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Searching for that REAL Love:

A Black Feminist Exploration of Dark-Skinned Black Women's Experiences on Post-2020

Finding Love Reality TV

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in African American Studies

by

Njeri Makena Nyathira Waititu

2026

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2026

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Searching for that REAL Love:

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University of California, Los Angeles, 2026

Professor Caroline A. Streeter, Chair

From *Love is Blind* to every iteration of *Love Island*, Finding Love reality television is a ubiquitous and ever-expanding genre of televisual entertainment in a post-2020 world. None is more polarizing and captivating than the hit reality show *Love Island USA*. *Love Island USA* presents a veneer of a color-blind multiculturalist paradise that promises to be a free market for love, uninhabited by the social order of the world which it mimics. However, the presence of dark-skinned Black women presents a foil to this ruse. Audiences witness how dark-skinned Black women—who are seeking partnership and/or notoriety on these shows—face sanctioned and stylized embarrassment, degradation, or harassment. This maltreatment is then utilized as entertainment, thus increasing the show's popularity and profitability. This project analyzes seasons 6 and 7 of *Love Island USA* to question how misogynoir and anti-Blackness influence

how production constructs narratives about these dark-skinned Black women. Furthermore, this inquiry attempts to connect the rise of the show to US nationalist and imperialist aims that signal an instructive portrayal of how "good citizens" engage in mating rituals. Relying on Black feminist, queer, and critical scholarship to ground the work, I utilize pop culture analysis and personal narrative to help us better search for that REAL love.

The thesis of Njeri Makena Nyathira Waititu is approved.

Ugo F. Edu

Wendy Sung

Caroline A. Streeter, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2026

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There is a Kikuyu saying that says “*Ona ngima yumaga mûtuinĩ*” which translates to even ugali comes from flour. Even as we stand on our own, we are standing on the shoulders of those who came before us. Similarly, this thesis is a result of the community that supported me through its creation.

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Introduction: God Bless the Villa!

July of 2025 marked a significant summer for United States politics and for reality television. At that time, the highly anticipated seventh season of *Love Island USA* was airing, rivaling summer sports as America's new summer pastime. After the staggering success of its previous season, *Love Island USA* became a hot commodity. Mentioning the salacious summer show became a surefire way to galvanize big audiences. It was hard to escape the Villa that summer as notifications about different contestants polluted the news cycle, filled with the horrific actions of the Trump regime domestically and internationally.

On July 3rd, 2025, as announcements about the passage of Trump's "Big Beautiful Bill" began populating the newsfeed, my friends, S and R, and I prepared to attend a *Love Island USA* watch party hosted by Reality Bar. After the success of *Love Island USA* season 6, watch parties became more popular, allowing fans to watch new episodes together as they aired, transforming the reality show viewing experience into one akin to a national league sports game. Reality Bar, an LA-based reality watch party hosting organization, turned these watch parties into experiential events, giving them themes, specialized drink menus, and games and activities for patrons to engage in. Advertised as a speed-dating social and watch party, Reality Bar's 4th-of-July-themed gathering titled "God Bless the Villa" took place at the Godfrey Hotel Rooftop in Hollywood. S, R, and I arrived tardy with the express purpose of avoiding the impending awkward, self-aggrandizing conversations with other singles that had become synonymous with trying to find love in Los Angeles. To our surprise, the speed-dating festivities were in full swing; however, questions about jobs and how many kids one wishes to have were replaced by questions about whether we were "Team Taylor or Team Olandria". As my friends and I conducted our survey of the environment, we happened upon another Black patron with whom

we instantly struck up a conversation. Amidst spangled banner decorations and conversations about which couple actually has real chemistry, we expressed our concerns about the implications of Trump's bill and commiserated about how *we* needed to look out for one another. A bell rang, and it was time for the viewing to commence.

Season 7 of *Love Island USA* was in the thick of its turbulent fourth week of programming. My friends and I had our clear favorites: Michelle "Chelley" Bissainthe and Olandria Carthen, the two dark-skinned Black girls left in the Villa who, at this moment, were facing an influx of virulent racism by the broader social media fanbase. The hostility derived from the highly stylized cinematic feud the women were engaged in with Huda Mustafa, their Palestinian-American castmate. As usual, the viewing began with a recap of the previous episode. Tensions are high in the Villa as we meet our Islanders in the aftermath of a newly invented challenge called "Stand on Business". The "Stand on Business" challenge allowed each Islander a platform to share their candid opinions and grievances with their fellow contestants. During the challenge, Chelley and Huda were the most at odds, as Chelley felt Huda was not upholding the social contract of their friendship. Chelley asserted that if Huda was going to preach about being a "girls' girl," and stand for "girl code," then she needed to live up to those standards. What exactly is Huda evading accountability for?

Well, Chelley was referring to feeling undercut by some of Huda's actions with Islander Chris Seeley when the two returned from the show's famed Casa Amor challenge. Chris and Chelley were paired up during Casa Amor, and the two had chemistry. Simultaneously, Chelley had a strong connection with Islander Ace Greene before going to Casa Amor and worried she would jeopardize that longer connection for a rather short-lived one. When it was time for them to leave Casa, Huda approached Chelley with a solution to help them both: she would return with

Chris so Chelley could partner with Ace, allowing Chelley to explore both options in the Villa. Chelley went along with it despite her apparent discomfort and confusion. To add insult to injury, Chelley was not pleased with Huda's actions in a previous challenge, "Hearts on Fire," where Huda went too far while dancing on Chelley's partner, Ace.

Huda continued to obfuscate responsibility in both scenarios, claiming that she has always had Chelley's best interests at heart. Suddenly, in a show of kinship with Chelley, Olandria put a piece of Huda's business on blast, sharing with Chelley and the group that Huda had kissed Chris Seeley, which Huda had told Olandria in secret. Olandria's exposure of Huda's secret kiss sent the Island and viewing audiences alike into a frenzy. Instead of Olandria's solidarity with Chelley being seen as a show of friendship, or even as an act of radical candor, the production team framed the moment as a cold-blooded betrayal of Huda's trust, thus casting her as a bully in their narrative. Similarly, Chelley's rightful airing of her frustration with her friend Huda's behavior to her, during the challenge designed for that very action, was systematically edited to curate the narrative that she was targeting and bullying Huda.

In the duration of the "Stand on Business" challenge, Chelley and Olandria suddenly became malicious actors rather than sympathetic figures. Essentially, then, the Island's only dark-skinned Black women residents were turned into the villains, thus opening them up to the vitriol of the fans.

As the new episode began, S, R, and I witnessed just that. Patrons began booing and jeering every time Olandria and Chelley appeared on screen. Others whispered that Chelley was such a horrible person that she was "such a pick-me". Two white-presenting patrons sitting closest to the monitor consistently yelled in high-pitched, shrill voices throughout the episode: "You're such a bitch!" "Fuck you, bitch!" and "Shut the fuck up, bitch!" every time Chelley

appeared on the screen. About halfway through the episode, Chelley and Huda finally sat together by the dock of *Love Island USA*'s luxurious Fijian Villa to talk through their grievances. Just then, a patron seated in front of us yelled, "Too late, bitch!" prompting others to cheer them on. Even as the secret-spilling situation between Olandria and Huda was resolved, the virulent attacks continued. All S, R, and I could do was look at each other, both amused and utterly shocked.

Vocal insults continued to be hurled at the digital renderings of Olandria and Chelley throughout the episode. Whereas watch parties often involve audience participation, the audience response we witnessed was unique. The manner of the expressions spewed at the television at this party captured the non-Black audience's desire for rhetorical carnage. The nature of their insults pointed to their desire to violently police Olandria and Chelley through scripts curated by anti-Blackness. Their goal was not just to insult these women or react to their behavior, but to punish and disappear them for violating the laws of social citizenship on the basis of their being Black and women. The anti-Black aggression did not stop with the Black women on the screen. It was also directed at my friends and me, as we received a myriad of microaggressions from the patrons around us as the party ended. That was when it clicked. It was not about the storylines played out on screen; it was about policing Black people and reifying the sociopolitical systems that maintain the national order. Olandria and Chelley, daring to stand up for themselves and each other, thus became the cause of vicious national outrage.

Villa producers seemingly incited the proliferation and expansion of the kind of white supremacist attacks on Olandria and Chelley that we witnessed at the party. The spectacle-driven elements of reality television shows like *Love Island USA* putatively seek to create vibrant, exciting, and drama-filled episodes to keep audiences engaged. However, the drama that befalls

Black women Islanders is not received in the same way. Due to the white supremacist logics that govern what Christina Sharpe (2016) names as the “afterlives of slavery” (5), the storylines imagined for Black women Islanders perpetually place them in the line of fire of white supremacist violence, be that rhetorical or tangible. *Love Island USA* is not the first show to exploit Black women contestants and the anti-Blackness of the world to generate engagement from viewing audiences. How does the *Villa* reconcile its horrific track record of degrading and entrapping Black women Islanders? Why do Black women Islanders keep going back to the *Villa*?

Historically, the mating habits of Black women have been heavily sanctioned and scrutinized by the state. Whether it is the monitoring and exploitation of enslaved women, the racist pathologizing of the 1965 Moynihan Report, or the controlling stereotypes that have dominated social, cultural, and political imaginaries, Black women stand in the legacy of a violent meddling in the matters of their hearts. Finding Love reality television shows are yet another incarnation of this meddling. Finding Love reality television describes a sub-genre of reality television that brings contestants together to engage romantically and/or sexually, usually via unorthodox means and under the guise of social experimentation. I refer to the genre of shows central to this project as “Finding Love,” rather than just dating shows, because these shows sell the narrative reminiscent of the old nursery rhyme “First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage,” and as a good social citizen, it is up to you to find that “one true love”. Dating shows, like the new popular series *Pop the Balloon*, do not require long-term “love” as the end goal but rather rest on the levity and liminality of dating. *Love Island USA* is the newest shining star of the ubiquitous and ever-expanding genre of

televisual entertainment in the post-2020 world. The premise is that one can find real, lasting love in the Villa, and those who do so win the final cash prize.

Additionally, *Love Island USA* has benefited from being colloquially understood as the place where Black women can find love. *Love Island USA* had the first dark-skinned Black woman winner in franchise history, Justine Ndibia. An article published in TIME Magazine cited season 6 finalist Jana Craig and winner Serena Page as having made them “believe in love again” (Crumpton 2024). Overall, Black women have been heavily featured on *Love Island USA*. According to an account from former *Love Island USA* executive producer, Simon Thomas, during the earlier seasons of the show, “[*Love Island USA*] was over-indexing with Black viewers, which meant that more Black people were watching the show than other CBS programming...Casting shifted to reflect the viewing demographics,” (Peele 2026, Chapter 7). These factors contribute to this vision that, because of its casting choices and the fact that, on *Love Island USA*, Black girls really can find love, they will be able to do so without the unrelenting brutality of white supremacy.

Presented by showrunners as a love-centered vacation in a color-blind multicultural paradise, *Love Island USA* presents as an open space uninhabited by the hegemonic white supremacist capitalist patriarchal order from which they are built to mimic. Further, offering to solve the social ills of singledom, this show portrays itself not only as an entertaining social good but also as a net-positive, inclusive utopia. However, the presence of dark-skinned Black women presents this notion as a ruse. Audiences witness how dark-skinned Black women—who are seeking partnership and/or fame through these Finding Love shows like their onscreen peers—face sanctioned and stylized embarrassment, degradation, or harassment. This maltreatment is then utilized as entertainment, thus increasing the show’s popularity and profitability.

Through a historical analysis and close reading of season 6 and season 7 of *Love Island USA*, this project seeks to probe the following: 1) What contexts foreground the dark-skinned Black women's participation and experiences on these Finding Love shows? 2) How do misogynoir and anti-Blackness structure the *Villa* and influence the *Villa* production team's creation of scenarios wherein dark-skinned Black women experience harm? 3) How does *Love Island USA* unearth socializing aims, instructing how "good citizens" engage in mating rituals? 4) How do those contexts and televisual team investments construct/instruct how fans should participate and interact with Black women Islanders? Relying on Black feminist, Afro-pessimist, Black queer, and Black critical scholarship to ground the work, I utilize pop culture analysis to question how under the guise of love, social mobility, and sovereignty, *Love Island USA* encourages contestants and audiences alike to buy into hegemonic notions of social citizenship, gender/desire, and love through the activation of the fan's parasocial relationships with the show through social media. Utilizing the infrastructure of the show, fans are incentivized to police the behaviors of the Islanders, leaving the Black women Islanders, who are often edited in incendiary ways, ostensibly in precarious situations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This inquiry explores how reality television focusing on dating and mating rituals—what I call Finding Love TV—has incorporated Black women into its narratives. In general, these reality shows engineer a buy-in to heteronormative dating rituals and hegemonic family structures under the guise of satisfying and securing individual desires for love and social mobility. The incorporation of Black women into Finding Love TV is often accompanied by strategies that objectify and alienate them. This thesis has a specific focus on how dark-skinned Black women fare on Finding Love shows, particularly in the period during the COVID-19 pandemic and the social upheavals following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. In this literary analysis, four core categories are examined: *Reality Television's Spectacle and Function*; *Marked Bodies and Racial Abjection*; *Home Valorization and Good Social Citizenship*; and, finally, *Performance and Re-membering*.

Real People, Real Stories: Reality Television's Spectacle and Function

When I began this exegesis into reality television, I would often discuss my interests with my father, who remarked on several occasions that “none of this stuff is real.” He is not alone in his opinion about this genre of entertainment. While there are aspects of reality TV that are pretense, beneath and intertwined in that fabrication are real-life people and situations. To understand the questions at the core of this inquiry, it is important to interrogate the medium from which the data is drawn. From its inception to its rise in popularity in the 1940s, reality television has captured audiences with a simple premise: “real people, real stories.” However, this refrain obscures the highly structured and curated scenes endemic to this televisual genre. Often called the godfather of reality television, Allen Funt and his popular show *Candid Camera* (1960-1975) created the formula of placing real, unsuspecting people at the center of strange

social situations to observe human behavior as cameras looked on. In "Stanley Milgram, Allen Funt, and Me: Postwar Social Science and the 'First Wave' of Reality TV," Anna McCarthy (2009) traces a lineage from Funt's *Candid Camera* to post-World War II social-psychological experimentation. McCarthy posits that the meeting point of infamous sociological studies like Milgram's obedience studies¹ and the theatrics of contemporary reality television lies in Allen Funt's *Candid Camera*. McCarthy highlights the notion of the hidden-camera show as the site of civic education: "Funt's method was frequently cited or duplicated as a way of inculcating responsible forms of citizenship both domestically and internationally" (25). The representations of proper citizenship in shows like *Candid Camera* are what lay the foundation for the current iterations of reality television. While formal scripts are absent, highly stylized, closely edited scenarios are engineered to craft seductive narratives for audiences. That is the point.

In "Reality Gives Back" pop culture scholar Laurie Ouellette (2010) describes the type of intervention reality television makes in the public consciousness, noting "[r]eality entertainment instead intervenes directly in social life, enacting 'can do' solutions to largely personalized problems within emotional and often suspenseful formats" (69). Ouellette asserts that the function of the spectacularized "real people's real stories" is to insert them into popular social life as a lesson on how to solve, discuss, or circumvent personal challenges. In other words, reality TV can act as a socializing tool. One of the more striking ways this appears is through "do-good" reality television. Do-good reality television is a sub-genre prominent in the United States that facilitates the social, cultural, or physical rehabilitation of subjects' personal ills.

¹Social psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted a variety of ethically problematic experiments studying human obedience to authority in the early 1960's. His most infamous study called for the participants to administer painful electric shocks to an unseen subject at the request of the lab-coat donned "scientist". The scientist would request the participants to increase the intensity of the electric shocks as the subject would violently scream out in pain. Though the scientist and unseen subject were both actors and the electric shocks were not real, Milgram wished to test the extent to which individuals would follow authority (Lewis 2024).

Corporate philanthropy exhibition shows such as CBS's *Undercover Boss*, social disciplinary shows like VH1's *Charm School*, makeover shows like Bravo's *Queer Eye* and ABC's *Extreme Home Makeover*, and interventionist shows like TLC's *Hoarders* and *My Strange Addiction* all fall under this umbrella.

Furthermore, these shows uphold and are upheld by a neoliberal political project. In *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity*, Brenda Weber (2009) argues that makeover reality television seeks to create a model of good citizens who align with neoliberal ideological positions. I contend that *Finding Love*, as a reality television genre, falls into this “do-good” category, especially for Black women participants. *Finding Love* reality television promises a salve to the wounds of a white supremacist system that marginalizes Black subjects. Through the show, Black women can transform their social standing by becoming partners and gaining substantial public visibility, which can lead to increased financial assets. However, this makeover has a price. That price is paid through spectacle.

Spectacular narratives are at the heart of reality television. A facet of this storytelling, specifically on do-good reality television, is ameliorating, or rather, quasi-healing one's trauma. In “Reality Television: A Neoliberal Theater of Suffering”, Anna McCarthy (2007) explores the pervasiveness of neoliberal logics and politics in the structure of makeover or “do-good” reality television. McCarthy probes the operationalization of trauma in this genre: “Trauma, whether deployed clinically or in cultural critique, names experiences at the limits of rational knowledge and of sovereign selfhood, exposing the challenges that terrifying experience pose for any coherent expression of history, memory, and individual autonomy” (25). As I will argue here, the operationalization of traumatic experiences is not only central to how Black women are incorporated; I would go further and argue that *Finding Love* reality television peddles in the

commodification of trauma both to sell its storylines and solidify its politics. In this regard, for Black women contestants, these shows are not only the point of sale of their traumas but also the means of production.

Hollow Villas: Home Valorization, Sovereignty, and Social Citizenship

Getting your house in order is a cultural refrain that entails organizing one's life/family in a stable, secure manner. In the United States, the national home has never been in order. The cause of this disarray? According to the findings of the 1965 report "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action", sponsored by the US Department of Labor and authored by then-Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the Black woman is the reason for the detriment and disorder of the Black American home (Moynihan 1965). More precisely, Moynihan points to the familial structure of the Black community, noting "a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male" (29). This anti-Black misogynist statement has remained a logic in the vault of ideological misreading of Black women, providing crucial structural support for anti-Black state violence and the suppression of Black citizenship.

The ideas of the nation as a home and a family are rhetorical tools used to rally citizens and establish belonging, rooted in an imaginary bond among sovereign citizens that is the basis of nationalism. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (2016) interrogates the idea of the nation as connected through shared history and culture, positing that a nation "is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion..." (6). The imagined community in this sense is the national home or the national family. Drawing

on Anderson's ideas, Eva Hageman's (2019) argument about "improvement" reality television shows in "Debt by Design: Race and Home Valorization" defines home valorization as "the possibility of success...reserved for those contestants who work within the aesthetic parameters of the network and invest in a normalizing project" (11). Within the context of the national home, those invested in upholding the normalizing project of the United States are granted access to sovereignty and the title of "good citizen."

Good citizenship is a neoliberal scheme. The parameters of the national normalizing project—or "house rules"—apply a neoliberal politics to cultural, social, and economic structures, thus placing responsibility for remediating structural disarray or discrimination on the individual (home). The supposed spoils of good citizenship are promises of safety under surveillance, stability in familial order, and great wealth through a free-market economy. Sovereignty as it functions here aligns with the definition outlined by Achille Mbembe (2019) in his seminal work, *Necropolitics*. Mbembe describes sovereignty as the right to kill or to determine who should exist as dead or what he terms "living dead". The term "living dead" refers to "vast populations are subjected to living conditions" that are the result of maximal death and destruction (40). Sovereignty provides justification for the expansion of state borders, the regulation of state laws, and the protection of state entities, including property, citizens, and land. In the hopes of maintaining the contextual imperatives of Mbembe's work, I do not wish to overextend my definition of the sovereign. With that said, the "good citizen," through valorizing the US national project, is granted the right to kill socially or culturally. Hence, "good citizens" are promised safety within the state (i.e., the parameters of the national Home) but also the full power of socio-cultural state-making (sovereignty). Those who do not abide by the "house rules"—the normalizing state-making project—become outsiders to the national home,

effectively “living dead.” Where does that leave the group Moynihan (1965) calls the “nation’s oldest, and most intransigent and now its most dangerous social problem” (ii)? Where do Black women – who have been held responsible for the failure of Black social citizenship – find that shield of sovereignty? They are sent to the *Villa*.

To clarify the particular pathway to “good” citizenship crafted for Black women, this inquiry extends the home metaphor to include the *Villa*—a recurrent avatar for the national homestead—on Finding Love reality TV. Sovereignty, as it relates to this inquiry, leans more toward understanding these concepts as cultural and social; however, its political valence remains legible in analyzing the *Villa* as an imperial schema—an incarnation of the homestead abroad. The *Villa* is not only a physical locale but also the grounds that embody a normalizing social and political project. Canonically, the *Villa* exists as the home base for Finding Love reality shows. Aesthetically, they are large, open-concept summer mansions equipped with state-of-the-art CCTV cameras, infinity pools, and private beaches, usually located on an island outside the United States. These expansive summer homes, privately owned or leased by US-based corporations, are depicted as physically isolated on large plots of “vacant” land. Contestants seldom interact with the local island communities. Representing the islands as “vacant” helps frame the *Villa* as separate from the US and its social order. However, the island is/was never empty, and the hegemonic strictures of the national home are never truly outside of the *Villa*. In political function, the *Villa* embodies a colonial/imperial schema, positioned as an extraterritorial base abroad that physically expands the borders of the national home. This imperial schema is dressed up in fire pits and daybeds, paraded on screen as a dream vacation reserved for those who truly want to change their lives forever.

The *Villa* extends the reach of the national home's normalizing project. In this sense, the Villa becomes a site for expanding the ideological formations that uphold “good citizenship”—heteronormative relationships, nuclear family models, free-market ideology—on the “vacant” island. For the Black women on these shows, the trip away seems like an escape from the stigmatizing world of dating plagued by misogynoir and haunted by Moynihan’s ghosts. Although the *Villa* may act as a pathway to the social citizenship Black women seek, the narrative structures of Finding Love TV replicate the damaging discourses the same women seek refuge from.

The *Villa* is not just a leg of the imperial core but also a false representation of a space for free love. Film scholar Kristen Warner’s (2017) “In the Time of Plastic Representation” offers a critique of colorblind casting in the era of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. Plastic representation is “a combination of synthetic elements put together and shaped to look like meaningful imagery, but which can only approximate depth and substance because ultimately it is hollow and cannot survive close scrutiny” (35). The *Villa* embodies this plastic/hollowness. Black women’s presence reifies the *Villa* as synthetic. The facade of a multicultural utopia crumbles as the anti-Black violence inherent to the normalizing design of the national home invariably materializes as impact – in the form of aggression, marginalization and the inducement of trauma on Black women – and particularly dark-skinned women – in the shows. Moreover, this violence is exacerbated by the imperial/colonial blueprints of the *Villa*. Whether within the national home or the extraterritorial *Villa*, home-valorizing narratives cannot grant Black women the safety and security of “good citizenship” because Blackness is always in peril under white supremacist, imperial regimes.

