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Constructing Emotion in a Woman's Genre: Affective Economies and The Bachelor

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For loyal viewers of ABC's *The Bachelor*, a rose by any other name is not just a rose. Instead a rose is a deeply emotional symbol that represents a lot of ideas, the most important of which is acceptance into another week of network television, and, of course, love. Media scholar Henry Jenkins calls this combination of emotional outreach and entertainment marketing affective economies, a system changing the context of broadcasting by recognizing consumer behavior and purchasing habits through an emotional investment in a program and the content that it's selling. Media and brands are coming together in order to quantify and commodity the commitment of its viewers and consumers, and in the process redefining certain discourses around various cultural affects, such as love and romance. However the use of affectivity in economic strategizing relies upon the manipulation of a deeply rooted cultural artifice, the biased and incredibly gendered construction of emotion, especially in the context of a romance narrative, as is the case with The Bachelor. There is a powerful danger in becoming invested in affective marketing strategies and in buying what's being sold, as long as it's coming from a discourse of inequality.

Having recently concluded its 16th season, The Bachelor is a long-running reality program which revolves around a single eligible bachelor and a pool of female love interests. Its success having spawned multiple spin-offs (The Bachelorette, The Bachelor Pad), The Bachelor franchise has developed a predominately female loyal fan base. With over a million likes on

Facebook and a near constant buzz surrounding each season's contestants, The Bachelor like various other reality programs has successfully built a community out of dedicated franchise followers.

The idea of television and fandom as a community builder certainly has its fans in media scholarship these days, pun intended. In Convergence Culture, Jenkins recognizes the importance of collective intelligence in the formation of affective economies, mentioning that it has both negative and positive implications. Advertisers and marketers can undoubtedly tap the collective intelligence for their own purposes; however Jenkins believes that consumers can also form their own "collective bargaining structure" by applying collective intelligence during consumption. So during *The Bachelor*, the show's creators are clearly selling a culturally accepted, although obviously commodified, perspective on romance and commitment. However an oversimplified reading of Jenkins and fellow popularized affect and fandom scholarship substantiates the idea that invested viewers are still able to challenge the corporate decisions behind the program and possess the power to affect the way they are being advertised to. And yet programs such as *The Bachelor* and *American Idol* are affect making machines; they present a fantasy of empowerment and participation, but to become truly engrossed and emotionally attached to something is to give up some level of control over how you are affected, and that is how affective economies can turn attachment into consumer desire.

The cornerstone of affective economies is loyal viewership, which is why a narrative must build an emotional relationship with potential consumers, effectively seeking a commitment. *The Bachelor*, although it's unlike shows in which viewers can directly vote or call in, builds itself, both in narrative and structurally, around the idea of commitment. As each woman is welcomed into the house by the bachelor, so each viewer is welcomed into the house

as the camera follows the contestant through the entranceway. The viewer gets to listen in on the girl talk inside of the mansion, and they also get to watch as the Bachelor makes his first impression outside. The audience is effectively part of these relationships from the beginning. Logging onto the website there is a spot for viewers to give their opinion; do you think the bachelor will find love? And with whom? *The Bachelor* as a reality program is also one of the first of its kind, with a core theme of choosing a partner under particular conditions, and it's a testament to the effectiveness of affective economies that with branding as with actual relationships, people tend to stick close to their first love. The Bachelor franchise rarely constructs an entirely new cast, instead bringing back favorites or possibly least favorites, contestants that made an impression. In this way the program develops a committed audience who is willing to tune into whatever The Bachelor has touched, and abides in some way with the message that is being transferred.

The mission for marketers within effective economies is then to understand that emotional attachment as a model of consumer decision making, using those desires to shape purchasing decisions. To be a loyal consumer whether to a brand or a television show, or increasingly in convergence culture both at the same time, is to have certain values and emotions commoditized in order to be sold a product. Jenkins calls this content "emotional capital", as it is quite literally the gain of capital through emotional investment. The Bachelor is almost transparent in it's commodfication of love, desire, and commitment. The materialistic perspective on attraction is evident from the moment that each woman steps out of their limo in an expensive gown and continues into the mansion after meeting their personal (and by personal I mean shared by 24 other women), Prince Charming. With the series beginning, the potential women utter things like, "I would put anything on the line to find true love" and "I'm willing to

