Analysis Paper

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Love Island USA Season Six had three breakout stars that deviated from the pattern, with all three facing how racism and visual racialization, as well as sexism and misogyny, are a detriment to public support, and yet all three made it to the finale and placed as the top 3, as well as becoming breakout stars and influencers online. Within this analysis, it is important to have a background knowledge of reality television and how it operates in order to analyze how *Love Island USA* is different within its own genre of shows, as well as the aspects of how these three women were exceptions to the typical rules of reality television as mentioned in the work of Dubrofsky as well as the typical reflection of society in which women and people of color, and especially women of color facing a double othering, are judged on a harsher scale due to the implicit biases due to how people are socialized.

Within these factors it is evident that there was a subversion of expectations in the scope of reality television, which led to the analysis methodology within this paper. Utilizing a textual analysis with a queer theory backing calls attention to how a pattern

was broken. Queer theory is useful within this context due to the subversion of expectations that was demonstrated in the show and the following influencing and parasociality on the social media platforms of Serena Page, JaNa Craig, and Leah Kateb. Within *Love Island USA* season 6 there is an inherent question when viewing the results, to what degree did the top three women being women of color (two black women and one Middle Eastern woman) affect the final voting results? The outcome, while positive for these three women, could have been negatively affected by the combination of misogyny and racism, also known as misogynoir for black women. So why did they become beloved? What made them the exception to a common practice and voter results?

Within the show *Love Island USA* Season 6, these three women were allowed to be whole people and perceived as such by the audience. However, there have been many Opinion pieces and editorials on how *Love Island USA* as a show made certain editing choices to portray these three women of color in certain ways, such as aggressive and over-the-top, and allowed racial microaggressions from other castmates to go unaddressed both within the aired show and by production. Within the study of reality television, it is stated as previously established fact by scholars such as Dubrovsky that reality television is edited to portray certain messages across all genres of shows, from pure competition to competition for love, and portray people in a certain light (commonly referred to on social media as the villain edit) in order to drive viewership and the drama that people are tuning in to see. While feeding this drama is good for ratings, it can also play into pre-existing implicit biases. Within previous works

on implicit bias and how it operates within scripted series there is a claim that factors such as attractiveness and behavior shown are core in seeing how the audience interacts with black characters on screen (Stamps, D. L., & Sahlman, J). While reality television is not explicitly scripted, it is edited in order to portray certain pieces of information or plotlines.

Within these edits, I would like to point to several key moments within the season, focusing on several clips from season 6's episodes 22, 26, 27, and 36. These episodes are considered pivotal moments within the edited characterization of these three women. As the season is 37 episodes in total, it is clear that all the cited moments are from the last third of the season because that is when the audience can connect with them and form parasocial relationships. As the series is discussed as operating on a very tight turnaround, there are constant edits to the show based on the audience reactions to the previous episodes. These moments also allow a much more nuanced and rounded view of who these women are as people as they open up more within relationships that develop naturally over time.

Season 6 Episode 22 of *Love Island USA* was the Casa Amor recoupling, where stress and anxiety over not knowing the outcome of a certain situation are utilized in order to create a heightened sense of tension and allow for drama when the outcomes are revealed. In this episode, all three women are left single and vulnerable (with one choosing to be that way) when all three of their couple partners came back from Casa Amor with one of the so-called Casa girls. Leah's Casa Amor recoupling, which was first

of the ones to be examined (timestamp 00:53:22- 00:58:26), ended with her couple, Miguel, coming back from Casa Amor with Sierra. The Casa Amor recoupling was a turning point for Leah because previously, if someone had made a choice similar to the one Miguel made such as choosing a bombshell to recouple with, she would have been very upset and reacted with anger; whereas in this recoupling she was understanding and almost resigned. In addition to this, I personally believe parts of her previous actions within the show were edited to allow her to fit into the role of antagonist within a narrative story, the instigator or drama starter.

While she did show certain traits that fit with that narrative, being mean and rude at times, she mentioned in later interviews that at certain points during the competition show, that she was also crying and expressing other unshown emotions quite frequently during these unaired times. I believe that these choices from production over what to and not to show were not only to create drama within the show, but also allowed them to play into implicit biases such as the stereotype of an angry, passionate Middle Eastern woman, even subconsciously. While the racial stereotyping may have been accidental and mostly driven by looking to create a longer plotline with the conflicts necessary to keep people hooked, it is also important to realize that these were also her real actions and she is a whole person. So while some parts of her may fulfill a certain stereotype within an abnormal situation, that does not mean that that is all she is. This point is what the portion of the text represents, her being more than her worst actions and being allowed to have good actions as well.