The Usual Suspects: Marked Bodies and Racial Abjection

Conversations about how Finding Love reality television shows violate, disrespect, or embarrass the Black women cast in them often end with the refrain of “shocked but not surprised”. The misogynist anti-Blackness that plagues the portrayals and behind-the-scenes testimonies of Black women has become a mundane side-effect, a banal blip on the visual and affective register of Black women viewers. Most significantly, traumatic experience is formulated as an occupational hazard for Black participants who “should have known what they were getting into” on these shows. The ways in which Black women appear on screen are heavily informed by the structures of the societies they live in. The occupational hazard of anti-Blackness is a byproduct of what Black feminist scholar Christina Sharpe (2016) calls the wake in her exegesis of Black onto-epistemologies born of the afterlives of slavery. Sharpe posits that Black people live in the reverberations of racist regimes, including slavery, Jim Crow, and police violence. Black life in the wake gestures toward a way of knowing and being forever linked to the massive death event of slavery and its myriad reverberations. As Sharpe writes, “[t]o be in the wake is also to recognize the ways that we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to overwhelming force, though not *only* known to ourselves and to each other *by* that force” (16). The virulent and specific anti-Blackness Black women face on these shows is informed by the residue of slavery that plagues the social systems they live in. Coined by scholar Moya Bailey (2021), “misogynoir” describes “the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience, particularly in US visual and digital culture” (1). This rhetorical dynamic is ever-present in the stereotypical configurations of Black women through the leering gaze of white-supremacist structures inherent to the DNA of the American Empire. Misogynoir appears in visual and digital representations through the positioning of Black women as excess. In

Troubling Vision, visual studies scholar Nicole Fleetwood (2011) uses the term “excess flesh” to define this concept. Fleetwood contends that because the Black visual culture landscape has been framed around the masculine, the Black woman or racialized femme subject is constituted as excessive: “Black female corporeality is rendered as an excessive overdetermination and as overdetermined excess” (9). Thus, Black women subjects seen and surveilled on *Finding Love* TV become fixed as surplus and superfluous visual presences. The goal of anti-Black systems is to position the raced and gendered subject as perpetually excessive, other, and abject.

In “The Politics of Black Abjection”, Brandon Davis (2023) writes: “The Black body in America has been simultaneously repulsive and desirable in ways that White bodies have not. African Americans have been unable to renegotiate their identity from this degradation because the social and cultural order are affixed to it” (147). Davis continues: “...terms such as “licentious,” “promiscuous,” “angry,” and “emasculating” have been attached to the Black female body to legitimize its living abjection. Black female flesh is both ungendered and sensual, lustful, and sordid, and unprotected yet highly policed” (155). Davis calls out the different labels that have been used to justify the continued literal and ontological subjugation of Black women. The way Black women are treated on *Finding Love* TV is as the racial-sexual abject. The producers' impetus is to concoct situations that justify the harm, embarrassment, and degradation they suffer for the sake of pleasure and amusement. Their responses, both in the moment and in the season's aftermath, to serial humiliation pass through the fine-tooth comb of misogynoir.

Whereas the Black women cast in *Finding Love* reality television are consistently characterized as embodiments of racialized abjection—outside of meaning, both repulsed and desired—they are not always portrayed in the same fashion. Said differently, the production uses various portrayals of these Black women subjects to convey their constructed narratives. The

preconceived notions of Black female types that drive Finding Love narratives undermine their autonomous subjectivity at the hands of their fellow cast members as well as the production, editing, and filming crews. In *Becoming Human*, Black queer and feminist scholar Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020) defines the plasticity of Black subjects in violent settings as representing what she calls “Black(ened) humanity” (14). For Jackson, the plasticity of a Black(ened) people relies on a sub-, supra-, and human triage. She writes “...its concept of plasticity, which maintains that Black(ened) people...are cast as sub, supra, and human simultaneously and in a manner that puts being in peril because the operations of simultaneously being everything and nothing for an order—human, animal, machine, for instance—constructs Black(ened) humanity as the privation and exorbitance of form.” (43). The phenomena of plasticity and Black(ened) humanity appear in a myriad of ways on Finding Love shows. For example, Chelley Bissainthe from the 7th season of *Love Island USA* exists as human-as such (a woman just looking for love), sub-human (object subject, monstrous “mean girl”, and the *Love Island USA* viewers’ metaphorical punching bag), and supra-human (strong enough to withstand mental and verbal abuse from her partner and national publications without needing substantial help or intervention). Chelley performs all these functions for the *Villa* production crew that watches and constructs her for the real-world audience. Alongside her configuration of Black(ened) humanity, Jackson (2020) contends that for Black people, asserting humanity is pointless because the normative notion of the Human excludes Black subjects. Jackson’s interrogation begs the question of how Black subjects should negotiate any category – including human or citizen – whose basis rests on their exclusion. In this regard, Black women’s aspirations for the goals of Finding Love TV are inherently unstable.

Matters of the body/flesh are considerable influences on the excessive overdetermination of the Black(ened) subject. Hortense Spillers's (1987) seminal essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" is central to this investigation of just how Black women are marked in discourses of reproduction and sexuality. Hortense Spillers begins the essay with a litany of the rhetorical markers that have fixed Black women as stereotyped racialized subjects in the United States' imagination. Historically grounding how the flesh is named (i.e., marked), Spillers notes that the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the "New World" it progenerates are marked by human trafficking and the "theft of the body." This theft violently detached the body from its "motive will, its active desire," making the body "a territory of cultural and political maneuver" (445). Consequently, the Black subject is stripped of autonomy in naming themselves and is subjected to markers and names determined not by them but by the socio-cultural imperatives of Empire.

In extending Spillers's theorizing, surveillance studies scholar Simone Browne (2015) intervenes with the concept of branding Blackness. Utilizing the grotesque practice of branding enslaved people as grounding, Browne theorizes that slave branding was not only a "theft of the body" but also a racializing act. She notes that "[b]y making Blackness visible as commodity and therefore sellable, branding was a dehumanizing process of classifying people into groupings, producing new racial identities that were tied to a system of exploitation." Further, she asserts that "branding was also a gendering act, as with women a discretionary concern² was said to be taken" (94). Placing both Browne and Spillers together here, race and gender are made clear as markings on the flesh, and the appellations—Spillers's roll call of the misnomers confounding

² The "discretionary concern" Browne refers to here calls back to the discretion taken by French, English and Dutch slaving companies in branding enslaved Black Women. Browne cites an account of a French Slave Merchant named John Barbot observed that the women aboard the slave barracoon "care is taken that the women, as tenderest, be not burnt too hard" (Browne 2015, 94)

Black female identities—work to brand the flesh. Said differently, the names and caricatures associated with racial Blackness and gendered femininity are mapped onto Black subjects in a branding process uniquely serving the social, political, and cultural imperatives of the American empire. On Finding Love reality TV, Black women enter the legacy and contexts of these markings. Though they are not called by the names of the controlling caricatures that precede them (e.g., Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, Welfare Queen, Tragic Mulatto), they live in their narrative wake and are representationally tethered to them. As this thesis shows, deeply embedded social branding follows Black women from “the real world” to “the reality world.” An interrogation of desire and desirability is critical to the discussions of love and relationships circulating between “the real world” and “the reality world.” In *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*, Da’Shaun L. Harrison (2021) defines Desire as “that which determines who gains and holds both social and structural power through the affairs of sensuality, often predicated on anti-Blackness, anti-fatness, (trans)misogynoir, cissexism, queer antagonism, and all other structural violence. It is intended to name the social, political, and economic capital one obtains / is given access to through their ability to be Desire[d]” (19). “Desire[d]” traits can take the form of thinness, lightness, cisgendered-ness, heterosexuality, whiteness, and other structurally normative identifiers. These traits offer a structural and social advantage in the libidinal economy. The inverse of these then makes a subject more susceptible to social and systematic death and disappearing.

Harrison goes on to say that “Desire/ability politics and Desire Capital, however, suggest that one does not need to feel pretty to be Pretty; one does not need to feel beautiful to be Beautiful; one does not need to feel ugly to be Ugly” (18-19). Moreover, a subject’s personal self-image does not negate their power within sociopolitical and cultural realms. As Spillers

(1987) notes, Black women subjects do not sit securely in the bounds of (normative) gender, which is rooted in the ideology of white femininity. This bars Black women from accessing as much Desire Capital as their white counterparts. When you configure this equation to include other aspects of identity, such as dark skin, a moderate or fat body shape, and kinky-coily hair texture, the sum results in a deficit in Desire Capital. I argue that *Finding Love* shows make the access (or lack thereof) to Desire Capital on the part of dark-skinned Black women apparent. From pairing them with men who actively emphasize their lack of Desire/ability, to quickly ushering them off the show, to hyper-scrutinizing and demonizing their behavior, it is apparent how invested these shows are in the normative project of Desire.

Theater with Real Consequences

'Act like you've been somewhere' is a disciplinary proverb often used by Black parents across the Diaspora to corral their children before ushering them into the public sphere. Articulated in Swahili, my mother would dispense a sharp look accompanied by the same warning in the form of "*kaa chonjo*," or sit/act ready; prepare yourself to leave this home so I don't have to do it for you. The stern warning to "act right" is said to try to mitigate the harm Black children can/will face when their regular childhood whimsy and jittery disposition are met with the cold hand of the outside world.

On *Finding Love* reality television shows, the proverbial *acting like* is a layered performance of racialized gender, sexuality and nationhood, on top of the performance of the ritual mating. To address the questions at the heart of this inquiry, discussions of the theatricality of reality television need to expand to focus on what comprises the performative at the social level. Diana Taylor (2003) defines the function of performance as "vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what

Richard Schechner has called 'twice-behaved behavior.' (2-3) For Taylor, performance is not just a practice, but a series of repetitive cultural and epistemic projects.

In Performance Studies, the concept of performance emphasizes social and linguistic gestures comprising repeated social behaviors. Social behaviors like those that comprise identity, gender, and race, as well as those that indicate specific nationalities and cultural spheres, are thus understood as transmitted rather than innate. Understanding identity as performance explodes the more essentialist notion that identities are innate rather than acquired. As Gender Studies scholar Judith Butler (1988) argues, social identities such as race, gender, and sexuality are everyday embodied and stylized “doings” of the body. Butler importantly notes that the social institutions or “cultural fictions” that are maintained by performances of social identity are also punitively regulated (522). In addition to social identity as an act of transfer, Taylor (2003) offers that cultural identity is also an act of transfer. To this end, her postulations allow for socio-cultural performances to be read as epistemological formations. Taylor notes “[c]ivic obedience, resistance, citizenship, gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity, for example, are rehearsed and performed daily in the public sphere... Embodied practice, along with and bound up with other cultural practices, offers a way of knowing.” (3) Consequently, the nationalist dating practices—which I refer to in this research as mating rituals—on Finding Love reality television are both a practice and an episteme. That is, the instructive mating rituals are not just cultural routines done for TV, they also traffic in social, cultural, and political knowledge about what dating for “good citizens” looks like.

Correspondingly, the Black women contestants on Finding Love reality TV are “doing” their bodies doubly. These women both perform their social identities and the mating rituals that make up the subject matter of these shows, and they also perform themselves through these

processes so that audiences can see that they have, to borrow from the Black parental proverb, *been somewhere*. Said differently, these Black women contestants perform the repeated social gestures that comprise their identities (Black, Woman, American, Heteronormative, and their intersections) enact the social role-playing of heterosexual dating with fellow contestants, and they perform identities and cultural rituals for audiences of the broadcasts and its afterlives in social media. This layered interaction gives rise to tensions in the way the racialized, gendered subject functions in these confounding performances.

To this end, I find it useful to place this multidimensional performance in conversation with notions of seeing race and representation as grounds for performance. The tensions that arise from these women performing for an audience of that proverbial *somewhere*³ can be in the precarious act of “seeing race”. Nicole Fleetwood’s (2011) *Troubling Visions* aids in arming this analysis with a theoretical posture for understanding the performance of Blackness and of viewing Blackness. Fleetwood theorizes about how “Blackness becomes visually knowable in the public sphere through performance, cultural practices, and psychic manifestations” (6). She grapples with how the visual problem of Blackness is encoded and deciphered in the visual sphere through what she calls the performance of seeing race. Fleetwood writes: “...the visual sphere is a performative field where seeing race is not a transparent act; it is itself a “doing” (7). Accordingly, the notions of performance henceforth discussed, can be applied to the “doing” of seeing race. Fleetwood presents an example for understanding the performance of seeing race in a scene analysis of what she calls the “Fanonian Moment”. This is a reference to an oft-cited

³ In this case, *somewhere* represents the American public or members of the National Home. These formulations derive from Benedict Anderson’s theorizing of the “imagined community” as a nationalizing formation. As mentioned in the previous section, Hollow Villas, I am positing that the imagined community of the United States can also be understood as the National Family or National Home. Thus, the *somewhere* represents the location that houses the imagined community.

passage in Frantz Fanon's (2008) *Black Skin, White Masks*, recalling Fanon's experience of being identified by a young white child walking with his father, who, upon seeing Fanon, exclaimed: "Look, A Negro!" (78). Fleetwood (2011) argues this moment "marks a racial primal scene in which the Black subject comes into self-knowing through the traumatic recognition of another's eyes." Her analysis extends the "Fanonian Moment" to encapsulate analogous experiences that demonstrate how Blackness and femininity are likewise fixed by visual and verbal articulations that objectify the subject and effect a transfer of the "traumatic recognition of another's eyes" to the individual being surveilled (23). For Black women and gender marginalized folks on and off Finding Love reality TV, the Fanonian moment can happen at any time. It is the moment when your bootcut jeans are hyper-scrutinized by your white elementary school teacher for being distracting to your male peers and teachers. It is the moment during free period, when you are asked if "yours looks like roast beef." It is the moment on the playground when your peers say you have a bubble butt and your fuller lips are called DSLs⁴. On Finding Love TV, it was the moment on *Love Is Blind* season six when Black woman contestant, Amber-Desiree or "AD", was nearly groped by a fellow castmate at the jovial request of his partner, AD's white woman castmate. This scene occurs as several members of the cast sexually chastise her "hot body." In the aftermath of the controversy, the parties involved apologized to AD's fiancé, but not to her. These scenes are not unique in their violence or frequency. Neither is the violent visual pleasure gleaned by audiences in watching these scenes play out. As Saidiya Hartman (1997) notes in *Scenes of Subjection*, "[o]nly more obscene than the brutality unleashed at the whipping post is the demand that this suffering be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and the terrible" (4) The on-

⁴ DSL is an abbreviation for dick sucking lips. This pejorative phrase was often levied at young Black girls by their peers to insult, make fun, and hypersexualize the appearance of fuller-looking lips.

screen actors perform these moments according to the sexually, gendered, and racially traumatic scripts transferred to them through the cultural practice of white supremacy. Whiteness teaches the scripts for engaging with the Other.

The scripts for these performances were etched in stone from the moment the colonial imaginary sought to pillage and taxonomize human beings and mark their flesh. Sylvia Wynter (1995) gestures to an origin point for this impulse of the colonial/imperial force⁵ in “1492: A New World View” as the onto-episteme of the New World. Wynter asserts that Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of the Americas ushered in new logics, vocabularies, and subjective understandings of the category of the Human (or Man). She contends that this New World logic regulates Black and Indigenous people as non-human Others to justify their repression. When reality television contestants train their gaze on Black women in the cast, in Fleetwood’s (2011) terms, practicing a performance that visualizes Black femininity, we see traces of the New World grammar Columbus created to distinguish the white European Man from Black and Indigenous Others. Undergirding the reiteration and reproduction of the vocabularies and scenes of anti-Blackness and difference is the notion of the representation and re-representation dialectic. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s (2020) theorizing around representation/re-representation can be helpful here. In *Becoming Human*, Jackson disrupts the viability of the Human through the prodding at its plasticity when applied to Black women. This plasticity of the Black and Woman renders her sub- (nothing), supra- (everything), and human (mundane). This fungibility throws representational politics in peril. Subsequently, Jackson agitates the notion of representation through her two-pronged demarcation of the representation/ re-representation dialectic. For Jackson, “representation performs rather than functions mimetically as the notion of “re-

⁵ As in Christina Sharpe’s (2016) formulation of force in the Wake.

presentation” suggests” (94). At the level of language, *representation* suggests something that serves as a performative stand-in for a particular thing or being, whereas re-presentation suggests a recreation or mirroring of that thing or being. Jackson, however, is naming that as it applies to Black female figures whose humanity/being is fungible; both the representations and re-presentations function at the level of myth and perform to some degree. Jackson’s theoretical distinctions make evident the fallibility of relying on representation for accurate images and pose representation as a more speculative notion. Additionally, Jackson’s formulations pose the impossibility of representation for Black women. Black women on these shows perform versions of themselves that attempt to resist anti-Black scripts for the cast, the production crew, and televisual audiences. However, these performances cannot adequately oppose these regimes, as the cultural scripts cannot be sidestepped. Bringing Fleetwood’s (2011) performance of seeing Blackness and the Black woman’s Fanonian moment and Jackson’s (2020) representation as performative—and, through that valence, speculative—aids in the reading of the multivalent performances of Black women contestants.

Just as the social performances of engaging the Other have been transmitted through white supremacy through acts of social and cultural transfer (Taylor 2003), so too has the performative reaction to this force been transmitted by Blackness. One of these modes of transfer is cultural memory. Memory is an important appendage to the analysis of performance studies, as it is through cultural memory that the materials (i.e., social gestures, sights, embodied styles, linguistics, etc.) that comprise a performance. Toni Morrison’s (1987) concept of rememory, first articulated in the novel *Beloved*, can be understood as a recollection of traumatic memories that can be recalled by individuals and those who resist the sites of those memories. In the novel, Denver questions her mother, Sethe, about her time at the Sweet Home plantation. The grief,

trauma, and devastating psychological terror that mark Sethe's time at Sweet Home and haunt her life and her new home are overwhelming. Sethe lashes back at her child before she can calm down enough to explain to Denver why protecting her daughter from the violence she experienced involves managing traumatic memory in a specific way. The weight of rememory captures the urgency of this project. Rememory aids in framing not only the cultural performance playbook that the audience of *somewhere* is inheriting but also informs the cultural notions, gestures, symbols and rhetoric taken on by Black people, especially Black women that inform how they "do" their own bodies.

The performance for the proverbial somewhere is rife with tension because Black women's representation is speculative, and due to the regime of misogynoir that encodes the scripts governing how Black women are seen and read, curating a performance of self that defies said scripts is difficult. The Black women subjects of Finding Love TV are tasked with managing performance as a mode of survival because there are consequences for unconvincing or non-normative performances. Belonging, or social citizenship within a space, thus depends on convincing performances, and there are consequences for failing to convincingly perform that "*you've been somewhere*" and belong in the national home⁶.

Putting the proverb back together, "*acting like you've been somewhere*" can be read as a gesture or linguistic performance that calls Black women to engage in actions and behaviors that assert their belonging transferred to them through a cultural playbook inherited through rememory. The saying addresses the performance and doing of one's Black (and woman) self, how the doing of one's Black (and woman) self must shift and self-police for survival. Political Science scholar Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) discusses how the policing of multivalent

⁶ The imagined community of the American public

performances is done internally at the affective register through what she calls “stigmatizing shame”. In *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, she posits that in the social schema of the United States, “[s]hame works through real or anticipated social sanctions that punish violations of group rules and thus helps us stay within the lines of acceptable behavior and thought” (107). Here, Harris-Perry unearths a schism in how shame functions not only as an affective jolt to prompt an act but also as an act itself.

Harris-Perry contends that shame is informed by the punitive regulation of Black women’s mating rituals originating in the Moynihan Report on the Negro Family in 1965 (Moynihan 1965). The shame brought on by the misogynoir that seeps into the performance of seeing Black women (Black mothers specifically) but also informs disciplining logics of the words of my foremothers “*acting like you’ve been somewhere*” as a response to offset the consequences of white supremacist violence. Knowledge that they inherited from their foremothers. Shame does not act alone in the affective register of disciplining logics of social citizenship; however, it is a useful frame of reference to recenter this conversation of performance and the tangible consequences to social citizenship of ineffective or non-normative performance. Said differently, placing Harris-Perry (2011) together with Morrison (1987), Fleetwood (2011), Jackson (2020), Taylor (2003), and Butler (1988) aids in establishing a framework to understand the breadth of what constitutes the performance for Black women in *Finding Love* reality television and thus making clear how the “group rules” for acting right (i.e. acting like a “good citizen”) are legitimated.

Chapter 3: Methods

To produce this research, I utilized a myriad of Black studies research methods to analyze *Love Island USA*. A significant component of this inquiry required a close content analysis of Finding Love TV shows. Although Finding Love TV is an expansive genre with a host of shows, this study focused on the two most recent seasons of *Love Island USA*: season 6 (aired 2024) and season 7 (aired 2025). This choice is not only due to the pop-cultural salience of the selected seasons but also to the show's format and structure, which do not overtly center normative mating rituals. More acutely, this decision is informed by Kristen Warner's (2015) musings around *ratchetness*. *Ratchet* is an African-American colloquialism that describes performances of self that disrupt respectable norms. Scholar Bettina Love (2017) describes *ratchet(ness)* as "messy, meaning it has no straightforward definition; it is contradictory, fluid, precarious, agentive, and oftentimes intentionally inappropriate" (540). *Ratchetness* insists on its excessiveness and expansiveness and does not abide by normative social mores. In "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless," Warner (2015) theorizes around the idea of *ratchetness* as taboo and how *ratchetness*, primarily through its representation of Black women on reality television, can be liberatory. *Love Island USA*, for all intents and purposes, is *ratchet* as it de-centers the same hegemonic narratives around marriage that rule shows like *Love Is Blind* and *Married at First Sight*, whose central purpose is marriage. *Love Island USA* moves away from the respectability politics that govern *Love Is Blind* or *Married at First Sight*, presenting a crasser, sexier, and louder environment. However, despite this subtle decentering of marriage, this show covertly traffics in the same messages and schemas as its normative counterparts.

Next, contextual analysis was important for placing the shows on a timeline and examining the stakes surrounding them in the proper context. These shows are linked by

historical context—the COVID-19 pandemic, economic conditions, the 2022-2023 writers' strike, the political sphere during two election cycles, and multiple protests and uprisings, especially Black Lives Matter 2020 and the pro-Palestinian encampments on college campuses beginning in 2023. Further, a historical analysis cultivated a better understanding of the social, cultural, and political precedents for the onto-epistemologies of Black women's worlds on reality TV. Thus, it illuminated how and why the storylines and character portrayals on-screen are as they are. I also used social media posts published during and after each season's broadcast to provide further context for the audience's reaction to the various storylines *Villa* producers concoct around the dark-skinned Black women Islanders. Platforms like Twitter (now X) and TikTok have distinct communities specifically created as fan spaces for different characters and shows, which I drew from. Finally, collecting the contestants' oral testimonies from post-show interviews, public appearances, and personal social media channels aided my analysis of how they perceive their experience on the show and the production team's role.

