

Television & New Media

<http://tvn.sagepub.com/>

A Shot at Half-Exposure: Asian Americans in Reality TV Shows

Grace Wang

Television New Media 2010 11: 404 originally published online 22 March 2010

DOI: 10.1177/1527476410363482

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://tvn.sagepub.com/content/11/5/404>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Television & New Media* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://tvn.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://tvn.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://tvn.sagepub.com/content/11/5/404.refs.html>

A Shot at Half-Exposure: Asian Americans in Reality TV Shows

Television & New Media
11(5) 404-427
© 2010 SAGE Publications
Reprints and permission: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>
DOI: 10.1177/1527476410363482
<http://tvnm.sagepub.com>



Grace Wang¹

Abstract

While reality TV programs open up a space for greater representation of racialized minorities, they also adhere to, and authenticate, racialized narraand stereotypes by embodying them in the characters of “real” people. Through an analysis of *Top Chef* and *Project Runway*, this essay reveals how the narrative of the Asian “technical robot” has emerged as a stock character for Asian Americans in reality TV programs, flexibly applied to a range of fields where Asian Americans threaten to achieve success. By focusing on Asian Americans who have won reality TV competitions, this essay analyzes how supposedly neutral concepts such as talent and skill are racialized in the reality TV format specifically and in the contemporary U.S. context broadly. Such representations illustrate the very narrow ways that racialized minorities are allowed to integrate into the U.S. For the allegation that Asian Americans are technicians who lack creativity is a barrier that not only helps keep them from trantheir racialized labor niches but also serves as an explanation for why people of color cannot make it to the top of their professions.

Keywords

reality television, race, Asian American, *Top Chef*, *Project Runway*, technique

From the start of the sixth season of *Dancing with the Stars*, it seemed almost inevitable that ice skater Kristi Yamaguchi would win the top prize. The graceful poise and athleticism that helped her capture gold in the 1992 Winter Olympics translated well into the realm of ballroom dancing. Throughout the season, Yamaguchi appeared to have little difficulty learning and mastering new dance moves. But having the winner be a

¹University of California, Davis, Davis, CA

Corresponding Author:

Grace Wang, University of California, Davis, One Shields Ave., 1034A Hart Hall, Davis, CA 95616
Email: grwang@ucdavis.edu

foregone conclusion on a show structured around the drama of a competition hardly seemed an ideal way to generate viewer excitement or ratings. And thus, for the Olympian who “brought golden precision to the floor,” a different narrative about obstacles faced and overcome needed to be constructed about her character during the season. It soon became clear to viewers that the primary narrative arc structuring Yamaguchi’s character on the show would be her inability to express emotions through her ballroom dancing and the personal barriers she would face learning to feel and show passion.

Dancing with the Stars is a popular reality TV show where an assortment of “stars” ranging from B-list Hollywood actors to professional athletes are paired with professional dancers and taught to perform a variety of ballroom dances. Each week, the judges and television audience collectively vote off a celebrity until a winner is finally chosen. Like many other reality TV programs, the show follows a fairly predictable format. Before the contestants perform their dance numbers, they are introduced in brief, easily digestible clips that provide tantalizing glimpses into their inner thoughts and personal biography. Yamaguchi, the cheerful ice skating champ turned mother of two, reflected early in the season, “It is not in my nature to be so open with my emotions.” And just in case viewers failed to intuit her lack of emotion while dancing such fiery ballroom styles as the tango and rumba—dances that even casual viewers know are supposed to embody intensity, passion, and lust—a panel of expert judges was on hand to assess her performance. After Yamaguchi’s tango in the third week, judge Len Goodman exhorted, “Sharp! Clean! Clear! Always delivered with extreme precision . . . [but I need] more emotional engagement. Lust! I want you to be a dirty girl. Release that for us to see!” Always the model competitor, Yamaguchi does learn to “release” her emotions over the course of the season and eventually wins the coveted top prize.

I begin this essay with Yamaguchi’s character construction on *Dancing with the Stars* as it offers an entry point for understanding one of the central narratives that influences Asian American representation in the reality TV format. In what follows, I argue that while reality TV programs open up a space for greater representation of racialized minorities, these shows also adhere to, and authenticate, racialized narratives and stereotypes by embodying them in the characters of “real” people. Through an analysis of the Bravo channel programs *Top Chef* and *Project Runway*, I show how the narrative of the Asian “technical robot” has emerged as a stock character for Asian Americans in reality TV programs, flexibly applied to a range of fields where Asian Americans threaten to achieve success.¹

While this essay focuses on *Top Chef* and *Project Runway*, these shows share similar features to other reality programming. If reality TV has been credited with diversifying television culture, this diversification has also depended on fueling drama and conflict through the deliberate casting of disparate characters that will generate tension over the course of the season (Braxton 2009; Stanley 2007). Rather than represent a wide range of “real people” who reflect the diversity of the nation, reality TV repackages difference into comfortingly familiar stock characters and stereotypes. Individuals are chosen to represent certain types and then slotted (self-consciously or

not) into a limited array of available characters: the angry black woman, the conservative Christian, the fabulous gay (usually white) man, the nonwhite immigrant grateful for the opportunities afforded to him or her in the United States, and so forth (Collins 2008). To make “real” people, who are obviously complex and contradictory, understandable to viewers in thirty- or sixty-minute time slots, reality shows turn them into “characters.” Individuals frequently become stand-ins for only a few of the most visible (and charged) aspects of their identity. Contestants seeking to win a reality TV competition quickly learn to perform their racial, gender, class, and sexual identities on demand or risk being sent home.

By focusing on Asian Americans who have won reality TV competitions, this essay analyzes how supposedly neutral concepts such as talent and skill are racialized in the reality TV format specifically and in the contemporary U.S. context broadly.² Both Hung Huynh, winner of the third season of *Top Chef*, and Chloe Dao, winner of the second season of *Project Runway*, are Vietnamese immigrants who had strikingly similar narratives about being technical but lacking passion. As “real” people who won these contests, Hung and Chloe granted authenticity to the trope of the technical robot by accepting the stock narratives placed on them and even playing into them to secure their win. In awarding the top prize to racialized immigrants who, over the course of the season, articulated gratitude and the importance of hard work, *Top Chef* and *Project Runway* situated the U.S. nation as the space where dreams can come true. Moreover, as Vietnamese immigrants whose families arrived to the United States as refugees, Hung and Chloe helped recast the special relationship between Vietnam and the United States into a narrative of rescue; the image of U.S. military defeat is salvaged by the more palatable story of rescuing Vietnamese families from a life of poverty, danger, and oppression and ushering them into the land of freedom and opportunity. By winning their respective reality TV competitions, Hung and Chloe affirmed both the meritocratic nature of the nation and the continuing salience of the American Dream. At the same time, as exceptional racialized immigrants who managed to transcend their technical nature through the help of the television program, these characters illustrate the very narrow ways that racialized minorities are allowed to integrate into the nation. For the allegation that Asian Americans are technicians who lack creativity is a barrier that not only helps keep Asian Americans from transcending their racialized labor niches but also serves as an explanation, more broadly, for why people of color cannot make it to the top of their professions.

The Technical but Unfeeling Asian: Historicizing Racialized Narratives

Before moving to an analysis of *Top Chef* and *Project Runway*, it is useful to provide some context for the racialized narratives about Asian Americans from which these television programs draw. We can link the representation of Asians and Asian Americans as skilled technicians who lack feeling to multiple historical contexts. Since the mid-1960s, journalists and scholars have frequently depicted Asian Americans as

model minority subjects whose hard work ethic, compliant temperament, and self-sufficient nature have led to their relative material success. Much has been written about the ideological function that model minority discourses serve in disciplining other racial minority groups for their purported cultural “inferiorities” while also continuing to buttress white superiority and celebrate U.S. meritocracy (Kim 2003; Palumbo-Liu 1999; Osajima 1988). Model minority myths also help perpetuate the racial and cultural difference of Asian Americans by depicting members of this group—regardless of their generational status—as embodying “Asian” rather than “American” cultural values. Such a construction contributes to the continued elision between Asians and Asian Americans and the perpetually “foreign” status that Asian Americans hold in the U.S. racial imaginary.

