

# Love is (Color)Blind: Constructing Race Non-Visually on Reality TV

KENDALL ARTZ

Netflix's 2020 dating show *Love is Blind* follows a long tradition of reality shows claiming to break through superficiality to help create "real" romantic connections. One contestant, Barnett, explains why he felt the need to try something different, "I always go for pretty girls. It's shallow to say but it's the truth. I hope this leads to something more real" ("Is Love Blind?" 00:14:35-00:14:38). What is unique about *Love is Blind* is the way Barnett and the other contestants must go about forming relationships. "There was [sic] some good voices," Barnett says after his first round of meeting the female contestants, "I think Jessica had a nice voice. That's probably the sexiest" ("Is Love Blind?" 00:17:05-00:17:08). The reason that Barnett must place such emphasis on the other contestants' voices is because of the central premise of *Love is Blind*: none of the contestants are able to see one another unless they become engaged to be married.

*Love is Blind* has been a sensational hit for Netflix, briefly becoming its most-viewed program in the United States (Weinstein 1). The show brings together more than a dozen men and women and physically separates them from one another. The only interactions that contestants may have with contestants of the opposite gender is through entering one of two small, conjoined rooms, called "pods," and speaking to one another through an opaque, glowing, glass wall. As host Vanessa Lachey explains, "Your value is often judged solely on the photo on your dating app. But everyone wants to be loved for who they are, not for their looks, their race, their background or their income" ("Is Love Blind?" 00:02:45-00:02:52). Instead, what *Love is Blind* seeks to answer is a seemingly simple question, "Is love truly blind?"

Contestants go about finding their potential love connections through a variety of different techniques. Many engage in in-depth conversations with their partners searching for similar personality traits. As one contestant says, "They can't see how

KENDALL ARTZ is a PhD candidate in the American Studies program at the College of William & Mary. His work lies on the intersections of whiteness studies and ethnography, being particularly interested in the ways white Americans live and experience race, especially in seemingly 'colorblind' environments. He can be reached at [kartz@email.wm.edu](mailto:kartz@email.wm.edu).

*Popular Culture Studies Journal*  
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

fly I am, they can't say 'Oh, he's handsome.' They can't say 'Oh, I like chocolate skin and beards.' They have to rely on my personality" ("Is Love Blind?" 00:05:50-00:05:56). But this ideal is quickly confounded as contestants try to imagine the appearance of the person on the other side of the wall. Barnett, for example, tries to identify the "sexiest" voice, naming Jessica as the initial object of his interest. It becomes clear that it is not only looks that can be deceiving as the audience discovers that Jessica dons a different voice in the pods than she does when speaking with the other female contestants or in the show's numerous asides.

While Jessica was able to successfully deceive Barnett with her voice, there are some attributes to which contestants seem especially attuned. Race emerges as a central theme in the show, even as it touts itself as an experiment about creating relationships without any knowledge of physical appearance. By eliminating visual contact, the show purports to eliminate race – and all other supposedly visual characteristics – as a factor in finding love. *Love is Blind* thus takes on the challenge of many liberal promoters of colorblindness, literally removing vision as a factor. This ideal is never fully realized as contestants find new ways to identify race, relying on the sound of their partner's voice, as well as cultural identifiers such as names and professions. In fact, by placing so much importance on erasing race as a meaningful aspect of who someone is, the show transforms race and its imagined physical characteristics into the most important component of identity, especially in romantic relationships. The drama that the show portrays relies largely on the possibility that contestants find a partner to whom they would not otherwise be attracted, and the possibility that contestants may find love despite racial differences. This paper aims to examine exactly how the show approaches this goal and what it reveals about how race is made to appear natural, decipherable, and "real" through the medium of reality television. Through the marking of certain attributes as racial and then making those identities hypervisible, *Love is Blind* successfully erases whiteness as a meaningful marker of identity while simultaneously identifying race as a natural way of "seeing" the world, even in a non-visual setting.

While *Love is Blind* is billed by Netflix as a dating show like no other, it draws upon many of the tropes and stereotypes of reality television in general, falling within the genre by nature of its claim to represent "the real" (Holmes and Jermyn 5). *Love is Blind*, even given its clearly manufactured setting, reflects an image of reality that at some level claims to depict the world as it truly is. Ultimately, the extent to which the show is accurate to the lives of "real" people or "real" situations

is irrelevant. As one pair of scholars observe, “rather than asking the increasingly tautological question ‘how *real* is Reality TV?’ we perhaps need to grasp its powerful appeal and claim to ‘the real,’ while at the same time acknowledging the highly contested and self-conscious space in which this takes place” (Holmes and Jermyn 12, emphasis added). Of interest is not whether the contestants were influenced by production or to what extent they create lasting relationships, but rather the ways that *Love is Blind* attempts to craft for its audience an understanding of the world that is imagined to be real. Race, too, is constructed as “real” in the context of *Love is Blind*, despite the show’s claims to the contrary. Behind the walls of the pods, certain contestants realize the ideal of dating as individuals free from physical constraints, while others remain ontologically fixed bodies, unable to break free.