do whatever it takes to get that rose." The women must pursue 'love', they must create the experience of attraction, and they must do what it takes. And using the program as a guide, what it takes is traveling to far away destinations, and limo rides. Viewers may not be on the show, but they can still be part of the message by participating in *The Bachelorette Ultimate Getaway Sweepstakes*. If love is an exotic locale, then buying a ticket to an exotic locale is the way to achieve that desire. The program gives emotions a tangible representation like the ever present rose, making it all the more easy to market a feeling. In the *Bachelor Pad*, the most recent spin-off of the franchise, past Bachelors and Bachelorettes live in a house together, pairing up and going on dates while competing for a cash prize. There is a direct connection between profit, risk, and having an emotional connection.

In describing affective economies, Jenkins seems to accurately describe the relationship between the emotional investment of viewers and the marketing objective to shape consumer choices, but he fails to be necessarily critical of the very cultural construction and ideological control of emotions, particularly the emotions that consumer culture most often manipulates, such as love, desire, and attraction. Affects are not neutral; emotions do not exist in a vacuum outside of cultural biases. Disposition and the way we respond to other's emotional states is affected by questions of gender, race, social status, and class. *The Bachelor* has gotten publically criticized for its lack of minority representation. When being interviewed, the producer mentioned that "it's just that for whatever reason, they don't come forward. I wish they would." The supposed lack of interest, whether that's a genuine statement from the producer or not, speaks not just to any on the surface racial discrimination on the show but also the way that cultural differences affect our perspective on affectivity. The Bachelor is a racially differentiated and gender stereotypical narrative. These narratives, as described by Rosalind Gill in Gender

and the Media, for the most part fetishize certain emotions predominantly associated with selling a discourse to a woman above all others.

The concept of emotion is deeply indebted in our cultural beliefs and practices, and it is undoubtedly gendered. In a way the foundation of affective economies, commoditization of emotion and the practice of emotion management has always existed in gender enculturation. In The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feelings, Arlie Hochschild describes the traditionally accepted doctrine of feeling, which states that those with a higher status tend to have the privilege of seeing their feelings considered important, considered rational, and given more weight fundamental weight. Women then, culturally the less advantaged gender, often have the burden of emotional management while at the same time having their emotions dismissed as irrational or easily affected, which as pointed out by Gill has in the past cultivated in colonial ideas of white women as neurotic and anxious. *The Bachelorette* might feature 25 men, but their emotions and motivations are depicted as rather straightforward. They are the romancers, and they want this woman to fall in love with them. There are emotional outbursts, but for the men these outbursts are depicted for the most part as rational. *Of course it must be hard for a man to see the woman that he has feelings for on dates with other men. It's natural that they would be aggressive in their emotional reaction*. On the other hand, In *The Bachelor* the protagonist may instead be a man, but the women are the true stars of the program. Unlike the men contestants on *The Bachelorette*, they are depicted for the most part as overflowing with emotion, actually bursting into tears. Their emotional outbursts are of constant confusion to their suitor, and are generally later a source of embarrassment for the woman.

Nowhere is this outpouring of heterosexual gender specific emotion more clear than in the climax of the series, when a man in tuxedo proceeds to give a sentimental and metaphor

filled speech before getting down on one knee. *The Bachelor* and jewelry commercials alike personify the emotions of love and commitment almost completely in the moment of engagement. Sure, the contestants on *The Bachelor* want that rose, but even more than a rose they want the ring, which symbolizes the ultimate commitment, the archetypal ending of any story that promises true love. Receiving the engagement ring means the woman has won the game. But to consider the idea that the narrative played out through *The Bachelor* is somehow universal, or that it is true representation of human desire, is to ignore a very important detail; our Western culture is obsessed with heterosexual, binary, racially distinct romance as a discourse. The cultural construction of romance that *The Bachelor* indulges in is in no way separated from the gendered construction of romance that has existed long before a bachelor started choosing a life partner from 25 eager women.

