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We're Asian, More Expected of Us

Representation, The Model Minority & Whiteness on King of the Hill

During its thirteen-season run from 1997-2009, *King of the Hill* was the second longest running animated series in U.S. television history (after *The Simpsons*). Co-created by Mike Judge of MTV's *Beavis and Butthead* and *Simpson's* writer Greg Daniels, the now-syndicated Emmy Award-winning show features white, suburban, lower middle class life in small town Texas. Central to the show, are nuanced explorations of class, gender, sexuality and race, and most specifically 'whiteness' in its southwestern rural form. Glenn Berger explains, "For most of the country, it's a really cool, smart show about people they know. For New York and L.A., it's like an anthropological study" (Werts 2001).

In an article written for the *New York Times Magazine*, Matt Bai (2005) urges "politicians and pundits" to watch *King of the Hill* as a way to "understand the values of conservative America," noting that the "subtle and complex portrayal of small-town voters" has consistently drawn support from Middle America. Ethan Thompson (2009, p.3) describes the series as one that "engages cultural change as narrative content" and contends that the program focuses on character consistency and a "greater attention to regional detail as a route to realism" (ibid, p.7). The program operates without what Jonathan Gray (2006, p.50) terms "the amnesia of sitcom memory" with storylines (and injuries) often spanning multiple episodes. Furthermore, *King of the Hill* generally refrains from the deconstructive surrealism typical of *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy* or *South Park*. For example there are no aliens, no talking dogs, and no singing excrement. Although characters are crudely drawn and barely age, they are based on realistic human proportions and they often look more like 'real' people than many of the styl(iz)ed, sculpted and surgically-enhanced actors from live action television.

The series' central character is Hank Hill, a well meaning but uptight propane salesman. He lives with his wife Peggy, a somewhat conceited substitute Spanish teacher and Boggle champion, and their son Bobby, an overweight pubescent who dreams of being a prop comic. Central to the series' over-arching narrative is Hank's struggle to accept his son's unabashed and often gleeful resistance to normative masculine interests. Perhaps reflecting the concerns of its producers and 'mainstream' target audience, *King of the Hill* is primarily about the challenges of being a straight, middle-aged white guy.

Next door to Hank, Peggy and Bobby, live the Souphanousinphones – Kahn, Minh, and Kahn Jr. (also known as Connie), a Laotian American family who mirror and often rival the Hills. Note that 'Kahn' is an anagram for 'Hank', thus being to him, like Edward Said (1979, p3) said of the Orient to Europe, "a sort of surrogate and even underground self." Yet several episodes foreground the challenges that the Souphanousinphones face as Asian Americans – issues of cultural isolation, racial prejudice, identity formation and assimilation. In its depiction of race and class, *King of the Hill* both deconstructs and perpetuates stereotypes. Comedy and satire play a complex role in racialized representation. *King of the Hill* demonstrates that animation can offer a unique strategy for addressing the politics of difference head on. It is precisely the presence of this Asian American family that prompted my interest in the series.

Asian American Representation on US Primetime

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As members of a group consistently under-represented in mainstream media, the Souphanousinphones are one of the few Asian American families who have appeared regularly on U.S. primetime. When *King of the Hill* began in the late 1990s, people of Asian descent comprised 3.6% of the American population, yet only 1.3% of the television world (Larson 2007, p.68). Characters of Southeast Asian descent, like the Laotian American Souphanousinphones, were almost never represented. Because of the relative paucity of televised Asian representation, Darrell Hamamoto (1994, p.xiii) might never have written *Monitored Peril, Asian Americans and the Politics of Representations*, (tellingly almost titled *You'll Wonder Where the Yellow Went*). Instead Hamamoto sifted through decades of television history, including guest appearances and made-for-TV movies, in search of Asian and Asian American representation. For the most part, the portrayals he found were “peripheral and one-dimensional,” but he proceeded, asserting “that racialized discourse of subordinate social identity must be accounted for historically and politically if they are ever to be subverted” (ibid, p.ix). Conversely, Herman Gray, for his 1995 text *Watching Race Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, a decidedly more optimistic analysis, was able to narrow his focus to 1980s network series featuring blackness. He excluded from his analysis shows with primarily white casts that had only one or two black actors, as well as black shows that failed to explicitly showcase blackness (H. Gray, 2004, p.10). Had Hamamoto applied similar criteria, he might have had nothing to watch. (*All-American Girl*, the short-lived sitcom about a Korean American family starring Margaret Cho ran from 1994-1995, too late for an appearance in *Monitored Peril*.) Still, to this day, depictions of Asian Americans on television remain relatively scarce. The Souphanousinphones on *King of the Hill* are rare exceptions.

