RESPECT ME, RESPECT ME NOT: THE INTERSECTION OF RESPECTABILITY POLITICS AND STEREOTYPES ABOUT BLACK WOMEN IN “THE BACHELOR” AND “READY TO LOVE”

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ABSTRACT

Black women face unrealistic expectations in society that are reflected in reality dating programming. Reality dating shows like Ready to Love and The Bachelor represent how Black women must act to remain respectable. Research shows that a combination of different factors including stereotypes and respectability politics impact Black women’s agency in these spaces. Current findings explore how reality television creates characters out of Black women through racial stereotypes. However, it fails to combine key societal factors to explain Black women’s role in reality dating shows.

The findings in this paper explore intricacies in society that affect Black women. Specifically, it examines the impact of physical appearance; anti-miscegenation; emotional state; and the Black woman’s double burden. The double burden relates to the decision Black women face as subjects of racism on whether to become the aggressor when confronted with racism or a teacher to the perpetrator. The final research concludes that the four societal standards affect Black women on reality dating television, and have real-life connections.

Keywords: The Bachelor, respectability politics, stereotypes, reality television, dating, race
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INTRODUCTION:
“Rachel Lindsay’s Tears”

In 2017, Rachel Lindsay became the first Black lead in the history of the Bachelor franchise. Her presence on The Bachelorette as the “first” put her on a high pedestal because of her race and gender. As the “first” Black lead, she had the opportunity to shape perceptions of Blackness and womanhood for the show’s predominantly white audience, with The Bachelor franchise’s racial demographics being more than 80 percent white. Not until Lindsay’s season was there an increase in Black viewership - from seven to twelve percent between Nick Viall’s season of The Bachelor in 2017 and Lindsay’s in 2018.

For Black television watchers, who on average make up the highest daily television consumption rate, it was compelling to see someone who looked like them in search of love. For Black women who are rated less attractive by cisgender and heterosexual men - and who do not find themselves represented romantically in the media - Rachel Lindsay was a big deal. However, Lindsay’s journey to The Bachelor held more challenges than she anticipated.


3 Ibid.


Ultimately, her path on the show resulted in her role as an outspoken alumnus of the franchise - and a big part of the public debates over race and television that have raged in the ensuing years.

The challenges of being a Black woman in the predominantly white behind-the-scenes space on The Bachelor reached a climax for Lindsay in June 2021. At this point, Lindsay published an opinion editorial piece on The New York Magazine’s website Vulture. In a written interview with Allison P. Davis, Lindsay expressed her unfiltered thoughts about her experience with ABC’s The Bachelor franchise and its long-time host, Chris Harrison.

Her piece was published after The Bachelor’s 25th season featuring Matt James, the first Black male lead in the franchise. Following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmed Aubrey, racial violence across the United States became a national issue. From politicians to media organizations, there were promises to do better to address issues of police violence and poor representation. Around the same time, Lindsay was very vocal about the lack of diversity within The Bachelor franchise. In an Honestly Rach blog post, she suggested: “An increase in cast leads interested in dating outside of their race and less problematic storylines for cast of color.”

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
Lindsay has consistently spoken out against racial inequities on the show, and this came to a head after Chris Harrison defended Rachel Kirkconnell’s racist comments she made before being on the show. On the 25th season of *The Bachelor*, Kirkonnell appeared as a contestant vying for Matt Jame’s love and attention. Towards the end of the season, evidence of Kirkonnell’s racism reached *The Bachelor’s* audience. In an interview on *Extra*, Lindsay asked Harrison about his thoughts on Kirkonnell’s comments. In response, he excused her racism and said, “We all need to have a little grace, a little understanding, a little compassion. Because I have seen some stuff online --- this judge, jury, and executioner thing where people are just tearing this girl’s life apart and diving into, like, her parents, her parents’ voting record.” He continued to criticize people for acting as the “woke police”.

The term “woke” gained popularity in 2014 when Michael Brown was murdered in Ferguson, Missouri. The phrase “stay woke” was used to galvanize support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Since then, it has been co-opted by members of the political divide to have different definitions. For the “left”, it means to identify as a heavily involved social justice advocate who is knowledgeable about the socioeconomic intersections of race and gender. On the other hand, the term was co-opted by members of the conservative right as a negative label.

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12 “Chris Harrison & Rachel Lindsay Talk ‘Bachelor’ Contestant Rachael Kirkconnell,” YouTube, Extratv, September 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hmY1gSAuRk&](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hmY1gSAuRk&).

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.


16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.
For this group, the term is used sarcastically and represents “political correctness”.\textsuperscript{19} In connection with “cancel culture”, many people have interpreted this term as individuals of a new generation who are overly sensitive about every issue.\textsuperscript{20}

In the \textit{Vulture} opinion article, Lindsay reflects on her experience as a contestant on \textit{The Bachelor}’s 21st season as well as being the lead for \textit{The Bachelorette}’s 18th season.\textsuperscript{21} In the article, a noteworthy aspect is that the article’s subtitle states, “I thought I could change \textit{The Bachelor} franchise from within. Until I realized I was their token.”\textsuperscript{22} Immediately, Lindsay frames her experience around racial respectability. Contemplating her feelings about being the first Black lead, Lindsay said: “I became the first Black lead - male or female - in the 16-year, 34-season history of the show. In 2018, I felt like I had changed the franchise just by representing myself as a Black professional woman in her 30s - those things had never been seen on the series.”\textsuperscript{23}

For more than 15 years, \textit{The Bachelor} franchise had never seen a Black lead. Lindsay was the first to represent the franchise as a Black woman, erupting in new conversations about how Black people were represented on the show. This is prevalent during one instance during Season 18 when she met a love interest’s friends.\textsuperscript{24} She recounts, “I walked in and saw two

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Lindsay, “Rachel Lindsay Has No Roses Left to Burn.”
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
Black men and two white women sitting at a table. I turned to my producer and gave her a look… I felt exploited.”

She continues, “The producers really thought, “How great! All these mixed couples can come together. They were only looking at the optics of the situation.” Lindsay explains that her main problem is that the interaction did not allow for real conversations about being in an interracial relationship in the Midwest or her concerns over the struggles to raise biracial children. Instead, her producer summed it up, “We thought it would be a good storyline.”

This train of thought by the behind-the-scenes staff was common throughout Lindsay’s season, where producers would steer the show in race-centered directions to produce a good storyline for viewers. There was little regard for the impact it would have on her as the lead or the audience.

While reality shows are supposed to be based on real-life; ultimately, it is a production that needs to be successful. This pushes the behind-the-scenes staff to create narratives that will be appealing to a wide range of audiences. In the end, many of these ideas put pressure on Lindsay to operate in a particular manner. The first Black Bachelorette in the franchise’s history fell victim to an exceedingly narrow set of expectations about Blackness and femininity that stems from the theory of respectability politics.

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
In its origin, the politics of respectability is an ideology formed by Black Americans and Caribbeans to combat racism and stigma.\textsuperscript{31} While the ideology pre-dates the Civil War, it increased in popularity during the Reconstruction period.\textsuperscript{32} At this point, Black people were participating in society in ways they were not allowed to prior. For example, there was an increase in the number of Black political representatives across Southern states.\textsuperscript{33} It aimed to associate Blackness “with displays of high (or at least not low) cultural capital and its accompanying social status.”\textsuperscript{34} In this context, the politics of respectability was used to elevate the Black community through the aforementioned cultural capital.

Over forty years, from 1880 to 1920, the theory of respectability politics underwent a transformation stemming from the influence of Black women in Baptist churches. In “Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in The Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920”, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham explores the role Black women played in racial pride and uplift as well as different tools that intersect with respectability politics. Throughout this research, Higginbotham’s analysis of the theory of respectability politics informs the examination of The


\textsuperscript{32} David Crockett, “Paths to Respectability: Consumption and Stigma Management in the Contemporary Black Middle Class,” \textit{Journal of Consumer Research} 44, no. 3 (September 2017): 557, \url{https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucx049}.


\textsuperscript{34} Crockett, 557.
Bachelor. Particularly, the predicament Lindsay found herself in during the taping of The Bachelor is an example of respectability politics plays out in real-life.

**Literature Review**

To my initial surprise, there is a good amount of research and information surrounding reality television shows. A majority of the readings focus on the impact of respectability politics, the role of stereotypes, and the world of reality television.

**Politics of Respectability**

A source of foundational information is Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s “Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920”. In the book, Higginbotham focuses on the role of Black women over 40 years and how they used the church to advance social and racial rights for the broader Black community. She explores how Black women were expected to have good mannerisms and a positive upbringing to gain new opportunities. This thesis uses her definition of respectability politics as the framework for further analysis. Higginbotham explains: “Through the discourse of respectability, the Baptist women emphasized manners and morals while simultaneously asserting traditional forms of protest.. [which] reflected and reinforced the hegemonic values of white America, as it simultaneously subverted and transformed the logic of race and gender subordination.”

