On 27 April 2009, the Australian commercial free-to-air channel Network Ten, a channel that usually plays poor cousin to the two major commercial broadcasters Nine and Seven, debuted a television show that was to go on to make Australian television history. The premise of the show – a group of ‘ordinary’ Australians are brought together from around the country to live in a shared house in Sydney while vying to become Australia’s leading amateur cook – hardly promised to be audience-grabbing programming. The accepted wisdom among Australian producers of reality and lifestyle programming is that primetime cooking shows are not usually popular fare with Australian audiences. MasterChef Australia (as the originally British format was titled and rebranded for Aussie audiences), however, proved this particular truism to be spectacularly wrong. More popular than Big Brother (2001–8) and Australian Idol (2003–9), both major successes in Australia, the show has had extraordinary appeal across a wide audience. The third-highest-rating programme in Australia (the other two highest-rating programmes were sporting events) since OzTAM began collecting ratings figures in 2001 (2010: 632), it was watched at least once by over 11 million Australians – 75 per cent of people in the five mainland cities (Meade 2010).1

There has been much debate in the local press about why ‘MasterChef has brought us, as a nation, together over the table celebrating food’ (Hardy 2009). Described as ‘accessible’, ‘family-friendly’ and ‘comforting’, the show’s success has been put down to its being a relatively non-conflictual ‘feel-good’ variant of reality television at a time when, faced with a global financial crisis, audiences are staying home and cooking more (Kalina 2009). In this chapter, I want to interrogate the show’s national appeal in the face of global economic pressures, focusing in particular on the way MasterChef Australia negotiates class, labour and social identity.

Jonathan Bignell suggests that the transnational mobility of reality television may indicate the growing universalisation of a ‘Western’ preoccupation with ‘personal confession, modification, testing and the perfectibility of the self’ (Bignell 2005: 40). Certainly, the widespread uptake of reality formats around the world and across different cultures – from Chinese/Singaporean reality-based home renovation shows like Home Décor Survivor to the Panamanian version of Extreme Makeover (Cambio Radical) – point to the global currency of consumerist and neo-liberal models of selfhood and citizenship. However, as Bignell also notes, while the embrace of reality television and its associated
modes of selfhood and lifestyle consumption might be an increasingly global phenomenon, the failure of some formats in certain countries and the popularity of indigenised versions of imported formats indicate that this mode of programming is still strongly shaped by local conditions.

My argument here is that *MasterChef Australia* (henceforth *MCA*) is characterised by a complex negotiation between globalising forces and domestic concerns. This is especially the case in relation to questions of class and the valuing of different forms of capital. Much scholarship on lifestyle-oriented reality television has noted the way in which some shows operate as sites of popular pedagogy, promoting middle-class taste preferences, lifestyles and consumption, with British shows (and the often moralising lifestyle experts that front them) in particular often equating good forms of selfhood and citizenship with the acquisition of bourgeois forms of cultural capital (Palmer 2004; Wood and Skeggs 2004; Lewis 2008). While *MCA* is concerned with teaching audiences culinary taste, in the Australian format, class and aspirationalism are also enacted through rather more pragmatic mechanisms such as the acquisition of labour skills and social capital. Part of the show's success in the Australian context lies in the way the rejigged *MCA* format manages to democratise its mode of address and uncouple issues of cultural capital and taste from classed identity through a focus on ethnicity, labour and economics.

**Nationalism, entertainment media and ‘the real’**

In common with vocational/career-oriented reality formats such as *The Apprentice* (2005–), *MasterChef* is a competitive cooking game-show format that blends elements of lifestyle programming – with its focus on transmitting various life skills and forms of taste to the audience – with reality game-doc conventions. Originally made for the BBC as a rather sedate game show, the Australian version significantly reworked the *MasterChef* format. In Australia, the show aired on primetime commercial television six nights a week and was a glossy, more theatrical and faster-paced take on the BBC concept. In series two, the format saw Australians from around the country audition for fifty semi-final places, undergoing various ‘challenges’ over a week before being whittled down to twenty-four contestants. The 'top twenty-four' were then put through various individual and team-based contests, with each week structured around a regular cycle of nightly challenges (mystery box and invention test, pressure test, celebrity chef challenge, off-site challenge, elimination and then a masterclass with the remaining contestants), culminating in a finals week and the ‘crowning’ of the winning *MasterChef*, whose prize includes work experience in leading restaurants, chef training from professional chefs, the publication of their own cookbook and $100,000 to support their ‘food dream’.