Next was JaNa's Casa Amor recoupling (timestamp 00:58:52- 01:04:54), where her couple, Kenny, came back with Catherine after she chose to stay loyal to him. In this point she also was allowed to show a different side of herself and be more vulnerable, when she was sad and upset and she was more assertive in how she interacted with Kenny and she also was allowed to be disappointed and upset as by this point she had also gone through several couples that did not work and she had believed Kenny was showing her a connection that could have worked for both of them. This clip was a turning point for her because she had primarily been bubbly, upbeat, and positive even in the face of other couples dissolving. While this was not always the case and she was angry and annoyed during another couple dissolving, this was also the first time that she had allowed herself to be upset and hurt within a conversation with her couple instead of solely in conversations with friends. While JaNa's characterization on the show did not play into common racial stereotyping, the point of allowing herself to be vulnerable and hurt and frustrated was a point that added another layer to who she was allowed to be on this show.

Serena's Casa Amor recoupling (timestamp 01:16:41- 01:25:35) was the longest of the night as her couple Kordell, who she had been with since the beginning of the season returned with Daia after she had seen videos of his behavior in Casa Amor which broke certain boundaries that they had agreed upon and she had followed. Throughout the show Serena had been a collected, direct, and respectful communicator and did not lose her cool, so to speak. In this Casa Amor recoupling, she was angry and let it be very known exactly why and exactly how she felt the way she did. This was also

an example of emotional vulnerability on her part and letting herself feel the emotions. She had been emotionally closed off for the first portion of her couple with Kordell and had even broken things off with him in a romantic sense. The competition and aspect of the show came in when they agreed to stay in a couple in order to stay on the show and have an ability to explore other connections. Throughout the time that they had spent together there, Serena was able to open up emotionally even though she always did it in a more detached and considerate manner where she explained how she was feeling and how it affected her. This expression of emotion of anger specifically, was a departure from an established norm of who she was as a character within the show. Her display of anger in this sense was an acknowledgment that she was a full person who had been hurt in a specific sense. Her display of anger also led into what is called the "money shot" by scholars such as Dubrofsky and her book on reality television. The money shot in this sense does not refer to the pornographic meaning, and instead refers to a close-up shot of specifically a woman crying and the vulnerability that comes with that.

This vulnerability I would argue can also apply to anger. Respectability politics have followed both women as a whole and women of color specifically in different ways. Black women in particular hold certain definitions of respectability and what it means. Serena referred to herself as more traditional in the show, which while ironic from the standpoint that she went on *Love Island USA*, referred mostly to her outlook on romantic relationships and what they entailed in the sense of responsibilities of both parties that are partially gender-based and partially personality-based. This expression

of anger specifically both played into and broke certain stereotypes. The expression of anger plays into the stereotype of the scorned woman or the wronged woman, which is a trope that is common in reality dating shows. It is not as common with the men that are competing on these shows as men's anger carries a threat of violence that a woman does not.

However, Black women are masculinized within racist stereotypes such as the welfare queen (Hill Collins), which portrays specifically Black women as money-seeking, angry, and sexually promiscuous. While Serena did not fall into the welfare queen stereotype in the sense of being sexually promiscuous or money seeking, within this characterization she was angry, and the interesting thing is she was allowed to be angry. She was not punished for being an angry Black woman and was instead celebrated for being angry within the context of the show's editing power.

Her reaction in this scene and its reception among her castmates were also a reflection of respectability politics, and the idea that there is a right way to act and react in situations, and that respectability is what allows a person to gain rights and power. While Serena's reaction rejected respectability politics as she was using a lot of profanity including a profane gesture (flipping Kordell off and then putting her middle finger to her backside), had a clear influence from African American Vernacular English (or AAVE) in her grammatical structure and syntax, and using words and gestures with sexual overtones, the background reactions mostly seemed to reinforce the idea of respectability politics. There was eye-rolling in the background, unhappy or

uncomfortable facial expressions, as well as several gasps or shocked exclamations from the people sitting down. The narrative framing of her words as well as Kordell's reaction to said words and other castmates' reactions in the background of the shots were framed in a way where it seemed to be surprising to them. In addition, while the women did support all of the other women when it was their turn to recouple after casa, there was more vocal support within the recouplings of Leah, Serena, and JaNa from the other two to whomever was standing up.

Serena's recoupling had the most vocal support from the other two women as she was the most clearly wronged person in this situation. From the perspective of editing and emotional framing of a scene, the song playing also implied a sense of the wrong woman stereotype. The phrase “I ain't never coming back again” was repeated, coming from the song with a dramatic and angry feel to the instrumental. This framing from the editing team was a choice made to evoke emotion from the viewers, and was also chosen to pair with what was happening on screen, both Serena’s actions and the reactions behind her. This also created an interesting contrast in between the expected reactions from an implicit standpoint as well as how the show seems to frame it.

