

True Love on TV: A Gendered Analysis of Reality-Romance Television

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True Love on TV

A Gendered Analysis of Reality-Romance Television

Michelle Brophy-Baermann

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I haven't had much luck on my own. . . . Maybe television can help me find the love of my life.

— Francine, contestant on *The Bachelor 4*

You never know; I've always just hoped that finding the right person would happen, so who is to say it couldn't happen on a TV show?

— Justin, contestant on *The Bachelorette 2*

I believe I have been given this opportunity for a reason, and the prospect of meeting my future husband as America watches is very intriguing.

— Mandy J, contestant on *The Bachelor 4*

ABC worked hard to find a wonderful woman. I want to see if this person could be my prospective partner.

— Robert, contestant on *The Bachelorette 2*

Good men are hard to come by. I am obviously not doing a good job "screening," so possibly ABC can.

— Tara, contestant on *The Bachelor 4*

The opportunity has presented itself, and I feel confident in ABC's choice of women.

— Keith, contestant on *The Bachelorette 2*¹

- 1 Have you been looking for love in all the wrong places? Search no more. Turn on your TV any night of the week. Whether it's *Blind-Date*, *Shipmates*, *elimiDATE*, *EX-treme Dating*, *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, *Joe Millionaire*, *Race to the Altar*, or *Cupid*, you're bound to be inspired by real people looking for real romance.
- 2 This is not your mother's *Dating Game*! Chuck Barris's 1960s era invention invited audiences to watch as bachelors (and bachelorettes) asked three complete and anonymous strangers personal questions to help choose the most suitable date. From 1981 to 1993, the *Love Connection* host, Chuck Woolery, encouraged live audiences to get in

on the act by asking his audience members to help contestants with their post-date reviews. *Blind-Date*, which got its late night start in 1999, was the first to invite viewers along on the date. The following year, Fox garnered 23 million viewers and a lot of flak with its *Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire?* In 2002, ABC hired Mike Fleiss, executive producer of the controversial *Millionaire* show, to make a “more romantic and more real” reality marriage show.² The result was *The Bachelor*, which has allowed voyeuristic viewers the chance to watch one man weed through twenty-five women on his quest for matrimonial bliss. Six more lucky men have had the chance to be the title role on *The Bachelor*, and three women have starred in *The Bachelorette*.

- 3 While the *Bachelor/ette* series have been around the longest, at least a dozen romance shows have popped onto the screen since the original airing of *The Bachelor*. Some – like *Joe Millionaire*, *For Love or Money*, and *Cupid* – bring cash back into the plot, while others – including *Average Joe*, *The Littlest Groom*, *My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiancée*, and *Boy Meets Boy* – use subterfuge or a carnival-like feel to entice viewers.
- 4 Just what does all this searching for true love on TV tell us about ourselves, our relationships and our politics in post-feminist America? Do shows with real people bring diversity to media depictions of women and men? Might we be witnessing the dawn of a new, empowered woman and an enlightened, commitment-ready man? Or is all this looking for love leading us to the same old, tired Cinderella story?
- 5 This essay explores the gender representations and cultural myths in the leaders of the reality-romance pack, *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*. Because these series provide the opportunity to explore portrayals of gender differences in similar formats and because *The Bachelorette* is one of the few programs to allow the woman to select her mate, these shows are particularly well suited for the study of the romance/marriage sub-genre of reality television. In our quest to understand how real men and women, how *individuals*, come to see themselves in relation to others and to the larger society, we must be willing to travel down untrodden paths.

Political Reality?

It seems more than likely that a steady, high-intake, long-term diet of *Survivor* and *The Bachelorette* will subtly, or not so subtly, affect the views and values of

the audiences that tune in week after week. Watching a nightly Darwinian free-for-all cannot help but have a desensitizing effect If the lesson of reality TV is that anyone will do anything for the money, that every human interaction necessarily involves the swift, calculated formation and dissolution of dishonest, amoral alliances, it seems naïve to be appalled by the fact that our government has been robbing us to pay off its supporters in the pharmaceutical industry and among the corporations profiting from therebuilding of Iraq. After you've seen a "real person" lie about his grandmother's death, you may be slightly less shocked to learn that our leaders failed to come clean about the weapons of mass destruction. . . . After all, it's the way the world works; it's how people behave. We can't have witnessed all that reality without having figured that out by now. . . . Everybody acts like that, given half the chance. And, we all admire a winner, regardless of how the game was won.

— Francis Prose (2004, p. 64)

- 6 In an era when a bodybuilder/actor turned California governor ridicules his legislative opponents for being "girly men," when a flash of an entertainer's breast during a Superbowl halftime show inspires Congressional action, it would seem unnecessary to have to justify the study of politics and popular culture. Yet political scientists who have devoted their careers to the study of political history, institutions, actors and behavior sometimes relegate the exploration of the dissemination of ideas, values, and meaning to sociologists, communications scholars, and philosophers.
- 7 Today popular culture "educates" Americans as much, if not more than formal education. What might popular culture tell us about politics? Politics is about conflict, conflict management, and the distribution of values and resources. Bottom line: politics is about power. Who has it? Who doesn't? How does one get it? What does one do with it? Traditionally our schools, churches, political institutions and families have helped us to explain, understand, and justify or condemn the way values and resources are distributed. Increasingly popular culture plays this role, as well.
- 8 In *Sense and Non-Sense: American Culture and Politics*, J. Harry Wray posits that cultural analysis is a necessary complement to the historical, institutional, economic and case study approaches political

scientists typically use to understand policy outcomes. He analyzes five prominent cultural characteristics at work in much of American popular culture: individualism, mobility, competition, materialism and consumption. While each of these values may appear to a greater or lesser degree in many of the world's cultures, they are most dramatically and historically manifest in American culture. Together, these characteristics, or cultural myths, act as lenses through which Americans view and explain political reality (Wray 2001).

What's Love Got to Do with It?

Part of what sets these [reality romance] shows apart from the rest is that, unlike the castaways and delusional music hopefuls, the suitors and love objects are meant to be not only "real" but "nice" people. One way we know this is that they continually espouse a set of fantasies, hopes and ideals that . . . would gladden the hearts of right-wing Christian proponents of old-fashioned Family Values.

— Francis Prose (2004, p. 62)

Perhaps the main cultural contribution of these shows is a signal lesson in how much the notion of engagement has suffered. After Aaron proposed to Helene, he referred to the engagement as simply an understanding the two would "date exclusively." This concept of engagement, common today, is very different from that of generations past. Previously an engagement was understood to be a solemn promise, the violation of which meant obloquy and potentially serious legal consequences for breach of contract. Lincoln fell into a severe depression after temporarily breaking off his engagement to Mary Todd, as he knew his reputation for honesty and integrity — what he called "the chief gem of my personality" — would suffer if he did not honor his pledge.

— Andrew Peyton Thomas (2003)

In a perfunctory nod to diversity, there are always contestants of color in the group of potential mates at the beginning of these shows. The black or Asian contestants usually don't make it past the third round (you don't want to cut them too quickly); the occasional ambiguous Latina/o can make it a bit further. But in the end, these shows always manage

to avoid parading interracial romance on prime time.
A suspicious view might be inclined to read
intimations of social engineering into these shows.

— Judith Halberstam (2004)

This week Fox broadcast two marriage-related reality shows. One is entitled “The Littlest Groom.” . . . The other is “My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiancé.” . . . So, this is how the Right sees things, apparently. People like me and my partner are a deadly threat to the dignity and integrity of the sacred institution of marriage. The Fox Network is not.

