research questions using language that would guide the methods to follow the critical, reflexive theories of the dissertation. The first of these questions turned to the rhetorical devices within the production process of creating stories and bodies on *The Real World*:

- How do decision makers construct bodies on *The Real World* that equip viewers for living in a commercially mediated world reliant on female bodies?

Through this question I first attempted to identify the terministic screens (Burke, 1966), or filters, of the body toward which *Real World* creative directors guide our attention by explaining the process of the show’s production. Second, the concept of equipment for
living, also a Burkean (1941/1967) one, brings the focus to the textual elements of bodies produced for *The Real World*. Through processes of casting and confessional in story development, *The Real World* has become a cultural marker of young adulthood dependent on the female body as commodity—a material, marked body for sale. I begin with casting.

**Casting**

It is through the casting of young women who adhere to an ideal standard of beauty that creative directors begin a visual screen of the normalization of bodies on *The Real World*. While it is no surprise that beautiful women are the norm on scripted television, a reliance on pretty women in narrative reality television reinforces feminist arguments that commercial television relies on women’s sexuality to encourage engagement with the text that extends beyond the aesthetic to the economic (Riordan, 2001). If young women feel comfortable with the onscreen presence they are more inclined to continue watching the program, and likewise the commercials (Dow, 1996). However, in Key West producers ran into trouble casting Paula, who crossed the threshold from slim to anorexic when taping began. Her exposed clavicle, overly thin arms, and gaunt face were juxtaposed to the curvier, though still slender, physiques of Svetlana and Janelle.

Like so many of the women of my study, I noticed that *The Real World* began casting mostly beautiful people more so than “average” people around season five with *RW Miami*. In those first seasons exceptional beauty was just that—exceptional and reserved for one or two cast members. For example, *RW New York* gave us the toned
model Eric, but it also offered a heavyset Black woman, Heather, and a slim, attractive—but not beautiful—young woman, Julie. Similarly, *RW London* provided another larger Black woman, Sharon; a girl next door of average beauty, Kat; but also a young dewy ingénue, Jacinda—who moved on from modeling to acting post *The Real World*. Though the creative directors did not confirm nor deny my assumptions, the shift in the Miami season to a mostly beautiful cast likely resulted from the culture of narcissism and high standard of sex appeal commonly understood to be engrained in that community. As the “pretty quotient” of *Real World* roommates increased, the ratings followed suit. And, like Gitlin (1979) before me argued, television producers tend to go with what works. Pretty people have been a fixture on *The Real World* for more than a decade, with the average roommate now being the exception.

Producers also spoke of a tendency to cast women and men who are willing to be open and raw onscreen—in front of millions of viewers no less. Joyce Corrington’s discussion of the potential lesbian roommate who backed out at the last minute before signing her contract is one example of this. The unnamed woman indicated to the producers that she was ready to come out publicly but then changed her mind. Although the producers liked her, they needed her to be as honest as possible about her life, which she declared was not an option. Paula’s response to the added scrutiny of the camera and her new roommates regarding her eating disorder offers another example of the primacy of openness in roommates. While previous women had dealt with eating disorders on *The Real World*, none before Paula were so willing to be open and honest about their struggles on a national cable network.
Confessional

In addition to casting, the role of the confessional is key in creating sustainable visual and narrative screens of the body on *The Real World*. It is yet another way producers encourage candid participation of roommates. However, in true, constructed reality TV fashion, without asking on-site producers and directors and off-site editors about every scene that used voiceover to add a truth-telling, emotional screen of bodies, it is impossible to determine which voiceovers came from confessional footage and which came from individual interviews held weekly between staff and roommates. But this may not matter, in that it is the telling process itself that grabs hold of the viewer. To be sure, the idea that bodies can escape into a separate room alone except for a camera builds the authenticity of *Real World* bodies, but the process of confession can take place anywhere. Confessing brings out a perceived truth, which establishes a connection between cast member and viewer.

The editors interweaving of footage from various vantage points on the discussion of Paula’s sexual identity provides a perfect case study in truth formation of bodies on *The Real World*. During the eighth episode kiss between Paula and Paolahni, the editors are attempting to weave a seamless visual narrative from multiple, fragmented screens to give us the truth of Paula. In addition to the kiss itself, we see snippets from the casting process of Paula explaining her close friendship with bisexual Janet, who has a crush on Paula back home, combined with her confessional admission of being comfortable around women, whom Paula says want nothing from her the way guys do. These three separate types of footage are not the only clips used to articulate a confused sexual body
in that sequence. Within that same story arc, viewers are also treated to snippets of the roommates encouraging Paula to confess her sexual identity, two of the roommates—John and Tyler—discussing their opinions of Paula’s sexuality, and finally, a taped telephone conversation between Paula and boyfriend Kevin, who is concerned about her sexual identity as well.