The next grouping of clips I have chosen to highlight are from the event Movie Night, where the Islanders watch clips of specific actions and conversations that they were not privy to previously on a literal giant movie screen, complete with popcorn. This event is split into two episodes, and I have chosen clips from both episode 26 & 27 to add specific points of interest within the characterization that I view as important to the

season long ‘character arc’ of these three women. The first is an argument among the women, specifically between Leah, Liv, and Kaylor (episode 26, timestamp 01:03:22-01:04:58). All three are OG girls in the Villa, and the argument was over Liv and Kaylor’s conversation with Rob, Leah’s old couple, about the group deciding the dumping of Andrea and a following conversation between Leah and Rob where she said she tried to take a backseat. As for the argument itself, Leah became angry when viewing the video of her friends in the Villa accusing her of lying about a group decision. While this was mainly a miscommunication on Rob's part, the reactions of both Liv and Kaylor were what Leah took offense to. They had immediately accused her of lying and said that she was pushing for Andrea to leave and speculated that it was solely to get Rob back.

This led to an escalation in both emotions and vocal volume, and when Leah started using her hands and arms to point and gestured towards people at one point Kaylor flinched back as if Leah was trying to hit her. At this reaction, Leah said a quoted line from the season "It's giving white woman scared." This line was also used to accentuate and criticize racial microaggressions within the season and points attention to the perceived intentions of racial minorities. Within history it is almost an accepted fact that white women accept a particular set of gendered racial expectations, that they are in need of protecting and securing, as well as depending on others in different forms.

Especially in America, most of these perceptions come from how black men specifically were racialized as dangerous and violent as a justification for slavery. This also ties into the masculinization of black women and is a part where the aggressive black woman stereotype comes from. While in this case, the expectation of aggression is applied to a Middle Eastern woman (specifically Persian), it is still an example of racialized aggression and an implicit bias. While there were raised voices in multiple senses and on both sides, there was no expectation of violence from either live or killer despite them making similar hand gestures and pointing specifically live doing such. no one was flinching back from the hand gestures that either of those women were making.

And while Leah was swearing more and at a louder volume, nothing else including her posture or previous actions had ever suggested that she would be willing to be physically aggressive in any sense. Especially in this sense, I am not arguing that one cannot feel threatened. My statement specifically applies to how the editing and characterization of Leah works. However, as if to counteract that perception, immediately after Kaylor flinched back from Leah's gesture, several people immediately stated she wasn't going to hit you, including Leah herself before the previous quote. All statements were also said with a tone implying that it should be obvious at this point.

Within *Love Island USA*, it is specifically created so you do not have much else to do other than talk to people at this point, the OG's especially had been on the island mostly isolated for approximately three weeks. It had also been stated previously within the season how the girls bonded more within the makeup room sessions.

In addition, directly after the argument between Leah and Liv and Kayla, JaNa made a statement about how the women were all mature and are better than this in an attempt to calm them down (episode 26 timestamp 01:04:58- 01:05:16) and was immediately met with a very curt message of stay out of this from Liv, which prompted Serena to state that there was no reason that live should be getting on to JaNa in this scenario. While this interaction could be interpreted as a gesture of friendship, which it was for sure, one could also interpret it as following Harbin's concept of racial duty within the context of a competition show. Serena and JaNa had been the only two Black women on the show until approximately two days before this event. Within this time on the show, while there had been other Black people (men) there is also a sense of gendered duty within this season, with the repetition of the phrase 'girl's girl' being commonplace in the season.

As has been previously discussed within this paper, the combination of race and gender played a clear role within the show. It is not far-fetched to imagine that especially within an isolated close-knit community people would seek clear similarities to bond with each other on. In this case, with Serena and JaNa specifically, there is a clear similarity and common experiences, along with the knowledge of microaggressions specific to black women and how they can appear in different environments. In this sense, it is not out of the realm of possibility to assume that not only did Serena see one of her friends get snapped at, but she also saw an unfair treatment of another black woman. And while Serena had previously intervened in

multiple situations on Leah's behalf, as well as discussing Serena’s emotions and personal feelings on certain topics, JaNa did not usually get as involved in the situations, mostly choosing to emotionally support her friends or attempt to de-escalate situations. This situation was one of the first times that Janae had really been snapped at or treated cuttingly in a way that took her aback.