— The Paid Adder (2004)

- 9 Political scientists may not have much to say about reality romance TV, but politically savvy commentators do. They don't like it. Critics from the left and right pick different fights, to be sure, but they all worry programs like *The Bachelor* will influence viewers' ideas about the institution of marriage. And these days, marriage is nothing if not political.
- 10 In the first decade of the new millennium, marriage is all the rage. Years of decrying welfare queens, single moms, teenage mothers, and illegitimacy finally led to the dramatic overhaul of the welfare system, but the Right continues its Family Values campaign with a focus on the family. An ubiquitous voice against illegitimacy in the mid '90s, Robert Rector, of the conservative Heritage Foundation, is part of the think tank's team of “marriage and family experts.” Other high profile authors of pro-traditional marriage books include Empower America co-founder and Republican loyalist, Bill Bennett, who published *The Broken Hearth: Reversing the Moral Decline of the American Family* in 2001 and political scientist James Q. Wilson, whose book on *The Marriage Problem* came out in 2002.
- 11 These voices of the Right not only wage wars against single moms, dead-beat dads and no-fault divorce; their attack on homosexual marriage rages on in Washington, DC and state capitals across the country. Gay activists and their supporters challenge Christian conservatives by arguing that marriage between *any* two people who love each other *is* the epitome of Family Values.
- 12 Feminist icons, for their part, have mellowed. Gloria Steinem tied the knot. Betty Friedan told women to stop mimicking the masculine mode. Naomi Wolf chastised women for playing victim. Mainstream feminists, while not necessarily advocating marriage, are certainly not

advocating against it. Indeed, if anything, modern feminists seem intent on encouraging the men in women's lives to be better husbands, mates and fathers. Feminist economist Nancy Folbre, who published *The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values* in 2001, argues that we must begin to value those typically undervalued services primarily performed by women, and that men, too, must provide such services, if we are to have a just society and real family values.

- 13 Whatever their politics, Americans cannot help but connect marriage to politics these days, and political scientists cannot help but notice this. When political commentators of all stripes worry the "reality" Americans tune into week after week is not at all real and not at all benign; political scientists can't help but investigate.

Looking for Love (In All the Wrong Places?)

Who wouldn't do anything to find true love?

— Karen, contestant on *The Bachelor* 4

- 14 To date, 234 men and women have looked for love on ABC's seven seasons of *The Bachelor* and three seasons of *The Bachelorette*. To the uninitiated, each season of six to eight episodes of wining, dining, roses and tears, all in front of rolling cameras, might seem a bit unreal. And yet, though edited, this is "reality TV." There are no highly paid actors or elaborate sets and props. There is one main contestant, the bachelor (or bachelorette), and 25 women (or men) vying to be chosen by him (her). Each week, the hour-long episode gives viewers more insights into the contestants, their personalities, interactions and relationships, and culminates in the "Rose Ceremony." It is at this ceremony where the Bachelor, armed with fewer flowers each week, presents a rose to each woman who's sparked his fancy, ultimately narrowing his playing field. In the very last episode, the bachelor goes engagement ring shopping at an upscale jewelry store and determines which of his final two picks will be the lucky lady. (For simplicity, I sometimes use "bachelor" to represent "bachelorette" as well. The two shows use identical formats, for the most part. On *The Bachelorette*, tradition reigns. The final two bachelors are the ones who go shopping for engagement rings, not the person who is choosing her man.)
- 15 ABC searches for and casts the bachelor's spousal wannabes at various major cities around the country. Once the main contestant pares his or her group of eligible mates down from 25 to 15, the chosen get to move into to a mansion (either the Ladies' Villa or the Guys' House) in

- Malibu, California. (In *Bachelor 5*, sixteen women receive roses at the first ceremony. An extra rose goes to a mole, one of the bachelor's friends who spies on the bachelorettes for the first three episodes. With each consecutive series, the show adds new twists to entice viewers.) The contestants are then sent on group and "individual" dates all over America, and even Canada. Eventually, when the bachelor is down to two women, he takes them home to meet the parents.
- 16 Over ten seasons, ABC has recycled several contestants in its two series. The first bachelorette, Trista, was the rejected "other woman" from the first *Bachelor*. The fourth bachelor, Bob, was a contestant on the first *Bachelorette*. The second bachelorette, Meredith, was one of the women Bob didn't choose. The third bachelorette was Jen. Although she was chosen by bachelor number three, Andrew, their relationship didn't last long. To date, only one of the show's couplings has resulted in marriage. A second pair is engaged. Trista married her bachelor, Ryan, in a heavily publicized wedding. *Bachelor 6* Byron's engagement with *Bachelor 4* reject, Maria, has made it to the six month mark. The bulk of the bachelors, including a millionaire heir to the Firestone tire company fortune and a second string NFL quarterback, didn't last more than a month or two with their picks; Bob ended up marrying a soap opera actress he met during the filming of *The Bachelorette*.
- 17 Despite its relative lack of nuptial success, the show has gone on. How much longer this will be the case is difficult to gauge. Ratings for the ten seasons have been up and down. The success of the first Bachelor series was a boon for ABC ; *Bachelor 2* did even better. Its season finale holds the record for the largest audience of all the series' episodes. The first *Bachelorette* didn't do quite as well as *Bachelor 2* but did better than *Bachelor 1*. The finales for *Bachelor 3* and *5* and *Bachelorette 2* didn't fare as well with viewers. *Bachelorette 2*, though dominating the 9-11 p.m. time slot in both the adult 18-34 and 18-49 demographics, held the record for the smallest audience for a *Bachelor/ette* season finale, that is, until *Bachelor 5*, with quarterback Jesse Palmer, ended its season with nine and a half million viewers. *Bachelor 4*, which preceded *Bachelorette 2*, premiered with the biggest *Bachelor/ette* audience ever and averaged 18.5 million viewers over the eight weeks it aired.
- 18 Some entertainment analysts foresee the demise of the program in the not-so-distant future, and evidently ABC has concerns about the show's viability. With the two most recent editions averaging just 8.39 million viewers, the network has pulled *The Bachelor* from its fall

2005 lineup. Yet ABC is not abandoning the show – the network has announced *The Bachelor* will return in January of 2006, after *Monday Night Football's* thirty-fifth and final season on ABC. What's more, both series have done well consistently with the 18-34 and 35-49 female demographics.³ With their ads for beauty products and extreme makeovers, advertisers are reaching young, impressionable, and consumptive women.⁴

Grrl Power?

It's considered cool for a guy to date 25 girls, but for a girl it's something else. But I don't care. I just want to make sure the guy I end up with is the guy I *should* end up with. And if that means getting intimate with him behind closed doors, I will. Because I think it's time in this country that women embrace their sexuality and not be afraid of it.⁵

— Tristra Rehn, *Bachelorette* star

Trista may have the power, but the men still have something to say.⁶

— *The Bachelorette*

- 19 Does ABC's *Bachelorette* provide audiences with a new feminist icon: a real and thoroughly modern woman, comfortable with her own sexuality, empowered by the ability to pick her mate? Judging by the bulk of the literature of academics who study gender roles in popular culture, this possibility seems a long shot. Gendered analyses of television programming are nothing new, but reality romance shows, having only been around for a handful of years, have yet to garner much academic attention. (For exceptions, see Douglas 2004 and Bennett 2004.) Only recently have academics begun to examine reality TV.
- 20 The birthdate of reality TV is tough to pin down. The first bona fide reality program, MTV's *Real World*, debuted in 1992. Some critics suggest reality TV is the direct descendent of that '70s show, *Candid Camera*. The tabloid and talk shows of the '80s and '90s are often considered a precursor to modern reality TV. In the last few years, the popular press has published thousands of reviews of and articles on reality television and its various sub-genres. Though cultural studies scholars have published countless books, articles and essays on television, reality TV began to attract scholarly investigation relatively recently (Grindstaff 1995; Friedman 2002; Smith and Wood 2003; Brenton and Cohen 2003; Andrejevic 2003; Murray and Ouellette

2004; Holmes and Jermyn 2004; Hearn 2004,n.d.).

