

## **Bachelor Nation(s): The construction of romantic love and audience investment in *The Bachelor/ette* in Australia and the United States**

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### **Abstract:**

*The Bachelor/ette* is a franchise with iterations in multiple major Anglophone countries. It began in the USA in 2002, but in the last five years, new versions of the franchise have emerged, including in Australia (2013-). While *The Bachelor/ette* is an instantly recognisable global franchise, local cultural priorities inflect both the show and the ways in which audiences react to it. This article examines this phenomenon in two territories: Australia and the United States. It will outline the diegetic differences between the two franchises, and use two key case studies to elucidate, explore, and explain some of these divergences. These two case studies – the failed romances of Bachelorette Georgia Love and runner-up Matty Johnson in *The Bachelorette Australia* in 2016, and Bachelorette Rachel Lindsey and runner-up Peter Kraus in the US version of *The Bachelorette* in 2017 – represent two instances in which audiences became deeply invested in particular love stories. Thus, I closely read both case studies with references to major recaps. By doing so, I seek to shed light on the divergent romantic cultures of the United States and Australia, and show that while there are numerous overlaps and commonalities in these cultures, there are also distinct national preferences and desires around romantic love.

**Keywords:** romantic love; *The Bachelor*; *The Bachelorette*; reality television; recaps

### **Introduction**

In 2016, after Bachelorette Georgia Love rejected Matty Johnson in favour of Lee Elliott in the finale of the second season of *The Bachelorette Australia*, the reaction of the audience was one of disbelief and heartbreak. Headlines about the finale included 'Hearts break as Matty fails to win Georgia's heart on *The Bachelorette*,' 'Georgia breaks millions of hearts by

dumping Matty,' and 'That brutal *Bachelorette* finale has Australia in heartbroken *déjà vu* mode'. Social media reactions from fans were similarly distraught, with thousands of tweets under the #BacheloretteAU hashtag expressing grief over Georgia's decision. Georgia's romantic relationship with Lee was an afterthought in most of the fan reactions: instead, attention was almost entirely focused on Matty.

A similar situation arose in the US franchise in 2017, where *Bachelorette* Rachel Lindsay broke up with contestant Peter Kraus before the ritualised final scene in the thirteenth season of *The Bachelorette*. These final rituals – where the Bachelor/ette first rejects the runner-up, then declares their love to the winner – are generally the show's apotheosis, particular the latter, in which true love nominally reigns triumphant. However, in this season, the long, tearful, non-ritualised breakup between Rachel and Peter was the centrepiece of the finale. As in the case of Matty and Georgia in *The Bachelorette Australia*, audience reactions to the final episode focused almost entirely on the heartbreak of Rachel's breakup with Peter. '[L]ast night's episode did not look like a formula broken for the sake of true love. It looked like true love sacrificed at the altar of formula,' Kathryn VanArendonk wrote for *Vulture*. Similarly, Doreen St Félix wrote for *The New Yorker* that Peter and Rachel's breakup seemed to 'violate the antiseptic core of the 'Bachelor' franchise—it was confusing to feel that, amid such artifice, a real tragedy may have occurred'. Both publications – along with most social media reactions – spared little time for the winner, Bryan Abasolo, except to note that he appeared to win 'by default' (VanArendonk; St Félix).

*The Bachelor/ette* is a franchise that centres clearly on romantic love, and in which romantic narratives proliferate. It is also the subject of a great deal of audience commentary – it is an excellent example of Annette Hill's claim that 'if we visualise the value of reality TV as a cultural phenomenon we would see shows overshadowed by talk about them' (4). Audience investment in the romantic possibilities offered by the show is common. However, this investment in particular romances is rarely as strong as it was for Georgia and Matty in Australia, and Rachel and Peter in the United States. Dana Cloud describes what she calls the 'irony bribe' of the show, arguing that, '*The Bachelor* invites two kinds of investment simultaneously: the pleasure of the romantic fantasy and the pleasure of irony in recognising the fantasy's folly' (414). Often, audience reactions to *The Bachelor/ette* franchise focus on the ironic pleasures of watching the show; however, in these instances, the investment of audiences in the pleasures of specific romantic fantasies were evident – and became especially clear at the moment that these romances failed. The rhetoric of heartbreak which surrounded both these narratives represented a notable intrusion of authentic audience emotion into the ironic detachment with which the franchise is usually discussed: clearly, both these romances struck some kind of cultural nerve.

In this article, I seek to shed light on why these narratives were peculiarly resonant, and why they provoked such a notable and apparently sincere emotional investment from the audience. While the national franchises spring from a common source, there are also notable differences, both in terms of the show's structure and the narratives in which

national audiences seek to invest. In this article, I offer a comparative close reading of the narratives constructed around Matty and Georgia in Australia and Peter and Rachel in the United States respectively. I also read these alongside audience reactions, taking as my primary corpus the recaps of the show written for *MamaMia*, *news.com.au*, and *PopSugar* in Australia, and *Vulture*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Glamour* in the United States. By doing this, and exploring why these narratives provoked an apparently sincere investment in the romantic fantasy from audiences, I aim to discuss and delineate some aspects of the differing romantic cultures of Australia versus the United States.

### ***The Bachelor/ette franchise***

*The Bachelor/ette* franchise is the brainchild of executive producer Mike Fleiss. It was not his first foray into making reality television which centred on love, attraction, and marriage: in 2000, he created the Fox reality program *Who Wants to Marry A Multi-Millionaire?*, where fifty women competed to marry the titular multi-millionaire. This show, in his words, ‘generated huge ratings and then a huge scandal’ (Fleiss, quoted in O’Regan), after it was revealed that the multi-millionaire, Rick Rockwell, had a restraining order for domestic violence filed against him by one of his previous girlfriends (Carter; Labi). Despite the popularity of the show, Fox decided against airing any future iterations, and allegedly decided against pursuing any programming in the same vein (Labi).