Six distinct conversations and visual sequences have been blended into a slickly edited MTV video, complete with an appropriate soundtrack. We are left thinking Paula is confused but are really no further in our understanding of Paula’s sexual body than we were before the commercial break. Perhaps this circular notion of truth works to our advantage. For, as Foucault (1977, 1978) has reminded us, the truth adds yet another power limitation to our discursive notions of the self and the body. Confessional video and voiceover provide the illusion of truth while maintaining a necessary detachment from *Real World* bodies. A false sense of objectivity, stemming from *The Real World*’s partial roots in cinema verite, is perhaps necessary in establishing the relationship between viewer and text. While the next section addresses viewer interaction with the text—the consumption of bodies—this section summarized the textual tools evidenced in *RW Key West* toward this end.

**Consuming Bodies on *The Real World***

Just as the textual analysis overlapped with my interviews with Bunim/Murray staff, watching *RW Key West* also coincided with my interviews with the young women who identified as fans of the program. Although I conducted these interviews first,
because they are the backbone of the dissertation, I have situated my discussion of them after my conclusions on the produced, textual aspects of *Real World*. The research question below guided the analysis:

- How do consumers/viewers negotiate meaning and body issues in *The Real World*?

This question situates bodies onscreen within viewers’ own ideas of bodies. Here the focus becomes the rhetorical exchange necessary to determine the authenticity of bodies and narratives on *The Real World*. The third and final research question, coming later in the chapter, engages the cultural context by which these conceptions of the body exist. For now the important element is the negotiation of the real. The women of this study, although entertained by the drama *The Real World* provides, participated in an ongoing process of filtering out the exaggerated notions of young adulthood and bodies to make sense of the bodies onscreen. Pullen (2004) identified this constant push-pull practice of reality TV consumption as part of a larger “reflexive reality environment” (p. 227). I turn next to a theory that situates the reflexive negotiation process within a larger framework of audience reality perception.

Real World *Realism*

In her taxonomy of media realism, Alice Hall (2003) found six categories of audience perceptions of media realism, which she defined as “the way in which a media representation is seen to relate to real-world experience” (p. 624), through focus group interviews with 47 young adults. The conceptualizations include plausibility (something that could actually happen), typicality (representativeness beyond happening to a single
person), factuality (based on real events), emotional involvement (potential for audience to relate to characters), narrative consistency (internal coherence), and perceptual persuasiveness (“compelling visual illusion,” p. 637). Hall’s subjects viewed and discussed both scripted and non-scripted fare, which is helpful in explaining the overlapping perception of realism across media texts, where notions of the real are determined by the relationship between a media representation and a viewer’s experience.

Each of the six components defined above were all articulated by the women of my study. Though either exaggerated, in the viewers’ words, or distilled, in the producers’, the events of *The Real World* are ostensibly real. Roommates are likely to have too much to drink and get in a fight (plausibility). The women’s explanations of the parallels of *Real World* drinking narratives an drinking behavior of college-aged women, as well as the “looking for attention” subtext in chapter five are examples of this negotiation process. Twentysomethings are going to struggle with their place in their families and the world (typicality), demonstrated by the viewers’ discussions of empathizing with roommates by comparing leaving family to attend college to *Real World* displacement. Despite, or maybe because of, minimal producer involvement, the events of Key West actually happened (factuality) The women spoke of recognizing what they perceived to be producer involvement in casting beautiful, thin women with emotional problems, but that those roommates dressed themselves and had emotional outbursts without the coaxing of producers. Although many of the women spoke of being upset at Paula’s televised struggle, they were no less concerned for her physical and emotional health, which leads to the next criteria in Hall’s taxonomy. Viewers connected,
sometimes painfully, to Paula’s trauma and Svetlana’s growing pains (emotional involvement). Voiceovers allow images to flow seamlessly from the confessional to the bar for a complete story (narrative consistency), which points more to the absence criteria in critical rhetoric. None of the women spoke of being distracted by the incorporation of the different footage to tell the story arcs. However, one exception occurred when some women spoke of suspecting that producers included a reaction shot to build dramatic tension in a sequence that may not have actually garnered that shot. The purpose, however, of building conflict to achieve narrative flow was achieved. Finally, the intimacy of *The Real World* cameras puts the viewer at the scene (perceptual persuasiveness). That the women I interviewed consistently spoke of identifying with many of *The Real World*’s roommates points to the immediacy of the reality genre. Again, viewers may have not mentioned that the positioning of the camera brought them closer to the subjects, but such is the purpose of proper camera placement and editing.