While virtues such as discipline and diligence are valorized in the U.S. context, these purportedly “model” traits can become deviant when pushed to excess. Political scientist Claire Jean Kim (2003, 46) notes that during the 1980s, U.S. popular media portrayed Korean merchants as so hardworking, driven, and self-sacrificing as to seem “barely human.” Taken to its zealous extreme, the unrelenting work ethic of Asians appears to evacuate them of both creativity and feeling. As Kim further observes, such narratives have a long historical precedent: “The construction of Asians/Asian Americans as self-immolating robots dates back to discussions of Chinese immigrant labor and Japanese kamikaze pilots during the 1800s and World War II respectively.” Similar discourses about the North Vietnamese as “subhuman” enemies who lacked feeling and individuality and placed little value on human life also circulated in the United States during the Vietnam War.

While the construction of Asians and Asian Americans as “quasi-robots” performs a dehumanizing function, it has also been used to domesticate the success that Asians and Asian Americans achieve in the United States. During the 1980s, an era marked by U.S. anxieties over the escalating ascendancy of Japan in the global economy, the United States positioned Japan as its cultural inverse. The conformist, unfeeling, and mechanical nature of Japanese culture specifically, and Asian cultures generally, stood in implicit contrast to the United States, which promotes individuality, free thinking, and ingenuity. Literary critic David Palumbo-Liu (1999, 201) observes, “Critics responding to the success of Japan in the world economy had to particularize both the Japanese and Americans in order to construct two types of ‘success’ and thereby downplay Asian success and rehabilitate America.” Such media reports helped alleviate U.S. anxieties about Japanese success since their accomplishments would ultimately be limited—for the imitator can never truly compete with imaginative innovators and the technician will be successful only to a certain point. Aligning Japan’s high-tech advancements with a culture of robot-like efficiency, discipline, and control allowed for the threat of Japan’s economic growth to be contained and managed through the framework of what David Morley and Kevin Robins have termed *techno-orientalism*.³ Within such a context of anxiety over techno-orientalism, Asians and Asian Americans become the implied foil for normative white Americans, whose balanced pursuit of work and innovation would, in the long run, prove more successful.

More recently, the specter of Asian and Asian American success has led literary critic Min Song (2008, 16) to suggest the emergence of a new construction of model minority success in U.S. popular media—the “super minority.” As Song observes, in such a characterization, “Asian Americans become less of a model whose successes specifically berate blacks and other racial minorities and more a kind of, for lack of a better term, super minority whose successes berate *everyone* who fails somehow to succeed.” Such a narrative can be detected in media descriptions of the “new white flight”—white families who leave high-achieving suburban school districts that have become “too Asian.” In this instance, the descriptor “too Asian” becomes a referent for a broad range of racialized anxieties about the ways that having an “overrepresentation” of Asian Americans transforms schools into excessively competitive environments, where the drive for academic achievement comes at the expense of the “whole” child (Egan 2007; Jaschik 2006; Hwang 2005). Moreover, Asian American academic success is portrayed as the result of unfair advantages over their white counterparts; Asian American students, for instance, enroll in extracurricular academic activities, hire private tutors, have uptight and overbearing parents, and possess a cultural propensity for discipline and hard work. At the same time, the areas where Asian Americans have the highest representation and have achieved the most success—math, science, engineering, classical music, and so forth—become constructed as fields that *merely* require mechanical and technical prowess. The stereotype of being just another “Asian student who wants to major in math and science and who plays the violin” in a pile of college admission applications is used to buttress the belief that Asian Americans lack originality and balance (Jaschik 2006). By coding expertise in fields such as math and classical music as the consequence of discipline and relentless practice—rather than creativity, passion, or even inventiveness—what counts as talent and skill is transformed to diminish the achievements of Asian Americans. Moreover, while the unremitting drive and work ethic of Asian Americans might lead to particular types of success, these same qualities also limit their ability to reach the highest echelons of their professions, where creativity—in addition to technical mastery—is required.

Contestants need a narrative to be interesting in a reality TV competition over the course of a season, and for racialized characters these narratives frequently fall into a longer history of racialized discourses and stereotypes. In what follows, I show how Asian Americans participating in *Top Chef* and *Project Runway* contend with beliefs about their technical nature—and the place that technique holds in their particular professions—as they attempt to win their respective competitions. As a site that recycles and reworks racialized narratives onto “real” individuals, reality TV represents a critical new laboratory for understanding the maintenance of racial hierarchies in the contemporary U.S. context.⁴

Project Runway and Top Chef

Project Runway and *Top Chef* feature a talented group of fashion designers and chefs competing in weekly challenges constructed under tight time constraints and

contrived contexts. With the \$100,000 cash prize for the winner come other rewards, including what might be the most desired prize of all—media exposure. Both shows operate under the implicit belief that competition creates a level playing field. Situating the United States as the space where dreams can come true, the shows uphold the purported meritocracy of the nation and the myth that hard work, skill, and talent are rewarded equally regardless of race or other social categories.

While reality TV shows such as *Dancing with the Stars* create a sense of democratization by allowing viewers to help vote for the winner, *Top Chef* and *Project Runway* solely rely on a panel of experts to select which contestant captures the top prize. Excluding viewers from the voting process helps emphasize to the audience that these are not television programs about mere clothes or food but an inside glimpse into the high-end worlds of fashion and fine dining.⁵ *Top Chef* and *Project Runway* further establish the exclusive nature of the fashion and culinary creations presented on screen by scripting them as sharing many of the same features of other Western “high” cultural fields: expertise is privileged; a hierarchy of taste, knowledge, training, and apprenticeship exists; and talent—embodied in the individual—is made up of some intangible combination of genius, passion, and soul. Unlike reality TV talent shows such as *American Idol*, which promote the fantasy narrative that ordinary people can be plucked from obscurity and achieve pop music stardom, the competitors on *Top Chef* and *Project Runway* are scripted as professionals, whose skills and artistry are not just embodiments of “natural talent” but rather were honed through extensive practice and dedication.⁶

As viewers, we depend on the assessment of professional experts to frame our understanding of artfully prepared dishes we cannot taste and fashions that would likely fit neither our bodies nor our budget. Despite some gestures to the “average” consumer—for instance, on *Top Chef* contestants had to create a Bertolli-inspired frozen entrée, while on *Project Runway* competitors had to create a woman’s apparel ensemble for Banana Republic—most challenges are targeted at an imagined, high-end client, whose lifestyle, tastes, and resources represent an implicit site of fantasy for the viewer. Given that the Bravo network has the most educated and wealthy audience of the entertainment cable networks, shows such as *Top Chef* and *Project Runway* cater to their key demographic—which the network terms “affluencers” (“affluent influencers”)—by legitimizing the cultural hierarchies that help uphold class privilege in the United States (Dominus 2008).⁷ Both shows operate squarely within the parameters of what marketers have termed “masstige” (“mass prestige”), fueling the desires that the middle and upper-middle class have for luxury and premium brands (Dominus 2008; Silverstein and Fiske 2003). These shows commodify those desires into consumable products—from Sears Kenmore appliances to designer clothes and accessories on Bluefly, an online retailer that sells high-end brands at discount prices—that are prominently featured on the show.

On *Top Chef* and *Project Runway*, the panel of judges plays a pedagogical role by performing for the viewing public the proper ways to discuss and discern what constitutes “good taste” in the highest echelons of food and fashion. Moreover, by featuring

a regular stable of guest judges, whose high repute and stature are ensured by the excitement that the contestants attest to feeling in their presence, viewers become familiar with the names of individuals who personify high style and prestige in their industry. Through this process, viewers can begin to feel that they, too, have (or can aspire to having) sophisticated palates and “expensive” taste. Demonstrating for regular viewers the proper criteria and language with which to talk about high fashion and cuisine, *Top Chef* and *Project Runway* affirm the domains of taste that structure race and class hierarchies in the United States.

