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Queering the competitive cooking show: performance on/of Netflix's *Nailed It!*

ABSTRACT: This paper will look at Netflix's *Nailed It!*, a competitive cooking show that introduces humor to the traditional format. In my analysis, I will look at the genre conventions of both food television and competitive cooking shows to situate *Nailed It!* within both these genres to understand its particular position. In comparing the show to the conventional narrative structures and performances within genre conventions, I will come to the conclusion that *Nailed It!* is a queer rendition of a cooking competition. In order to do so, I will look at how humor works in the show, both in the performances of the host, judges, and participants, as well as the format and production design. Finally, I will conclude that the particular use of humor enables the show to be read as "a queer cooking show", in how it destabilizes gender roles ascribed to the traditional genres as well as the genre itself.

KEYWORDS: performativity; media studies; food television; humor; discourse analysis.

Netflix's *Nailed It!* is unlike any other competitive cooking show. Inspired by the Internet phenomenon of amateur bakers posting attempts of their aspirational baking and failing miserably -captioning their effort with the sarcastic motto "Nailed It" -, the baking competition has certainly had an impact on the streaming platform. Since its premiere in 2018, it has spawned a sizable franchise; with four seasons, a three season holiday spin-off, a Youtube spin-off called *Sleighed It!*, a virtual experience package titled *Nailed It! At Home Experience*, and four international productions, all in two years. *Nailed It!* has also received critical acclaim, with positive reviews by critics as well as Emmy Nominations for both the show and its host Nicole Byer.

In reviews, *Nailed It!* is often categorized as an entertaining baking show, with its comedic quality often credited for its success. In this article, I will argue that the comedic elements of the show are in fact, queer moments in the context of competitive cooking show conventions. Using

the term queer here will help identify the departure of *Nailed It!* from traditional food television, which is heavily structured around gender binaries. Furthermore, approaching *Nailed It!* through a queer lens will allow to contextualize it within the cooking show genre, understanding the genre conventions and consider it a way to go against them.¹ In order to do so, this paper is divided into two parts: a definition of “queer” in the context of this paper along with a broad overview of food television in the first half for context and analyzing the narrative structure, tone, and content of *Nailed It!* as a “queer cooking show” in the second.²

QUEER IN CONTEXT

In order to understand *Nailed It!* within the perspective of a “queer cooking show”, I would like to define “queer” in the scope of this paper. Taking the broadest understanding of the term “queer”, defined by Donald E. Hall, as a means “to disrupt, to render unnatural and strange, texts and practices that are naturalized and neutralized, i.e. taken-for-granted”, I will explore the ways in which *Nailed It!* queers the conventions surrounding the genre of cooking shows (as qtd. in WATSON 2005: 74).³ Often applied to ideas and theories surrounding personal identity, this fundamental operative quality of a queer perspective will be helpful in identifying moments of disruption in *Nailed It!* in terms of both the format and conventions of

¹ A similar approach has been used recently by Katharina Vester in her analysis of cookbooks through a queer lens (2020). In her article, Vester situates particular cookbooks within the broader frame determined by the genre conventions, establishing a way of “queering the cookbook” through them. To do so, Vester takes into account stylistic departures from the genre, as well as some gender-bending narratives, drawing from works not only by LGBTQ+ authors, but other narratives that lead to “a critical exploration of the genre” (140). In her analysis, Vester identifies Alice B. Toklas’s *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* as such an example for the performance of “queering the cookbook” through “disturb[ing] the normative power cookbooks traditionally wielded” by framing her recipes within “culinary memoirs”, “autobiographical stories and testimonies” (140). It is interesting to note that there is no work -to my knowledge- that conducts a similar work within the field of food television, which is determined by ideological implications of genre conventions overlapping with those of cookbooks. Sarah Murray makes note of this in her entry for *The Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies* which covers the field of food television, identifying “queer representation and queer aesthetics” as an area that would benefit from attention (2013: 193).

² In the same chapter, Murray implies that “cooking shows” and “food television” are two terms that can be used interchangeably (2013). I will also use these two terms interchangeably, referring to the broader field/genre of food television/cooking shows.

³ Imre Lakatos maintains a similar understanding of queer, as “by definition, whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (qtd. in Dell’ AVERSANO 2018: 36).

the genre to which it supposes to belong, in short, its identity as a competitive cooking show.

