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What Would It Mean To Have A 'Hapa' Bachelorette?

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Caila Quinn shares the details of her disappointment on the March 7 "The Women Tell All" follow-up to ABC's *The Bachelor*. Some fans are rooting for her to be named the new lead of *The Bachelorette* on Monday night.

Kelsey McNeal/ABC via Getty Images

On a recent episode of *The Bachelor*, the ABC dating reality show that ends its 20th season Monday night, contestant Caila Quinn brings Ben Higgins home to meet her interracial family.

"Have you ever met Filipinos before?" Quinn's mother asks, leading Higgins into a dining room where the table is filled with traditional Filipino food.

"I don't know," he replies. "No. I don't think so."

'Half Asian'? 'Half White'? No — 'Hapa'

As they sit around the adobo and pancit, Quinn's father talks to Higgins, white man to

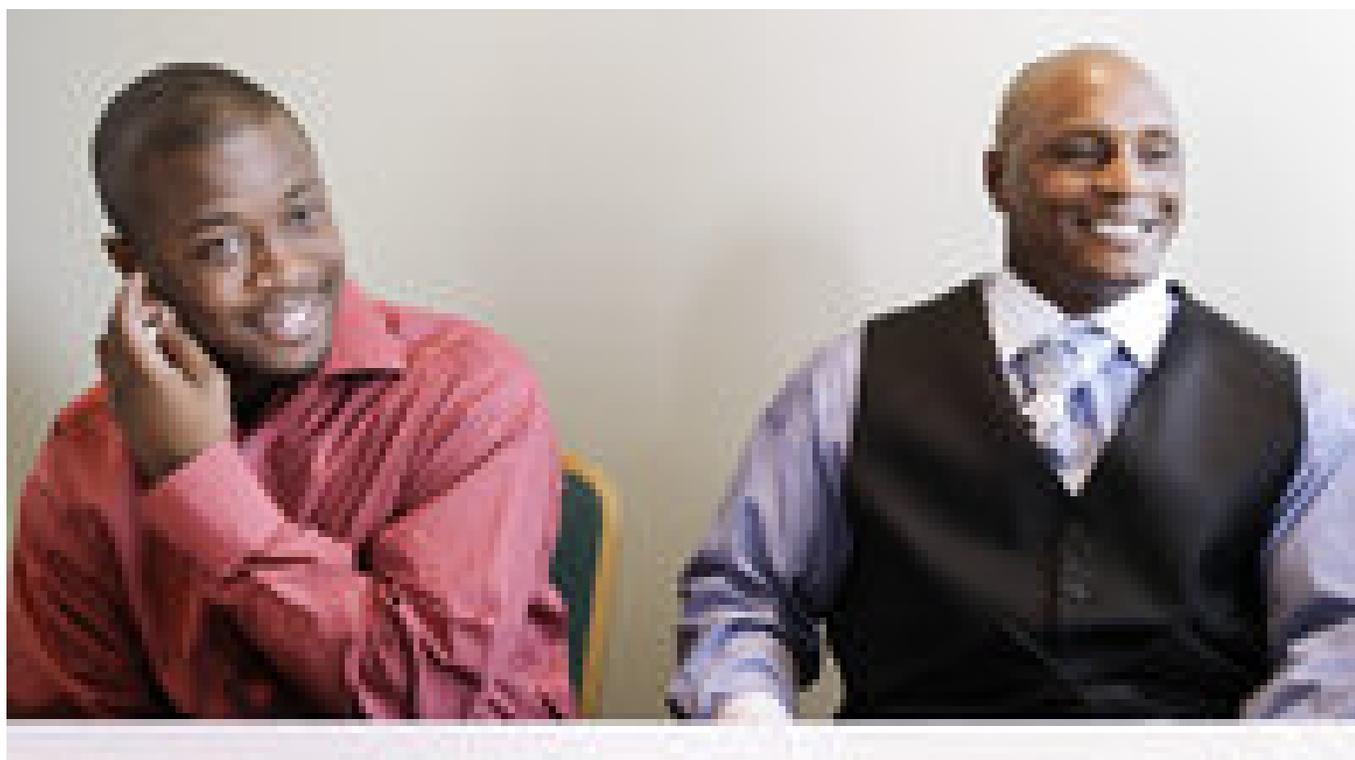
white man. What comes with dating Quinn, the father says, "is a very special Philippine community." Quinn grimaces.