It is imperative for this project that I clarify my distinction regarding the Finding Love reality TV shows. As previously stated, I refer to the shows central to this project as “Finding Love,” rather than just dating shows, because the impetus of these shows is to peddle the ideology of heteronormative partnership that ends in a singular marital union. In other words, these shows sell a narrative reminiscent of the old nursery rhyme “First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage,” and, as a good citizen, it is up to you to find that “one true love.” Dating shows do not require long-term “love” to be the end goal but rather rest on the levity and liminality of dating.

The absurdities of everyday Black life, the torrential matters of the heart, and the spectacular scenes of reality television necessitate a scholar to be a bit dramatic. Thus, this

project will be musical, poetic, and theatrical in nature. An aspect of this will be relying on music and performance as modes of analysis and as theoretical interludes. This is where visual artist and filmmaker Arthur Jafa's concept of 'affective proximity' comes into play. Jafa's 'affective proximity' is a method of placing different elements of a film that uses feeling to create a narrative (Knight 2019, 37-38). 'Affective proximity' informs the inclusion of music, fables, poems, dialogue from famous Black sitcom couples, alongside theoretical and historical analysis. The use of music dramatizes the various plot points of these Finding Love reality shows and signals to the audience how we should comprehend what we are watching. I am interested in the cultural memory that shapes how we understand what love is supposed to look and function like. Music, specifically love songs, is one branch that helps create that picture. In approaching its incorporation, I employ music as titles for several sections of this thesis. The choices of these songs are intentional. Each song aligns with the islanders' desires and the production dynamics explicated in their respective chapters, offering a resource for understanding the "rules" of mating rituals and a metaphor for cultural refrains that impact social understanding. Pulling from Stephanie Leigh Batiste's (2019) musings on memory and performance, and her reflections on Gaye Teresa Johnson's "beat juggling", the scholar as a DJ will function as a modality here. Batiste writes that "Scholars as DJs...mix beats as an interaction with moments in time, mix moments in a play of marking time, times, and timing to reconsider histories and propose a new understanding of the past. Such elaborate beats serve as traces that play like memories meeting across time and space, sometimes returning in rhythm to make a new feeling, a remixed genealogy for understanding the present" (2). In this sense, the melding of music, televisual representations of Black love, and other fables depicting how relationships should look and function in conversation with history helps bring life into the analysis of the current stories being

told about Black women and relationships on reality television. Through the “sampling” of history, memory, and performance, I hope to imbue new meaning and robust analysis.

Additionally, I will be utilizing Nicole Fleetwood’s (2011) theorizing of “to render/rendering” as an imperative modality for reading/understanding objectivity/subjectivity of the Black and Blackness in visual performance as a method. Fleetwood’s definition of rendering as the process of making or becoming somebody, as well as attending to its other meanings as “to give help; to translate; to deliver a verdict; to submit for consideration; to purify through extraction; to surrender something; to exchange or give something back,” informs how rendering functions theoretically in this work (7). Rendering is an important intervention in the content analysis of this project, as it addresses how Blackness and the controlling images/ “markings of the flesh” are transposed, transcribed, and portrayed digitally and in the imaginary.

I relied heavily on the canon of Black feminist, Black queer, and critical Black scholarship to synthesize the data collected through the aforementioned methods. Grounding the suppositions I am making about the larger picture of what is occurring requires me to be in constant conversation with theories garnered from these groups of study. At its foundation, my arguments are influenced by Racial Abjection theory and the postulations made on Black humanity explored by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020) and Brandon Davis (2023). Furthermore, Hortense Spillers’ (1987) discussion of racialized gender and marking/misnaming in her text “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” informs the framing of the controlling images that haunt the Black women on these shows. Moreover, my investments in a critical media study begin with Kristen Warner’s (2015, 2017) work on Black women on reality TV and extend to an exploration of reality television’s function as neoliberal civic training, as posited by scholars Laura Ouellette (2010), Brenda Weber (2009), and Anna McCarthy (2007,

2009). I am also interested in discussions of desire and desirability politics in my analysis of the cinematic representation of the Black (and woman) body, thus engaging in conversation with Da'Shaun L. Harrison's (2021) theorizing of anti-fatness as anti-Blackness in their text *Belly of the Beast*. In addition to the discussions above, I have a deep affinity for memory not only as a mode of analysis but as an archival practice. Drawing on the work of Toni Morrison (1987) and the wisdom of my community shared through phrases and warnings, I hope to make clear the visceral, sensorial, and affective ways in which Black women's existence on the Finding Love reality TV show is informed and shaped.

The essence of my study is exploring how gender and Blackness place in contention the ways the veneer of multicultural utopia is presented in these reality television shows. Further, by exploring these dynamics, we can track how our views are being molded by this media and look towards more caring and liberatory-oriented futures. Overall, as Katherine McKittrick (2006) does in her text *Demonic Grounds* to chart the geographies of enslaved Black women, my approach to methods and methodologies is "to move between past and present, archives and fiction, theory and the everyday" to conduct an expansive and generative investigation of these reality shows.

Chapter 4: What You Won't Do 4 *Love Island*: Season 6 and Perfecting the *Villa*



Figure 1. Serena Page and Jana Craig Spliced Headshots Night 1 in the Villa

Love Island USA is a seven-year-old offshoot of *Love Island (UK)*. As I have argued thus far, despite the veneer of an international multicultural utopia that undergirds the narratives of love in Finding Love programming, anti-Blackness prevails as the core organizing structure of these reality shows. This ideological and ontological impetus is continually made apparent through the onscreen treatment and experiences of dark-skinned Black women contestants. In recent years, fans of this sub-genre of TV, specifically Black gender marginalized folks, have expressed their disillusionment with this brand of spectacularized mistreatment. Then, in the summer of 2024, with the premiere of *Love Island USA* season 6, conversations about this brand of television entertainment changed. The success of season 6, paired with the success of the Black women Islanders, Jana Craig and Serena Page, has helped *Love Island USA* avoid some of the critiques leveled at its Finding Love counterparts. However, as this chapter's analysis will show, *Love Island USA* not only utilizes the same structures of anti-Blackness present in other

Finding Love shows but also exacerbates them through heavy surveillance and the imperial locale of the *Villa*.

As is the case throughout the franchise, the 6th season of *Love Island USA* is systemically structured by discourses of anti-Black misogynoir underpinning its larger project of heteronormative mating rituals. *Love Island USA* sells nationalist ideals under the guise of necessity, presenting them as preconditions for an individual's ability to be loved. *Love Island USA* implicitly propagates ideas rooted in anti-Blackness as the means of securing and maintaining partnerships. This formula is made clear on and through the experiences and bodies of the Black women, more specifically, the dark-skinned Black women cast members admitted to the *Love Island Villa*. Despite these apparent undercurrents, the show has managed to maintain favor as a perceived place of possibility for Black women to find love and become good social citizens. My analysis of the rise in popularity of the 6th season of *Love Island USA*, the dark-skinned Black women who made it happen, and the structure that enables the display of these harmful dynamics sets up the stakes for how Black women are treated in season 7 of the show. I argue that, despite the facade of a redemptive utopia of love, *Love Island USA* season 6 deploys structures of misogynoir and anti-Blackness to punish contestants Serena Page and Jana Craig (the two dark-skinned Black women Islanders). Focusing specifically on the Casa Amor challenge that comes at the midpoint of every season, I contend that the structures of *Love Island USA* season 6 efficiently traffic the tendrils of misogynoir and anti-Blackness through systems like surveillance configured as sociopolitically and culturally advantageous to Black women. I will demonstrate how the treatment of Craig and Serena in the time leading up to, during, and after Casa Amor *Love Island USA* season 6, in fact, perfects and prepares egregious structural

exploitation of dark-skinned Black women awaiting cast members and audiences in the seventh season of *Love Island USA*.

TROUBLE IN PARADISE: Misogynoir and Anti-Blackness on *Love Island USA*

Misogynoir, as I have stated elsewhere in this work, is the primary organizing feature of the mechanics of Finding Love reality TV shows. Coined by scholars Moya Bailey and Trudy, the term misogynoir captures “the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization” (Bailey 2021, 1). What Bailey and Trudy make clear through their theorization of misogynoir is how interwoven and collaboratively created anti-Blackness and gendered violence are. This is because Blackness and gendered Blackness come into being through immense, indescribable violence. As a conceptual term, misogynoir tracks the ways Blackness transforms when read through gender. The brutality of anti-Blackness structures gender outside of the normative categories set forth through whiteness. Put differently, gender is not the same as Blackened gender because Blackness intervenes in the ontological formation of gender. Racialized women are not read through the same lens as white women. That is by design. As scholar Patrice D. Douglass (2018) writes, “The archive of gender is structurally anti-Black. Its assumptive logic...maintains that all women have the same gender. This orientation of thought... render(s) Black gender invisible or silent” (115). Misogynoir accounts for this erasure and seeks to name clearly how the unique and grotesque conjurings of the white supremacist imagination affect Black women and their representation and reception in popular culture.

Misogynoir gives language to name the set of images, actions, and behaviors that strip Black women of the ability to name themselves, clearing the ground for the litany of

stereotypical caricatures I discuss throughout this study. As Spillers (1987) attests in “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” the host of misnomers that become the vocabulary of the 'Black' and 'Woman' are founded, maintained, and proliferated by the imperatives of the wake and of the United States empire. This rhetorical theft mirrors the literal theft defining the afterlife of slavery, a violent detachment of the body from its "motive will, its active desire," making the body "a territory of cultural and political maneuver" (445). On *Love Island USA*, Black women's sexual and romantic lives become a territory for this political and cultural maneuvering. As a television show, *Love Island USA* operates structurally as a living laboratory wherein Black women's quests to “find love” become a ruse to inveigle them into an active role in the recreation of harmful scenes of misogynoir. The falsehood latent in the show's performance of a race-conscious multicultural paradise maintains the ideological and structural imperatives of the United States. Thus, the political and cultural manipulation that occurs on and through these Black women is in service to nationalist rhetoric. As my interlocutor and reality-show gossip companion, Makiyah Holder, has said, *Love Island USA* serves as an almanac of the political and cultural moments occurring in the country. Thus, the *Villa* acts as an experimental incubator for how to package and sell violent rhetoric of misogynoir to an avid viewing public poised to consume.

Placing Spillers (1987) and Bailey (2021) together, misogynoir thus becomes the vocabulary that is violently pressed into the flesh of the Black women Islanders the moment they are selected for the *Villa*. Misogynoir appears throughout the structure of the show and in the viewing culture and receptive practices of the show's audiences. From the ways Black women's narratives are fashioned to the structural hierarchies determining desire, misogynoir exists as an ecological imperative for *Love Island USA*. That is to say, the challenges, storylines, production,

and contestant behavior that make up *Love Island USA* operate through and with misogynoir as an a priori condition of their function. I utilize the language of ecology to reference Christina Sharpe's (2016) description of the effects of weather in her theorization of anti-Blackness and wake. She writes: "...the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is anti-Black. Furthermore, while the air of freedom might linger around the ship, it does not reach into the hold or attend the bodies in the hold" (104). The totality of the environment of the wake is structured by changes with and grows through anti-Blackness. Misogynoir on *Love Island USA* functions, similarly, indelibly shaping the spectacle and spontaneity of the show's live surveillance model. Black women arriving in Fiji, powered by the hope of breathing in the air of freedom, buoyed by the promise of love and long-lasting partnerships, are required to submit to the regime of misogynoir.

Accompanied by the gross misrecognition that is empowered by misogynoir, a reading of *Love Island USA* must also include a theoretical understanding of surveillance. The onto-epistemological incentives of misogynoir feed and influence a vast and all-consuming project of surveillance. In *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Simone Browne (2015) argues that the policing of Black people and Blackness is the bedrock for surveillance technologies in the United States. In extending how the ecosystem of the *Villa* is predicated on misogynoir and the theft of Black women's flesh, Browne's figuration of surveillance provides a helpful foundation for building a frame to decipher how it functions on *Love Island USA*. In this inquiry, surveillance (as a theoretical process) is categorized into four coinciding occurrences: *watching*, *listening*, *following*, and *rendering*. Watching is characterized as the vigilant, close monitoring of subjects with the intent of capture. This mode of looking is pervasive, as it seeks to consume the subject, rendering them perpetually visible and capturable. Next, *listening* shares practices with

watching; however, it captures the unseeable. Drawing on visual cultures scholar Tina Campt's (2017) notion of "listening to images," *listening* seeks access to "the affective registers through which... images enunciate alternate accounts of their subjects" (5). *Following* describes the spatio-temporality of the gaze/surveilling eye. It examines how surveillance processes trail and record subjects, monitoring their behaviors, actions, and movements throughout space.

Finally, *rendering* describes how surveillance synthesizes, determines, and defines a subject. Nicole Fleetwood's (2011) many definitions of *rendering* as the process of making or becoming somebody, as well as attending to its other meanings as "to give help; to translate; to deliver a verdict; to submit for consideration; to purify through extraction; to surrender something; to exchange or give something back," inform how *rendering* functions theoretically in this work (7). When Black women enter the line of sight, these four processes are mobilized to stare, eavesdrop, hunt, and overdetermine Black women subjects on two levels: the visual/representational and the social. Each feature of *Love Island*'s production structure exists to watch, listen, and follow, capturing contestants to render them through the misrecognizing gaze of misogynoir. This, in turn, informs the way that these dark-skinned Islanders perform. As this chapter will show, in *Love Island USA* season 6, both Serena Page and Jana Craig manage their performance of self with a hyperawareness of the surveilling eyes of the camera and their castmates. Heightened by the spectacle of reality television, both Page and Craig perform a form of respectability to shield themselves from the anti-Black misnomers that mark their flesh, while also attempting to succeed in the love-ritual challenges set forth by *Love Island USA*. Unfortunately, as this chapter will argue, these plural performances of self, do not in the end, shield them from the blows of misogynoir and ultimately serve as the gateways to public punishment on the show.

WELCOME TO LOVE ISLAND: Structure of *Love Island* and the Making of Season 6

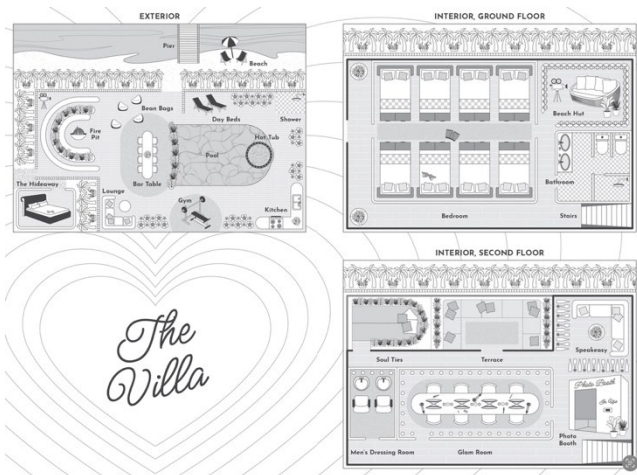


Figure 2. Diagram of the Love Island USA Villa



Figure 3. Exterior View of Love Island USA S6 Villa

Love Island USA season 6 ushered in a new era for the post-2020 Finding Love show. This show aired exclusively on the NBCUniversal-owned streaming service Peacock, five days a week from June to July of 2024 with a special reunion episode filmed in real time outside the Villa, which aired in August 2024. The season's success cannot be overstated, as it not only shifted engagement with this genre of televisual entertainment but also introduced a new type of reality star, a new language, and new ideas about love to the popular culture zeitgeist. *Love Island USA* brings ten "hot, young singles" (five men and five women) to a Villa in Fiji, where they enjoy a 5-week summer vacation, getting to know one another in hopes of making a connection.

In *Love Island USA*'s world, an individual's ability to form and maintain a partnership—to "couple"—both ensures the individual's safety from elimination and gives them access to the varied resources in the *Villa*. Whether determined by the contestants, the viewing public, or the "*Love Island Gods*" (a term alluding to production decision-makers), the first order of business is for "Islanders" to pair up. Once established as a couple, the two sleep in the same bed, participate

in challenges, and pull each other for chats⁷ to deepen their connections. As the Islanders spend their days lounging in swimsuits at their summer mansion, they engage in a variety of challenges, most of which are explicit and physical. Sexually charged challenges are a key part of the show's design across all franchises. Additional activities include group events like “Casa Amor,” a week-long challenge meant to test established connections; “Movie Night,” which utilizes footage caught on *Villa* cameras to expose hidden truths; and the “Heart Rate” challenge, which calls for all contestants to dress in sexy costumes and perform provocatively with fellow contestants who are then tested to determine whose heart rates are triggered by whom. As connections form, other opportunities for side quests occur, like the “Hideaway” that furnishes rare alone time for the happy couple selected to spend a night there. Such challenges are integral to the show's storytelling and appear across the *Love Island* universe.

Like their UK counterparts, American Islanders are completely cut off from smartphones, families, and community connections. They must build alliances, relationships, and bonds with one another to survive on the show. On *Love Island USA*, when the cast is solidified, the contestants are flown to Fiji, where they are sequestered in a hotel room devoid of smartphones, clocks, or any other means of communication that would connect them to the outside world, whether spatially, socially, or temporally. The goal of this type of confinement is to allow producers to control these subjects and begin the world-building process that will then be actualized in the *Villa* proper. Contestants are placed in a hold that robs them of their lived realities, replacing what they knew with reality and temporality determined by the *Villa*. Making these people epistemically vulnerable allows for the complete usurpation of their comfort and for

⁷ “Pulling someone for a chat” consists of an Islander asking another Islander to talk in private. These chats usually see these Islanders moving away from the group to a more secluded or sequestered area to talk. These chats are the way Islanders get to know one another, have deep and vulnerable conversations and sometimes debrief on drama happening in the house

the production of malleable/fungible bodies that production subsequently molds into avatars poised to spar and swoon in the *Villa*.

Time is not just manipulated for the Islanders; it is altered for viewers as well. Though the Islanders are filmed 24 hours a day, that day is heavily edited to fit into an episode about an hour long each night. Days are often stretched or shortened to match the cinematic narrative the “*Love Island Gods*” are trying to curate. While the Islanders are in the Villa for an estimated 42 days, approximately 30 of those days are filmed and aired. Episodes can span multiple days, or a day/night can span multiple episodes. For example, an event like “Movie Night” occurs only one night in the Villa; however, it may appear over several nights to viewing audiences. Such manipulation allows drama to be extended beyond the window of its occurrence. Thus, allowing *Villa* producers to garner more engagement with the show. The frequency of the episodes also leads audiences to become overfamiliar with the different contestants they see on screen.

As this thesis argues, anti-Blackness and misogynoir are seemingly the only social features that maintain viability despite the hermetic confines of the *Villa* are. Notwithstanding the construction of an entirely new world, the basic grammar of misogynoir and anti-Blackness persists. Once production has decided who will be members of the first and most prominent cohort of contestants to enter the Villa—with each new season referred to as the OG Islanders (appropriating the term from Black colloquial vernacular for Original Gangsta)—production releases them into their lavish new summer home.

While in the Villa, contestants are surveilled by over 80 deliberately hidden CCTV cameras placed around the expansive open-concept architecture (including some placed in the bathrooms), an on-ground camera crew equipped with human-operated traditional television cameras, and a production crew of over 400 people with personnel being split between the Villa,

an offsite hotel, and post-production and editing locales (Yandoli 2024). Production controls all aspects of life in the Villa. As the only people with access to the accurate date and time, freedom of movement, and personal space, production decision-makers—the *Love Island* Gods—have truly deity-level control over Islanders: deciding when the day begins and ends, when and what people eat and drink, and how relationships develop between Islanders. Islanders are surveilled around the clock, watched keenly by high-definition nighttime cameras as they slumber. Not even the perceived pitch-Black darkness of forcibly shared domiciles grants contestants cover to talk or physically engage discreetly, let alone unintelligibly. The Islanders share a large bedroom lined wall-to-wall with equidistant full-sized beds, where individuals sleep next to the person with whom they have been coupled. Whereas the show begins with ten individuals organized into five couples, the configurations of couples may change as the season progresses. Each bed has microphones attached that pick up all manner of communication or activity (including fornication). Throughout time in the Villa, obstacles will arise from the introduction of new single contestants ("Bombshells") and recouplings, in which established couples must either stay coupled with their partner or choose someone new. In the end, the goal of this love game is to find one's true love connection, gain the love and popularity of the viewing public, and win a \$100,000 cash prize.

Love Island USA season 6 was a watershed moment for the franchise, setting historical precedents in viewership, overall economic returns, and cultural and sociopolitical impact. These successes were due in part to deliberate efforts to boost the American franchise's popularity. Season 6 introduced a variety of upgrades that created a break in form, revitalizing and transforming the homestead by taking it abroad and widening the show's popularity and reach. Prior to 2024's season 6 debut, *Love Island USA* was a rather mediocre edition of the

franchise. Unlike other *Love Island* franchises, the early seasons of *Love Island USA* were not set “abroad.” While season 1 was set in Fiji, season 2 took place in Los Angeles, season 3 in Las Vegas, and season 4 in Hawaii. However, this pattern shifted in 2023 when the Villa moved back to Fiji for season 5 (DeGrushe 2026). Alongside this shift, producers from the very successful UK franchise were embedded in the US production team. For season 6, the Villa moved to a new location on the Mamanuca group of Islands in Fiji. The Villa was expanded for the 2024 season with a separate Hideaway, equipped with a private bathroom, a larger bed, a closet full of sex toys, and a hot tub.

In 2024, *Love Island USA* hired reality TV veteran Ariana Madix as the new host. Madix, star of the famed Bravo Network show *Vanderpump Rules*, had recently left that show following a notorious cheating scandal involving her then-longtime partner, Tom Sandoval, having an affair with her on-screen best friend Raquel Leviss. Madix’s performance of what fans perceived as righteous indignation with her ex-friend and ex-partner at that season’s reunion made her a fan favorite and primed her for selection as the host of *Love Island USA*. This was bound to benefit the show due to Madix’s name recognition and *Vanderpump Rules*’ considerable audience. With the Villa’s outward-facing image altered for the 6th season, the Islanders needed their own special edge as well. Enter that season’s casting coup, Kordell Beckham, younger brother of NFL Hall of Famer and Miami Dolphins wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr. In the US version of the show, Beckham was the first quasi-celebrity cast on the island. His presence changed the dynamics not only within the show, as his name was recognized across the cast, but also drew a new viewing public. While celebrity siblings are not uncommon in reality television, Kordell Beckham’s partnership with Serena Page, a social media manager from Houston, TX, generated significant buzz. These changes primed *Love Island USA* season 6 for a new kind of popularity.

The addition of Islanders Jana Craig, a day-trader from Las Vegas, and Leah Kateb, an influencer from Bell Canyon, both of whom became close friends with Serena Page, created a deeply bonded trio, popularly referred to as PPG⁸, that won the hearts of viewers as well.