Moreover, “Real Sister: Stereotypes, Respectability, and Black Women in Reality TV” edited by Jervette W. Ward is included in the bibliography. Composed of multiple authors, each chapter focuses on a different aspect of reality television as it pertains to Black women. This paper uses information from more than one section, however, the Introduction is a major focus.

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35 Higginbotham, 177-78
Titled “The Real Scandal: Portrayals of Black Women in Reality TV”, Ward explores the impact of different depictions of Black women in television affecting audience perceptions. Specifically, Ward uses ABC’s *Scandal* and Bravo’s *Real Housewives of Atlanta*. She argues that while there is positivity in seeing Black women represented on television, it usually comes with respectability politics and stereotypes.

Furthermore, there is a chapter in the book titled “Selective Reuptake: Perpetuating Misleading Cultural Identities in the Reality Television World” authored by Latoya Jefferson-James. In it, she analyzes how reality shows with majority Black casts are not inherently different from those with a majority white cast. She argues that Black people continue to manifest the “dominant culture’s view of them” and perpetuate their subjugation to profit other people. This idea is reflected in this paper as it relates to *Ready to Love*.

**Reality Dating Television**

The research on reality television shows, specifically dating shows, became important to understand the world of reality television. While it is a microcosm of societal structures including race, gender, and culture - the way it is represented and acted out is different. In “Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth about Reality TV” by Jennifer L. Pozner, she uses different reality show programs like *America’s Next Top Model* and VH1’s *Charm School* to prove her point. While not dating shows, she explores the impact of colorism and texturism on Black female representation. Importantly, she includes moments of Black women using their agency on television - like here: “I’m Toccara, and I’m big, Black, beautiful, and loving it!” she told the judges with a snap.”

**Findings**

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36 Pozner, 79
All in all, the sources above are referenced heavily throughout the paper. This thesis explores the main idea of each book and their validity to my argument. All of the works are composed by experts in their field and the information has aided in the analysis of the paper. By examining the problem through these books, this thesis concludes that stereotypes and respectability have a great impact on Black women on reality television - as well as the audience's perception of them. This is important because these perceptions can affect the way Black women are treated outside of a reality television environment.

**History of Reality Television**

The first reality television show debuted in 1973 called “An American Family”. Produced by the PBS television network, the show follows the lives of seemingly everyday Americans. Advertised as a 12-hour documentary series, the cameras cover an affair, divorce, and LGBTQ activism in a time when this was acceptable in societal discourse. However, it was very representative of the issues facing Americans. This show helped transform the way American families were portrayed on television - usually as a perfect unit.

In 1973, the show garnered 10 million viewers. Today, viewership is at similar levels, however, there is an abundance of multiple reality television shows compared to a single program. Since the 1990s, reality television has captivated American viewers with programs like *The Real World*. This genre of television continued to rise in popularity during the 2000s and 2010s with programs like *Flavor of Love, The Bachelor*, and *Are You The One?*. All of these programs are focused on contestants finding love with a competitive element.

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38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.
In each show, there is a cast of characters competing with each other to win a prize. There are similar events that happen in each like arguments within the cast, one-on-one dates, and eliminations. In the last year, reality television has reached a peak number of viewers with a 30 percent increase for *American Idol*.\(^{40}\) Partially, this rise is due to the coronavirus pandemic. With more people spending time in their homes, there was more time for binge-watching. However, there was an upward trend in reality television viewership before the pandemic.

Uniquely, *The Bachelor* represents the ideal of love and marriage that audience members desire. Amy Kaufman, the author of “Bachelor Nation: Inside the World of America’s Favorite Guilty Pleasure”, spoke to TIME’s Samantha Cooney about the reasons that *The Bachelor* remains a highly watched show even though it is problematic.\(^{41}\) She said, “This is such a crazy premise, I need to tune in and see how it works because it is such an odd social experiment.”\(^{42}\) This, in combination with the “desire to have fantasy and romance in our life”, is the recipe for *The Bachelor* franchise’s success over the last 20 years.\(^{43}\)

Stemming from the success of *The Bachelor* franchise, other shows have decided to utilize a similar model in hopes of yielding similar results. For instance, the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN)’s *Ready to Love* show brings a group of singles who are hoping to find a romantic partner.\(^{44}\) In contrast to *The Bachelor*, this show is composed of only Black

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\(^{42}\) Ibid.

\(^{43}\) Ibid.

contestants. This is a contrast to the predominantly white representation on reality dating shows. Additionally, its goal is to provide a realistic dating experience for the cast by “going on weekly dates… meeting each other’s families… and the power to eliminate people is in either the men or women’s collective hands depending on the week” - which differs from The Bachelor’s model of a single lead and leaving family visits for the last few episodes.

Most importantly, Ready to Love is a pivotal counterpart to The Bachelor franchise because even though it is not perfect - it intends to display Black women in a way that they are not usually showcased. OWN’s Senior Communications Manager Joseph Williams said, “The purpose of Ready to Love is to highlight and emphasize the beauty of all those differences.” The episodes from The Bachelor franchise and Ready to Love uphold my argument that Black women are placed in a box — in terms of what is acceptable — by producers and through their agency.

Methodology

For my Senior Thesis, I set out to research respectability politics as it intersected with ABC’s The Bachelor and OWN’s Ready to Love. To address and narrow my research question, I employed a variety of research strategies and data collection tools. My initial research question was: How do OWN’s Ready to Love and ABC’s The Bachelor perpetuate female stereotypes and enforce respectability politics?

By analyzing different primary and secondary sources, I arrived at my current thesis statement: Established understandings of racial respectability shape the image of Black women on reality television. In particular, long-standing and pervasive ideas about acceptable physical

\[45\text{ Ibid.}\]
\[46\text{ Ibid.}\]
\[47\text{ Ibid.}\]
appearance, proper affect, and appropriate romantic decisions have the effect of narrowing performances and perceptions of Black femininity on camera.

At first, I familiarized myself with library resources and began creating a bibliography. My research included dissertations, scholarly books, and newspaper articles. Out of approximately 45 scholarly secondary sources, I chose journal articles or books based on a few different criteria. First, did the abstract explicitly mention my key terms: respectability, stereotypes, media representation, and interracial relationships?

Furthermore, I asked two more questions: “Do American reality dating shows capitalize off of Black love stories or interracial relationships between 2000 to 2021?” and “Does The Bachelor, Love Island USA, and Flavor of Love use Black female stereotypes to their advantage during the 21st century?” A major observation of these questions is that I had not decided on which reality shows I wanted to focus on. I was still undecided on focusing on The Bachelor, Flavor of Love, or Love Island USA.

After a meeting with Dr. Marcia Chatelain, Pulitzer Prize author and professor of history at Georgetown University - I concluded that Flavor of Love and Love Island USA were unsuitable options against The Bachelor. While Flavor Flav called himself the “Black Bach-elor” and the show was advertised as a reality dating show that juxtaposed the mainstream white dating shows of the time, in reality, Flavor of Love was a minstrel performance that elicited a comedic response rather than a serious lifetime commitment for a couple.

Additionally, I found that the format of Love Island is very different from The Bachelor. For example, there are seven women and men that pair off in the introductory episode - in contrast to one male or female lead with over 30 contestants from the opposite sex. Also, new episodes for Love Island are released 6 days a week - differing from 2-hour episodes on The Bachelor.
This means the type and amount of content on each show differ from where I would be comparing apples and oranges rather than green apples and red apples.

At this research junction, I posited a preliminary thesis statement. Yes, reality television shows are responsible for perpetuating stereotypes due to casting and editing - but the Black community is complicit by continuing to watch these depictions and enforcing respectability norms. My research had shown me that Black people, particularly Black women, had agency in their situations and portrayals on reality television. Not only that but there is a historical legacy of Black women creating standards of respectability for their community. This discovery disrupted my original thought process that white producers had complete and utter control over Black women on these shows.

During a thesis advisor meeting with Dr. Brian Hochman, director of the American Studies department and professor of English at Georgetown University - we discussed how the absence of race in reality television is a covert form of racism. While watching episodes of The Bachelor and Ready to Love, I tended to focus on direct interactions with Black people. This limited my research because even with a Black female lead, The Bachelor is still a mainstream white show. Focusing on moments where race is not included opens up the conversation of covert respectability politics on reality television. Additionally, during this meeting, I came up with four general reasons to serve as evidence for my thesis statement. These categories were personal affects, physical appearance, the double burden, and interracial relationships.

In my research, I found that Black women are unable to display emotions without consciously or unconsciously enforcing these stereotypes or tropes. This includes but is not limited to: “Angry Black Woman”, “Strong Black Woman” and “desperate” or “down-bad”. In Chapter 1, I break down each stereotype with a brief history of its connection to tropes used during
slavery. These tropes include: “Sapphire”, “Jezebel”, and “Mammy” labels. My research connects to modern-day depictions of these tropes that provide different parameters for white women to express themselves compared to Black women on reality dating shows.