Sometimes, as Hall (2003) admitted, viewers are aware of the production process of creating media texts, which more often than not shifts their perceptions of realism. *Real World* viewers are no exception. They are part of a technology-savvy generation of heavy media users who have been raised on reality television and the Internet. Not only do they understand the language of constructed bodies and narratives, they helped create it—maybe not the viewers of this study specifically—but young women who constitute more than 60 percent of *The Real World*’s audience have seen and participated in the complicated relationship between cameras and bodies. From *Girls Gone Wild* to MySpace or the countless other reality programs on television today, the desire to be the
focus of attention transcends the line between the virtual and the real. Furthermore, in our surveillance society, the work of being watched (Andrejevic, 2004) and doing the watching have become interchangeable. Like contestants on American Idol, the current generation of Real World cast members knows its conventions and has learned what it takes to get onscreen and command the camera. Although viewers at home are aware of this interplay, they see themselves represented on The Real World and identify it as real and helpful in their daily lives. A reflexive authenticity of Real World bodies is established. I want to move on to what this obscured, but tangible, interrelationship of produced and consumed bodies can teach us about hybrid television and hybrid audiences.

Finding Meaning in Hybrid Bodies

The rest of this chapter synthesizes my findings of bodies and audiences of The Real World to identify the frames of bodies most prevalent in hybrid media culture today and what this means for young women who consume these images. These frames include bodies as hungry, heteronormative, and real. I explain each of these frames in the following pages. Each are guided by the research question:

- What can we learn from the intersection of the consumption and construction of bodies of hybrid television?

This question shifts the focus from bodies as marked and normalized to the productive power of bodies as explained by Foucault (1978) and Grosz (1994). While this dissertation has intended to explain the discourses of commodity bodies, I want to
reiterate that despite the frames of bodies that have been normalized as heterosexual or otherwise, young women can still learn from these fractured bodies. However, the research question above is first intended for scholars who want to critically engage the body in media studies. As Bordo has argued (1993) cultural critics in every field must recognize the materiality and meaning inherent in bodies. To begin this discussion I introduce the first frame, hungry bodies.

The Hungry Body

The fields of psychology, history, sociology, and medicine have contributed to the rich body of literature on eating disorders. I cannot claim to be a scholar of eating disorders based on my analysis here. I simply would like to summarize some of the findings about the diseases of anorexia and bulimia, including the most current statistics on eating disorders, in order to provide depth to the already rich stories shared by the women of this study.

According to figures updated in January 2006, the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) reported that as many as 10 million women and 1 million men have anorexia or bulimia and another 25 million more suffer from binge eating disorder (NEDA, 2006). However, because of the shame associated with eating disorders, many cases go unreported. People in their teens and twenties are the main sufferers of anorexia and bulimia, but according to Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders, Inc. (ANRED) (2006) children as young as six and people as old as 76 can also fight eating disorders. Hoek and van Hoeken (2003) found that 40 percent of newly identified cases of anorexia are girls 15-19 years old, the target audience of The Real World. Roughly
four percent of college-aged women have bulimia, which again can be skewed since the statistic is based on self-report measures (ANRED, 2006). Overall, ANRED reported that one percent of female adolescents have anorexia and another four percent have bulimia.

Historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg (2000) traced the prevalence of anorexia nervosa, or what used to be known as “the fasting disease” from its roots in sainthood and patienthood. She described the transition from secularization to medicalization, in which the valor and celebrity status awarded anorectics of medieval Europe and Victorian times, considered miracle workers for subsisting on so little food, were replaced in 1870, when anorexia nervosa was officially named. Doctors pointed to maladjustment to industrialization and new middle-class life as a major factor in the increase of anorexia in young women, who mostly resided in Western Europe and the United States. But as the twenty-first century approached, so did an increase in anorexia in Japanese women. Brumberg cited media institutions, celebrity worship, and makeover culture in general as a correlation of the increase of the disease in modern times. However, she was very careful to not blame the media. Rather, she noticed a shift in women today, whereby as beauty becomes more of a commodity, with the body eclipsing the face as the true marker of beauty in the twentieth century, women are more willing than ever to suffer physically to achieve bodily perfection. Anorexia and its control over the physical and the mental is a form of power in an increasingly powerless world.