Along with a revamped narrative structure, the show has also been strongly indigenised at the level of cultural content and rebranded along strongly nationalistic lines. This has involved the usual replacement of foreign hosts and judges with local talent (the show features three Australian judges – chefs Gary Mehigan and George Calombaris and food critic Matt Preston), alongside a particularly self-conscious embrace of national tropes. Drawn from a variety of backgrounds, the top twenty-four contestants on the show stand in for a kind of idealised, cross-class multicultural Australia.
Various iconic markers of Australian national identity are also a feature, from ‘classic’ Aussie foods such as the ‘chiko roll’ to the frequent insertion of panoramic shots of Sydney, the location of the MasterChef house and kitchen. The format has also been tailored to reflect Australian national myths of social egalitarianism with the competitive aspects relatively downplayed and rather more emphasis given to the social bonds that have developed between contestants.

Graeme Turner foregrounds ‘the construction of cultural identity as one of [the media’s] primary spheres of activity’ (Turner 2009: 3). Discussing reality television, he emphasises the commercial logics that drive media imperatives, pointing in particular to the limitations of claims about the (much vaunted) democratising nature of reality television as a ‘participatory’ medium. In emphasising economics, Turner’s argument is that media industries today need to be understood as having moved beyond a purely mediating role to one of considerably more authorial power and centrality – where their interests rather than those of just the state or nation are being served through processes of representation. Given that these interests are structured by regimes of value that are distinct from those of the social or the political sphere, participatory television is thus a very different animal from participatory democracy.

I want to stress, however, that at the same time, such media interests are clearly not served in complete autonomy from those of the state or nation; rather, they are in complex articulation. Indeed, Turner’s concern is to understand the increasingly central role played by the media at a point where crucial social institutions are stepping back from processes of identity-shaping, leaving media players to fill the gap. The utility of Turner’s argument for understanding the status of shows like MCA is that such media phenomena need to be understood not simply as a devolved technique of state governance that mediates the social (see Palmer 2003; Ouellette and Hay 2008), but rather as the (somewhat serendipitous) outcome of certain social tendencies. These include the privatisation of once structural social processes, the increasingly central role of the media in making and shaping cultural identities, and the growing merger between culture and economics. In a Gramscian turn, instead of figuring the relations between media culture and broader socio-political and ideological structures in determinist terms, these processes, as per the theory of articulation, are both semi-autonomous and mutually constitutive. As Turner argues, ‘we are now entering an age in which entertainment has become increasingly important’ (Turner 2009: 10; my emphasis).

Such a shift dovetails with arguments related to the growing centrality of performance – of self-conscious enactments of community and personhood in contemporary social relations (Skeggs and Wood 2009). While shows like MCA do of course function, at an ideological and informational level, as important sites of popular pedagogy that teach the optimal management of social identity, they do so in a way that is not purely textual but which is also productive of the social itself. While the immediate interests of the reality television industry may seem to be economic, the broader implications of the populist media logic of the reality turn is to produce ‘a direct and sustained intervention into the construction of people’s desires, cultural identities and expectations of the real’ (Turner 2009: 24). This chapter examines what kind of social imaginary is enacted inside the MasterChef kitchen.
‘One nation, united, under a colourful oven mitt\textsuperscript{13}: ordinariness, cosmopolitanism and ethnicity

Media commentators have put the success of MCA down to the ‘feel-good’ nature of the show as opposed to the more conflictual narrative logics often associated with US and British reality television. Australian television producers are often reluctant to overly emphasise aspirationalism or competitiveness on local versions of lifestyle and reality television (Lewis 2009: 302–3). On the surface at least, MCA embraces and performs a kind of non-hierarchical, democratic version of Australian ‘ordinariness’ through shoring up ‘a cultural mythos of “mateship” and social egalitarianism’ (ibid.: 303). The winner of the first series of MCA, Julie Goodwin, a homely Anglo woman concerned with cooking ‘honest food’ using ingredients everyone cooks, is perhaps the epitome of (a certain normative model of) Australian ordinariness. Julie represented herself (and was likewise presented in the media) as an ordinary ‘home cook’ and (despite running an IT business) ‘stay at home mum’, while her MasterChef web profile describes her favourite cuisine as ‘Aussie!’ and her favourite dish as ‘baked dinner’, positioning her values and taste as that of an ‘average’ white Australian free of class pretensions.