Looking at the problem through a different lens, Chapter 2 focuses on how physical appearance affects Black women’s agency on reality dating shows. Specifically, texturism; clothing; makeup; and fatphobia impact how Black women can move through the reality dating universe. However, on *The Bachelorette* and *Ready to Love*, there is a demonstrated effort by Black women who use their agency to disrupt Eurocentric beauty standards. This research displays how Black women are more than pawns on reality dating television.

Moreover, Chapter 3 explores the narrow parameters Black women find themselves in pertaining to non-Black romantic relationships. In this section, I explain the history of miscegenation in the United States. I show how history leaves a legacy on interracial relationships that are stigmatized. The pressure to consider race in a relationship is apparent with Rachel Lindsay on *The Bachelorette*; and the all-Black dynamic on *Ready to Love* that does not allow for interracial relationships.

In Chapter 4, I examine how perceptions of acceptable Black femininity affect conversations about race and how it can be perceived by the audience. The chapter focuses on two white contestants, Rachel Kirkonnell and Lee Garrett, who were caught with racist social media posts. The circumstance with Lee Garrett required forgiveness by Black male contestants along with Rachel’s responsibility to hold him accountable. With Rachel Kirkonnell, I explore the impact of white female tears on emotional permissibility on reality television. For both of these situations, I dissect the conversation around their racist comments while questioning the likelihood for a Black woman to be given the same amount of space.
Finally, in the Conclusion, I reiterate my complete understanding of the problem of respectability politics for Black women on reality dating shows. In this section, I briefly overview and summarize my findings for each chapter. In the “Methodology” section, I take the time to question my type of sources. Why were certain shows chosen over others and would my thesis work under different parameters than reality dating television in this specific format? Lastly, I aim to summarize the importance of exploring a problem like this in 2022.
CHAPTER 1:
““I’m Not a Strong Black Woman”

Reality dating television shows provide a widespread platform for the perpetuation of harmful norms against Black women. In an arena that is supposed to reflect “reality”, it is common for real and fake to intertwine and turn confusing. For the audience, this relationship can lead them to attach labels to Black women that fit their preconceived notions. Even if there are no preconceived ideas of Black women, reality television is a platform where ideas about different groups can be created and embedded in the audience’s psyche. However, for Black women, there is the agency to decide whether to reinforce these stereotypes or reject them using their position on the shows.

This chapter will focus on Black women appearing narrowly on reality dating shows because they are unable to display their emotions without consciously or unconsciously enforcing a stereotype. In social discourse generally—and in reality television programming in particular—there is a tendency to attach negative characteristics to Black women. For instance,

\[\text{48 Pozner, 21.}\]
\[\text{49 Alison D. Ligon, Real Sister: Stereotypes, Respectability, and Black Women in Reality TV, ed. Jervette R. Ward (Rutgers University Press, 2015), 62.}\]
as Alison D. Ligon has argued, Black women on reality dating programs are frequently advertised as “desperate” or “down-bad” when looking for and engaging in romantic relationships.\textsuperscript{50} Stereotypical characteristics like these contribute to Black women’s reputation for being the least desirable group of romantic partners, according to dating app research.\textsuperscript{51}

Moreover, reality shows often depict Black women as “angry” or “aggressive,” stereotypes that tend to put them in positions where they are unable to express their true emotional states.

Furthermore, on the surface, the phrase “strong Black woman” appears as a positive characteristic. When one thinks about being strong, it elicits ideas of high capability and dependability. However, this becomes problematic with the nation’s history of using and depending on Black women’s bodies for hard labor.\textsuperscript{52} By repeatedly labeling Black women as “strong”, it narrows the parameters of their emotional expression. Oftentimes, “strong Black women” are not given the space to be sad and cry - a natural human emotion.\textsuperscript{53} Instead, they are expected to submerge their emotions and undertake the role of a caregiver for groups that can be more vulnerable.


\textsuperscript{51} Ken-Hou Lin and Jennifer Lundquist, “Mate Selection in Cyberspace: The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Education,” \textit{American Journal of Sociology} 119, no. 1 (July 2013): pp. 203, \url{https://doi.org/10.1086/673129}.


Finally, a common stereotype placed on Black women is one known as “Sapphire,” or the “Angry Black Woman”.\textsuperscript{54} Originating in the mid-20th century, the Sapphire stereotype depicted Black women as “hostile and nagging” whose ultimate goal was to demasculinize their husbands.\textsuperscript{55} In contrast to white women, Black women needed to gain employment alongside their male partners to support the family household.\textsuperscript{56} Since Black people did not make as much as their white counterparts - many times, a household needed two incomes to survive.\textsuperscript{57} This prevented Black women from upholding femininity norms permitted for white women who did not have the same constraints and parameters.\textsuperscript{58}

J. Celeste Walley-Jean argues that all Black women are vulnerable to the label of an “Angry Black Woman”.\textsuperscript{59} She posits that the stereotype is based on a combination of negative characteristics and societal subordination of Black women that do not afford them the emotional privilege to express themselves.\textsuperscript{60} Walley-Jean claims that the trauma of Black households being separated during slavery; economical needs placed on Black women; and the “strength” needed to take care of a family alone in a society that places Black women at the bottom of the totem pole makes the characterization understandable.\textsuperscript{61}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{55} Ibid.
\bibitem{56} Walley-Jean, 71.
\bibitem{58} Walley-Jean, 70.
\bibitem{59} Ibid.
\bibitem{60} Walley-Jean, 71.
\bibitem{61} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
For this paper, I will be referring to the “Angry Black Woman” as it relates to reality show representation that relies on negative characteristics to make popular television. On *The Bachelor*’s 25th season, there is a tense moment involving six women on the show. During the seventh episode, a situation involving a white woman and a predominantly woman of the color group occurs. In the episode, Heather - a white woman - enters the show as a romantic prospect for Matt James. This is an unexpected development for other women in the show who do not like this.

In this situation, the girls begin questioning her motives for being on Matt’s season and entering the mansion during the seventh episode. By this point, the other female contestants had built a relationship with Matt and were close to the finish line. Heather starts crying because she feels attacked by the other women in the mansion. In this scene, the other women - who were mainly Black and Brown contestants - did not get hysterical like Heather.

Conversely, in *Ready to Love*, contestants are more willing to express themselves without conforming to racialized contexts. In this environment, Black women are not directly compared to white women. In Season 1, Ashlee, a 31-year-old woman, explains that she finally feels that she can be vulnerable with Alexx, her potential partner because she has not been able to for so

62 Toms-Anthony, 61.

63 *The Bachelor*, season 25, episode 7, aired February 15, 2021, on ABC.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.
long. In Ashlee’s situation, she has had to be strong and hold her emotions together for her mother during her childhood and into adulthood.

In the final scene with Alexx, she apologizes for being reserved with him and begins crying to show him how much she cares for him. Ashlee allows herself to be vulnerable with Alexx in a way that would be difficult on a predominantly white television show like *The Bachelor*. While there are still circumstances that prohibit Black women from expressing themselves, on *Ready to Love*, Black women are more likely to maintain a level of agency and reclaim their emotions.

Moreover, to understand the social construct of “strong Black womanhood” requires looking at the topic through an intersectional racialized framework. Black women are marginalized in their gender and race, which assists in confining Black women to specific stereotypes and categories.

According to “Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman” by Michele Wallace, there is a history of Black women being designated as a group with “inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work.” Wallace stated:

“This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men… She is

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68 *Ready to Love*, season 1, episode 10, aired December 22, 2018, on OWN.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.


73 Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 24
more of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is superwoman.”

Repeatedly, Black women find themselves in situations where they must put their feelings aside to take care of the men in their life, the children in their home, and undertake household chores while being financial providers. In doing so, they are not afforded the same feminine attributes that have softer connotations that are usually afforded to white women. Instead, they are regarded as constantly capable of enduring physical and emotional labor.

Similar to the Sapphire caricature turning into the “angry Black woman trope”, the title “strong Black woman” stems from the “Mammy” caricature originating in slavery. As justification for keeping Black women in the chattel slave system, “Mammy” was necessary to show how “hardworking, powerless, and committed to white rule…” Black women were. “She was a Black woman who knew her place of servitude and helped to regulate the behavior of other slaves through her discipline and example.”

On Ready to Love, there are instances of Black women expressing pressure to do it all. While at dinner, Shatava - a fashion boutique owner - tells Michael that she rejects the idea of being a trophy wife. “Even if my man had everything, I would still work.” In the same breath, she said, “I always have to be she-woman for everything - to my employees, to my family, to

74 Ibid.
75 Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 28.
76 Ibid.
77 Ready to Love, season 1, episode 2, aired October 27, 2018, on OWN.
everyone around me. I feel like I have to be a hero to everybody. But who’s looking to be my hero? Who’s looking out for me?”

In this conversation, she falls into the trope of “strong Black woman” but also expresses her desire to be cared for. There is a divide that disallows Black women from being strong and vulnerable at the same time. Black women are accustomed to being the caregiver for the people around them that it is normalized. However, Ready to Love exposes complications around that stereotype using reality television.

