

## Wondering about ... the intimate geographies of *Married at First Sight New Zealand* #MAFSNZ

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Why should I, or any geographers, be wondering about *Married at First Sight New Zealand* (MAFSNZ, TV3 2019), the franchised reality television show where strangers meet each other at the altar? Pitched, as a 'ground-breaking social experiment' there is a lot we can learn from this show about people and places. The success of the show - with ratings of over one million viewers in Australia (Dawson 2019) and up to 170,000 in Aotearoa New Zealand (Grieves 2019) – rests on the adventures of couples as they 'hothouse' the highs and lows of marital life. The latest season aired 17 episodes over six weeks as '10 singles put it all on the line and embark on a new journey to find love' (TV3 2019).

Typically, each season begins by profiling the contestants as they tell their families and friends that they are getting married to someone they have never met. There is a 'stag' night for men and 'hen' night for women. Viewers watch as contestants select wedding attire and make their way to the altar where they meet their future spouse. There are photographs, a reception, first reaction interviews, before each couple is taken to a hotel for the night. This season (2019), newlyweds were treated to a honeymoon in Fiji, where they holidayed together as a couple and also spent time socialising together as a group, then all couples returned to their own apartment in central Auckland in order to mimic married life. At some point in the show, couples visit each other's usual home to meet family and friends. During the course of the show, contestants gather for dinner parties where 'experts' - relationship counsellors and mediators –sit and commentate behind one way mirrors. Every time contestants change locations, there is time for reflection in the form of a 'commitment' ceremony. Each couple has a turn on the 'couch' while the experts ask questions about how the marriage is developing. Contestants must then chose to 'stay' or 'leave' the experiment. All contestants were cisgender, that is, their personal identity and gender corresponds with the gender they were assigned at birth. There were four heterosexual couples and one gay couple (reflecting Aotearoa New Zealand's Marriage Amendment Act 2013).

The show has been heavily criticised by many commentators. Some have de-bunked the 'science' behind matching strangers (Curtis 2017; Dixon 2019), others have argued that it is a lesson on relationship failure (Karantzas 2019), and some say the show reflects current demographics in relation to age and ethnicities

(Sigler and Charles-Edwards 2019). Viewed with a feminist and queer geography lens MAFS NZ provides excellent resource material for geographers who are, or wish to become, attuned to the power of gender, sexuality and emotional geographies. The intimate geographies of MAFS NZ are a contemporary window into identity construction, emotions, and cultural norms, which tend to reproduce rather than contest unequal gendered and sexed power relations. Rather than turn away from this, and similar popular culture shows, we might learn something from them. The show is compelling viewing precisely because it invokes multiple emotions – such as humour, sadness, joy, hurt and so on – within intimate spaces. Putting the spot light on MAFS NZ illustrates the way particular gender and sexual identities and performances are deemed to be ‘in place’ and / or ‘out of place’.

Geographers often reach for popular culture and non-traditional texts in learning environments (see Lukinbeal 2014 for a case to understand how media constitutes knowledge). Movies such as *Bend it Like Beckham* (Aleo 2007) are used to teach geographies of identity and difference. The benefits of teaching with film include understanding how watching a film for pleasure is not the same as actively learning, and knowing how to deconstruct images, fiction, stereotypes, and realities (Di Palma 2009). Madsen (2014) provides a guide to the benefits of teaching political geography and imperialism through the film *Avatar*. Documentaries, such as *The Amazing Race* (Gaillard and McSherry, 2014; Smiley 2017), help learning about cultures, identities, and difference. Closer to home, geographer Andrew Gorman-Murray investigates the Australian version of reality television show *The Block* (2006, 2011), finding: ‘mainstream acceptance of gay masculinity: gay men and their homes are welcome when they reinforce heteronormative ideals’ (Gorman-Murray 2011, 435). In summary, existing geographical research of popular culture provides excellent resource for teachers guiding students to ‘Understand how people’s diverse values and perceptions influence the environmental, social, and economic decisions and response that they make’ (Level 8, NCEA level 3) (Ministry of Education 2019).