"I had no idea what I was getting into when I married Caila's mother," the father says. But being married to a Filipina, he assures Higgins, has been "the most fun" and "magical."

This scene can be read as an attempt by *The Bachelor* franchise to dispel criticisms (and the memory of a 2012 lawsuit) concerning its whitewashed casts. It shows how these attempts can be clunky at best, offensive and creepy at worst.

Quinn's run also demonstrates how, as this rose-strewn, fantasy-fueled romance machine tries to include more people of color, diversification looks like biracial Asian-American — often known as "hapa" — women.

Among the 19 women who have won the "final rose" since *The Bachelor* premiered in 2002, two — Tessa Horst and Catherine Giudici — have been biracial Asian-white. All other winners, aside from Mary Delgado in 2004 who was Cuban-American, appear to have been white. As these handy graphics by writer and video artist Karen X. Cheng show, in the previous seven years, the only women of color who lasted into the final few weeks were of mixed-race Asian-white background.



Christopher Johnson (left) and Nathaniel Claybrooks unsuccessfully sued *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* in 2012, claiming the shows kept contestants of color out of starring roles.

Mark Humphrey/AP

Other women of color on *The Bachelor* tend to follow a familiar pattern: They may face hostility and racial anxieties from other contestants, then disappear from the screen early in the season. The latest example is Jubilee Sharpe, this season's black military veteran who fielded microaggressions from other contestants and suffered tension with the two biracial African-American and white women. On the show, these conflicts were coded with euphemisms: Sharpe was "layered" and "complicated" and "different." Sharpe stuck around longer than most black women, but was still eliminated within the first half of the season.

Now, ABC executives have hinted that the next woman to lead the spinoff show *The Bachelorette* will be — for the first time — a woman of color. Who is the rumored lucky lady? Caila Quinn, whose father tried and failed to sell Higgins on the advantages of Filipina wives this season. Anointing her as the first bachelorette of color would be a safe, predictable choice for the franchise. Producers could hold Quinn up as proof the shows are changing, while continuing to reflect and reinforce racial stereotypes.

To understand why only a narrow group of women of color — biracial Asian-white women — survive in this world is to delve into romantic tropes, the stuff *The Bachelor* is made of.

"As objects of beauty, these women are benefiting from two helpful stereotypes about female desirability," said Ann Morning, associate professor of sociology at New York University. One is whiteness as the persisting standard of beauty. The other is Asian women as sexualized, exotic and submissive.

Taken alone, the first stereotype can be detrimental. "Today, being white is often perceived as a kind of boring, colorless identity," Morning said. But that stereotype about whiteness can work to balance negative stereotypes about Asian women.

Lily Anne Welty Tamai, curator of history at the Japanese American National Museum (and a friend of mine), explained where these stereotypes about Asian women come from. The trope of Puccini's 1904 *Madama Butterfly* paved the way for American

incarnations of a tragic love story between an American soldier and Asian woman in the mid-20th century, when American soldiers brought home war stories — and sometimes brides — from Asia, where women were often part of the conquest. Popular narratives included the 1957 film *Sayonara* and the 1989 musical *Miss Saigon*. ("I guess they just never got around to making the Korea version," Tamai said.)



If this show was called 'The Hookup,' and contestants were having one-night stands, we'd see more racially diverse pools of people."

Ann Morning, associate professor of sociology at New York University

These stories cemented in the American consciousness the idea of the Asian woman as the foreign sex toy: the geisha, the china doll, the "me love you long time" sex worker.