- 21 Scholarly analyses of reality television are overwhelmingly negative. Feminist explorations of mainstream popular culture aren't any more upbeat. Writing of gender codes in advertising, sociologist Diane Barthel (1997) utilizes Baudrillard's (1998) Feminine and Masculine modes to examine how advertisements help define gender roles for both women and men. Not surprisingly, men in advertisements are powerful. *Power, performance, and precision* are key words and themes in ads aimed at men. We expect men in ads, and in reality, to display *exactingness* and *choice* (Barthel 1997, pp. 145-146). Woman's power, it seems, is sexual: her ability to be desired, to be chosen, tantamount. The typical ad woman is *passive, complacent, and narcissistic* (p. 145). Though she may please herself, the viewer understands she does so in order to please others, especially men.
- 22 Men are powerful because they do the choosing. Women's power, if any, comes from being chosen. Or these days, does it come from kicking butt? In 2001, *New Republic's* Amanda Fazzone criticized the National Organization for Women's *Feminist Primetime Report*, which recommended *Felicity* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* for their strong feminist themes. For Fazzone, fit and strong female leads like Buffy and Lara Croft are hardly role models (2003). "NOW may praise Buffy for her butt-kicking assertiveness . . . but the promo photos make it difficult to divorce the ass-kicking from the tits and ass" (2001). In popular culture, power for women is still largely sexual.
- 23 Can't women be sexy *and* smart *and* powerful? Certainly we've seen these women in popular culture: Cagney and Lacey, Murphy Brown, Agent Scully, G. I. Jane. (OK, scratch the sexy part.) Of course, we've witnessed plenty of sex-crazed, man-hungry, neurotic women as well. (Think of any movie with Michael Douglas in it.) But what about those real women who are powerful *without* flaunting their sexuality: the women of the armed forces? In a recent column for *In These Times*, Susan Douglas, a professor of Communication Studies, has choice words to say about "macho" military socialization as she connects torture in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison to reality TV. Despicable actions, yes, but we see women using and abusing power side by side with their male counterparts.
- 24 Because we often dismiss popular culture as banal and inconsequential, we don't stand back and think about the connections between what we see in the news and what we see in entertainment programming. But we should appreciate that reality TV, particularly, traffics in and relies upon voyeurism, one-upmanship, humiliation

and often soft-core pornography. This is hardly to say reality TV “caused” Abu Ghraib; the soldier-torturers, including the women, were socialized into highly macho military institutions predicated on conquering and killing those deemed the enemy. But the “few bad apples” argument Rumsfeld and Bush used in their efforts to distance torture from “the true nature and heart of America” fails to acknowledge how common humiliation has become in what passes for daily entertainment (2004).

- 25 Astutely Douglas understands how the Right uses the female military torturers’ behavior at Abu Ghraib to advance anti-feminism. According to Douglas, *American Spectator’s* George Neumayr wrote, “The image of that female guard, smoking away as she joins gleefully in the disgraceful melee like one of they guys, is a cultural outgrowth of a feminist culture which encourages female barbarianism. . . . this is Eleanor Smeal’s vision come to life.” Evidently smoking and torturing is all in a day’s work for men, a (necessary?) part of their nature. But at the end of the day, what man is going to want to go home to a beer-drinking, butt-kicking wife?

Bringing Back the Boys

We’re looking for someone more approachable than people thought (the last *Bachelor*) was. . . . I really look for someone who’s genuine and is interested in being there for all the right reasons. Aside from the obvious, we’re looking for someone who’s charming, attractive and someone most girls would want to date. . . . We’re clearly looking for a guy who’s different and who’s had new experiences. . . . maybe someone who didn’t graduate from an Ivy League school, has a regular job, enjoys sports . . . and enjoys all sorts of regular activities. . . . Someone who understands the vulnerability of everyone else there, including himself. We don’t want someone who doesn’t respond . . . or who is totally self-absorbed (Rogers 2002).

— Executive Producer and Casting
Director for *The Bachelor*

- 26 If powerful popular-culture women are rather elusive in the post-feminist age, what can we expect of the opposite sex? That would seem to depend upon the audience. From misogynistic music videos to the hyper-masculine World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc., from testosterone-topped movies like *XXX* (2002) to the chauvinistic *The*

- Man Show* (1999-2004), there's no shortage of manly man representations for male-dominated audiences. Still a perusal of men's fashion and lifestyle magazines turns up a plethora of feminized, objectified men in ads for male grooming goods, body-enhancing products and clothing. Advertisements for women's products have always preyed upon women's self-esteem and self-image; increasingly we see men receiving equal treatment from marketers.
- 27 Loutish and violent, sexy and buff are not the only representations of masculinity we find in popular culture. Sitcoms with goofy-but-good single dads were the standard in the '90s. And sensitive, nurturing, vulnerable men have appeared in shows like *Friends*, *Home Improvement*, *ER*, and *NYPD Blues* and movies like *Cheaper By the Dozen* (2003) and *Lost in Translation* (2003). On soap operas, even the commitment-wary or rich and nasty man, once confronted with the tell-tale DNA test, settles down and falls in love with his bastard child and the woman who bore it. For female characters, the "who's the daddy" paternity plot can be an essential way to achieve a name, wealth and, ultimately, power (Mumford 2003).
- 28 Soap operas, of course, are primarily women's fare, and that helps explain the sensitive man phenomenon. Women want to see nice guys. According to Susan Douglas, women are drawn to shows with successful women and sensitive guys. Yet as Douglas observes, lurking beneath the "veneer of liberalism and feminism," shows like *NYPD Blues* and *ER* actually promote post-feminism. We were made to feel sorry for *ER*'s sympathetic Dr. Green, whose lawyer wife was too career-focused and rigid to be a good mom and partner. As Douglas notes, in these shows, real men are feminized for the better while women are masculinized for the worse (1997, p. 203). Though successful, TV women often pay the price as their families, friendships and even sanities suffer.
- 29 No question about it, reality romance TV is geared to the young to middle-aged female viewer. Can we expect such programming to break the mold – to present audiences with happy, successful, even powerful women who have simply taken to television to find true love? Or is that truly too much to ask of the producers of popular culture?

Getting Real

The very definition of the real becomes: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction. The

real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced. The hyperreal.

— Jean Baudrillard (1983, p. 146)

Pretty much everything I do is as if I'm being watched anyway.

— Mike (Hearn 2004)

- 30 In exploring gender representations in reality romance television, I chose the initial *Bachelorette*, with Trista Rehn, and the subsequent *Bachelor 3*, with Andrew Firestone, for a comparative analysis. I viewed each hour or two hour-long episode of both series and examined the programs' invaluable websites.⁷ The websites offer mini-biographies of the bachelor/ette and the show's host, Chris Harrison, as well as pertinent information (hometown, age, occupation, height, weight, hobbies) about the other 25 contestants. (Mike, above, was not a contestant, but Hearn's interview with this twenty-year-old student from Salem State College shows how the viewers can respond.) On these pages, *Bachelor/ette* fans can also find the dates' three self-descriptive adjectives and their reasoning for why they are ready to get married now (women) or why they would make a great husband for Trista (men). A photo gallery, video clips, episode guide, "date tracker," bachelor/ette diary, message board, desktop "wallpaper" of the *bachelor/ette*, and the chance to win diamond jewelry playing *The Rose Ceremony Game* are all available to fans with Internet connections.
- 31 Drawing on semiotic and content analysis, I want to understand both the contestants – who they are, how they explain themselves, their choices, their fates – and what they do: their relationships, interactions, and dates. What follow are my main gender findings, capped with observations about the American values promoted by *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*.

Playmate vs. the Whole Package, True Love vs. Companion

- 32 Trista Rehn has it all. A 29-year old pediatric physical therapist with a Master's degree in Exercise Science and former dancer for the Miami Heat, she is quite the modern woman. Articulate, outgoing, beautiful, bright, sexy, athletic and fun: who wouldn't be charmed? For the 25 bachelors of *The Bachelorette*, the brains may be nice, but that's not what they're seeking. No one, on camera at least, seems the least bit interested in her education, her career. Again and again, Trista is the playmate, the trophy.