As Stuart Hall has observed, race is a floating signifier that variously marks, prohibits, or extends certain bodies and social possibilities. This means that the “reality” of race is constantly undergoing redefinition according to context rather than stable markers of belonging. For the purposes of this essay, what is significant are the ways that the “colorblind” spaces of the pods mark certain individuals as Other due not to their essential attributes, but through the ways certain speech mannerisms and cultural differences come to stand for imagined membership in a larger racial group. This racialization is not indiscriminate, but is selectively applied to the show’s non-white contestants, especially those marked as Black. In fact, nearly every one of the contestants on the show falls to one side of the Black/white divide, making Blackness hypervisible to ensure the success of the experiment for white contestants. In this way the show upholds a Black/white paradigm of race relations that ultimately further alienates its Black contestants as “impossible bodies” while allowing its white contestants to seemingly transcend race. The mutually supportive technologies of the show – the camera and the pods – not only mirror larger structural classifications of race, they also redefine them as natural, nonvisual, and susceptible to common-sense identification. As race has no stable referent, it cannot be said to reside solely in physical appearance. Instead, the constructions of race in *Love is Blind* reveal the ways that race is constructed through a multi-sensory embodied experience of cultural similarity and difference. Through the techniques employed in *Love is Blind*, whiteness comes to stand as neutral at the expense of Black identity.

While race is a central theme of the show, it is notable that the ways race is primarily discussed is through its perceived absence. This ideal is realized for some

contestants, who do not explicitly discuss their own race or the race of their partner. In these cases, both contestants invariably present as white. This outcome mirrors the perceived invisibility of whiteness frequently discussed by whiteness studies and Critical Race scholars (e.g., Dyer; hooks; Roediger), but this conclusion obscures as much as it reveals. Often overlooked in these analyses is an account of the ways in which whiteness *becomes* invisible. The depiction of whiteness as always already invisible runs the risk of redoubling its power. Instead, it is important to identify the ways both structural and individual expressions of whiteness must be constantly reimagined and reconstructed. Sara Ahmed has written that whiteness “is a category of experience that disappears as a category through experience” (150). What she means by this is that the perceived invisibility of whiteness requires work to create and maintain. As an ongoing process, it is possible to examine in *Love is Blind* the ways this invisibility is accomplished and maintained.

### Invisible Fantasies

Colorblindness has long been a purported aim of reality television, even as shows make ample use of racist stereotypes. So-called “colorblind casting” disguises the ways production companies search for and continue to exploit stereotypes of Jezebel, Sapphire, and mammy characters, and limit the roles that people of color, especially Black women, can play (Goepfert 8). *Love is Blind* utilizes and redefines these racialized and heteronormative tropes, making certain characters hypervisible as spectacles for consumption. As such, certain attributes are brought to the forefront to make the show and its contestants intelligible to a wide audience. Gender, for example, is one identity not hidden behind the walls of the pods. In fact, romantic relationships between men and women are a given of the show, and contestants may be assured that they do not risk any potential romantic relationships with contestants of the same gender or sex. Race on *Love is Blind* is always co-produced through the assumption of gendered identity and vice versa. The ways that contestants interact and are presented to the audience are familiar and nonthreatening in their reenactment of established norms of romance.

The “reality” in reality television purports to display the world as it is, but it in fact reifies existing beliefs and hierarchies, depicting certain racialized and gendered roles as natural ways of behaving in and understanding the world, creating reality as much as displaying it (Moorti and Ross 205). At the same time, audiences

are free to reinterpret these displays to their own ends. Viewers from across gender, race, and class lines often understand reality TV in radically different ways, both because of different interpretations of cultural forms and expressions, and due to the varying sensitivity to the “hidden transcripts” that allow marginalized individuals to shape discourse around race on television (Acham 6). Further research has shown that due to this wide range of subjective experience, audiences across racial lines reflexively interpret reality TV for their own ends, despite the manufactured nature of the “reality” portrayed. Even when watching shows like CBS’s *Big Brother*, which portrays raw, uncut footage of strangers living in a communal house, viewers are aware and often critical of the mediated experience of such shows (Rose and Wood 289). In most shows, the settings, dilemmas, and even the people themselves are far removed from the everyday experiences of viewers, yet many audience members continue to find parallels to their own lives within the fantasy. Far from tainting the experience, viewers who embraced and acknowledged the contradictory aspects of reality television experienced the shows as more “satisfyingly authentic” (Rose and Wood 294). The knowledge that a situation was influenced by editing or production did nothing to lessen its impact. These shows create a paradox in which they do not merely show reality as viewers think it is or wish it would be, they show a reality that viewers know is not real and enjoy because of this knowledge. Viewers are free to selectively interpret what is important or not reflexively, finding meaning for their own lives and circumstances. This phenomenon has been labeled “hyperauthenticity,” or authenticity that is comfortably able to incorporate fantasy elements (Rose and Wood 294).

Philosopher Slavoj Žižek makes a similar observation in his discussion of fantasy and ideology. He argues that an “ideological edifice” that seeks to convey and structure knowledge must “articulate its inherent antagonism in the externality of its material existence” (2). By creating its own opposition, it is the nature of power to structure the conditions through which it may be resisted. Reality television forms a similar kind of “ideological edifice” that embraces and promotes its own inauthenticity in order to appear “hyperauthentic” and allow a wide variety of people to find meaning in its fantastical premise. In other words, it is those aspects of reality television that are clearly manufactured that contrast and bolster those elements that are meant to appear natural. What the fantastical allows is the understanding of the contradictions of reality television without its complete collapse into irrationality and absurdity. Fantasy is not only the suspension of disbelief but the ability to simultaneously believe and disbelieve: to search for the

“hyperauthentic.” The fantasy of *Love is Blind* enables the show to overcome the inherent contradictions of colorblindness as depicted in a visual medium by positioning certain individuals as impossible subjects in-and-of themselves.