Unlike visible minorities that have more successfully crossed colour lines into American sitcom television with shows such as *The Cosby Show* (1984-1988) and *George Lopez* (2002-2007), most recurring Asian American characters on prime time appear in ensemble-cast one-hour dramas where they are the only Asian cast members on their shows – suggesting tokenism and the absence of Asian family life. However, the studies I found on televised Asian representation (Chin, et al, 2006; Dea, et al., 2002; Harwood & Anderson 2002; Larson 2007; Mastro & Greenberg 2000; Mok 1998 ; Shah 2003; Shim 1998) ignored animated sitcoms. They overlook *The Simpsons'* South Asian Nahasapeemapeitlons and the aforementioned Souphanousinphones and neglect this genre's penchant for embracing difficult topics such as race and racism.

Operating on an iconic rather than indexical level, animation makes an excellent medium for social satire, parody and intertextual critiques of popular culture. Shilpa Davé (2005, p321) explains, because of “the audience's suspension of disbelief, animated series can tackle issues and situations that would be unbelievable or inappropriate on live action sitcoms.” Its representations of race, gender, class and sexuality often traverse the boundaries of what is deemed politically correct. Animation's essential distance from reality makes its subversion not only possible but also more acceptable.

Thus, this examination of *King of the Hill* attempts to address two areas of under-representation – Asian Americans on prime time and animation in Asian American studies.

“Westie Side Story” and Assimilationist Discourse

The Souphanousinphones were introduced as the Hills' new neighbours in season one's “Westie Side Story.” The episode opens with Hank and his friends drinking beer and hanging out on their lawn tractors. A moving truck arrives at the house next door and the men immediately mistake the white movers for their new neighbours. After musing about the teenage son's athleticism and wondering if the father bowls, they decide that the new family will fit

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perfectly into their community. As soon as they learn that their neighbours are in fact Asian, their mood shifts from excitement to unease. Emerging from a blue minivan, the new arrivals are the picture of suburban banality. Yet, to the four white men, they are completely unexpected and exotic.

The friends debate their neighbours' origins, with Dale insisting that they must be Chinese since Japanese men wear glasses, suits and ties. Bill wonders if they speak English while Boomhauer, whose rapid mumblings are almost completely incomprehensible, mutters something about Chinese accents being impossible to understand. After introductions are made, Kahn Souphanousinphone explains that while they lived in California for twenty years, they were originally from Laos. In fact he repeats no less than five times that they are Laotian, getting increasingly more impatient. "We are Laotian. From Laos, stupid! It's a landlocked country in Southeast Asia. It's between Vietnam and Thailand, okay? Population 4.7 million." Still puzzled, Hank asks, "So are you Chinese or Japanese?"

Portrayed as ignorant rather than malicious, the white characters regard the Asian Americans as exotic, foreign and inferior. Peggy Hill is delighted with the newcomers because, "It's like we get to travel to the Orient without having to worry about getting diarrhoea or being jailed for our pro-democracy beliefs." Calling them "by nature, shy and reserved," she invites the Souphanousinphones to dinner where she greets them with halting English and welcomes them to the country. Scenes throughout the episode undermine the Hills' unwitting prejudices by demonstrating how like them (and therefore 'American'), their neighbours really are. Like Hank, Kahn uses a riding lawn mower, dotes on his dog and barbecues hamburger. Peggy and Minh compete over baking and their children bond over not being the sons that their fathers desire. After hostilities escalate over missing (and perhaps eaten) dogs, conflict is resolved (albeit temporarily) with the realization that they are not that different after all.