- 33 When a group of guys receives Trista's "video invitation" for their group date, their oohs and aahs are audible. Trista, clad only in an oversize Chargers jersey and spiky heels, tells them, "You can probably guess by my outfit what we're going to be doing tomorrow; but don't get your hopes up, because I will *not* be wearing this to the game." Charlie, who ends the season as Trista's runner-up, tells viewers, "We were like, 'damn, she looked good.' All of a sudden you see that little silhouette between, you know, her legs and you're just like woo-hoo-hoo."
- 34 This is reiterated by another contestant, a self-described professional football player. "That's everybody's dream, you know, go to a football game with a hot chick, you know. I mean, she's gorgeous. It's gonna be fun."
- 35 For her part, Trista is not afraid to be up front about her desires. At one point she says Charlie is the man she's most sexually attracted to. When bachelor Greg T., clad in black leather arrives on a motorcycle to fetch Trista, he offers her roses, bowing and saying, "Lovely Lady." Trista's voiceover follows, "I was definitely thinking that he looked pretty hot." The feeling is mutual for Greg T., "Trista got on the back of the bike and we took a spin through Central Park. At one point, I looked in the rearview mirror and I saw her back there and it was like, 'It doesn't get much better than this.'"
- 36 America is introduced to *Bachelor* Andrew Firestone at the end of a special episode that recounts the bachelor selection process. A member of the creative team tells viewers ABC received thousands of letters and pictures from great guys, then narrowed the field down to 100 who were asked to send in videos. ABC felt it necessary "to find one man that all the women will find attractive at some level. . . . The whole package, a little bit of everything. . . . Men sometimes can't talk about love and their feelings – that's an important characteristic for the bachelor to have. The bachelor needs to open up to women, and in turn open up to America." Men on videotape say they want to be *The Bachelor 3* because they "want a companion," or are looking for "someone to share my life with, to raise a family with," or hope to someday "tell my kids I met their mom on TV."
- 37 When we finally "meet the wealthiest, most eligible bachelor ever," as ABC introduced Andrew, we find a nervous, not particularly articulate, twenty-seven-year-old who says he's ready to settle down and look for Mrs. Firestone.⁸ Like the other men, he is looking for a partner and wants to "share what I have." Almost immediately, the twenty-five women of *The Bachelor 3* realize a good catch when they see one.

During the introduction to the first “dating” episode, as the camera pans up women’s bodies, focusing on breasts, bellies and butts, disembodied voices describe Andrew. “He’s sexy.” “Cool.” “Hot.” “The most amazing person I’ve ever met.” “I want to understand him.” “I’ve developed a crush on him.” “Awesome!”

- 38 What about the men and women vying to get roses? How might viewers “read” them? In the first episode of each series, we’re introduced to the hopefuls. The gender contrast couldn’t be starker. While the men speak in terms of companionship, finding someone to share their lives with, to have children with; the women mention finding true love, soul mates, and stability. Oh, and fairy-tale weddings.
- 39 The women are hopeful and desperate; the men confident, even arrogant. “You can’t be a wallflower, you’ve gotta take an aggressive approach,” says one bachelor. Another, “I’m gonna try harder than anybody else, and I’m gonna beat ‘em down by the end of it.” “I have a feeling I’m going to be around here for a while,” says Russ, soon to be known by audiences as The Chiseler. Not long after meeting Trista, Russ gives her a bracelet from Tiffany’s. Jokes Bob, who becomes the show’s Mr. Personality, “If some dude rolls in here with a Tiffany box, I’ll clip him in the knees.” As the 15 men move into the Guys’ House, the narrator tells us, the men are ready to “compete for the love of one woman.”
- 40 *The Bachelor 3* opens with clips of contestants packing their bags and getting ready to head to Los Angeles. As viewers are introduced to each woman, they can’t help but notice how love-hungry some seem. One young woman, seated by her father’s side, sobs, “All I want is for my dad to walk me down the aisle.” The mother of Liz, who viewers will come to know as Miss Emotional Wreck, tells her daughter as she tries on a wedding dress, “If the bachelor sees you in that he’ll know he made the right decision.” A 22-year-old Wisconsinite, who will eventually earn the title, Tina Fabulous, has a unique perspective on marriage. “I think I would be a great wife. I like to have a lot of fun. I would definitely let the guy watch football and have all his friends over and give him beer and make him food and then I would leave . . . with his credit card!” Another contestant, Christina, who is to play the part of “the Overbearing Vixen,” tells the camera, “I will do whatever it takes to receive a rose.”
- 41 It is clear that part of “what it takes” is being gorgeous. The narrator notes that, for the first time ever, viewers will get to see the women as they ready themselves for dates. Clips of women applying mascara,

searching through their wardrobes, curling their hair and trying to fit into skintight jeans follow.

- 42 The women of *The Bachelor 3* are most likely too young to have watched the movie *Fatal Attraction* (1980), but the initial episode of the series is eerily reminiscent of the 1987 hit starring Glenn Close as a modern woman gone mad. As the narrator explains what a great catch Andrew is, we see Tina Fabulous pulling down her eye mask, clutching a pillow to her bosom, and sighing, “He’s mine!” We also watch clips of various women battering Andrew with, “Do I intimidate you?” “I’d hate to be you.” “I want to be in the top four.” “Do you get nervous around everybody?” “What are you feeling about *us*?”
- 43 Our hearts can’t help but go out to an overwhelmed Andrew, who admits, “I didn’t have any idea what was going to happen.”

Tall, Dark, and Handsome

- 44 *The Bachelorette* website’s bachelor biographies offer a sense of Trista’s choices. While the average American male is between 5’8” and 5’9”, the men of *The Bachelorette* range from 5’11” to 6’3”, with the average being 6’1”. Thirteen of the men are at this height or taller. The average weight for males is 180 pounds. On *The Bachelorette*, their weight ranges from 165 to 235 with the average at 190 pounds and eleven being at or above that weight. Of the twenty-five men, nineteen are brunette, twenty-two are Caucasian, two are of Asian ancestry, one is African-American. Their ages range from twenty-four to forty-two, with the average being Trista’s age, twenty-nine. All of the men list jobs; many, if not most, are professional. Among the pool are two pilots, three firefighters, several in sales, a gym owner, some technical writers and a couple of mortgage bankers/brokers.
- 45 Trista has a decent range of stock characters to choose from. Overwhelmingly they are good guys – with the exception, perhaps, of the whiny cowboy Brook. But there are also clear “types.” I include the aggressive “chiseler,” Russ; the sweet, shy guy, Ryan; and several artsy types like Greg T., the composer/singer/guitarist. Charlie is the classy, worldly man; Bob is the joker; Jamie and Jeff are the athletes. Jeff, the youngest at twenty-four, exudes a bit of that “all brawn, no brain” persona. On a group date to a San Diego Chargers game, a tire blows out. Jeff leaps into action, ripping off his shirt to reveal a buff upper body, and says, “I’m not the type of guy to just sit around and let someone else do something. You want something done right, you do it yourself.” As Trista and the others stand idly by, watching Jeff change the tire, Greg T. remarks, he “makes us look like the *pansies*

we are.” It’s meant for a laugh, but it also works to evoke sympathy for guys with more average physiques.

