

Mary Alice Yeskey

Welcome to the Johns Hopkins University Press podcast. I'm Mary Alice Yeskey with the JHU Press Journals Division. Joining us today is Dr. Leland Tabares. Dr. Tabares is a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Loyola University New Orleans. His latest paper, "Misfit Professionals: Asian American Chefs and Restaurateurs in the Twenty-First Century", appears in the summer 2021 issue of the journal *Arizona Quarterly*. The paper explores how Asian American chefs and restaurateurs are gaining mainstream acclaim through challenging the norms of the restaurant industry. Examining the narratives in these chef's cookbooks, Dr. Tabares coins the term "coming to career narrative" to take a close look at how these misfit chefs achieve success through new forms of professional and cultural belonging that revise popular perceptions of Asian Americanness.

Thank you so much for joining us Leland I really appreciate your time today. The first question I like to ask all our guests, just to get a little background, is what is your academic origin story?

Leland Tabares

Yeah, so for me I was actually thinking about this a little in preparation for our discussion today and it made me really think about how my origin story is kind of circuitous in the ways that I write about with some of these, what I call misfit professional chefs and restaurateurs. I kind of had this windy road, one to academia, and then two to Asian American studies. So, before academia, I was, you know, working in a non-profit, kind of had a career in education directing, and even before that when I was an undergrad I was, like, I went into college as a biology major thinking I was gonna do medicine, but I really didn't know what I was going to do. You know, I come from a mixed-race family of, you know, Chinese immigrants, Mexican immigrants, who were really just trying to establish themselves, so I didn't really have too much guidance on, you know, what I wanted to do or thought about that as much. In college, I was interning at, like, non-profits as well as, I spent a year as a carpenter, which I hadn't really talked about, but I guess it might be relevant for our discussion here. I kind of found myself in these sort of, you know, what I think of as, like, non-traditional sort of spaces that are not explicitly coded or marked as sort of Asian American, right, being a carpenter.

So, when I got to grad school, I also came in really not expecting to do Asian American studies. I didn't have a background about really thinking about my, or even Asian Americans, sort of racialization in these critical kind of ways, and it wasn't until I happened into a graduate seminar on multi-racial and multi-ethnic literatures that I began to really find interest in, and kind of relate to the materials that I was reading. I was led by a professor who became really influential to me and still is. She would ultimately become my advisor and I'm still really close

with her. So, her class in graduate school was really influential and inspiring to me and it kind of brought together a lot of these personal and professional connections that would ultimately guide my work. And, you know, how did get into even, like, thinking about race and labor? I think it really in some of these ways that I didn't really imagine myself or didn't see myself fitting into some of these traditional or stereotyped narratives of Asian American kind of professional belonging, at least when I was finding my way, and this really allowed me to think about and really tap into my own interests, I guess, in reading and thinking critically about social media influencers or something on YouTube and Instagram and TikTok and Asian American chefs and restaurateurs. So, I think maybe, you know, my career background gave me a foundation for thinking about the ways that, you know, institutional structures inform and shape how we see Asian Americanness and racialized people and manage certain kinds of forms of belonging. But also inspired me to think about what new kinds of industries are emerging and what new kinds of institutional modes of professionalism are emerging and how does this impact our long-held understandings of race, ethnicity, gender sexuality.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's really interesting. Just as a kind of interesting aside, this is I think maybe my fifth or sixth podcast interview with, you know, an author in academia who has said, there was one class, there was one lecture, or one professor that just was it, that kind of lit the fire under the person in terms of how they directed their research and that just, kind of, as the daughter of an educator warms my heart knowing that, like, there's still those moments of really good inspiration. What is your professor's name by the way?

Leland Tabares

Yeah, Tina Chen. She, we still keep in touch a lot. I will say too, it's wonderful to see, and I actually write about this a little bit in the piece too, the ways that these kind of mentorship in formalized but also informal mentorship pathways manifest in these institutional spaces that can be really generative, on the one hand, and facilitate this kind of community, I was able to find, you know, a small and close Asian Americanist community at my graduate institution. That was really helpful for me moving forward with my career but also, again, with me personally thinking more about matters related to identity, belonging, race. On the other hand, though, I think that it's interesting that a lot of the people you've mentioned have, like, one professor, or one class that inspired them, cause while mentorship on the one hand definitely is generative in how it can forge communities, I think it also can be symptomatic of maybe structural inequalities where people might have to rely on, maybe more so than certain other kinds of communities might rely on mentorship more than others because they might not be getting the same kinds of guidance in the more formalized and normative structures of an institution. So, mentorship becomes, like, a very productive and influential space, but it's again, it might be a byproduct of some of those existing structural issues.