Fleiss, however, was not discouraged. Two years later, he developed *The Bachelor*, using the same underpinning idea – multiple women competing for the affection of one man – but in a way he described as ‘more romantic and more real’ (Fleiss, quoted in O’Regan; cf. Brophy-Baermann). While the multi-millionaire of the earlier show was seen only in silhouette and the competition was structured like a beauty pageant, the eponymous Bachelor was physically present, the structure revolved around dating, and the iconography was highly romantic. The first season, starring Alex Michel as the Bachelor, aired in 2002. In 2003, after the success of a second season of *The Bachelor* starring Aaron Buerge, the first season of *The Bachelorette* aired, starring Trista Rehn, the runner-up from Michel’s season, as the Bachelorette. Since then, both shows have run regularly on American television, making it unusually long-running for a romantic reality TV show (Dubrofsky, ‘The Bachelorette’s Postfeminist Therapy’). Two seasons of *The Bachelor* aired per year from 2002-2007 (except in 2005, where only one season aired), and shifted to an annual run thereafter, while *The Bachelorette* has run annually from 2003 (except in 2006 and 2007, when no seasons aired). As of the time of writing in late 2018, twenty-two American seasons of *The Bachelor* and fourteen of *The Bachelorette* had aired. Several international versions have since been created, including *The Bachelor Australia* (2013-) and *The Bachelorette Australia* (2015-), of which six and four seasons respectively had aired.

While there have been slight variations in the format over time and across national franchises, *The Bachelor/ette* has a largely consistent structure. It revolves almost entirely around the romantic ritual of the date: every week, the Bachelor/ette goes on numerous dates, some with one contestant, some with multiple contestants. At the end of each week,

the Bachelor/ette must eliminate one or more contestants via the ‘rose ceremony’, where they award roses to the contestants they wish to continue. Gradually, after passing through a series of escalating rituals – for example, when only four contestants remain, the Bachelor/ette will visit their hometowns – the pool is whittled down, until the Bachelor/ette chooses between the final two contestants in the season finale. The implication is that the Bachelor/ette and the winner will form a lasting romantic relationship outside the show.

*The Bachelor/ette* thus belongs to what Misha Kavka calls the ‘second generation’ of reality television shows, which purport to intervene with, rather than document, reality: a phenomenon similarly described by Holmes and Jermyn as a shift from shows which attempt to capture life lived to a more highly formatted environment, more reliant on ‘discourse of display and performance’ (5). Here, contestants are placed in highly structured, artificial situations, and reality is imagined ‘as something that lies ‘before’ the participants, that is, in the participants’ future as a result of the interventions of the reality TV apparatus’ (Kavka, *Reality TV*, 113). The promise of the show is that while the situation that the Bachelor/ette and contestants are placed in is unreal, the love that will follow is real. ‘[L]ove itself’ becomes the prize that the winner and Bachelor/ette obtain by reaching the show’s culmination (Frank 93): what is constructed as a fairytale romance will be inscribed into their everyday lives. Contestants who do not prove themselves worthy of love are often symbolically punished (Dubrosfky, ‘Fallen Women in Reality TV’), but those that do – even if they are not successful in this particular romance – can be offered another chance at having romance inscribed into their reality by returning to the artificial world of the show. New Bachelors and Bachelorettes are regularly chosen from the pool of contestants who have gone before – Matty Johnson, for instance, became the Bachelor in Australia in 2017 after his failed *Bachelorette* romance with Georgia Love in 2016; and Peter Kraus allegedly turned down the chance to be the 2018 American Bachelor after his 2017 stint on *The Bachelorette* (Blynn; Sorren). Contestants may also appear on one of the spinoffs, such as *Bachelor in Paradise* (2014- in the United States, 2018- in Australia), where, by participating in the show’s structures, they are offered another chance at finding a ‘real’ romance: i.e. one that will continue post-show.

*The Bachelor/ette* franchise thus provides an excellent opportunity for ‘exploring the nature of relationship formation and experimenting in new ways with the negotiation and meaning of monogamous commitments’ (Frank 95). It is an unreal environment that purports to nurture and create a romance that is real, and that will continue to be real after the show’s conclusion. If we return to Cloud’s notion of the irony bribe, we may conclude that it is the unreality and the artificiality of many of the show’s structures that invite ironic engagement, implicit in which is the idea that the romantic fantasy is, like the show, unreal (and, potentially, by extension, foolish). However, on some occasions – such as the cases of Matty and Georgia, and Peter and Rachel – a particular romance seems to resonate as both real and ideal with the audience, as the romantic fantasy come to life. Part of its appeal is its apparent authenticity. Minna Aslama and Mervi Pantti argue that *The Bachelor/ette* is a product of a ‘contemporary confessional culture in which the key attraction is the revelation

of ‘true’ emotions’ (168), and certainly, the feeling that a real romance had punctured the show’s artifices swirled in audience reactions to both of the cases I am discussing in this article (see, for instance, St Félix’s assertion, quoted above, that Peter and Rachel’s breakup may have been a ‘real tragedy’). However, part of the appeal also comes from the ‘pleasures of the romantic fantasy’ (Cloud 414), and it is this which I wish to examine further: what is it about these particular narratives that resonated so intensely with their respective audiences? Why did they seem not just real, but ideal?