Small, Blond, and Loathsome

- 46 With a modal height of 5’5”, the women of *The Bachelor* are slightly taller than the average American woman’s 5’3” to 5’4”. Still, with heights ranging from 5’2” to 5’10”, thirteen of the twenty-five women have petite builds (5’5” or shorter). The average adult female weight is 152 pounds. But on *The Bachelor*, where the women’s weight ranges from 103 to 140, 120 pounds is average; and only seven women weigh more than that. Fourteen of twenty-five are blond. Others include one Asian, one Latina, and one of African-American ancestry. The women range in age from twenty-one to twenty-nine, with an average of twenty-four-and-a-half. Andrew is twenty-seven. Where most of Trista’s choices had careers, Andrew’s have jobs. Several of the women are in sales, one is a hair stylist, one is a massage therapist, several are students, and a few are waiters or bartenders. The African-American woman, who is listed as a law student on the website, is called a waiter on the show. Three women list no employment.
- 47 Trista has a likeable and sympathetic bunch of men to work with; Andrew has no such luck. Again we see certain “types,” and they are largely negative. There’s the overbearing vixen, Christina. After winning craps at a Casino on the group date in Lake Tahoe, she shouts, “I won, baby! I knew you wanted me!” Later she says to the camera, “I feel very confident I’m going to get a rose. I feel Andrew is *most* attracted to *me* on this date in Tahoe.” The audience can’t help but snicker when Andrew has his chance to evaluate the situation. “I felt a little bit cornered by Christina. . . . I was a little bit unnerved by her approach.” Kirsten is clearly the opportunist, the gold digger. When she returns from her first one-on-one date with Andrew and raves about the jewelry she got to wear, worth half a million dollars, the camera pans the room and catches the other women looking despondent. Then there’s the cool and aloof Tina P, otherwise known as Tina Fabulous, with her penchant for scarves and eye masks. Little Liz is just the opposite. An emotional wreck, she wears her heart on her sleeve. The “characters” also include Miss Goody Two Shoes, Audree, and Jen, the Midwestern Sweetie. Amber has two roles: the Lush and the Shallow Blond Ditz who, when asked whose marriage she most admires, responds, “Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt.”

Buddies and Bitches, Camaraderie vs. Cattiness

- 48 What is it people do on reality romance shows? Again this seems to be dictated largely by gender. The one activity that is pretty much the same for both *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* is dating. The individual and group dates tend to involve “guy things” and physical activity. Women who can “be one of the guys” have the advantage.
- 49 For her group dates, Trista and her men gamble in Vegas, soak in a hot tub, experience massages, and enjoy a pro football game. Individual dates include a trip to a water theme park, a blimp ride, swimming with dolphins, tooling around in a stretch Hummer, a steamboat cruise, a motorcycle ride, and an evening on the town in a shiny, new, red Aston Martin sports car. (Tina hands the keys to an excited Charlie.) On hometown dates, when Trista has winnowed the field to four, she visits the men’s families, and is introduced to several nephews and nieces. One bachelor’s niece even presents Trista with a gift, and viewers hear how well various bachelors get along with kids. In Andrew’s dates with women, kids are glaringly absent.
- 50 Andrew’s group dates include gambling in Tahoe, mechanical-bull riding, a pro basketball game, playing tennis, spa treatments, and lunch at a Moroccan restaurant where the women try belly-dancing! (Poor Liz is uncoordinated.) On their one-on-one date, Amber is not too pleased about ice-skating, but she manages to keep on her feet for the most part. Andrew is impressed when Kirsten jumps, without hesitating, on a bobsled. After a romantic outdoor date gets rained out and they head to the bowling alley, Andrew tells Jen that she’s getting to see “the real” him. Other individual dates include beach-combing, a riverboat cruise, and an evening as the only patrons at a drive-in theater.
- 51 Perhaps the best example of women’s “new power,” as Fazzone (2003) describes it, is Tina Fabulous and her football tossing. When Tina manages to stay the longest on the mechanical bull, she wins a few minutes alone with Andrew. They drink some beer and throw a football back and forth. In a voiceover, Andrew says, “I just couldn’t imagine a lady that looks as good as she does in stilettos and with long fingernails could chuck a football 50 yards out of, on a spiral.” Viewers watch him tell her, “You may be the prettiest quarterback I’ve ever seen.” To which she responds, “I know.” Later Tina tells viewers, “I can still be elegant and feminine in heels and throw a mean spiral football. I’m proud of myself, and my dad’s proud too.” The closing shot of Andrew finds him commenting, “And you drink beer.”

Nonchalantly Tina replies, "Yeah. It's good."

- 52 In the second-to-last episode of both series, when the bachelor/ette is down to three choices, it is time for the Big Question. No, not *that* Big Question, the other one: "Do you want to spend the night with me in a Fantasy Suite?" The audience is treated to some hot and heavy foreplay. But as the "Do Not Disturb" sign is placed on the knob and the door shuts, we must use our imaginations. The contestants don't kiss and tell, so it is up to us to assume what may or may not have happened behind closed doors.
- 53 For the first two *Bachelor* series, little attention was paid to the fact that women chose to join the bachelors in their suites. But as soon as word was out that there would be a *Bachelorette*, media critics were in a tizzy about how the double standard might affect ratings. Some predicted the premise just wouldn't fly with audiences. Who would want to see a woman in charge? ABC Entertainment President Susan Lyne responded to this in a meeting with TV critics. According to Lyne, giving a woman the opportunity to choose her mate "will force all of us to look at what those double standards are. Trista is aware of that possibility. I also think she's a smart, engaging, modern female who loves the idea of having the same opportunity Alex had." Lyne added, "We're looking very carefully at the format to see whether there are different things we might do during the course of episodes, given that we have a female at the center. We may not change a thing" (Shister 2002, pp. 1-2). Added ABC Senior Vice President Kevin Brockman, "People know her and her story: she was the one 'left at the altar.' That will create a little more sympathy if there is a double standard, and I think there is. Once we get viewers engaged, future editions will be easier to mount" (*ibid.*). Evidently audiences weren't turned off by the prospect of a woman asking a man to spend the night. At least Trista has some sense of propriety; after all: she declines to invite Russ to share her suite.
- 54 The initial episodes of *The Bachelor/ette* not only provide viewers with a sneak preview of what the season will bring, they also convey how the housemates will interact with one another. Men hang together in large groups, down beers, sing songs, pass a lot of gas, do shots, and some even eat pony chow. When Jack, the only African-American contestant, drinks too much and (presumably) passes out, the guys carry him in his cot out to the front yard and joke good-naturedly about it. We see no fighting, and rarely do we see them talking about each other. The only direct criticism is directed at Russ. On the first group date, after Russ and Trista have disappeared behind closed doors, one unhappy contestant says, "Russ always tries to get in

there . . . make sure he has the face time with the girl. Where I come from that's known as 'chiseling.'" Russ sees it differently: "I had to step up and make my presence known."

- 55 The Ladies' Villa is something else entirely. Consider what the audience for the second episode of *The Bachelor 3* experienced in a short montage of clips of the bachelorettes:

I know better than to trust women.
People are out for blood.
Girls can be conniving, deceiving and just vicious.
I'm sorry, I don't want to be bitch about this,
but she's just not that fabulous.
There's gonna be backstabbing, people talking
behind people's backs.
Are you making it junior high?
People are so freaking shallow.

The women of the Ladies' Villa hang in small groups, talk a lot, analyze each other, talk about each other, put on makeup, get into dresses, and lie around the pool. Many come across as petty and jealous. On a group date, Tina Fabulous admires Andrew's watch, so he lets her wear it. Later, when Christina notices this, she is nasty to Tina, who reciprocates. After Andrew's initial individual date with Kirsten, Jen and Liz note how superficial she is and suggest she's just there for the ride.

- 56 Andrew notices dejected looks on the women's faces and remarks, "If the girls were jealous before, the fangs are coming out tonight!"
- 57 When women are involved, even what seems like an act of altruism may be something else. In episode two, we see Tina S. take Amber into a bathroom and pull the door shut. We soon hear Amber sob, "I'm not like this, you don't know me!" Then she retches behind the closed door. With the camera rolling, we hear Tina S. comforting Amber; but seconds later in voiceover, she says, "I know someone is going to have to mess up for me to get a rose. [Amber] put herself at a disadvantage by not knowing her limits." Kirsten adds her two cents, "Amber cannot be social without having alcohol; and I think that's a huge, huge, thing." The message to the audience seems to be: when the guys drink too much, it's amusing; when Amber does, she has an alcohol problem.