Mary Alice Yeskey

It's filling a void. That's a really good point. I'm really glad you said that, thank you. So, what drew you to focus on the vocation of chefs for your research? How did you sort of narrow down your focus there?

Leland Tabares

Yeah, so I mean, this project comes out of my larger book project. This is kind of a project in food studies, but my larger book project is really thinking about professionalization, reckoning with Asian Americans, and trends into increasingly diverse industry professions in the twenty-first century, you know, and what their participation means as they go into wholly and newly emergent kinds of professional fields, like, again, say YouTube or Tik Tok or Instagram, but also fields that have been historically working-class and then evolved or transitioned into these professional spheres, like the restaurant industry which professionalized in, like, the mid-twentieth century. So, that's kind of the groundwork for some of my thinking, but also, I mean if I'm just saying like where are we seeing Asian Americans accruing high levels of visibility, well it's on like cooking competition shows, or, like, mainstream entertainment like Bravo. I will say, I do like cooking competition shows, and that's, kind of like, sparked my own interest. But then, those kind of shows quickly show you how Asian Americans are now industry leaders or industry influencers, you know, they're winning Michelin Stars, James Beard Awards, Food and Wine, you know, magazine awards, Bon Appetit Awards. So, it's really signaling, a changing kind of, one, industry, but then two, changing perceptions of Asian Americans and Asian American foodways, Asian inspired foodways, in a field that has historically disenfranchised that population.

You know, maybe listeners now might think that, it's very common to see, like, Asian inspired or Asian American foods as like high fine dining. But that hasn't been the case for many years, you know, and even the origins, the origin story we could say of, like, Asian Americans in the food world was kind of due towards institutional and systemic racism. In the nineteenth century, Chinese immigrants came to California for the gold rush. They experienced a lot of racist legislative policies that pushed them out of the gold mines and forced them into service industry jobs in San Francisco China towns, doing service work like laundry work, or, you know, food and restaurant work. So, you know, the origins of Asian Americans in the food world really dates back to the nineteenth century, kind of like racist regulations of Chinese immigrants, and then, you know, in the mid-twentieth century for various reasons different kinds of Asian ethnic foods become popularized, to the point where now it's now common, you expect almost to see Asian Americans winning *Top Chef* or, you know, in this last season a Japanese chef was in the finals of *Top Chef* and many of the guest judges were Asian Americans. So, you can see how this kind of shift in professional norms and expectations alter, my work tries to show, understandings of Asian Americanness. But also, you know, spotlight and signal shifts in the industry that enculturate these kinds of different perceptions.

Mary Alice Yeskey

As a fan of *Top Chef*, one thing I've noticed throughout many seasons, this seems to be a recurring thing, is that the story arcs of the chef competitors frequently follow a storyline of the chef sort of not doing well or not succeeding in the competition until they find their "authentic cuisine" or "cuisine with heart", a lot of air quotes here, and that frequently is the food of their childhood or their culture of origin, you know, what their grandmother cooked for them, that kind of thing. So, my question is, the changing definition of authentic is something that your paper explores in detail, which I thought was so interesting, do you think that shows like *Top Chef*, I mean, as you just said in your last answer, that are kind of showing all this, do you think shows like *Top Chef* help or hinder dismantling cultural and professional standards within the restaurant industry, in terms of that sort of authentic definition?

Leland Tabares

Yeah, I mean I think that's a good question, and it's hard to pick sides I think it's kind of both. So, I will say though, that authenticity is a very fraught term as you were signaling in your question. You know, like, what does authentic mean, what constitutes authenticity, right? A lot of scholars point to the ways that certain kinds of food are seemingly authentic but then their origins sort of date back further. You know, you could trace ingredients and certain ingredients are authentic to a particular region at a particular time, but also, had circulated other regions at different times, so then it was authentic to other regions at different times. So, it's easy to push back against authenticity and show how it's fraught. This kind of showcases how authenticity is very ideological, it kind of confirms the, you know, a person's assumptions of what authenticity is and then kind of just maps that onto, like, another person or another kind of foodway. So, I think that the show, and this kind of produces very limiting definitions of what minoritized foodways or Asian ethnic foodways could be and what Asian Americans could be. And I think that shows like *Top Chef* on the one hand can be generative for undermining that, but at the very same time just as well codify a lot of these ideological problems.