## **The Love Story**

The extent to which shows like *The Bachelor/ette* actually represent reality is regularly called into question – most famously in recent years by the television show *UnReal* (2015-), a fictional drama series in which the principal characters all work behind the scenes on a reality romance programme called *Everlasting* (clearly an analogue to *The Bachelor/ette*), which regularly represents them manipulating contestants and situations so as to create appropriately dramatic television. Whether or not behind-the-scenes manipulation is quite as extensive as *UnReal* would seem to suggest, there is no doubt that the storylines presented in a given season of *The Bachelor/ette* are deliberately constructed via the editing of the show. This is discussed fascinatingly in the work of Rebecca Trelease, a reality television scholar and contestant in the second season of *The Bachelor New Zealand* (2016). Trelease notes that she repeatedly discussed her academic interest in reality television with Bachelor Jordan Mauger over the course of filming; however, this was omitted from the narrative portrayed by the show. Within the diegesis, her career as a reality television scholar was dramatically revealed in the seventh week of the show, ‘comprised of one sentence of three disjointed cuts, supporting production’s version of events’ (6). Bachelor Mauger was shown to be shocked, and Trelease was eliminated in the same episode, creating a neat narrative of cause and effect.

Cases like Trelease’s make it clear that the narrative of *The Bachelor/ette* is ‘a constructed fiction, like the action on scripted shows, with the twist the real people create the fiction of the series’ (Dubrofsky, ‘Whiteness in the Harem’, 41). Given this, Beth Montemurro suggests that studying shows like *The Bachelor/ette* with respect to ‘realism’ rather than ‘reality’ – that is, reading it as a resonant but fictional, rather than non-fictional, property – may be a more useful approach, especially given that audiences are cynical about the show’s claims to represent reality (86). This is the approach that I am taking in this article: that is, approaching the romances of Matty and Georgia and Peter and Rachel respectively as love *stories*, rather than as depictions of real life.

This may seem somewhat counter-intuitive, given that at least some of the appeal of these particular romances came from the fact that audiences believed that these two couples had genuinely fallen in love: that they had found real romance in an unreal world. However, firstly, we cannot escape the fact that despite their apparent verisimilitude, neither of these narratives was exempt from the story construction processes of the show; and secondly, that what made these narratives feel so authentic and resonant is itself a

subject worthy of analysis. Kavka writes that ‘love, like television, must be performed to be real. The performance of love will generate the effects of love’ (‘Love ‘n the Real’, 97).<sup>1</sup> This question of performance is key here. Whether or not these two couples genuinely were in love is functionally irrelevant to this article (especially considering that such a thing is impossible to measure). What matters is the narratives constructed around them resonated with audiences – in particular, audiences with a strong ironic tendency (Cloud) – as real.

The question thus becomes: how were these particular love stories performed and constructed, and why did they resonate? If, as Monique Scheer suggests, emotions are something we have and we do – that we experience and we enact – how was romantic love performed and manifested in these two stories (195)? ‘Love’ and ‘story’ are two deeply intertwined concepts. Catherine Belsey contends that ‘[t]o be in love is to be the protagonist of a story... [d]esire in Western culture is inextricably intertwined with narrative’ (ix), while Jean-Claude Kaufmann writes that ‘for someone who wants to be in a love story, the story is just as important as the love’ (62). The stories constructed around Matty and Georgia in Australia and Peter and Rachel in the US, and the way that the romantic connection between them was performed and narratively constructed, is key to understanding why these narratives resonated so heavily with their audiences. Potentially, such an analysis can also shed light on some of the similarities and differences between the romantic cultures of Australia and the United States.

### **Building Blocks of Storytelling: Diegetic Differences**

Before we can discuss the differences in the way romantic love is constructed at the micro-level – that is, in the individual cases of Matty and Georgia in Australia, and Peter and Rachel in the US – we must discuss some of the differences in storytelling at the macro-level. Despite the fact that both national versions spring from the same origin, there are key diegetic differences between the Australian and American iterations of the franchise.

The *Bachelor/ette* franchise is ‘not just global, but ‘glocal’’ (Trelease). The differences between local franchises – in particular, the choices made when adapting the original American show for an Australian audience – suggest differences in priorities of the audience. If national audiences function as what Barbara Rosenwein calls an ‘emotional community’, which is a group ‘in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value – or devalue – the same or related emotions’ (2), then we can conclude that these differences in audience priority may be indicative of broader differences in romantic culture.

There are two key diegetic differences between the two franchises. The first is the role played by sex. Notoriously, in the American franchise, when there are three contestants left, they go on overnight dates with the Bachelor/ette, where they have the opportunity to spend the night together in the ‘fantasy suite’: an opportunity that is almost always taken up. Sex is thus inscribed into the narrative as one of the steps toward establishing a long-term romantic relationship. By contrast, the ritual of the fantasy suite does not currently exist in the Australian franchise. In the first season of *The Bachelor Australia* in 2013, the

fantasy suite dates were on offer; however, Bachelor Tim Robards refused to take up the offer with any of his final three contestants. Ever since, sex has essentially been omitted from the diegesis in every season of *The Bachelor/ette Australia*.

Similarly, the Australian iteration of the show is much more restrained than the United States when it comes to kissing. According to the social contract that appears to have been agreed upon in *The Bachelor/ette Australia*, the only place where Bachelor/ette and contestant are permitted to kiss is on a single date, when they are the only two people present.<sup>2</sup> In the American version, however, the Bachelor or Bachelorette will regularly kiss multiple people on group dates and at the cocktail party that precedes the rose ceremony (including rarely, but occasionally, in front of other contestants). Matty Johnson provided a neat illustration of this difference in 2017, when he was the Bachelor in the fifth season of the Australian franchise. Contestant Elora Murger attempted to kiss him at a cocktail party, and he backed swiftly away, saying that this would be inappropriate (*The Bachelor Australia*, S5E12). In the US franchise, however, where the politics of public displays of affection appear to be different, this would be a perfectly normal occurrence.