The descriptions offered by the women of my study of Paula as weak and crazy, as well as Julie’s discussion of the “bizarre” girl who ate cotton balls to keep her stomach full and Elizabeth’s belief that the motives behind her friend’s eating disorder were “100
"percent for a boy" were commonplace and in line with the pre-Princess Diana popular press discussion of eating disorders that constitutes young women’s double burden (Saukko, 2006). Saukko compared press coverage of the pop star Karen Carpenter, who died due to anorexic complications in 1983, with coverage of Princess Diana, who came out publicly with her battle with bulimia in 1995, two years before her untimely death in a car crash while being chased frantically by the paparazzi. Saukko found that in the case of Reagan-era Carpenter, the female body was looked to as a “bounded fortress” (p. 166), where first the burden of perfection often brings young women to extreme cycles of starvation, dieting, or binging and purging. Second, these women become damaged goods who bear the societal burden of the results of excess and essentially are victims who cannot take care of themselves.

However, Saukko argued that the press’ betrothal of empowerment to Princess Di for speaking out about her illness represented a political shift, where bodies are now more pliable and fluid. Analysis of public discourse about a corporeal issue like eating disorders stresses the power of social structures on norms:

The analysis of news discourses about Karen Carpenter and Princess Diana draws attention to how not only media images of thinness but also media representations of eating disorders legitimate the same gendered structural contradictions that interlace women’s problematic relationships with body, self, and achievement. (p. 167)

The above statement could not ring more true in the age of reality TV and surveillance, with cameras providing 24-hour coverage of women’s bodies. However, I already see a
shift in the political climate Saukko described. While her observations may be appropriate for the political time that Di’s press coverage occurred—the Clintonesque, post-Reagan, but pre-Bush II era—and as much as I have stressed the fluid nature of bodies in this dissertation, the discussions I had with the women of this study has made me recognize exactly how far off base public discourse is regarding the current state of eating disorders.

With their stories of the pressures that drive Hollywood starlets such as Lindsey Lohan and Mary-Beth Olsen to anorexia or bulimia, magazines, entertainment news, and the Internet have saturated young women about the dangers of eating disorders. According to Brumberg (2000), hedonism and discipline coexist when it comes to the body. Women know it is “wrong” to abuse their bodies in such a way, but the popular press has again victimized these so-called sufferers of eating disorders as it simultaneously plasters their overly thin physiques in poses of partying and the glamorous life on their covers and lead stories. As such, the women are uncomfortable with any “real” critique offered by the cameras of reality television. At the same time, the women also recognize that younger girls, who have not endured as many years of media representation of the disease, are prime candidates for learning about anorexia on programs like The Real World. In her groundbreaking study of feminism and the body in Western culture, Unbearable Weight, Susan Bordo (1993) explained that images of the body are never just images. Images of thinness and beauty serve a normalizing function, but they can also serve as a lesson to young women. However, Bordo argued that young
women are tired of being preached to, whether by the media, their teachers, their families, or their peers, about the problems of eating disorders.

I want to make clear that I believe strongly that anorexia and bulimia are illnesses that must be treated in the appropriate psychotherapeutic and/or medical ways. However, until the popular media releases the victimhood stereotype, I do not see an improvement in young women’s lives, which means that women, including future Real World roommates, are sure to continue to fight the same uphill battle with poor body image in a never ending cycle. What does it mean that college women, who professed here to understanding the ubiquity of eating disorders and often dealing personally with them, are so uncomfortable watching the disease unfold on one of their favorite television programs? I believe that it has become too much. The women of my study view women in their late teens and early twenties as insecure beings inundated by media images of airbrushed celebrity perfection. The corporeal today is a self-monitored body but also an other-monitored body. The functions of Bentham’s panopticon, the all-seeing, ever-present eye are shared by the self, the camera, and society to assist in shaping young women’s bodies and their relations to bodies on television and other media forms. They watch themselves and are being watched constantly. The women may have attested to the reality of eating disorders but would rather these narratives escape close scrutiny on The Real World, which they turn to for entertainment and a release from the pressures of school and work.
The Heteronormative Body

Sadly, a normalization of portrayals of eating disorders and true body conflicts is not the only way hybrid media forms have encouraged another normalization—that of responses to sexual bodies. Katie’s story about her experience of bicurious behavior in chapter five was the rare exception of the women of this study describing the phenomenon of heteroflexibility. In my casual observations of bar behavior and inundation of television advertisements for *Girls Gone Wild*, I expected more of the women to be open about their experiences in this realm. However, this assumption was packed with its own assumption that the women were actually participating in these behaviors. Just as the cameras of reality television and hybrid media are misleading, the very nature of research that relies on self-disclosure does not afford a privilege of knowing the “truth.” I will never know what information the women of my study chose not to share. The larger issue at hand is not the truth—for as Foucault (1977 and 1978) reminds us, the truth only leads to more constraints—nor participants’ real world behaviors. Rather it is their perceptions of those behaviors onscreen, for as revealed by the textual and audience analyses here, any possibility of women’s sexual behavior outside the heterosexual norm was either looked to as a means of seeking attention or a drunken mistake.