Liquored-Up Love

- 58 Amber aside, liquor provides the lubrication for love on *The Bachelor/ette*. In every conversation, every encounter, every date, alcohol flows freely. Wine and champagne are most common, but beer and fancy fruit drinks make regular appearances. The fact that Andrew's family owns a winery/brewery makes booze all the more conspicuous, as dates at his family's Santa Ynez Valley estate include driving through the vineyard and bottling wine.
- 59 Audree, a Mormon, is convinced her unwillingness to imbibe cost her the opportunity to go farther with bachelor Andrew. Andrew is clearly impressed that Tina Fabulous drinks beer. True, Amber is rebuked by other contestants for her lack of self control; but the overriding message of *The Bachelor/ette* is that booze is a routine, if not required, part of the courting ritual.
- 60 If alcohol *isn't* in a scene, that's a sign something's seriously wrong. When bachelorette Trista enters Greg's slovenly Manhattan studio apartment and grimaces with disgust, it's clear she's not in the mood for love. In her voiceover, Trista admits, "I honestly try not to be superficial, and I can't judge Greg without knowing why he lives where he lives. But it's just not some place I see myself being in." Greg offers her wine; she demands water. Wine would signal the possibility of romance. Trista, who up to this point has never seen a drink (or kiss) she doesn't like, clearly has no desire to let herself go. Instead she clutches a pillow to her stomach. At the end of this episode, Greg, who had made it all the way to the final four, goes home.

Family Values

- 61 Conservatives who criticize reality romance TV probably haven't watched it. Sure, there are lots of booze and bikinis; but that's not all. At least where *The Bachelor* and *Bachelorette* are concerned, family is center stage. Both Andrew and Trista profess strong family values. Both mention the desire to have children. Indeed Andrew explains that the oval shape of the \$48,000, 3-carat Harry Winston engagement ring he has purchased for his lucky lady signifies a large family: it "encapsulates all the things she and I are about," says Andrew.
- 62 The producers of the series focus fully on the family in two episodes. In the third-to-last episode, when the bachelor has narrowed the field to four, he goes on hometown dates with each hopeful. Audiences enter the kitchens and living rooms of the various mothers, fathers,

stepparents, and siblings of the dates, and watch how well everyone relates. Mom, Dad, Sister, Brother, Best Friend: they all have the opportunity to interrogate the bachelor about his intentions.

- 63 The final episode turns the tables and the bachelor/ette brings the remaining two dates home to meet the parents. The family's approval seems crucial to both Trista and Ryan. Trista confesses her dislike of decision-making. She hopes her mother, father, and stepmother will help. (Trista's mother and stepmother amicably disagree about who is a better match for her. Her stepmother actually picks the winner.) In Andrew's case, his two sisters grill Kirsten and later explain to the audience that they don't really trust her. Big brother Adam takes Andrew aside to tell him that Kirsten isn't being totally honest with him about her relationship with her former boyfriend. Shocked, Andrew gets defensive; but it is clear that, for his family, Kirsten is *not* the one.
- 64 In a one-on-one session with Ryan, who asks "are you ready to be married?" *Bachelorette* Trista responds, "I think so. I have traditional values, in terms of getting engaged. And I've always pictured the guy getting down on his knee and saying "will you marry me?" Ryan follows up with a "what do you want out of marriage?" Trista's answer? "Family and to maintain friendships."
- 65 Though the TV courtship of Trista and Ryan was a whirlwind six weeks, it did include Ryan asking Trista's father for his daughter's hand in marriage – if she should pick him, of course. (Though bachelor Alex Michael rejected Trista for Amanda, Amanda reportedly broke off their relationship after learning he was still seeing Trista.) Even faith has a role in *The Bachelor/ette*. As a contestant on the original *Bachelor*, Trista offers an assessment of her future: "I am not a 'conservative' person in terms of religion, but I do believe God has a plan for my life. Although the 'man of my dreams' remains hidden, it's not for a lack of looking for him on my part. I will admit that I have high standards, but I truly believe that it will happen as 'planned.'"⁹

Bruised Egos and Broken Hearts

- 66 How do contestants handle rejection? If they're women, not particularly well. The lead-in, "preview" segment to each episode features tearful women. Each episode also includes interviews with the contestants before and after Andrew dumps them. A typical response by an unlucky lady is, "I'm totally destroyed. I think I was putting my heart out there, and I don't think he was." Convinced she's not going to get a rose at the Rose Ceremony, Amber "proceeds to eat

everything in sight, saying she's going to get fat."¹⁰ There are only two on-screen exceptions to the jilted women. Christina S. removes herself from the competition while explaining that she likes "a man who takes charge."¹¹ Tina Fabulous, who once told the audience that she'd serve her husband beer and food during football games, coolly leaves the program, saying, "I don't think that being barefoot and pregnant on a vineyard is fabulous."

- 67 The men handle rejection differently. They don't talk about broken hearts; instead they suggest they must not have been what Trista was looking for. "I heard she got a gift, maybe that *did* influence her," complains one contestant who fails to make it to episode two. Says Bob, commenting on quiet Ryan, he and I "are polar opposites. I'm really outgoing, gregarious. If that's her type, that's unbelievable; I can't believe." Another contestant, Brook, accuses Trista of being superficial because she worries that her allergies would make life on his ranch unmanageable. While the forlorn women focus inward, the men seem to blame Trista for not falling for them.
- 68 Female viewers, no doubt, saw through Trista's "allergy excuse." She just couldn't bring herself to tell Brook he didn't do it for her. Indeed Trista has a horrible time saying goodbye to any of the men. Repeatedly the former runner-up on the original *Bachelor* says that she knows what it's like to be rejected. She continually worries about hurting the men. It is "so difficult. It makes me feel awful, because I feel like the burden is on me to please these guys and not break their hearts, and it's really hard for me to forget about the guys who walked out the door tonight."
- 69 Andrew, on the other hand, doesn't take his responsibility quite so personally. Throughout the episodes, he says that he hopes he hasn't made a mistake and sent the "wrong ladies" home. As he narrows the field to just a few women, he does admit that he hates to be a heartbreaker, but never do we see him torn up about having to hurt some women. When reflecting on his final decision, he hopes the loser will understand that he's doing what's best for two people.
- 70 The season finale of *The Bachelor/ette* brings two people together, which means that one person must be let go. While both runners-up express disbelief and bitterness, Kirsten's bitchiness contrasts with Charlie's wounded pride. Crying, Kirsten departs in her limo. Between her sobs she tells the camera:

I did put my whole life on the line for Andrew, and now I have so many pieces to put back now. . . . And I still just

keep thinking that this is not happening because it really isn't happening – it's really just a bad dream. . . . I took a chance, and I opened myself up. . . . My ultimate fear did come true. . . . I really am just so sick thinking about him and Jen. It just makes me, like, so sick. And now he's proposing to Jen, and it makes me just want to throw up.

“No more tears, OK?” runner-up Charlie comforts Trista as she sends him on his way. “Enjoy the rest of the night.” In the limo, Charlie is less sanguine:

I didn't think, um, that she was going to end up choosing Ryan. I really didn't. I thought that we were going to end up having a relationship. There's no doubt in my mind about that. I don't know. I don't know. You know, it really is weird sitting here now, knowing who I am and what I gave to her and what I shared and what I opened up and what I thought I was getting in return from it, and, you know, just talk about getting, you know, getting thrown in front of a bus. Going up there, it was just like, what, you know, it was, phew. Wow. This is ridiculous what just happened.

Charlie's way with words paid off. By the time *Bachelor 3* aired, the celebrity gossip show *Extra* had hired him to cover Hollywood luminaries and their shindigs.

Girls Will Be Girls and Boys Will Be Boys

- 71 A season of Trista's trials and tribulations concludes with the bachelorette and her man in a romantic, candlelit garden. In a little girl voice, she confides:

This day is the day I have dreamt about my entire life. Since I was a little girl, I had visions of a man who I could see my future with, but someone whose face was always blurred, until now. Now I not only see his face, but I see a future of dreams come true. I see smiles and laughter. I see babies and grandbabies. I see comfort and safety. I see a white dress and I see it with you.