Moreover, another stereotype commonly associated with Black women is one of being “down-bad” or “desperate”. In Ready to Love’s second episode, Ashlee expressed her experiences of being cheated on by a man. She said, “I’ve been that side chick. I’ve been cheated on multiple times and still took them back. Didn’t know why I was taking them back. Just didn’t want to be alone.” Instead of being comfortable with being single, Ashlee felt more at ease going back to the same person who was cheating on her and hurting her in the process. In this situation, she was desperate to be with someone even if they weren’t the best person for her.

During the first episode of Ready to Love, two Black women made it clear that they have not been in a relationship for over a decade. In a way, it reinforces ideas about Black women - that they are undateable or unmarriable. There is a history in the United States of Black women being unacceptable marriage choices - especially compared to their white counterparts. Due to

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78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ready to Love, season 1, episode 2, aired October 27, 2018, on OWN.
81 Ibid.
the masculinization of Black women in the workforce, and by consequence, the emasculation of Black men - Black men were opposed to marrying Black women in fear that they would not be viewed as a “man” in the relationship.\textsuperscript{83}

Furthermore, this stereotype brings up the “Jezebel” archetype, who is a Black woman who is sexually promiscuous.\textsuperscript{84} In addition to being used as justification or ignorance of Black female rape by white men, this trope can be used as a reason why Black women find it difficult to enter a relationship with a man. Their so-called sexual promiscuity does not make them socially acceptable to be considered for marriage, therefore, they are left without a significant other.

Untrue but still prevalent in today’s society, Black women find it hard to enter relationships.\textsuperscript{85} The goal of \textit{Ready to Love} is to disrupt this, but in some contexts, this narrative is reinforced by the women on the show. For instance, one of the female contestants explicitly states that women are the problem and insinuates that it is their fault that they cannot find a relationship. Stormy says, “Atlanta women are the problem. They are putting it out there that they are content with being side pieces.”\textsuperscript{86} By stating this, she is perpetuating stereotypes that Black women are promiscuous without taking into account a multitude of factors that influence these situations.


\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Ready to Love}, season 1, episode 3, aired November 3, 2018, on OWN.
Harmful adjectives attached to Black women who do not fit into the norms of respectability in modern-day American society have a troubling consequence on audience perception. By identifying a Black woman as “angry”, “desperate”, or “strong,” reality dating television programs limit acceptable parameters of femininity. Millions of people view Black women on reality television and take their assumptions into everyday life so it is instrumental that this group is represented fairly. Stereotypes like the ones perpetrated on The Bachelor and Ready to Love can affect human relationships, career trajectories, and individual self-image.

The racist ideology originating in slavery with the Sapphire caricature and other troubling tropes have been reproduced in society using mass media like reality television. Reality dating shows create a “social vacuum” that places boundaries and oftentimes, limitations, on Black women’s sexuality and romantic relationships.\(^\text{87}\)

Modern-day racial constructions lead to stereotypes that are rooted in historical racism. The “angry Black woman” is a legacy of the Sapphire trope created by white slaveholders to hyper-sexualize the sexuality of Black women. Similarly, the “strong Black woman” characteristic is a result of the Mammy’s creation during slavery that allowed slaveholders to justify the use of their labor. Finally, I posit that the Jezebel stereotype lends itself to the “desperate” and “down-bad” label that Black women today face. All of these stereotypes are amplified on reality television in a format that is hard for the audience to distinguish real from manufactured content, which can harm the everyday lives of Black women.

\(^{87}\) Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 29.
CHAPTER 2:  
“Don’t Touch My Hair”

For many women, their physical appearance defines their identity. This applies to their hairstyle, makeup, and clothing decisions. Their outward appearance has long-lasting effects on people’s perceptions of their character. However, Black women are held to more rigid beauty standards than their white counterparts. Black women’s decisions to follow—or avoid—Eurocentric beauty standards as it pertains to hair, makeup, and clothing shape their depiction on reality television shows like *The Bachelor* and *Ready to Love*.

As it pertains to Eurocentric beauty standards, the Black community holds responsibility for perpetuating Black female stereotypes in connection to their body types and overall appearance. This chapter will explore the intra-community dynamics that perpetuate stereotypes, as well as Evelyn Higginbotham’s theory of respectability politics that connects to modern-day
viewpoints of Black women. It will show how respectability politics within the Black community work with narratives outside of the community to narrowly define Black women on reality television.

In *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, Higginbotham explores the connection between professionalism and the politics of respectability.\(^{88}\) Black women were trained to view professionalism in their domestic work as a way to uplift their community.\(^{89}\) In the early 1900s, the National Training School was created to professionalize housework for women.\(^{90}\) For white women, this entailed training on how to become a good homemaker.\(^{91}\) Conversely, Black women were trained to be homemakers and domestic servants.\(^{92}\)

The differences did not cease there. In their education, proper appearance was ferociously enforced for Black women.\(^{93}\) “At six o’clock each morning students were inspected for personal cleanliness and neatness. They were ranked as critically on appearance and deportment as on course work, with attention being paid to body odor, hair, and clothing.”\(^{94}\) Stemming from the professionalization of domestic work during this period that was heavily present in Black female

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\(^{88}\) Higginbotham, 216.

\(^{89}\) Higginbotham, 214.

\(^{90}\) Higginbotham, 215.

\(^{91}\) Higginbotham, 215.

\(^{92}\) Ibid.

\(^{93}\) Higginbotham, 216.

\(^{94}\) Ibid.
spaces, Black women’s appearance has been and continues to be a big part of their respectability norms.

In 2022, these respectability norms have transformed within reality television. There is a direct correlation between hair, skin tone, and desirability on reality dating shows like The Bachelor franchise and Ready to Love. In Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV, Jennifer L. Pozner describes instances where women of color receive different treatment based on their outward appearance. She writes, “Women of color are invisible on most network reality shows, minus quickly eliminated tokens… biracial women with lighter skin tones and straightened hair are more desirable than those with darker skin and kinky locs.” There is a correlation in the popularity of racially ambiguous women who can appeal to all audiences because they do not fit one box and do not have to.

From having a slimmer body to straightened hair to lighter skin, women who fall into these categories have more romantic success—and thus more screen time. Contestants who fall on the opposite end of the spectrum usually fare worse. Darker-skinned women with kinkier hair are more likely to leave the show earlier or not have long-lasting relationships post-filming. However, this does not mean that Black women cannot maintain agency in deciding which societal structures will determine their identity.

Hair

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95 Pozner, 62.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
98 Pozner, 68.
99 Komonibo, “Black Women on Reality Dating Shows Are Rarely Finding Love. Instead, They're Securing the Bag.”
At the beginning of each season, the lead bachelor or bachelorette introduces themselves to the audience. This may or may not be the first time viewers are watching *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette*, so there is a similar template for all leads across all the seasons. It begins with an introduction of the lead, followed by a montage of the contestants in their hometown, doing their favorite things. In the 13th season, Chris Harrison introduces Rachel Lindsay outside of *The Bachelor*’s mansion which leads into a montage.\(^{100}\) The scene cuts to Lindsay in her hometown of Dallas, Texas, playing basketball; skipping down the street, and walking by a field of roses as she explains in a voice-over how her career as an attorney has prevented her from focusing on finding love.\(^{101}\)

In the premiere episode of this season, Rachel Lindsay entered the scene with straightened hair (See Figure 1).\(^{102}\) She is wearing a white lace patterned evening dress with a slightly open back.\(^{103}\) Her makeup is neutral and her hair is in deep waves.\(^{104}\) Everything about her introduction and first night at the house matters because this is the first impression many viewers will have of her. The decision to appear on the show with straightened hair brings a lot of questions to the surface.

For Black women, hair is a representation of their identity. Stereotypes and measures of respectability are assumed for Black women depending on their hairstyle.\(^{105}\) From locs to

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\(^{100}\) *The Bachelorette*, season 13, episode 1, aired May 22, 2017 on ABC.

\(^{101}\) Ibid.

\(^{102}\) Ibid.

\(^{103}\) Ibid.

\(^{104}\) Ibid.

\(^{105}\) Jones, 139.
knotless braids to afros or wig installs, Black women use their hairstyle to embody a certain character or to present themselves in a particular manner. For instance, knotless braids and faux locs are protective styles that can last upwards of two months.

However, for job interviews or special occasions, many Black women will revert to a straightened hairstyle. This will either be on their natural hair or with a wig/weave installation. This hairstyle choice adheres to the politics of respectability in society, especially while interacting with white people who are usually in positions of power - for example, one’s boss or a job recruiter. Historically, the Training School taught Black women that proper appearance was a method to become favorable with white employers. The school was seen as a “vehicle for winning friends for the race and for fostering positive images of blacks in the minds of white employers.” Hence, when Rachel Lindsay appeared on The Bachelorette as the first Black lead with straight hair, it raised the point of hair and representation as it intersects with Blackness and respectability.

However, this does not mean that Black women do not hold agency on reality television as it pertains to their hair. For instance, on The Bachelor’s 25th season, a female contestant named Chelsea appeared on the show with a shaved head. To come on national television, as a dark-skinned Black woman, with a bald head and not feeling any pressure to wear a wig speaks

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108 Higginbotham, 216.

