

Talent-based reality shows are about the great American myth of self-actualization in which anyone with some talent, and a little hard work, can realize their full potential and collect a dream bounty in accolades and automobiles. They work as allegory for an idealized utopian America. The individual stories of success are rendered particularly meaningful when they are framed in such a way that they apply to larger social and cultural issues. *Top Chef*, *American Idol* and *Project Runway* have been especially successful in showcasing the manifestation of talent into reward in the notoriously unstable and competitive industries of entertainment, food service and fashion. The fate of individual contestants, especially those who become popular among the audience, serve as short parables by playing out morality tales centered around relationships, work ethics, creativity and humility – to name a few. These simple narratives put the contestants in a very structured setting in which they face difficult decisions and suffer the resultant consequences or reap the rewards. Embedded are prescriptive subtexts that suggest how one should behave or what one should believe.

The individual stories of success are rendered particularly meaningful when they are framed in such a way that they apply to larger social and cultural issues. Of course, the idea of the American Dream hinges on the ability, ingenuity and work ethic of the individual while it is stripped of the influence of limiting social institutions and practices. Widespread economic inequality makes the dream more desirable at the same time that it becomes more unattainable. It is that very difficulty, that exclusivity, which gives it higher cultural capital. The stories are framed as rags-to-riches tales, but the fact is that contestants often have enjoyed success in their chosen fields before entering the televised arena. Many of the *Project Runway* and *Top Chef* contestants work for fashion houses,

have designed their own clothing lines, and have owned and/or run their own kitchens in modestly lucrative restaurants. In the end however, the stories tell us, the cream rises to the top and the deserving are rewarded with consumer products and vehicles that allow them continue their hard work and showcase their talents. Talent, as it is presented in this form, has a democratic appeal, and within these tales lives a strong element of delicious schadenfreude that allows the audience to snicker at the foibles of lesser beings and star talents alike.

These myths of the American dream tell the story of success by industry, through consumption, and against the odds. Here, for participants, as well as the audience, talent is an important basis for identity as well as a source of power that can influence the rich and powerful. In these stories of success despite the odds, the rewards are held out for the audience like an enticing carrot in the face of an unfair social system. Oppression becomes the failure of the individual to realize her or his potential. In this way, the American dream ideology labors markedly as a tool to depoliticize and dehistoricize some of the politically charged historical and cultural issues associated with social (and professional) mobility, while advancing the imperatives of consumer culture.

Riches, success and social mobility are the explicit rewards for these contests of talent, work and perseverance. But the reality for many Americans is that opportunities for social mobility are limited and trust in authoritarian structures is failing. Platforms like *American Idol*, *Project Runway* and *Top Chef* are formulated to restore or reinforce consumer confidence in the power of consumable products to make us happier, more fulfilled and worthy. Although the stardom aspect of the American dream ideology in these contests is emphasized, it is clear that the material prizes are what mark the dream

as realized. Consequently, our ability to consume the prize, even without the contest, allows us to bypass the talent requirements demonstrated by the winners, and we too can live happily ever after.