Before delving further into the unique aspects of *Love Island* season 6, it is important to discuss the timeline leading up to it. Prior to the fifth season's airing in July 2023, two former *Love Island USA* producers at the Villa, Jasmine Crestwell and Alex Rinks, filed a lawsuit against NBCUniversal Media (Wenger 2023). The two former employees stated that NBCUniversal and the production teams they hired fostered an unhealthy, unsafe, and coercive workplace environment. Amid accusations of unsanitary conditions and other Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) violations observed on set, Crestwell and Rinks made troubling claims about the nefarious work culture curated by production decision-makers. Crestwell and Rinks allege that producers routinely coerced women contestants to engage sexually with men on the show despite their apprehension or misgivings. Furthermore, the two pointed to the systemic disqualification of dark-skinned Black women on the show, specifically Sereniti Springs, who participated in the fourth season of *Love Island USA*.

Sereniti Springs (28) was a bartender from New Orleans, Louisiana who began *Love Island* season four as an OG Islander. Throughout her time on the show, Springs wore her heart on her sleeve, genuinely trying to make connections with different men in the Villa. She was bubbly and witty, continually trying to communicate her needs to potential partners. Her most prominent and “long-lasting” coupling in the villa was with a Black man named Chazz Bryant (21), a personal trainer from Clifton, New Jersey. Bryant entered the Villa as a Bombshell after

⁸ PPG stands for Powerpuff Gang. The name is a reference to the Cartoon Network show *The Powerpuff Girls* created by Craig McCracken. Each of the three women were given the Powerpuff girl with whom their personality matches best. Jana Craig represented the character Bubbles, Serena Page represented Buttercup, and Leah Kateb represented Blossom. The three women opted for “gang” as opposed to “girls” because they felt it matched them better.

the first week of the show, and he and Sereniti connected quickly. At Bryant's first recoupling, he paired up with Springs. Although their relationship seemed to start well, things became rocky, with communication blips that caused some tension between them. However, just when their relationship seemed to settle, a white bombshell, Katherine "Kat" Gibson (25), entered the Villa. Despite giving his reassurance that Springs was still his priority, Bryant re-coupled with Gibson, leaving Springs single, and she was eliminated the following day. This re-coupling and Springs' subsequent elimination so early in the game prompted an outpouring of support from fans, with some very upset about her fate.

In their lawsuit, Crestwell and Rink alleged that "*Love Island USA*" producers prevented a Black contestant, Sereniti Springs, from succeeding on the show by barring her from making connections with male cast members (Wenger 2023). While Islanders in seasons to follow would state that production cannot directly tell them what to do, but rather only suggest and ask questions, Crestwell and Rinks allege that production's stake in individual decision-making is not a completely hands-off affair. It can be inferred that the two former producers are stating that production interfered with Springs' ability to find a new partner. Crestwell and Rinks motion to a structural issue that proliferates at every level of production, from those on the ground to those in casting to those in the executive offices. Further, the two also allege that when Crestwell brought up her fear that Springs was being systematically disadvantaged by producers, "...the executive producer Sophie Bush told Crestwell, 'We are protecting her because we know none of the boys on the show like her, and we would hate to see her get rejected'" (Wenger 2023). Through her statements, Bush implies that Sereniti's treatment on the show was not prejudicial but rather protective. These patronizing comments from Sophie Bush highlight the problem with Finding Love shows. Crestwell and Rinks's proposed institutional sabotage of Springs seemingly points

to a structural impetus to create a dynamic in which a contestant would have no other contestants who “like her”. Being single on *Love Island USA* is not a stable position, not only for one’s continued presence on the island, but also for getting basic necessities on the show. How the show predicated on coupling up would allow for such oversight to happen exposes how integral misogynoir is to *Love Island USA*’s framework. Moreover, the ones who hold this position are dark-skinned Black women.

Not all Black women on *Love Island USA* are discarded preemptively, as was the case with Springs in season four. In some cases, Black women remain on the show and even win. For example, Justine Ndiba and her partner, Caleb Coreprew, made history as the first Black couple to win *Love Island* in the franchise when they won season 2 of USA, also known as the COVID-19 season. Ndiba and Coreprew’s journey on the show was drama-filled; nevertheless, the two seemed to have found love. Three months after their win, however, the two announced their split, and speculations about why proliferated across social media. While there is no direct confirmation of what happened, there is a general sense from Ndiba that she was not given a proper heads-up about her former partner’s background, which led to her heartbreak afterward. The willingness of production to play games with the experiences of the Black women on screen exemplifies the misogynoir that undergirds their positions on the show. While the results of the Crestwell and Rinks civil lawsuit have yet to be made public, their claims offer a behind-the-scenes look into the decision-making practices of the *Love Island* Gods – providing a rare glimpse into the mechanisms of production that usually remain invisible. *Love Island USA* comes into being specifically through the degradation and humiliation of Black women. What is unique about season 6, however, is that several key moments break the script and expose the underlying mechanisms that create the anti-Black landscape of the *Villa*.

BEFORE CASA:

Serena

At the beginning of every season, *Love Island USA*'s audience is introduced to cast members through short introductory vignettes typical of the reality TV format. In each vignette, the Islander shares their name and details about their background, love life, and sexual preferences. The statements made in each contestant's unique introduction elucidate how each individual's narrative arc is being molded by production. In the first episode of the season, these vignettes are edited alongside the live 24/7 camera footage of the contestants' initial arrival at the Villa and their first meetings as new Islanders. As one of the first contestants to enter the Villa for season 6, Serena Page was the first to be introduced on the show. Gold neon lights flash as the name Serena cascades across the screen. "Husband, where are you?" A voice bellows as the camera zooms out, revealing the 24-year-old seated, staring into the camera, flipping her neatly parted boho knotless braids over her shoulder. The camera immediately cuts to footage of Page in a neon yellow bikini, strutting, twerking, and dancing sensually on a beach, presumably in Fiji. Serena introduces herself as a 24-year-old Social Media Planner from Houston, Texas, looking to start her love story. She shares her preferences and discloses that prior to the show, she had been "extremely unlucky in love". The show then presumably becomes the pathway to bettering that luck with love. As the introductory sequence continues, Page shares that her past partners either "love-bombed" her or loved her for a brief amount of time before "ghosting or cheating" on her. In this moment, Page's misfortune in love becomes a biographical marker. A calling card. A way to identify her as and through the structures of the *Villa*. That is, the circumstances that led her to even go in for the interview to be on the show become integral markers of how she personally interacts with her fellow contestants and inform the mechanics of

the show. This series of unfortunate relationships is situated in this sequence to identify Page as the ideal candidate for the transformative project that is the *Villa*.

Early in the season, Serena pairs up with 21-year-old Kordell Beckham, the model from Dallas, Texas. The two coupled up in the first episode after they kissed and chose each other during the introductory challenge “Icebreakers.” (Night 1, Episode 1) Early in their courtship, Serena made it clear that she was interested in a romantic relationship with Kordell; however, she needed them to slow down. She insisted they be in a friendship first. This type of coupling ensures an Islander’s safety from elimination but allows for a platonic distancing not usually granted in a normative couple. Expressing her discomfort with the speed at which her relationship with Beckham is supposed to progress, Page pushes back against the temporal imperatives of *Villa* time. Instead, she asserts her need for more time and space, explaining to her partner and the viewing audience that she is a “slow burner.”

Slow Burn, or the slow-burn trope, is common in the romance genre of literature and film. Rather than taking the audience through a whirlwind of nursery fables, “*love, marriage and the baby carriage*,” the slow burn features characters whose love story builds gradually over time. Serena explains to Kordell that she needs more time for her feelings to grow before she becomes more physically and intimately involved. In the outside world, this sort of conversation with a person you met no less than a week prior would not be taboo; however, in the *Villa*, Serena’s agent- driven proposition destabilizes that world order. As imperial schemas do, the *Villa*’s social and financial success lies in the *Villa* producers' ability to speculate on the Islanders' futures. Producers alter space and control time to ensure “entertaining” results that keep audiences tuned in every day. In “Stolen Life, Stolen Time” scholar Tao Leigh Goffe (2022) critiques European imperial temporalities positing the “standardization of time” was an

attempt to order global and “universal” time to London time “in order to secure and underwrite the power of coloniality” (112). The *Villa* and *Villa* producers set out to “standardize” the internal clocks of the Islanders first through stealing their sense of time and reorienting them within the temporal strictures of the show’s 6-week airing. Thus, *Villa* time becomes the universal “standard” time for the Islanders. The moment Serena asserts her identification with the slow-burn trope, she ruptures the temporal project of the *Villa*. By slowing down, she takes back the time speculated on by the imperial *Villa* and thus lives in a Black temporal landscape. Put differently, Page’s slow burn refuses how time is supposed to function in the *Love Island Villa* in the way that Blackness alters temporal governance, as Blackness exists in/out/against time.

Woven into Serena’s assertions of the slow burn is the dual awareness of her position as the surveilled. She is acutely aware of how she is being surveilled and rendered for a live viewing audience. Knowing that she is being watched and has thus become a representative of Black women, Serena is hyperaware of how she appears on camera. Though not said directly in her slow-burn propositions, the anxieties of appearing as a reiteration of controlling misogynoir stereotypes (Sapphire, Jezebel, Mammy) are apparent in Serena’s hyper-attention to being watched. As I have mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, Black women on *Finding Love* broadcasts are performing themselves in multiple ways onscreen. This performance comprises the “doing” of their gendered and racialized bodies and a spectacular ritual of heterosexual dating they perform simultaneously for the larger viewing public. Moreover, the state of being watched in this way as Black women renders them representational models of Black womanhood. This representation or speculative performance exists through and against scripts of misogynoir informing viewing and performing practices. For Serena, this representational weight

compels her to alter how she is rendered in the frame to avoid the social branding of controlling images. By asserting that she does not want to be physical outside of *Villa*-mandated challenges, she also plays offense in avoiding the tracking eyes that seek to brand and sell her through stereotypes.

Serena does not come into this awareness without the lived knowledge of being surveilled by the world. She expresses this understanding when she jovially remarks on her “mama watching [the show]” in the moments before Casa Amor, when she and Kordell kissed outside of the mandated challenges. This statement brings to life the genealogies and disciplining practices that inform anxieties around performance. When Serena refers to her mother watching her on the broadcast, her performance becomes a reflection of all Black mothers’ ability to raise children who “act right”. This disciplining logic is, of course, instructed through a surveilling anti-Blackness *and* misogynoir. So, in reinstating the ideas of a punitive gaze through her mama, Serena performs a sort of self-disciplining that relegates her to a performance of respectability. Page’s “slow burner” declaration could serve as what Simone Browne calls a “dark souvaillant” practice that serves as a way to cope with the violence of misogynoir and being hunted by the surveilling cameras. However, what it also uncovered is the way misogynoir impacts Serena’s ability to practice romantic and sexual autonomy within the *Villa*.

Serena’s declaration of slow-burner status was a temporal and performative refusal of the *Villa*’s imperial imperatives that placed her in a precarious spot, as *Love Island USA* primes contestants to burn hot and heavy from the early days. Although she and Kordell agreed that taking it at Serena’s pace was the best option, her refusal to follow the coercive timeline of the *Villa* placed Page in opposition both to the show’s audience and to the other men on the show. While other Islanders do not have as many misgivings about being intimate as cameras watch,

listen, and follow, Serena is adamant about "taking things slow," thus creating the diegetically disseminated narrative that she is leading Kordell on. This narrative is thus what undergirds the pathway to Casa Amor.

Jana

The second Black woman the audience meets in Season 6 came running into the Villa with a bright and beautiful smile. As Jana Craig enters the Villa, she yells in excitement upon seeing the other girls. Immediately, Jana locks eyes with Serena, the only other Black girl in the room. The two run toward each other and embrace like old friends. As the two hug, they exchange compliments and walk hand in hand into the Villa. This early sign of kinship cements the foundation of their relationship. As her vignette begins, her name flashes in white neon light as the screen lights up, and the color-clad room comes into view as a figure walks in, facing away from the camera, gasping in disbelief at the sight she encounters.

A dark-skinned Black woman in a short white bodycon dress and wand-curved Black hair walks to the back of the frame before turning her face to the front, saying to the camera, "Hey! Get my good side." Before finding her place seated at the front of the frame, Craig leaps in the back, saying jovially, "I'm single," showing the audience her more tongue-in-cheek, humorous side. Jana Craig introduces herself as a 27-year-old day trader on the foreign exchange market and a military brat. Craig states that while she mainly grew up in Hawaii (and lived in Las Vegas at the time), she grew up all over Asia as her family moved wherever her parent were stationed. She proclaims she is someone who "loves love" and says that sharing what she is willing to do for love is "crazy." She relays anecdotes from her dating past and tries to make sense of why she is still single. Craig notes, "I'm independent, I pay my taxes on time, I mind my business, my credit score is 807; I have no idea why I'm single," as she shares these statements about herself,

B-roll footage of her in a bright red bikini on the beaches of Fiji is cut into view. She stares into the camera as the lens pans down her body. The camera cuts back to Craig, seated, as she continues and half-jokingly says, “No one's perfect, but I'm the closest.” It can be presumed that the show will serve as a place to resolve this seemingly illogical state of singledom. In the final moments of her introductory vignette, Craig shares an earnest plea about being in her late 20s and wanting a marriage-minded partner she can settle down with. Unfortunately for Jana, her earnest desire for partnership is weaponized by the mechanisms of the *Villa*. What is an ordinary dating anxiety transforms into a biographical marker for Craig within the game of the *Villa*. This seemingly perpetual singledom and anxieties about finding a serious relationship become the criteria by which she is deemed eligible for the *Villa*.

After the introductory *Love Island* challenge, “Icebreakers,” Jana is paired with 28-year-old African-American school district administrator Coye Simmons. (Night 1, Episode 1) Simmons's biographical marker during his time on the show was his above-average height of 6'8. Perhaps more concerning is his emphatic reliance on defining himself through these biometrics. Being tall, dark-skinned, and physically fit, Simmons consistently defined himself through the fetishistic rhetoric of his perceived sexual vitality due to his largesse. During their third night in the Villa, two new bombshells, including 28-year-old PR specialist Connor Newsum appeared (Night 3, Episode 2). As the bombshells were getting to know the OG Islander girls, Jana said she was locked in with Coye and that it would take a lot for her to turn her head. In his side conversation with the boys, Simmons' sentiments mirrored those of Craig's; however, he centered the stability of their relationship around his height and the perceived sexual prowess he possesses because of it, remarking “She ain't going nowhere.” At the end of the following day, Jana and Coye discuss their relationship, agreeing that it was stable and they

could almost be considered exclusive. This confidence fades as Craig notices that Simmons was not putting forth the effort to get to know her in the same way she was. Unlike the other men in the Villa, Simmons was not pulling her for chats, showing her affection, or engaging her meaningfully as a prospective partner. Simultaneously, Jana and Connor had their private chat and realized they align in their love for reading, their desire for their partner to be their best friend, and their goal of finding a serious relationship. At the next opportunity to re-couple, Jana chooses to dump Coye and partner up with Connor (Night 4, Episode 3).

When Newsum decides to set his romantic sights on Islander Leah Ketab, he begins to distance himself from Craig. Despite assuring Jana that their connection is very strong, he tells Leah a different story. At the next re-coupling, Connor chooses to partner with Leah, stating that his connection to Leah is the “strongest connection” he has felt since entering the Villa, that the connection feels “effortless,” and that it was “not a difficult decision” to dump Jana to partner with her (Night 10, Episode 10). His confession caught Jana off guard, prompting confusion about where that negative energy was coming from. Latent in Newsum’s statements are microaggressions rooted in misogynoir. He attributes his lack of candor in conversations with Craig to her being overbearing and hard to be with. As Brandon Davis (2023) states there are various terms that have been attached to Black women's flesh "to legitimize its living abjection" (155) Though subtly, Connor’s characterization of Jana sought to mark her as someone worthy of his maltreatment of her. By using the language taken from the repertoire of misogynoir, he rendered Jana as racial-sexual abject, as repulsive, contributing to the narrative *Villa* producers doctored to curate an image of Jana as someone who ostensibly cannot keep a partner. Instead of directing the narrative to the behaviors of her past partners, the show sets Craig up to be misunderstood as overbearing and hyperemotional, repeating the patterns seen with past

Islanders like Sereniti Springs. The underlying sentiments of this re-coupling are codified the next day when the Islanders are charged with eliminating someone from the island – and Jana is up for elimination.

In the latter half of episode 12 of *Love Island USA* season 6, host Ariana Madix declares that America voted for the strongest couples: those not among them were up for elimination. This elimination would see one boy and one girl dumped from the island, determined by Islander vote (Night 11, Episode 12). Unfortunately, Craig landed in the camp of those up for elimination. When the women Islanders met to decide whom to dump, it was almost unanimous that Jana would stay in the Villa. Notwithstanding the interventions of the *Villa* producers, the women understood that Jana was not single of her own volition. The women are steadfast in keeping Craig, as they recognize that she has gotten what they call “the shit end of the stick” in her previous connections. Unwittingly, in their assertions about how Jana has experienced her “love journey” on the show, they notice the misogynoir scaffolding the *Villa*’s structure. Dramatic music plays when the Islanders render their decision. The boys selected 29-year-old African-American fitness coach Hakeem White, and the girls decide to dump Andrea Carmona partnered with the 24-year-old snake wrangler, Robert “Rob” Rausch-for removal. Outrage reverberates through the Villa as the boy Islanders set their sights on the girls in defense of Rob. Despite not using her name directly, the boys erupt in a chorus of “How could you be so stupid?” and “There was an obvious choice, and you all know that.” Craig is beside herself in tears, breaking down because she knows the boys' comments refer to her. The boys continue to yell about how the logical move was to vote out the person who “nobody liked,” as they did when expelling Hakeem. In a confessional interview during the ordeal, Rob expresses his sheer disappointment about the departure of his new paramour. He decries the establishment of the *Villa*, claiming that

“the system failed her [Andrea].” Latent in this statement is the idea that Jana should be discarded, as the structures should not have kept her in the Villa. The men on the Island again cast Craig as racially and sexually abject. As racial-sexual abject she is the “obvious” choice to meet their end on the show. As Brandon Davis (2023) states in his description of the anti-Black logics that frame Black women’s existence as public women⁹, “...the transgressions beset upon her, and even her death, are seen as restorative to the social order” (155). Though the boy Islanders did not wish to physically harm Craig, her elimination was propositioned as restorative to the order of the *Villa* as she was “obviously” undesired. Thus, her very continuance as someone cast as racial-sexual abject, and thus undesirable, threw into peril an entire ecosystem of how the *Villa* should function. The girl Islanders’ choice to keep Jana and the boy Islanders’ explosive reaction shows the tension between the will of the *Love Island* Gods being undercut by the impositions of cast members who notice - possibly inadvertently- how misogynoir has impacted their peer’s time in the Villa. The narratives around her abjection conjured in the first segment of the season inform Jana Craig’s time during Casa Amor.

CASA AMOR:

Casa Amor is a staple of the *Love Island* franchise that stands as the ultimate test of loyalty between the couples on the show. The episodes of *Love Island USA* season 6 featuring *Casa Amor* are an important aspect of my analysis, as Casa Amor illustrates how the ecosystem of misogynoir operates within the *Love Island Villa*. Through the specific targeting of these women’s connections, manipulation of the landscape of the *Villa*, and a zooming in on their reactions, it becomes clear that the goal of the *Villa* is to punish and discipline these Black

⁹ Davis names that Black women have been made spectacles of in public and in private. When framing Black women as “public women”, Davis attempts to grasp the ways in which during slavery and its afterlives Black women are ungended in the public sphere. This ungending justifies their brutal and grotesque treatment and deaths. (Davis 2023, 155)

women. Moreover, it is through Casa Amor that Jana and Serena's harm, embarrassment, and degradation become fodder that solidifies their status as celebrities. The Casa Amor challenge occurs approximately halfway through the season. During Casa Amor, the OG Islanders are separated by gender, with one group placed in the Casa Amor Villa adjacent to the original Villa (i.e., the OG Villa). Once separated, 10 more "hot, new Bombshells" (five men and five women) arrive and are split between the OG Villa and Casa Amor Villa. These Casa Bombshells will try to hook up with an OG Islander in the hopes of finding a connection, staying in the original Villa, and possibly winning the \$100,000 prize. The existing Villa couples will have a week to test the strength of their partnerships before ultimately deciding whether to stay together or recouple with a Casa Bombshell. Like the OG Villa, the Casa Amor Villa is fully equipped with CCTV cameras and microphones to monitor and record interactions. This season, the Casa Amor twist allowed the OG Islander boys to vote on whether they should commence the challenge or not. By a unanimous vote, the Islander boys took the experiences and commenced the challenge. (Day 17, Episode 19) Throughout their time in Casa Amor, both Serena and Jana are set up by production to experience both televisual and personal harm.

At the time of Casa Amor, Jana Craig is newly coupled with Kenny Rodríguez, a 24-year-old accounts manager from the Bronx. Although they had not known each other for long, the two agreed that their connection was strong and that they had little interest in seeing other people. Rodriguez and Craig would agree again, out of a shared sense of loyalty, while understanding that Casa is the place for each of them to explore. To the viewing audience, it appeared that the two would stay loyal to one another, as Kenny even leaves behind clothing for Jana to hold on to, covered in his cologne, before heading to the Casa Amor. On the Page and Beckham front, the two were settling into their pairing. The night preceding the Casa Amor

departure, Kordell and Serena discuss boundaries and promise to respect each other as they explore new relationships in Casa Amor. After the show's conclusion, Page and Beckham revealed that they had exchanged rings¹⁰. This exchange was not aired to viewers, yet it adds needed context to the Casa Amor events. An equally noteworthy shift in dynamic occurred for Kordell and Serena as they were more physically intimate with one another the night before Casa Amor. These moments are narratively set up as primers for the spectacle of the punishments both Serena and Jana face in and after the Casa Amor challenge.

Serena and Kordell

The terms of respectfully exploring other connections in Casa Amor that Serena and Kordell negotiated prior to the challenge commencing were not adhered to on Kordell's behalf. There, he was immediately pursued by Daia McGhee, a 27-year-old travel blogger from Los Angeles. In her introductory vignette, Daia explicitly states that she intends to partner with Kordell, saying she would be a better match for the 21-year-old model (Day 17, Episode 19). The landscape of Casa Amor becomes the arena to coordinate that desire, and thus her attraction to him becomes her biographical marker on the show. McGhee is lighter skinned with hair in a loose curl pattern; she is bubbly, soft-spoken, and flirtatiously straightforward. In their early conversations, McGhee notes that Beckham needs a partner who can match his energy, something he has apparently lacked in his relationship with Serena. What is subtle in Daia's verbiage is an expression of a willingness to engage romantically that is absent in Serena as a self-identified "slow burner." In seeking a connection with Beckham, Daia positions Serena's boundaries as a lack of care for him in the partnership. By rendering the mutually slowed intimacy as an inequitable partnership, Page's behavior is not only reified as undermining the

¹⁰ Beckham and Page mention this in their post-Villa appearance on the *Baby, This Is Keke Palmer* Podcast hosted by multi-hyphenate entertainer Keke Palmer (2024).

show's process but also characterized as a personal moral failure. McGhee's language is echoed by the OG Villa Boys, who have been decrying Page's boundaries for leading Beckham on, bringing him undue stress, and making him change who he is. 27-year-old OG Islander Kendall Washington led the charge, commending Kordell for finding someone like Daia who allows him "to be himself." The literal and theoretical vocabularies that both Daia and the OG Villa boys use render Serena's flesh and behavior as abject. Harkening back to Spiller's formation of an American Grammar, despite her maneuvering through the plural performance of respectability, Serena is still unable to escape the pervasive anti-Black markings on her theoretical flesh. The reestablishment of her position as a racial-sexual abject in these narrative moments primes her for the humiliation and punishment that follow.