As reported by researchers at the University of Michigan’s Substance Abuse Research Center, college students are drinking less and more at the same time in that the percentage of students abstaining from drinking has increased simultaneously as the percentage of binge drinking has increased on college campus, especially among women
(Young, Morales, Esteban McCabe, Boyd & D’Arcy, 2005). The most common descriptor the young women shared with the researchers was binging on alcohol to “drink like a guy” (p. 255). The women spoke of trying to fit into coed peer groups, but Young et al. questioned whether the motive was drinking like a guy or drinking to be liked by a guy as a way of college women using alcohol and sexuality to reinforce their heterosexuality.

The rhetoric of defining drinking behavior along gender lines is problematic for a number of reasons. Young women’s desire to drink as much as men to fit in or impress them ignores the physiological differences in women’s and men’s body size and metabolic functions. When women try to “keep up” with their male peers, they are more likely to suffer bodily harm, including alcohol poisoning or sexual assault (Young et al., 2005). I stress here that I am not placing the burden of safe alcohol consumption solely on women, nor does that mean that men should have the burden of looking after their female friends. Rather, I question the social context by which young women feel such pressure to use alcohol and, in turn, their bodies to achieve in-group status.

While I trust the Real World producers’ assertions that they do not directly ask roommates to behave in certain ways, Mark Raudonis’ example of Girls Gone Wild does raise questions about the “moral” case he made regarding drinking policies, and whether or not the producers’ strict no interference policies (except in rare cases described in earlier chapters) might act as their own form of encouragement without consequences.

As Alexandra Robbins (2004) shared in Pledged, her in-depth look at sorority life, sorority sisters’ views on female sexuality are a double bind of first projecting a virginal,
pure image amidst current negative press of sorority life, such as binge drinking and hazing, and second succumbing to the pressure of being down, or fun, girls who form sexual kinships with brother fraternities. This “sexual double standard,” as explained by Wright (2003, p. 141), reflects the contradictions of the expectation of sorority sisters to enact a form of “perfect womanhood” at the same time as engaging in party and sexual activities. Further, the sexual bodies encouraged by sororities are strictly heterosexual.

The University Michigan study by Young and colleagues (2005) noted the perceived in-group status attained by women who consumed alcohol in similar, binge patterns as their male peers/potential hook-ups as a marker not of equality with the men but of heterosexuality.

As Ariel Levy (2006) explained in *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*:

Proof that a woman actively *seeks* approval is a crucial criterion for hotness in the first place. For women and only women, hotness requires projecting a kind of eagerness, offering a promise that any attention you receive for your physicality is welcome…Proving that you are hot, worthy of lust, and—necessarily—that you seek to provoke lust is still exclusively women’s work. (p. 33).

As a third-wave feminist, Levy’s argument rings all too true. I have been raised to appreciate the hard work of women before me to improve the rights and choices of women, locally, nationally, and globally. While conceptualizing, researching, and now writing this dissertation, I have struggled with this notion of choice—that women can and in large numbers do choose to use their bodies for attention—as another form of a double
bind. Women have made a space to be sexy and to be looked at, but we are consistently reminded to frown upon this type of *Girls Gone Wild* behavior, as it gives women a bad name. In my interviews, most of the women concurred with this sentiment. They looked to the overexposed women of *The Real World* as encouragement for how not to behave. These reminders come from parents, peers, educators, and powerful media institutions.

At the same time that the porno-ization of American culture—especially on the small screen of reality TV—has increased, critics in the entertainment news business—from the *New York Times* to *Entertainment Tonight*—participate in the exploitation of bodies as much as the creative directors, cast members, and viewers of hybrid media forms.

According to Sloop (2004), ideologically constrained portrayals of gender and sexuality demand cultural criticism in order to, in the least, call attention to these limitations, but especially to “encourage a de-literalization and de-naturalization of gender and sexual categories” (p. 13). My work has been, on one level, to begin unpacking assumptions in the loaded bodies of reality TV as conduits of sexualized norms because, as I elaborate on next, viewers can and do look past the constructed nature of reality television to see the genre as a very “real” form of mediated communication.

The Real Body

As articulated in chapter six, life in *The Real World* house is comparable to college life for *Real World* viewers. The cast members’ discovering the selected location’s hotspots and getting to know roommates equates to students learning their way around campus and meeting fellow classmates and dorm dwellers. New and exciting at
first, the shine wears off quickly. Pending responsibilities weigh in, which the women cited as a major reason they do not view *The Real World* as much during the school year as when it airs in the summer. However, many of their references to growing up with the show demonstrate the importance of *The Real World* as a socialization tool. When they viewed the show prior to being in college they saw the older teens and twentysomethings of *The Real World* as leading exciting lives the viewers themselves would like to achieve. In addition, the women spoke of being intrigued by how *The Real World* brought together all walks of life—Black, White, gay, straight.