On bended knee, Prince Ryan then offers Trista the ring she has pre-selected. And they live happily ever after . . . ?

- 72 By the time Trista and Ryan tie the knot, *Bachelor 3* has begun to

unravel. It had started with so much promise. At the end of eight episodes, our nervous millionaire bachelor, Andrew, is ready to commit. He finally settles for Midwestern Sweetie, Jen. An excited Jen tries to grab the ring as soon as Andrew brings it out of his pocket. After a smile, Andrew says, “Jen, I love you. I think that we fit perfectly together, and I look forward to a life of adventure, happiness and family.” When the duo splits by the end of the year, they chalk it up to “different goals.” Media reports suggest Jen, after giving up her life in Chicago to move in with Andrew in San Francisco, was uncomfortable in the spotlight. Apparently Andrew was uncomfortable not being a bachelor (Haberman 2003).

American as Apple Pie

The goal isn't to make friends, but to find a mate.

— Andrew Firestone, *Bachelor 3*

- 73 *The Bachelor* and *Bachelorette* offer viewers more than lessons in what it means to be a man or woman, to be masculine or feminine. These shows also provide audiences with an education in Americanism. As Wray (2001) observes, the all-American cultural values of individualism, mobility, competition, materialism and consumption help explain our nation's unique politics and policy outcomes. Compared to citizens of other democracies, why are Americans so reluctant to engage in politics? So stingy when it comes to social welfare? So adverse to foreign aid? So oblivious to income inequality? So relentless in their desire to incarcerate and execute criminals? According to Wray, these “political curiosities” can at least partially be explained by the values, stories and myths so often-repeated in our popular culture. These classic myths, whether Rags to Riches or American Exceptionalism, to name just two, affect how we view ourselves, each other, our society and the world. While good values in many respects, individualism, mobility, competition, materialism, and consumption can also be, if taken to extremes, counterproductive and harmful.
- 74 In *The Bachelor/ette*, as in the bulk of America's popular-culture products, viewers are subjected to each of these five values. The lessons in *individualism* are clear: any “average” Joe or Joanne can show what it takes to choose or be chosen. They have distinct personalities, whether they're kind or catty, sociable or shy; and viewers are encouraged to believe these personalities determine why some contestants get the roses and others get the heave-ho. If some contestants *choose* to drink too much or *choose* to try too hard, well, they only have themselves to blame. The audience also knows the

choosers are in control. *The Bachelor* and *Bachelorette* are responsible for their actions; they determine their own fates. Of course, the audience is reminded again and again that the “dates” always have the chance to opt out or reject the bachelor/rette. They, too, have a kind of power.

- 75 *Mobility* is important to *The Bachelor/ette* series. In the physical sense, contestants are whisked around the country on elaborate dates, and questions of whether prospective dates are willing to relocate if chosen are de rigueur. Social mobility, too, is evident throughout the shows, though perhaps more obvious in *The Bachelorette*. While *The Bachelorette*'s Trista has many seemingly self-sufficient men, besides Charlie, to choose, none appear to be higher in class than she. We are not led to believe that she or any of her men are looking to “marry up.” This is dramatically different in *The Bachelor 3*. Andrew is “ABC’s most eligible bachelor to date;” his wealth and class are crucial components of the show. It is clear that any of the women would be marrying into the upper class. Indeed the audience can judge for itself which of the women might be able to adapt to the lifestyle of the rich and famous. Sensitive viewers are likely to wince in embarrassment for Amber when she asks Andrew about his favorite Italian restaurant, only to be surprised that he doesn’t mention her pick, the Olive Garden.
- 76 *Competition* is the name of *The Bachelor/ette* game. One man or woman is chosen to play the lead role in a romantic game show; twenty-five women or men must compete for the lead’s affections. Who is more wonderful, more attractive, more interesting, more worthy? From twenty-five dates, to fifteen, to ten, to seven, to four, to three, to two, to one, the audience watches as strangers-turned-roommates compete to win the love of the bachelor/ette. The men complain a bit about “chiseling,” to be sure, but it is the women who are seen as bitchy and back-stabbing. They’ll do whatever it takes to win their man. Not wanting to ruin the moment, Liz, vegetarian of twelve years, eats the lamb Andrew feeds her at a Moroccan restaurant.
- 77 Competition also manifests itself on nearly every group date. Many dates take place at sporting events: Trista takes five guys to a Chargers game; Andrew and his ladies occupy a skybox at a Lakers game. Others force the contestants to compete. The “winners” of tennis, mechanical-bull riding, craps, and rock-scissors-paper are rewarded with special one-on-one time with the bachelor/ette. In another nod to competition, celebrity athletes pepper both series. After the game is done, Trista and her lucky five get to head down to

the field to toss the ball around with San Diego Chargers LaDanian Tomlinson and Drew Brees, who admits he's a *Bachelor* fan. On Andrew's basketball group date, L.A. Lakers Shaquille O'Neal and Derek Fisher meet him and his ladies on the court. Fisher gives a special Lakers jersey to the lady he likes best. When Andrew and entourage play tennis on another date, it's the perfect opportunity for tennis pro Tracey Austin to provide some tips. And what bobsledding date would be complete without Olympic Gold Medalist, Bonnie Warner, to tell you what to do?

- 78 For those chosen to be on *The Bachelor/ette*, life is like a dream. From the limousine that carries contestants to the opening reception, to life in a mansion, to dream dates complete with gourmet food, bubbly champagne, fresh flowers, fancy dresses, exquisite jewelry, luxurious spa treatments, and celebrity-filled sporting events, to the limousine that whisks losers away, *materialism* is ubiquitous. Over the course of the few weeks contestants are on the show, viewers can't help but envy the fantasy lives they lead. Because the contestants must endure the uncertainties of reality TV life, we root for them, happy they have the chance to have the "vacations" most of us only dream of. Sometimes, we find a character like Kirsten a bit greedy; yet, in the end what we have is a morality tale. We breathe a sigh of relief as Prince Andrew Firestone Charming chooses the modest girl over the gold-digger.
- 79 *Consumption* relates strongly to materialism. The material girl (or boy) wants to have it all. But consumption is something so much bigger. We live to consume and consume to live. Whether it's downing drink after drink, driving fast cars and motorcycles, or eating at the finest restaurants, *The Bachelor/ette* is nothing if not a gluttonous free-for-all. The champagne is ever-flowing and the candles ever-burning. Perfection is the norm in Reality TV Land. Trista is visibly disturbed when she enters Greg's messy Manhattan apartment. Not only is it shockingly imperfect, it seems to lack recognizable or brand-name consumer goods! How can she possibly make out with a man who doesn't seem to care about *things*? That every series must end with fabulously expensive engagement rings, supplied by a Hollywood "jeweler for the stars," reminds us of the real meaning of true love: extravagant weddings!
- 80 To be sure, viewers find individualism, mobility, competition, materialism and consumption on the sets of *The Bachelor* and *Bachelorette*; but it doesn't end there. After each series, winners find their faces plastered all over magazines and on TV. Even some losers get interviews or entertainment jobs or are asked back on another

season of the program. For the Andrew Firestone devotee, an Internet search easily leads her to his personal website, where she can purchase, what else, Firestone wine and beer!¹²

- 81 Who can forget the wedding of Trista and Ryan? What a beautiful ending for a fairytale romance, the mandatory requirement of every little girl's American Dream. Through hard work, good looks, and perseverance, two all-American kids beat the odds and found true love on TV. Die-hard fans were treated to the inside scoop on the wedding planning and final results when ABC rewarded Trista and Ryan with an enchanted, multi-million dollar, made-for-TV wedding (and a million dollar dowry).
- 82 Fans of *The Bachelor/ette* learn another important life lesson beyond the show. Bombarded by commercials hawking beauty products and ads for the hit reality series, *Extreme Makeover*, the (mostly female) audience is encouraged to think that individuals *can* control their destinies and discover true happiness. With some money to buy the *right* wardrobe, make-up, and nose, anyone can find true love or escape her ho-hum existence. Those who are losers in the game of life have no one but themselves to blame.
- 83 Mark Andrejevic also connects consumption to reality TV and the willingness of individuals to live their lives before *Big Brother*-like cameras or voyeuristically view those who do. "This is . . . an echo of the promise of the promoters of the new, interactive economy: self-disclosure is good for us – the more we tell marketers about ourselves, our shopping habits, our web-surfing habits, our viewing and reading preferences, the more empowered we are as consumers" (2004, p. 10). More than ever, democracy is defined by our ability to choose, not between competing candidates or belief systems, but between competing anti-depressants and chain restaurants. To be a citizen is to be a consumer. We may not get involved in politics or vote, but at least we're doing our patriotic duty to shop 'til we drop.