109 Ibid.

110 The Bachelor, season 25, episode 1, aired January 4, 2021 on ABC.
volumes. In doing this, she disrupted the norms for Black women on reality television. She used her agency to represent Black women in a different way for a national audience of mostly white viewers.

Over the last five years, multiple networks like ABC and Fox have committed to diversify their shows.111 In its most recent season, the U.S. version of Love Island had a racially diverse cast. Cashay Proudfoot, a 25-year-old, appeared wearing a long straight wig.112 During her introduction to fans, she removed her wig to display her bald head (See Figure 2).113 Many Black women feel the need to find ways to overemphasize their femininity through their hair and physical appearance.114 However, Proudfoot proved to her castmates and the audience that Black women can feel beautiful with their hair in its natural form.

While Proudfoot’s presence signified progress for Black women in reality television, Black women continue to face adversity based on their skin color and unfair criticism based on their hairstyles.115 In many shows like Too Hot to Handle and Love is Blind, Black women


112 Love Island USA, season 3, episode 1, aired July 7, 2021, on CBS.

113 Ibid.


115 Pozner, 62.
receive minimal representation.\textsuperscript{116} If there is Black female representation, there are only two types of Black women.

Similarly, while it is an all-Black reality dating show, the cast on \textit{Ready to Love} still follows Eurocentric normativity and ideas of respectability. These norms fall on women but interestingly are perpetuated by both Black men and women. This is reflective of the history of enforcing respectability upon Black women from within the Black community. It stems from the late 19th century as Higginbotham has researched but has continued to infiltrate the Black community and the way individuals interact with white society.\textsuperscript{117}

These connections become apparent on \textit{Ready to Love} when a male cast member - Mike - assumes that a female cast member - Shea, has Indian in her background because she is light-skinned with looser hair texture and baby hairs.\textsuperscript{118} Mike asked, “What’d you put in here? Juices and berry sauce?”\textsuperscript{119} When she replies no, he reiterates his point and asks, “You Indian? You got baby hairs.”\textsuperscript{120} The scene is set at a bar and it is a very flirty scenario with Shea laughing the entire time.\textsuperscript{121} While Shea appears fine with this assumption, it does not erase the idea that this is an example of a Black man perpetuating featurism that preserves respectability within the

\textsuperscript{116} Makenna Roy, “Review: Netflix’s 'Too Hot to Handle' Was Lukewarm,” \textit{The State Hornet}, April 30, 2020, \url{https://statehornet.com/2020/04/review-netflixs-too-hot-to-handle-was-lukewarm/}.


\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Ready to Love}, season 1, episode 3, aired November 3, 2018 on OWN.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
community. His assumption implies that Shea has to be mixed with something other than Black to be considered attractive and that proximity to whiteness is something to aspire to.

**Face Makeup**

Furthermore, the narrow parameters placed upon Black women include their makeup decisions. Black women are either told that certain colors do not work with their skin tone or they are prohibited from expressing themselves in the same ways that their white counterparts can. This was displayed through a female-male interaction on *Ready to Love*.

Like all the women cast on the show, Dr. Lexy is a successful woman. While some women express themselves through clothing, handbags, or shoes - Dr. Lexy enjoys trying different makeup looks. Throughout the season, she embraces different hairstyles and a variety of makeup shades. This led Black male cast members to label her as “too much” and called her “diva-like”. In one instance, Alex - a potential suitor for Dr. Lexy - told her that he did not feel comfortable approaching her because she intimidated him.

Consciously or not, Alex took his standards of respectability for Black women and placed them on Dr. Lexy. As a result, she became overwhelmed with emotion and began crying.

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123 *Ready to Love*, season 1, episode 1, aired October 23, 2018, on OWN.

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid.

127 Ibid.
explained that she is very insecure about her physical appearance, and her makeup and hair allow her to feel more confident.¹²⁸

Ultimately, Dr. Lexy spoke up for herself and used her agency in the situation.¹²⁹ In a one-on-one reaction with the film crew, she said, “It wasn’t just the makeup. It is the confidence that I walk with, it is them knowing that I am a doctor. I’m a doctor because I worked my ass off for ten years in school and I’m not gonna stop being who I am for no man.”¹³⁰ In this situation, Dr. Lexy did not let a man - Alex - dictate the conversation or allow his opinions to have a lasting effect on her. She realized that she can dress however she wants, style her hair however she chooses, and paint her face in any shade she likes. She should be able to do all this without fear of being judged, labeled undesirable, or perceived as intimidating.

**Clothing & Body Image**

Moreover, later in the first season of *Ready to Love*, a female castmate stereotypes another woman for a clothing choice. Angel criticizes Courtney for wearing a tight dress at an event.¹³¹ Instead of allowing her to dress however she chooses, Angel tells Courtney to dress more in the “right” way or a “demure” manner.¹³² By commenting on her outfits, Angel is reinforcing ideas of respectability for Courtney.

As previously stated, the Black community tends to place Black women in narrow parameters of properness. In particular, Black women are the most common and popular

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¹²⁸ Ibid.
¹²⁹ Ibid.
¹³⁰ Ibid.
¹³¹ Ibid.
¹³² Ibid.
perpetrators of these stereotypes and confinements. Rather than celebrating her choices to dress to her heart's desire, she accuses her of dressing provocatively. Angel believed it is appropriate to criticize Courtney’s outfit because she has been taught by the Black community and general society that her opinion of another Black woman matters. In these spaces, “to be respectable is to be policed by oneself and a larger black community so that one is deemed worthy of equal treatment.”

Furthermore, in another instance, there was a similar situation between two female cast members. For this case, Alexis criticized Chrysanthemum for wearing a scandalous outfit to meet Ron’s friends - a man she was interested in. Alexis claimed it wasn’t a respectful outfit and wouldn’t create a good first impression. In this case, a man didn’t outwardly disapprove of her outfit - it was a woman. Alexis is allowing a man’s potential perception of Chrysanthemum to dictate the way Alexis thinks and speaks about her. By doing this, Alexis removes Chrysanthemum’s agency in deciding the way she wants to be portrayed to men and women on the show, as well as to the audience at home.

Finally, some of the women acknowledge they have to be more cautious with male suitors because of their voluptuous bodies. If women do not take it seriously, it can lead to sexual assault or harassment. This has been a pervasive situation for Black women since slavery when Black women’s bodies were not their own. Their bodies were continuously under the

133 Ward, 5.
134 Ready to Love, season 3, episode 7, aired May 21, 2021 on OWN.
135 Ibid.
control of other people - white men, white women, or Black men.\textsuperscript{138} With minimal autonomy over their body, the Black female body has been defined by other people.

Instead of trying to change this dynamic, many members of the Black community will perpetuate these ideas. Black women feel the need to contain their bodies to fit inside notions of proper respectability and limit charges of over-sexualization, which is perpetuated through the Jezebel stereotype. On \textit{Ready to Love}, male and female castmates place limitations on Black women using their bodies. In the show, Alexis is criticized by another woman for wearing a revealing outfit, implying that her body is inappropriate.\textsuperscript{139} In the Black community, women face the consequences of defying traditional body standards.\textsuperscript{140}

Conversely, this issue is not explicitly apparent in \textit{The Bachelorette}'s 13th season or \textit{The Bachelor}'s 25th season. Since \textit{The Bachelor} franchise is catered to a white audience, the female contestants fit European standards of beauty including body size. While not overtly present, the show's cast picture shows women who are one body type and dress similarly - not too provocative but not too modest (See Figure 3).

Whereas on \textit{Ready to Love}, there is a varied representation of Black women - but there is an obvious difference in body type. This representation only being visible on \textit{Ready to Love}, an all-Black dating show, speaks to how body norms operate differently within the Black community. Black women are beheld to European body standards when in white society and as a

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{139} \textit{Ready to Love}, season 3, episode 7, aired May 21, 2021 on OWN.
measure of respectability, but in the same context, the Black community perpetuates the idea that Black women should be curvy and have an hourglass figure.\textsuperscript{141}

CHAPTER 3:

“Don’t Tell Me Who To Date”

Black women find themselves within narrow parameters as it pertains to their dating choices and the ways it intersects with racial categories. This problem stems from slavery and the

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
minimal agency Black women held in choosing their romantic partners.\textsuperscript{142} Particularly, there is a historical legacy of miscegenation laws in the United States that lends itself to the precaution of entering interracial relationships.\textsuperscript{143} This past, in addition to pressures within the Black community to have relationships with people within the race, is part of the reason why romantic prospects for Black women outside of their race are limited.

While there has been an increase in interracial relationships over the years, there remains uneasiness within the Black community and white audiences towards multiracial relationships.\textsuperscript{144} In this chapter, I will explore how Black women are used as tokens in white spaces to further notions of progress and racial equality on reality dating shows. I will break down the apparatus of \textit{Ready to Love} as a Black counterpart to \textit{The Bachelor} franchise — and how that reinforces intra-racial relationships within the Black community. Finally, I will demonstrate how the legacy of anti-miscegenation can lead to internal and external pressures from within the Black community or Black viewers of reality television shows — consequently impacting dating choices for Black women.

