

**Paul and Mary would very much like you to make... a national heritage:  
‘The Great British Bake Off’ and forming a Modern British Identity**

Abigail Denton

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *Abigail Denton positions The Great British Bake Off as a site of postcolonial tensions, bringing together insights from a range of disciplines, including media studies, sociology, and history, in order to weave a compelling argument about the nation-building capacities of the popular television program.*

*Excerpt*

Peri Bradley, a lecturer in media studies at Bournemouth University, has suggested that *The Great British Bake Off* is a rebirth of imperialist ideals which harken back to the days when the British Empire was in full swing<sup>1</sup>—a theory which is supported by Pauline Leonard, a sociologist at Southampton University, whose work with expatriates in Hong Kong suggests that the post-colonial British identity is susceptible to relying on the safety of building barriers between the British and any group perceived as “others.”<sup>2</sup> But in the same work, Bradley also brings up the topic of food voice—the use of which, she claims, defines subgroups within nations and the nation itself.<sup>3</sup> In a study of the writings of female British settlers in Canada, Vera Alexander, a lecturer at the University of Groningen whose specialties include migration and identity formation, supports Bradley’s claims about food voice by stating that food is a means of strengthening bonds between people. The theory of terroir, defined by Ronda L. Brulotte and Michael A. Di Giovine, as the idea that “the biological components of an environment bestow uniqueness and authenticity onto a place’s product, prohibiting it from being replicated elsewhere in the world,”<sup>4</sup> supports this theory of nation- and heritage-building in aspects of *The Great British Bake Off*. It is through these ideas that I find the true essence of *The Great British Bake Off*—not in Bradley’s idea of neoimperialism,<sup>5</sup> but building off of her idea of food voice and Alexander’s idea of using food to build up a nation to include all people. I argue that, through the variety of foods and culinary traditions displayed on

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<sup>1</sup> Peri Bradley, “More Cake Please—We’re British! Locating British Identity in Contemporary TV Food Texts, *The Great British Bake Off* and *Come Dine With Me*,” in *Food, Media & Contemporary Culture: The Edible Image*, ed. Peri Bradley (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Pauline Leonard, “Migrating Identities: Gender, Whiteness and Britishness in Post-colonial Hong Kong,” *Gender, Place & Culture*, 15:1, 45–60, DOI: 10.1080/09663690701817519, accessed on 10 December 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Bradley, “More Cake Please,” 16.

<sup>4</sup> Ronda L. Brulotte and Michael A. De Giovine, introduction to *Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage*, edited by Ronda L. Brulotte and Michael A. De Giovine (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014), 6.

<sup>5</sup> In my paper, this concept is interchangeable with the more frequently used term *empire-building*, and both terms are used to refer to the domination of another country’s cultural heritage and thus identity rather than political or economic domination.

*The Great British Bake Off*, the show is able to capitalize on the post-colonial fragility of British identity by reaffirming Britain's heritage of "greatness" while also showing how immigrants contribute to the new definition of that heritage.

## *Author Commentary*

Abigail Denton

When I first started to think of ideas for this final Writing Seminar paper, I knew I wanted to research something related to food, particularly baking, but it wasn't until my professor highlighted my mention of *The Great British Bake Off* in my pre-draft that I realized that it would be possible to write the whole paper about the show that really kickstarted my passion for baking. *The Great British Bake Off* is a British television show in which twelve bakers from around Britain try to impress the celebrity judges, the intimidating Paul Hollywood and the inestimable Mary Berry, with their bakes until there are only three left—and in the finale, one of those three becomes the winner. At first, I was thinking of tackling the question of heritage and identity through an economic lens, but then I found an article about Nadiya Hussain, the winner of the sixth season, which stated that she had been called out by some for winning only because it was politically correct to have a non-white Briton win and called her Britishness into question. As I had watched Nadiya's ascent to *The Great British Bake Off* success with great joy, this was angering and—because her talent seemed so obvious to the audience during the show—confusing. So I started questioning how the show functions with regards to the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of its contestants.

The result is a paper which attempts to demonstrate that, through the different representations of food on *The Great British Bake Off*, the show questions post-colonial British identity and in answering those questions, allows groups which had, in the past, been excluded from British heritage help to redefine the modern British identity. My motive that spurred this thesis was—on a theoretical level—the question of what it means to be British, how different heritages can come together to shape identity, and how a simple baking show can facilitate that.

This particular excerpt deals with the idea that one of my key scholars, Peri Bradley, puts forward about *The Great British Bake Off* as an empire-building entity. I set up the conversation between Bradley, the show, and a study of British expatriates in order to demonstrate that the show could function as a remnant of the imperialist age, but this argument is one that I refute, trading the idea of the show as an imperialist instrument for the idea of the show as a mechanism for inclusion in the British culture. I think the reason this excerpt is successful is the variety of evidence and how that lent itself to direct comparison between my sources. With Bradley as my lens, I could compare her ideas with themes from the show itself that pointed towards possible imperialist tendencies, which were further supported later in the paper by Pauline Leonard's study of expatriates in Hong Kong. Through those direct comparisons of the evidence, I was able to emphasize the moves that I was making with my own thesis.

*Fellow Commentary*  
Sahand Keshavarz Rahbar

Abigail's paper affords readers a fascinating overview of one of the most popular culinary programs in the world. Remarkably, Abigail does not distract her readers with mindless or random anecdotes from the show itself. Rather, she crafts together an intricate and interesting assortment of materials from the series and from her secondary literature to provide a provoking examination of British identity—all through the framework of a baking show!

The excerpt published here is taken from the beginning of her paper. This section establishes the parameters of the scholarly conversation in which Abigail is taking part. She deftly names all of the key figures she will be working with—Bradley, Leonard, Brulotte, and Di Giovine—and supplies us with a brief account of their academic credentials. This sort of orienting is particularly critical in a paper as expansive and interdisciplinary as Abigail's. Since her method relies on the enlacement of multiple disciplines around a common knot related to food and identity, it is all the more important for her to explain the backgrounds and bailiwicks of the various authors with whom she is engaging in conversation.

It is precisely this interdisciplinary character that makes Abigail's work so successful in the execution of its method. Abigail sweeps together an astonishing assortment of sources, everything from newspaper editorials to food studies to migration histories, all without losing her own voice or expanding her scope to an unwieldy extent. Her voice is quite clear even in this paragraph, which lingers at length on the work of other scholars. Abigail succinctly establishes her own view in relation to these other authors in the concluding sentences. By introducing readers to the important scholars and concepts she will grapple with in later sections, she simultaneously provides a brief roadmap for the rest of her analysis. By this point, we have been introduced to many of the main ideas that will resurface in the following paragraphs and are thus prepared to examine them in-depth alongside Abigail. The balanced juggling of multiple disciplines, each with its own methods, provides us with a textured understanding of the sort of work Abigail sets out to do in the rest of her piece.

### Works Cited

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### Bios

**Abigail Denton '20** is a prospective comparative literature major who is interested in pursuing certificates in creative writing, art and archaeology, and French. On campus, she is a member of the copy team for *The Daily Princetonian*. When she has free time, she enjoys trying out baking recipes for her friends, writing fiction, and playing board games with friends. She wrote this essay as a first-year.

**Sahand Keshavarz Rahbar '17** is a History major who was born in Iran and raised in Idaho, an arrangement that has naturally invested him with a deep appreciation for migration and potatoes. He spends his time listening to Regina Spektor while studying race, gender, and law in nineteenth-century America.