I think a show like *Top Chef* is really great with bringing widespread and immediate visibility to underserved and underrepresented culinary cultures, and minoritized chefs who work in those kinds of culinary tracts. You know, the last couple seasons of *Top Chef* have spotlighted food from the African diaspora and the global slave trade, or the legacies of that and the food cultures around it. It's really put pressure on, not to ruin this last season for you, there were chefs who got really far I will say, putting pressure on what Mexican food could be, really turning away from, like, the taco model and showcasing a lot of things that people might not know of, even someone, you know, a Mexican American person of mixed-race background, like, I didn't know a lot of the foods that were being showcased, so even eye-opening to people who identify as Mexican or Mexican American. It also shows that, like, these kinds of food cultures can be fine dining. Right, which again pushes back on maybe mainstream perceptions of people's understanding or assumption that Chinese food is only take-out and it should be, like, seven dollars, and, like, you know, African food is just, like, Ethiopian food that is, like, ten-dollar take out, and tacos are only, you know, fifty cents and that's how much I should pay for

them and that's all their good for. Right, so I think it really showcases, it really challenges, the existing ideas we have about value and worth of minoritized food cultures.

On the other hand, though, as you were saying, there are very clear instances where *Top Chef* risks perpetuating the very problems or ideologies that come with authenticity. Right, cooking from the heart or the soul. Authenticity, ironically, is not equal to everyone, right? Authentic Italian and French cuisine and Spanish cuisine is really seen as soulful and therefore, like, valuable. But, you know, in this latest season of *Top Chef* as well, there was a Black chef from Philadelphia if I recall correctly, who cooked African diasporic foods, her foods were called, when her foods were talked about in this authentic kind of way, that judges called it, like, home cooking and wanted a little more elevation to her home cooking. On the flip end, or in a different way, I should say, as you also mentioned, like, Asian American chefs have been on the show and were told to be more soulful, which implicitly operates on this ideology that Asian Americans are these robotic model minorities who, like, produce, or do labor in ways that are, like, heartless or, you know, lacking feeling. So, it's this, you know, you can see how different modes of ways in which people have been racialized, Black people's, Asian American people's, appears in different ways in the show that maybe inadvertently risks codifying some of these existing ideologies.

But again, I think that's why, you know, I turn to, I think, cookbooks as an important way to challenge and frustrate some of these narratives where I see the cookbook as an important space where chefs who have been historically misrepresented, stereotyped, marginalized, excluded on mainstream media. They're now able to challenge those modes of stereotyping through their texts that put pressure on this sort of, like, glorified, glamorous light of restaurant work and restaurant ownership. You know, I have a set of cookbooks right next to me, but I know people won't be able to see but I'll at least show you. I have Dale Talde, who was on *Top Chef* as well, he has this, actually, incidentally, his cookbook is named *Proudly Inauthentic Recipes from the Philippines to Brooklyn* and he titles it *Asian-American*. So, his coming to career narrative which I write about in my piece, his coming to career narrative challenges this kind of glamorous way that professional kitchens have been presented, He actually uses the term, he calls it, his narrative, pushing back against the "food as art bullshit" that gets portrayed on mainstream television, by really showing how, like, he was subject to a lot of racism in the kitchen where people expected him to cook Asian or Asian inspired foods even though he wasn't necessarily trained in that way and kind of actively avoided that as his own effort to kind of, like, distance himself from that expectation. He actually even describes working in professional kitchen cultures as "hard labor", as if it's, like, being imprisoned. He actually compares it to, like, not being in chef's whites, but actually being in prison's, like, orange jumpsuits, where you're subject to all this kind of expected toils. So, I think that you know, the cookbook functions in this very resistant way to challenge and maybe even supplement the narratives that we get in mainstream media like *Top Chef*.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, thank you, and again that's a great segue to my next question, which, one of the things you point out in your paper, sort of one of the main sections, is this coming to career narrative, which is, you know, these cookbooks aren't just you open them up and chapter one is recipes and that's it, it just goes through. There's a whole text involved, which is what your reading is all about, and as I read your paper I was struck, and maybe this is just because I'm, you know, in PR and marketing and this is how my brain works, but my question to you is as you read these coming to career narratives and you look at these cookbooks on the whole with the text as well as the recipes and how they're presented, and how those messages are delivered like you just pointed out with Dale's cookbook, how much do you think that those narratives are being driven by the chef's themselves versus, you know, an editor, a PR marketing department, that's saying, you know, this is gonna sell, why don't you write a personal essay to go along with these recipes? Do you think that there's, sort of, equal billing in sort of the impetus of those texts?