\textit{The Bachelor} franchise and \textit{Ready to Love} are two vehicles that arrive at the same location: Black women are placed in narrow parameters with their dating choices. On \textit{The Bachelorette}, Rachel Lindsay finds herself in a dating pool that is a majority of people of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{142} Kecia R. Johnson and Karyn Loscocco, “Black Marriage Through the Prism of Gender, Race, and Class,” \textit{Journal of Black Studies} 46, no. 2 (2014): 146, \url{https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934714562644}.
\end{itemize}
color.\textsuperscript{145} While ABC’s casting decisions in this season are questionable - in terms of finding men who were interested in the first Black female lead, there was a conscious effort to cast a racially diverse group of men.\textsuperscript{146} However, societal and general audience pressures to choose a Black man persisted.\textsuperscript{147}

Not only did Lindsay face pressure to choose a certain type of Black man - in situations where Black and white communities intersected, it also left her feeling tokenized.\textsuperscript{148} Producers and behind-the-scenes staff hold a lot of power concerning storylines to get high viewership.\textsuperscript{149} In Lindsay’s case, the need for a good story outweighed the impact it could have on her.

From a first-person perspective, Rachel Lindsay explains her experience as the first Black lead for \textit{The Bachelor} franchise during a Hometown visit with Peter Krauss.\textsuperscript{150} With three people left vying for Lindsay’s final rose, each contestant has the opportunity to show the Bachelorette his home and introduce her to his family. In this instance, the pair traveled to Wisconsin where Rachel meets Peter’s friends at a bar.\textsuperscript{151} In the scene, Lindsay and Krauss are engaging in conversation with Krauss’ friends - all of whom turn out to be in interracial relationships

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\textsuperscript{147} \textit{The Bachelorette}, season 13, episode 1, aired May 22, 2017 on ABC.

\textsuperscript{148} Lindsay, “Rachel Lindsay Has No Roses Left to Burn”.


\textsuperscript{150} Lindsay, “Rachel Lindsay Has No Roses Left to Burn”.

\textsuperscript{151} \textit{The Bachelorette}, season 13, episode 8, aired July 17, 2017, on ABC.
themselves. In the scene, Lindsay brings up a sentiment Krauss shared with her before the Hometown visit. She recalls, “He said, ‘I have ten really close friends.’ And you said, ‘Eight out of ten are Black.’” While the group laughs, his statement reflects a sentiment that having a Black friend implies that a white person is not racist or is color blind. Krauss’ mentions having Black friends as if it gives him credibility in the space. His Black male friends even go as far as to say, “Peter’s a very accepting guy. He treats everybody the same. Doesn’t even consider it [race]... he’s a good guy.” This statement promotes color-blindness as a positive attribute even though it would disallow the couple from having necessary conversations about race that are pertinent to being in an interracial relationship and having a multi-racial family.

Without having these conversations, difficulties as a couple from different races and identities follow. Rachel Lindsay says: “We didn’t get the depths of what it can feel like for a Black man to date a white woman in the Midwest. We didn’t get into the struggles, into how hard it can be to raise biracial children.” When Lindsay questioned her producer on the choice

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152 Ibid.  
153 Ibid.  
154 Ibid.  
155 Ibid.  
156 Ibid.  
157 Lindsay, “Rachel Lindsay Has No Roses Left to Burn”.  
158 Ibid.
to have these interracial couples at the Hometown visit - she responded, “We thought it would be a good storyline.”

This is an example of producers on *The Bachelorette* using leads to push a certain narrative. This is complicated and problematic especially when the lead is a Black person and the storyline uses that identity without taking into account the effects it can have. The situation resulted in less room for Lindsay to discuss the real truths of entering an interracial relationship in front of a predominantly white audience.

In this instance, Lindsay was tokenized for her race and the potential for an interracial relationship on *The Bachelorette*. According to the limits of gender-neutral theory, the focus is on “the token’s marginal status as a participant that is admitted entrance, but not full participation.” Even more disturbingly, tokens commonly “refer to persons (women or minorities) who are hired, admitted, or appointed to a group because of their difference from other members, perhaps to serve as ‘proof’ that the group does not discriminate against such people.” As it relates to *The Bachelorette*’s 13th season, Lindsay was used as a token in that particular scene with Peter Krauss and his friends. She was unable to fully express herself or engage in meaningful conversation about race and interracial dynamics.

**History of Anti-Miscegenation Laws**

There is a long history of anti-miscegenation laws in the United States and the remnants of that past are a part of the culture today. The first legislation opposing interracial marriage and

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159 Ibid.


161 Ibid.
sex in the United States is found in 1660s colonial Virginia. The major concern for enforcing this law was the threat racial mixing could do to the social and economic system based on racial stratification. Biracial children would get property privileges reserved for white citizens and their existence would disrupt the subjugation of Black people as less than human.

Up until 60 years ago, interracial marriage was illegal in the United States. Brown v. Board of Education, the Voting Rights Act, and the Civil Rights Act all came before marrying someone out of one’s race became legal. Loving v. Virginia (1967), a Supreme Court case that ruled against bans on interracial relationships across the country, involved a white man and a Black woman. This ruling took longer than other civil rights legislation because there was a fear of racial mixing. As previously mentioned, there were concerns that the prominence of biracial children would disrupt the social order enforced by a racial stratification with white individuals at the top. On The Bachelorette, Lindsay must be aware of racial dynamics and the race of her final choice because the legacies of miscegenation remain in American society.

Throughout the show, she faces the predicament of choosing a mate within her race versus someone who is a different race - and she ponders what it means to have to consider this as the first Black lead. As she chooses from men of all races, she must decide on the race of

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163 Ibid.

164 Ibid, 594-5.


166 Ibid.

167 The Bachelorette, season 13, episode 8.
her partner because it has societal implications. While interracial relationships are more common today than in 1967, it remains in the minority of relationships due to history. This predicament becomes apparent in a scene where Lindsay meets Eric Bigger’s family in Baltimore, Maryland.\textsuperscript{168}

She speaks to Eric’s aunt, Verna, and mentions the pressure she is facing to “pick a certain person because of race”.\textsuperscript{169} Lindsay said, “It’s a lot of pressure because you’re being judged by two different groups. I’m getting judged by Black people and I’m getting judged by everyone else.”\textsuperscript{170} While Lindsay does not explicitly mention facing coercion to pick Eric because he is a Black man and she is a Black woman, it is implied that she feels a level of constraint for her final rose.

In the Black community, there are widely spoken pressures to date within the race. This stems from racial pride and keeping the race “Black”. Marriage within the Black community is a representation of believing in Black love, having Black children, and raising your family with Black cultural values. Lindsay finds herself in a predicament that forces her to choose her race or not. Ultimately, Lindsay is unwilling to let external pressure dictate who she chooses to pick as her final rose. In the scene with Eric’s aunt, Verna, she said, “… my journey for love shouldn’t be any different than the other 12 Bachelorettes that were in front of me.”\textsuperscript{171} Lindsay shouldn’t have to face extra criticism or insistence to choose a specific person because of their race from the audience or society in general.

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid.
On the opposite end of the spectrum, the entire premise of Ready to Love promotes only dating within your race. Created as a “Black Bachelor” show on a Black-owned network, it is understandable that the cast is Black. It is important to have a space on television where Black people can interact and find love with each other. There are too many reality dating shows that do not center on Black people, like The Bachelor franchise up until recently. Even when the cast is diverse, the storylines are not and they tend to revolve around tropes that perpetuate stereotypes.

However, that does not ignore that Ready to Love is pushing a narrative of pro-Blackness by creating a space that limits the cast to Black suitors. The cast is not allowed to explore love outside of Blackness. While Black women on Ready to Love maintain their agency by choosing to go on an all-Black reality dating show, there is an idea that Black women are only able to find love within their race.

This can be a positive change from the shows where Black women are the minority and race is not a central topic. In Ready to Love, the cast members are not concerned with mentioning race. For instance, in the premiere episode of Season 1, Darnell - a Black contestant - jokes that “black doesn’t crack”. In response, the Black women around him laughed in agreement. This phrase is said colloquially within the Black community about the appearance of Black people aging well compared to other races. In this context, it shows the comfortability Black women find themselves in on a reality dating show that centers on Blackness.

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172 Komonibo, “OWN’s Ready To Love Is The Dating Show You've Been Waiting For”.

173 Ibid.

174 Ready to Love, season 1, episode 1, aired October 23, 2018, on OWN.
CHAPTER 4:
“Black Women’s Double Burden”

In American society, Black women face a double burden that puts them in a position to be subject to racism, while loaded with the responsibility to explain it. The Bachelor franchise is a perfect example of this burden playing out between Black leads and white contestants. Throughout The Bachelor’s history, this has occurred on two occasions. An instance where a white person has made inappropriate and racist comments towards Black people yet is cast for the show and expected to fall in love with a Black person. In each situation, Black women are expected to explain racism and offer forgiveness to their oppressors.

