

# THIS IS A TRUE STORY ABOUT A TRUE STORY: THE NEW *REAL WORLD*

Laurie Ouellette

At the close of the debut season of *The Real World* (1992–2017, MTV), the subjects of the reality series demand access to the control room. Eventually, the production crew unbolts the door and exposes the apparatus of a new kind of television in the making. The strangers picked by MTV to live in a New York City loft and have their lives taped 24/7 are astounded to see a clip of themselves on dozens of video monitors connected to surveillance cameras in the living space and the live feeds of camera operators who are recording the scene while production assistants log the footage in real time. Three decades later, the now middle-aged roommates are back at the same loft, watching and discussing this clip and others from the 1992 season for *The Real World Homecoming* (2021–), a new reality series on Paramount+ that reunites early *Real World* cast members. *Homecoming* restages the original to address “unfinished business” and reveal what the people who “paved the way for modern reality TV” learned from the experience.<sup>1</sup> The curtain is hard to pull back on this “true story about a true story,” as it incorporates reflexivity’s slipperier ways and shows how intertwined the content industries and ordinary people have become.

Why revisit the first *Real World* now? Born of the merger of CBS, Paramount Pictures, and Viacom (the parent company of MTV), Paramount+ launched in March 2021 with content drawn mainly from the archives of those media companies and original programming skewed toward reboots and spin-offs. *Homecoming* was released the same month, bundled with decades-old seasons of *The Real World* offered on demand in their entirety. This was clearly nostalgia bait for a generation that came of age with *The Real World* and remembers what a big deal it was then. I had zero interest in another streaming service, but as someone

who had watched the 1992 season with rapt attention in my twenties (on a thirteen-inch analog TV set!), I pulled out a credit card immediately.

*Homecoming* was also timed to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of *The Real World*. In the opening episode, the reunited cast members (seemingly prompted by producers) repeatedly praise *The Real World* as a TV milestone and refer to themselves often as reality pioneers. At one point, cocreator Jonathan Murray makes a surprise visit to the loft to reminisce about inventing reality television “on the fly.” The tribute to *The Real World* continued in news stories, cast interviews, aftershows, and adjacent retrospectives including *For Real: The Story of Reality TV* (2021, E!), a docuseries that also looks back on the series and staged its own minireunion of the 1992 cast, during which host Andy Cohen of Bravo fame, who is around my age, got tears in his eyes.<sup>2</sup>

*The Real World* is iconic—but it wasn’t exactly first. Real people have been used as content in US television programs since the beginning of the medium, from *Candid Camera* (1948–67, ABC, NBC, CBS, and syndication) to *An American Family* (1973, PBS). European public broadcasters also experimented with unscripted entertainment. *Nummer 28* (1991, KRO), a Dutch reality series that followed a group of unacquainted university students brought together in a house, actually predated the debut of *The Real World* by a year. Propelled to watercooler status by MTV’s promotional machine, *The Real World* is a similar concept in a more contrived and commodified form.

According to the origin story, a soap-opera executive and a documentary producer joined forces and pitched an idea to MTV. Bunim-Murray Productions originally conceived a fictional prime-time soap about twentysomethings but switched gears when the network balked at the cost. Soliciting volunteers on Craigslist, they piloted an unscripted version, and the network ran with it. The participants were recorded inside the loft and followed by the crew when they left. Hundreds of hours of footage were packaged as thirteen twenty-two-minute episodes, each

*Film Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 2, pp. 88–92. ISSN: 0015-1386 electronic ISSN: 1533-8630 © 2022 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2022.76.2.88

with A and B story lines interspersed with taped “confessionals” (minus the prompts) in which individual cast members shared perceptions of happenings and skirmishes. The first episode of *The Real World* aired on May 21, 1992, launching a signature MTV program refreshed by a new cast every season for twenty-five years.

*The Real World* was canceled in 2017 without fanfare. Ratings were declining as reality saturated television, and MTV cast its lens on such niche populations as real teen moms and Jersey Shore vacationers. It migrated to Facebook Watch for a season but was not renewed. Now Paramount+ is revitalizing the franchise for a middle-aged demographic wistful about the pop culture of the past, including a first-generation reality show that feels rawer than the *Real Housewives* or *Kardashian* franchises.

*Homecoming* is a lot slicker than the earliest seasons of *The Real World*, with its low-definition video, shaky camera, weird angles, natural lighting, and muddled sound. As one reviewer put it, the reunion is shot like generic cable reality while the original conjures reality television 1.0. My students sometimes laugh when I show them clips because these conventions read as dated and no longer signify authenticity to them. Truth claims seem less important in

reality television now, perhaps because viewers assume the shows are performative and stage-managed.