In this regard, to explore further what is meant by a queer approach, I will refer extensively to Carmen Dell'Aversano's article, "A research programme for queer studies" (2018). In it, Dell'Aversano advocates for a new approach within queer studies and details the problematics that arise from attempts at a queer approach within preexisting categories. She gives examples from Harvey Sacks's undertaking of "denaturalization of social categories", as she draws to the conclusion that these categories must be first deontologized before any "performance" can be deemed queer. She states this as:

Performativity, which is arguably the most widely applied concept in queer theory, is, from the logical viewpoint, nothing but a consequence of this questioning and deconstruction of categories: unless social categories are deontologized, they cannot be revealed as nothing more than the outcome of the iteration of performances. (Dell'AVERSANO 2018: 38)

This statement complicates the statement that *Nailed It!* is a queer cooking show, as it still adheres to some of the formal conventions of the genre, as seen in its premise and distribution label.⁴ However, the show still performs queerness by destabilizing a lot of these preconceived notions that come with these labels, denaturalizing genre conventions by example.

Therefore, it is particularly interesting to look at *Nailed It!* through a queer lens, especially at the way in which it manages to play on the conventions of a cooking show, which allows it to create space for alternative ways of existing within the genre. In this sense, it maintains what Dell'Aversano expresses as essential for a queer perspective: "a consistently queer position can only aim to defend the freedom of expression and self-definition of *any* subject" (42).⁵ And as I will demonstrate in the second half of my paper, *Nailed It!* is able to defend various different experiences, especially in the

⁴ The show is marketed as a baking show by Netflix, and the tags for the show include "Food and Travel Series", "Reality Competition Series" etc. It is also often featured on lists identifying best cooking shows on the Internet, notably by Katerina Daley on *Screenrant* and Loren Cecil's article for *Esquire* (DALEY 2019; CECIL 2020). It is important to note this, as despite its heavy emphasis on quirky humor, the show is still marketed and viewed as a regular cooking show.

⁵ In her work, Dell'Aversano refers primarily to identity. Here, I consider "cooking show" as *Nailed It!*'s identity.

context gender roles as prescribed by food television. In its particular way, the show is able to somewhat comply with Madhavi Menon’s proposal of a queer formulation, which “disrupts the discourse of differences, no longer perform[ing] the ontological division mandated by the term... becom[ing] difference” (qtd. in Dell’AVERSANO 2018: 66).⁶ The “indifference” one has in this process is also an important attribute, as *Nailed It!* performs difference without any seemingly explicit methods or actions. The reason for this implicitness stems from the fact that the queer performance of *Nailed It!* comes out sheerly through its comedic aspirations.

FOOD TELEVISION AS A GENRE

Before going into the details of the humor of *Nailed It!* and its subversive potential, we need to understand the genre in which the show seemingly belongs. For this purpose I will first establish the genre of cooking shows, as well as the sub-genre of competitive cooking shows. Through this, I will be able to identify particular narratives and structures engrained within these genres, giving an in-depth understanding the convention in which *Nailed It!* is positioned. In this endeavor, I will draw from a number of works that have conducted a genre analysis of cooking shows.

First of these is Kathleen Collins’s book, *Watching What We Eat: The Evolution of Television Cooking Shows* (2009). In it, Collins offers an insightful progression of the genre, starting from its early conception as radio programming to the television shows in THE 2000s. The evolution that Collins alludes to her title is defined as:

[A]n evolution of women’s roles from homemakers to coworkers; food as a way to feed ourselves to a way to express out creativity and cultural capital; a shift from a culture of conformity to one of diversity; and a change in focus—from a social life centered inside the home, to one outside of the home, to a desire to have a foot in both. (9)

This quote is interesting in understanding some of the genre defining conventions Collins identifies within food television. According to this, the main driving forces in the evolution are; the shift of women’s place

⁶ This proposal is suggested by Dell’Aversano to be a queer argument, reflecting both the “de-ontologization of categories” and the “denaturalization of performances” in the foundation of queer studies (65).

in relation to domestic food preparation and foregrounding the desire to be entertained while expanding their knowledge in the cultural, environmental, and nutritional aspects of food. This is the base of what numerous scholars identify as the shift from the instructional “home cooking” to the entertainment oriented “lifestyle” format which brought with it the rise of celebrity chefs, and of food media that further fed into this divide (PACKHAM 2016: 85).⁷ Within this divide, cooking shows were coded with the former being considered feminine, and the latter as the masculine (87).

The second work relevant to understanding cooking shows in the scope of this paper is “Inquiry in television cooking shows” by Kelsi and Keri Matwick. Here, the authors raise the question of how cooking performs “social and cultural functions” as well as the implications it has “in a media context” (2015: 313). In their analysis, Matwick and Matwick look at four aspects of inquiry in cooking shows; purpose, expression, participants and context (315).⁸ These four aspects of the genre as understood within the scope of their paper will be fundamental in my analysis of *Nailed It!* particularly in terms of how they are queered through the performances of the hosts, contestants and the show. They are as follows:

Purpose, the first aspect, is formed around the instructional nature of the cooking show. The emphasis here is on the desire to learn, and the “rich exchange” that manifests from the “shared wonder” between the expert and novice (316). Therefore, the purpose of the show implies mutual interest and successful outcome in communication between host and viewer, expert and novice. When talking about the premise and narrative structure of *Nailed It!* this idea of purpose will be seen to be built on an assumption that fails realization.⁹

Expression, the second aspect discussed by the authors, highlights the expression, presentation, and representation of food displays on the show (321). Through transforming food into a “vehicle of expression”, the authors

⁷ These scholars include Jonathan Leer, Charley Packham, Isabelle de Solier, Deborah Phillips, among others who look at this shift from various disciplines and standpoints.

