



A SHOT AT HALF-EXPOSURE

Asian Americans in Reality TV Shows

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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 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.

. . . 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 comfortably 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

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