"Asian-American women today still experience the wrath of those legacies every day," said Joanne Rondilla, a lecturer of Asian Pacific American Studies at Arizona State University. Rondilla pointed to the "Creepy White Guys" Tumblr that collected offensive messages sent to Asian-American women via online dating platforms. In a similar vein, last year Mia Matsumiya created an Instagram account to post the thousand-plus "messages from creeps, weirdos & fetishists" she's received over the past decade. My personal favorite calling out of these dating dynamics is comedian Kristina Wong's incredible *I'm Asian American and...* episode in which she collects "reparations for yellow fever" on dates with white men.

On *The Bachelor*, producers exercised these stereotypes about Asian-American women the last time they cast a single-race Asian-American woman. In 2010, contestant Channy Choch was introduced to viewers and bachelor Jake Pavelka with her inviting him in Cambodian to have sex with her. Later, she laughingly spoke to the camera about how Pavelka "needs a little bit of Cambodian fever."

"All her moments on screen highlight her Cambodian heritage and her sexual desires — usually both at once, drawing a link between these," Rachel Dubrofsky told me by email. Dubrofsky, associate professor of communication at the University of South Florida, wrote a book analyzing *The Bachelor* franchise, and found that women of

color win the prize of a proposal only when their "racial difference is treated as not only unimportant, but as nonexistent."

What's exciting on *Tinder*, the show communicates, becomes unacceptable when matrimony is involved. "If this show was called *The Hookup*, and contestants were having one-night stands, we'd see more racially diverse pools of people," Morning said.

Mixed-race Asian-white women become the perfect vehicles for diversity on this show because they are "white enough to present to the family," as Morning said, while still being exotic enough to fill a quota. Morning suggested they also get a boost from the model minority myth and the recent idea that being multiracial is "cool."

Until this season's Quinn family dinner scene, the ethnic identities of hapa women have been largely unremarked upon onscreen. Instead, only a vague, alluring, comfortable kind of distinction might be mentioned. "She was different," bachelor Juan Pablo Galavis said of contestant Sharleen Joynt, a Chinese-Canadian opera singer from season 18. "She was elegant, and I was, like, surprised. She was so classy. And she's sexy."

Outside the final media product presented by makers of the show, more explicit exotification can happen. In 2007, bachelor Andy Baldwin chose Tessa Horst as his final pick. Throughout the season, Horst's Chinese-white background is never mentioned and, as Dubrofsky noted, "is only briefly apparent during the hometown date where her [Asian] mom appears. ... Her mom, however, barely speaks, and is mostly seen in the background."

Only after the season had ended did we glimpse how Horst's race might have played into her relationship with Baldwin. At a press conference in Waikiki, Baldwin said of his choice, "I always say the mutts are the most exotic and beautiful."

This is the kind of comment mixed-race Asian-American women contend with outside the sanitized space of *The Bachelor*. "We're exotified for being mixed," said Athena Mari Askliadis, a board member at Multiracial Americans of Southern California. "If a man has an Asian fetish, he'll play that up in what he sees in me." She said fetishization also can come from Asian-American men who see her whiteness as exotic.

If Caila Quinn is cast as the first bachelorette of color, producers will probably

continue to omit thornier realities. Her casting could represent some form of progress, though, if producers continue to highlight her Filipina heritage, however awkwardly. Portraying an Asian-American woman as the ultimate marriage material — and not as a sexualized joke — could signal a step toward better humanizing people of color in this space. But it also could be just another spin on the "model minority" myth.

And there's the question of how diverse her suitors would be. A bachelorette of color presents a dilemma for producers: either an interracial romance — still controversial to some viewers — or a relationship in which neither person is white (who will the white audience relate to?).

Myra Washington, assistant professor of communication at the University of New Mexico, predicted an increase in black contestants if Quinn becomes the bachelorette. "Not Wesley Snipes black, because this is still TV," she said. She guessed there would be more mixed-race African-Americans, brown-skinned men, Latinos. But colonial legacies and systems of power die hard. "I think she'll ultimately end up with a white dude," she said.

Akemi Johnson is a writer whose work has appeared in The Nation, The Journal and The Asian American Literary Review.

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