⁸ The authors use “inquiry” here to define “information-seeking and wondering” within the genre (316).

⁹ It is important to note that in the article, Matwick and Matwick apply these criteria to a number of cooking shows, acknowledging the differences in the various aspects of inquiry in relation to particular channels and celebrity chefs and how they demonstrate certain conventional notions such as healthy food vs. junk food (322). However, most cases here show a universal notion of inquiry, which is rendered complicated in *Nailed It!*

suggest that the cooking show becomes “a site where the viewer witnesses long-term personal development and growth” (320-21). Once again, this framework is complicated in *Nailed It!* through the host Nicole Byer as well as a number of contestants.

Participation is defined as the driving force behind the discourse on the show, mostly about taking into account the addressees of this communication be it the audience, co-host, or the food itself (324, 326). This aspect is highly important for understanding the queerness of *Nailed It!* particularly as a competitive cooking show, as the heightened sense of interaction on the show allows for a far more nuanced way of introducing humor and delivering critique.

Context, the final aspect of inquiry, consists of two separate domains: the physical and the social (326). The physical implies the *mise-en-scène* whereas the social is the institutionalized context in which the show is based, both of which contain notions of gendered ideologies. The authors go on to state that the physical can also inform analyses on the social context of the show, with daytime television exhibiting “male hosts... as professionals or hobbyists and female as domestic cooks” and the evening shows being “competitions or travel oriented” (327). Or, similarly with set pieces that convey messages of traditional masculinity and femininity.¹⁰ In this, gender becomes “a determining factor in the context and the expression of inquiry,” thus creating coded meanings within the genre, with most male cooking shows communicating power and professionalism tied to the masculine identity and female cooking shows as a “time saving and economical solution to daily food preparation” (327). This means that context “helps to establish a recognizable set of expectations or genre... which captures the conventions understood by a shared stylistic criteria, one steeped in gender (327). Therefore, as I mentioned in the introduction, understanding the social context by which *Nailed It!* is surrounded, it will be possible to see the subversions that exist throughout the show.

¹⁰ Some examples given for this are; “billiard tables, a red Viking refrigerator... a racing stripe, a drum set, a large flat-screen television turned on with extreme sports shows” as masculine set pieces and “flower decorations and bright lighting... soft yellow tablecloth and lemon lace cookies” as set pieces reserved for shows representing a feminine way of cooking (327).

THE COMPETITIVE COOKING SHOW AS A SUB-GENRE

In the effort to get a more nuanced comprehension of why certain aspects of *Nailed It!* can be identified as queer performances, I will contextualize it specifically within the sub-genre of competitive cooking shows. This final step of contextualization is particularly important due to the hyper-masculine conventions that are linked to them.

“On the line: format, cooking and competition as television values” explains the particular “structural logic of the format” in detail, its social context, and specific genre expectations (OREN 2013: 20). The one crucial aspect of these shows is their narrative structure, where the emphasis of the shows lies. This is explained by Tasha Oren as the following:

[The] climax is not the dish itself. Here too, the format reorganises the show’s procedural syntax, deferring the climax from the dish’s successful completion/presentation to its reception/critical evaluation. This final stage, coming on the heels of the frenzied rush and (more often than not) tears and meltdowns, visits fresh humiliation on the contestants whose dishes – and, by clear extension, personal worth – are scrutinised, criticised, and often rejected by a panel of judges. (30)

The essential format of the cooking show, therefore, focuses not on the cooking but on the evaluating to “taste hierarchies” which is inherently a male dominant aspect of cooking shows (31).¹¹ As noted by Jonathan Leer, the persona of “the *connoisseur*” is someone who has a “sophisticated relationship to food” - a relationship found similarly in the persona of the professional chef (2018: 17). Collapsing these two personas into the -predominantly- male judge, cooking shows double down on creating “a tradition of food shows with male hosts in which archaism and aggression promote hypermasculinity” (19). Taking Oren’s idea that the competitive cooking show is about the critical evaluation, and the “hypermasculine” judges that embody authority in this framework, competitive cooking shows are spaces exhibiting “cold, harsh and often stinging atmosphere of the professional kitchen” (2013: 31).