On The Bachelorette’s 13th season, there was a diverse cast of male contestants for the franchise’s first Black lead.175 Of the 31 men cast, there were 14 men of color - including 11 Black men.176 However, this diverse cast did not mean that everyone was interested in dating a Black woman. Lee Garrett, a 30-year-old musician from Nashville, Tennessee, impressed Lindsay with his southern charm, and there was interest from Lindsay towards Garrett for the first few episodes of the season.177

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176 Ibid.

177 The Bachelorette, season 13, episode 1-6, on ABC.
Despite the progress they were making, ultimately, Garrett was sent home after being involved in too many explosive moments with other cast members.\textsuperscript{178} It reached a point where Lindsay could not focus on her dates with other men because of the drama involving Garrett in the house.\textsuperscript{179} During the “Men Tell-All” episode, there was an entire segment dedicated to the discovery of Garretts’ racist tweets that were uncovered after filming the season.\textsuperscript{180} His problematic tweets compared Black Lives Matter to a “terrorist group” and asked “What’s the difference between the NAACP and the KKK? Wait for it… One has the sense of shame to cover their racist ass faces (See Figure 4).”\textsuperscript{181}

During the interview, Garrett was given time to reflect on his tweets.\textsuperscript{182} The tweets, which were posted on Garrett’s Twitter two years before his appearance on \textit{The Bachelorette}, were shown to the entire audience and included shocked faces from the other cast members.\textsuperscript{183} Garrett responded by refusing to acknowledge his inappropriate tweets and the hurtful impact they had on others.\textsuperscript{184} Ultimately, he apologized - although, it was out of pressure from Lindsay, the audience, and the cast members.\textsuperscript{185} Twenty minutes of the programming was spent focused on this situation, giving Garrett an enormous platform to shirk accountability for his racist

\begin{footnotesize}
\bibitem{178} \textit{The Bachelorette}, season 13, episode 6, aired June 27, 2017, on ABC.
\bibitem{179} Ibid.
\bibitem{180} Ibid.
\bibitem{182} \textit{The Bachelorette}, season 13, episode 8, aired July 17, 2017, on ABC.
\bibitem{183} Ibid.
\bibitem{184} Ibid.
\bibitem{185} Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
ideology. This is a luxury that Black women are not given, yet this is the treatment white people expect.

In this situation, Garretts’ Black castmates and Rachel Lindsay were tasked with explaining why Garretts’ tweets were wrong to him. In one instance, Lindsay said, “I feel like I’m in such a unique position. I have the opportunity to be a spokesperson for... African-Americans, for women... Please know that you can exit stage left and meet me backstage, and I’d be more than happy to give you a black history lesson, a lesson on women’s rights.” The audience laughed and cheered as Lee was being put in his place. However, it is unfortunate that Lindsay felt the responsibility of the Black community as well as the need to educate him. It is a constant area Black women find themselves in and fully embody for the white community.

The manner in which Garrett was forgiven is very similar to an instance with Rachael Kirkonnell during The Bachelor’s 25th season. While the season was on-air, problematic photographs with Kirkonnell were uncovered from Instagram. In it, she wore antebellum clothing as a costume for a party as a college student at the University of Georgia. The antebellum period represents the years before the Civil War while slavery remained legal across the country. The outfits and accessories from that period represent a time when Black people

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186 Ibid.
187 Ibid.
188 Ibid.
190 Ibid.
were viewed and treated inferiorly by white individuals and the legal system of the time. It represents a regressive period, and it is inappropriate as a costume at an event meant to reminisce on that era.

Throughout the scandal, Kirkonnell remained quiet on the subject - leaving people to speculate on her intentions and whether or not she felt she did something truly wrong. During this time, Chris Harrison defended Kirkonnell in an interview with Rachel Lindsay. As mentioned in the “Introduction” chapter, this was an unexpected and highly controversial move for Harrison - The Bachelor franchise’s host for 19 years - to speak out in favor of Kirkconnell.

In the interview, Rachel Lindsay spoke with Harrison and asked him his thoughts on the controversy. He said, “Well Rachel - is it not a good look in 2018 or in 2021.” In this quote, Harrison implies that racism was not as bad in 2018 as it is in 2021. In response, Lindsay was faced with two choices. Either she could become an aggressor in the situation or she could play a teacher role. For this scenario, similar to the interaction with Lee Garrett, Lindsay decided to perform as an educator for Harrison even though she is a victim of the racism he excuses.

She asked him, “If I went to that party, what would I represent at that party?” To this, suggested that antebellum parties were normal in 2018 - “I just know that, I don’t know, 50 million people did that in 2018” - and that Kirkonnell should be treated with “grace, compassion,
and understanding.”197 In this context, a white man is expecting a Black woman to respond to racism with genteel emotions, forcing Lindsay to choose which burden to carry.

With Kirkonnell, similar to Lee Garett, she was given the platform to apologize on national television during The Bachelor’s 25th season reunion episode.198 In the segment where the racist photos were addressed, Kirkonnell apologized and began getting emotional.199 By showing emotional vulnerability, she gained sympathy and forgiveness from their audience. White women have a history of being allowed to display their emotions in ways in which Black women are not.200 “Karens”, a relatively new term to describe white women who are racist towards Black and Brown communities, is a good example of this.201 “Karens” will use their tears to portray themselves as the victim in situations and gain the trust of the people in charge.202

Meanwhile, Black women have a history of the exact opposite. Black women were viewed as “mammies” who could take care of their children, their enslaver’s children - all while cooking and cleaning the master’s house.203 During this time, Black women were not able to be

197 Ibid.

198 The Bachelor, season 25, episode 12, aired March 15, 2021 on ABC.

199 Ibid.


202 Ibid.

emotional in the same ways that white women were. In contrast, white women are easily believed and put on a pedestal of purity. Records have shown that white women have a long history of using their privilege to accuse Black men of sexual assault because they knew they would be believed. It was common to levy rape accusations against a Black man and have him sent to jail or killed than admit they were friends or romantic companions. Many times, Black families could be torn apart due to a white woman’s tears.

The reunion when Kirkonnell defended herself came after Matt James chose her as his final rose. Most significantly, James’ decision to pick Kirkonnell with the knowledge of her racist past and defend her at the reunion episode speaks volumes. By accepting her apology and sitting beside her on national television while she spoke about her racist photos, James signified to society that an apology from a white woman is enough. It signifies that a white person can dress up in antebellum wear, celebrate a time when enslavement was legal, and be accepted back into society with a mere apology and promise to do better.

The situations Lee Garrett and Rachel Kirkonell found themselves in are eerily similar. In both circumstances, racist rhetoric was perpetrated and forgiven by their Black peers. For Garrett, he explicitly compared the Klu Klux Klan to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; expressed his Islamophobic and sexist views; and called the...
Black Lives Movement a terrorist organization.\textsuperscript{209} With Kirkonnell, she attended an “Old South” plantation party dressed in antebellum wear - two years before going on The Bachelor featuring the first Black male lead (See Figure 5).\textsuperscript{210}

Garrett and Kirkonnell were exposed through social media - Twitter and Instagram, respectively. Both were given the opportunity by The Bachelor franchise to share their thoughts. Dissimilarly, Kirkonell actively apologized and took responsibility for her actions, whereas Chris Harrison and the other cast members had to explain to Garrett why he was wrong. He was given a plethora of chances to take accountability, but he refused to do so until the very end of his segment.\textsuperscript{211} He did not think he did anything wrong, yet the audience and cast members applauded him for his forced apology.\textsuperscript{212}

In another context, through the lens of Ready to Love, the topic of race is overtly present. With an all-Black cast, race is always present on the show - even if it is not explicitly referenced at all times. However, in the premiere episode for Season 1, Shantay said, “Being a strong, dominant Black woman, I don’t have a problem approaching men. I’m aggressive.”\textsuperscript{213} This statement occurred during the audience’s introduction to Shantay.\textsuperscript{214}

\textsuperscript{209} Erika, Twitter (Twitter, May 31, 2017), https://twitter.com/emesola/status/869712430036910080.

\textsuperscript{210} Schollenberger, “What Is the Antebellum Photo of Rachael Kirkconnell?”.

\textsuperscript{211} The Bachelorette, season 13, episode 8, aired July 17, 2017, on ABC.

\textsuperscript{212} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{213} Ready to Love, season 1, episode 1, aired October 23, 2018 on OWN.

\textsuperscript{214} Ibid.
More often than not, women are taught to be submissive - particularly in romantic relationships.\textsuperscript{215} According to the sexual script theory, women are taught to be receivers instead of initiators.\textsuperscript{216} In this situation, a Black woman is using her agency to discuss race as it relates to her identity on her terms. In using the word “aggressive” to describe how she interacts with men, Juliet becomes an active - not passive - participant in dating.