Leland Tabares

Yeah, I mean I think that's a really interesting point, and could even lead to a really great project of tracing the connections between PR marketing and editing and, like, evolutions in the food industry.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I will read that paper too (laughs).

Leland Tabares

Yeah, I was gonna say you should write that paper (laughs). But no, that sounds really great. I don't necessarily, well, one I would say I think that's definitely evidence, you know, a lot of the chefs I write on are just open with the way the ways they either left their education, their formal kind of, like, schooling education early or dropped out or only went up to a certain level before they went to culinary school. So, it, you know, makes sense I'm sure they get guidance in different ways. I don't analyze that in my project so much, but I do think that it's important to at least think about the ways, the possibilities, and also the limitations of what that means, right. So, I think on the one hand it's easy to maybe critique the ways that different kinds of industries are, or institutional incentives, kind of revolving around the profitability of that book in the literary marketplace informs these narratives. It's easy to critique that. But, on the other hand, I think that there are also generative ways in which you can see that Asian Americans are now accessing a level of influence where people want those narratives, and it shouldn't be, like, this turn away from that fully or, like, a full embrace of that. But again, somewhere in between about where there has to be something positive about, you know, one, the reading public's interest in Asian American stories and also this comes with, you know, viewing audiences as well, but also, like, the publishing industry's interest in Asian American stories. But again, as my project also tries to showcase how the concept of misfits and misfit professionals extends beyond Asian America. But nevertheless, I'm just using that as an example.

So, I think that it can be positive in its own ways, I think also though, it just demonstrates to us further that the restaurant industry and, I guess, industries more broadly, are just connected to other industries, right. So, it just makes us more sensitive to the ways that what we think of as this very isolated space is actually a part of a larger network of professional ideologies and capitalist production and cultural production that, again, actually maybe even going back to your previous question, force us to put pressure on, like, what constitutes authenticity, or what constitutes cultural production for these chefs, because on the one hand, like, authenticity could relate to, say, cultural backgrounds or racial background or ethnic background or class background or something, though what my piece tries to do is really showcase the ways that institutional structures that inform professionalization are deeply impactful for these people. And, while on the one hand, like, “racial or ethnic culture” or, like, “culture” is important to them. I think also, I argue and my piece argues, professional management systems become influential to the kinds of cultural production we see and the foods that get produced. So, again I think it’s kinda like a both and right. So, editing is something or the publishing industry and the literary marketplace, can be a site of critique, but it can also for people who have not had voices or who have been stereotyped in those very fields, it can be a site of possibility. And I think that’s why I really try to focus on how minoritized people navigate certain industries rather than argue for, like, a full turn-in, or a entire turn-away from industry norms and professionalism, that’s what my broader work is interested in, right.

So, earlier in this piece, I position misfits against punks, right, we think of punks as I mean when you think of misfits you think of a punk or something, or some iteration of that. But, you know, punk although it’s a very diverse and rich kind of sub-culture with a long history, the idea, just the general idea, from a reader might be they’re kinda these, like, ant-capitalist groups. But what I try to show, and why I use the term misfits in this, is because misfits are not like anti-capitalists necessarily, right, like, they’re actively participating in an industry that has been very open and visible kinda, especially in recent years with activist movements, but with its, you know, toxic masculinity, with its racism, with its sexism, homophobia. So, in this way, you know, you can see how misfits are actively engaged in the industry and, at times, even risking kind of, like, reproducing some of these problems and, you know, some chefs have been lately just being very open with how they want to be more sensitive and cognizant of their role within these industries. So, the point is not to herald them, misfit professionals, as these kind of heroes of the industry, or even disavow their narratives because they are, like, interpolated into market capitalism, right. But the point is simply to showcase how they navigate, or how they become managed, but also how they navigate in response to these spaces to find agency and to forge communities amid regulation.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Exactly, yeah, and that’s one of the things I really liked about the beginning of your paper, was just that clear-cute definition where you wanted to show that misfit means working within a system to do things in a way that’s never been done before, and I was reminded of that when

you were talking about Dale's cookbook and the title, you know, defiantly, is that the word you used? Defiantly inauthentic, or unapologetically?