¹¹ Analyzing the TV show *Masterchef*, scholar Deborah Phillips also expands on this by noting that the role of the judges “is judgmental, rather than about sharing skills and knowledge, and their assessment is unassailable”, underlining the authoritative position of the panel of judges within the space (176).

THE “QUEERNESS” OF NAILED IT!

“Welcome to *Nailed It!* the only show with the fire department on speed dial”.
 (“Ready to Wear, Ready to Eat” 2019)

“Home bakers with a terrible track record take a crack at re-creating edible masterpieces for a \$10,000 prize. It is part reality contest, part hot mess.”¹²

The premise of *Nailed It!* is simple: Three contestants who are notoriously bad at baking -evidenced extensively through introductory footage- come into the *Nailed It!* kitchen to participate in two consecutive challenges. The first one is called “Baker’s Choice”, which features various confections decorated according to the theme of the episode. The name “Baker’s Choice” refers to how the contestants choose the confection they want to replicate by running up to the stand and grabbing it. The winner of this challenge usually gets to -or, more accurately, has to- wear a golden baker’s cap embellished with glitter and a cooking themed gift such as baking moulds or stand mixers.¹³ The second challenge, “Nail It, or Fail It” is a multi-tiered cake, elaborately decorated, which needs to be replicated in approximately two hours, which is possibly too big a task even for professional bakers.¹⁴

The potential of failure is set up through these impossible tasks laid out for contestants whose credentials for being on the show are being under qualified. Looking at the premise of the show alone, it is possible view it in line of traditional competitive cooking show, warranting “a tense and sweaty affair, featuring contestants, impossible assignments, rushed preparations, costly mistakes, and withering assessments” (OREN 2013: 24). However, this expectation is undercut through the humor embedded in the performances throughout the show.¹⁵

¹² This is the official description for the first season of the show on Netflix.

¹³ With the exception of the second episode of the fourth season titled, “The One with the 90’s Theme” in which the winner, Crystal Roman, is gifted a “ghettoblaster” and a neon tracksuit inspired by 90s fashion.

¹⁴ Looking at *Sugar Rush*, another baking competition that launched on Netflix a few months after the debut of *Nailed It!*, it is possible to see that many of the competitors, two professional bakers, struggle with this task within a time span, nearly doubling what the contestants on *Nailed It!* get.

¹⁵ Aside from humor, the show queers the genre through introducing non-conventional ways of being in this space. This constitutes a multitude of subversions ranging from genderqueer guest judges -Art Smith, Zac Young, Fortuna Feimster to name a new- and contestants such as Broad-

“QUEER” HUMOR IN NAILED IT!

The entire narrative structure of *Nailed It!* centers around humor. The most apparent way in which this can be seen is in the producers’ decision to cast comedian Nicole Byer, who lacks experience in food television, as the host.¹⁶ Through this, the purpose and participation aspects of inquiry in the show are oriented towards humor and not culinary knowledge. This can be viewed as a starting point, or better yet the driving force, of how the show offers a queer rendition of the genre of competitive cooking shows.

The emphasis on humor is a deliberate choice by the show’s creators which creates a queer way of doing baking competitions. However, the show is truly queering this genre through the existence of an out-of-place “queer” host and the way in which her presence informs the elements of participation and expression in the show’s inquiry.¹⁷ A final aspect of the show I will look at is its physical context, and how the *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, and editing employed in the show play into the queerness of *Nailed It!* compared to the serious, cutthroat format that exists in conventional competitive cooking shows.

Humor in the context of food television is also connected to gender, making its use significant in understanding queer performances in the show. Kelsi and Keri Matwick consider humor as a potential way in which to perform gender outside of the binaries established within the genre, through humor’s “ambiguous nature” (2019: 126). Although their study focuses primarily on the instructional cooking show format, applying some of the ideas in their work to the competitive cooking show framework will work to show how humor may function in the context of this

way dancer John Carroll or the cast of *Queer Eye* performing gender roles in a non-traditional way, a stay at home dad, working mom or a grandmother who cannot cook to name a few (“Zoo You Bake?” 2018; “Bonus: 3,2,1... Ya Not Done!” 2018). Likewise, some guest judges subvert expectations set solely from gender appearance, as is seen with Natalie Sideserf whose interest in gore and creepy cakes is unusual for “someone who seems as sweet her” (“Cake-o-Phobia” 02:55-03:21).

¹⁶ It is interesting to consider that early research into humor deems women as incapable of telling jokes, proven to be a misconception through the success of *Nailed It!* (Matwick, MATWICK 2015: 127-28).