Borrowing again from Herman Gray (1995, pp.85-87), I would describe "Westie Side Story" as: "assimilationist television discourse," marginalizing "social and cultural differences in the interest of shared and universal similarity;" locating racial prejudice in readily resolved individual misunderstandings rather than systemic racism and unequal power relations; and placing the privileged subject position as that of the white middle class, in this case Hank Hill.

With this first appearance of Asian America in small-town Texas, a stage is set for shifted subjectivities and reinforcements to white hegemony.

"Man Without A Country Club" and the Myth of the Model Minority

The rule of white subjectivity plays out in the season six episode "Man Without A Country Club", when Hank is recruited by the all-Asian Nine Rivers Country Club in order to placate the Professional Golfers Association and take part in an upcoming PGA Tour. Nine Rivers is presented as an exclusive but well-known place of beauty and privilege, coveted by even white golfers. Through the audience's identification with Hank Hill and his role-reversed status as an outsider, the episode explores concepts of segregation, exclusion and tokenism.

In a sense, *King of the Hill* admonishes historic practices of segregation and contemporary all-white private golf clubs. In the episode, club recruiter Ted Wassanasong attempts to assuage Hank's concern that Nine Rivers is all Asian. He explains, "This club was founded by an immigrant Vietnamese hot sauce tycoon after he was excluded from all the other clubs in Heimlich County. The first members were his friends, who also happened to be Asian. And then their friends joined, also Asian, and so on."

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Thus the segregated nature of Nine Rivers is, and is not, a product of intentional discrimination. While not necessarily condoning exclusivity or ghettoization, *King of the Hill* certainly naturalizes it. In the end, Hank declines his membership opting instead to invite Kahn into The Rainey Street Country Club (essentially neighbours playing in their back alley). In lieu of opening or dismantling inaccessible institutions, the episode proposes the creation of alternate spaces – the very strategy that produced the problematic Nine Rivers to begin with.

Yet this episode is more than a critique of tokenism, exclusivity and a white man's lesson in becoming Other. Rather what interests me is how replete (as are frankly most storylines featuring the Souphanousinphones) it is with the myth of the model minority. Convinced by the notion that all Asian Americans are successful, Kahn complains to Minh about not being part of the elite club. "Nine Rivers is the only all-Asian country club in Heimlich County. We're all Asian, we should be there." To Hank, Kahn says, "Everyone at Nine Rivers comes from different places: Laos, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, South Korea... but we all have one thing in common, our *love...of golf*." While Keith Booker (2006, p.73) may describe Kahn and Minh as "grasping, competitive and materialistic", their unwavering belief in Asian American success is not unfounded.

The myth of the model minority has been propagated through mainstream American media for decades (and *King of the Hill* to a large extent perpetuates it). This hegemonic discourse evincing attainment and assimilation is founded on the political silence and adaptability of Asian Americans and has circulated since the mid-1960s Civil Rights movement. Conservatism, lack of political activism, low (perhaps unreported) crime rates and reluctance to participate in social welfare programs were celebrated as symptoms of lawfulness and self-sufficiency, rather than effects of government distrust. These narratives of acquiescence and productivity were useful in the face of growing racial unrest. In the post-Fordist 1980s, the myth expanded to focus on economic and academic success and encompass all Asians – conflating them regardless of individual immigration histories. It ignores the over-education of Asian Americans for comparable wages and that recent immigrants and refugees from China and Southeast Asia (including Laos) often struggle with poverty and integration (Thrupkaew 2008). The myth of the model minority continues to function as a justification for the status quo and a way to chastise less successful Americans, adding pressure to individuals like the Souphanousinphones to meet high expectations. Success is attributed to race rather than ability and effort.

In popular media, the myth of the model minority is propagated by 'positive stereotypes,' which present Asian Americans as work-oriented overachievers. Thus on American prime time, Asian characters primarily appear in series featuring the workplace, frequently portraying high achievers such as doctors (*ER, Grey's Anatomy, Law and Order SVU*) and scientists (*Big Bang Theory, CSI, Dexter*). Yet unlike most TV Asians (including their overachieving daughter Connie), Kahn and Minh are not part of the model minority. If they were, they would be a lot more successful or at least, not so loud.