Finding “Heart” and “Soul” on *Top Chef*

Hung Huynh, a Vietnamese immigrant, won the third season of *Top Chef* (original episodes aired June through October 2007, but, like other Bravo programs, the episodes constantly replay). Similar to the other contestants on the show, he arrived with an impressive resume, having worked his way through some of the nation’s most celebrated restaurants. Yet few contestants matched Hung’s arrogance. From the first episode, he was a self-proclaimed “CPA”—a “certified professional asshole.” Relentlessly self-centered, Hung’s attitude was best summarized by his mantra: “I’m here for myself, I came here by myself, and hopefully I can win this by myself.” Not just mere braggadocio, however, Hung backed his arrogant swagger with an extensive arsenal of culinary skill and knowledge. His deft use of classic French techniques—depicted on *Top Chef* as representing the backbone of all fine culinary cuisine—brought him praise throughout the season.

Hung shined in challenges that focused on technique. He butchered chickens in such record time that even the head judge, chef Tom Colicchio, was left chuckling and shaking his head in astonishment.⁸ In another challenge, Hung outperformed his contestants by replicating a signature dish served at the fancy French eatery *Le Cirque* that looked and tasted most close to the original. And in a challenge meant to showcase the competitors’ knowledge of classical training, he garnered abundant praise for his beautifully presented and executed dish by a panel of culinary luminaries at the French Culinary Institute. At the same time, however, the adulation Hung received was tempered with reservation. For while he was arguably the best chef technically, his food seemed to lack a certain elusive quality we might term “soul.” Throughout the season, a swirl of questions consistently trailed Hung: Where was his passion? Where was his heart? One of the three finalists, Dale—the self-anointed “big gay chef” of the season—commented, “Hung is the best technical cook. But in my world, the best food has heart and when you don’t have one it doesn’t taste good.”⁹ This sentiment seemed to be shared by the judges, who complimented Hung for his technique but praised other contestants for dishes that “sang” and had “soul.”

How does one see, taste, or hear passion, much less soul? It seems that in cooking, as in other fields of culture, the precise calculation of soul is difficult to quantify. The extent to which the theme of cooking with “heart” and “soul” kept recurring during the third season of *Top Chef* prompted viewers to post questions about this topic on blogs written by judges and other food professionals on the Bravo channel web site. This

chatter of commentary led Anthony Bourdain, a regular guest judge on the show, to discuss the topic of “soulful” cooking on his *Top Chef* blog. Bourdain’s observations hold particular authority to television viewers given his public stature as the outspoken host of *No Reservations* (a travel show that uses food and local cuisine as a lens into understanding cultural differences), a celebrity chef personality, and the author of a number of best-selling books that provide readers with an “insider’s” view into the kitchen culture of high-end restaurants. As Bourdain observed on his *Top Chef* blog,

For those commentators who wonder what “heart” or “soul” means—in relation to food (the judges frequently reward Casey with the remark that her food is somehow more “soulful” than others. That she has “heart”)—let me make it simple for you. They mean her food has a pleasing FLAVOR. Chefs usually mean—when talking about “soul” (or “heart”)—that the food has a depth of flavor that is both exciting and somehow, strangely, comfortingly familiar. As if the ingredients belong together the way macaroni and cheese—or peanut butter and jelly—or other, similarly beloved childhood combinations feel “just right.”¹⁰

Bourdain’s explanation linked “soul” to technique—the expert ability to combine ingredients in such a way as to create a “depth of flavor”—as well as to the ineffable realm of feeling. Still, in clarifying soul to mean, in the most reductive sense, a “pleasing FLAVOR,” he also raised new questions. For if soul is about creating a pleasurable flavor, how that flavor is evaluated is, nonetheless, a socially constructed assessment that depends on one’s subject position along intersecting grids of power. Foods such as macaroni and cheese are beloved and “comfortingly familiar” dishes only to those Americans whose childhood foods are marked as, or are assumed to be, “normative” within racialized hierarchies of power in the United States. In the U.S. national landscape, “ethnic” food continues to be perceived as a different—if not strange, exotic, and foreign—category of cuisine (Manalansan 2009).

On *Top Chef*, the judges implicitly drew not only from their own memories of “beloved childhood combinations” but also from an imagined sense of what their contestants grew up eating in their home. And thus, for individuals whom the judges perceived as inhabiting identities and childhood cuisines marked as “ethnic,” creating “soulful” dishes required referencing flavors directly linked to their ethnic heritage. Indeed, the notion that “soulful” cooking is tied to one’s “roots” and ethnic heritage emerged clearly toward the end of the season. In the episode before the finale, head judge Colicchio deftly summarized Hung’s limitations this way: “You [Hung] are technically the best chef up here. Technically. But we don’t see you in the food at all [pause . . . drum sounds dramatically in the background]. You were born in Vietnam?” Already knowing the answer, Colicchio quickly continued, “We need to see you in the food. Somewhere, we need to see Hung.” In this particular iteration, Hung became a proxy for his nation of birth. Finding Hung, and presumably his soul, would involve tasting Vietnamese flavors in his food and, in so doing, returning to his “roots,” his ethnic heritage, and his place of birth.

Colicchio's suggestion that Hung look "homeward" to Vietnam invoked a straightforward and accessible narrative for successfully performing "ethnic soul." For Hung to cook food that showcased his skills and knowledge in the fundamentals of classic French cuisine somehow inferred that he was not being himself. Yet similar pressures were not placed on his fellow white competitors. In fact, one of Hung's fellow finalists, a white woman from Texas, described her signature style of cuisine as drawing on Asian flavors. Thus, while the whiteness of the other finalists insulated them from any implicit (or explicit) expectation to draw on certain influences and flavor profiles in their food, as a clearly marked "ethnic" contestant, Hung needed to authenticate himself through a narrowly defined conception of passion to win over the judges. The image of Hung facing a white judge advising him to reveal his "soul" by looking to Vietnam—a nation long colonized by France and subject to imperial blunders by the United States—visually symbolized the bind that Asian Americans face when navigating fields of culture that continue to be governed by white privilege.¹¹ French food, it seems, could never authenticate a Vietnamese chef's "soul," regardless of the historical relationship of colonialism that linked these two nations. Since *Top Chef* presents the techniques and standards of Europeans and white Americans as universal, racialized minorities are cast either as "soulless" when they better their white counterparts at those skills or as unsophisticated and lacking proper training when they do not.¹²

The ongoing debate about the state of Hung's "soul" wedded race and ethnicity to discourses of authenticity—powerfully bolstering the notion that passion, heart, and the flavors of "home" cannot be taught and that certain foods and flavor profiles come from, and therefore belong to, a particular people or place. Within this framework, while certain mechanics of technique can be learned and practiced, the feeling that an individual has for the ineluctable "essence" of a cuisine is, like the air one breathes and the landscape in which one grows up, grasped through place and ethnic heritage.¹³ We can observe such discourses of culinary authenticity circulating in the *New York Times* article reporting on the anxiety that some Italians feel about the growing numbers of non-Italian immigrants—Moroccans, Tunisians, Romanians, and Bangladeshis—working in the restaurant kitchens in Italy. As the reporter asks, "Does [Italian food] become less distinct—or less Italian—if anyone can prepare it to restaurant standards?" (Fisher 2008). While some Italian respondents believed that the issue lay not in one's ethnic heritage but in one's training, others questioned whether any amount of training could produce a depth of feeling and understanding that would exceed skilled mimicry. As one restaurant owner suggested, cultural preservation—not race—lay at the heart of the matter: "Tradition is needed to go forward with Italian youngsters, not foreigners. . . . It's not racism, but culture." Another chef agreed, observing that "without supervision, [foreign chefs] tend to drift toward what is in their DNA." Even if we view DNA in a less strictly biological sense and more as the ineluctable imprint left onto chefs from "the flavors of your mother's kitchen," such a narrative nonetheless depends on a direct and uncomplicated link among race, ethnicity, and food—among a Moroccan immigrant and saffron, mint, preserved lemons, and a tagine.¹⁴ Racialized immigrants who cannot

(or choose not to) draw from their “mother’s kitchen”—or a corresponding family inheritance—face barriers authenticating their place in culinary cultures implicitly viewed as not their own.