¹⁷ I identify Nicole Byer as a queer presence not only because of her lack of cooking knowledge but, as I will demonstrate shortly, in the ways in which she performs this persona, as completely different to the roles traditionally ascribed to the women who inhabit the space with a professional chef-featuring in a chef’s coat-as the student (LEER 2018: 17-18). Traditionally, such a persona is there to function as “the voice of the public” as well as “eye candy” (18). Compared to this image of the feminine as a passive and submissive companion, Byer asserts herself into the narrative of the show with considerable force.

particular sub-genre. The authors underline two kinds of humor; “teasing” and “self-deprecatory” (126). These two specific types of humor are especially noteworthy in the interactions between the judges and the contestants of *Nailed It!* in how it undercuts the authoritative judging process and severe atmosphere in the arena of competitive cooking described earlier in this paper. In order to situate humor within *Nailed It!*, I will consider the four aspects of inquiry in cooking shows; purpose, participation, expression and context, with particular emphasis on how humor operates within these frameworks (Matwick, MATWICK 2015: 321-24).

“QUEER” PRESENCE/PARTICIPATION IN NAILED IT!

Before locating specific sites where “teasing” and “self-deprecatory” humor contribute to the queering of the show, I will first look at how humor as an aspiration for the show gives way to a subversive potential to for the host and judge of the show, Nicole Byer and Jacques Torres. The duo are the established in a very subversive manner in relation to the traditional roles they are prescribed in the genre, particularly in relation to gender.

Nicole Byer, the larger than life host of the show, is a highly unconventional persona in the genre of competitive cooking shows. She embodies a person who is clueless about the world of baking, often asking head judge Jacques Torres to relay the steps in which to correctly execute the tasks at hand. In that sense, she helps extract information from the “professional chef”, similar to the traditional function of a novice. However, in certain cases such as the “Zoo You Bake?” episode, Byer subverts this role (2018). When she says she would love to see how the mice decorations for the cake are made, Torres takes out three mounds of fondant tasking both Byer and guest judge Art Smith to participate in the demonstration. Byer responds to this by saying “I hate this”, alluding to her distance to the craft and implies resistance to learning. When they are displaying their results, Byer’s mouse is complete with anthropomorphic breasts indicating it is a “girl mouse”, a decision she explains stating “because of feminism” (25:49-59). Through setting up this joke with a straight face, Byer both introduces feminism as a concept into the show, while also offering a subtle irony to term by attaching it to very narrow application. In this example, Byer both queers the position she is meant to occupy, as well as the subject matter discussed.

Byer’s performance and subversive discourse within the genre is noticed in her use of sexual imagery and language. She does this by pointing out

certain sexual connotations, as seen with the bottle the contestants have to shape from Rice Krispies Treats in the episode titled “Tailgate, Failgate” (2018). Torres points out the bottle made by Leean Muns, asking Byer what she thinks the bottle looks like. She replies, “you don’t want me to say what her bottle looks like” (2018: 18:42-53). The cinematography works to make her comment suggestive, using a perspective shot which highlights the phallic property of the bottle, lacking any of the details or shaping that would identify it as a bottle. In this moment, the show leans into Byer’s joke, just enough to get away with its family friendly rating.¹⁸ Similarly, in “Let’s Get Lit”, she observes that one of the contestants’ piping skills is off, commenting “everybody knows you have to put the tip in” (2020: 11:37-42). This double entendre is alluded to by a “boing” sound effect, once again drawing attention to the humor that is derived from sexual imagery.

Byer further plays on this by explicitly expressing her own sexual desire in the show.¹⁹ In the “Tailgate, Failgate” episode Byer approaches the guest judge, NFL player Johnny Hekker, asking to be set up with single football players they may know. Byer adds, “they don’t even have to buy me dinner, I am a sure thing” (2018: 05:44-06:07). Through this, she reduces her interest in potential dates as purely sexual, creating a feminine embodiment of a (hyper-)sexual appetite. In the previous episode, “Fictitious and Delicious”, Byer exhibits similar sexual interest in the joker call of contestant Chris Elam. Awarded a special “Call-for-Help Button” due to mishaps in his first attempt, Elam calls his friend Sean to get help in the second round. Byer holds up a tablet to facilitate the conversation, and upon seeing Sean, remarks, “Sean, you are cute” followed by, “oh, Sean can get it” (23:32-39). In both these instances, Byer expresses sexual interest independent of any food related expressions. This reverts the gender conventions in the genre in two ways; first it switches the implicit sexual assertion communicated through food into an explicit one that stands on its own. The second way is

¹⁸ The bottle is out of focus in the shot, which focuses on the panel of judges, allowing it to maintain the implicit suggestive tone.