MCA, however, is also concerned with promoting thoroughly bourgeois and cosmopolitan forms of taste as well as modelling entrepreneurial models of selfhood. The runner-up in series one, South Australian Ling Yeow Poh (who has subsequently gone on to host her own cooking show on the public channel, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation or ABC), is a highly articulate artist whom the judges consistently praised for her far-from-ordinary, cosmopolitan cuisine. Given Poh’s high-end culinary prowess, there was much controversy over Julie’s victory, with many audience members claiming the final vote had been rigged. The heated nature of the debate reflected tensions around MCA’s attempts to speak to a very broad Australian audience, from commercial viewers to the more bourgeois audiences normally devoted to the ABC. What the glib media byline ‘one nation, united’\textsuperscript{4} intimates but glosses over is the show’s efforts to negotiate the rather rocky terrain of Australian social identity.

As Greig, Lewins and White (2003) point out, while notions of social egalitarianism lie at the core of Australian self-identity, this national perception has been built on rather shaky foundations, with claims to a coherent Australian nationhood glossing over major historical and political exclusions around citizenship and identity.\textsuperscript{5} Australian national culture is founded on the notion of the ‘fair go’, reflected in the pervasive belief that it is a classless society, in direct contrast to its British colonial origins. Myths of social equity and mobility abound, but while Australia is one of the most ethnically diverse nations in the world, its national identity is still centred around a hegemonic Anglocentrism in which ethnic multiculturalism and indigenity feature as forms of strategic economic branding for Australia on the world stage.\textsuperscript{6} Migrants are often popularly depicted as socially mobile, with prominent successful figures held up as markers of Australian egalitarianism. But as Greig et al. (2003) point out, new migrants coming to Australia often enter into the working class, with many finding themselves downwardly mobile, while recent events such as the Tampa affair\textsuperscript{7} and the Cronulla riots\textsuperscript{8} have put paid to the perception that Australia is some kind of multicultural haven, receiving migrants and refugees alike with open arms.
In light of this more complicated picture, such apparently bland statements about MCA uniting Australia as 'one nation' start to take on a rather different complexion. MCA, in its attempts to negotiate a sense of national ordinariness and inclusiveness, represents an intervention into a complex cultural field marked by considerable struggle. Class differences tend to be largely disavowed in Australian culture or displaced onto other social categories. MCA is somewhat unusual here in its broad demographic reach and its attempt to speak to a range of classed identities – though the programme is marked by anxieties around the bourgeois connotations of the culinary and fine-dining culture promoted on the show. MCA thus uses various strategies to manage the class issues raised by its focus on distinction, taste and value. One central way in which class is negotiated on the show is via ethnicity.

The contestants on reality shows – particularly at the more tabloid end of the television spectrum – are often drawn from lower-middle-class or working-class backgrounds. With its relatively bourgeois cultural focus and high production values, MCA has attracted contestants from all walks of life, with a number of more upper-middle-class, professional-managerial contestants featuring on the show. It has also sought a roughly equal balance of men and women, although the contestants to date have been largely in their twenties and thirties. While the producers have clearly striven to include a broad range of participants, questions of class and gender are not necessarily highlighted. Where MCA is rather more self-conscious in its claims to 'diversity' and national representativeness is in its focus on ethnicity and multiculturalism.