Leland Tabares

Proudly.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Proudly! Yeah, well that works. Proudly inauthentic, which is just kind of, in a way they're using transparency as a form of power, you know what I mean, just sort of, like, I will say things as bluntly and clearly, truthfully as I can, and that's, you know, cause I think a lot of folks like you said are, I think that the sort of hot cuisine industry has been this impenetrable box that people think that they need to do certain things to get into, and yeah, like, I think this radical misfit truth telling is a really powerful way that these chefs are doing that. So, thank you that was a really interesting answer. So, my next question is just cause I'm curious, but having read your paper I'm wondering if you like to cook and if you collect cookbooks and if any of these texts that your reading for your professional research have sort of, you know, made their way into your actual kitchen in your life?

Leland Tabares

Yeah, well, I didn't really start cooking too much until, you know, in grad school, but even then I was, you know, the foundations for this project were kind of when I was writing, you know, my dissertation. But even when I was, like, in grad school, I was always cooking on a budget, which I guess is like the classic English grad student budget, so I couldn't really cook too many fancy things. I will say I do like to cook, you know, some things from scratch, like, I really like making pizza, I guess, like, just, like, classic foods.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Nice.

Leland Tabares

Homecooked pizza or homemade pizza, even, like, fried chicken sandwiches. Some of this was kind of coming out of, like, my own experiences living, you know, part-time with my partner. I would commute to see her and she lived in Philadelphia when she went to grad school there. But, yeah, so some of the local kind of food cultures there inspired me. In terms of, like, the food from the cookbooks that I analyzed I have some of them right next to me. What's interesting about the cookbooks, and I think maybe this even comes, and I mean this does come out in my project, what's interesting to me about the cookbooks that I analyze and my relation to them is, like, ironically, I'm not as interested in the recipes. Or, like, I don't think it's just about the recipes, I should say. But I really like the narratives, I mean, that makes sense cause I'm analyzing the narratives, but I like the narratives, I also like, like, the pictures and the images and the artwork. So, you know, I have, I can show you again I know that your listeners

won't see but, Danny Bowien's *Mission Chinese* cookbook kind of the cover emulates this sort of, like, your expectations of the Asian or Chinese restaurants. But ultimately, I argue in my piece, he does a lot of work to undermine those expectations and alters his own restaurant space to resist that. But in his book he has not only over a hundred pages of the narrative so you can see how the narrative really take primacy in these kind of coming to career narratives, even more so than the recipes at times, but also he includes a lot of images that show him as this kind of, like, misfit kid with how he is dressed, or misfit young adult, and then also he showcases a lot of moments with his family, or with his friends, or even, like, restaurant workers who have historically escaped visibility in the public sphere, like, you know, these undocumented or working back-end workers who, you know, who work in the back-end parts of the restaurant space and don't get any attention. So, there's a lot of, like, photos that he includes that bring visibility to that, and that's what I like about it.

I also really liked Preeti Mistry's *The Juhu Beach Club Cookbook* and in this one they spotlight in these very beautiful ways, like, Indian spices and ingredients, like, vegetables or even just the spices themselves center on the page, which I think, importantly, you know, on the one hand they're beautiful, but on the other hand I think that they're actively and visually challenging the expectations we have about, you know, what takes primacy in a dish, right. In this kind of Western culinary tradition, we see sort of, like, the protein is, like, the center of the dish and, like, vegetables are a side, or vegetables are secondary. You know, in this kind of maybe Indian context, spices are, you know, in Western perceptions of Indian food might just be, like, it's just a bunch of spices, we don't know what it is, it's mysterious, but there are a lot of spices. But understanding is not important, but it ends up being good, but, I think, like, what they do here is they really showcase and put front and center the spices as a way to challenge and undermine that expectation, but also, yeah, the vegetables.