Beckham chose to partner up with McGhee, enamored by their conversations. Going against his vows to Serena, Daia, and Kordell, the two clandestinely steal passionate kisses during night one of Casa Amor. The camera tracks their movements as microphones pick them up, capturing multiple angles and the rattle of their whispers. This display of affection continues in the Casa Amor Villa, with them becoming more frequent and visible to the other Villa Boys, who jeer and encourage it. As their love affair intensifies, the CCTV cameras watch, listen, and follow the pair, capturing every lingering kiss, every barely spoken whisper, and every wandering hand. These stolen moments culminate in a compromising show of intimacy occurring as the couple is getting ready to get out of bed (Day 19, Episode 21) Beckham and McGhee were waking up. Daia appears to be straddling Kordell with a white duvet covering their bodies. Maintaining this stance, the two embrace and kiss as the CCTV camera above their bed's backboard zooms in on the movement beneath the duvet. The camera tracks the covered movement of Kordell's hands to hold and fondle Daia's butt. In this position, both McGhee and

Beckham simulate intimate movements that mimic the covert performance of sexual acts for less than 5 seconds before the camera cuts away. In the next instant, the camera cuts back to the two, the duvet pushed back, revealing their bodies in the same embrace as they share how excited they are to spend time together, exchanging small kisses between their morning greetings. The moment was somewhat innocuous in its full playback, as the whole interaction did not last more than 20 seconds total on screen. However, the *Villa* production team and the storylines they had been curating rendered the interaction as compromising. The less-than-5-second touch became a pornographic display of public intercourse that production used in the secret segment, “Video Mail.” “Video Mail” is when OG Islanders are sent videos by production of what their partner is doing in the Casa Amor Villa. The goal is to get them to see if witnessing what their partner does when faced with temptation will alter how they navigate the *Love Island USA* experience.

Daia and Kordell were not the only couple to engage in public displays of passionate closeness. 27-year-old Englishman, Aaron Evans and his *Casa* partner, 22-year-old Daniela Ortiz-Rivera, were incredibly intimate from their first night in Casa Amor. That same morning, the cameras filmed them in a similar position with Daniella straddling Aaron's back to cajole him awake. Evans and Ortiz-Rivera were captured kissing, touching, exchanging secret handshakes, and engaging in intimate interactions at night. The couple's actions may have been marketed as salacious, but *Villa* production does not take and misread their movements out of context. However, because both McGhee and Beckham are Black, their actions are not surveilled and captured in the same way. As Achille Mbembe (2001) delineates in *On the Postcolony*, surveillance serves the citizen. Moreover, Black Islander's citizenship within the *Villa* is already imperiled based on their Blackness. Thus, the producers are not just stirring up and sharing out drama; they are curating storylines that overdetermine every action as an incursion. This is clear

in the depictions of Daniella versus Daia. Ortiz-Rivera effectively went further intimately on camera with Evans than McGhee and Beckham; however, because McGhee is a Black woman, her actions are overdetermined as excessive¹¹. Thus, Daia is rendered onscreen through narratives of misogynoir branding her flesh, allowing audiences to burden her with the marker of Jezebel.

Meanwhile, back in the OG Villa, Serena is seen experiencing a wave of emotions. While the burgeoning Casa love story developed between McGhee and Beckham, Page was in the original Villa, missing Beckham. In the early days of Casa Amor, she opened herself up to exploring a connection with a couple of Casa boys; however, her mind kept wandering back to Kordell. Page confides in Jana Craig, sharing her fear and anxiety about being hurt by Beckham. Serena is adamant that ultimately, she just “wants her man.” While she is not afraid to be vulnerable in front of her friends, her hyperawareness of the cameras gives her pause. On one occasion, she is seen lying on the floor in the girls' dressing room between fellow OG Villa girls Olivia “Liv” Walker and Kaylor Martin. As she lies, we hear her share her desire to just be with Kordell, overshadowed by her anxiety about how Casa may change their relationship. In an instant, Page begins to cry, saying, “I know I’m just gonna look so stupid.” Page had even forgone sleeping in bed with the Casa Bombshell she was partnered with even in a cursory way to sleep outside in Soul Ties, a large daybed on the Villa's exterior patio. The *Villa* producers stoke the emotional buildup we see from Page as they commence the looming side challenge, “Video Mail”.

¹¹ This overdetermined excessiveness is a reference to Nicole Fleetwood's (2011) notion of “excess flesh” which describes how “Black female corporeality is rendered as an excessive overdetermination and as overdetermined excess” (9)

The night of their third day at Casa Amor, “Video Mail” commences (Night 19, Episode 21). During this side quest, the Islanders left in the Villa receive a video of their partner's actions in Casa Amor. The videos are short, heavily edited clips meant to portray the Islanders in compromising positions. Kaylor Martin was the first to receive a text message on her show-sanctioned phone. As is customary for the show, she exclaims loudly enough for the rest of the cast to hear, “I got a text!” Martin receives a video message from her partner, Aaron, who is conversing with Daniela about the possibility of pursuing a connection. The video cuts off before Kaylor sees the two kiss. This message does not fully capture the intimacy Evans and Ortiz-Rivera shared up until that point in Casa Amor. The clip cuts off before Evans and Ortiz-Rivera share a kiss and does not capture the moments of intimacy earlier that morning.

Serena’s phone is the next to go off. Unlike Martin, she receives two videos from Casa Amor: one of Kordell and Daia kissing passionately on the first night, and the second, a cut-and-edited video portraying Kordell and Daia “humping” in bed from that third morning. The display and messaging were excessive. *Villa* production made a concerted effort to collect and display clips that would emotionally and mentally harm Page, who had already divulged how infidelity had marred her last relationships. In this moment, the structures of the *Villa* closed in on Page and ostensibly sought to punish her. Her rupture of *Villa*'s time and insistence on slowed physical intimacy outside of challenges engendered a narrative of Page as betraying the impetus of the show. Under the guise of exposing infidelity, *Villa* production created a scenario to exploit Page’s history and the televisual characterization they conjured of her, in the hopes that she would have an emotional outburst.

Serena, cognizant of the eyes on her, chooses instead to laugh with her friends Jana and Leah by calling them over to watch the videos together repeatedly in disbelief. Page is clearly

hurt and embarrassed by the videos sent to her. In the days that follow, we see Serena break down emotionally, continually hiding her tears from view. She reiterates how disrespected and embarrassed she feels.

Jana and Kenny

Jana Craig and Kenny Rodriguez, on the other hand, seem to maintain their boundaries throughout the Casa Amor ordeal. The two had Bombshells who wished to partner with them; however, the two refused to pursue these partnerships seriously. Craig found herself in a love triangle in which two Black contestants, Josiah Roebuck and Jacobi Graham, were vying for her attention and partnership. Josiah and Jacobi separately shared their observation of how Craig was treated on the show, declaring she did not deserve that treatment. Despite entertaining conversations with both Jacobi and Josiah, Craig ultimately decides that her partnership with Kenny Rodriguez is deeper and takes precedence over the Casa Amor boys. From that point on, Jana shares how she wished Casa Amor would end so she could return to Rodriguez.

Meanwhile, in the Casa Amor Villa, Kenny Rodriguez remarks that while he has found nice women during the challenge, no one matches the partner he found in Jana. As Casa Amor ended, it appeared that Kenny was having conversations with light-skinned Casa Amor Bombshell, Catherine Marshall. Despite several chats, the spark did not ignite between Kenny and Catherine, and it seemed that Kenny and Jana were headed back to each other. Unlike Serena, who received harsh repudiation for being a “slow burner,” Jana’s Casa Amor experience was more affirming. The Casa Bombshells, Josiah, and Jacobi, affirmed to her that it was apparent that she was getting the short end of the stick in the Villa experience. Additionally, her partner, Kenny Rodriguez, respectfully explored other connections, ultimately concluding that his first and only choice was Jana. In the duration of a challenge, the stereotypical portrayals that

rendered her undesirable and abject, which shrouded her representation on the show, were again called into question. The investments placed on casting that shadow over Jana were put in peril. After Casa Amor, the dynamics of how Jana is treated shift, continuing the *Villa*'s pattern of disciplining and degrading dark-skinned Islanders.

AFTER CASA

As Casa Amor comes to an end, the Casa Amor residents arrive back at the OG Villa for the much-awaited Casa Amor re-coupling (Night 20, Episode 22). Islanders will either recouple with their original Villa partner, match with their Casa partner, or choose to stay single. Seated around the fire pit, the Casa Amor contestants come back one by one as each decision is revealed in real time. As the first few couples enter the Villa, it appears to the OG Villa girls that the boys were not faithful to their relationships during the Casa Amor experience.

Jana and Kenny

When Jana's name is called, she chooses not to partner with any of the new boys brought for the experience, instead maintaining her partnership with Kenny. As I stated previously, Kenny had told the men during Casa that he was leaning more toward his relationship with Jana because he could not get her out of his mind. However, when he walks back into the OG Villa, he does so with Catherine. Upon observing the pair walking towards the group, Craig's face immediately drops. The camera zooms in for a close-up as Jana watches her partner walk in with a new girl. Livid and hurt, Craig announced to the group that she was done and would not continue the process any longer. Looking to the host Ariana Maddix, she requests that her suitcase be packed, affirming, "I wanna go home. I'm so fucking serious. I'm done. I'm tired of taking Ls. I'm done." This scene and re-coupling are particularly cruel. After everything Craig has experienced, she has been forced back into the same dynamic of being configured as

undesirable. When asked, Rodriguez could not articulate coherent reasoning for his coupling with Marshall. His inability to produce an answer highlights the possibility of producer influence in this decision. Her outright refusal of the *Villa* is illustrative of Craig's refusal to identify with the portrayal imposed upon her by the misogynoir of the *Villa*. The *Villa* apparatuses appear to be disciplining her for daring to want love or see herself as lovable. Though the two reconcile at the end of the season and make it into the top 3 couples, the invariable harm caused by the narrative spun about Jana's abjection and thus her supposed inherent "undesirability" throughout the season should not be ignored.

Serena and Kordell

When Serena's name is called, she refuses to re-couple with a Casa Amor Bombshell as well as with Kordell, no matter whom he brings back to the OG Villa. Her reason for doing so was her utter disgust at the way Kordell disrespected their relationship and the promises they had made to one another before the challenge. She opted to be single, which is, as Ariana Madix says, "one of the worst things to be on *Love Island*." Singledom on *Love Island* alters how and where you sleep, changes your status within the hierarchy of the *Villa*, and thus threatens your safety from expulsion.

Kordell returns with his Casa Amor partner, Daia, affirming their status as a couple. When Serena and Kordell meet again, Serena curses Kordell out with complete confidence and gusto in a moment that was etched into *Love Island USA* history. She scorns him for his disrespect for her and himself, ending the marathon speech with a middle finger, which she kisses and points to her behind.

The following day, the animosity continued, culminating in a scene that defined the season and cemented the show's popularity. Kordell and Serena have a major blowout on the

dock of the Villa (Night 21, Episode 24). The two yell back and forth, rehashing the betrayal from Casa Amor. Serena shares that she felt disrespected by the way Kordell chose to explore his connection with Daia. Kordell agreed that he was disrespectful and that she had every right to be angry about his betrayal. Before he had the chance to share more of his perspective, Serena walked away in tears, seething with anger and overcome with hurt. After this conversation, the OG boy Islanders gather around Kordell as surveillance cameras watch, zoom in, and pick up their whispered conversation. Kordell expresses that he understands the way Serena feels and that she is entitled to her anger. Huddled around one another, speaking in hushed tones, the OG boys take turns, sharing their misogynoir-drenched opinions on Serena's anger. Through their whispered dialogue, they render her uncontrollable and violent. Similar to how they characterized Jana when she faced elimination before Casa Amor, the OG boys pathologize Serena. The group takes turns remarking on how "unbecoming" Page's display of righteous indignation was. The group pleads with Kordell to dump her. Using the microaggressions in their artillery, the group renders Serena as a Sapphire. Islander Miguel Hairchi questions Kordell, asking "Is that how you want your future wife to behave?" The dialogue concludes with Kendall Washington saying that Beckham needs to "be a man" and let Serena go. Her emotional reaction to disrespect was policed by all these men. Illuminated by their misogynoir-dripped conference, they view Serena as not only unfit to be Kordell's partner, but as racial sexual abject also unfit to be partnered, period. Moreover, they pose that Beckham's swift dismissal of her would reconstitute his gendered performance or make him "a man." Thus, his gender is affirmed, and he comes of age through his dehumanizing disposal of her. Davis's postulations on the transgressions and death that befall Black women as "public women" are seen as restorative actions to maintain the social order return here (155). By positioning Kordell's imagined

discarding of Serena as man-making behavior the boy Islanders position the separation as restoring the hegemonic gendered order inside (and outside) the Villa. This chorus, in tandem with its close monitoring, exemplifies the dual nature of surveillance on Black women. The eyes of the *Love Island* Gods watched and followed as the Islander boys watched Serena, policing her actions (i.e., raised voice, pointed finger, scrunched face) and branded her a Sapphire, angry and emasculating.



Figure 2. Kordell and Serena Post Villa Photoshoot with Cosmopolitan

Over the course of a few days, Kordell and Serena had several conversations, with Kordell apologizing profusely for his lack of candor, his disrespect for their relationship, and for hurting her feelings. After this, the two rekindled, re-coupled, and eventually won the show's \$100K prize. Serena and Kordell have gone on to become celebrities in their own right, with spreads in legacy media glossy magazines like *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan*. Additionally, they have partnerships with well-known brands Cheez-It, CeraVe, Neutrogena, and Warby Parker, as well

as A-list celebrity friends including Tracee Ellis Ross, Rihanna, and Beyoncé. Serena and Kordell even had a brand deal with Lyft to get young people out to vote in the 2024 election.

In conclusion, *Love Island USA*'s season 6 exponentially boosted the show's social cachet and overall viewership, thereby thrusting the participants into a new space of celebrity. Although *Love Island USA*'s 6th season's microcosmic surveilling scheme churned out Black victors who transformed into sovereign social citizens in the outside world, Black subjects, especially Black women, are not afforded that access. Serena and Kordell's win set a precedent for a fundamental neoliberal misreading of *Love Island USA*. When the violence of surveillance and nationalist rhetoric is obfuscated and trafficked through the ambiguity of love, it becomes easier for audiences to accept them as viable social systems, justify their continuation, and become active agents of those same apparatuses. Season 6's contribution to the canon of *Love Island USA* is to establish the show as a staple of American reality television, specifically through the hyper-surveillance of dark-skinned Black women.

Chapter 5: Blackgirls Need Love Too: Blackgirlhood and Season 7



Figure 3. Olandria and Chelley Together Night 1 in the Villa

The previous chapter covered season 6 of *Love Island USA* and its pervasive ecology of misogynoir and anti-Blackness through close reading of the experiences of the two dark-skinned Black women on that season, Serena Page and Jana Craig, specifically during the Casa Amor challenge. I have argued that the ecosystem of misogynoir and anti-Blackness that structures the *Villa* led to the moments that created the popularity and financial success of the show. Furthermore, the fact that Serena Page and Kordell Beckham won season 6 reifies the notion that the *Love Island* ecosystem can be sociopolitically and culturally advantageous for Black women. Season 7, however, functions differently. While season 6 lays the groundwork for the structures that make the *Villa*, season 7 sees the operationalization of these systems via the insidious conscription of the national viewing public. I argue that season 7 of *Love Island USA* utilizes the popularity of the show and its veneer of racial progress to mask the more extreme displays of anti-Blackness and misogynoir as well as invigorate national intervention in the molding of the show's narrative and disciplining the "bad social citizenship" of dark-skinned Black women

participants . The circumstances that incite public outcry ostensibly stem from the impulse of misogynoir to punish Black women for not adhering to white supremacist notions of gender. In season 7 this punishment appears specifically through the colloquial nomenclature of “girls’ girl” and “mean girl”. Moreover, we see these Black women used to recreate horrid scenes of anti-Black violence through the allure and tantalizing spectacle of reality television and its new age TV spectatorship culture. Through a close reading of scenes depicting the experiences of two of the dark-skinned OG Islanders, Olandria Carthen and Michelle “Chelley” Bissainthe, I aim to illuminate the ways in which the harm the two face on and off the show is an acceleration of the structures of the *Villa* and allow for the manufacturing of public consent to expand state apparatuses under the guise of molding “proper social citizens.”

As the seventh season of *Love Island USA* commences, viewers see sweeping shots of Fiji’s shorelines, including luscious plant-life on rolling green hills and warm pink sunsets. The booming voice of the narrator, Scottish comedian Iain Stirling bellows out as a large ship full of shipping containers swiftly comes into view. Stirling makes what is, for African-Americans and their allies, a rather harrowing joke about how the *Love Island USA* producers have set up season 7 as the most eco-friendly season yet, as they saved on carbon emissions by SHIPPING THE ISLANDERS TO FIJI ON CARGO SHIPS. This joke might land if one has no historical relationship with being cargo. Reinstating the vision of the hold of the slave ship through this joke and the others that follow highlights the anti-Black structures and memory that the *Villa* not only performs, but also urges audiences to delight in. Stirling then jokes about them keeping the lights off at the Villa, and promptly, the lights across the state-of-the-art surveillance structure flicker on. The camera flies above and through the Villa, showing every room in the mansion, including recently added features, as Stirling makes clear the premise of the show. Stirling pokes

fun at the addition of the photo booth in the lower part of the structure, sarcastically remarking on his relief that there is a way to document the moments that will ensue that summer, as the “85 hidden cameras and 17 microphones superglued to the bed frames” might not be enough. As stated previously, surveillance technologies are built through anti-Blackness, and thus the position of being watched and rendered by the unblinking eye presents particularly more perilously for Black women. Surveillance is a core tenet of the *Villa* and is the modality through which national intervention is staged. Audiences are encouraged not only to surveil the Islanders through the sanctioned channels set up by the show, like the *Love Island USA* app where fans participate in voting activities and *Love Island USA* social media channels but also unofficial channels like the Islanders’ individual social media accounts and online fandom communities.

The tour of the Villa ceases, and the first Islanders arrive. Entering together are the two gorgeous Black women at the core of this inquiry's interest, Michelle “Chelley” Bissainthe and Olandria Carthen. Two vehicles pull up to the Villa's front entrance as Carthen and Bissainthe exit and meet, walking into the Villa hand in hand. Primary introductions ensue between the two, sharing pleasantries like name introductions and sharing compliments with one another. The two traverse from the entrance to a big table in the middle of the mansion's open garden. They pop open a bottle, and the camera zooms in tightly to capture Bissainthe signaling that she will be the first Islander to be introduced. Haitian-American Islander, Chelley Bissainthe’s vignette begins with her seated dancing and posing sensually in a colorful ensemble. She introduces herself as a 27-year-old day trader that lives in Queens, New York. Bissainthe shares her commitment to authenticity stating that she is always open, candid and 100% unapologetically herself. Her openness is then extended into a discussion of her sexuality. As she shares her romantic history, she is clear about the importance of good sex in her relationships and continues to share how she

dates across gender. Bissainthe is not shy about her queer sexuality but wishes not to be labeled, stating “They ask: Are you straight? Are you bi? I’m Chelley, you feel me!” She is one of very few queer and Black women who have appeared on *Love Island USA*. After discussing her sexuality, she then reveals her openness to dating across racial lines. Calling to other canonical hot girls like Spike Lee’s (1986) Nola Darling from his premier film *She’s Gotta Have It*. Bissainthe’s insistence on her openness not only in her dating preferences but to the experiment of *Love Island USA* become the calling card of her representation on the show. This same openness however ends up being the weapon wielded against her as her access to ‘social citizenship’ is debated at the national level later in the show.

The camera flashes colors as we are bright back to Olandria and Chelley discussing their ideal type. Olandria expresses her desire for a “good southern man.” This dream man “knows how to build a house” and is not afraid to “get his hands dirty.” For all intents and purposes, it appears her desire is for a man who embodies the stereotypical patriarchal traits expected of “men” in the West. As the women’s conversation continues, Carthen homes in on the importance of chivalry in her partnerships, noting that she should not ever have to touch a door in the presence of a man. Such idealized images of gender roles are not unique to Olandria and are more indicative of a grander cultural phenomenon of relying on conservative gender roles to establish rules and expectations in relationships. The camera zooms in on her as preparation for the audience meeting Olandria one on one.

Olandria’s vignette begins with her bubbly laughter as she sits in the middle of the plastic neon explosion of the room. Olandria Carthen is a 27-year-old elevator and escalator salesperson from Decatur, Alabama. She shares her pride in her southern roots as she praises soul food and her ability to cook it well. A proud graduate of her HBCU Tuskegee University, Carthen shares

that her mother had three children by age 21, and that she herself attended college as a first-generation student. The Alabama native is excited to find her partner through the show, encouraged by her own mother to fully do what needs to be done on the show. She jokes that her mother told her that if she is to kiss other contestants passionately that she does so to the best of her ability. Carthen's relationship to her mother and how she feels her upbringing has impacted her life become integral to her story influencing how she understands the *Villa* as her pathway to "love". It appears that Carthen is invested in a particular performance of gender and respectability that makes her more legible within the realm of social citizenship. She has a stable, corporate career and attended a renowned HBCU however, her status as single opens a gap she wants to fill. Olandria states that she would like to find herself a cowboy in the *Villa*. She explains that southern gentlemen can easily perform the chivalrous behaviors she would like in a partner. The emphasis on her desire for partnership with southern men also comes to stand for a desire for a conservative gender performance preoccupied with submission and domination. Despite this more rigid signaling, Carthen's bubbly personality was showcased through her jovial recalling of her mother's encouragement. Her idealized vision of southern values in the form of conservative gender performance became her biographical marker for the season. In other words, her desire for her cowboy, becomes what defines how she searches for love in the *Villa*.

Both Chelley and Olandria both appear through separate valences—one queer and open, the other more conservative and focused—but become interlinked as the two dark-skinned women in the OG cast. As such, the two become quick friends and advocates for one another in the *Villa*. As the show progresses what is noticeable in the presentation of these women in season 7 is production's adaptation to the way Black women seek to self-define on these shows. I

read this apparent adaptation on the part of production as the result of subjective decision-making on the part of Black women participants in *Love Island USA*'s pivotal season 6. Examples include Jana's refusal to buy into invented storylines characterizing her as "second choice" and Serena's adoption of the moniker "slow burner"—a defiance of production's preferences for a timeline to intimacy that felt too rushed for her. Said differently, it appears that the season 7's producers are more attuned to the individual avenues through which Black women fought for their self-definition on and through the show. On season 7 it appeared that these women were being trafficked through new archetypal avatars that would render them more vulnerable to extreme public ridicule. These new machinations of misogynoir are reiterations of the violent scenes that predate and exist as rememory for these Black women and that is the "mean girl" and the bad girl. These monikers act as tools of punishment wielded when they have gone against the structures of the show in service of their self-making. In other words, on season 7, the attempts that the Black women make to refuse their stereotypical depiction are undercut by the editing and curating of the show that renders them through those archetypes anyway.