Lauren, a Black female contestant, explains away the importance of the physical aspect of relationships formed on the show. “White or Black, tall or short, too young or too old?” (“Is Love Blind?” 00:56:20-00:56:25) she asks rhetorically, dismissing each of these characteristics in turn, but in practice, physical appearance continues to be in the forefront of some contestants’ minds. Jessica, a white woman, names each of these factors in a potential suitor before declaring them unimportant, “I came in here open to doing this experiment, but I really didn’t think that I would connect with someone off the bat like that. With Mark it was just instant. We’re different race, we’re different age, but we’re definitely cut from the same cloth.” (“Is Love Blind?” 00:08:35-00:08:45). After meeting Mark in person Jessica quickly comes to feel differently. Mark is shorter than she is, and she confesses that she doesn’t find him physically attractive. She also decides that he is too young for her. Consequently, after becoming engaged to Mark and being allowed to meet the rest of the male contestants, Jessica begins to pursue Barnett, who is much taller, closer to her age, and white. In fact, in each of the relationships that last until the end of the show, the contestants claim to be physically attracted to one another. Physical appearance plays a large role in their romantic connections, but the show makes Jessica seem shallow and to have failed the experiment. The impossibility that Jessica disguises is the extent to which all the contestants rely on physical appearance to form lasting connections. Instead, the show depicts Jessica as incapable of finding love without physical attraction, disguising the fact that no contestants who found love on the show were disinterested in the physical appearance of their partners.

Jessica’s fiancé, Mark, is somewhat of an anomaly on *Love is Blind* in that he is one of the few contestants who does not easily slot into a Black/white binary. “Both my parents are from Mexico,” he explains in an aside, “I’ll never forget my first date with one of my girlfriends in high school. She had told her dad that I was Mexican and he opened the door and he goes, ‘Oh, you’re not what I expected’” (“Is Love Blind?” 00:07:34-00:07:40). Mark’s description of his family preemptively describes his own race and the extent to which he exemplifies stereotypical Mexican physical attributes. In this way Mark directly ties his Mexican identity to dating, while also making the claim for the unimportance of his race. Here, Mark describes his race as something that may be overcome; Mark can

find love despite his race. At the same time, Mark's standard American accent and his claim that his physical appearance does not match what is "expected" of someone of Mexican descent complicates how he is depicted on *Love is Blind*. Mark does not fit within the show's construction of race as an essential physical characteristic because he does not look, talk, or act Mexican. The ambiguity with which the show portrays Mark's race is demonstrated by the fact that never in his relationships does his race remain unstated as it does for white contestants, but neither do his romantic partners contemplate life in an interracial relationship as do contestants entering into Black/white relationships. Mark's presence challenges the Black/white binary established by the casting of other contestants and raises difficult questions in terms of whether race is primarily a cultural or essential attribute. To what extent does Mark represent the Other? Would race prevent Mark and Jessica from dating outside the pods? Are they an interracial couple? The show has no easy answers for these questions and instead focuses on the drama caused by Jessica's attraction to Barnett. The show reserves its primary claims about race and colorblindness for the interactions between Black and white contestants.

The emphasis that the show places on Black and white as the most meaningful of racial identities is made clear by the interracial relationship that forms between Lauren and Cameron. As will be discussed shortly, other contestants call Lauren's race into question, but the audience never sees any such conversation with Cameron, a white man whom she eventually marries. In a post-show interview, Lauren went so far as to say that she hadn't ever asked about Cameron's race, "I really didn't know what Cameron was. I felt like I was going to be thrown for a loop. It was hard to tell for me just from his voice. I kind of figured he was Caucasian, but I didn't know for sure. I was ready for an element of surprise though" (Penn). The connection that Lauren and Cameron find is meant to prove the success of the colorblind aspect of the experiment, but in the same breath the emphasis that the show places on Lauren and Cameron's different races once again shows the importance race assumes. After becoming engaged and meeting one another face-to-face for the first time, Lauren muses that "being in an interracial relationship will be difficult" ("Will You Marry Me?" 00:05:06-00:05:08). The implication in these words is that prior to meeting one another physically, neither Lauren nor Cameron were in an interracial relationship. The deafening silence with which Lauren and Cameron approach one another's race within the pods is contrasted with the ways they proclaim their sustained ignorance. "This environment has allowed me to date outside my race without even knowing,"

Lauren says (“Will You Marry Me?” 00:02:02-00:02:05). Cameron explains that he believes the show helps to eliminate race entirely, “As a scientist I’m a believer in this experiment that’s removing the confounding variables of ethnicity, race, background, and the big one being physical appearance. None of that matters” (“Is Love Blind?” 00:10:04-00:10:12). In contrast to Jessica and Mark, Lauren and Cameron’s relationship appears to be truly “colorblind” because neither contestant knows anything of the other’s race. Whether Lauren or Cameron suspected one another’s race is beside the point. Instead, what is notable is how the show depicts Lauren and Cameron’s relationship as something manufactured by the nonvisual space of the pods to depict the racial categories of Black and white as essential and diametrically opposed.