Still, the content industries continue to look for markers of authenticity when it can be used as a selling point. For me as a targeted middle-aged viewer, the naiveté of the cast in 1992, which had never seen anything like *The Real World* and was untrained in the ways of reality television, still comes across as genuine. Their visibly aged faces and bodies on *Homecoming* also resonate as evidence of social life outside the control of a television production.

*Homecoming* reboots *The Real World* with a longitudinal twist. The enigma is not so much what happens when people from diverse backgrounds “stop being polite and start getting real,” but rather where are they now and how have they changed. In this respect, *Homecoming* bears some resemblance to the famous *Up* series of documentaries (1964, ITV; 1970, ITV; 1977, ITV; 1984, ITV; 1991, ITV; 1998, BBC One; 2005, ITV; 2012, ITV; 2019, ITV), in which director Michael Apted follows the same group of fourteen British children from different socioeconomic backgrounds from the time they are seven years old until they are in their sixties. Spaced seven years apart, each installment of *Up* combines previous observational



The middle-aged roommates of *The Real World Homecoming*.

footage and interviews with updated material to trace life trajectories over time.<sup>3</sup>

*Homecoming* also revisits the subjects of an earlier TV production, but unlike the *Up* series, it places *The Real World* itself at the center of the inquiry. This is not a sociological account of lived biography or an examination of mediated personhood. *Homecoming* revisits the original cast of *The Real World* to produce value from a dormant brand.

In the opening episode of *Homecoming*, footage of the roommates arriving back at the loft is juxtaposed with similar scenes from 1992, establishing a logic of comparison and contrast that propels the narrative. Clips from the original season are continually interspersed with new observational sequences and confessionals. Ambient B-roll of participants (walking in New York, riding in taxi cabs, exiting the Prince Street subway station) is reshot and shown side by side with the reference material. “Never before seen” footage from 1992 is also used as bonus content and backstory. This show-within-a-show framework codifies *The Real World* as the model for observing the maturation of real people who are also TV characters.

*Homecoming* draws from its own archive to revive the authenticity and relevance ascribed to *The Real World* when it was new. In the context of Rodney King, Anita Hill, the AIDS epidemic, and other struggles that mattered to young people, *The Real World* was billed as more than an unscripted soap opera. It was presented as a social experiment captured on tape from which could be learned what happens when people of different genders, races, sexual identities, religions, political beliefs, and geographical regions come together under the same roof. Social science was evoked to justify the artificiality of the setup and advance *The Real World* as a contribution to the smooth operation of liberal democracy.

Anna McCarthy has traced the televisual appropriation of social science to midcentury experiments on human subjects that used deception and theatricality to reveal human nature for the public good, including Stanley Milgram’s studies of obedience and the Stanford Prison Experiment.<sup>4</sup> While *The Real World* would eventually devolve into a spectacle of drunken brawls and late-night hot-tub hookups, MTV initially said that placing people recruited for a TV show under the microscope could encourage tolerance, understanding, and personal growth.<sup>5</sup>