Newman and Gibson note that Australian food media is often divided along distinct class lines. Food magazines such as Vogue Entertaining and the Australian Women's Weekly speak to very different social groups, with the latter type of publication 'quite resistant to strong implications of ethnic difference' (Newman and Gibson 2005: 90). In contrast, food television is rather more inclusive in its demographic reach and mode of address because 'television has the capacity to domesticate and reassure, to erase the more obtrusive markers of difference' (ibid.: 91). MCA is overtly cosmopolitan, embracing and championing Australian multiculturalism. Throughout the show, much is made of the Greek background of chef and judge George Calombaris, a highly successful chef and restaurateur (who plays up his role of ordinary Aussie Greek boy 'made good'). The ethnic backgrounds of contestants on the show are also often foregrounded as part of their personal cooking 'journey' and 'style', though race and indigeneity is noticeably absent from MCA's purview. Ethnicity largely seems to stand in or act as a (relatively safe) site for the negotiation of social diversity more broadly – in particular, class difference.

Such points of 'difference', though, are quite literally 'domesticated' – with the show's house and kitchen (the strangely familiar hybridised 'non-places' that we have come to associate with reality television) acting as stages for performing (and containing) a rather unchallenging version of multiculturalism. This 'safe' multiculturalism is heightened by the fact that the 'ethically' marked contestants (particularly those who make it to the final twenty-four) are largely second- or third-generation migrants complete with Australian accents and habitus. It is fair to say that cultural difference is celebrated on the show but only to the point where it adds a degree of cultural colour or gives a contestant that extra edge in terms of personal branding or culinary know-how, with the performance...
of ethnic skills or knowledge often conflated with ‘inventiveness’. At times, though, this is a double-edged sword. When a Greek contestant is encouraged to make baklava, the gambit fails when they are then chastised for not making a dish innovative enough to be served at a high-end restaurant. The object on MCA is to aim for a particular model of savvy, cosmopolitan, bourgeois food culture – a point illustrated by the winner of MCA’s second series, Adam Liaw. Liaw, an Australian-born, Japanese-based lawyer with a Chinese Malaysian background, offered up cuisine that was a fusion of international and various Asian influences (such as prawn scotch eggs with coconut and chilli sambal). Likewise, Liaw performed a kind of trans-Asian identity on the show, speaking Japanese to ‘Iron Chef Sakai’ from the famous eponymous Japanese cooking show while often linking his ‘innovation’ dishes to family narratives or to Asian mythology (as reflected in his high-scoring dish based on the seven lucky gods of Japan). Ethnicity functions on the show as a kind of cultural capital, one that only ‘works’ when it is flexible enough to be articulated into certain forms of (globalised bourgeois) taste.

If ethnicity stands in for class, enabling an embrace of middle-class cosmopolitanism, the kind of food cooked on MCA moves between the extremes of cutting-edge cuisines such as molecular gastronomy and food that is self-consciously marked out as ordinary and ‘Aussie’. MCA is clearly concerned with educating audiences about food (and there has been much positive media commentary on the educational value of the show) and, in the process, about certain kinds of middle-class taste and cultural capital. However, it also seeks to distance itself from excessively bourgeois forms of taste, with the show’s producers clearly aware of steering a careful course between its aspirational values and the values of so-called ‘ordinary’ Australians. For instance, the contestants have to master Country Women’s Association9 favourites such as scones and participate in a team cook-off on a P&O cruise ship. In one particular episode, teams are challenged to create vegetarian dishes for a panel of Australian men of the ‘Aussie bloke’ variety – notably blue-collar workers and a farmer, all somewhat oddly wearing their work clothes – with much made of their unfamiliarity with the main ingredient used in the show, goat’s cheese, and their general disdain for meatless meals. While the episode caricatured Australian working-class men and their perceived lack of taste, it also evidenced a discomfort with class pretensions. These broader concerns with the class connotations of the show were laid out on the table, as it were, by FremantleMedia chief executive Ian Hogg. Commenting on the top recipe downloads on the MCA website – pavlova, spare ribs, crème brûlée, beef wellington and sausage rolls – he argued: ‘It’s not Parisian food. It’s very Australian working class. It’s very comforting. People are hungry in winter and they want something accessible to watch and to eat’ (Meade 2010).