While young women, as the primary audience of the longest running reality program ever, have been trained in the “language of reality TV” (Ouellette and Murray, 2004) they have actually participated in what Burke has termed a “trained incapacity” in culture and communicative life. Viewing reality TV has become second nature and therefore normalized. Viewers know how to identify the “crazy” one, the “slut,” and so on, but often do little to look deeper at what it means to have these types of bodies presented over and over again. “Oh that’s just the way it is. It sucks, but what can we do?” I heard in one form or another from multiple women. Despite the women’s juxtaposition of the real with the female cast members, the implication is still, “Why question what is onscreen when we are just viewing to escape our daily lives?”

Bordo’s (1999) argument that young women today have been trained to see dysfunction, and defective bodies especially, offers one explanation. In her analysis of the increase in advertisements for plastic surgery and face-transforming cosmetic creams and peels, Bordo noted, “If you are trained to see defect, you will” (p. 57). As a viewing
audience, fans of programs like *The Real World* have come to expect and eventually enjoy the exploitation of female bodies, whether as crazy, confused, slutty, or hungry. It is important to note that longtime viewers, while privy to the stylized production and commercial construction of reality programming, were not always so aware. Those viewers who began watching in middle school and early high school, before the presence of media literacy components appear in most curricula, began linking young adult life with excessive drinking and sparse responsibilities. *The Real World* appears to have appealed to female viewers mostly through these elements of escapism and the daily drama of potential romantic or sexual relationships. But while those seemingly mundane, escapist narratives unfolded, larger issues of bodies in crisis were going mostly under the radar until recently. Evidenced by the women of my study, including responses from *The Real World*’s longtime casting director, Sasha Alpert, young women are perhaps more insecure than ever before. The camera only heightens the already established pressures and insecurities on young women today.

Nonetheless, the actual presence of the cameras on hybrid television should not be considered lightly. The cameras of *The Real World*, while occupying a secondary role in the panoptical process, are mostly operated at the hands of white males employed by Bunim/Murray Productions for the very powerful Viacom Corporation. It should not be surprising that *The Real World*’s shift away from empathy of race politics and sexual difference toward onscreen behaviors of heavy drinking and “hooking up” coincided with the success of the *Girls Gone Wild* franchise. If as feminist media scholars, we ignored the obvious gendered and raced implications of the creative control of popular cultural
texts, then we would only be doing ourselves, our students, and the discipline a disservice. I do not mean to imply that audiences of reality TV of *The Real World* sort are passive, manipulated viewers ignorant to the gendered and raced biases inherent in the genre. They are just the opposite—intelligent, observant, and participatory. The genre of hybrid television in fact *demands* active viewers to engage in the visual discourse of this new media form.

The women of my study have essentially been raised on reality programming. They know the roles the cast members take on and recognize the conventions of constructing narratives from thousands of hours of footage. They get it. However, while hybrid viewers do question the context of and motives behind the production process, my fear is that the real problem is that they do not question their own roles in the continuation of the stereotypes of young women they spoke of to me. This is where the macrostructures of hybrid television production are at play. The political economy study of media encourages investigation of production processes and media artifacts to better understand the influence of capital on the cultural (Meehan, Mosco & Wasko, 1993). The proliferation of beautiful, troubled women who make out with each other for the benefit of men and the camera on reality TV and *Girls Gone Wild* has contributed to a normalization of certain sexual identities and behaviors—namely the heterosexed, damaged body. The corporate entities that produce these programs are balancing a fine line between the real and the fabricated, which I elaborate on in the final section.
A Final Note on the Intersection of Reality TV, Young Women, and Popular Culture

Sometimes narratives of young adulthood on reality TV can become too “real,” as in the case of Paula’s eating disorder, and cause discomfort in their viewers. When this happens, viewers now have more options than ever before to escape into fantasy worlds of celebrity gossip and virtual identities. In an ironic twist, the viewers who chose not to deal with *The Real World*’s offering of an honest, though admittedly glossed over, portrayal of the body, were treated to the celebrity media’s menu of women in crisis—featuring Britney Spears and Lindsey Lohan as the main damsels in distress and Anna Nicole Smith as its fatal victim. As I write this, the paparazzi have engorged themselves on Spears’ most recent public crisis. On the homepage for Gallery of the Absurd, a site devoted to “artistic” interpretations of public figures and stars, the head of a newly bald Spears is imposed on the body of the cleaning product marketing character of Mr. Clean above the following words: “Ms. Crazy. She’ll do anything for attention” (Gallery of the Absurd, 2007). It appears it is easier to participate in viewing the public pain of celebrities rather than witness the implosion of people “just like us.” Scholars such as Hermes (1999) and Littler (2004) have examined the pleasure women receive from reading about the poor choices made by or problems of celebrities in gossip magazines. In 2007, however, reality TV has made the average citizen famous, complicating audiences’ relationship to consuming others’ pain.