Similar narrative constructions structure public discourse about the place of racialized immigrants in high-end restaurants in the United States. For instance, restaurant owners might use coded phrases about particular individuals “not quite being ready” for a promotion or needing to maintain a certain “feel” and “look” to a restaurant to justify why larger numbers of racial minorities are not promoted to the top of the profession (Severson and Ellick 2007).¹⁵ Such rationalizations are, as Bourdain (2007, 45) puts it bluntly in his collection of essays *The Nasty Bits*, a flimsy shield for racism:

The strata of Latino labor has enlarged to include sauté, grill, and even sous-chef positions. But you don’t see too many chefs of French or Italian or even “New American” restaurants with a last name like Hernandez or Perez or Garcia. Owners, it seems, still shrink from having a mestizo-looking chef swanning about the dining room of their two—or three-star French eatery—even if the candidate richly deserves the job. Language skills are not the issue. Chances are, Mexicans or Ecuadorians speak English a hell of a lot better than most Americans speak Spanish (or French for that matter). It’s . . . well . . . we *know* what it is, don’t we? It’s racism, pure and simple.

For Bourdain, an outspoken advocate for the Latino workers who make up the backbone of the restaurant industry but are hardly ever promoted to its highest ranks, excuses such as lack of language or skills underscore the hierarchies of race and labor that operate in restaurant kitchens. Terms such as *culinary heritage* and *tradition* serve more broadly as proxies for entrenched notions of race, nation, and belonging. And thus, while celebrated French, Italian, and “New American” restaurants depend on the labor of racialized minorities—their prep work, their preparation of sauces, and their skillful replication of culinary creations—their “ethnic soul” is not nearly as welcome at the highest ranks in the kitchen.

In *Top Chef*, the judges’ plea for Hung to release his “ethnic soul” from the trappings of French classical cooking might not necessarily seem like “racism, pure and simple” but more like a liberal, humanist desire for him to embrace his ethnic and culinary heritage. The distance between the judges’ expectations and Hung’s dishes measured just how closely wedded “ethnic soul” was to “roots” cuisine in the minds of the judges. To impress the judges and fulfill their desires, he needed to incorporate Vietnamese flavors and ingredients into his dishes. Hung could not win the top prize without convincing the judges that he had passion and “soul.” For on *Top Chef* specifically, and in artistic endeavors generally, to be described as a “technician” means one is lacking. If the pinnacle of creative expression is to communicate “heart” and “soul,” then to be labeled as technical and dispassionate constitutes a fundamental critique. Simply put, to be technical—even technically brilliant—is to be second-rate.

Far from a neutral process, to label an individual as “technical” is to make an assessment bound up in ideological constructions about race and other aspects of identity. Here, it is useful to draw comparison to how traits such as technicality are understood in other artistic fields of culture. For instance, musicologist Henry Kingsbury (2001, 106) observes that in Western classical music, what constitutes the notion of “playing with feeling,” and how one identifies and evaluates how such playing should sound, is neither natural nor given but framed through socially constructed beliefs about what that sound entails. That is, while the expression of musical feeling is regarded as emerging from an individual’s “heart” and “soul,” such a belief obscures the extent to which social relationships structure ideas about what constitutes playing with feeling. As Kingsbury notes,

While playing with feeling is at the core of the meaning of musical performance, it must be emphasized that this is so only as this feeling mediates the social power relations that exist in musical performance situations. The free play of fantasy and imagination, of playing with feeling, are never “free” in musical performance. Musical feeling mediates social relationships, including the elements of power in those relationships, which constitute the situations of musical performance.

As Kingsbury’s observation makes clear, playing with “feeling” does not emerge from the recesses of one’s inner being but rather is constructed through social and cultural hierarchies within and beyond the realm of music. Put differently, preexisting assumptions about how a particular individual will sound influences how listeners interpret what they see and hear.¹⁶ Given the longstanding racial representation of Asians and Asian Americans as unfeeling technicians, framing Hung’s cooking as technically skilled but lacking passion made him an easily recognizable and decipherable character not only to the judges but also to the viewing public. Indeed, for an Asian American to be indicted as technical is a narrative so expected, so “comfortingly familiar” that—like macaroni and cheese—it feels “just right.”

In the complex interplay among character construction, perception, and expectation operating in *Top Chef*, Hung appeared to be a quick study. He knew that the primary customers he needed to please were the panel of judges.¹⁷ And if the judges wanted Hung to authenticate his passion for cooking through a particular construction of himself and his food, then he would willingly oblige. And thus, whether or not he believed himself to have a special connection to Vietnamese cuisine, Hung seemed to realize just how much authority the trope of “returning to one’s roots” and cooking from one’s “own” ethnic and national culinary tradition held on *Top Chef*.

On screen, Hung’s persona transformed completely following judge Colicchio’s caution that despite having superior technical skills his food communicated neither passion nor a sense of his identity as an individual born in Vietnam. While the process of judging on *Top Chef* demands a performance of authenticity—a declaration of love and passion—the change in Hung’s character was so abrupt as to feel forced, even for

a reality TV competition clearly edited to reveal, over the course of a season, the personal motivations that drive each contestant's passion for cooking. Writing about the *Top Chef* finale, Frank Bruni (2007), a restaurant critic for the *New York Times* at the time, appeared unconvinced by what he described as Hung's "transparent groveling and obsequiousness to the judges' panel. . . . On the heels of a comment that he didn't seem to cook with enough heart or soul, Hung suddenly morphed—at least semantically—into one big, red beating heart that had been marinated for 24 hours in essence of soul." For Bruni, Hung's shift was a performance in excess—a saccharine overkill of love, heart, and his mother's cooking. Indeed, it is not clear whether Hung's declaration of love was a calculated and desperate attempt to say whatever he needed to stay on the show, a sincere articulation of passion, a function of clever editing, or some combination of those factors. Still, placing his character's transformation within the context of popular representations of Asians and Asian Americans allows us to understand how this revised version of Hung enabled him to overcome the script of the Asian technician who lacks passion and, at the same time, to reaffirm dominant ideologies about race, immigration, and nation.¹⁸

The redemption of Hung's character and "soul" took place on the level of discourse—the narratives he used to frame his life story—and in the flavors contained in the dishes he promised to deliver in the finale. Arguing for his spot in the final challenge, Hung linked cooking to the very soul of his being. For the first time on the show, he spoke of a childhood spent sleeping in the kitchen and learning to cook from his mother. He described his mother as "the greatest chef in the world" and cooking as inherent to his family bloodline: "I cook with so much love and I get that from my mother. I grew up in the kitchen, sleeping in the kitchen. Cooking all my life. And when I think about my mom's food, I get so emotional. I get tingly. Because it's all about soul." The details Hung revealed about his personal background were equally compelling. His father risked his life escaping postwar Vietnam on a fishing boat headed for the United States when Hung was an infant; he did not see his father again until he was nine years old. Through hard work, sacrifice, and determination, his family eventually got off welfare by opening a restaurant. Winning the title "top chef" would, as Hung put it, make his mom proud *and* show the viewing public that "through hard work every immigrant can achieve the American Dream." And thus, whether the result of careful editing, a self-conscious recrafting of his on-screen persona, or a blend of both, by the finale Hung was less the self-centered braggart talking up his superior technique and skills and more the earnest immigrant who wanted, in his own words, to "win it for all immigrants in America." Hung scripted his family inheritance as twofold: he gained the flavors of home and family from his mother (a narrative replete with the gendered slippage between mother, food, and "homeland") and inherited the classic American story of self-reliance and immigrant success from his father.

In the final challenge, Hung showcased Vietnamese flavors in his food—palm sugar, coconut, and "ocean-scented rice"—and was rewarded not only with the title of "top chef" but also with praise for finally marrying "passion with technique." Colicchio lauded, "You put together a fabulous meal, and we're really happy to see you in

your food.” When the judges announced his win, an elated Hung exclaimed, “I’m so excited! I worked so hard to get here and to prove myself. And I have so much support from America.” Through the narrative progression of the *Top Chef* season, the selfish and arrogant “CPA” was domesticated into story of the grateful immigrant whose parents sacrificed so much so their son could “make it” in America. Through the support of a magnanimous U.S. nation and, presumably, the hard-earned lessons learned from the *Top Chef* experience, Hung transformed from a self-centered technician to the immigrant who learned to share the succulent pleasures of his mother and homeland with a welcoming host nation. In a nation that demands exoticism, difference, and, most significantly, gratitude from its racialized immigrants, Hung fulfilled his prescribed role and was rewarded with the top prize.