Overlooking the dubious definition of crème brûlée as Australian working-class food, such comments indicate the way in which the embrace of culinary multiculturalism is perhaps not as blandly apolitical a manoeuvre as it might at first seem. Newman and Gibson (2005) note that Australian food culture since the 1970s has been characterised by a growing ‘multiculinarianism’, becoming internationally renowned for its fusion food. Australia’s shift away from a progressive policy of multiculturalism with the election of the Conservative government under John Howard in 1996 saw the rise of both anti-race and anti-class discourse, with multiculturalism increasingly associated with a perceived intellectual elite characterised by ‘cosmopolitan values’ (Newman and Gibson 2005). In
the context of growing wage inequity in Australia and a declining industrial base, Howard redirected fears about a struggling labour market to this imagined ‘new class’ of the cultural left who are often dismissed in Australian media and political circles (strikingly, as Newman and Gibson note, in culinary terms) as the ‘latte set’ and ‘chardonnay socialists’ (ibid.: 90).

The choice of Matt Preston as a judge on MCA is an interesting one, marking the show’s complex engagement with both middle-class and working-class audiences. An eloquent and, at times, somewhat pompous food critic for the Melbourne newspaper The Age, with a rather plummy British accent, Preston is a fully signed-up member of the ‘latte belt’. Before the airing of MCA, Preston would have been little known to audiences outside of Melbourne’s foodie middle class, but he has since become a huge favourite with audiences, even winning a Best New Talent award at the Australian annual television awards, the Logies, a distinctly lowbrow cultural event. While this is perhaps surprising given that commercial Australian television presenters tend to work hard at being seen as ordinary, it reflects Newman and Gibson’s point about food television’s broader scope in relation to cultural representations and its role in democratising culturally exotic and bourgeois forms of taste for a broad audience. Preston’s posh food critic is balanced out by George Calombaris’ working-class Greek chef made good and by chef Gary Mehigan’s more middle-of-the-road television host persona (both of whom, as successful working chefs, also anchor the show in questions of labour, craft and vocationalism). While not a chef, Preston plays to a tradition of television chefdom through flamboyant displays of camp and cultural capital. Such overt displays of ‘personality’ are also central to the economic logics of reality television, where Preston’s larger-than-life and highly performative persona as an overweight Oscar Wildish dandy has seen him positioned as a ‘branded expert’ characterised by certain trademarks, from his cravat to his rotundness (Lewis 2010).

**Economies of personhood: work, mobility and insecurity on MCA**

Matt Preston’s status as a highly marketable food personality leads us into another key dimension of MCA’s mode of sociality – its embeddedness, as ‘a master stroke of branding’ (Cauchi 2010), in economic logics. Linked to this logic, a crucial aspect of the way MCA navigates the politics of class is through its focus on labour and job mobility. It is here that the show perhaps speaks most overtly to the pressures of global neo-liberalism. As Skeggs and Wood argue, such logics have seen the growing centrality of a culture of performed selfhood in which we see the naturalisation of ‘an economy of personhood’ (Skeggs and Wood 2009: 632).

Clearly, one way in which this performative, economised self is realised on MCA is through the focus on contestants as entrepreneurial subjects and as sites of potential branding. Here MCA’s extensive branding franchise embraces not just the celebrity chefs and judges featured on the show but also the participants. Like the various celebrity chefs who appear as guests, the contestants are presented to the audience as ‘personalities’ and as sites of (potential) economic and brand value (Hearn 2009) – from the glossy opening titles where contestants are individually introduced to the audience (via ‘glamour’ shots set to American popster Katy Perry’s top 40 hit ‘Hot N Cold’), to the
recurrent use of pop-up text identifying them (and often their age and current occupation/work status), to the names embroidered on their uniforms (along with the *MasterChef* logo) and the focus on their particular ‘food styles’.