The other major difference between the two franchises is the role played by marriage. The marital impulse is extremely strong in the American franchise. While some of the titular leads in the early American seasons of *The Bachelor*, including the first Bachelor, Alex Michel, offered a continuing a romantic relationship to the winning contestant but did not propose, a proposal has become almost mandatory in the past decade or so (Bricker, 'Is *The Bachelor's* Obsession With Proposals Hurting the Franchise?'; Kaufman). Since 2007, eleven of the thirteen Bachelors have proposed to their winners. The only two exceptions have been Brad Womack in Season 11 (2007), who did not choose either of the final two contestants (cf. Cloud), and Juan Pablo Galavis in Season 18 (2014), widely held to be the worst Bachelor in the franchise's history, who neither proposed nor said 'I love you' to his winner Nikki Ferrell (Bricker, 'Juan Pablo Galavis, The Worst Bachelor Ever?'; Davis; Fisher; Hare). In *The Bachelorette*, all fourteen Bachelorettes have been proposed to, and all but one (Jen Schefft, in the third season in 2005) have accepted. The proposal is the show's romantic culmination, a crucial element in the romantic narrative told in the American franchise. Without its promise, the romance becomes unsustainable: something, as I discuss, seen clearly in the case of Peter and Rachel, where his reluctance to propose was framed as the death-knell to their romance.

In the Australian *Bachelor/ette* franchise, things are very different. There has only been one proposal in ten seasons.<sup>3</sup> In 2014, in the second season of *The Bachelor Australia*, Bachelor Blake Garvey proposed to Sam Frost. However, they broke up soon afterwards – theirs is the shortest-lived relationship in the Australian franchise (excepting in the sixth season, where Bachelor Nick Cummins rejected both final contestants). Like Juan Pablo Galavis in the United States, Blake effectively became the villain in his own season: but while Juan Pablo's villainy was wrapped up in his refusal to propose, Blake's was linked to the fact he did propose. When Sam became the Bachelorette in 2015, she declared in the first episode that she would decline any proposals offered to her, saying 'I don't want to be a

spoiler alert, but there's probably not going to be an engagement at the end of the series' (*The Bachelorette Australia*, S1E1). Although the possibility of engagement still exists in the iconography surrounding the show in Australia – the show's logo, for instance, features an engagement ring in place of the letter O in the word 'Bachelor' or 'Bachelorette' – it is rarely referred to as a diegetic possibility, and there is no sense that the happy ending is tainted or made lesser by the absence of a proposal. If Peter and Rachel's romance had been staged in the Australian version of the show, it is likely that the story constructed around them would have been quite different.

In short, even though the Australian and US versions of *The Bachelor/ette* belong to the same franchise and share many of the same rituals and structures, the differences between them shape quite different narratives. The American version of the show ties sex, love, and marriage tightly together, and the 'journey' (to use *Bachelor/ette* parlance) of the show follows quite a firm script: dating leads to sex leads to a declaration of love leads to marriage. The show is aware of its truncated timeline – filming takes place over a period of about two months – and so, as I discuss further in the next section, emphasis is placed on spectacular and excessive demonstrations of emotion, so as to make the proposal at the end seem warranted. Its emphasis is on what is called in romance fiction the Happily Ever After (HEA): even though a lot of Bachelor/ette couples break up post-show, the heavy stress placed on marriage in the American franchise means that the ending is imagined as one wherein Bachelor/ette and winning contestant will be together forever. Nothing less than a promise to be together 'ever after' will suffice.

The Australian version, on the other hand, is more restrained. Displays of affection are both less common and less ostentatious. Declarations of love are also less common. Research I have undertaken elsewhere shows that the phrase 'I love you' is used much less frequently in the Australian franchise, and a declaration of love from the Bachelor/ette is confined to the final scene of the last episode, when they make their declaration to the winner (McAlister). In the US franchise, however, a Bachelor/ette might declare their love to multiple people, as Ben Higgins and Arie Luyendyk Jr (Bachelors in 2016 and 2018 respectively) did, and as Rachel did in *The Bachelorette* in 2017 when she declared her love to both Peter and eventual winner Bryan Abasolo. Sex is not often mentioned in the Australian iteration of the show, and it is absent from the diegesis. Just as Kavka claims that reality exists in the world after the show in second-generation reality television franchises like *The Bachelor/ette*, so too do sex and marriage in the Australian franchise (*Reality TV*, 113). If the American version relies on a HEA, the Australian *Bachelor/ette* franchise instead emphasises a HFN ending: Happy For Now. The relationship established is one where Bachelor/ette and winner declare their love and decide to be together for the foreseeable future. While some 'ever after' rhetoric is included (eg. 'I want to spend the rest of my life with you,' a phrase regularly used in climactic declarations of love), and commitment rings are regularly exchanged in *The Bachelor Australia* (although not, interestingly, in *The Bachelorette Australia*), the imagined future – the post-show reality onto which romance is



inscribed – is far less concretised than in the American franchise. These key diegetic differences heavily influence the kinds of stories that can be told.

### **‘Slow Burn’ vs ‘Smitten Kitten’: The Cases of Matty and Peter**

In this section, I provide a brief overview of the romance narratives constructed around Matty and Georgia in *The Bachelorette Australia* and Peter and Rachel in *The Bachelorette*. As I am particularly interested in audience reactions and with how these narratives resonated, I provide this overview with reference to three of the major collections of recaps from each country: *MamaMia*, *news.com.au*, and *PopSugar* in Australia, and *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Vulture* in the US. I then follow this with a comparative analysis.