In interviews conducted outside of *Top Chef* and the Bravo network, viewers gain a sense of how Hung negotiated his television persona, as many of these interviews reveal the deliberateness with which he constructed his reality TV persona. He was media conversant enough to realize that *Top Chef* was as much a cooking competition as it was a reality TV program that depended on conflict and drama from its contestants. As Hung observed, being an interesting and outspoken character on the program would garner the most media exposure and ensure a lengthier stay on the show: “I wouldn’t say I was the bad boy, but the most controversial contestant. That’s the character I wanted to create from the beginning. I’m the most talked-about contestant. Either you love me or you hate me. It gets you more exposure. . . . It’s a way to stay on the show, and it made good TV” (Smith 2007). Hung was clearly aware that he was playing a character crafted in concert with specific professional goals.

Hung’s savvy also extended to the narratives he performed to satisfy the judges. For while he repeatedly emphasized the importance of passion, love, and soul toward the end of the *Top Chef* season, in interviews outside the show Hung continued to maintain that “technique is more important than soul and love, and creativity” (Tieu 2008). In one interview, Hung noted that he would donate a portion of his winnings to Buddhist temples and use another portion to travel to Spain and “experience life, learn, cook, [and become] *more* technical!” As he scoffed later in that interview, “When was the last time you walked out of a restaurant and said, ‘That steak was so soulful, I’m definitely going back?’ No. You say it was cooked perfectly, it was seasoned perfectly. . . . Why am I being dissed for having some technical skills?” (Lalli 2007). Thus, while *Top Chef* created an aura around “soul” that erased the typically racialized and immigrant labor involved in running a restaurant, such a media-constructed fantasy held less currency outside the realm of television. As Hung noted, in the day-to-day work of running a business, dishes need to be replicated with technical precision, and “heart” will not keep a restaurant afloat: “Just because you have passion and love for the food doesn’t mean you can operate a restaurant. You do need the training and the skills and the techniques to produce food for a \$30 million operation. Passion just doesn’t do that for you” (Smith 2007). Such media reports suggest how consciously Hung went about trying to create a television character that would not only keep him on the

show but also win over the judges who ultimately controlled his fate in the competition.

Hung willingly participated in the reality TV competition and accepted the specific parameters set forth by *Top Chef*. If the television program needed him to embody the role of the grateful Vietnamese immigrant who cooks food inspired by the flavors of his homeland, he did his part and hoped that the editing process would go his way. In an article that appeared a few days before the finale aired, Hung seemed hopeful that he had performed enough “soul” and gratitude to secure the win: “Everything is going to make sense in the end, if they edit it right” (Lalli 2007). At the same time, he seemed to brace against the limitations placed on him, including the one-dimensional and expected version of ethnicity offered to him within the context of the show. For such a simplistic performance of ethnicity revealed neither the complexity of his life experience nor his food. As Hung questioned in an interview, “What does that mean when [Colicchio] says, ‘We don’t see Hung.’? What should I do, make sweet and sour chicken and wontons? I’m trained in French food. I love French food. That is me” (Lalli 2007). Tellingly, Hung pointed to food references easily recognized as signifiers of “Asian” and “Americanized Chinese” food rather than a specific Vietnamese dish. We can read this as an implicit critique of how Asian Americans represent an undifferentiated racial group in the U.S. imaginary, with little attention paid to the particularities of ethnicity, history, and cuisine. We can also see how Hung satirizes the narrative of invisibility—of not being “seen”—placed on him by the judges on *Top Chef*. For clearly, given the taste hierarchy established on the show, the judges would neither seek nor “find” Hung in battered, deep-fried chicken chunks tossed with canned pineapple and bell peppers in an orange-colored sauce. And yet it might be that in the narrow framing of his character Hung felt that the racial essentialism asked of him was as clichéd and derivative as searching for his “soul” in a cloyingly sweet “ethnic” dish specifically designed to please a mainstream U.S. palate.

On *Top Chef*, the nuance of Hung’s life story and his multilayered relationship to cuisine were compressed into an easily digestible story of immigrant success achieved through hard work, humility, gratitude, and maintaining one’s ethnic heritage and “roots.” Hung’s narrative on *Top Chef* revealed not only how the trope of being technical but lacking “heart” and “soul” is placed on Asian Americans but also the conflicts that racialized minorities encounter competing in fields of culture that continue to be governed by white privilege. As the next section shows, a comparable narrative construction and set of challenges guided the portrayal of Chloe Dao, the fashion designer who won the second season of *Project Runway* (original episodes aired December 2005 to March 2006, with frequent reruns afterward).

From Pattern Maker to “Real” Designer on *Project Runway*

For regular viewers of Bravo’s reality TV programs, Hung’s narrative arc on *Top Chef* might have felt familiar not only given its close adherence to stock narratives but also

because of its similarity to the representation of Chloe on the second season of *Project Runway*. Nonetheless, the overlap that would emerge in their story lines was not immediately apparent to viewers, particularly given how little Chloe and Hung initially seemed to have in common beside a shared Vietnamese heritage. Unlike Hung, Chloe appeared visibly nervous in the first episode. And in a cast that featured a number of outsized personalities—from the notorious villain Santino Rice to the weepy drama queen Andrae Gonzalo—Chloe managed to stay mostly under the radar throughout much of the season. A strong contestant who won a few challenges, Chloe did solid work without creating much behind-the-scenes drama. Confident while not outwardly pompous, she did not reveal a great deal about her personal life during most of the season. Had Chloe been eliminated earlier in the season, she would have likely been a fairly forgettable contestant who, while capable and clearly talented, did not leave much of an impression on viewers.

An individual needs a story line to be a compelling character on reality TV. So as the field of contestants narrowed to four designers on *Project Runway*, Chloe's narrative quickly coalesced around the easily recognizable theme of being technically strong but still lacking creativity and passion. In one of the most replayed comments of the season, Santino described Chloe as "a brilliant pattern maker but not necessarily a brilliant designer." His harsh indictment of her helped concretize the few personal details viewers had learned about Chloe up until that point in the season into a clear and concise narrative. Viewers knew that she received a degree in pattern making (read: not fashion design). After receiving her degree, she worked for a few years in the pressure-filled fashion capital of New York City before moving back to Houston to open her own boutique and to pursue a more "balanced life." It was not clear whether Chloe dreamed about becoming, as she put it, "the next Vera Wang or Ralph Lauren" given the extraordinary amount of work, time, and stress that achieving success at that level entailed. Santino's comment thus placed all of these biographical morsels about Chloe into a concise story line. Was she a "real" designer—original, creative, a true artist—or was she a mere pattern maker who could skillfully replicate only the artistic visions of others? Did she have the passion, drive, and even desire to be a great designer? And did her interest in the commercial side of fashion—the business aspect of running a successful boutique—sully her artistic vision?

Even as the judges awarded Chloe one of the three spots as a finalist, supermodel Heidi Klum—the host and one of the judges on *Project Runway*—cautioned that the judges were still unsure whether she had the "passion to be the next great American designer." Through this statement, Klum set the narrative arc of Chloe's story line firmly in place. For despite Chloe's insistence that "if I didn't want it, I wouldn't be here" and her blunt statement that "I have the passion," it was clear to viewers—and likely Chloe to herself—that to have any hope of capturing the top prize, she would need to quash any lingering doubts that the judges might have about the level of her passion and dedication.