What is distinctive about the kind of ‘foodies lifestyle’ (de Solier 2008) promoted on *MCA* is its focus on production, with the skilled, labouring self figured as a marketable product. The model of economic selfhood promoted on *MCA* is one that speaks to Australian class mores and in particular Australian conceptions of social mobility, which compared to the UK, for example, are often more overtly tied to material rather than symbolic resources. As Emmison, Bennett and Frow (1999) argue, while cultural capital and regimes of taste clearly play a role in social identity formation and class distinction in Australia, for many Australians, social status is also strongly linked to the acquisition of social and economic forms of capital. Class concerns are also therefore played out on the show through a focus on the acquisition of work skills, knowledge and relevant work ‘connections’ as well as on forms of entrepreneurialism. There is a strong emphasis on the importance of industry networks, with the judges and contestants often commenting on the potential benefits of being connected with and mentored by the various celebrity chefs featured on the show. Fitting in with this utilitarian approach, cultural capital is treated as a social advantage or utility that can be ‘cashed in’ in the marketplace: for instance, Melbourne lawyer Claire’s ability to speak and read French is depicted as a skill that gave her (and her team) a distinct advantage in various challenges. While Matt Preston’s surfeit of bourgeois cultural capital as a cravat-wearing, educated Briton is acceptable on Australian television in part because it ties neatly into the economics of *MCA* – functioning as a persuasive and highly likeable branded personality.

Self-branding is of course central to the logics of reality television more broadly (see Palmer in this volume). But what is distinctive about the narratives of success and social mobility promoted on *MCA* is the rather pragmatic focus on work skills and career development within the food industry. One cross-promotion on the show’s website entitled ‘If you’re no *MasterChef* get the skills with Guy Grossi’ was linked, for instance, to an Australian state government website for ‘skills Victoria’ with information on ‘education and training options’ for Victorian workers. In contrast to the instant success aspired to on other reality formats, the focus of the *MCA* narrative instead is on rather more realistic and achievable career pathways, with many of the contestants having relatively modest expectations (usually to run their own business in the form of a small restaurant or café). Rather than seeking fame, Alvin, a scientist, and Matthew, an accountant, both speak of escaping the boredom of their desk jobs for the ‘creativity’ of cooking, reflecting the show’s broader emphasis on job satisfaction and finding one’s vocation. And while publicly prominent figures like Julie and Poh are represented as *MCA* success stories, so too are ‘evictees’ such as Fiona who, as we are told in one media report, ‘landed her dream role as a kitchen garden teacher’ at a primary school. Here the show again plays out its egalitarian credentials – anyone can achieve some degree of success. The ‘dreams’ of mobility promoted on the show are not just those of fame and status but are often the more ordinary aspirations of contestants and viewers. And here labour itself is the equaliser on *MCA* – if one is prepared to work at one’s vocation and on oneself, then achieving life goals is guaranteed.
While much of the scripted rhetoric of MCA is about the ‘journeys’ of contestants as they work towards their vocational goals, the flipside to ‘the dream’ – reflected in the show’s pressure tests, challenges and eliminations – is the reality of life and work under late-modern conditions: risk, stress, insecurity, with the potential for downward mobility or ‘elimination’ from the labour market for the worker who is unable to be flexible or entrepreneurial enough to make the grade (Hearn 2009). The broader social, political and economic backdrop to a show that dramatises work processes and the acquisition of vocational skills is one common to most developed neo-liberal states. While many Australians identify themselves as middle class (McGregor 2001), the Australian labour market has become an increasingly insecure, risky place marked by a growing gap between the ‘work rich’ and the ‘work poor’, with increasing numbers of workers clocking up longer hours and holding down multiple jobs (Broomhill and Sharp 2007: 93). In contrast to the image of the laid-back Australian lifestyle, the evidence is that ‘middle Australia’ has been experiencing growing work stress and insecurity, with many expressing a sense of dissatisfaction with their quality of life (Greig, Lewins and White 2003: 98). These recent shifts come off the back of longer global trends since the 1970s towards relative deindustrialisation and the growth of an informational economy with increasing numbers of people employed in the service sector. Alongside the deregulation of the Australian labour market in the 1980s and the replacement of protections around wage equality with the ‘flexibility’ of enterprise bargaining, the rise of the informational economy has heralded an era of insecure employment.

