

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.

THE TECHNICAL BUT UNFEELING ASIAN: HISTORICIZING RACIALIZED NARRATIVES

... 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 hard-working, 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. . . . 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 *technoorientalism*.¹ 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). . . . 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. . . . 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.² . . .

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. . . . 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.³ 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.”⁴ 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.”

. . . 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.⁵ 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.⁶

... 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.⁷ 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.”

... 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 brag, 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.”

... 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).

... 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. ...

NOTES

1. See Morley and Robins (1995).
2. 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).
3. 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.
 4. 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.
 5. 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.
 6. 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 culinary. . . . French cuisine supplies a point of reference and a standard."
 7. 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).

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