Race historian Linda Martín Alcoff writes that the Black/white paradigm is not “descriptive” but “prescriptive” (9). In other words, much like white invisibility, seeing race in Black and white is not a natural way of imagining race relations in the United States but requires work to construct and maintain. As Alcoff notes, this binary is used by politicians, pundits, and scholars alike to influence discourse surrounding the racial makeup and meanings of race in the United States (16). *Love is Blind* reinforces this binary but also repurposes it for its own ends. The show’s selection and depiction of contestants who for the most part fall to either side of the Black/white divide falsely portrays the racial makeup of the United States in a way that gives whiteness undue weight and depicts Blackness as its opposite, rather than allowing for the complexity of the United States’ racial spectrum. These casting and editing decisions play upon the long tendency of reality television to utilize existing tropes and characters, erasing those who do not fit and typecasting those who do into stereotypical roles. The ambivalence with which *Love is Blind* depicts Mark’s self-described race is revealing of the show’s reliance upon a Black/white binary to depict race for viewers. Mark’s romance with Jessica is not “interracial” in the same way as Cameron and Lauren’s relationship, and this difference is paradoxically shown in the continued portrayal of Cameron and Lauren as mutually ignorant of the other’s race. Through Cameron and Lauren’s self-conscious disavowal of racial knowledge, the show proclaims the success of its experiment. However, this result is only notable if Cameron and Lauren’s races would have stopped them from dating without the help of the pods. *Love is Blind* thus reinscribes Black and white identities as incompatible, capable of forming a relationship only through external intervention. The apparent colorblindness that the show promotes serves to give new meaning to the significance and imagined



incompatibility of Black and white individuals. Cameron and Lauren, according to the narrative of *Love is Blind*, find love despite their racial differences. This is not a commonsense conclusion. Not all differences are given the same weight, and Mark and Jessica, for example, spend little time discussing the significance of race in their relationship. In contrast, Cameron and Lauren's races are made meaningful in their opposition to one another. In this way the show reasserts a Black/white binary that appears natural and commonsensical even as the show claims to challenge it. The success of the show's experiment relies on the ability of certain individuals to transcend these naturalized identities. To do so, the dual technologies of the pods and the camera mark Black contestants as racialized bodies, their ability to present as individuals always already impossible.

### Impossible Bodies

Some contestants are marked as impossible almost before they even have a chance to speak. Barnett simply asks his pod partner for her name. "My name is Diamond," she responds. "Diamond? Okay. How you doing, Diamond?" Barnett says with a laugh. "That's my real name. I heard it in your voice, questioning it," Diamond says, frowning at the wall that separates her from Barnett. "So, which strip club do you work at?" Barnett asks, before hastily adding, "I'm kidding!" ("Is Love Blind?" 00:18:00-00:18:21). Through this interaction Barnett marks Diamond, a Black woman, as culturally distinct and even stigmatized as a stripper before she is ever given a chance to distinguish herself as an individual. It is not Diamond's complexion or the sound of her voice that Barnett uses to racialize her, but rather a cultural marker of difference that allows him to categorize Diamond as a readily understandable stereotype. Diamond is also distinguished by her profession – a dancer in the NBA. "Being a professional dancer, it has led to some ups and downs especially in dating. There have been some guys out there who only want to talk to me for my looks, or only want to talk to me because of what I do in life. I want to be with someone who is going to really get to know me for who I am because honestly my mom didn't name me Diamond for nothing. Like she named me Diamond for a reason" ("Is Love Blind?" 00:23:05-00:23:17). Diamond's description of her dating life outside of *Love is Blind* shows that she is treated in much the same way in the pods as she is in her everyday life, even when physical appearance is removed as a factor.

Barnett's identification of Diamond as a stripper because of her name is not an innocent or random association. Instead, he is drawing upon his own knowledge of what a name means using class, gender, and racial stereotypes. Even without the visual confirmation of Diamond's race, Barnett has categorized her into an existing trope. He connects Diamond to a stereotype of hypersexuality that has historically marked Black women as promiscuous "Jezebels." The Jezebel stereotype has had a storied legacy on reality television, in which shows like *Maury* and *The Bachelor* have repackaged racist historical portrayals of Black female sexuality for modern audiences by depicting Black women as promiscuous and temperamental (Boylorn). It is possible that Barnett was not drawing explicit conclusions about Diamond's race, but the gendered, socioeconomic, and racial implications of names in the United States cannot be separated from one another (Gaddis 480).

Barnett's judgment, whether explicitly racial or not, has impacts on Diamond, who notes the ways her looks and profession define her from without. The show allows the audience the visual "confirmation" that Barnett is denied, seemingly verifying his assumptions about Diamond's role as fulfilling a certain stereotype that requires both racial and gendered attributes. Barnett – whose name is arguably more unusual than Diamond's – is not similarly marked due to his name. He is successfully able to exist as a disembodied voice, fulfilling the promise of the show while making that promise impossible for another contestant. This is the contradiction that allows *Love is Blind* to exist as "reality" in the minds of viewers. The fantasy of literal colorblindness obscures the extent to which Black contestants are repeatedly racialized and marked as bodies rather than individuals. Because the show fulfills its promise for some contestants, those who are left out are naturalized as "impossible," the fact of their race reified as an essential attribute that cannot be transgressed, even in a seemingly colorblind setting.

Frantz Fanon writes of the experience of being marked not as an individual but as the member of a larger Black body. He explains, "I am a slave not to the idea others have of me, but to my appearance" (Fanon 165). Before being distinguished as an individual, Fanon is overdetermined from without as one of a type. Similarly, Diamond is assumed to be a stripper not because of the idea that Barnett has formed of her as a person, but because her name has put the image of a particular body in his mind that is then conveyed to the audience, eradicating her individuality before she is even able to speak. It is not her physical appearance by which Diamond is marked, but the appearance of her perceived cultural difference.