#### ***The Bachelorette Australia*: Matty and Georgia**

Unusually for a contestant who will become a major contender for the heart of the Bachelor/ette, Matty barely featured in the first episode of the second season of *The Bachelorette Australia*. His introduction to Georgia was shown only as part of a montage, he received little screen time, and he was clearly not in the pool of contention to win the coveted ‘first impression’ rose. He similarly made little impact on the audience – he is not mentioned in either the *MamaMia* or *news.com.au* recaps of the first episode (Stephens and Stephens, ‘And We’ve Already Chosen Our Winner’; Weir, ‘James Weir Recaps *The Bachelorette Australia* 2016 Episode 1’), and only receives the most cursory mention in the *PopSugar* recap, where he is misnamed ‘Matt’ (Rota, ‘*The Bachelorette* is Back and We Love Georgia Love!’).

It was not until the third episode that he emerged as a romantic contender in the narrative, where he won some solo time with Georgia as a result of succeeding in a challenge on a group date. Here, Georgia’s initial impression of Matty is confirmed – ‘I didn’t really notice Matty at the first cocktail party,’ she says (*The Bachelorette Australia*, S2E3). However, here, the narrative suggests that her opinion has slowly begun to change, a fact noted by the audience: ‘Georgia is spotting a lot of common ground between herself and Matty,’ notes the *PopSugar* recap (Lee), while the *MamaMia* recap mentions that ‘[t]here’s A Grade banter. Aw.’ However, it goes on to say that, ‘he’s never going to win because Lee, Fireman Cam, etc’ (Stephens and Stephens, ‘Lee is the Hottest Man on TV’).

At the midpoint of the season, Matty received his first single date: a date characterised largely by conversation and unorthodox confession, where Georgia made the somewhat awkward admission that Matty had not made a particularly strong first impression on her. With this admitted, their relationship was able to move forward, and, after further conversation, they shared their first kiss. This was positively received by the audience: Matty’s ability to converse made him seem ‘like one of the only guys interested in Georgia’ (Stephens and Stephens, ‘Georgia Has Had it Up to HERE’), and Georgia’s warm response to this led to speculation he ‘could actually be Georgia’s new crush’ (Weir, ‘James Weir Recaps *The Bachelorette Australia* 2016 Episode 6’). There was still some doubt,

however, evident in the *PopSugar* recap: '[t]hey got along well, lots of laughs, a romantic kiss, but... we got friend vibes?' (Rota, 'Everything You Need to Know About Episode 6').

Nevertheless, by the eighth episode, when Matty and Georgia had their second single date, these doubts appeared to be assuaged. On this date, Matty confessed to Georgia that he was falling in love with her, and the audience reactions were highly positive: 'Matty admitted he's falling for Georgia and our hearts exploded into a thousand pieces' (Rossi), 'He says he's falling for Georgia and we didn't get goosebumps YOU got goosebumps' (Stephens and Stephens, 'In Which a New Front Runner Emerges'). James Weir's recap for news.com.au emphasises Matty's eloquence as well as his apparent honesty:

Matty says he's falling for Georgia 'big time' and he lets his feelings spill out.

'I wanted this pretty much since the first time I saw you,' he confesses. 'I need to let you know that literally when I wake up from the moment I go to bed, you're always on my mind constantly.'

They kiss, not only because it would be awkward if they didn't after such an honest admission, but also because Georgia's falling for Matty too ('James Weir Recaps *The Bachelorette Australia* 2016 Episode 8').

This cocktail of eloquence and honesty continues to lie at the heart of Matty's appeal for the audience. This is particularly clear in recaps of the penultimate episode of the season, in which Matty declares his love. 'Matty wants to tell Georgia he loves her, and he's kinda shitting himself. What a cutie. Oh gosh, he's so attractive,' read the *PopSugar* recap (Rota, 'It's the Penultimate Episode of *The Bachelorette* 2016'). The news.com.au recap calls Matty's declaration 'one of the most vulnerable, raw and exposed moments of television we've seen all year,' and contends that 'Matty's jacuzzi declaration may have just secured him Georgia's heart' (Weir, ('James Weir Recaps *The Bachelorette Australia* 2016 Episode 11)). The *MamaMia* recap especially emphasises the appeal of Matty's articulateness:

Georgia's date with Matty J is by far the most entertaining because a) he has words in his vocabulary besides 'amazing,' and b) he's like the hottest person we've ever seen...

He whispers sexy things about his 'serious side' and is the first man on the show to say he's 'falling in love' with her...

We're both completely objective, but if she doesn't choose Matty J we cannot. We can't anymore (Stephens and Stephens, 'In Which Matty J Is A Revelation').

While recaps throughout the season also do comment on the physical chemistry between Georgia and Matty – for instance, in the *MamaMia* recap for Episode 6, it is noted that ‘they kiss with so much sexual chemistry we’re pretty sure Georgia is pregnant. With f\*cking triplets’ (Stephens and Stephens, ‘Georgia Has Had it Up to HERE’) – the key appeal of the romance seems to be Matty’s eloquence and the apparent honesty of his admissions and confessions. The ability of Matty and Georgia to converse and communicate is narratively constructed as strong enough to overcome their lack of any immediate connection, and their love story is framed as a ‘slow burn’ (*The Bachelorette Australia*, S2E12).