The central role that questions about Chloe's passion played in the construction of her television persona underscored the extent to which being a "real" designer (similar

to being a “real” chef) required wedding technique with passion. On *Project Runway*, fashion designers were constructed as the true “artists” of the fashion industry—the visionaries whose brilliant inspirations helped create brands. Hence, for Santino to accuse Chloe of being a pattern maker was the most powerful critique he could levy. Chloe affirmed this in the reunion show: “Calling another designer a pattern maker is one of the worst things you can say to a designer.” For to be a pattern maker—the specialized professional who translates a designer’s ideas and drawings into the actual templates needed to construct an article of clothing—suggested being unoriginal, derivative, and mechanical. To be a pattern maker, in short, implied being a faithful servant to the “real” designer. In this context, we can interpret television programs such as *Project Runway* and *Top Chef* as shows about moving out of the service professions to become an artist. To win status and recognition as an artist—the individual whose vision others labor for—is not just a creative fantasy but also a class fantasy. The artist whose name is etched in the brand is also the individual who reaps the greatest financial return.

Yet what did it mean to possess “passion” in the realm of fashion design? On *Project Runway*, the answer to this question was ambiguous at best. The judges frequently praised contestants for possessing a unique “point of view,” having a sophisticated “taste level” (taste, it seems, cannot be taught), and constructing outfits that looked “expensive.” The nuances of such subjective criteria—particularly for viewers who likely do not have an expertise in high fashion—can be difficult to understand without an accompanying narrative. The story most frequently articulated on *Project Runway* was that “real” designers had no choice but to follow their dream. Fashion, it seems, was a calling. As Santino said while interviewed on the show, “I always wanted to be a fashion designer, and I gave up a lot to pursue that life.” Here, Santino drew on the well-honed and familiar narrative of the struggling artist who took risks, encountered adversity, and sacrificed greatly for the sake of his or her art.

The extent to which passion appeared to entail enduring hardship and pursuing a calling may be one reason that *Project Runway* devoted considerable airtime to showing the finalists working in their home setting as they prepared for the final challenge—a runway show at New York City’s Fashion Week where top fashion designers showcase their collections to buyers, fashion press, celebrities, and industry insiders.¹⁹ Gaining a glimpse of the finalists interacting in their “native” home environment allows viewers to feel they are gaining deeper insight about the designers, both about their work process and their life story. Most of the personal details revealed during these visits are variations on a similar theme, from the designer’s desire to pursue fashion design from a young age to hardships encountered in their personal and/or professional life. The “villain” Santino, for instance, was humanized during his home visit through revelations about the difficulties he faced growing up in Missouri as the child of a black mother and white father (up until this point in the season, his racial background had been ambiguous) and disclosures about being destitute after his fashion line went out of business. Even though fashion designers are in the business of creating class fantasies about the “high” life—and constructing garments that look “expensive”—the finalists

tended to live in relatively modest settings. This contradiction was in keeping with the broader narrative established on the show about what it meant to live the life of an artist. For the designers (particularly those who lived in New York City), their cramped quarters served as authenticating markers of the depth of their passion and their willingness to sacrifice for their dream of becoming the “next great American designer.”

The extent to which sacrifice and hardship were recurring motifs during the home visits implied that the passion a designer had for fashion was proportionately calculated to the amount of individual suffering endured. And within the parameters of that equation, Chloe emerged as the designer with the most “passion” to share. In a process similar to Hung’s, Chloe eventually overcame the perception of being passionless through the particular rescripting of her character into the immigrant embodiment of the American Dream generally and the refugee who makes good on the promise of the United States specifically. If the depth of the suffering experienced by Chloe and her family served as a yardstick for the magnanimity of the nation, then her story revealed the United States to be the ultimate embodiment of safety, openness, and generosity.

From the start of Chloe’s home visit, viewers could discern a difference. Not only did she live in a large, upscale house in the Houston suburbs (rather than in an urban locale such as New York City), but she also lived in her parents’ home, despite being in her thirties. Viewers could read this, in part, as part of her sacrifice—living with her parents so as to invest all her money into her boutique. Alternatively, viewers could see this as part of being a “good daughter” linked to a vague notion of traditional “Asian” family values. Both readings were supported on the show. More compelling, however, were the dramatic details Chloe revealed for the first time about her family history. With her mother silently and nervously in frame for just a few seconds, the camera panned to a wall of family photos as Chloe began to describe the story behind the images. While ethnically Vietnamese, Chloe was born in Pakse, Laos, as the sixth of eight daughters. Her parents sought to flee Laos by escaping to the United States. Against the backdrop of somber black and white family portraits, Chloe elaborated, “My mom actually hired someone to take us through the night, through the village, and to the beach. But we got caught by the Laos police and were in family prison.” After spending a few years in refugee camps in Laos, her family finally made it to the United States. As Chloe narrated this part of her story, the camera cut to a color photograph of the eight sisters riding a bicycle and laughing in a cookie-cutter U.S. suburb. The contrast between these photographs visually symbolized the geographical shift in Chloe’s narrative as the family moved from a space of darkness and despair to the brightness of freedom and opportunity. Her eyes welling up slightly, Chloe continued, “We flew over and stayed with my uncle in Dallas. We had it so very lucky. Imagine eight girls, and mom and dad, and we got here all safe.” The drama in Chloe’s story—eight daughters, escape by night, capture, family prison, and American salvation—required little embellishment with outsized personal antics. It would be hard to craft a more uplifting immigrant and national narrative. For her parents to arrive as refugees dependent on the “largess” of the state and then proceed to achieve the neoliberal ideal of home ownership underscored the economic opportunities afforded to newcomers in

the nation. And for Chloe to compete for, and win, the title of “next great American designer” on national television would affirm that cultural acceptance and integration were possible for immigrants who have a dream and work hard to achieve it.

Defending her runway collection to the judges in the final episode, Chloe highlighted her passion through consistent references to love. Her collection was, as she put it, a way to “do what I love . . . the evening collection that I always wanted. My fantasy collection.” Unlike the other finalists, Chloe’s inspiration was based not on a historical period or a geographic region but on personal passion: doing what she loved. As she noted, “For me, it was about doing what I love which is the structured pieces that I love. The chiffon. I loved tailoring it. I did the suit. I did stuff that I really loved so if I had to defend it, at least I loved it.” Chloe further described the collection as a gendered labor of love—her “baby”—and the process of its creation like “giving birth.” At the same time, while highlighting the unstinting depth of her passion, Chloe refused to privilege a conception of artistry and “love” that erased the labor entailed in making fashion and running a business. She called herself a “designer–marketer” during the final judging process, observing that “at the end of the day, I have to sell this.” Asked why she should win, Chloe asserted, “We all have the passion, designability, creativity, but I’m a real business person. If I win, this is going to be a real business, bottom line.” At the end of the day, fashion still depended on labor and profit margins even if such a narrative erased some of the aura that circulates around concepts of art, passion, and creative genius. It was probably no coincidence that Chloe, like Hung, came from an immigrant family that worked in the second-tier, racialized labor market of their chosen professions. While Hung’s family ran a Vietnamese restaurant, Chloe’s family operated a dry cleaning and tailoring business in Houston. Growing up, her mother worked as a seamstress. As a child, she only glimpsed the, as she put it, “high falutin’ part” of the fashion through the filter of television, namely, *Style with Elsa Klensch*, a fashion and design show that ran on CNN during the 1980s and 1990s (Feldman 2006). And finally, when it came time to hiring a seamstress to help her sew the original designs she sold in her own boutique store, Chloe turned to her aunt. Given her background, it is not hard to imagine why Chloe would be highly attuned to the fact that the “passionate” visions of fashion designers depend on racialized and immigrant labor, both domestically and abroad.

When the judges announced Chloe’s win, she was incredulous: “I am the winner of *Project Runway*. Oh my God! I’m a real designer!” she exclaimed, still sounding a bit unsure. To be “real” was to have “passion” and creativity returned to her character. That Jay McCarroll—the highly entertaining, abrasive, and outspoken winner of the first season—seemed hopelessly ill equipped to handle the business side of fashion might have also helped Chloe capture the top prize. Unlike Jay, she would not thumb her nose at the cash prize, act unprofessional, and appear embittered and ungrateful to media outlets (Senior 2007). Jay’s failure to produce any visible work, coupled with his diva antics, was diluting the credibility of *Project Runway* and Bravo’s claim to finding the “next great designer.” Given the obstacles that Chloe and her family had overcome and her track record of building a successful business, it was likely that she would capitalize on the opportunities that accompanied her win.