I'm Just a Girl

Before delving further into a scenic analysis, it is integral to make clear the role that "girl" and girlhood play in the politics of season 7. Girlhood is defined as the state or period of being a girl (Merriam-Webster). This state of being a girl is associated directly with the positionality of being a child (non-adult) and thus also a state of innocence. Much of the majoritarian understanding of "girl" and "girlhood" relies on a hyper of gender. Think about how you came to understand gender as a child. The myths and logics that rely on girl and boy being natural states as opposed to social constructs. Suddenly things that are completely formed through social conditioning become attributed to biology. "Girl" not only becomes a biological

thing, but it becomes a way to obfuscate social conditioning. For example, seeing “girls” as “naturally” nurturing treats social conditioning as an innate sense. This gender binary and the norms associated with them function become justifications for social behaviors as well as the laws that police non-normative performances of it. “Girl” and “girlhood” become representative of a host of investments into gender and the policing of social behavior. When describing the mythic function of ethnicity, Hortense Spillers (1987) notes that ethnicity is used to “confirm the human body as a metonymic figure for an entire repertoire of human and social arrangements” (444). Ethnicity becomes a stand-in for an entire host of human and social understandings. One can just say, “African-American” and a host of ideologies and sociocultural investments are conjured and applied. In a similar fashion, gender is etched into the human body and used to hold a host of human and social arrangements. Thus, when one mentions “girls” or “girlhood”, an entire inventory of ideals and norms are hailed to one’s imaginary

Even though there is a more expansive imagination of gender in the current popular culture zeitgeist people have easily slid back into the binary glass slipper. Girlhood is making a resurgence. Any TikTok user can tell you that a week cannot pass without them happening upon a video utilizing Gwen Stefani’s band No Doubt’s “Just a Girl” song as its soundtrack. So-called relatable behavioral trends like “girl dinner” and “girl math” explain the sort of unique eating and spending habits allegedly innate to the normative “girl” experience. The luxurious aesthetics of the “clean girl” and “soft life girl” provide an aspirational vision of ease and wellness that is achieved through \$90 moisturizers, international trips with wealthy partners, and exclusive fitness memberships. Lucrative influencer markets for femininity coaches who promise to help audiences secure the levity of a soft girl lifestyle through attracting a “high-value” chivalrous

mate by teaching them how to properly embody their innate or divinely ordained femininity. As illustrated by all these examples, it appears that “girl” is back in fashion.

Alongside these viral “girl” trends, there is also a curated mythos around different archetypes of “girl”. There is the “girls’ girl,” who is the type of woman whose words and behaviors seek to center, uplift, and protect women with a specific intention to do so despite the presence or feelings of men. The “girls’ girl” is someone who supposedly looks out for other women and above all else places the safety and comfort of other “girls” first in the public sphere. Her malevolent opposite is the “mean girl”. The “mean girl” is a bully. She is a woman who projects undo malice onto a helpless party. This cruelty is often done surreptitiously showcased through snide denigrating remarks, covert social sabotage, and sneakily staged harassment and embarrassment of the victim. Though used decades before the 2006 movie by the same name, for Gen-Z and their counterparts the term is utilized in modern contexts to harken back to a juvenile, high school style bully like Regina George. Thus the “mean girl” is not just a bully, but she is someone whose negative affect is blamed on an arrestment in their emotional and mental maturity. “Girls’ girl” and “mean girl” are employed as mythic tools to categorize, police, and punish social behavior.

In these representations of “girlhood” there is a presentation of sociocultural maneuverings of “girlhood” as a natural, intrinsic, feigned claim to uncomplicated levity that defines the innocence of childhood. In these trends, “girl” is doing a lot of the heavy lifting. Much like how we socialize children to view and understand gender through rudimentary bioessentialist and heteronormative scripts, these trends and myths of “girl” are relying on an oversimplified basic understanding of gender for them to be coherent. In other words, being “a girl” transcribes these scripts into an aspirational, community-building and secure social

positioning. It is not by coincidence that in an era defined by slogans that wish to return the country to its former glory that trends seeking to reify the false idea of a “natural” way of doing gender are spiking in their popularity. In times marked by social, political and cultural upheaval, there is an influx of those attempting to use white supremacist patriarchal capitalist ideologies as a social safety blanket. What is fascinating about the “girl” trends of the post-2020 era is the attempt to position this crude bioessentialist rhetoric as a secure pathway to assuage sociopolitical anxieties/insecurities and structural dispossession. Moreover, relying on this bioessentialist framing of “girl” is misconstrued to seem like a cogent, perhaps even revolutionary organizing principle. What is missing from these trends is an actual reckoning with and interrogation of gender that could effectively challenge patriarchal regimes.

However, for Black women, for whom girlhood is deeply troubled because of anti-Blackness, these trends may appear to house a pathway to address the tensions inherent in the experience of gendered Blackness. Black girls are not allowed to be “just girls.” Girlhood is transmogrified or rather its social meaning dissipated when Blackness enters the fold. Instantaneously “girl” loses its normative meaning. I turn here to Christina Sharpe’s (2016) notion of anagrammatical Blackness. Sharpe offers the concept of anagrammatical Blackness to “describe how the meanings of words decompose when they are applied to Black bodies, allowing such scramblings that then repeat the ontological destruction of Black being” (Teshome and Yang 2018, 163) For Sharpe, the anagrammatical nature of Blackness offers a metaphorical sense of how Blackness metamorphizes the controlling grammar of social identity. This framing animates how Blackness rearranges the hegemonic vernacular and produces an/other meaning. Thus, girlhood in Black is not legible through the normative grammar of gender because of the specific adultification and engendering done to Black people and Black children specifically.

How many stories have we read about the dozens of Black girls who were not seen as innocent children but as imminent threats resulting in their state sanctioned death? Returning to Spiller's (1987) *American grammar*, the captive Black flesh "loses at least gender difference," thus that flesh becomes a site for social, cultural and political maneuver (445). The social and political maneuver is given a name through anagrammatical Blackness. Moreover, Blackness perishes the distinction of girl, creating something new; a Blackgirlhood. I borrow from auto-ethnographer Robin Boylorn's (2016) term, Blackgirl, to demarcate what Blackness does to "girl." She articulates her reasoning for this grammatical enmeshment saying, "I write Blackgirl (one word) ...because it speaks to the twoness and oneness of my raced and gender identity...I am never only Black or only girl/woman, but always both/and at the same time, and that colors and situates my lived experience" (49). I utilize Boylorn's term in conversation with Sharpe's anagrammatical Blackness to offer a way to define how Black women experience gender that attends to Patrice Douglass's posing of the anti-Black structure of gender. Douglass (2018) states that the normative structure of gender assumes "all women have the same gender" (115). Moreover, that oversimplification obscures the ways in which Blackness alters and creates its own racialized gender. Blackgirlhood attends to the grammatical breaking that happens to "girl" when Blackness enters the frame but also makes clear the ways that Blackness is gender(ed) and is always ever-present.

As the aforementioned theorists argue, this identity of "girl" carries with it an ontological weight that is troubled by racial difference, so much so that femininity becomes scrambled when inscribed on the Black body. The dark-skinned Black women on *Love Island USA* season 7 experience the problem of being unintelligible as "girls." This occurs in the narration of their own personal history, in interactions with their fellow women Islanders, and in the response to

them on the part of the viewing public. Olandria and Chelley are not seen as “girls” in the same way their non-Black, non-dark-skinned cast members are. The anagrammatical nature of Blackness bends and breaks what kinds of “girls” they can be. This incoherence threatens the kind of mythologized “girlhood” bonds that they can share with their non-Black castmates which ultimately troubles their citizenship in the *Villa*.

One of the core tenets of social citizenship is not only an adherence to cis-normative gender identity but performances of that gender identity that comply with inscriptive standards. For the women on the show, adherence to girlhood is overwhelmingly emphasized as important. Whether rhetorically or metaphorically, being a girl becomes integral to the determining of social citizenship within the *Villa*. This places the Black women on these shows in a bind for social citizenship for whom normative gender performance has not been a stable category. Social citizenship is determined by one’s adherence to the strictures of a normative performance of social identity (i.e., gender, race, sexuality, etc.). If attained, a subject’s social citizenship grants them the possibility of the ontological distinction of Human and the perceived rights and privileges that accompany that status. For Black women, their access to social citizenship has been disrupted by the systems of anti-Blackness that render them ontologically in crisis. *Love Island USA* is purported to be a site of ontological transformation for Black women contestants. The reality show gives them the opportunity not only to vie for their social citizenship through compulsory heterosexuality but to do so through normative gender performances. However, because both Chelley and Olandria are Blackgirls, the way they perform gender and sexuality does not fit easily within the bounds of what is compulsory or normative.

Throughout season 7, both Chelley and Olandria navigate the traps set by the structures of the *Villa*. One of the most formidable traps is found in their relationships with other women

contestants and with the standards of “girlhood”. Conversations about who is a “mean girl” and who is a “girls’ girl” dominated audience discourse about season 7, ultimately casting a shadow over Chelley and Olandria and placing a target on their backs. The viewing public was ready and willing to violently express anti-Black views. Internally, it appears that Olandria also had a tenuous internal relationship to girlhood as well. Throughout the season Olandria expresses several ideas around femininity and her access to it that highlight the anxieties that undergird Black women’s unsettledness within gender.

Bad Girl Ola: Olandria, Gender Performance, and Social Citizenship

There cannot be a conversation about the seventh season of *Love Island USA* without talking about its breakout star, the fan-named Bama Barbie, Olandria Carthen. Made apparent through her biographical markers formed in the introductory vignette discussed earlier in this chapter, Carthen is portrayed to be preoccupied with doing gender “the right way”. From the emphasis on finding her real Southern cowboy to her remarks about chivalry to her later remarks about feeling “too much in her masculine” because of her upbringing, her anxieties around performing gender in relationships are apparent. Her remarks about “being in her masculine” and the desire to change that, presents the sense in her language that she believed entering the show she was performing her gender identity of “girl” in the “wrong way.” Moreover, the *Villa* stands as the place where in those gender anxieties are not only be addressed but remedied through the adoption of a normative performance of hegemonic gender roles. Said another way, Carthen’s anxiety around her performance of gender leading to her singledom allows the *Villa* to step in to provide a path to reform. The *Villa* becomes the place where she can reform and redeem herself through the normative performance of “girl.” To delve deeper into Olandria’s journey, I feel it helpful to map her experiences of misogynoir through the term bad girl. Here, bad girl stands as

a triple entendre: first, bad girl as in the Black colloquial use of the term “bad”; second, *bad* girl as in sexualized and defiant girl; and third, bad *girl* as in bad at performing the gender normative role of “girl.” For all intents and purposes, Olandria Carthen embodies the Black colloquial distinction “bad.” She is beautiful, embodies a desirable physique, is very stylish, self-assured, witty, and emotionally mature. Despite the producers’ deliberate editing of her personality to render her as rigid, unrelenting and insecure, her humor, vibrance, and self-confidence still shone through. The girl is “*don’t hurt ‘em*” “*go ahead girl*” “*I ain’t mad at you*” bad. Not only did we as the viewing public know it, but the *Villa* producers knew it too. Her presence on the show has been defined through the allure of her badness. This allure is concentrated onto her body. Like other Black girls, Olandria’s darker skin tone, gender and Blackness are engaged through the social, cultural, and political investments of society outside the *Villa*. As mentioned previously, there are a host of social and political investments stapled into the Black female flesh. What is seen through the way *Villa* production, fellow Islanders and *Love Island* watchers alike is how their interactions with Carthen are informed by these investments. In fact, production is counting on them to create their storylines. Similar to how Hortense Spillers (1987) discusses the function of ethnicity in the 1965 Moynihan Report, *Villa* production need not extrapolate with any care or nuance about who Carthen is and how that informs the way she moves through the *Villa* instead they rely on the mythos baked into the body. Thus, Carthen’s body is speculated on through the scripts that never need to know her, they just need to know she is Black, dark-skinned and bad. The language that overdetermines Olandria is likewise reflected in the diegetic investments around her sexuality the producers have leading us to the second distinction of *bad* girl; the hyper-sexual defiant girl; the Jezebel.

The second distinction of *bad* girl refers to the definition of the term that prescribes a certain licentiousness to the subject. Because of her Blackness and her badness, Carthen did not need to express any sexual desire to be placed within the category of *bad* girl. Returning to Sharpe's (2016) anagrammatical Blackness, the presence of Blackness dissolves and changes the meaning of different things. Through Sharpe's framework of anagrammatical Blackness, we can also understand how a Blackgirlhood interrupted influences how Black women are hyper-vigilant to how they perform and how they are perceived in the public sphere. For example, Black girls who develop hips and breasts from an early age are not seen as children but rather Jezebels seeking the leering eyes of the adults around them. Blackness decomposes the meaning and position of the child allowing for the harm that befalls them in the institutions that comprise the afterlife of slavery. This hyper-attention to the body cannot be detached from how I am analyzing *bad* girlhood. The anti-Black world that misrecognizes Blackgirls and labels them *bad* girls utilizes that distinction to further excuse and justify their exploitation and harm.

From the moment she stepped foot in the Villa, Olandria was clear about her boundaries around physical intimacy outside of challenges, noting that she wants a connection that goes beyond just the physical. She is extra attentive to the way her body is engaged by the men on the island, expressing that, for her, the emotional and mental connection is most important. Latent in how she communicates her boundaries is also her desire to embody a "soft girl" persona. Additionally, there is an attentiveness in her presentation of these boundaries that they are in part due to how she has been engaged with in the past among a variable of other confounding explanations. However, she is already sitting within the confines of how her flesh has been rendered the site of political and social maneuvering. This means that it does not matter how intentional Carthen is when dating in the Villa, especially regarding physical contact. The anti-

Black and misogynist tropes that plague the world outside the Villa mark and overdetermine her regardless. Olandria's declarations of being a "slow burner" do not matter because her dark skin and the way her flesh is read renders her declarations unintelligible. They transform and become falsehoods or smoke screens that obscure her supposed "true nature" and deny producers access to the overdetermined characterization of her sexuality.

Similar to her season 6 predecessor, Serena Page, Carthen's slowing of time and boundaries surrounding physical intimacy defied productions objectives to speed up time and obstruct attempts to evade exploitation. Olandria's punishment, however, was colored by her Blackness and badness. Her vocal and behavioral refusal to be physical outside of challenges set her up to face the clandestine retaliation of production. This is disturbingly apparent with the challenge "Got Wood?"

As the "Got Wood" challenge sequence began, the camera cut to slow motion footage of the Islanders in new challenge coordinated costumes running down a hill. The women are wearing different colored cropped plaid flannel tops opened to reveal fur bikini tops and daisy duke jean shorts with Timberland-esque boots, while the men donned similar colored plaid flannel tops with the sleeves cut off left open to reveal their bare chests accompanied by cut off jean shorts and similar boots. "Got Wood" was hosted by Bravo-lebrity Paige DeSorbo from the show *Summer House* (also streaming on Peacock). For this challenge the boys and the girls were divided into two separate teams. As the Islanders and DeSorbo take their place, *Love Island* narrator Iain Sterling states the rules. The boys will climb up the (prop) tree and chop down a pot-stirring question about "a fellow lumberjack" (the challenge's stand-in for "boy"). They were to then spray down the boy they chose with the prop wood chopper called the woodpecker 5000. Next, the blasted boy was to invite one girl whom the original lumberjack was not coupled up

with to sit atop a seesaw that has a prop axe attached underneath one end that chops down on a prop log. On this log, they are to simulate sexual motions or as Sterling put it “show off their best bump and grind moves” to operate the contraption. The lumberjack will then pick another girl to help him get over the spinning log.

The final part of the challenge involves the main “lumberjack” walking over to DeSorbo and selecting a stuffed animal beaver labeled with the name of an Islander girl and taking that girl into a private cabin for some “fun”. In explaining the rules of this final portion of the game, DeSorbo remarks that “each beaver has the name of the girls still in play”. Once in the cabin, the boy and girl whose beaver he picks will be sequestered away from the rest of the Islanders giving them privacy to kiss (or pretend to) freely.



Figure 4. Nic chooses Olandria's beaver during the "Got Wood?" Challenge

The challenge begins with 26-year-old pool boy Austin Shepard. After completing all the preliminary physical elements of the challenge, Shepard picks a beaver from the basket. Around the stuffed animal’s neck is a tag displaying Olandria’s name. Shocked to be picked first, Carthen approaches Shepard who blurts out “don’t look so sad” before the two walks into the

cabin and close the door behind them. Up until this point, Olandria was under the impression that she and Austin were, to use her words, besties. Because of this relationship she was expecting him to “keep it cute” and maybe give her “a kiss on the forehead” when they entered the cabin alone. To her surprise, Austin immediately picked her up and began to passionately kiss her. Her eyes widened from shock as her feet left the ground. The two kissed and emerged from the cabin to cheers from both groups. Olandria’s shock at how Austin engaged her physically once they were in the cabin is notable. However, because it is *Love Island USA* and kissing on the mouth is the name of the game it is easy to dismiss Shepard’s behavior as playing along.

The next lumberjack to chop wood is 25-year-old cowboy Taylor Williams, Olandria’s partner at the time of the challenge. When it is Taylor’s turn to pick a beaver, he picks that of 25-year-old Cierra Ortega. The two are not in a couple like Olandria and Austin; however, when the two enter the cabin, they decide to pretend to engage each other sexually banging on the side of the cabin, fake moaning and yelling. Seeing how easily the two fake their sexual interaction gives greater credence to Olandria’s shock that Austin would want to engage her the way he does. Why couldn’t Shepard have faked it too? Why couldn’t he have just given Carthen a kiss on the cheek like she had imagined? I contend that this shift in behavior indicates a certain sexual expectation that Olandria experiences because of her Blackness and badness. This dynamic becomes increasingly clear as the challenge continues. Next, Nicolas “Nic” Vansteenbergh who was at that time partnered with Cierra Ortega, took his turn. When it was time for him to pick a beaver, he also chose one bearing Olandria’s name. The camera pans to her fellow Islanders reacting to her beaver being chosen a second time. Nic and Olandria enter the cabin and kiss passionately as a beach hit confessional from Nic narrates their moment. He notes “I think she’s really beautiful and I do enjoy kissing her and I think she’s super sexy to say

the least.” The two emerge from the log cabin with Olandria thrown over Nic’s left shoulder. Nic turns his head towards the boys as they exit revealing a gleeful and adrenaline filled smile.

Olandria’s face is obscured by her braids and Nic’s body, but her shorts and her bare behind are in full view of the camera. The Islanders cheer with excitement as they walk out.

Vansteenberghé’s full attention is to the boys as his grin widens and eyes feed off their excitement. Carthen kicks her legs slightly and attempts to lift her head to face her peers. Nic shifts his hands and slightly slaps her leg. The cameras cut closer and slow motion is queued, capturing the way Olandria’s lower body shakes from the impact. Vansteenberghé’s body language upon exiting the cabin with Carthen and the cameras’ focus on Carthen’s body offered more insight into the function of this challenge. Beyond being a challenge meant to stir up drama amongst the men, this challenge uses Olandria’s continual exploitation as a specter of the social maneuvering of the men in the Villa. Her boundaries around outside challenge intimacy especially around kissing and intimate touch are barreled through tenfold in this challenge. The challenge offers perfect cover for the producers' aims to force Olandria to comply to the physical demands preemptively bet on because of her Blackness and badness. Additionally, the challenge centers on stoking the flames of interpersonal conflict amongst the boy Islanders with the Islander girls being utilized as tools to increase that conflict. This is why it is the boys’ choice which girl must bump and grind on another boy, who must roll with and kiss them on the wet log, and finally who must kiss them in the log cabin. The producers thus kill two birds of misogyny with one stone: get the boys to fight and punish Olandria for her personal boundaries.

Following Nic is Jeremiah Brown. When it is time to pick a beaver, Olandria’s beaver is once again selected. At this point, her beaver has been picked three times. It is hard to understand how her name is still in the mix considering at this point there are 6 other female contestants, 5

of whom have yet to be chosen once. Carthen expresses her exasperation, remarking “Bro, how does this keep happening?” It is clear in her reaction and her body language that she is not only confused at her name being called a third time but is also uncomfortable engaging again physically with another Islander for this challenge. Production adds an audio cut of fellow Islander Hannah Fields remarking that Olandria “loves it in there.” These editing choices make clear that Olandria’s continual selection is being played up by production as not only something jovial but pleasurable for her. While it is not possible to know what Olandria felt about the challenge overall, her affect in the scenes showcase her distress. Up until this point, Jeremiah Brown was coupled with Huda Mustafa, and the two had a torrid love affair. Going into this challenge it was apparent that Brown sought to push back against his partner and participate in this challenge to the fullest. After secluding themselves in the poorly built paper prop log cabin, Olandria is barely even able to stand properly in the small space before she is swept up by Jeremiah causing her to yelp “Oh shit!” in surprise. The two kiss as the prop cabin door swings ajar revealing the two actually kissing which shocked the Islanders. The two exit the cabin, Carthen looking sheepish, grinning slowly walking to the crowd while Brown showboats for the boys, dancing and sticking his tongue out as he returns to high five his fellow contestants.

Ace Greene is next in the challenge. He also selects Olandria’s beaver. At this point, having been selected 4 times, Olandria yells out “NO fucking way! No way!!” as she begrudgingly makes her way to the log cabin. Ace holds the door open for her and once she is inside the cabin, he turns to the boys, points to Taylor Williams, Olandria’s partner at the time, and laughs mockingly. As Greene and Carthen kiss in the log cabin, Williams cries out “Can we take her beaver out that damn basket?” looking beyond the camera. The remaining Islanders play the Challenge and Olandria’s name is not called again. As the Islanders return to the Villa the

boys debrief, with one remarking that Olandria was a “hot commodity” because her beaver was chosen 4 times. The Islanders use language that gives the illusion of choice and pleasure on Olandria’s part, despite her obvious embarrassment and dismay which was communicated verbally and through her body language. Calling Olandria a “hot commodity” obscures the blatant manipulation seemingly at play in this challenge. In addition to using Olandria’s sexuality as a pawn to comment on the interpersonal dynamics of the Villa, the meta commentary is even more insidious. Not simply sexual availability, but a voracious sexual appetite is mapped onto Olandria, embossed on her body through Blackness and badness. Keeping Olandria’s beaver “in play” rather than removing it from the basket after it has been chosen once emphasizes anti-Black and misogynistic tropes about Black women especially those who are bad. Olandria’s sexual autonomy, her body, and her choices about how she engages are sacrificed to the sociopolitical investments into Black women being seen as Jezebels. This dynamic is cinematically supported by the edited clips of fellow Islanders proclaiming Olandria’s delight in kissing all the different men.