Holmes and Redmond (2006) have argued that celebrity bodies function in two major ways. The first is a hegemonic role of reproducing the “dominant culture’s patriarchal, racial and heterosexual gaze,” while the second is a role of transgression and
opposition (p. 4). Reality television, with its promise of the democratization of fame and celebrity (Holmes & Redmond, 2006; Jenkins, 2006), functions in similar ways regarding bodies. Here *The Real World* and celebrity news have turned the camera on so-called crazy and attention-seeking behaviors of young women in America today. Discourse of women in crisis across media genres has brought us a scholarly crisis across multiple disciplines. As much as the current generation is aware of the touched up nature of celebrity and the produced element of the reality TV star, the most important question scholars should be asking is not, “How do audiences distinguish between the real and the fabricated?” but rather, “Does the real even matter anymore?” The images are there. The stories are there. What can we do about them?

Future studies should investigate the conflation of realism across media genres, but especially reality TV and online content. With blogs built around tracking reality TV—and media in general—fan sites centered on writing their own narratives of television programs, and online user-created content modeled after *Real World* video narrative techniques, scholars must be creative in assessing realism and learning. Research on convergence and media education may be the most helpful in advancing theories of audience relationship to media texts. According to Jenkins (2006), not only understanding media production conventions but also how users create and participate in media texts through new technologies gives us many possibilities in evaluating a generation actively engaged as consumers and citizens of media texts in a commercial world. I hope through this dissertation I have contributed to laying a foundation for what constitutes the real in at least one genre of new media culture. Most importantly,
however, I hope that media scholars and feminist scholars alike can look to the work here as evidence for the need for more projects that link the two camps and to move beyond defining the real toward theoretical issues implicated by material bodies. The commodity construction of bodies in hybrid media forms, from the Internet to reality TV, demand critical engagement across disciplines. Looking to bodies instead of gender, race, and sexuality as separate categories is but one way of working toward the feminist media project.

The next step is to weave these layers of the body into cultural narratives beyond the classroom and the ivory tower of academia. According to Japp (2005):

As narrative connects to narrative, as personal and public, moral and ideological elements are intertwined, each representation continues to live on as various interpretations, interests, and uses layer onto it and comprise the larger environment in which the original representation is embedded. (p. 58)

Cultural studies may tell us that interpretations of cultural mediated expression are polysemic (Fiske, 1987), but the constrained political and economic foundations of mass media outlets bind infinite expression to normalized ideals of beauty, of sex, of the real. The possibilities for academic contributions to the personal and public productions of knowledge of bodies should not be so limited. The interrogation of the production practices of the company behind *The Real World*, though small in scale, is a start. Although here I must stress the problems inherent in the type of production research advocated by a number of feminist media scholars (van Zoonen 1994; Riordan & Meehan, 2002). Inspired by the handful of analyses that had included both production
and audience research, such as Radway (1984) did with romance novels and D’Acci (1994) with *Cagney and Lacey*, I had hoped to do the same with the popular reality TV genre. Following the model articulated by Levine (2001) for soap opera production, I thought that by interviewing decision-makers on *The Real World* and seeing their production facilities, I would be able to offer a better understanding of the way bodies are produced in hybrid media. While my experiences with the Bunim/Murray producers and vice presidents were very helpful and provided insight I would not have had with a standard textual, audience study, not attaining access to an actual taping site of a *Real World* season limited the production scope of the study.

On the other hand, the macro-structures and micro-practices of production happen simultaneously within a larger schema of cultural production that extends beyond the daily routines of creating a reality TV program. Television producers are, in a sense, politicians, who will only share information along the party line. Some creative directors were more forthcoming than others in this study, but much of this was privileged information only told to me on the condition I would not publish it. As much as feminist media scholars have called for production research, there is a reason we see it so rarely. However, we can use these limitations to encourage linkages across disciplines. Political economy and critical rhetoric both question power structures. With the body as the flashpoint we can examine production and reception simultaneously and continue to build a space for critical scholarship on how bodies become gendered, sexed, raced, and damaged. In closing, then, communication scholars need to be creative in how we engage media texts, audiences, and institutions.
References

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Appendix A: Interview Guide for Viewers

How long have you been viewing *Real World*?