I also really like Kristen Kish, who was on *Top Chef* recently and won, she has really beautiful images of food that are very fine dining looking. Also, this one's really engaging, Nguyen Tran's *Adventures in Starry Kitchen* cookbook, which, you can see just kind of on the cover here, as I'm showing you.

Mary Alice Yeskey

There isn't a picture of a dish on the cover, that's so interesting.

Leland Tabares

No, it's kind of like street art almost.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, yeah. I'll put images of these covers in with the show description so our listeners can see, but that one to me is, like, that doesn't even look like a cookbook. That just looks, like, yeah, that's so interesting.

Leland Tabares

Yeah, I don't even know how to describe it, but it definitely has, you know, like, the street art vibe. Nguyen Tran was some who, like, cooks in in these sort of what he calls illegal underground kitchens out of his home.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Pop-ups, yeah.

Leland Tabares

And he had this, like, yeah, sort of underground food economy that was only, like, legible through these, like, food blogs and friends. And he includes a lot of images in his cookbook where he's, like, just showcasing him with his friends and being out and, like, being social. It's this way in which you can see Asian Americans just being social, right, pushing back again against the stereotype of Asian Americans as these isolated model minorities who are just, you know, among themselves or just constantly toiling or something, but instead, you know, there's this social dynamic, and I think this goes back to the ways that my project is really trying to showcase how the cookbook is not only just this space for recipe making and bringing visibility to underseen foods, which on the one hand is important, but on the other hand, it also is this kind of, social and political text that engages with or sheds light on systemic institutional inequalities that Asian Americans, among others, face. But then also, once we can begin to see the cookbook as a document that gives light to these issues, we can also then begin to see the cookbook as a resistant kind of text that expands how we think about resistance itself. So, we normally think of resistance as just kind of, like, public activism, which on the one hand is very important, but on the other hand, if we only think of public activism and militating on the street as a mod of resistance, it doesn't really do justice, and it makes us overlook all of these mundane, or maybe even day-to-day experiences and racisms that, you know, minorities face, but also, it makes us overlook us then, the cookbook at least allows us to, you know, draw visibility to the ways in which, even within those kind of day-to-day regulations, there are opportunities for resistance in their own kind of context.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right.

Leland Tabares

I think that it's really useful in those ways to read the cookbook.

Mary Alice Yeskey

And like you said I think, the power in it is that, pardon the pun I guess, it's sort of like a palatable vehicle for that, you know what I mean?

Leland Tabares

Yeah (laughs).

Mary Alice Yeskey

It's like, oh it's just a cookbook for this show that I watch, and then you do that but these, sort or, you know, one by one these little changes and these new narratives that start to dismantle these stereotypes and these assumptions. You know, there's power in that, and I think that's why your work specifically is so valuable because you're just sort of calling it out while it's happening so thank you for that.

Leland Tabares

Yeah, it's, like, come for the recipes stay for the political activism.

Mary Alice Yeskey

(laughs) Stay for dismantling structural racism, we can do all of this before dinners done, I love it. So, my last question is what are you currently researching? What's next for you?

Leland Tabares

Yeah, so I'm working on a couple of things right now. One of them actually is related to food, although I mentioned earlier my larger work is more geared towards professional labor. But in this new job that I have at Loyola New Orleans, I've been really interested in thinking about Viet Cajun food, which is like a contemporary fusion between Vietnamese food tradition and Cajun food traditions of the deep South, but, you know, often in public spheres Viet Cajun food and even actually in, you know, documentaries that have been popularized on Vice or Netflix original series *Ugly Delicious* with David Chang, Viet Cajun is portrayed as this, like, mingling of Vietnamese and local Southern communities in ways that risk doing a disservice to the longer histories, structural racism, that have managed and regulated and really disenfranchised the Vietnamese refugee communities that have been in the South since the Vietnam war. So, my project tries to push against this kind of narrative by looking at the ways, by spotlighting, I guess, the fisher folks, and the ways that Vietnamese refugee communities have been part of the food industry through their farming practices, and I do this by wanting to draw attention to the role that ecological disasters have played in exacerbating these kinds of social and political and urban inequalities by tracing Viet Cajun food back to disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill that ravaged the industry and access to those industry opportunities. So, I'm trying to bring in this sort of eco-critical perspective in order to, again, expand these narratives of Asian American belonging and participation within the food world that push back against this idea that, you know, Viet Cajun food is just a product of a more progressive South.