Assimilation, Authenticity and Yellow Voice

The Souphanousinphones are very vocal about their desire to be like fellow Laotian Americans Ted and Cindy Wassonasing, an elitist couple who are considerably more affluent and seemingly more 'white.' Yet Ted's acculturation appears dubious. He has a conspicuously robotic 'American' accent, his compliments seem practiced, and his delayed responses suggest a processing of information. When trying to convince Hank, who he has apparently researched, to join Nine Rivers, Ted says, "Think about it, Hank. Talk it over with your wife Peggy and son Bobby, age 13." In season eight's "Redneck on Rainey Street", when Kahn and Minh find the

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Wassanasongs at the Episcopalian church, Ted explains his family's conversion from Buddhism as "just good business." Thus storylines suggest that Ted's assimilation into North American culture is calculated and therefore inauthentic, thereby subscribing to the myth of the model minority discourse that at once promotes integration while deeming Asian Americans perpetually foreign.

In the 1971 *Newsweek* article "Success Story: Outwhiting the Whites," an interviewee explained that Japanese Americans responded to their wartime internment by the US Government by saying "I'll become an even better American," adding proudly, "Scratch a Japanese American and you'll find a WASP." Robert G. Lee (1999, pp.190-191) compares the assimilation and therefore invisibility of the model minority to the supposed invisibility of the Viet Cong. He describes cinematic depictions of Asian Americans "as an alien threat in [these] narratives of multicultural dystopia and besieged nationhood, at once ubiquitous and invisible, ersatz and inauthentic." Likening Asian Americans to the hunted down 'replicants' in *Blade Runner*, Lee (1999, p.196) writes, "Both the android 'new friend' and the model minority are people without history; both are simulacra whom a programmed historical memory simultaneously renders functional and inauthentic."

Of course, one might argue that Ted Wassanasong's voice is not fake, but is simply the way the actor who portrays him speaks (for example, like Shakespearean-trained actor, George Takei). However, Toby Huss who plays Ted is a white actor from Iowa who also portrays Hank's father Cotton and of course Kahn himself. In this instance Huss is not unlike actor Hank Azaria, who portrays *The Simpsons'* South Asian character Apu as well as a number of other characters from the show.

Is this the cartoon equivalent of yellowface? In that much maligned practice, actors (usually, although not always, white) wear makeup to conform to visual stereotypes of Asianness. Rob Schneider in *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2005) channelling Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), Christopher Walken's *Fu Manchu*-like turn in *Ball's of Fury* (2007) and Robert Downey Jr.'s performance in *Tropic Thunder* (2008) demonstrate that yellowface and blackface have not been completely banished. Nevertheless, such casting rarely goes unquestioned.

In examining the case of Apu, Shilpa Davé (2005) calls Azaria's vocal performance "brown voice." She explains that this is accepted because the actor remains largely anonymous and hidden during the performance. However, Davé contends, this is not a neutral act. Accented vocal performances construct fixed and ahistoric notions of identity, race and ethnicity. Huss, as Kahn, speaks with what I would call 'yellow voice' – an accent not specific to any linguistic origin but one that fulfils audience expectations of what Asians sound like, thus racializing them as foreign and all the same. Asian American actors routinely perform this "Asian accent [that] isn't really an Asian accent" to conform to Hollywood conventions (Nancy Yuen Wang 2004, p.260). Thus, Asian American actress Lauren Tom's performance as Minh features this 'yellow voice.' However, Tom does not use it to perform the assimilated Asian American characters – Connie Souphanousinphone and Cindy Wassanasong, whose accents are rather neutral. Yet, like Asian American guest actors on *King of the Hill* such as Lucy Liu and Amy Hill, Tom – 'yellow voice' not withstanding – has never voiced a non-Asian character on the program.

While Asians are cast as all the same regardless of ethnicity and often expected to perform with this 'yellow voice', casting across colour lines even for a non-visual vocal performance remains a privilege reserved for white actors. Still, in season eight of *King of the Hill*, Kahn and Minh do get a chance to impersonate whiteness (of a kind).