In addition to cultural factors such as names, the contestants' voices are used to imagine a certain type of body. While Jessica puts on a manufactured "sexy" voice that evokes her attractiveness, Black contestants like Lauren are questioned and marked in reference to the sound of their voices. One white male contestant named Jon decides to interrogate Lauren regarding her race. "If I had to guess I'd say you're African American," he says. "What makes you think I'm African American?" she shoots back. "Just your voice," he replies. At this the show cuts to Lauren's talking head, "Who cares what my complexion is? I'm a woman, that's all you need to worry about, that I don't have a penis." Back in the pods Lauren answers Jon flatly, "Actually, no, I'm white." "Are you?" Jon says, explicitly accusing Lauren of attempting to pass. Lauren mouths "no," and writes a note in her notebook, ostensibly crossing Jon from her list of potential suitors ("Is Love Blind?" 00:12:40-00:13:15). In this interaction, we can see how race is created intersubjectively and mediated through the technologies of both the pod and the camera. Both Lauren and Jon, when alone in their respective pods, resemble Fanon's description of habitual behavior that Ahmed calls the "body-at-home." Ahmed goes so far as to argue that the body-at-home is naturally raceless and only becomes identified as raced through intersubjective interactions (153). At the same time, habitual racialized experiences are still present, affecting the ways individuals react to and interact with their environments (Yancy 48).

Existing structures of racial classification and meaning are brought to bear in new ways within the pods, with contestants reenacting fields of power relations in a curated environment that, while unique, is still comprehensible and serviceable as normative whiteness (Guenther 192). Within the charged discursive space that the pods create, the importance of race is at the forefront of many contestants' minds. Jon, for instance, is alerted to the danger of a non-white body passing as an individual by Lauren's voice. Even then, race does not take place solely in Jon's head. He explicitly accuses her, marking Blackness as hypervisible – and hyperaudible – as a stigmatized identity that must be accompanied by confession. To not reveal Lauren's race, Jon seems to say, is for her to hide romantic and social baggage. She must be willing to find love despite her race, never as an equal partner in a romantic relationship. Jon's accusation marks Lauren as Other but also reifies Jon's white identity as neutral. He does not feel compelled to reveal his own race, nor does Lauren ask. Instead, Jon's whiteness is made powerful and meaningful through its hidden and accusatory position.

Philosopher George Yancy offers another illustration of the phenomenon of race marking through nonvisual means. Yancy describes the sounds of car doors locking as an example of an embodied racial experience. As Yancy walks down the street, the clicks of locks that he hears while passing cars act upon his body and sense of self simultaneously. With whites safely locked within the car, he as a non-white body is excluded and sealed off. These clicks mark him as dangerous and foreign, not only physically, but psychically as well. Each click redefines his being by an external action, one that he must interpret and reconcile within his own subjective reality. But the Othering of Black bodies is not a one-directional process. At the moment of the locking the white actors define themselves. Yancy writes, “Those whites in their cars, through the sheer act of locking their doors, perform their white identities as in need of safety, as in need of protection.” Perhaps without even realizing the significance of their actions, the whites that Yancy passes on the street, through one simple action, inscribe racial meanings on both their bodies as well as Yancy’s: “*Click* (prey). *Click* (innocent). *Click* (pure)” (49, italics in original). The click of a locking door sets off a reverberation that is not restricted only to Yancy’s perception, but molds and defines his body, their own white bodies, and the experience of inhabiting racial space in everyday life. These sounds are not meaningful in-and-of themselves, but are assigned meaning by their interpreters, who incorporate sounds into an existing repertoire of experience and context.

As Jon’s questioning indicates, voice is one such sound that has become deeply imbued with racial meaning. Numerous experiments into the ways Americans perceive race audibly have shown that people from across racial backgrounds are able to accurately pick out Black and white speakers based solely on their voice (Thomas and Reaser 57-9). What these studies demonstrate is not the common-sense nature of race, but rather the way the construction of race is not confined solely to the visual field. Unfortunately, the ways that visual, auditory, and other sensorial cues intersect in the construction and identification of race is often overlooked by scholars, despite the ways this multisensory interpretation of the world is used across media to reify race as a naturally occurring and observable phenomena. As Sachi Sekimoto writes, “the continuous re/invention of race capitalizes on our existing and active sensory capacities, making it seem as if our act of perceiving race is a primary experience, while we are actually perceiving the effects of racism” (83). The seemingly objective engagement of human senses with the external world can appear to facilitate an uncensored experience of reality. It is said that seeing is believing, but so is hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting.

Sensorial experience is learned (e.g., Feld), and where Blackness is concerned white Americans are especially attuned to ferreting out racial Otherness through sensing it as a seemingly quantifiable entity, not from a neutral observation of the world, but through the interpretation of socially learned markers.

In his sweeping examination of the sensorial construction of race in the United States, historian Mark Smith argues that anti-Black racism has always been a multisensory regime of power through which whites were trained to detect possible indicators of racial Otherness. In the postbellum United States, Smith argues that the increased potential for the breakdown of racial boundaries meant that visual perception was often not enough to accurately identify one's race. In the following several decades, the "great age of passing," white noses, fingers, tongues, and ears became transformed into delicate instruments of racial identification (Smith 67). With the establishment of seemingly scientific means of racial identification through the one-drop rule and formalized ancestry records, white senses were augmented, but not replaced. Today, race is imagined by many to be a visual, physical indicator of ancestry, but race remains multisensory.