Like many reality programs and romance stories alike, there is a certain amount of ironic self-awareness adopted by the fans. "Of course it's fake," they insist, "We realize that moments are scripted, sets are arranged, and feelings are inflated." However therein lies the danger of affective economies and emotionality in marketing; it goes beyond logic and often situates itself in a reinforced stereotype, in this case a marginalization that has become increasingly unpopular to discuss (that of women.) *The Bachelor* franchise, whether it's *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette*, is undoubtedly a romance discourse, in that it is centered on the emotion, and emotional labor, of the women in relation to a man with a so called fulfilling ending to the narrative. The featured voiceovers from the women on *The Bachelor* tend to sound like they are directly reading lines from a traditional romance novel. Within romantic narratives, there is a kind identification that leads to a discourse of what a woman should expect from a man and the kind of transformation that can happen if you're engaged in a romance. On this level, romance

becomes extremely ideological; ideas reacting with a societal construct that works to keep certain societal norms in place. Romance offers a fantasy, a symbolic solution to those problems, differences in gender, race, social status, and class, which are inherent in most of our culturally constructed institutions. Romance promises transcendent love, the inequality of affects resolved in a fantasy.

But romance as a discourse, and it's resulting usage in contemporary culture, not just offers the message of what women should expect from a man and from a romance, it offers messages centered around how to get certain things from a man, things like love, attention, and commitment. However, Gill points out that often, "female homosociality is constructed around a strongly male-identified notion of femininity and works to promote male interest." On The Bachelor, especially in the beginning when there is a large group, if the girls aren't fighting with each other they are intimately dancing with each other. And yet it's not just male interest that's being promoted, but also commercial culture. Romantic discourses are centered on not just a question of what constitutes love and attraction, but also what deserves love and what deserves attraction and how to achieve that aspiration. Hochschild mentions that as a response to their lack of power and undervalued emotions, women might seek to improve their role in a given situation by making use of traditional feminine qualities, or more recently sexualized feminine roles. On *The Bachelor*, women are quickly categorized in types which are spoken aloud usually by the girls themselves; there are the nice girls, the bitchy girls, aggressive girls. The media and advertising machine wants its viewers to enact these roles of womanhood and the flip side of masculinity, because emotional differences are reified and reflected in actions and consumer choices.

Theory critical of post-feminist media revolves around the idea that a discourse of self-control and choice is in many ways simply a new form of control, but one that's more complicated than clear top down domination. In "Post-Feminism and Culture", Angela McRobbie discusses the ways in which supposed freedom and choice, especially in political gains, make feminism seem unnecessary, or in the very least an unfashionable anachronism, in which "objection is pre-empted with irony." McRobbie introduced a context in which, "for the girls what is proposed is a movement beyond feminism, to a more comfortable zone where women are now free to choose for themselves." This post-feminist process is especially evident in *The Bachelor*, and even more so *The Bachelorette* which on the surface would seem like a more feminist friendly program. However even as the woman is given the illusion of choice on the latter program, she is still situated inside of an ideological romantic discourse in which the happy ending is choosing a man, receiving his declaration of love, and getting proposed to; and make no mistake, the man is still the one who does the proposing. The idea of choice and promise of power is a tempting reality to believe in, but it's also an easy reality to pretend.

In returning to Jenkins, his idealistic belief for affective economies, indeed for convergence culture in general, is that while media and advertising corporations might practice top-down domination over the culture, using collective intelligence made available through convergence allows for counterstrike ammunition. However it's clear that ideological control is not simply in the commands, it's in the illusion of choice that is an ingrained aspect of consumer culture. Feminist discourse became important to television executives because it became a new way to target an audience that they could then deliver to advertisers, so *Sex and the City* was born. What appears to be a negotiation is often just a new way to market a desire, a new way to sell an ideal.

There is a certain inherent irony surrounding The Bachelor and other similar reality shows when put in terms of affective economies and the risks that must be taken in order to make such an economy work. How genius, but also how dangerous, to create a show all about building a committed relationship while being assaulted with various other attractive choices. Commit, says the Bachelor. Commit, say the television executives and brand communities. But just as *The Bachelor* and all of its trite sentimentalism is a cleanly produced façade, so are the underlying emotional truths that romantic discourses are prone to rely on. Jenkins preaches the possibility of democracy through affective economies, but democracies built on the fantasy of neutrality and equality should always be suspect. Concepts like love and devotion are almost never a negotiation, and never without qualifications.

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