Reactions show that this was a love story the audience found very appealing, and when Georgia broke up with Matty in the finale episode, the widespread reaction was one of heartache, heartbreak, and betrayal. ‘WE CANNOT... He is DEVASTATED. We are devastated,’ was the reaction from *PopSugar* (Rota, ‘Every Moment As It Happened’, emphasis in original). ‘As Georgia delivered her decision, Matty was heartbroken. So was Australia,’ James Weir wrote for news.com.au (‘James Weir Recaps *The Bachelorette Australia* 2016: The Finale’). The recap of the finale for *MamaMia* revolved almost entirely around Matty J, with ‘we can’t hear anything over our loud sobbing [over Matty]’ the only reaction to Georgia’s declaration of love for Lee (Stephens and Stephens, ‘YOU RIPPED OUT OUR HEARTS AND SET THEM ON FIRE’). Thus, in recaps, the tragedy of the unsuccessful love story trumped any joy over the successful one.

### ***The Bachelorette (US): Peter and Rachel***

Peter’s initial introduction in the season premiere of *The Bachelorette* in 2017 was much more typical of a contestant who will go on to become a major contender. While he did not receive the first impression rose from Rachel – which is given out before the first rose ceremony – he did receive the first rose at the rose ceremony, a gesture which narratively signals a strong impression made. He also made a strong impression on the audience, although this appears to have had more to do with his looks than his connection with Rachel: the recap of the premiere in *Glamour* perpetually refers to him as ‘Hot Peter’ (Logan, ‘Whaaa-Boom!’), and former *Bachelor* contestant Ashley Iaconetti writes for *Cosmopolitan* that ‘Peter is a stunner. He doesn’t have anything extraordinary to say to make a great first impression necessarily, but his face certainly makes up for that’ (‘WHABOOM is in the House’).

In the second episode, Peter received the first single date. This is another narrative signal of the strength of the immediate impression he made on Rachel: she says, ‘I just feel drawn to you... it’s some type of energy’ (*The Bachelorette*, S13E2). The recaps make some mention of their conversation – particularly of their discussion of the fact that they both have gaps between their front teeth – but this is subsumed by questions of physical chemistry: ‘they kiss — Rachel is smitten kitten. She feels romance. She’s giggly and googly-eyed’ (Iaconetti, ‘Love & Basketball’), ‘[w]hen it’s time for Rachel to give Peter the rose, *she* goes in for the kiss and it’s a good kiss’ (Barthwell, ‘Husband Material’, emphasis in original), ‘*He gets a rose. They smooch. THIS IS A LOT. THIS IS SO MUCH. I AM A PUDDLE. IT...THEY*

ARE...THIS COUPLE COULD HEAL AMERICA?’ (Logan, ‘Get Your Head in the Game’, all emphasis in original).

The physical chemistry between Peter and Rachel continued to be emphasised as the season moves forward: ‘Peter brings Rachel out to look at the beautiful view, and they kiss. Then *she* suggests getting in the hot tub, where they kiss more. For hours? Possibly for hours. Get. It. Girl,’ (Logan, ‘The Oslo Not-Accords’, emphasis in original). Tied to it is a growing sense of a kind of ineffable connection between them, despite the early stage: ‘She’s all in, guys’ (Barthwell, ‘Spelling Bee’).

However, at the midpoint of the season, a new narrative started to emerge around Peter and Rachel’s relationship. Peter is first reticent to declare his love for Rachel, and then unsure if he’ll be able to propose at the end of the season; Rachel, however, wants to be proposed to. In the show, this casts doubt over the future of their relationship: For the first time, I’m thinking that Peter and I may not work out,’ Rachel says ominously (*The Bachelorette*, S13E9). In the recaps, this problem begins to provoke new readings of Peter: specifically, he begins to be seen as a character who refuses to comply with the *Bachelor* rules – as someone who is ‘real’, as opposed to playing a role. For instance, Iaconetti writes for *Cosmopolitan* that:

Peter is no B.S. He doesn’t exaggerate his feelings or keep himself from telling his truth, even when he knows it is not what the other person wants to hear. Case in point, he admits that he wasn’t feeling ‘love’ until the night before when he realized how much he missed Rachel (‘Meet the Parents, Part #2’).

Concerns begin to be expressed in recaps that instead of fostering romance – that is, creating an environment where romance will be able to flourish in the ‘real’ world after the show (Kavka, *Reality TV*, 113) – the artificial structures of the show will limit this potential future. Elizabeth Logan writes for *Glamour* that:

Frankly, Peter ‘not being ready to propose’ is such a bullshit thing to get upset over because any man in his right mind would be scared to propose to a woman he had known for a matter of weeks and only dated in the presence of reality TV cameras. [...]

I want these two nice, funny, intelligent people to find love and get married and have babies. This is annoying. I am annoyed.

This is a dumb cliffhanger. Peter better f-cking win (Logan, ‘Meet the Lindseys’).

Peter’s desire for a committed relationship, but not an immediate engagement, post-show is constructed in recaps as sensible, and his transgression of the show’s mandate as honest

and authentic. Rachel's desire to be proposed to – that is, to comply with the show's structures – begins to be constructed as the threat to their relationship: 'I secretly think Rachel just disagrees with Peter on this issue because she doesn't want to be first Bachelorette who isn't proposed to by her chosen man,' Iaconetti writes ('Meet the Parents, Part #2').

Recaps of the finale largely discuss the tragedy of Peter and Rachel's breakup – which consumed over an hour of the three hour finale – with little space for the culmination of Rachel and Bryan's story, other than to mention that their climactic declaration of love was unconvincing and unemotional: '[t]here's no romance or even warmth in their proposal' (Barthwell, 'Win by Default'), 'Um. OK. They get engaged. Um. Well. Congrats?' (Logan, 'And the Winner Is...'). Unlike most breakups between Bachelor/ette and runner-up, a ritual which takes place immediately prior to the climactic declaration, Peter and Rachel's breakup takes place the night before, transgressing the show's usual structures: something that appears to add to the aura of authenticity surrounding him. The high emotionality of this breakup dominated both the diegesis – 'I cried my eyelashes off,' Rachel admits (*The Bachelorette*, S13E11) – and the recaps:

They have the most drawn-out teary goodbye of all time and it is SAD and I am UPSET and they are both BEAUTIFUL and cannot stop kissing and please just stay together. Please don't screw this up, you two... (Logan, 'And the Winner Is...', emphasis in original).