Even those who cannot see continue to identify sight as the primary indicator of race. In a survey of dozens non-sighted individuals, Obasogie finds that even amongst respondents who cannot "see" race, it is imagined to be primarily defined by color. For these non-sighted respondents, race was still a meaningful marker of difference, with one individual even breaking off a potential romantic relationship upon discovering their partner was Black. The ways these respondents reported that they experienced race, of course, was not visual, but through touch (hair and skin texture), sound (voice), and smell. Obasogie concludes, "The very presumption that race is visually self-evident is part of a constitutive social process that produces a visual understanding of race at the same time that it masks its own existence by making race seem obvious" (597). While it is true that the seeming visual certainty of race naturalizes and essentializes race as biological, even the visual markers of race do not have meaning in-and-of themselves. As one respondent noted, nonvisual interpretations help one to answer the question "what would I see if I looked at you?" (Obasogie 597). Fanon reminds us that what one sees when one looks at a racialized body is actually a bevy of meanings far beyond the physical (165). Race is a marker of what can be known about an individual before they are distinguished as a person. Race is "placed before" the individual (Yancy 54).

While the contestants on *Love is Blind* must identify one another non-visually, the audience is not similarly limited. Contestants, while physically hidden from one

another, are visible to the audience, who are free to compare the veracity of contestants' racializing of one another with the physical appearance of the contestants themselves. Due to the multiple ways that certain contestants are marked and stigmatized as non-white, the visual confirmation that viewers receive makes race appear natural and undisguisable. The ability for a non-white individual to pass as a disembodied voice is made to appear impossible by their continued "outing" throughout the course of the show. This is the contradiction through which the show makes race appear tangible and discoverable; even though the races of the contestants are disguised from one another, the audience is privy to the "reality" of race.

To again draw upon the work of Žižek, "what precedes fantasy is not reality but a hole in reality, its point of impossibility filled in with fantasy" (xiv). The "point of impossibility" to which he is referring is the ultimate conclusion at which a belief cannot be maintained. Fantasy is what allows this boundary to be transgressed. In *Love is Blind*, despite – or perhaps because of – the obfuscation of physical attributes, race is still salient. Far from an essential attribute that is carried solely on the skin, it is clear that race is constructed through intersubjective relations that mark certain cultural and auditory factors as meaningful in relation to a pre-existing regime of power relations. This, then, is the point of impossibility that the show must traverse in order to give meaning to its claims of enabling colorblind love *despite* essential differences. The show's goals of allowing contestants to transcend race relies on its contestants' racialized identities, identities that must necessarily be constructed by the show itself. In place of this "hole in reality," the show posits another claim: that certain contestants are always already raceless, while others are simply impossible. As Mark Smith points out, "Blackness, whites had to believe, was always vulnerable to sensory detection" (7). In *Love is Blind*, Blackness is brought into stark relief through the importance that is placed on it as something to be disguised, investigated, and found out.

What allows the show to make the claim that certain bodies are impossible is the ease with which certain contestants can shed their race. The promise of *Love is Blind* is to allow for romantic connection between two individuals – not two raced bodies – and for some, this becomes a reality. The nature of the pods themselves allows for white contestants, who are not culturally or audibly marked as Other, to allow their race to go unnoticed, and thus to stand as neutral or even "raceless." (Garner 4). Lauren describes her relationship with Cameron as if she were able "to meet this man who I feel like fell out of the sky. I feel like he was made in a factory,

like he was specifically put together for me” (“Will You Marry Me?” 00:00:30-00:00:33). Cameron’s race does not “precede” him; it “trails behind” (Ahmed 156). In other words, the pods serve to disguise Cameron’s white identity, allowing him to meet Lauren as an individual, a privilege that Lauren herself is not always afforded. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, the invisibility of whiteness is not a necessary or natural position, it is a process. As such, we can observe the ways the marking of the show’s Black contestants as impossible and hypervisible facilitates the creation of white identity as the only one that can appear as if it “fell out of the sky.”

Where then, does race take place? Traditional Cartesian separation between body and mind would suggest that the perception of race occurs somewhere inside our skulls, as a conscious or unconscious evaluation of an essential physical attribute held by others, but the technology of the pods empowers and obscures white identity in order to eliminate the possibility of Black invisibility. To understand the multisensory and mutable constructions of race we must allow for the possibility that race is a relational way of being-in-the-world that is constructed at the meeting point between subjective experience and the givens of the world (Lee 2). Racialized embodiment is developed and practiced to the point that whiteness, and often the ways whites think of race in general, is pre-conscious, or simply reactive. But this does not mean that it is natural. Instead, race is reconstituted and recreated in everyday interactions that solidify whiteness as the normative condition of existence.

Because white contestants are not forced to confront their own race, the pods allow for the erasure of whiteness. While appearing to disguise race as a physical indicator of identity, the pods in fact facilitate a particular discursive space in which race retains its meaning but must be uncovered through nonvisual means. White contestants are hyperaware of possible indications of racial Otherness, marking non-white contestants through their speech patterns, voice, and cultural indicators of difference. These investigations and interrogations not only exert creative power on the non-white body, they also define the boundaries of the Self as white. It is the hypervisibility of certain contestants as non-white bodies that allows whiteness assume the position of the normative, default identity. Thus, the show transforms whiteness into a prerequisite for romance, dating, and individuality. White contestants are not questioned; they do the questioning. They do not admit race; they seek it out. Race is an essential tool of invisibility, itself allowing for the possibility that certain contestants may be allowed to fulfill the show’s promise of

individuals distinct from their bodies. Ahmed argues that in normative white spaces white bodies “extend” their shape (158). Within the manufactured physical spaces of the pods the whiteness of contestants extends to allow certain contestants to act as individuals without bodies. For non-white contestants on the other hand, it is this very invisibility that makes non-white identity appear pathological.