In the media coverage that followed Chloe's win, many of the stories highlighted both her niceness and her jump from refugee-immigrant status to *Project Runway* winner. These stories complemented the narrative arc of Chloe's on-screen persona. For instance, *US Weekly* ran a story with the headline "In Her Own Words: From Refugee to *Project Runway*," accompanied with the subheading "Chloe fled war-ravaged Laos, spent time in prison and survived poverty before becoming a hot designer" (Cohen 2006, 120). The story of Chloe was the ultimate embodiment of the U.S. "rags to riches" narrative as well as proof of the continued salience of the American Dream. Moreover, as a Vietnamese refugee who achieved success, Chloe helped recast Vietnam-U.S. relations into a narrative of rescue. Replacing the image of U.S. military quagmire and loss is a more brightly colored picture of the nation as the ultimate beacon of freedom, safety, and opportunity for Vietnamese refugees seeking to flee a life of poverty, danger, and civil and political unrest.

Elle magazine, whose featured spread was part of the competition prize, used the headline, "Being a good Asian daughter, I thought I should become a buyer or work on the business side instead of trying to design" (Feldman 2006). In so doing, the *Elle* magazine feature highlighted how the *Project Runway* experience helped Chloe transcend the racialized and gendered limitations that she placed on herself and expand her own sense of what was possible. Being a "good Asian daughter," Chloe—as the article suggests—internalized the belief that she should not pursue design. This hurdle is personalized rather than placed within the context of obstacles that racialized minorities face making it to the top of their profession.²⁰ On *Project Runway*, as on *Top Chef*, the impediments that racialized minorities face "winning" the competition are presented as individual limitations rather than structural barriers that help create a playing field of unequal opportunities. Little mention is made of the racialized, and typically immigrant, labor markets that the fashion and culinary industries depend on in the United States. Nor is there any acknowledgement of the hurdles that people of color face competing in fields of culture steeped in discourses that uphold race and class hierarchies and that naturalize the standards and techniques of Europeans and white Americans as universal. For Asian Americans in particular, they are cast as passionless if they surpass their competitors in their technical skills but lacking in proper training if they do not. It might be that to be strong technically is an asset only when one is not Asian. And for those exceptional Asian Americans such as Hung and Chloe who somehow manage to transcend their technical nature, they must show gratitude not only to the judges and the experience of the reality TV competition for teaching them how to show passion but also for the fact that they are living in a magnanimous nation that gives racialized immigrants equal opportunities to succeed.

Kristi, Chloe, and Hung emerged victorious in their reality TV competitions. But they won despite their seemingly "natural" inclination toward being an unfeeling technician. They did so by finding their "passion," "soul," and creativity. Yet the real creativity at stake in these competitions may well lie in the many flexible applications of the technical discourse onto Asian Americans. The trope of the talented but technical robot is endlessly replayable, a purportedly nonracial narrative freely applied to a whole host of fields where Asian Americans threaten to achieve success. Being technical,

being passionless, and being an automaton—these are not racialized descriptions. But understanding how these traits are placed onto Asian Americans and naturalized as part of their character reveals just how persuasively racial hierarchies continue to operate in the United States, even when the word *race* is never uttered at all.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

Notes

1. After a long entanglement in litigation, *Project Runway* was cleared to move to the network Lifetime. It remains to be seen whether the transfer to a “women’s network” will bring changes in the representational strategies of the show. The *Fashion Show*, Bravo’s replacement television show for *Project Runway*, began airing in May 2009. New episodes of *Project Runway* began airing in August 2009 on the Lifetime channel.
2. This essay focuses on individuals who won their reality TV competitions because, unlike characters who are on for only a few episodes, those who win have the most developed story line.
3. See Morley and Robins (1995).
4. Space limitations prevent a fuller analysis of racial representation across a range of reality TV shows. While the rapid proliferation of new reality TV programs produced each year makes it somewhat difficult for critical scholarship to keep pace, several scholars have insightfully analyzed how reality TV incorporates the tenets of multicultural discourse in the United States by celebrating racial and ethnic diversity through the mere fact of representation itself and by personalizing, decontextualizing, and containing racism to the realm of individual conflict. See, for instance, Kim and Blasini (2001) and Kraszewski (2009).
5. Viewers vote only on the less consequential “fan favorite” prize, which comes with a \$10,000 cash prize.
6. For a thoughtful analysis of how the narrative of fame is constructed on the British version *Pop Idol* (on which *American Idol* is modeled), see Holmes (2004).
7. The Bravo network has coined their desirable viewer demographic as “the affluencers”—“affluent influencers” who travel, dress, dine out, design, and connect with savvy, finesse, and high style. Urban gay men and single female professionals make up a key viewer demographic of *Top Chef* and *Project Runway* (Dominus 2008).
8. At the same time, Hung’s impressively fast skills were also portrayed on the show as making him, quite literally, a menace in the kitchen. Contestants noted that Hung ran quickly and carelessly around the kitchen with his knives in hand, ready at any minute to accidentally slice off the limb of an unsuspecting competitor.
9. It is worth noting that while Hung reveals himself to be bisexual during the reunion show, his queerness never becomes part of his narrative arc. It might be that to foreground Hung’s

queerness *and* his identity as a racialized immigrant would have muddled his character construction too much for a show that depends on the easy legibility of its characters.

10. The frequent comments about the “soulful” cooking of Casey Thompson, one of the three finalists in the third season of *Top Chef*, also have clear gendered implications. During the show, Casey herself noted the difficulties she encountered being a female chef working, throughout her career, in predominantly male kitchens. Unlike Hung, Casey lacked classical training but compensated by embodying her dishes with “soulful” flavors. During the season, the show pitted Casey’s “passionate” cooking in contrast to Hung’s “technical” skills.
11. It is worth noting that included in the panel of judges is Padma Lakshmi, who is of South Asian descent. However, as the host of the show, her capital seems primarily located in her attractiveness rather than in her culinary expertise.
12. See Priscilla Ferguson (2004, 4) for a fascinating account of how the French came to dominate Western concepts of sophisticated culinary cuisine. As Ferguson notes, from the nineteenth century to the present era, French culinary customs, restaurant practices, and discourses of gastronomy have retained their special place as an “ideal of culinaryity. . . . French cuisine supplies a point of reference and a standard.”
13. Such discourses of authenticity find easy parallels in other fields of culture. For instance, in music, the entrenched notion that some things—passion, individuality, and the “feel” one has for the music—cannot be taught links musical understanding to cultural heritage. Given the degree to which notions of cultural heritage are intimately linked to ideas of racial difference, beliefs about musical authenticity can find uneasy translation into broader statements naturalizing the inherent difficulties that racialized minorities face truly comprehending the depth and scope of different musical traditions. See Martin Stokes (1994) for a rich edited collection of essays on the relationship among musical authenticity, place, nation, and race.
14. One notable exception is Marcus Samuelsson, a renowned black chef born in Ethiopia and adopted as a toddler by a Swedish family, who is executive chef and a co-owner of Acquavit, a three-star, Scandinavian-influenced restaurant located in New York City. In his cookbooks and television appearances, he credits his early love and interest in cooking to his maternal grandmother, authenticating his understanding and love for Scandinavian culinary traditions and flavor profiles through the traditional narrative of family inheritance and his “mother’s (mother’s) kitchen” (Parasecoli 2009).
15. The public demonstrations and lawsuit filed against chef Daniel Boulud, the celebrated chef-owner of the French restaurant Daniel, placed into question whether restaurants can hire and promote restaurant workers based on their race/ethnicity to create an overall “feeling” and “look” to the establishment or whether such practices are discriminatory because cooking AND service styles and skills can be learned regardless of an individual’s particular background. Boulud was sued for purportedly denying promotion to Latino and Bangladeshi restaurant workers in favor of white Europeans. The lawsuit was later settled out of court for an undisclosed financial sum, 8 percent raises for the busboys and runners, and racial sensitivity training for all the managers. While the lawsuit against Boulud specifically focused on dining service, such racial dynamics are not limited to the front of the restaurant. The larger question about race, hiring, and promotions in the restaurant