To add further anti-Black insult to already anti-Black injury, the setting for the challenge—a log cabin—has terrible associations for Black women. Historically in the plantation economy, the isolated log cabin was a site of the repetitive sexual violation of Black women. Despite *Love Island*’s cartoonish, soft-core pornographic reimagining of the cabin, for anyone familiar with African American slave narratives, the resemblance is unmistakable. As Saidiya Hartman (1997) contends in *Scenes of Subjection*, “[o]nly more obscene than the brutality unleashed at the whipping post is the demand that this suffering be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and the terrible” (4). The pleasure of recreating the imagery of exploitation in a supposedly benign and even humorous

setting works to obfuscate the violent visual rhetoric of recreating the log cabin. As such, Olandria was both punished by the producers for disobeying the temporal regimes of the *Villa* and not playing the role laid out for her by her flesh. That punishment not only sent a message about her temporal defiance but at her desire for ontological mobility. How dare she define herself for herself when *Villa* production has already made an image of her to fit into the pre-crafted monikers of our American grammar? How dare she define her sexuality for herself? Her display of bodily autonomy was a defiance of the regimes built up by the *Villa* producers. To receive the return on their investment in what Olandria's Blackness and badness will mean, the producers seemingly created a scenario within a challenge that not only replicated a historical site of sexual violence for Black women but also conjured the anti-Black tropes of Black women's consistent sexual availability symbolized by Olandria's beaver remaining "in play" throughout the duration of the game. Olandria's desires for herself and her time on the show are quite violently undermined.

Before defining the final delineation of bad girl, I return to Olandria's introductory vignette. Within this vignette, she outlines her desire not only to find a partner after being single for 5 years, but her explicit desire for a "cowboy". As Carthen explained in an interview post *Villa*, for her a cowboy encompasses what a "man" should be, with an emphasis on chivalry¹². Carthen notes in that interview that her desire to be with a man that embodies chivalric traits is important to her, especially if she is expected to "submit" to him. These preoccupations with gender inform the way Olandria moves in the *Villa* and impacts how *Villa* production builds her storyline. The representation of Olandria's desires is overdetermined with conservative gender ideals that highlight the third definition of bad *girl*—she who is bad at performing as a girl. This

¹² Carthen shared this meaning behind what cowboy meant to her with Tish Cyrus on the podcast Sorry We're Cyrus on an episode that aired on August 14th, 2025 (Cyrus and Cyrus 2025).

meaning refers to what I am reading Olandria's insecurity about her performance of normative girlhood. I wish to focus on what I see as Olandria's acute attentiveness to the instability of her performance of girlhood. Moreover, her insecurity is reflective of the overall ontological incoherence of normative gender and Blackness. The viral "girl" archetypes mentioned previously in this chapter help frame the following discussion, specifically the "girls' girl" vs. the "mean girl".

Zooming out momentarily, it is important again to sit with the simplistic, digestible way gender is portrayed on *Love Island USA*. This is a reality show meaning its messaging around its episteme is incredibly simplistic and seeks to rely on easy digestible bites to inculcate its audience into the world of the show. They do not have the time to spend setting up the "why" of what the audience sees; rather, *Love Island USA* creates a landscape filled with excessively simple and determined ideas of how the world works. In this regard, the reality show resembles the institutions (e.g., schools) that inculcate children into the social norms that will govern their lives. Thus, on *Love Island USA*, "girl" and "boy" are oversimplified so that the worlds of torrential heartbreak, betrayal, and triumphant odds-defying love are understood through the hegemonic notions of those categories. Said another way, the *Villa* producers pose girl and boy in a way that allows the social conditioning of the audience to fill in the blanks of what those categories mean and how each is supposed to relate to the other. It is easier to produce a viral love story with an overdetermined gender category than a full complex person. Constitutively, it is also easier for the Islanders who have only 6 weeks to find a partner, build a connection and win America over to win the 100K prize to also fall back on highly simplistic notions of gender. The reliance on minimally complex ideas of gender offers a way to police behavior and isolate those who do not appropriately perform the categories of "boy" and "girl." Likewise, the

exigencies of the show make clear the need for the mythic archetypes that structure the boundaries of acceptable girlhood and idealized femininity on *Love Island USA*: the “mean girl” and the “girls’ girl.” *Love Island* viewers often joke about how contestants spend so much time reifying their positions and behaviors by reiterating archetypes that dwell on the gender binary. Olandria’s preoccupation with wanting her “cowboy” is an expression of this. Cowboy is not just a way to determine a specific gender/gender performance, I contend that Olandria’s desire for a cowboy also affirms her desire to reform the instability she feels about her own performance of “girl.” Her foregrounding having been single for 5 years is emblematic of that concern. When discussing her perception of her dating life before the show with Islander Jalen Brown, Carthen mentions that she is tired of “being in her masculine” and is looking for a partner that would allow her to be soft and “be in her feminine”. Growing up in a single-parent household, she had to be a surrogate parent to her younger siblings and felt immense pressure to be perfect to make her mother proud. She took herself through college and got herself a successful career however, she is just missing her perfect guy. It appears that she has internalized the complex dynamics that have surrounded how she has built her life as disrupting her normative gender dynamic. It can be inferred that she feels she was not able to be a “girl” adequately precisely because of her success in achieving independence, higher education and gainful employment.

Carthen is not the first person to think or feel this way. The logic underlying these anxieties are clearly rooted in antiquated patriarchal understandings of gender and are haunted by the ghosts of the Moynihan Report. Olandria’s upbringing with a single parent being placed alongside her anxieties around gender indicate how the misogynoir seeping from the illogics of the Moynihan Report’s findings about the failings of the Black American family is not an accident. What Spillers (1987) calls the captive female flesh is once again used for political and

social maneuver to concretize the logics of the Moynihan report that suggests that the Black mother is deleterious to the Black communities attempt to achieve social citizenship in America. It seeks to create a lineage wherein bad Blackgirlhood is inherited matrilineally and bestowed upon the daughter. She is the specter responsible for her daughter's unstable social citizenship. The *Villa* producers emphasize this aspect of Olandria's biography alongside her anxieties about her performance of gender and seems intent on placing the responsibility of this incoherence on Olandria's single mother. Despite Olandria not placing any blame or shame on her mother, the narrative is built through how Olandria's story is framed by *Love Island*. In other words, she got it from her mama.

Furthermore, it is safe to say that on *Love Island*, "girlhood" and its proper performance are crucial tenets of social citizenship. Perform the right type of girlhood and you perceivably are stable within the category of citizen and ostensibly reap the benefits. However, for Black women and Black girls, girlhood is not a stable nor secure position. Their gendered Blackness renders them forever ontologically unstable within that category. *Love Island USA* is aware of this dynamic and as this research has shown thus far utilizes this idea to curate situations wherein Black women contestants face harm. On season 7, the *Villa* producers make it abundantly clear how they would like the audience to read the dark-skinned Black women, their girlhood, and their roles within the grander sociopolitical narratives played out through the show. Carthen's story is thus set to be rooted in the possibility of her ontological transformation that would render her a "girl" and thus a social citizen. A redemption from her state of bad Blackgirlhood into normative "girlhood." Her pathway to social citizenship is externally chartered as her success in finding her cowboy and having a heterosexual relationship. It appears that internally, she sees her social citizenship and humanity seemingly hinges on her ability to perform "girl" which sets up

the fundamental ruse of *Love Island USA* and the Finding Love reality TV show. This is because, as we have discussed already, she is a bad *girl*. The systems of misogynoir, patriarchy and anti-Blackness that come to define the afterlives of slavery, place her as perpetually bad at being/doing “girl”. The *Villa* producers are then able to curate narratives that deliberate Olandria’s humanity based on her proper performance of “girl”. Similar to how they manipulated the Islander boys in the “Got Wood?” challenge to craft their intended storyline, Carthen’s pursuit of girlhood is also manipulated by and through the policing logics of the “mean girl” and “girls’ girl.” This manipulation is meticulously curated by *Villa* production and can be traced through two main trials. I use trials here because the scenarios of conflict presented show Olandria being put to the test based on her ability to do “girl” correctly. Both trials involve her fellow Islander 24-year-old personal trainer Huda Mustafa who becomes the paragon and vocal enforcer of normative white girlhood on the show.

The first trial occurs across episode 2 and 3 on the Islanders’ third evening in the Villa. At this moment in the show, the Islanders are still in the couples established by the initial icebreaker game. Olandria was paired with Taylor Williams and Chelley Bissainthe with Austin Shepard. These connections were burgeoning as each couple had only just met and was still open to exploring other connections. On the evening of their second day in the Villa, a new bombshell, 25-year-old Cierra Ortega entered the game and tried to secure her spot in a couple. After having conversations with each of the boys, it appeared she had the most chemistry with the 24-year-old nurse from Jacksonville, Florida, Nicolas “Nic” Vansteenbergh.

At the recoupling that occurs the evening following her arrival (Episode 2, Night 3), the host Ariana Maddix asks the men that would like the opportunity to recouple with Cierra to stand up. Both Chelley’s partner Austin and Olandria’s partner Taylor stand and make their way to the

front. The two women sat shocked but not really upset at the scenario; however, as this occurs, a voice rings out chastising the boys. “Wowwww! That’s crazy” the feigned blaccent of Huda Mustafa enters the soundscape of the re-coupling. Sitting next to her then-partner, 25-year-old Jeremiah Brown, she pats his knee praising him for not standing up like the others (“I’m proud of you. Brownie points.”). Mustafa continues to rave about the betrayal that both Olandria and Chelley faced at this moment, ending by saying “Y’all need some real men.” Immediately catching the shade of that comment Olandria responded to Huda, politely saying “girl, you don’t have to play that.” Taken aback, Mustafa looks lost and asks Carthen what she means. Carthen replies politely that she and Chelley are not upset by the boys’ decision to explore with Cierra. Defending her comments, Huda retorts “No but I was just saying...” Before she can finish, Olandria interrupts her to say “I know you’re being supportive, and I love that, but I’m saying we’re not upset” before ensuring Huda that they can talk about it later. Evidently caught utterly off-guard by Carthen’s direct and polite redirection, Mustafa begins to retreat into herself, her mood shifting and appearing visibly upset.

After the re-coupling ceremony is over, Huda is seen crying, claiming Olandria was “incredibly rude” to her during the ceremony. Crying on Chelley’s shoulder, Huda emphasizes she felt Olandria’s comments were unwarranted and mean and that she would “never do that to somebody.” Through flowing tears, Mustafa emphasizes she would have preferred Carthen pull her to the side to speak to her. Chelley emphasizes to the crying 24-year-old that Olandria probably did not intend the comments to come off the way Huda received them. Simultaneously, Carthen looks on with confusion at Bissainthe and Mustafa noticing the body language of the two. Olandria questions if Mustafa was crying and hopes it is not because of what she said at the fire pit. A simple comment made by Olandria to signal her desire to save the smack talk for girl

time quickly alchemized into a stern tongue lashing. Olandria's posture changes and she quickly responds that it had not been her intention.

In a confessional, Mustafa explains that Olandria neglecting to speak to her privately was rude. She goes on to characterize Olandria's response as unsisterly. Mustafa makes herself a complete unsuspecting victim of Carthen, transforming a somewhat benign intervention into a complete and violent break of sister social mores or "girl code." Returning to Sharpe's (2016) anagrammatical Blackness, Olandria's slight contestation returns anew as an attack not only on Huda personally but on Huda's performance of proper "girlhood". This repudiation began to sow the narrative seeds of Huda's victimization at the hands of the Black women. *Love Island USA* gives Mustafa cover under the cloak of whiteness; her tears are not only allowed to flow plentifully on screen, but they also allow for the protection whiteness offers. Through establishing Huda's place in whiteness, the structure of the *Villa* comes to represent a sort of normative "girlhood." It is the perpetual victim to the predatory eye of the Black woman, whose words and actions are fundamentally misunderstood and decomposed into monstrosity. Olandria choosing to speak back to Huda's insidious and inflammatory comment was a failure to pass the trials of girlhood. She ostensibly did not do or say anything harmful or do anything wrong. Olandria pushing back against the avatar for normative girlhood (i.e., Huda) negates her ability to be seen within that category. In other words, she picked the wrong "girl." Her failure to pick the right type of girl is policed by the viewing audience who go on to discuss that her behavior was uncalled for and not becoming of a "girls' girl." These early narrative spindles wind to gather to weave a storyline about Olandria that leaves an opening for public ridicule because of her conduct with other women.

The second trial is a winding road and involves her fellow dark-skinned woman castmate Michelle “Chelley” Bissainthe. The second trial scenario occurs during the “Stand on Business” challenge on the night of the 23rd day in the Villa (Episode 26-27). We meet the Islanders in a post-Casa Amor Villa. Olandria had a torrential Casa Amor experience. In a twist of events, she was dumped from the Casa Amor Villa, saved by partnering with fellow dumped OG Islander Nic Vansteenbergh and brought back to the OG Villa. At the OG Villa, she found that her partner, Taylor Williams, was partnered with another girl, Clarke Calloway. *Villa* producers strategically edited Taylor’s and Olandria’s storylines, sharing with audiences that he was not attracted to her physically. Olandria, unaware of Taylor’s lack of attraction to her, interprets his hesitancy to engage physically as a sign that he is respecting her boundaries with physical intimacy. When she arrived back to the OG Villa to find Taylor partnered with Casa Amor Bombshell Clarke, a light-skinned Black woman from North Carolina, she did not waver in her loyalty to her connection to Taylor. Although she and Nic explored their connection, she ultimately decided to stay loyal to Taylor; however, Taylor chose to abandon his connection with Olandria for Clarke. In conversations with Olandria, however, it appears that he is still open to exploring his relationship with her. When we meet Olandria on day 23, she is single and looking for a new connection but maintaining an open mind to couple with Taylor again.

In addition to Casa Amor this episode brings us to the Islanders in the aftermath of the challenge “Hearts on Fire” also known as the “Heart Rate Challenge”. During this challenge each Islander dons sexy Halloween costumes and is given a heart rate monitor to wear. Each Islander will take turns giving their fellow Islanders lap dances, kisses, and other intimate touches to raise their castmates’ heart rates. When the challenge is over, each Islanders heart rate monitor will be reviewed, and the results are shared to determine who raised whose heart rate the

most. During that challenge, Huda went too far with Chelley's partner Ace Greene. In fact, during the time the show was airing, the clip of what Mustafa and Greene were doing was edited out leaving fans to speculate on just how explicit the dance was, given that it could not be aired on Peacock. Chelley stated that Huda sat on Ace's face and the two simulated a sort of sex act during the challenge that lasted a bit too long. Other Islanders confirmed this, adding they also thought the two took it beyond what was necessary. In the aftermath of that incident, Bissainthe was incredibly hurt and upset with Mustafa and Greene feeling the two had crossed the line. Olandria, Chelley's closest friend in the Villa, agreed and stood by her friend and comforted her. However, she still maintained her friendship with Huda hoping the two could resolve their conflict. The tension on the island was palpable as Chelley and Huda had yet to have a conversation about the "Hearts on Fire" scandal.

During the daytime on their 23rd day, Huda, Olandria and fellow Islander and 24-year-old model, Andreina Santos, sat together on the lawn of the Villa. Huda shared some inside information about a burgeoning romance between herself and 27-year-old basketball player, Chris Seeley whom she partnered with during Casa Amor. This connection is not without its complications as Chris spent the majority of Casa Amor partnered with Chelley and the two had strong chemistry. This chemistry with Seeley confused Bissainthe, as she was unsure whether she should stick by her pre-Casa partner, Ace Greene, or explore her new match with the athlete. As Casa Amor ended, Huda approached Chelley with a proposition that she said would benefit both of them. In an act that she would characterize as peak sisterhood, she offers to partner with Chris so that Chelley can continue to explore with him and partner with Ace again. The benefit for Huda would be that she would also explore her connection with Chris but primarily, the goal was to bring the athlete back so the two would share him. Subsequently, Huda and Chris coupled

and returned from Casa Amor together with the understanding that a connection with Chris would be explored by both Huda and Chelley. The night after the heart rate challenge (Episode 25, Night 22), Chris and Huda steal away to the hidden speakeasy room in the Villa to talk more about their connection and the fall out between her and Chelley. During their conversation, the two share a passionate kiss. Fast forward to Mustafa's council with Carthen and Santos, she shares with the women that she and Seeley shared a kiss and that she was really starting to fall for him. These hidden truths circulating the compound create a ripe environment for the newest challenge concocted by the *Villa* producers, "Stand on Business." This challenge offers the Islanders a forum to unleash their unfiltered opinions of their castmates. Each Islander was given several postcards to write down their honest thoughts, comments and critiques of their fellow Islanders with the option to either sign the post card or submit it anonymously. Olandria, Chelley and Cierra sit together before the challenge starts and Olandria encourages Chelley that this challenge presents her with a unique opportunity to speak candidly about the situation with Huda. Chelley, in kind, encourages Olandria to address Taylor and check his temperature especially as it relates to his feelings about her.

Carthen and Bissainthe share bad Blackgirlhood, which bonds them throughout their time in the *Villa*. In this moment, Carthen's encouragement to Chelley and vice versa act not simply as friendly advice but as a showing of kinship. Before the challenge commences, the camera bounces from Chelley and Olandria to Huda and the new Casa Amor girls. The camera cuts between footage of Olandria and Chelley thinking and writing to Huda and the Casa Amor girls doing the same as a royalty-free song with the lyrics "I am done pulling my punches" plays in the background. The *Villa* producers are, rather heavy handedly, introducing the storylines that place these two dark-skinned Black women in opposition with the other women in the Villa. In

this moment, Carthen and Bissainthe are primed to be portrayed as “mean girls” further pushing them away from social citizenship. Knowing the environment of the *Villa* is plagued by misogynoir and anti-Blackness, the cinematic language of this scene juxtaposing Carthen and Bissainthe versus Huda appears intentional. The *Villa* producers are investing in these systems of oppression to do the work in pushing the plot forward. Left hanging in the balance are two Black women who are not allowed the possibility of addressing their grievances with their peers without already being prepared for punishment. The visual and diegetic tricks that the *Villa* producers play help set up the second and final trial for Olandria’s girlhood and chance for ontological mobility that plays out during the messy challenge.

“Stand On Business” commences, and the Islanders are called one by one to read their mail from their peers. Olandria’s failure to adequately redeem her girlhood comes twofold in this challenge: first, through her choosing the wrong girlhood to protect, and second, through the fallout and grotesque display of disrespect by her partner, the cowboy, Taylor Williams.

When it is Huda’s turn to read from her postcards, she reads a card written and signed by Chelley that says, “If you are going to preach about being a “girls’ girl”, you should practice what you preach.” The letter continues with Chelley calling into question Huda’s loyalty and challenges the standards she expects to receive but not give. When Huda questions the origin of her complaints, Chelley stands her ground and explains the root of her problem. She notes that when it came to “the girl-code stuff” Huda did not stand on her own standards when it came to Chelley. She then brings up the deal made when Huda and Chris returned from Casa together and how that made her incredibly uncomfortable despite Huda’s framing of the situation as a win-win. Chelley continues that she would have respected Huda more had she been honest about her intention rather than try to manipulate her. Huda maintained that she has been nothing but

supportive of Chelley whether she believes it despite her actions up until this showcasing otherwise.

It is after Huda's rebuttal towards Chelley that Olandria interjects in their quarrel with her own misgivings with Huda's statements. This interruption sets in motion the act that would turn her into a "mean girl" and thus exclude her access to social citizenship and bring forth the wrath of the *Love Island USA* fanbase. Olandria questions Huda's intention to make space for Chelley and Chris to explore their relationship and interrogates Huda's allegiance to sisterhood. She affirms Chelley's grievances stating she has seen the hypocrisy in Huda's behaviors in comparison to her words. Olandria then said aloud the secret that Huda had shared with her earlier that day on the grassy lawn of the Villa, she had kissed Chris. With the sharing of Huda's secret kiss with the group, Olandria picked the wrong girlhood once again. This time, her decision to support Chelley, another bad Blackgirl, and not perform the sort of kinship Huda expected exploded her attempt at social citizenship. Upon hearing Carthen's request, Mustafa acted confused, unsure what she was referring to. Olandria exposes the kiss that had occurred the night before to Chelley allowing her access to the full truth about how Huda and Chris's relationship has progressed (Episode 25, Night 22). Huda immediately becomes defensive, stating that she should not have to share her personal business with all her castmates. She retorts by questioning Olandria's fidelity to the trust encrusted into "girls' girlhood," similar to the defense she used in the first trial. Olandria stands strong in defense of telling Chelley the truth. She alludes to Huda's lack of candor surrounding that kiss uncovering the gaps in her defense that the partnership with Chris was dually advantageous and directly challenges Huda's commitment to "sisterhood." Clearly infuriated by Carthen's disclosure, Mustafa states that what she told her should have stayed in confidence. Again, Carthen reiterates that Mustafa was not

being very sisterly by not disclosing what she had done. Huda then exclaims that it was not Olandria's business to tell and it is not her "place" to share. Mustafa throws her postcards to the ground and angrily returns to her seat.

Despite her indiscretion being in the name of protecting another woman in the cast, the argument between Olandria and Huda came to stand as yet another example of Olandria being bad at performing girlhood. Evidently, if we are to let the colloquial definition of what a "girls' girl" is guide us through delving deeper into this tête-à-tête, Olandria embodied the role. She put the safety, comfort, and feelings of another woman first by showing her loyalty to Chelley. Why does this moment get framed as a transgression against sisterhood? Christina Sharpe's (2016) framework of anagrammatical Blackness is useful here. This argument and disclosure are not framed as "girls' girl" behavior because neither Chelley nor Olandria are ontologically or sociopolitically able to be girls like Huda is. Distinctions of "girl" rot, disintegrate, and become something else when applied to their marked Black and bad flesh. They are not girls; they are something else. They are Blackgirls. Chelley is a Blackgirl, so she does not get protection through "girlhood". You cannot be a "girls' girl" to someone who has been rendered Other. As Achille Mbembe (2001) notes, surveillance (proposed state protection) serves the citizen. Blackgirls are not citizens and in the afterlives of slavery the policing structures have the job of perpetually targeting and putting them under erasure. Olandria's attempts to be a sister to Chelley do not grant her access to girlhood because while Chelley may be a sister (Olandria's fictive kin), she is not a "girl." Huda stating that she was wrong to think she could rely on the proposed secrecy amongst her girls, namely Olandria, subtly created a divergence between the kind of girl she is and the kind of girl Olandria is. Alluding to this rift between them once again

marks Carthen as bad at being/doing girl. Moreover, because of the seed sown by the *Villa* producers she is not only bad at being a girl, but also a “mean girl.”