While it may appear that Jon instigated the interaction regarding Lauren’s race and that had he simply been more tactful – like Cameron for example – Lauren’s Blackness would have gone unmarked, unnoticed, and able to pass as invisible, this conclusion simply reveals the fantasy of *Love is Blind*. The show uses the hypervisibility of Black contestants to make possible white contestants’ racial transcendence, pathologizing Blackness to the extent that its erasure appears impossible. The ongoing investigation of race that exists throughout the show is made to appear contrary the goals of *Love is Blind*, and to only arise as an “issue” due to the improprieties of contestants. Had Lauren only disguised her voice like Jessica, had Diamond’s name and profession not marked her as problematic, had Jon and Barnett simply showed more tact in their questioning, perhaps, the show seems to suggest, Black contestants would have been able to achieve “racelessness” as well. But it is important to remember that no interaction on the show exists in isolation. Each and every date, conversation, and relationship is edited into a singular narrative, one that imparts certain knowledge to audiences even while claiming to approach reality. Mark’s depiction as Mexican despite his lack of stereotypically Mexican attributes is evidence of this fact. Although there are no explicit visual or auditory markers of Mark’s Mexican identity, the show precludes the possibility of his “passing” as raceless in the eyes of the viewing audience by foregrounding his own statements about his background. Through its selective application of colorblindness, the show itself positions race as a natural and essentialized aspect of identity, even as it imparts racial information to the audience.

The physical structure of the pods – letting in sound but nothing else – appears to show race to be uncoverable even in nonvisual interactions. Certain contestants seem to be always already racial and hypervisible. But the eye of the camera gives audiences the ability to glimpse behind the scenes, facilitating the visual construction of the contestants’ raced bodies alongside the narrative construction of contestants’ races. The discovery and investigation of race that takes place in the pods is confirmed to be accurate through the audience’s simultaneous construction of the race of various contestants. The show thus acts as a medium between the



contestants' interactions and the audience's gaze to entrench race as an essential attribute only possessed by certain contestants. As Obasogie discovered in his investigation of non-sighted individuals, the imagined existence of visual confirmation of race serves to make racial identity appear an essential and natural condition of human beings. *Love is Blind* accomplishes two constructions simultaneously; it seemingly confirms the ability of whites to discover race in even nonvisual interactions and reifies as natural the physical appearance of race through its use as evidence to verify nonvisual indicators.

### Conclusion: Fantasy and Nightmare

As a necessary component of its claim to "the real," *Love is Blind* structures the very reality it seeks to portray, one in which race is tangible and identifiable. This is no small claim. As incisively depicted in the 2018 film *Sorry to Bother You*, the insistence on positive racial identification in fact papers over the terrifying possibility of racial incomprehensibility in a society structured by white supremacy. In the film, the protagonist, a Black telemarketer played by Lakeith Stanfield, finds himself struggling to make sales over the phone until his coworker, played by Danny Glover, lets him in on the secret of success. "Use your white voice," Glover says with a grin. Suddenly, Stanfield finds himself able to outsell anyone else in the company, even his white coworkers, and is quickly promoted to upper management. Stanfield's "white voice" is almost supernatural in its ability to make sales to white customers. His success demonstrates not only the multisensory construction of race, but also precisely articulates what for whites is the nightmare scenario of Black invisibility. This scenario seems to suggest that when Blacks can pass as raceless, they may not only achieve some semblance of equality, but also that they may displace whites from the top of the racial hierarchy. As we can see in Smith's work on slavery and the senses and rearticulated in contemporary media, the (mis)identification of Blackness has always had dire consequences in the psychological imagining of white people.

This is the nightmare that *Love is Blind* seeks to disguise and erase. The physical appearance of the contestants is hidden from one another but is not and never can be hidden from the audience. Without the seemingly natural physical evidence of race, the comprehensibility of the show's message of colorblindness loses all meaningful impact; race and its identification would remain in the forefront of viewers' minds. *Love is Blind* erases this uncertainty for its viewers. The audience

is thus able to invest in the idea of “colorblind” relationships without ever having to experience or witness them. The white audience can only imagine Jon’s questioning of Lauren’s race to be shallow because of the insider information that the show allows into Lauren’s appearance. Had Lauren’s complexion and its naturalized racial meaning been invisible to the audience, Jon’s questioning would have taken on an entirely different meaning. Many audience members would likely have encountered the same questions about Lauren’s race. This is the true paradox at the heart of the show; it is only through the knowledge of race and its seemingly natural visual accompaniment that race can be meaningfully said to be erased. The fantasy of *Love is Blind* disguises the inherent contradiction that race can only come to be understood as unimportant through the complete subjugation of non-white bodies to the (normatively white) media gaze. The audience does not experience the possibility of Black invisibility because the dual technologies of the camera and the pods render Black contestants hypervisible, identifiable, and nonthreatening. This erasure allows for the simultaneous conclusion that some bodies can effectively transcend race. Those who are marked as normal, neutral, and raceless in the pods are white, and whiteness comes to stand as a prerequisite for romantic relationships. Non-white contestants are never able to achieve this ideal, remaining ontologically fixed bodies, overdetermined from without by both the probing questions of white contestants and the gaze of normatively white viewers.