Popular culture is also a good place to start for geographers who have been slow to think about love, place and space. Indeed, there ‘doesn’t seem to be a lot of love in geography’ (Morrison, Johnston, Longhurst 2013, 505). Yet most of us - at different points in our lives - have experienced the intensities of love, fallen in and out of various relationships, felt love and hate at the same time, stayed in dysfunctional and / or abusive relationships, and felt the boredom and contentment associated with long term relationships. The resistance to academic engagement with love and relationships is perhaps because love continues to be deemed private and feminised ‘women’s issues’ topics heavily influenced by romanticised popular culture. The romantic realities of MAFS NZ - although staged and edited - gives insights into the lived emotions of ‘everyday’ New Zealanders.

MAFS NZ is saturated with examples of how place and space matter to gender and sexuality and vice versa. Here’s one example centred on home and masculinities. Consider the following from Stefaan (aged 26) about his life desires:

One of my dreams was to get married at 26, or to have that ticked off by the age of 30, so that includes buying a home, starting a family. Both of my grandparents easily passed their golden wedding anniversary. I think my grandparents, at the moment, are pushing 60 years [together]. Mum and Dad are at about 36 years [together]. I mean, it’s all set in stone for me to, you know, keep this going (TV3 2019).

Stefaan wants his life to follow a heteronormative script, that is, get married, start a family and buy a home (Morrison 2010). These powerful narratives and practices of love and sexuality not only constitute people’s identities, they also constitute meanings and experiences of home. This dominant scripting of love – as monogamous heterosexual coupling institutionalised in marriage and spaces of home – appears as if it is ‘set in stone’.

Another contestant – Jimmy (aged 29) – at the stag night was quick to assert when men should **not** be at home, telling the other male contestants:

I hope you know that you gonna have to tell your future wives that Saturdays are for boys eh? You gonna have to get out of the house and get away from it or it’s going to be unhealthy (TV3 2019).

Jimmy illustrates how homes are often considered feminised spaces (and he thinks that staying in them makes men ‘unhealthy’). Saturday leisure time with mates – watching sport and drinking alcohol – is deemed necessary by Jimmy in order to stay ‘sane’ when married and sharing a home. This assertion of hegemonic and toxic masculinity, thankfully, was critiqued by another contestant, Jordan (aged 26):

Some of the things that Jimmy says probably makes me feel a little bit uncomfortable at times, because he is very forward and quite confronting, at times. I sort of try and not be too friendly with guys like that because they can start a lot of conflict (TV3 2019).

At the start of the 2019 season viewers of MAFS NZ learn that one contestant had been edited out of the show after his domestic violence charges came to light (Casey 2019). Domestic violence – everyday terrorism in the home – challenges the notion that homes are safe havens. Further, geographers have shown how the

complex politics of intimate, national and global violence are linked. In other words, all acts of terror are an exertion of political control through fear (Pain 2014).

It was hard to watch the scenes where free booze and New Zealand 'lad' culture reasserted menacing masculinities. MAFS NZ 2019 contestants' bad behaviour escalated so much so that during the last dinner party 'we ran the gauntlet of homophobia, misogyny, slut-shaming, and threats of physical violence before we made it to dessert' (Casey 2019). The 'unpleasantness continued in an at-times ugly season, culminating in one of the participants calling another a 'slut' six times in a single sentence' (Grieves 2019). It was as if the #MeToo movement did not exist, and while sometimes painful to watch, it prompts a rethink about emotions, relationships, and intimate spaces. There were, however, some tender and caring moments on MAFS NZ and these tended to happen when couples connected in 'safe' places, often away from group dynamics, and in their own family and community spaces. As noted by another geographer, 'an individual's experience of couple 'love' ties cannot be isolated from their enactment of friendship or family' (Walsh 2018, 4).

MAFS NZ shows how place – the space of the body, home spaces, leisure spaces, national stereotypes - is vital to the way in which contestants behave and perform their gendered and sexualised identities. These relational spatialities of intimacy exist at every spatial scale. If we as geographers want to make a difference in the world, then starting with emotional and intimate geographies goes a long way towards understanding contemporary and powerful articulations of place and space.

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