¹⁹ Byer’s sexuality on *Nailed It!* can be read as aggressively straightforward in comparison to other women occupying the space of cooking television. Packham, in her work analyzing gender in television shows, notes Nigella Lawson’s use of “suggestive vocabulary in a husky, dulcet tone... displaying her assets”, concluding that through this Lawson negotiates a break from the often subservient homemaker figure into the elevated status of “domestic goddess” through performing her sexuality (2016: 89, 91). In comparison to Lawson’s suggestive approach, Byer is far more forthcoming in her sexual desire, expressing it clearly without attaching them to the performances around/through food.

that it takes the traditional masculine coding of this energy and transfers it into a woman.²⁰

Jacques Torres creates an entirely different persona compared to that of Nicole Byer. He is the head judge and resident baker who dons a chef's coat in each episode. As mentioned in the beginning of this sub chapter, his attire is indicative that he is the authoritative figure in this kitchen.²¹ Torres aligns his authority with the figure of the instructor, repeatedly expressing his desire to teach the contestants, to have them leave with having learned something, using his knowledge to offer help in place of criticism ("Fictitious and Delicious" 2018: 27:55-28:05).²² He expresses this attitude when asked if he finds it "ironic that [he] is a highly decorated, well-respected pastry chef that eats trash every day for money" ("Let's Get Lit" 2020: 06:00-20). Torres responds to this by noting that he enjoys being able to explain to the contestants what their mistakes were and help them improve their baking skills, calling an opportunity. In this statement, Torres implies that he enjoys his job due to its potential to educate, a task often given to female hosts in the traditional genre conventions (PACKHAM 2016: 85). As a result, he gives up the *connoisseur* identity as a judge, by subjecting himself to "four seasons of bad cakes" in order to teach (LEER 2018: 17; "Let's Get Lit" 2020: 01:27-29).

In line with this, he often explains to contestants where they went wrong in the judging process. When Nicole Combs presents her cakes mashed into a single pan after underbaking them, Torres walks her through steps to ensure her cakes are baked all the way through ("Fictitious and

²⁰ I want to briefly add that Nicole Byer is a woman of color, further destabilizing the hegemonic structures that are inextricably linked to whiteness, which is not discussed in the scope of this paper but nevertheless creates further layers of "queering" traditional roles.

²¹ It should be noted that Jacques Torres does not perform the authoritarian figure of the professional male chef on the show. This is pointed out by the guest judges who taken aback by how he is situated in the show. This is seen most explicitly in the "Out of This World" episode, where Joshua John Russell marvels on how Byer can tease Torres, distinguishing him as a legendary aspirational figure during his time in culinary school (2018: 21:19-44). The interaction exposes how Torres's presumed position, established through his credentials, is realized in a queer manner through the premise, interactions and structure in the show.

²² There are also various ways in which his persona is queered through his relationship with Byer. She often teases him, prompting him to do a southern accent, asking him to take her to France all expenses paid in a mocking manner, and asking him to strike an "Iron Man pose" ("Tailgate, Failgate" 2018; "Out of This World" 2018; "The Marvel Episode!" 2019). Torres plays into this, at times even contributing to the sexual innuendos laced throughout the show, albeit far less than Byer's contribution. ("High Society" 2018; "Out of This World" 2018).

Delicious” 2018: 27:43-28:52). Similarly, Torres also provides a voice-over for the steps in order to correctly execute recipes, coupled with a video montage providing visual reinforcement. Here too, Torres posits his role as an instructor, this time addressing the audience as the participants. He carries this position through to the judges’ panel as well, often bringing in demo equipment to execute small elements from the confections and walks Nicole Byer and a guest judge through the process, which at times gets interrupted as mentioned earlier in this paper. Therefore, Torres embodies teaching fully, demonstrated in multiple addresses throughout the show.

Torres’s insistence of bringing an instructive, or educational element into the show is evocative of the origins of the genre of cooking shows. However, this is undercut throughout the show in exchange for humor. This is best exemplified with the “Pardon-My-French Button”. The “Pardon-My-French Button” is offered to the least successful contestants from round one to sabotage other contestants. It can be used to block any other contestant’s “Panic Button”. The function of the button is to offer help to contestants any time during the second round, for three minutes. This help comes in the form of Jacques Torres going up to their station, answering any questions the contestants may have and offering advice. The “Pardon-my-French Button” disrupts this educational interaction altogether, as when it is pressed, Torres must speak only French during the entire three minutes. The effect of the combination of these two buttons can be seen in the episode “Zoo You Bake?”, when Kate Christenbury activates the “Pardon-My-French Button” ten seconds after Kelly Williams Bolar uses her “Panic Button” (2018: 20:13-51). Not understanding Torres’s French instructions, she misinterprets the French word for color, *couleur*, as cooler, nearly freezing her buttercream. Due to these gimmicks, the instructional tone provided by Torres is queered in the broader sense.

“QUEER” JUDGING/EXPRESSION IN NAILED IT!