This culture of flexible labour is reflected and normalised in the narrative logic of MCA itself, with contestants depicted as often being prepared to give up highly paid jobs in order to pursue their vocational ‘dream’ even if that dream comes at significant personal risk. In this context, ‘mobility’ has now become a growing part of life but not necessarily in a positive way; rather, contemporary workers find themselves forced to be mobile and flexible in order to fit into the changing needs of capital. Such shifts have resulted in some paradoxical developments around the nature of work. On the one hand, the rise of informational capitalism has seen a growing proportion of professional-managerial workers with an associated increased focus on the need for education, qualifications and for continual upskilling (Greig, Lewins and Frow 2003: 101). On the other hand, a hollowing out of the middle sector of the job market has resulted in a relatively small core of highly educated workers possessing symbolic-analytic skills, while the majority of workers find themselves increasingly in low-skilled, insecure, part-time employment.

This is the backdrop to MCA’s focus on work – a global marketplace in which mobility and flexibility are twinned with risk and insecurity and by a complex set of tensions between ‘immaterial’ symbolic work and skilled/unskilled labour (Hardt and Negri 2000). The show’s mode of address attempts to be broadly inclusive, addressing the concerns of a wide range of Australians from the professional-managerial class to blue-collar workers, something it manages partly through the kinds of labour it chooses to focus on. Unlike reality shows like The Apprentice, which use the narrow frame of business and managerialism, the focus on cooking and the twinned figure of the amateur cook/professional chef enables MCA to straddle a much wider range of classed and gendered concerns and to embrace a more romantic work ethic, linked to notions of creative labour. Viewers witness the
show’s contestants labouring in a range of settings and under a variety of (often pressured) conditions, from the Fordist factory-like scenario of cooking on a cruise liner, to preparing meals in an army kitchen out in ‘the bush’, to working in the kitchens of high-end restaurants in Sydney and in London.

Contestants also move between participating as members of a collaborative team, working as individuals against each other and against the clock, and also at times playing a supervisory role as ‘team leader’. The kind of labour they are asked to perform crosses a broad spectrum, from relatively unskilled supervised work through to the exhibition of leadership skills and to highly creative, analytic forms of labour, as evidenced in the example of the ‘invention’ tests where contestants have to create new dishes, often from ingredients they haven’t chosen themselves. The focus on creative labour and the blurring of the lines between productive leisure and labour is reinforced by the apparently permeable boundary between amateur cooks and professional chefs and by the way the show encourages viewers to engage in restaurant-level cooking (‘you too can be a MasterChef at home’). The emphasis on communal enterprise is extended here to the audience, who are called upon to identify with and participate in the creative endeavours of the contestants. This focus on both creative and skilled labour thus allows MCA to embrace the interests not only of a wide range of contestants from a variety of backgrounds but also to connect with a broadly diversified audience.

**Conclusion**

As Graeme Turner suggests (2009), successful reality TV shows work not just as textual mediations of the social but rather produce active interventions into social space, shaping normative conceptions of identity and, perhaps more importantly, framing people’s social expectations and their imagined life trajectories. Much scholarship on reality and lifestyle formats sees them as vehicles for globalising models of social identity articulated, in particular, to individualised, consumerist conceptions of selfhood, which are, in turn, often tied to cosmopolitan middle-class forms of taste and cultural value. In its attempts to democratise high-end culinary taste for a broad audience while simultaneously promoting an enterprising, branded conception of selfhood, MCA can certainly be read in this vein. But while inflected by an enterprise model of selfhood (Rose 1999), the show also offers a distinctive engagement with the economic and cultural pressures around transnational cosmopolitanism, linked to the way in which the format has been Australianised. The show’s appeal across a large audience reflects the way in which it manages to re-articulate questions of taste and cultural capital, as well as the competitive individualist elements of the global reality television format, to a variety of Australian social, cultural and economic concerns, as well as to local industry and commercial interests.

While MCA’s narrative trajectory is ostensibly focused on social mobility and the acquisition of cultural, social and economic capital, the show’s producers have been careful to strive for an inclusive cross-class mode of address, portraying the MasterChef kitchen as a space of egalitarianism. As Skeggs and Wood’s work on UK reality programming has shown, such formats often set up a moral hierarchy between middle-class lifestyles and cultural values and working-class subjects, with the latter often positioned as socially deficient and in need of reform (Skeggs and Wood 2009). MCA in contrast, by
reflecting Australian anxieties about overt displays of class distinction, works hard to pave over class
difference. And the show is somewhat unusual in bringing together contestants from a broad range
of class backgrounds in the same (highly artificial) social space. Paradoxically, though, while MCA
embraces social diversity, at the same time it works to deny class hierarchies – the MasterChef
kitchen is portrayed as a level playing field where crème brûlée is ‘working-class food’ and where
labourers and lawyers alike can aspire to the same goals.