And then, in my broader research, I'm continuing to work on my book project which examines and reckons with Asian Americans and trends into increasingly diverse industry professions in the twenty-first century. I have, you know, one of my chapters on misfit chefs and

restaurateurs. I mentioned earlier that I also have work and one chapter is on what I call professional amateurs which examines Asian American content creators on YouTube. YouTube is normally seen as this free alternative open democratic space apart from mainstream media where minoritized peoples who have been historically stereotyped and excluded now have a space to present themselves authentically, so authenticity kind of comes back into play, but that piece traces content monetization policies and developments on the platform to show how actually mainstream media and entertainment industries have been central to the making of YouTube and the evolution of YouTube because these very kind of profit initiatives, or profit-based initiatives, to expand the platform are gatekept by the very industries that have pushed out minoritized peoples. So, I kind of push back against this idea of YouTube as a free and open space and show how minoritized peoples are made, although they are making money, their performances are made just to seem amateur.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's interesting. My PR wheels are spinning. So, is that gonna be also a separately published paper or is that just a part of the book?

Leland Tabares

That's actually out now in the *Journal of Asian American Studies*.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Fantastic.

Leland Tabares

People can check it out (laughs).

Mary Alice Yeskey

I will link that right in our show write-up. That's fantastic, thank you so much. I didn't even realize that. That's wonderful. God, that's really interesting and when you described that I was, like, well yeah, and not in a, I don't mean this in a bad way, but like yeah obviously, I just would love to really read into the meat of that and see how that turned out, cause it is, it's like, not democratic at all.

Leland Tabares

And I think YouTube know that, right, cause their slogan is "Broadcast Yourself". So, they try to enculturate this sensibility where they're free and open but they're not.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right, it's like how Google used to say "Don't Be Evil" was their motto and they very quietly stopped using that (laughs)

Leland Tabares

(laughs) Yeah, that's a good one. Speaking of Google, one of my chapters is also looking at shifts in Silicon Valley ideologies of professionalism. So, I have a chapter on the ways that, you know, Asian Americans and Asian knowledge workers were recruited in the late twentieth century to Silicon Valley, in the mid to late twentieth century, to really bolster its STEM type initiatives, but since the late nineties, or, like, mid to late nineties we've been seeing a shift towards, like, Silicon Valley's embrace, or really co-opting, of humanistic ideologies like valuing innovation and creativity and free-thinking in ways that, on the one hand, can be publicly perceived as good, but as we, you know, are very ideological and dangerous when these kinds of privatized companies co-opt free-thinking ideologies. So, that's one of my chapters, then kind of to set this all off, in one of my early chapters I'm trying to look at and make sense of changing representations of Asian American college students in literature, film, and media to showcase and argue that, you know, there's a new generation of Asian Americans arising who are, you know, going into different kinds of career tracts that require us to rethink their almost pre-professional approaches to careerism by looking at, you know, Asian American students and representations of Asian American students migrating towards more humanistic fields and how this alters our traditional understandings of model minority-ness and making it possible to think about Asian Americans in more diverse industry settings. Which then, again, sets off the rest of the book looking at chefs and content creators and Silicon Valley people. So, yeah, it's a project I really enjoy, and food is one aspect of it but it's largely driven by changing relations to professional industries given, again, Asian Americans historical relation to the American labor economy.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right, through that specific lens. I mean, everything, I wanna read all of it, so you sold me. Last question, does the book have a title and a publication date yet?

Leland Tabares

It's tentatively titled *Professionalizing Asian America: Race and Labor in the Twenty First Century*, doesn't have a publication date yet but maybe I'll be back on the podcast again when it comes out.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I would love to have you back; I would love to have you back. But thank you so much, Leland, for this, this was a wonderful conversation. I could probably keep talking to you for another hour but we'll spare our listeners that. I just really appreciate it; your work is so interesting and important and I want to thank you for your time today.

Leland Tabares

Yeah, thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed talking to you. I mean, I could talk also about cooking and chefs and restaurateurs forever so it was really enjoyable to be here and I really appreciate you.