Just as in Australia, the dominant audience reaction was one of heartbreak: 'why couldn't you have worked it out FOR THE LOVE OF LOVE?' (Logan, 'And the Winner Is...', emphasis in original). There is, however, a different nuance in play. With Rachel and Peter, there was a strong sense that he was the real winner of Rachel's heart: that Bryan won 'by default' (Barthwell, 'Win by Default') and was 'her second-place finisher' (Iaconetti, 'Why Isn't This Finale Joyous?'). In Australia, audiences frequently blamed the construction of the narrative for leading them to emotionally invest in the wrong character; whereas in the US, the narrative structures were blamed for getting in the way of a real love story.

### **Analysis: Romance vs Intimacy**

There are strong points of overlap between both the failed romance narratives of Matty and Georgia in Australia and Peter and Rachel in the United States and the respective audience reactions to them. In both cases, audiences responded to the apparent authenticity of the failed lover. Matty's eloquent declarations of love for Georgia were viewed as 'vulnerable, raw and exposed' (Weir, 'James Weir Recaps *The Bachelorette Australia* 2016 Episode 11'), while Peter's assertions of his own feelings exposed the artificial structures of the American show, particularly as regards marriage. The ostensible 'realness' of Matty and Peter allowed audiences to invest in the pleasurable romantic fantasies they represented, which meant

that they responded with heartbreak when the romances did not succeed, instead of enjoying the pleasures of ironic detachment (Cloud).

However, there are also key differences between these two highly resonant romantic narratives, and it is these differences which are most useful for exploring the divergent romantic cultures of Australia versus the United States. These differences revolved largely around what was valued in the two narratives. In Australia, it was Matty's eloquence and communicative abilities. While he did not have an instantaneous connection with Georgia, their 'A Grade banter' (Stephens and Stephens, 'Lee is the Hottest Man on TV') was fundamental to their romance, and his willingness and expressiveness in declaring his love was highly valued by the audience. In contrast, in the United States, the initial connection between Peter and Rachel was framed as instant and ineffable, and their physical chemistry explosive. Peter's unwillingness to (firstly) declare his love and (particularly) propose – that is, his disobedience of the diegetic mandates of the show in favour of prioritising his own feelings – were objects of strong audience investment.

In his book *Modern Love*, David Shumway outlines two key romantic discourses: 'romance', which prioritises passion, and 'intimacy', which prioritises emotional closeness (3). Both, he argues,

promise a great deal in the name of love. Romance offers adventure, intense emotion, and the possibility of finding a perfect mate. Intimacy promises deep communication, friendship, and sharing that will last beyond the passion of new love (27).

Shumway contends that as Western (particularly American) approaches to romantic love have evolved, intimacy becomes more discursively important, although romance does not disappear: he writes that '[m]any stories of the later part of century are told as mixtures of intimacy and romance, which often function in tension with each other' (3). I contend here that the romantic fantasy in Australia and the romantic fantasy in the United States are different cocktails of the two: while both elements are present, the mixture is differently weighted.

This can be observed clearly in the stories of and reactions to Matty and Georgia in Australia and Peter and Rachel in the United States. In the case of Matty, the discourse of romance is almost entirely absent at first. His eyes do not meet with Georgia's across a crowded room: it is emphatically not love at first sight. Instead, through communication, conversation, and confession, they establish a friendship that turns romantic. 'I've just felt this overwhelming move away from just a friendship and just happiness to huge butterflies and romance,' Georgia says after their second single date (*The Bachelorette Australia*, S2E8). This is eight episodes into a twelve episode season: two thirds of the season have effectively passed before Shumway's discourse of romance begins to appear in the narrative surrounding Matty and Georgia. Previously, it had relied heavily on the discourse of intimacy. Although a more passionate element does feature prominently in the concluding

stages of Matty and Georgia's romance, his expressiveness continues to be at the heart of his appeal to the audience – in particular, his ability to articulately and persuasively declare his love.

The opposite is true of Peter and Rachel, where communication is a stumbling block, rather than a key feature of their romance. Instead, emphasis is placed on their physical chemistry and ineffable connection. 'Sometimes there are things between two people that you don't need to express – you just feel a connection,' Peter says, after their first single date (*The Bachelorette*, S13E2). The romance between them is constructed as intense and passionate, but it does not have the basis of friendship that we can observe in Matty and Georgia's relationship. Their consistent failure to communicate, to negotiate, and to compromise proves to be the ultimate failing of their relationship. However, despite their communicative issues – which we might, in Shumway's terms, consider to be failures in the intimate space – audiences were still firmly 'Team Hot Peter' (Logan, 'Dean Has an Emotional Hometown'). While intimacy was highly valued by the Australian audience, American audiences preferred that the passionate discourse of romance be the primary ingredient in the romantic cocktail.