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“Redneck on Rainey Street” and White Trash

In “Redneck on Rainey Street”, a prestigious summer school rejects Connie Souphanousinphone because as an over-achieving Asian American, she does not fulfil their diversity policy (in other words they have an excess of the so-called model minority.) Kahn, frustrated with this latest setback, trades his sensible sedan for an El Camino and persuades Minh that they should stop working so hard. He pleads, “Don’t you see? This is for Connie. So she don’t spend half her life losing at their rigged game. What do you say, Minh? Will you be my redneck bride?” The two joyously decide to ‘give up’ and instead, spend their days and nights drinking and partying with their new friends from Belcher’s Grove (the ‘wrong’ side of town). Kahn stops working and shaving and Minh starts sporting tube tops. Connie’s classmate Stuart Dooley observes insultingly, “Your dad is white trash.”

Matt Wray (2006, p.16) explains that poor whites are almost always described in terms of “moral unworthiness.” He recounts colonialist William Byrd’s creation of a foundational narrative of marginalized whiteness in America: “The entire region had long had a reputation as a haven for runaway servants and slaves, criminals, and ne’er-do-wells of all sorts. In his travel writing and diaries, Byrd, borrowing a term from English culture, dubbed these backcountry dwellers ‘lubbers’” (ibid, p. 25). Although Byrd was describing a way of eighteenth century life around the disputed boundary between Virginia and North Carolina, he might as well have been talking about *King of the Hill*’s Belcher’s Grove and the Souphanousinphones’ new friends.

Byrd uses the term ‘lubber’ to evoke laziness and immorality. Lubberland was a well-known fiction of peasant utopia, similar to the Land of Cockaigne and the hobo paradise described by Depression Era song *Big Rock Candy Mountain*. Characterized by freedom from labour, bountiful supplies of food, and plenty of sex, it is a fantasy that resonates most powerfully with the disenfranchised, downtrodden, dispossessed and hungry, and is epitomized in the carnivalesque atmosphere of Kahn and Minh’s descent.

Thus in their impersonations of marginalized whites Kahn and Minh, once again, personify the Other. Here they doubly reinforce the privileged whiteness of Hank Hill and the rest of the regular cast, through both race and class-based differences. Furthermore, the appearance of ‘authentic’ rednecks in “Redneck on Rainey Street” complicates an overarching series premise that, as Michael Chaney explains, the “underdog heroes in *King of the Hill*...represent stigmatized subjects of white culture” (Chaney 2004, p.170).

As potential rednecks, the primary white characters of *King of the Hill* shore up the ‘normal and unmarked’ whiteness of a more privileged America (its northern, urban and more affluent viewers). Throughout the series, Kahn and Minh reinforce this (as well as their own racialized status) by referring to Hank and his friends as “rednecks” and “hillbillies,” with Hank, in particular, bristling against these labels. Yet the Hills’ supposed marginalization is a masquerade of white otherness. They are neither poor nor disempowered. The denizens of Belcher’s Grove (where Kahn and Minh find acceptance) are the true white Others. Rather Hank Hill embodies the “honourable” and “square-dealing” whiteness described so vividly by Richard Dyer (1997, p.65) in his seminal text *White*. Dyer (1997, pp.35-37) contends that the American West has been crucial to “the construction of a white (male) identity” based on the conquest of land and the establishment of order. While Hank and his friends are neither cowboys nor frontiersmen; their obsession with lawn care is a contemporary suburban form of conquering territory. Chaney (2004, p.170) remarks, “The cartoon carves out a space for a white class consciousness that is initially marked as Other. But this marking is only tenuous.” Here we can understand *King of the Hill*’s

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popularity with those it purports to satirize. Hank's triumph at the end of every episode as the apparent voice of reason solidifies his place, and therefore that of small town America, well within the boundaries of white privilege.

In "Redneck on Rainey Street," Hank restores order once again. Having discovered that the bank is about to foreclose on the Souphanousinphone house, Hank finds Kahn at the stick fights behind the lumberyard and convinces him to straighten up, reminding him, "Even when you and Minh went off the deep end, Connie never complained and never stopped trying, you couldn't drag that little girl into the muck with you." By invoking the myth of the model minority, our privileged white hero suppresses both racial and economic unrest.

