

# A vast wasteland

## What's so real about reality television?

THE N WORD

By Nsenga Burton

**R**eality television pretty much sucks. I often marvel at the types of reality shows that people will watch with absolutely no production value at all. *Big Brother* is a huge hit for CBS, but I cannot comprehend why anyone would watch a bunch of people in a house plot and scheme against each other just to win a lump sum of money that will never make up for the asinine amount of pain, suffering and humiliation.

MTV's *The Real World* started the reality phenomenon, and this runaway train will not stop. Each year, more and more shows are added to the lineups with titles that become more and more lame (*So You Think You Can Dance?*). When a show hits the air that is actually good — like *Project Runway* — networks run the idea into the ground by doing knock-off after knock-off. (*Make Me a Supermodel*, anyone?)

*Project Runway* began as a show that discovered undiscovered talent. It was cool to see someone from the middle of nowhere with little to no professional experience create cool fashions. Now the show features designers with copious amounts of experience vying for ... what exactly? What's so real about a show that pretends to discover talent but now showcases proven talent?

Even the "scandals" are lame. An *American Idol* contestant recorded an album before! A woman on *Flavor of Love* lied about being a contestant on another reality show! Mario Lopez was a dancer before he was a contestant on *Dancing with the Stars*! Someone may have an eating disorder on *America's Next Top Model*! Gasp and swoon — a model with an eating disorder, a dancer who knows how to dance, a liar on a show featuring gold diggers and a singer who made a CD. Shocking? Not quite.

Reality television is the farthest thing from reality. Can you possibly be looking for love on television? Maybe, but you're probably also chasing fame and fortune, which is why most of the unions do not end happily. They aren't based on anything real. Perhaps it is the fantasy that the average person can find love, lose ridiculous amounts of weight in ridiculous amounts of time, obtain a million dollars after outwitting

unwitting opponents, or become the belle or beau of the ball. Maybe it is not the reality at all that viewers seek, but the fantasy of the reality instead. Case in point: Bravo's series *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. Bravo and these women are clearly living in a fantasy world if they expect to pull off the idea that they are wealthy socialites in Atlanta.

This series started in Orange County and last season was filmed in New York City. In reality, really wealthy people, particularly those with "old money," would never participate in a reality show. Why? Discretion is one of the highest values that they embrace. Those who know, know. And those who do not know, don't need to know. The women on this show parade around throwing money everywhere, letting people know that they have it, and berating those who do not have it. What's funny about this particular show is that none of the women actually live in Atlanta ... i.e. OTP (inside the perimeter). They are OTP people (outside the perimeter) and obtained their wealth by marrying professional athletes. Wow. Is this the best that Bravo could do? How stereotypical and abhorrent it is to choose athletes as signifiers of wealth in a city filled with African-Americans who have accumulated wealth through business and entrepreneurial endeavors. But, I digress.

Maybe Bravo believes that this is the reality of black people in Atlanta. Maybe this is the reality that they want the viewer to believe. Although all of the shows were bogus, the Atlanta show is, bar none, the worst group of women assembled. Why? The reality is that these women are in no way, shape or form, socialites, even less so than the women on the other series. What makes it worse is that they don't seem to know this, which actually makes it hilarious and pathetic at the same time. The reality of the situation is that these women are being exposed as the pretenders that they are, which, in a subversive way, is quite real.

In 1961, FCC Chairman Newton Minow stated that television was a vast wasteland. I won't toss out an entire genre, but I will say that reality television is helping to prove him right almost 50 years later. Enough of this reality