Describe for me what it is like to watch *The Real World*?

How would you describe the women you have seen on the show?

And the men?

How does *Real World* compare to your life?

What seasons stand out more than others?

What, if any, changes have you noticed throughout the time you’ve been watching?

What do you like about the show?

What do you dislike about it?

What factors influenced you to watch?

Which happenings seemed most real and why?

Which ones seemed outrageous?

Elaborate on anything you think you have learned from the show?

What influence, if any, do you think *The Real World* has had on your life?

Who do you usually watch with?

Is there anything else you would like to add?
Appendix B: Interview Guides for Creative Directors
(modified based on position)

Can you describe, if any, different institutional constraints that exist in reality television compared to other formats you have worked in?

What specifically do you look for in casting (editing, story development)?

What ground rules do you have for casting (personality quirks, behaviors, lifestyles)?

How has the casting (editing, story development) process changed over the years?

How many applicants do you have?

A large portion of the audience seems to be younger than the actual ages of the roommates. Do you take this into account when making casting (story, production, editing) decisions?

What were your expectations in casting Paula?

A major focus this season has been on Paula’s struggle with an eating disorder. Other seasons featured eating disorders. Why do you it became such a focus this time?

How do you gauge viewers’ tastes, what they are willing to invest their time in?

What makes a story appealing on The Real World?

Please guide me through the process of creating a story from thousands of hours of footage?

What age group do you have in mind when putting stories together?

Has there been a time when you had certain stories lined up but saw the audience was not responding as well as you thought? If so, how did you make changes?

What about stories you hoped would develop but did not?

Have there been stories that developed that you deemed off limits for MTV viewers?

How do you respond to viewers’ descriptions of similar character types over the years?

What’s next for The Real World?

Do you have anything else to add? Questions for me?
### Appendix C: Real World Key West Episode Guide

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Original airdate in 2006</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Welcome to Key West</td>
<td>February 28</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Roommate Anxiety</td>
<td>February 28</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Club Hoppin’</td>
<td>March 7</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Svetlana’s Tough Times</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Troubled Waters</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>No Friends of Mine</td>
<td>March 28</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Zach Steps It Up</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>John’s Got Game</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>John and Paula’s Fight</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Gettin’ Stormy</td>
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<td>Clarification</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Tyler’s Night of Fun</td>
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<td>The Burn Book</td>
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<td>Zach’s Girl Trouble</td>
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<td>Wake of the Storm</td>
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<td>Spanish Getaway</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>Jose Gets Stranded</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
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<td>Regaining the Pace</td>
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<td>Svetlana’s Birthday</td>
<td>August 8</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Time To Say Goodbye</td>
<td>August 15</td>
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Appendix D: Descriptions of Male Roommates of Real World Key West

The descriptions below come from segments of the casting tapes and interviews provided in the Key West casting special. Roommates ages are those when taping began.

**Jose**, 20, from Tallahassee
Jose calls himself a “welfare baby” who had a tough life being raised by a single mom. He is of Puerto Rican descent and grew up in Brooklyn but moved to Florida around the start of college. He declares he has turned his life around and recently purchased a new home and his first investment property. We see him standing in front of his new house next to his new Camaro, which is next to his investment property—another house. He says he has no girlfriend and that he is an “ass man” and enters his boxer into dog show tournaments.

**John**, 22, from California
John says he is into sports. We see him speaking in front of a black and white poster of a half-naked woman. Her back faces the camera. One hand is on her waist. The other is pulling her jeans down to expose the top of her buttocks. A football sits on the desk beside John. Next he is dressed in a Scooby-Doo costume on his college campus catching a Frisbee. He says he is a “player” and has been in love once. About women he says, “Guys lose a lot of respect of them if they give it up on the first night.” He says he’s looking for time to unwind and relax after 18 years of schooling.

**Zach**, 22, from Seattle
Zach identifies his parents as his best friends. He is Jewish. We see him play tennis then acknowledge that he struggles with his weight. He somewhat brags about being a virgin until recently, when he had sex with four girls in the past four months—one time with each girl. He says he does not like drinking or smoking but that he stays energized when going out by drinking Red Bull.

**Tyler**, 23, from Minneapolis
Tyler tells the camera, “I’m good looking. I have a great body. I’m very intelligent.” He says he loves gossip and dancing. We see him practice his high-kicking, which he entered a competition for at one time. He is gay and says, “I am obsessed with Michelle Kwan.” He tells us his friends have identified his personality flaws as “malicious, cold-hearted and manipulative.”