To add further insult to injury, Olandria’s confrontation with Taylor continued to build a narrative of her being bad at performing as a girl. Taylor’s postcard segment was slated last, though it is unclear if it was filmed in the order it aired. Amongst his cards was an abundance of notes asking him how he could possibly switch up on Olandria so quickly to partner up with Clarke. He states that she gives him that “kid feeling,” or the feeling of childlike giddiness. He then reads Olandria’s card to him which declares “Stand on Business and stop acting like a little bitch.” Carthen’s message relays the rage she feels having spent the past three weeks pouring her all into her relationship with Williams just for him to callously discard her. She speaks up, her voice breaking as she shares her frustration and sadness with Williams. How his consideration for her simply dissipated once Clarke arrived. How he disrespected her, degrading her with snide remarks, and was willing and ready to send her home with no further explanation. In her message she hoped to relay to him the same he had given her after Casa Amor. In response Taylor attempts to embarrass Olandria, stating that he could have left her vulnerable earlier, and he was doing her a favor by maintaining his couple status with her as long as he did. His turn ends with him sheepishly grinning as he chooses to be with Clarke. Riddled throughout their back and forth were inserted edits of other Islander boys remarking that Taylor really showed Olandria who’s boss. This was the second time the *Villa* producers allowed the viewing audience to see heightened emotion from Olandria. The focus on her anger, and brashness towards Taylor was not framed as hurt given the soft dramatic music that should score such a moment. Instead, the moment is sensationalized both to frame her as angry and to transform her anger to make it appear vindictive, hardened and mean. This is because she is a Blackgirl. She is not afforded the

same benefit of the doubt or the empathy her counterparts benefit from, due to the misogynoir and anti-Blackness that shape the environment inside the Villa and in the outside world.

Olandria's righteous indignation is transformed into surplus and unwarranted outrage. The producers count on the overdetermined stereotypes the viewing audience will bring to the viewing of this episode hoping to stoke outrage to increase viewership. While they could not have anticipated how far the public outcry would become, *Villa* producers created a scenario wherein the viewing public was incentivized to share disturbing anti-Black posts in response to the way Olandria was successfully rendered a villain.

Mean Blackgirls: The Case for National Action

Love Island USA is predicated on a parasocial dynamic wherein viewers are empowered to view the people on screen as their own personal game. The 24/7 surveillance gives the illusion of closeness with their favorite Islanders and the interactive component through the *Love Island USA* app gives them the power to enact change within the Villa and eventually choose the winner. After season 6 the *Love Island USA* audience grew not only in size but in intensity. The show completely changed the social, cultural, and financial landscape of the United States. Brands just needed to mention *Love Island USA*, recreate *Love Island USA* scenes or imagery, or mention the favored Islanders and the various *Love Island USA* fan communities would swarm to engage them. The show had clearly transcended the television. The over-familiarity with contestants helped extend the life of the show after the Islanders left the Villa. Parasociality allowed for the formation of expansive (and somewhat dangerous) fan networks. These fan networks pick up where *Villa* producers and NBCUniversal leave off, continuing to surveil, and profit off the daily lives of their favorite Islander. In return, there is the veneer of individual success. It is the logic that says if an Islander is well loved and has a strong and enthusiastic

fanbase, they have a better chance at securing long-term financial support beyond the Villa. The parasociality is justified through the mirage of welfare and support.

Similarly, people who create online platforms based around discussing *Love Island USA* in any capacity have also seen a financial and social boost. *Villa* producers encourage fans to discuss the season as it airs and keep #LoveIslandUSAS7 trending. These desires to garner public interest are evident in the show's editing and production. The powers that be are acutely aware of online discussions about the show. As mentioned, the producers deliberately curate scenarios that spark public conversation and interest. There is no such thing as bad publicity. When it comes to Black women, especially the dark-skinned Black women, it appears that the crutch they can always rely on is how ready and willing viewing audiences are to embody anti-Black behaviors and discourse. *Villa* producers did the work throughout the season to emphasize narrow personas of both Chelley and Olandria, altering their personalities into digestible caricatures for audiences to attach to. After manipulating audience perception of the two Blackgirls as “mean girls” and antagonists in the aftermath of the “Stand on Business” Challenge, the *Love Island* producers placed the power back in the hands of the audience, not officially on the *Love Island USA* app, but on their social media stories.

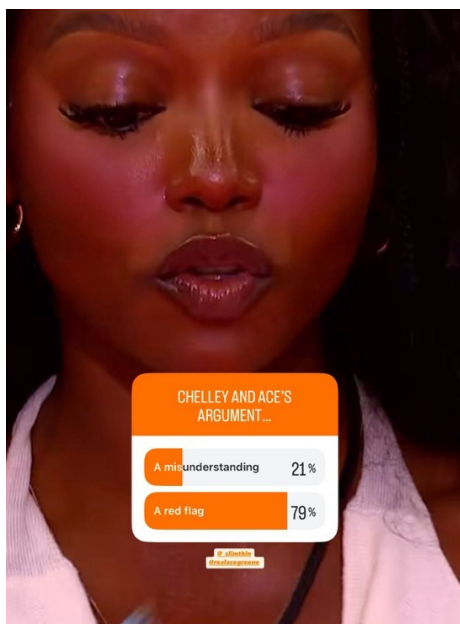


Figure 6. Screenshot of Chelley's Instagram Poll

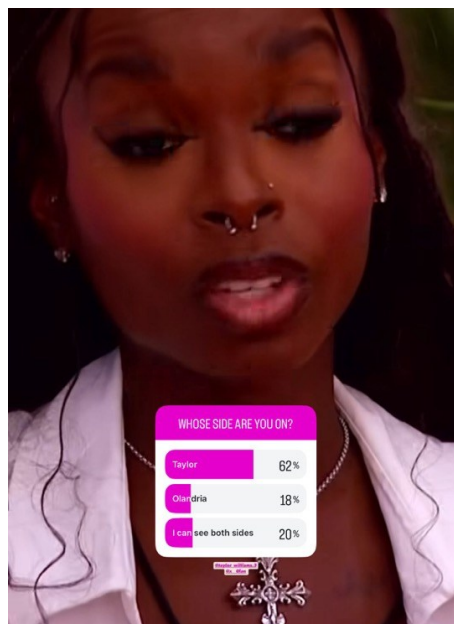


Figure 5. Screenshot of Olandria's Instagram Poll

On the official *Love Island USA* Instagram story, they asked audiences to weigh in on the highlights from the “Stand on Business” challenge. For the highlights concerning Olandria and Chelley’s moments, they presented polls on the validity of the conflict in their respective couples/former couples. For example, one poll posted by the that used the clip of Olandria and Taylor’s standoff asked “Who’s side are you on? Taylor, Olandria, or I can see both sides” and then tagged the accounts of both Islanders. This sort of framing seeks to delegitimize the harm Taylor was trying to inflict upon Olandria in that moment and opens the floodgates for disgruntled fans to cyberbully both Islanders. Separately, fandoms were invited to weigh in on social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter (now X) with the #LoveIslandUSAS7. Netizens were given a forum for fans and antagonists to share their opinions freely.

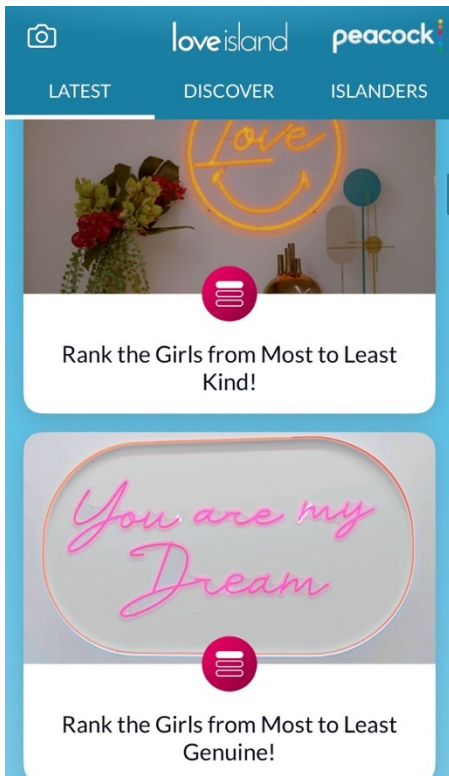


Figure 7. Screenshot 1 of Official Love Island USA App Rank Vote 7/1/2025

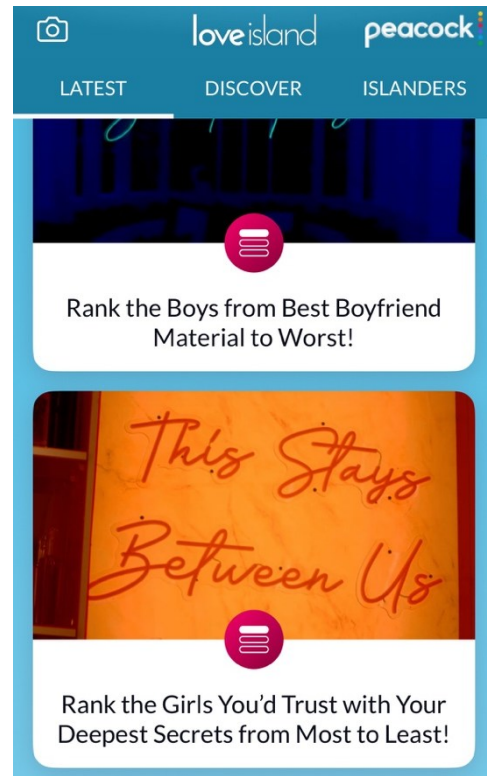


Figure 8. Screenshot 2 of Official Love Island USA App Rank Vote 7/1/2025

At the same time as the social media poll, a special ranking vote was put on the *Love Island USA* app. Fans would have two hours after the “Stand on Business” episode aired to cast their vote on the app. This vote asked fans to rank the boys, girls and couples in order of most to least based on a number of prompts like “Rank the Girls from Most to Least Kind!” or “Rank the Girls You’d Trust with Your Deepest Secrets from Most to Least” (Peacock 2025) These prompts clearly put the two dark-skinned Black women at a disadvantage who during that episode were painted as untrustworthy “mean girls”. Those ranked least would be at risk for expulsion from the Villa. Though not stated explicitly, it is visibly apparent that the engagement strategy was anti-Blackness. They knew positioning Carthen’s Blackgirlhood as inherently in opposition to the rules of social citizenship in the *Villa* (i.e., “girls’ girlhood”) would ensure the engagement they desired. After all, in the afterlives of slavery, anti-Blackness is an investment

with guaranteed dividends. They lit the match that started the burning inferno national outrage seeking to punish Carthen and Bissainthe.

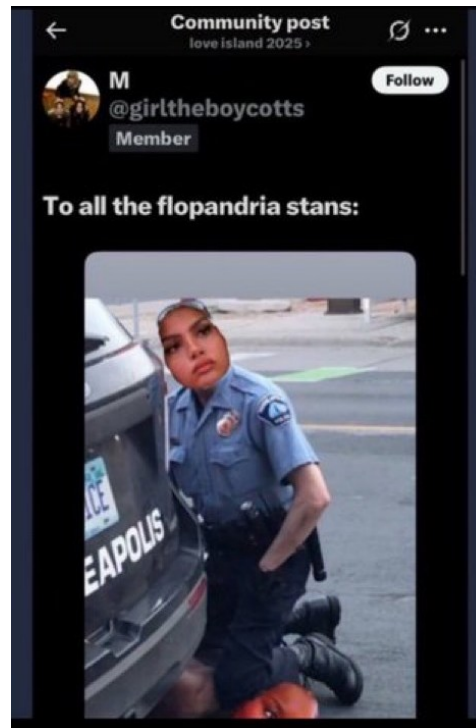


Figure 9. Screenshot of Tweet with Olandria as George Floyd Meme posted by @girltheboycotts

Olandria, who had been seeking a pathway to redeem her bad Blackgirlhood, had become the target of the large and dangerous Huda fanbase. To them, the idol of their affection had been tormented and betrayed by this Black woman who according to the narrative of the show has been targeting Huda since the first recoupling. Various fans of Huda attacked Olandria and her fans using all manner of racial epithets. This was the punishment they thought was deserved. It was akin to a virtual lynching. This suspicion was confirmed when an anonymous fan account posted a meme targeting Olandria's fans that depicted the image of former Minneapolis Police Department officer Derrick Chauvin kneeling on the deceased body of George Floyd with Olandria's face superimposed on Floyd's limp body and Huda's face superimposed on Derek Chauvin. It was a horrific image. In creating, re-posting, engaging and laughing at this image

audiences took to its end the investments *Villa* producers made in curating Carthen's persona how they did. She sought redemption and a chance at social citizenship; however, because she is bad and a Blackgirl there is no chance at girlhood, or personhood beyond or outside of the death promised by anti-Blackness. She was not only not a "girls' girl" or just a "mean girl" anymore; this image solidified how the grander anti-Black landscape of the United States Empire views her: as captive flesh. Furthermore, in the afterlives of slavery, death is what is promised to captive flesh. Here, Mustafa's fans decided that the answer to "America's most intransigent problem" was to demonize a Blackgirl/Black woman and to call for her death and use the spectacle of her violation and death as fuel to build and maintain networks and systems.



Figure 12. Screenshot of BuzzFeed Tasty Post Title Page



Figure 13. Screenshot of Chelley's Breakfast posted by BuzzFeed Tasty

Similarly, Chelley's righteous indignation towards Huda rendered her not only a "mean girl" but a monster, un-human. On July 9th, 2025, BuzzFeed's food lifestyle blog, Tasty, published a social post across platforms entitled "What I Think Each *Love Island* Girl Deserves for Breakfast." In this post, they said Chelley deserved a "Knuckle Sandwich" for breakfast, implying she deserved a punch in the face. Her physical violation became the ending of a horrific

joke. This is because she too is a bad Blackgirl. She does not perform normative girlhood adequately because of her Blackness, her badness, and her queerness. Unlike Olandria, she is not explicitly seeking a reformation of her performance of gender. Thus, Chelley is further rendered as defiant of the norms of social citizenship. Her defiance is set up then to meet with the policing and punishing force of the normative regime. Because she is bad and she is not seeking ontological redemption, she is damned to the perpetual harm that befalls her as a bad Blackgirl, as racial-sexual abject. Her conflict with Huda reified her as racial-sexual abject/captive flesh justifying the national backlash and the physical violence jokingly remarked upon in BuzzFeed's post. Returning to Brandon Davis (2023) the threats of violence and the national call to enact said violence that come down upon Chelley because she is rendered as captive flesh is seen as "restorative to the social order" (155). The perceived injury she inflicted upon Huda, is seen as a transgression against normative girlhood, and thus must be punished with full force to restore the social order in the *Villa* and in the real world. Though Buzzfeed later deleted and apologized for the post, the damage had already been done. Just a week and a half later, TIME Magazine, a publication that prides itself on its 100 year legacy of "trusted guidance about the ideas and people who shape and improve the world" published an article on July 15th at the conclusion of *Love Island USA* season 7 entitled "The Most Toxic Communication Habit on *Love Island* Season 7" wherein contributor Angela Haupt (2025) stated that Chelley represented the "Toxic Interruption" communication style. Haupt characterized Bissainthe's interruption of Mustafa's apology after the "Hearts on Fire" challenge as an exemplar of that style. The only trouble being she misquoted Chelley, citing her for Olandria's words, for which Haupt published a retraction. What Chelley did was tell Huda that she needed some time to cool down because she was too upset to listen to Huda. Moreover, Haupt turned around to celebrate Huda for acting the same

way Chelley did. While Chelley's de-escalation was framed as "toxic interruption," Huda's similar display of restraint was characterized as an exemplar of what to do. (Haupt 2025) These national publications, paired with fan conversation, portrayed Chelley as the social ill that befalls the nation. Her mundane frustration with her friend alchemized into a cause for national disposal. Social media users posted themselves ranting about how Chelley should meet harm for how she has hurt Huda. She became a vacuum to hold all their contempt, turning her producer-manipulated interpersonal drama into a case for national uproar and intervention.



Figure 10. Chelley and Olandria Post Villa Photoshoot with Teen Vogue

In conclusion, despite their openness and kindness toward their castmates, their displays of kinship and support for one another, and their authentic self-expression on screen, Carthen's and Bissainthe's every little action was transmogrified through misogynoir-tinted glasses, rendering them into "mean girls". Despite their differing afflictions with their gender performance and social citizenship, Chelley and Olandria perpetually damned to the violences inflicted on them through the narratives invoked by *Love Island USA* because they are bad Blackgirls. Their badness and Blackness were manipulated by the show and used as engagement

bait to increase the dividends of the season. Left hanging in the balance are the two Black women who were there to search for companionship, now made into specters for anti-Black national outrage.

Conclusion: *Love Island*'s in Need of Love Today

Throughout this thesis, I explored how *Love Island USA*'s deep investment in the continuation of misogynoir and anti-Blackness is exposed in its treatment of the dark-skinned Black women contestants who participate. I focused on how the structures that create and maintain the *Villa* are not dissimilar to the markings and makings of the sociopolitical sphere in the United States in the afterlives of slavery. I contend that these shows offer a forum for ontological mobility, allowing them respite, or rather redemption from the state of the social Other into legibility as a social citizen. This project names the ideologies pushed forth about Black women, the Black Family, and Black citizenship in the 1965 Report on the Negro Family: The Case for National Action (or the Moynihan Report), which created the climate for Black women to seek out the Finding Love reality show in order to seek that social citizenship. I contend, however, that this ontological redemption is not only a smokescreen but also impossible.

Despite the fame, notoriety, and partnership these dark-skinned women receive after their time in the *Love Island Villa*, there is no respite or redemption from the markings of their proverbial flesh. The very structure of the *Love Island Villa* is built on imperial logics, which will never produce a safe, stable position for Black women, especially in the wake of slavery. The nature of reality television necessitates spectacle, and this thesis highlighted the ways that *Love Island USA* uses the justification of reality spectacle to engage in the exploitation, punishment, and public and perpetual degradation of the dark-skinned women Islanders. Focusing on the two most recent and ostensibly most popular seasons of the show, seasons six and seven, this project examined how the dark-skinned Black women experienced structural misogynoir and anti-Blackness, and how these experiences reveal the logics and social

maneuvering of the US political schema. Focusing on Islanders Jana Craig and Serena Page of season 6 and Michelle “Chelley” Bissainthe and Olandria Carthen of season 7, I analyzed how each of their experiences demonstrates that structural anti-Blackness makes the pursuit of social citizenship impossible, even as the *Villa* purports to be a model that will enable these same women to become paragons of conventional heterosexual womanhood. And, in the case of winners like Serena Page, there are clear benefits.

The chapter entitled “What You Won’t Do 4 *Love Island*: Perfecting the *Villa*” offered background on *Love Island USA*, its structure and function, and examined the record-breaking, culture-altering season 6. In this portion of the work, I postulated that misogynoir and anti-Blackness are constitutive elements of the *Love Island Villa* ecosystem. Through a close reading of the experiences of the two dark-skinned Black women, Serena Page and Jana Craig, during the Casa Amor challenge in season 6, I argued that misogynoir and anti-Blackness fuel the show's popularity and financial success. The two women face undue public humiliation, manipulation, and punishment for their very place on the show. Serena’s resistance to the temporal regimes of the *Villa* and Jana’s rejection of the *Villa* producer’s narratives about her personhood culminated in their reprimand during Casa Amor. I assert that Page’s win and Craig’s continued public favor reify the falsehood that systems like surveillance are sociopolitically and culturally advantageous to Black women. Relying on Moya Bailey’s (2021) definitions of misogynoir, Tao Leigh Goffee’s (2022) framework of stealing time, and Simone Browne’s (2015) branding Blackness, I found that Page and Craig’s experiences of harm generate the foundation for *Love Island USA* as a force. Furthermore, I investigate how their success obscures the very violent systems that structure the *Villa* as a sociopolitical apparatus.

The chapter entitled “Blackgirls Need Love Too” analyzes how season 7 operationalizes the structures of the *Villa* and escalates the harm by engaging more deeply with the parasociality of the national viewing public. I argue that season 7 of *Love Island USA* utilizes the popularity of the show and the mirage of racial progress to mask the more extreme displays of anti-Blackness and misogynoir as well as invigorate national intervention in molding the show’s narrative and disciplining the “bad social citizenship” of the Islanders, Olandria Carthen and Michelle “Chelley” Bissainthe. Using Christina Sharpe’s (2016) anagrammatical Blackness and Patrice Douglass’ (2018) definition of Black gender, I employ “girlhood” and “Blackgirlhood” as frameworks for my analysis of how the performances of Blackgirlhood embodied by Carthen and Bissainthe perpetually place them outside of social citizenship. No matter how they seek to enact normative performance of “girlhood,” their Blackness bars them from the stability of social citizenship in the *Villa* and thus the outside world. Moreover, I show how the *Villa* producers’ investment in anti-Blackness and misogynoir that frame Blackgirlhood as outside of social citizenship is accelerated by the manufacturing of public outrage towards these girls, resulting in displays of violence.

While the focus of this thesis was only seasons 6 and 7 of *Love Island USA*, this project can be expanded to consider not only the entirety of *Love Island USA* but for Finding Love reality TV overall. There is a myriad of shows that have come to make up the pop culture landscape that engage their dark-skinned Black women contestants in a similar fashion and mirror the desires of the US empire. Expanding this research to include the gambit of western Finding Love reality TV extends the analysis of how these dynamics not only span across space/time/place. What national imperatives are encoded in the DNA of Finding Love reality television?

In closing and in the spirit of Christina Sharpe's (2016) "wake work," I offer this project as a call for care. Sharpe names "wake work" as care work in the wake of the ultimate world-altering tragedy of enslavement. She asks us to consider what it means to care for Black people in the afterlife of slavery who are living perpetually as dead and dying (17-18). I mention Toni Morrison's (1987) concept of rememory from *Beloved* in this thesis alongside quotes of familial wisdom because they inform my approach to this project as care work. A rememory is a traumatic memory that can be recalled and experienced by individuals who were not present for its inception. The deep, traumatizing fear that the absence of care, the invalidation of personhood, and the devastating, grotesque violation that defined enslavement could possibly transfer to her child through memory was enough for Sethe to discipline Denver for asking about Sweet Home. Alongside this, I think of the warnings of my mother to act like I've been somewhere and to have a plan. She would say "mwanamke ni kujipanga," which means to be a woman is to have a plan. Issued as a warning and a charge, this phrase was used to prepare me to take seriously the potential for violence in intimate partnerships and to create plan(s) to protect myself and ensure a safe escape when necessary. Violence awaits us in all sectors of the wake: physically, mentally, emotionally, and interpersonally. What we need right now—what we should be striving for—is trust and care for one another. It is through these logics that I reflect on this research. Olandria, Chelley, Serena, and Jana all deserved to be treated with care during their seasons. They went on that show not imagining they would face an absolute absence of care in how they were depicted, produced, and discussed. Yet, because the four have become successful, we imagine that the ends justified the misogynoir-riddled means. I ask that we be more critical not only of these shows but also of what they are asking us to take on politically, socially, and culturally. If *Love Island* is going to be the beacon of what we should desire our

love to be, we need to want something else. We need to center care instead of citizenship. Citizenship is not liberation, and it is not life-preserving. Just as my mother warned me, I warn us that if we do not have a plan for what we deem as real love and care, the trap of imperial desire will ensnare us. Our love should not be that of a nation but rather seeking how best to live through the horrors of the wake. I want my research to be like a warning call and a pathway to resistance; to arm against the violences that can and do come from the hollow, fragmentary narratives at the heart of these shows.

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