End Game

Reality TV's obsession with women's appearance, sexuality, ability to please men, desperate need to compete with each other over men, redecorate, have breast implants and liposuction – reinforces and celebrates pre-feminist gender codes. From "The Bachelor" to "Joe Millionaire" to "Trading Spaces," reality TV keeps women in their place and encourages a retreat from citizenship and world

affairs into consumerism and the domestic sphere.
— Susan Douglas (2004)

I feel I am ready to settle down with someone and start a new life because I can see my wedding day so clearly in my mind. I am ready to have the house with the picket fence and I want somebody to share my life with so it is not so dull. I am ready to feel like Cinderella.¹³

— Stephanie, 21, contestant on *The Bachelor*

- 84 For all the focus on women making choices, for all the sexual freedom, *The Bachelorette* is not necessarily a conservative's worst nightmare. It and its counterpart, *The Bachelor*, may trivialize courtship and marriage; conversely these programs make it clear that heterosexual (and overwhelmingly white) people are very much interested in the chance to find true love or the ability to settle down and start a family. Some nice, normal, all-American guys and gals do exist. With a little luck, they may find each other on TV.
- 85 A nice, normal, All-American guy can be the strong, sensitive type. He might write poetry in his spare time, but he'll surely be able to put out a fire or trade stocks for a living. That he does the dishes and plays with his nieces and nephews makes him all the more attractive to his prospective mate *and* the viewing audience. So what if many of the women on these shows are overly emotional, catty, obsessed with their looks or gold-diggers? We know that's what women are like, don't we, especially when it comes to competing for a great guy? Not to worry too much, of course, because the bachelor will most likely end up with a sweetheart of a girl in the end.
- 86 If they really want a heroine, female viewers are invited to identify with the all-American *Bachelorette*, whose beauty, poise, and playfulness we can't help but admire. She's one of the guys but has a feminine side, too. She can throw a spiral and wear high heels. She'll be her man's playmate but also the mother of his children. What man wouldn't want her? If only we could be she
- 87 Reality-Romance TV shows like *The Bachelor/ette* sell women the same old Cinderella story, updated for modern times. Certainly some women watch these programs subversively. Others may use them to escape their lives, their real relationships, or to help them cope and accept what they have. But what these programs are most reminiscent of are pre-adolescent board games for girls, games like *Heart Throb: The Dream Date Game* and *Girl Talk: Date Line*. Jennifer Scanlon

- (1999) notes that these and other same-sex girl board date games “invite girls to enter the consumer marketplace by encouraging players to use products such as clothing and makeup to enhance their looks. . . . Whether a girl steals one from a friend, wins one through her own matchmaking skills, or reads one in her future, a boyfriend rather than a career or a life remains the player’s central goal” (504).
- 88 This analysis of one season each of *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* is intended to be an exploratory study of gender and cultural myths in reality romance television. Clearly there is much room for additional work. Such analysis could include all seasons of the program. In a cursory examination of the first season of *The Bachelor*, the bachelorette pool looked quite different than that for *The Bachelor 3*. Among Bachelor Alex Michael’s prospective choices was a Ph.D. student, a doctor, a neuropsychologist, and two attorneys! Looking for similarities and differences across the series might indicate what producers discovered about their audience over time.
- 89 Investigating the audience for reality romance television is another possible avenue for research. What makes these programs persevere and propagate? What uses and gratifications do they offer their viewers? Is it simply schadenfreude that draws some of us in? Do we need to make ourselves feel better than those men and women out there willing to live their lives in front of the camera? Do voyeurism and vicarious-living explain the popularity of these shows? And what about the interactivity of so many reality romance programs? Chat boards, websites, viewing “parties” and even audience participation encourage fans to evaluate and criticize contestants and each other, to bet on winners, to talk back to the television set.
- 90 In a strange way, programs like *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* may help foster a sense of power or community. Staying on top of the “current events” of the series, “voting” on favorite contestants, “campaigning against” undesirable ones: that’s making choices. And kinship, whether found on-line or in the living room: that’s the basis of society. Along with rally-around-the-flag patriotism, pseudo-power and pseudo-community may seem like the best many Americans can hope for these days.
- 91 There is of course, a way in which Trash TV, for all its claims to depict real life, is about anything but that. There is room here for an analysis of fantasy, for a reading of Trash TV as an expression of what our culture lacks and therefore desires: a world in which race, gender, and sexual orientation don’t matter, where complex social problems have individual, therapeutic solutions, where deviance is easily

recognizable, swiftly and justly punished. Or, more significantly perhaps, where the desire to connect with other human beings at whatever level generates an elaborate, mythical electronic space in which no detail is too small to reproduce, no story too personal to tell (Grindstaff 1995, p. 7).

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Notes

- ¹ All contestant quotations are responses to two questions: "Why I'm trying to find my spouse on TV?" for the women and "Why would you want to find your spouse on a TV show?" for the men. They appeared in the "Bios" section of websites for *The Bachelorette 2* (<http://abc.go.com/primetime/bachelorette/bios>, no longer linked) and *The Bachelor 4* (<http://abc.go.com/primetime/bachelor/bios>).
- ² Mike Fleiss, quoted from an interview with Mick O'Regan, "Marriage, Death and Reality TV," for Australia Broadcasting Corporation's Radio National program *The Media Report*, December

19, 2002, <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/mediarpt/stories/s748766.htm>.

3 Others argue that the networks' sharp decline in young adult viewers is due to their relative paucity of reality shows. Young Americans flock to reality programs wherever they air. See Paulsen (2003).

4 On ratings data, see Grossberg (2002), Rogers (2002, 2003, 2004, 2005), de Moraes (2003).

5 *Maxim*, January, 2003, http://www.maximonline.com/girls_of_maxim/html/girl_962.html.

6 ABC, *The Bachelorette* homepage, <http://abc.abcnews.go.com/primetime/bachelorette/index.html> (no longer linked). This led viewers to video clips of male contestants offering their thoughts on Trista.

7 Throughout the analysis sections, any quotations from contestants or narrators are my own transcriptions.

8 Andrew was very fond of using the same words and phrases again and again. "Both these ladies make my heart race" and "both these ladies are gorgeous" were two of his favorites.

9 <http://abc.go.com/primetime/specials/bachelor/bios/Trista.html>.

10 *The Bachelor* Episode Guide, 3, <http://abc.abcnews.go.com/primetime/specials/bachelor/episodes/2002-03/47.html>.

11 *The Bachelor* Episode Guide, 2, <http://abc.abcnews.go.com/primetime/specials/bachelor/episodes/2002-03/33.html>.

12 See <http://www.andrewfirestone.com/>.

13 <http://abc.abcnews.go.com/primetime/specials/bachelor/bios/Stephanie.html> (no longer linked).

All contestant quotations are responses to two questions: "Why I'm trying to find my spouse on TV?" for the women and "Why would you want to find your spouse on a TV show?" for the men. They appeared in the "Bios" section of websites for *The Bachelorette 2* (<http://abc.go.com/primetime.bachelorette/bios>, no longer linked) and *The Bachelor 4* (<http://abc.go.com/primetime/bachelor/bios>).

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