As emphasized in the first half of the paper when establishing the genre of competitive cooking shows, critical evaluation is the focal point of the genre’s entire narrative structure (OREN 2013: 30). This process is identified as an extremely harsh and unforgiving affair, where the judges often reject the food in front of them to assert their authority (30). The premise of *Nailed It!* renders this process impossible to maintain. First of all, the contestants come onto the show with zero claim and/or expectation that

they can fulfill the challenges. Secondly, on a show where the expected result is failure, the criticism for the sake of critiquing is rendered obsolete. Apart from the aforementioned efforts by Torres to use the moment to instruct the contestants, the judging on the show primarily is centered around humor more so than critical evaluation.

“Teasing” and “self-deprecatory” humor are often used in expression by both judges and contestants, resulting in reciprocal friendly banter in place of a “cold harsh environment” (OREN 2013: 31). An example to this exchange can be seen in the interaction between Jacques Torres and Toni Bryant when he approaches her station after observing her donuts from afar (“Fantasyland” 2018). Torres teases Bryant admitting that he came down to check out her glazed donuts because they looked like baked potatoes from the judges’ table. Torres continues, saying they look like baked potatoes up close as well. This prompts a laughing fit from Bryant clearly amused by this comparison, reciprocating self-deprecatory humor (09:15-51).

Teasing is mainly used by Byer in her interactions with the contestants. In the “Fictitious and Delicious” episode, upon witnessing that two of the three contestants had to scoop the baked parts of their cakes into one mould, Byer tells the contestants “to cut or layer” their cakes for the judges to taste (“Fictitious and Delicious” 2018: 29:05-10). In her critique, Byer notes how it is “wild” that Nicole Combs’s cake is dry and underbaked at the same time, prompting laughter from all three contestants (30:30-40). Byer engages in similar teasing with Jamie Olivier in the “Oui Can’t Bake!” episode, when she points out that he served the judges Rice Krispies in both rounds, adding “you did not bake one thing today – on a baking show” (2019: 29:52-30:13). Once again her teasing joke is met by Olivier with laughter, maintaining that her teasing does not cross into harsh critique.²³

Another way in which Byer softens the blow in her teasing is through self-deprecatory humor. Byer often targets herself in her humor, chipping away at her authority as a judge. There are several examples that can be given to this. In the “Holi-Daze” episode, contestant Joelito Nunez corrects

²³ During the evaluation, the judges often comment on the positive notes of an endeavor, seen in how Ron Ben Israeli points out that Kristina Black’s take on a unicorn horn -two candy canes wrapped with sour candy stripes- is a viable solution in an emergency (“Fictitious and Delicious” 2019: 30:05-12). This gentle approach to find words of encouragement for even the most out of proportion baked goods emphasize that these moments of teasing are not about humiliation but just there for comedic play.

Byer's mispronunciation of his name. Byer is horrified at her mistake and keeps bringing this back up, evoking her mistake (2018: 15:33-16:05; 17:45). The fact that she, as a seasoned performer and host, can also make mistakes makes the show a space where mistakes happen but are not determining of anyone's capability of doing something.

Byer also functions as a saboteur, upon the use of the "Nicole-Nags Button", which works similar to the aforementioned "Pardon-My-French Button". When pressed, Byer goes up to the other two contestants, annoying them verbally and physically by yelling, asking questions, and standing in the contestants' way to restrict their movements in the kitchen. This too can be read as a form of self-deprecatory performance, as she performs acts associated with a small child, undermining any authority that comes from her title as a judge as well as the expectancy that comes with it. In the literature themed first episode of the fourth season, Byer exhibits similar behavior that goes beyond self-deprecatory humor.

Self-deprecatory humor is also used by the contestants to emphasize their position within the show, not as amateur bakers to be ridiculed but as contributors to the comedic atmosphere. This is seen with contestants introducing their own catchphrases, such as Jennifer Parks's "Snailed It!"-alluding to her éclair with a snail decoration, or Gregory Gardner's "bursting" which prompts a burst-o-meter graphic inserted into the episode marking the use of the term („Oui Can't Bake!" 2019: 12:43; "Let's Get Lit" 2020). After introducing her creation, Parks jokes that her snail is asleep, justifying it being presented on its side (12:48). In "Masterpiece or Disasterpiece?" Toyshika Peterson goes through the list of things required to make a cake decorated with a replica of Michelangelo's *David* statue, noting that the cake part is "not a problem" but moulding the statue is (2019: 19:39-49). In her lament, Peterson says; "I can't even get a damn man, y'all want me to mould one", poking fun at her relationship status (19:48).

"QUEER" PRODUCTION/PHYSICAL CONTEXT IN NAILED IT!

The final element of inquiry that helps establish *Nailed It!* as a site of exhibiting and experiencing queer competitive food television is the production design. Here I use production design to talk about *mise-en-scène*, or set design, as well as the cinematography, and editing choices all of which make up the physical context of the show. All of these elements function in the context of the purpose of the show which is, as stated earlier, is to

produce comedy in the form of a baking competition. In this effort, the set design varies from that of other competitive shows.