This is received well on \emph{Ready to Love} because it is an all-Black reality dating show.\textsuperscript{217} The racial imbalance that is present on \emph{The Bachelor} and \emph{The Bachelorette} is invisible on \emph{Ready to Love}. The women can take back their agency in the rhetoric surrounding race because the majority of the behind-the-scenes staff are people of color; but most importantly, the audience is majority Black viewers.\textsuperscript{218}

For Black women watching the show, it is positive to see another Black woman on national television using their agency and portraying themselves based on their ideals and terms. Black women are constantly portrayed negatively or they have to follow a certain narrative that is comfortable and normal to the audience. Shantay makes it clear that she defines herself as “aggressive” and it is okay for other Black women to do the same.

On the flip side, Black women are portrayed as “aggressive” without external factors and groups of people. For Black women, the term “aggressive” has negative connotations - especially

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\textsuperscript{216} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{217} Komonibo, “Enough of ‘The Bachelor’ - ‘Ready to Love’ Is the Dating Show You've Been Waiting For”.

ones that can have detrimental impacts on romantic relationships. In the Merriam Webster dictionary, synonyms for “aggressive” include: ambitious, pushy, and militant.\(^{219}\) For words relating to “aggressive”, these include: argumentative, combative, and quarrelsome.\(^{220}\) Oppositely, antonyms for “aggressive” are: shrinking, demure, passive, and timid.\(^{221}\)

Historically, sought-after female companions are the opposite of “aggressive”.\(^{222}\) They embody timid and demure characteristics to make the man feel like he is in charge.\(^{223}\) White women are usually described with those characteristics, which make them suitable partners.\(^{224}\) However, since Black women are more likely to be labeled aggressive, combative, and argumentative - Black women are less likely to be desired by men.\(^{225}\) Today, the terms have progressed to include: ratchet, ghetto, and loud. These terms are unfairly associated with Black women without a specific reason.


\(^{220}\) Ibid.

\(^{221}\) Ibid.


\(^{223}\) Ibid.


\(^{225}\) Ken-Hou Lin and Jennifer Lundquist, “Mate Selection in Cyberspace: The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Education,” *American Journal of Sociology* 119, no. 1 (July 2013): 203, [https://doi.org/10.1086/673129](https://doi.org/10.1086/673129).
CONCLUSION

*Ready to Love* and *The Bachelor* franchise are a microcosm of how reality television acts as a platform for Black female agency, as well as a caricature of race in society. While *Ready to Love* is a show where the majority of the cast are Black whereas the opposite is true on *The Bachelor*, both shows are poignant examples of how race and gender intersect with respectability politics and stereotypes. However, both shows act as evidence and representations of much larger and more complex issues in American society.

Through the lens of respectability politics, I explore the intricacies and intersections of Black women on reality dating shows. Using *The Bachelor* franchise and *Ready to Love*, I
theorize how societally established understandings of Black female respectability narrow the perceptions and performances of Black femininity on reality dating shows.

*The Bachelor*, a show that has been on-air since the early 2000s with a predominantly white cast, gives great insight into white and Black relationships in America. A lot of the issues seen on *The Bachelor* are representative of the ones seen every day amongst Americans. Similarly, in *Ready to Love*, the cast and the televised conversations illustrate issues within the Black community that affect Black women. As a show that is advertised as the Black version of *The Bachelor*, it is interesting to view these two shows with one another. It is clear the extent a Black environment affects the overall perception of Black women and the parameters created to promote respectability politics and permissible Black femininity.

The “Introduction” uses Rachel Lindsay’s opinion piece published in Vulture magazine as a jumping-off point to examine larger issues on reality dating shows. Using the public outrage that erupted from Lindsay’s conversation with Harrison, she wrote about her own experiences as a contestant and the first Black Bachelorette. By entering this role, Lindsay represents a Blackness in *The Bachelor* franchise from multiple perspectives. As a contestant on the 13th season of *The Bachelor*; the first Black lead on *The Bachelorette*; and a consistent presence within the franchise as co-host for the *Bachelor Happy Hour* television program - she touched on multiple aspects of the franchise and she holds more expertise than most people.

Throughout my research, I explored four main intersections to Black women on reality dating television. In “Chapter One”, I posit that there is a thread visible from slavery to the modern-day through racist caricatures of the Sapphire, Mammy, and Jezebel myths. Respectively, these myths have transformed into stereotypes of the “Angry Black Woman”, “Strong Black Woman”, and “desperate and down-bad” characteristics. These labels given to
Black women limit Black feminine permissibility and are harmful to the agency Black women should have to emotionally express themselves.

The historical thread of these stereotypes originates during the antebellum and post-slavery periods in the United States. The “Angry Black Woman” stereotype is tied to the complaining and criticizing Black women characterized by the Sapphire myth. Similarly, the “Strong Black Woman” stems from the Mammy caricature that was used to justify keeping Black women in chattel slavery. Finally, labeling Black women as “down-bad” or “desperate” elicits the legacy of the Jezebel. This trope hypersexualizes Black women and views them as socially unacceptable marriage partners; therefore, they are the least likely female group to get married in American society.226

Moreover, in “Chapter Two”, I discuss the impact physical appearance has on Black women. My research is split into three sections: hair length and texturism; colorism; and clothing with body shape within the Black community. Oftentimes, Black women are viewed differently than their white counterparts of the same size - and this is worth unpacking. While these conversations occur inside the Black community, there is a relation to Eurocentrism that needs to be recognized.

For Black women, there are pressures to appear respectable based on body shape, hair type, and skin color. These pressures are connected to the overarching Eurocentrism embedded in American culture that impacts the Black community. It is important to acknowledge the agency Black women hold in deciding how they will be represented on reality television. On The

Bachelorette and Ready to Love, Black women have a degree of choice when it comes to matters of physical appearance and if they will allow outside judgment to impact their self-worth.

Furthermore, “Chapter Three” focuses on the internal and external pressures that Black women face to date someone from within their race. In the chapter, I explore the history of interracial relationships using the Loving v. Virginia (1967) case. Through this lens, it is clear that there is a throughline of anti-miscegenation in the United States that continues to prevail in American culture. I discuss how the history of anti-miscegenation laws and the modern-day pressures for Black women to pick a certain type of romantic partner are connected to create limitations around Black women. On The Bachelorette, Rachel Lindsay explicitly mentions feeling pressure to pick a Black man - something she feels uncomfortable with.

Finally, “Chapter Four” looks at the over-and under-emphasis of conversations about race in The Bachelor franchise. A central point of this chapter is understanding who is given the space to talk about race and the reasoning for it. I explore two separate occasions in The Bachelor franchise where a white contestant is allowed on national television to explain themselves after racist sentiments were released on social media. Then, they were forgiven by the audience and the Black cast members. On Ready to Love, bringing up race relates to the connection between rhetoric and aggressive nature. In both shows, Black women appear narrowly in their depictions when conversations relating to race arise.

A Conversation with Emily Yahr

During my research process and as I began writing my thesis, I was unable to view the topic from a different perspective or look at questions that I did not answer. Emily Yahr, a journalist at The Washington Post who reports on pop culture and is an avid viewer of reality
shows, shared her thoughts about my topic - which brought my attention to a new perspective and opened new questions for me.  

For *The Bachelorette*’s 21st season finale, the show format was different from previous seasons. While usually there is an opportunity for the eliminated contestants to express their feelings; this time, Lindsay watched her finale live. She was forced to put her emotions on national television while hearing terrible sentiments about her from rejected suitors. Particularly, Peter Krauss and Lindsay have a heated conversation that involves him telling her, “You can just go and have a mediocre life with someone else” - referring to Bryan Abasolo, her final pick.

Throughout the episode, it seemed like the producers were continuously putting Lindsay into situations where her emotions were on display. As previously mentioned, Black women are categorized and stereotyped in one particular manner based on their emotional state. For Lindsay, she has to pass certain tests like that to be accepted by white American society as respectable. Additionally, this format being the first time it was used on *The Bachelor* with a Black woman is interesting. Why did the producers decide to create this intensely emotional environment, leading to a confrontation by a wronged ex, for the first Black Bachelorette? The stereotypes of Black women being overly emotional and aggressive intersect with the producers’ motivation for shocking reality television. Again, using Lindsay’s Blackness against her and putting it on display like a performance.

Furthermore, another missing perspective from this thesis is the impact Black men have on Black women. Whether perpetuating stereotypes or using their privilege to stand up against respectability politics particularly for Black women, Black men are an important intersectional

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component of this paper’s argument. In this thesis, I mention Black men at different intersections they can be the reason for the normalization of certain tropes. For instance, Michael brought up and emphasized Shay’s hair and likeness to Indian ancestry - promoting Eurocentric beauty standards. By assuming she is mixed with something other than Black, he presumes that her Blackness is not enough.

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**APPENDIX**

Figure 1.
Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Figure 4.
What's the difference between the NAACP and the KKK?
Wait for it.....
One has the sense of shame to cover their racist ass faces.

7/13/15, 10:30 PM

Figure 5.