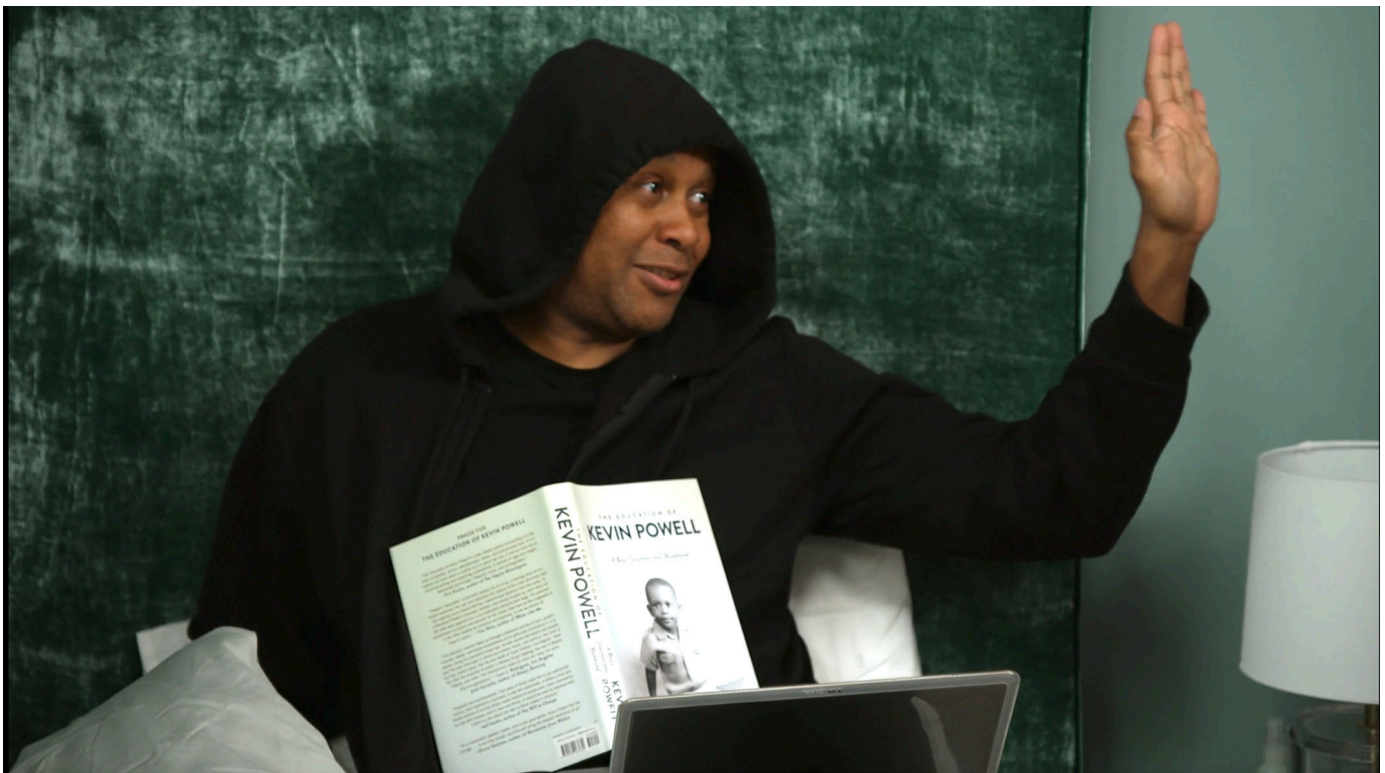
*Homecoming* restages the experiment on the original subjects to determine what has changed in the interim, with a focus on the attitudes and behaviors of the returning cast members but with history and structure edited out as variables. To stir the pot, “incoming messages” are transmitted on a supersized TV set, cueing the roommates

to watch and discuss particular clips from the 1992 season. The clips emphasize conflicts and prompt the roommates to reflect on their conduct, explain themselves, apologize for prior behavior, and demonstrate how they have grown and evolved. This plays as a technology of the self in reverse, with the roommates reflecting on their prior selves as mediated by *The Real World*.<sup>6</sup> Reality television’s own role in the politics of civility and governance is the elephant in the room.<sup>7</sup> Although the reunion episode was taped the same week that white-nationalist Trump supporters were storming the Capitol, there is no discussion of this on *Homecoming*, just one passing reference to the reality-TV president.

*Homecoming* does feature conversations about racism because race was a contested topic on *The Real World* in 1992 and was evoked to signal the program’s authenticity and relevance. Scholars have shown how the ostensibly unscripted program drew from stereotypes of blackness and displaced the structural basis of racialized oppression onto a few ignorant but mostly redeemable white individuals.<sup>8</sup> While all of the participants were typecast and shaped into familiar characters through editing, Kevin, a Black journalist and poet, was depicted as angry and possibly violent. Kevin is mostly shown arguing about racism with his white roommates. When, in the episode titled “Julie Thinks Kevin Is Psycho,” he is accused of cursing and hurling a candlestick at a white female roommate—during an argument over the telephone that MTV did not include—he is shot in extreme close-up while menacing music plays and the camera lingers on a Malcolm X poster.

I expected *Homecoming* to replay this fight, but it did not, perhaps because Julie, who was cast as a naive girl-next-door type, is still presented as a likable character. Instead, the cast members (and by extension the new audience) are shown a dispute between Kevin and Becky, who is also white. In this scene, Kevin protests Becky’s view of the United States as a land of opportunity and attempts to explain how white privilege works. When Becky questions his analysis, both become frustrated, and Kevin calls her a racist. In the present, Kevin, who seems very aware of how he might be edited, speaks quietly as he elaborates on the point he was making. He also admits that he was sexist at the time, which he says he is sorry for and has since overcome.

While most cast members admit that Kevin was right about racism and attempt to signal their own wokeness now, Becky continually interrupts Kevin, disputing his insights and contending that she doesn’t “see color.” She comes across as a Karen in today’s terminology, as noted by a roommate who tells her to “shut up” because he is



*Homecoming* cast member Kevin Powell with his latest book.

concerned about how she will appear on television. When Becky walks off the TV production in protest, the others process her problematic opinions and behavior, while observational footage of Becky boasting about her upscale lifestyle and making insensitive remarks is intercut to prove their point. A condensed version of these scenes is used in the episode recap and in promotional teasers.