Concluding Thoughts: Racial Grief and Alternate Representations

My examination of Asian American representation on *King of the Hill* reveals an assimilationist discourse that, perpetuated by the myth of the model minority, privileges white male hegemony. According to bell hooks (1992, p.120), "grown black women" "claim" the Sapphire of *Amos 'n' Andy* in opposition, because despite her character's loathsome disposition, they relate to her anger, adopting her as one of their own. Thus, I claim fellow Asian Kahn Souphanousinphone for loudly and persistently voicing his frustrations with discrimination and unwitting prejudice.


There is an implicit rule (or stereotype) that as the model minority, Asian Americans do not speak out against racial injustice. Remember, as Peggy Hill says, we are "by nature, shy and reserved." Furthermore, Hank Hill, whose morality rules the show, embodies whiteness with his "obsessive self-control, rationality, order and repression of emotions" (Dyer 1988, 1997 cited in Garner 2007, p.49). Thus the most satisfying moments of *King of the Hill* occur when Kahn breaks these two rules and expresses his frustration.

When, in "Westie Side Story" Hank tells Kahn that his dog Ladybird "can only love another purebred Georgia bloodhound," Hill's unwitting reference to the American South's anti-miscegenation past provokes Kahn into shouting, "You know what I think, Hank Hill? I think you're a narrow-minded redneck!" In "Man Without A Country Club," when Hank laments having felt like an outsider, Kahn responds sarcastically, "Oh, yeah, you right. I always feel comfortable everywhere I go. You know, my original name is Smith. I just change it to Souphanousinphone when I move to Texas!" While in "Redneck on Rainey Street," Kahn wails to Hank, "We flee horrible dictatorship, learn a new language, work hard and study hard. And our reward for doing everything right is to be told 'Go to hell. You work too hard. You study too hard.'"

Expressions such as these, of Asian American grief in mainstream popular culture, are almost non-existent. Yet anger is a powerful political force and racial grief and grievance has performed a vital role in implementing change. As Anne Anlin Cheng (2001, p3) asserts "it is precisely at moments when racial injury is most publicly pronounced that its substance and tangibility come most stridently into question."

Furthermore, it is refreshing to see representations of Asians that don't always conform to stereotypes. Stephanie Larson (2007, pp.67-70) lists the following Asian stereotypes prevalent in mainstream film and television: "inscrutable foreigners, China dolls, dragon ladies, de-sexed sidekicks, criminals, nerds and mystics." In *King of the Hill*, we are presented with two creatures rare to U.S. prime time—a virile Asian American man (instead of an asexual nerd) and an Asian American woman who happens to not be a doctor in an interracial romance.

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In the Souphanousinphones, and their struggle to join the mythical model minority, we find alternate representations and ones that do acknowledge a history of racialization. Although Kahn especially is portrayed as a marginalized and intolerant bigot (perhaps to demonstrate that protagonist Hank Hill is not), I can't help but enjoy (and almost admire) this Laotian American as he breaks the model minority rule of Asian silence, and the white rule of self-control, to complain about the unfairness that surrounds him. It is gratifying to see every day prejudice towards Asian Americans acknowledged in popular culture. Mike Judge's Hank clearly is the 'King of the Hill,' but there is room for other subjectivities. Thus we can enjoy Kahn's anger as a rare spectacle of Asian American racial grief and see that televised representations need not always be two-dimensional, even in cartoons. 

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King of the Hill Episodes

- Westie Side Story. *King of the Hill*, Season 1, Episode 7. Writers Glenn Berger and Jonathan Aibel. Directed by Brian Sheesley. First aired 2 March 1997 on Fox.
- A Man Without a Country Club. *King of the Hill*, Season 6, Episode 15. Writers Kit Boss. Directed by Boohwan Lim and Kyounghee Lim. First aired 14 April 2002 on Fox.
- The Redneck on Rainey Street. *King of the Hill*, Season 8, Episode 21. Writer Jim Dauteriv. Directed Gary McCarver. First aired 16 May 2004 on Fox.

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