This sleight of hand is enabled on the show by an emphasis on economics and labour: The focus
on work and personal drive, rather than on cultural capital and taste, works as a kind of equaliser:
While middle-class forms of cultural capital and habitus are valued on MCA, they are depicted as
personality traits and life skills that can be used to add value to the branded, economised self. MCA’s
focus on ethnicity, for instance, is framed in terms of economic capital; representing cultural identity
as a potentially useful form of personal branding enables the show to negotiate and embrace
middle-class cosmopolitanism without having to foreground the role of class in social mobility.

Likewise, the show speaks to a range of classed experiences through its focus on a variety of
forms of labour and recognition of the pressures of the labour market. However, while the show
acknowledges such pressures through its narrativisation of risk and insecurity, the ‘solutions’ it offers
largely involve the contestants learning to see themselves as risk-bearing entrepreneurial subjects.
Part of the huge success of the format in Australia has been the way the producers have managed
to personalise and humanise these issues for a broad cross-demographic audience, tying questions
of enterprise, mobility and self-fulfilment to the often modest personal aspirations of a range of
Australians. MCA’s underlying concern with viewing contestants as sites of enterprise and capacity-
building in the end leads to an overemphasis on the possibilities of individual mobility and on the self
as a value-added economic entity, glossing over the realities of a labour market structured by class-
based inequities and by a growing gap between the rich and the poor.

Acknowledgements

I’d like to thank Alison Huber, Beverley Skeggs, Graeme Turner and Helen Wood for their extremely
helpful critical comments on this chapter.

Notes

1. Its national import was recently further highlighted by the fact that the federal election leaders’ debate
for the 2010 Australian election, traditionally aired in the time slot of 7.30 p.m. on Sunday, was moved to
an earlier time to avoid a clash with the finale of Series 2 of the show. On being questioned about why
he wasn’t invited to be part of the TV debate, Greens leader Bob Brown quipped, ‘I’ve as much chance
of making the debate as I have of making the finals of MasterChef’ (Curtis 2010).

2. Invented in Australia in the 1950s as a snack for outdoor events, the chiko roll is essentially a larger, more
robust version of the Chinese spring roll.

3. This phrase is taken from a byline of an article on MCA in the Melbourne broadsheet The Age (Quinn
2009).
4. The byline also conjures up some presumably unintended resonances with the far right nationalist One Nation Party.

5. For instance, the myth of ‘terra nullias’, of Australia as unpopulated when it was first colonised by British settlers, was only overturned in the late 1990s.

6. The *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901, known as the white Australian Policy, prohibited entry to Australia of non-whites. Most migrants who came to Australia before World War II were of Anglo stock, while more than half of postwar migrants came from non-English-speaking backgrounds. These migrants faced a strongly assimilationist culture.

7. The Tampa affair occurred in August 2001 when the Howard Government refused permission for the Norwegian freighter MV *Tampa*, carrying 438 rescued Afghans from a distressed fishing vessel, to enter Australian waters, leading to controversy locally and internationally over Australia’s breach of international human rights.

8. What became known as ‘the Cronulla riots’ began in December 2005 with reports of clashes between volunteer lifesavers at Cronulla (a beachside suburb of Sydney) and a group of youths of ‘Middle Eastern appearance’. This was followed by a period of race-based violent confrontations and incidences commonly depicted in the press as ‘race riots’.

9. The CWA is Australia’s largest voluntary women’s organisation whose primary remit is to make life better for families, especially those living in rural Australia.

10. Commercial interests lie at the core of the MCA franchise, which includes a magazine, cookbooks, two spin-off shows, *Celebrity MasterChef* and *Junior MasterChef*, estimated to bring in $65 million in revenue (Cauchi 2010).

**Bibliography**