In addition, in the next section of movie night (episode 27) Serena is still in focus in another sense of her show characterization. In one of the videos shown during movie night, a clip was shown of her crying in the makeup room during the separation period of Casa Amor where no one knows what the other part of their couple is doing over missing Kordell and being scared that her being previously vulnerable would make her look stupid if he came back with another girl. It transitioned into a clip from when the girls were watching video sent to them from Casa Amor and she saw how Kordell had been behaving outside of their agreed upon boundaries where she began crying, and ended with her statements following viewing that video where she shut down being vulnerable and stated “If you think you about to come back in this b**** and swindle me? It's over, it's wraps, [Kordell] is finished".

After viewing the video, she expressed that her fear is in the first clip had come true and she did look stupid, where she was comforted by Kaylor and told that he looked stupid and she did not. Serena also stated within a confessional that even though she did feel embarrassed at being vulnerable on a giant screen, she also felt that it was good that she was expressing how she felt and allowing herself to be sad as

it was a step forward for her and breaking previous patterns. I believe that this statement and interaction is important because it was a subversion of expectations for Serena herself. As she had stated in the confessional she had a hard time being vulnerable and her choice to allow herself to feel these things was uncomfortable and she didn't quite know how to handle seeing it.

This event was a subversion of expectations for Serena herself, in that the trope of the strong black woman character was no longer solely what she was depicted as. While Serena did demonstrate a strength of conviction in her beliefs, she also allowed herself to be open with others and comforted after previously stating that part of the reason why she kept herself closed off was because of previous experiences and being disappointed in dating and romantic relationships. In addition, her queered timelines within romantic relationships in the Villa are of note in how subversive she was to the overall structure of *Love Island USA*, as even though she is a “slow burner” in romance, *Love Island USA* had all contestants make out within the first hour of meeting each other. This queering of timelines add another layer of questioning within the existing question about how her popularity grew enough for her to win a fan vote that decides the winners and end up with $50,000.

This brings me to another important aspect of the show, the competition of it all. *Love Island USA* advertises the competition as a chance to find love and maybe win $100,000 dollars, with the structure being one person from the winning couple,chosen at random, is given the opportunity to walk away with $100,000 or split the money with

their couple. The goal of this game echoes a commonly stated question within the show, whether someone is there for the ‘right reasons’, as in solely a chance at love. This raises a paradoxical question, as a person who applies to *Love Island USA*, or other *Love Island* versions, by virtue of the applications alone, has to know that the money and fame are a factor within the show. Even the suspicion of whether someone is there because of these factors is enough to affect how the show operates, with doubt about interpersonal relationships and their sincerity.

And another important part of the competition is that in order for there to be a winner, there have to be losers. Love Island USA has several different forms of eliminations within season six, with the options of a recoupling leaving someone single and dumped, or audience voting; either a straight vote with the bottom couple going home or the Islanders being made to choose who goes home, with options of girls and boys going home. There is no discernible rotation or pattern to me in what elimination option they utilize and when, so therefore it is my belief that it is based on a preplanned outline that can change week to week, the possibility of which was stated by a director in an interview on the structuring of challenges. These losses of friends or couples not only serve to remind people that they are at risk of leaving, but they can also create longer-lasting conflicts, the best example of which was mentioned above, referred to as the “backseat debate” on the show over Leah’s role in the elimination of Andrea.

While these are small glimpses and in no way a comprehensive look at the psychological effects or goals of these choices, these are supposed to be the only two

outcomes for the players, winning or losing. However, recently a third option has become available for the cast members. Influencing. The parasocial attachments to the reality show figures are also easily transferable to social media formats, where there is now less of a concern with growing an audience as there has been a good amount of publicity. And, the biggest part of the influencing option that appeals to people, is that they just have to be memorable instead of win. The memorable option has allowed all thre women, Serena Page, Leah Kateb, and JaNa Craig, to become influencers and expand into different areas, such as brand ownership and appearances on other reality television shows. While the influencing path is not an option for everyone, whether due to popularity or just not wanting that, it is important to note that it is an option. And similarly to *Love Island USA*, influencing gives you an inconsistent and unpredictable outcome, in the financial sense or in the long-term effort sense. There is no employment contract or pension available for influencers, and when your income depends on the tide of the public opinion, it can be difficult.

Overall, what is the most important thing to note here is that these three women broke a pattern through finishing in the top three and creating a parasocial audience that has followed them to their new endeavors. I believe this break in pattern is significant in its implications for the race and gender of it all. In addition, there are some interesting questions about how Love Island operates that could be important to the scholars within the field of reality television. In addition, there are more questions to be asked, such as these women were a major break in the pattern, can other people break the pattern? Why did they specifically break the pattern? Will they continue to be liked in

the future or will public opinion change about them? As for the field of communications itself, I believe that the conclusions here are to be drawn about the characters and characterizations in television, especially reality television, and not any sort of intrinsic view into people's souls.

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