Shumway notes that, although notions of romance and intimacy are mixed in modern love stories, there is a fundamental incompatibility between the two. Inherent in the discourse of romance is the idea that 'love is something that befalls one,' which means that 'whether a couple loves is beyond their control' (25). In the discourse of intimacy, however, 'love is something that happens between lovers' (25): a process at which they both must work, and be active participants. With this in mind, we can see the different nuances inherent in the heartbroken responses to the two love stories in question here, especially if we consider the Australian audience prefers intimacy while the American audience prefers romance. When Georgia chose to pursue a relationship with Lee instead of Matty, she chose – in narrative terms – not to continue to actively work at the relationship that she and Matty had built, resting on their foundation of friendship and emotional closeness. When Rachel split from Peter, on the other hand, in the eyes of a large section of the audience, she chose marriage to Bryan, whom she did not love, over the true love that unavoidably befallen her with Peter. For the respective audiences, Georgia chose the wrong romantic future, but Rachel failed to choose her 'perfect mate' (Shumway 27).

If we look at the larger frame narratives of *The Bachelor/ette*, we can see many of the same tensions and patterns in evidence as we do in the stories of and audience reactions to Matty and Peter. The Australian version of the franchise has considerably lower stakes, with sex and marriage removed almost entirely from the diegesis. Instead, the emphasis is placed on building a foundation from which a long-term romantic relationship can be established. Romantic milestones like sex and marriage proposals exist in the reality established *after* the show (Kavka, *Reality TV*, 113). The reality of love is thus imagined as something that the lovers work towards and at together. In the United States, by contrast, there exists a much stronger sense that love is something that befalls the lovers. The comparative emphasis on romance as opposed to intimacy, with its encoded preference for instantaneous passionate

attachment, thus makes sense, as does the truncated nature of the diegesis, in which sex and the promise of marriage are inscribed. If love happens, rather than develops, then time becomes somewhat irrelevant. In the US franchise, the final declaration of love between Bachelor/ette and winner recognises, rather than establishes, a romantic relationship: heightening the tragedy in cases like that of Peter, where the audience believes that the Bachelor/ette has failed to recognise where their romantic destiny truly lies.

## Conclusion

Dana Cloud notes much engagement with *The Bachelor/ette* comes from an ironic place, recognising the folly and emptiness of the romantic fantasy (414). This makes the cases of Matty and Peter particularly interesting because of the level of apparently genuine emotional investment provoked in the audience by their particular romantic narratives, especially at the moment of their failures. Cloud goes on to write that ‘what counts as ‘real’ in romantic genres aimed primarily at women is not empirical truth but affective fidelity to women’s expectations about how love feels’ (418). The case studies I have provided here, as well as the broader diegeses of the two national franchises, reveal that these expectations appear to be different in the two territories in question. In Australia, the romantic fantasy rests on ideals of intimacy: that is, friendship, communication, and a cooperative love at which both lovers will work. In the US, much more of Shumway’s discourse of romance appears to be encoded into the fantasy, prioritising passion, ineffability, and inevitability: love either happens or it doesn’t. In Australia, the romantic narrative of *The Bachelor/ette* ends with a Happy For Now; in the US, with a Happily Ever After.

Of course, due to the way celebrity culture operates, we can follow what happens with the *Bachelor/ette* couples in both territories after the show’s conclusion. Something immediately evident is that the Australian franchise has a much higher comparative success rate than the American one. Five of nine couples are still together<sup>4</sup> (including Georgia Love and Lee Elliott of the 2016 season of *The Bachelorette Australia*, and Matty Johnson and Laura Byrne of the 2017 season of *The Bachelor Australia*). We could make an argument that the success rate is, in fact, higher than this, given that the ending only promises a Happy For Now ending: only one couple broke up immediately (Blake Garvey and Sam Frost of the 2014 season of *The Bachelor Australia*). In the United States, by contrast, only seven of thirty-six couples are still together (four married, three – including Rachel Lindsey and Bryan Abasolo – still engaged).

Given such an outcome, the Happily Ever After promise of *The Bachelor/ette* in the United States seems to be curiously hollow: why has its rhetoric of true love changed so little? But when we consider the different mixture in the romantic cocktail in the United States – one which prioritises Shumway’s romance, inherent in which is the notion that passionate connection is instantaneous and love is something that happens, rather than something that you do – this makes more sense. If you are the Bachelor/ette and your true love is not in the room, then a Happily Ever After ending is not possible in the ideal romantic fantasy the show represents. In the version of the romantic fantasy presented in Australia,



by contrast, where intimacy is prioritised, love can be a slow burn, something that grows, evolves, changes, and matures over time.

The cases of Matty and Peter are only two case studies; and *The Bachelor/ette* only one product in romantic culture. However, we should remember that *The Bachelor/ette* is a deeply commercial enterprise that has outlasted all its competitors in the romantic reality TV space (Dubrofsky, 'The *Bachelorette*'s Postfeminist Therapy'), responding and catering to national 'emotional communities' (Rosenwein 2). It is in its interest to speak directly to local romantic cultural values, and its longevity suggests that it is, in some respects, succeeding. The glocal *Bachelor/ette* franchise thus offers excellent opportunities for further study by interrogating the culturally specific romantic fantasies it portrays – in particular, when these fantasies strike a nerve with the audience.

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> This assertion is not dissimilar to the Thomas theorem, commonly used in sociology – ‘if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’ (Thomas & Thomas, 572) – which suggests that this phenomenon has a broader application than reality television.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, however, that the 2018 Australian Bachelorette Ali Oetjen pushed back somewhat against this contract, and kissed several contestants at cocktail parties.

<sup>3</sup> There was also one proposal in the Australian version of *Bachelor in Paradise* (2018). However, the couple in question – Sam Cochrane and Tara Pavlovic – broke up a few months later.

<sup>4</sup> This is inclusive of the first five seasons of *The Bachelor Australia* and the first four of *The Bachelorette Australia*. In the sixth season of *The Bachelor Australia*, Bachelor Nick Cummins rejected both final contestants, so his season is not included as no final couple was established.