The drama around Becky dominates *Homecoming* and overshadows Kevin's attempt to use the reunion as a platform for racial critique. The narrative focus on revealing, evaluating, and processing the truth about Becky forecloses the possibility of any concern for racialized police violence, racial capitalism, and other issues that Kevin writes about. This allows the other white cast members, and by extension white viewers, to distance themselves from an unwoke character and disavow their own privilege and complicity in racial inequalities. Nonetheless, the story line enables *Homecoming* to be branded as socially conscious reality programming.

*The Real World* was not built for critique, and much less so the reboot. At its core, reality television is a mode of production that uses real people to manufacture content for a cultural marketplace. In 2011, the *Village Voice* obtained the thirty-page contract all Real Worlders had to sign, which, among other things, granted the production “blanket rights” to their “entire stories” and the ability to portray

them in a “disparaging,” “embarrassing,” and “false light.” The contract further clarified that participants whose characters lived on in reruns and on-demand episodes would never receive additional compensation or residuals.<sup>9</sup> In exchange, reality television provided a platform for cultural visibility and self-enterprise—a potential (but unlikely) route to minor celebrity, influencer status, a stint on another reality show, or perhaps a product deal.<sup>10</sup>

This circuitry was not in place in 1992, but Kevin acknowledges the rules of the game now by placing the books he has authored around the loft for publicity. In one scene, he is reading his latest, *The Education of Kevin Powell: A Boy's Journey into Manhood* (2016), held high for the camera, while lounging in bed.<sup>11</sup> In the same episode, Norman, an artist, confesses that he has fallen on hard times. During the pandemic, work dried up and he lost his home. Down to his last dollars, Norman needs cash to move his belongings to his hometown, where he works in a bakery. The cast members respond in a story line that they know will double as visibility for Norman's artwork. They purchase art supplies, photograph his paintings on their phones, and develop a game plan to use Norman's social-media accounts as a self-branding platform.

In 1992, the Internet was in its infancy and social media didn't exist, but today these digital platforms are

interactive extensions of the new *Real World*.<sup>12</sup> Outside the diegesis of the program, the cast members gained visibility on platforms like Twitter and Instagram, where they also promoted *Homecoming*—a form of cast labor that is now common. I searched these curated posts for critical reflection on the production of unscripted entertainment from life but found nothing, probably because this use of social media is contractually forbidden.

Those who encountered the debut season of *The Real World* as mere audiences were also invited to take part in the digital overflow. My own social-media feeds were filled with memories of the original experience and opinions about the subjects of *Homecoming* as real people and TV characters all in one. This tactic may have generated community around *The Real World*, but it rarely questioned reality television's logics. Even when the Kevin/Becky redux went semiviral, *The Real World*'s complicity in racism was overshadowed as viewers generated priceless publicity for *Homecoming*—and, undoubtedly, new subscribers for Paramount+.

*Homecoming* has since reunited two more *Real World* casts, but I had already canceled my subscription to Paramount+. *Homecoming* tapped into the novelty of *The Real World* when it was new but ended up being just a variation on reality television as it exists now.

## Notes

1. All quotes regarding *Homecoming* are taken from the series and its promotional materials.
2. In full disclosure, I was one of a handful of academics interviewed for *For Real*. I discussed the cultural politics of reality television with a midlevel producer for several hours, resulting in an on-screen appearance so brief even I missed it on the first viewing.

3. Stella Bruzzi, *Seven Up* (London: British Film Institute, 2007).
4. Anna McCarthy and Allen Funt, "Stanley Milgram, and Me: Postwar Social Science and the First Wave of Reality TV," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 23–43.
5. For an analysis of later seasons of *The Real World*, see Amanda Ann Klein, *Millennials Killed the Video Star: MTV's Transition to Reality Programming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).
6. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972); Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).
7. Laurie Ouellette, "The Trump Show," *Television & New Media* 17, no. 7 (2016): 647–50.
8. Jon Kraszewski, "Country Hicks and Urban Cliques: Mediating Race, Reality, and Liberalism on MTV's *The Real World*," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 205–20.
9. Camille Doder, "We Have Obtained a Copy of MTV's Standard Real World Cast-Member Contract," *Village Voice*, August 1, 2011, [www.villagevoice.com/2011/08/01/we-have-obtained-a-copy-of-mtvs-standard-real-world-cast-member-contract/](http://www.villagevoice.com/2011/08/01/we-have-obtained-a-copy-of-mtvs-standard-real-world-cast-member-contract/).
10. Alison Hearn, "Insecure: Narratives and Economies of the Branded Self in Transformation Television," *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 22, no. 4 (2008): 495–504.
11. Kevin Powell, *The Education of Kevin Powell: A Boy's Journey into Manhood* (New York: Atria Books, 2016).
12. Mark Andrejevic, "When Everyone Has Their Own Reality Show," in *A Companion to Reality Television*, ed. Laurie Ouellette (Malden, NJ: Blackwell-Wiley, 2014), 40–56.