*Love is Blind* may be unique in its presentation, but the show’s attempt to portray a stable social reality is nothing new. Like many reality shows, it does work by drawing upon existing racial and gendered hierarchies and stereotypes and making them appear foundational. The show repurposes pre-existing social relationships to create fabricated but meaningful scenarios that reinscribe racial difference and white superiority. Recognizing this racial difference is meant to demonstrate the success or failure of contestants’ commitment to colorblindness, but in doing so, *Love is Blind* creates both the impossibility of Black invisibility in the pods, and, more importantly, essentialized race in the “real” world. What is in actuality a small sample size in a carefully curated environment comes to stand for much larger themes of interracial romance and visibility in the United States as a whole. Across reality television, racialized, gendered, and classed tropes are utilized for dramatic effect and are disguised as the essential attributes of contestants, rather than the constructions of the very media portraying them. This foundational essentialism is what allows reality television to make cultural claims that extend far beyond its runtime. When reality is manipulated, it is those very

things that are taken for granted that come to appear more stable, natural, and essential than ever before. These constructions are never fully settled; the constant reinvention of reality television into new formats such as *Love is Blind* is necessary because essentialism is inadequate in crafting stable identities. The excess of meaning that cannot be contained by simple stereotypes or tropes allows for both the reading of “hidden transcripts” as well as the necessity of future reality shows, further fantasies, that create and explain new and changing social relationships in the United States and the world. It is up to future scholars and audiences alike to identify and examine the implications of these new fantasies, and to recognize the powerful depiction of “the real” that reality television both claims and creates.

### Works Cited

- Acham, Christine. *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and The Struggle for Black Power*. U Minnesota P, 2004.
- Ahmed, S. “A phenomenology of whiteness.” *Feminist Theory*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2007, pp. 149-68.
- Alcoff, Linda Martín. “Latino/As, Asian Americans, and the Black-White binary.” *The Journal of Ethics*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2003, pp. 5-27.
- Boylorn, Robin M. “As seen on TV: An autoethnographic reflection on race and reality television.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2008, pp. 413-33.
- Dyer, Richard. *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. Routledge, 1988.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press, 1952.
- Feld, Steven. “A rainforest acoustemology.” *The Auditory Culture Reader*, edited by Micheal Bull and Les Back, Berg, 2003.
- Gaddis, S. “How Black are Lakisha and Jamal? Racial perceptions from names used in correspondence audit studies.” *Sociological Science*, vol. 4, 2017, pp. 469-89.
- Garner, Steve. *Whiteness: An Introduction*. Routledge, 2007.
- Goepfert, Ava. *Colorblind Love and Black Love on Purpose: Black Feminist Thought, Casting, and the Invisibility/Visibility of Black Womanhood on Television*. Colorado State University. Master’s thesis, Colorado State University, 2018.

- Guenther, Lisa. "Seeing like a cop: A critical phenomenology of whiteness as property." *Race as Phenomena: Between Phenomenology and Philosophy of Race*, edited by Emily S. Lee, Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.
- Hall, Stuart. *Stuart Hall: Race the Floating Signifier (1997)*, uploaded by Thepostarchive, 10 Feb. 2021, [www.youtu.be/PodKki9g2Pw](http://www.youtu.be/PodKki9g2Pw).
- Holmes, Su and Deborah Jermyn. *Understanding Reality Television*. Routledge, 2004.
- hooks, bell. "Representing whiteness in the Black imagination." *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, edited by Ruth Frankenberg, Duke UP, 1997.
- "Is Love Blind?" *Love is Blind*. Created by Chris Coelen, season 1, episode 1, Kinetic Content, 2020.
- Lee, Emily S. "Introduction." *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*, edited by Emily S. Lee, SUNY Press, 2014.
- Moorti, Sujata, and Karen Ross. "Reality television: Fairy tale or feminist nightmare?" *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2004, pp. 203-31.
- Obasogie, Osagie K. "Do blind people see race? Social, legal, and theoretical considerations." *Law & Society Review*, vol. 44, no. 3-4, 2010, pp. 585-616.
- Penn, Charli. "Lauren from 'Love Is Blind' answers the questions every Black woman is asking." *Essence*, 27 Feb. 2020, [www.essence.com/love/lauren-speed-love-is-blind-interracial-dating](http://www.essence.com/love/lauren-speed-love-is-blind-interracial-dating).
- Roediger, David R. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. Verso, 1999.
- Rose, Randall L., and Stacey Wood. "Paradox and the consumption of authenticity through reality television." *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2005, pp. 284-96.
- Sekimoto, Sachi. "Race and the senses: Toward articulating the sensory apparatus of race." *Critical Philosophy of Race*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2018, pp. 82-100.
- Smith, Mark Michael. *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*. U North Carolina P, 2006.
- Sorry to Bother You*. Directed by Boots Riley. Significant Productions. 2018.
- Thomas, Erik R., and Jeffrey Reaser. "Delimiting perceptual cues used for the ethnic labeling of African American and European American voices." *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2004, pp. 54-87.
- Weinstein, Kara. "Despite its progressive facade, 'Love Is Blind' still fixates on traditional ideas of marriage." *Mic*, 7 Mar. 2020, [www.mic.com/p/despite-its-](http://www.mic.com/p/despite-its-)

[progressive-facade-love-is-blind-still-fixates-on-traditional-ideas-of-marriage-22601280](#).

“Will You Marry Me?” *Love is Blind*. Created by Chris Coelen, season 1, episode 2, Kinetic Content, 2020.

Yancy, George. “White gazes: What it feels like to be an essence.” *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*, edited by Emily S. Lee, SUNY Press, 2014, pp. 43-64.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Plague of Fantasies*. Verso, 1997.