- industry—which heavily depends on immigrant labor to fill its lower paying jobs—remains unsettled. See Severson and Ellick (2007 and Ellick (2007).
16. See, for instance, the study conducted by Charles Elliot (1995–1996) in which eighty-eight music teachers were shown videotapes of trumpet and flute students and asked to evaluate their performances. As the videotapes were synchronized to identical trumpet and flute performances, the only changing variables were the instrument, gender, and race (white and black) of the performers. The music teachers scored the performances of women lower than those of men, female trumpeters lower than female flutists, and blacks significantly lower than whites. In this example, we clearly see how preconceptions about gender and race—and intersecting gendered and racialized beliefs associated with particular musical instruments—affect evaluations of musical performance and can serve as self-fulfilling prophecies about the validity of racial and gendered ideologies.
 17. Hung, like many other *Top Chef* contestants, frequently noted the importance of pleasing the judges first and foremost regardless of the particular demographic being targeted for the challenge (which ranged from “cowboys” and “cowgirls” at a rodeo to members of the Elks club).
 18. Here it is useful to acknowledge the different readings that viewers bring to any particular media text in light of their position along a grid of social identities. Given the history of racial representation in U.S. popular media, there may be a desire for racialized spectators to grant self-consciousness, resistance, and agency to actors who inhabit roles that outwardly appear to conform to dominant norms and stereotypes. See, for instance, Chung (2006) and Feng (2000).
 19. For an astute analysis of the representation of labor and the multiple ways that working to the point of exhaustion is used as an indicator of passion in *Project Runway*, see Hendershot (2009).
 20. It is worth noting the high representation of Asians and Asian Americans in top U.S. fashion schools. At Parsons School of Design, where the competition *Project Runway* is filmed, nearly half of the students enrolled in the bachelor’s program in fashion design are Asian or Asian American (Boncompagni 2008; Go 2005; Betts 2004). This, however, is hardly the representation that is featured in *Project Runway*.

References

- Betts, Kate. 2004. Visions from the East. *Time*, September 20. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,699434,00.html>.
- Blasini, Gilberto Moises and Kim, L.S. 2001. The Performance of Multicultural Identity in U.S. Network Television: Shiny, Happy, POPSTARS (Holding Hands) *Emergences: Journal for the Study of Media and Composite Cultures* 11 (2): 287-307.
- Boncompagni, Tatiana. 2008. Korea opportunities. *FT.com*, January 5. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/3a1b5eb6-ba6b-11dc-abcb-0000779fd2ac.html>.
- Bourdain, Anthony. 2007. *The nasty bits: Collected varietal cuts, usable trim, scraps, and bones*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Braxton, Greg. 2009. The greater reality of minorities on TV. *Los Angeles Times*, February 17.
- Bruni, Frank. 2007. The Top Chef finale: Of bad lobster and tame cake. *New York Times*, October 4.

- Chung, Hye Seung. 2006. *Hollywood Asian: Philip Ahn and the politics of cross-ethnic performance*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Cohen, Lara. 2006. In her own words: From refugee to *Project Runway*. *US Weekly*, March 20, 120–21.
- Collins, Sue. 2008. Making the most out of 15 minutes: Reality TV's dispensable celebrity. *Television & New Media* 9:87–110.
- Dominus, Susan. 2008. The affluencer. *New York Times*, November 2.
- Egan, Timothy. 2007. Little Asia on the hill. *New York Times*, January 7.
- Ellick, Adam. 2007. Boulud settling suit alleging bias at French restaurant. *New York Times*, July 31.
- Elliot, Charles. 1995–1996. Race and gender as factors in judgments of musical performance. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 12 (7): 50–56.
- Feldman, Jenny. 2006. Being a good Asian daughter, I thought I should become a buyer or work on the business side instead of trying to design. *Elle*, August.
- Feng, Peter X. 2000. Recuperating Suzie Wong: A fan's Nancy Kwan-dary. In *Countervisions: Asian American film criticism*, ed. D. Hamamoto and S. Liu, 40–58. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Ferguson, Priscilla. 2004. *Accounting for taste: The triumph of French cuisine*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fisher, Ian. 2008. Is cuisine still Italian even if the chef isn't? *New York Times*, April 7.
- Go, Kitty. 2005. Eastern exposure. *Financial Times*, January 8.
- Hendershot, Heather. 2009. Belabored reality: Making it work on *The Simple Life* and *Project Runway*. In *Reality TV: Remaking television culture*, 2nd ed., ed. S. Murray and L. Ouellette, 243–59. New York: New York University Press.
- Holmes, Su. 2004. "Reality goes pop!" Reality TV, popular music, and narratives of stardom. *Television & New Media* 5:147–72.
- Hwang, Suein. 2005. The new white flight. *Wall Street Journal*, November 19.
- Jaschik, Scott. 2006. Too Asian? *Inside Higher Ed*, October 10. <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2006/10/10/asian>.
- Kim, Claire Jean. 2003. *Bitter fruit: The politics of black-Korean conflict in New York City*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Kingsbury, Henry. 2001. *Music, talent, and performance: A conservatory cultural system*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Kraszewski, Jon. 2009. Country hicks and urban cliques: Mediating race, reality, and liberalism on MTV's *The Real World*. In *Reality TV: Remaking television culture*, 2nd ed., ed. S. Murray and L. Ouellette, 205–22. New York: New York University Press.
- Lalli, Nina. 2007. Hung speaks: "What should I do, make sweet and sour chicken?" *Village Voice*, October 1. http://blogs.villagevoice.com/food/archives/2007/10/hung_speaks_wha.php.
- Manalansan, Martin. 2009. The empire of food: Place, memory, and Asian "ethnic" cuisines. In *Gastropolis: Food and New York City*, ed. A. Hauck-Lawson and J. Deutsch, 93–107. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Morley, David, and Kevin Robins. 1995. *Spaces of identity: Global media, electronic landscapes and cultural boundaries*. London: Routledge University Press.

- Osajima, Keith. 1988. Asian Americans as the model minority: An analysis of the popular press image in the 1960s and 1980s. In *Reflections on shattered windows: Promises and prospects for Asian American studies*, ed. G. Okiihiro, 165-174. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Palumbo-Liu, David. 1999. *Asian/America: Historical crossings of a racial frontier*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Parasecoli, Fabio. 2009. The chefs, the entrepreneurs, and their patrons: The avant-garde food scene in New York City. In *Gastropolis: Food and New York City*, ed. A. Hauck-Lawson and J. Deutsch, 116–31. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Senior, Jennifer. 2007. The near fame experience. *New York Magazine*, August 6. <http://nymag.com/news/features/35538/>.
- Severson, Kim, and Adam Ellick. 2007. A top chef's kitchen is far too hot, some workers say. *New York Times*, January 17.
- Silverstein, Michael, and Neil Fiske. 2003. *Trading up: The new American luxury*. New York: Portfolio.
- Smith, Nina. 2007. *Top Chef's* controversial Hung wins—and says he deserves it. *TV Guide*, October 5. <http://www.tvguide.com/news/top-chef-hung-35797.aspx>
- Song, Min Hyoung. 2008. Communities of remembrance: Reflections on the Virginia Tech shootings and race. *Journal of Asian American Studies* 11 (1): 1–26.
- Stanley, Alessandra. 2007. The classless utopia of reality TV. *New York Times*, December 2.
- Stokes, Martin. 1994. *Ethnicity, identity and music: The musical construction of place*. New York: Berg.
- Tieu, Hong Hoa. 2008. Hail to the chef: Cooking his way to the top. *BN Magazine*, March 28. http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=4b076d2bc03de735409ee094a90255f2

Bio

Grace Wang is an assistant professor in American Studies at UC Davis and is currently working on a book that examines the role that music plays in processes of Asian American racial formation.

Fonte: Television & New Media, v. 11, p. 404-427, September 2010. [Base de Dados]. Disponível em: <<http://online.sagepub.com>>. Acesso em: 24 ago. 2010.