The basic form of the *Nailed It!* set is made up of the judges' table, contestants' stations and the pantry. There is a wall behind judges' table, displaying a Willy Wonka-like array of cakes and sweets, all of which are misshapen in some aspect. There are three separate stations for the contestants, set up with negative space between each station. The pantry is built behind a wall to the side, with wooden walls and shelves. What is particularly interesting about this set is the negative space that is used throughout. None of these individual elements are linked but are instead situated within a bigger open space with an industrial aesthetic. Industrial aesthetics are pointed out as a characteristic for the set of *Masterchef*, a competitive cooking show that embodies the highest level of the previously discussed genre conventions (PHILLIPS 2016: 176). By constructing a non-cohesive set which looks like it can be easily disassembled within this broader space, the show feels like a guerrilla takeover of a space into which it does not naturally belong. This negative space also works to remind audiences that this show takes place in a made-up, constructed space that functions as a stage where performances take place, instead of a narrative of reality.

The editing of the show also goes hand in hand with this aspect of the set design that foregrounds performativity. Throughout the runtime of the episodes, the production crew is shown in the camera frames, exposing the "real" space behind the constructed reality of the show. In relation to this, many mishaps and moments that should normally be edited out also make their way into the show. The best known example to this is the incident with guest judge, Jay Chandrasekhar in the sixth episode of the first season ("In Your Face!" 2018). Halfway through the show, Chandrasekhar asks to be excused for a bit while filming to pick up his children. Byer responds by telling him he needs to Kip, one of the producers of the show. After Kip approves, he departs, leaving Byer and Torres confused as to whether he is coming back at all. Chandrasekhar does make it back in time, bringing coffee for the other two judges (2018: 22:05-26:56). The fact that he was there in time for the evaluation suggests that his absence could have been edited out altogether from the episode.²⁴ The decision to include this works

²⁴ When asked about this viral moment in an interview, Chandrasekhar answers that he had no idea they left that part in the show, assuming they would edit it out to make the show "nice and normal" (CHANDRASEKHAR 2018: 00:14-35).

to highlight the reality in the making of show, exposing the failures of the show itself. A similar moment happens in the “Fictitious and Delicious” episode where the judges are told to change switch where they stand and wait for camera adjustments. An awkward silence pursues as the contestants and judges stare at each other and do silly dances, before the crew finally informs them that they are ready to resume shooting (2018: 28:02-30). These moments work to show what editing erases out of a traditional finished episode of a show, exposing the reality behind it and queering the heterotopic space of food television. It also creates solidarity with the contestants, by choosing to leave in some of the mistakes that occur when producing a television episode, pointed out by Byer in her remark that the show itself is “the *Nailed It!* version of a TV show” (“Fictitious and Delicious” 2018: 23:31-37).

CONCLUSION

Considering the formulation of a traditional cooking show episode as laid out in this paper, the show offers an alternative to the naturalized discourse mandated through certain (gendered) conventions of the cooking show, creating a queer performance of the entire genre. The centralization of humor in the narrative structure of *Nailed It!* allows for a lot of room to subvert traditional roles within the genre and create a queer performance that challenges it. With humor, *Nailed It!* denaturalizes the personas, interactions and space within the traditional setting, allowing for disruption. The recognition, marketing and success of *Nailed It!* as a competitive baking show suggests that the performances within are a valid possibility and this translates to the audience that the competitive cooking show can still entertain without its hypermasculine formulations. Whether or not the purpose behind the show is solely for comedy, the show is able to manifest queer performances within the genre as well as communicate a possible way to queer the format.

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NAILED IT! EPISODES

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"Cake-o-Phobia", 2019, *Nailed It!*, series 3, episode 2, Netflix, 17 May.

"Fantasyland", 2018, *Nailed It!*, series 1, episode 2, Netflix, 9 March.

"Fictitious and Delicious", 2018, *Nailed It!*, series 2, episode 2, Netflix, 29 June.

"High Society", 2018, *Nailed It!*, series 2, episode 1, Netflix, 29 June.

"Holi-Daze", 2018, *Nailed It!*, series 2, episode 4, Netflix, 29 June.

"In Your Face", 2018, *Nailed It!*, series 1, episode 6, Netflix, 9 March.

"Let's Get Lit", 2020, *Nailed It!*, series 4, episode 1, Netflix, 1 April.

"Masterpiece or Disasterpiece?", 2019, *Nailed It!*, series 3, episode 3, Netflix, 17 May.

"Oui Can't Bake!", 2019, *Nailed It!*, series 3, episode 5, Netflix, 17 May.

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