“Be a Fan, Not a Hater”: Identity Politics and the Audience in American Idol

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Biography

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Abstract

The televised singing competition *American Idol* is remarkable for its interactive nature. Its audience ostensibly becomes an active social agent, influencing the narrative of the reality program in a weekly voting process. This audience does not exist in a vacuum, but is socially constructed through viewers’ relationships with the media industry, with each other, and, notably with the “characters” on the show. Politics of identity figure considerably in the formation of the audience, as viewers create special meaning from their televisual experience through identification with the contestants. Their support is motivated not only by the singers’ talent, but also by an interest in markers of regional, ethnic, or religious associations. This paper addresses the ways in which *American Idol*’s producers, contestants, and viewers collaboratively negotiate identity, onscreen, offscreen, and online.

Introduction

In 1996, Keith Negus proposed that audiences, while often physically distanced from the sites of musical production, are never far removed from productive *processes* (1996:35). A decade later, the accuracy of this statement is increasingly apparent in the design of music-based reality television shows like *American Idol*. In these programs, viewers participate directly in the making of a musical product. The winning contestant of *American Idol* is selected through a long process of viewer voting, receives a recording contract, and turns out a full album in the months between one televised season and the next. This system results in the simultaneous creation of product and built-in audience— a commodity package with “consumer included.” In the narrative structure of *American Idol*, the lines separating producer, character, and audience begin to blur. The audience helps to shape the story of the show by voting. It does so as a character named “America”—finalists are told each week how “America” has voted. And it exists on both sides of the camera, the studio audience functioning as a kind of visual synecdoche for the invisible, nationwide living-room whole. Old questions about the nature of audiences must be renegotiated to accommodate this dialectic relationship between audience and media industry. Amid the ruins of the proverbial fourth wall, the passive audience and the active audience are superseded by the *interactive* audience.[1]

Not only is this audience allowed to cross functional boundaries, but it is also built on a set of interconnections related to these roles. Denise Bielby and C. Lee Harrington have addressed the significance of three types of “bonds” in the formation of reality television audiences: the bonds among viewers, between viewers and the “characters” on a show, and between viewers and producers (1994:83). In the case of *American Idol*, these ties are often created and maintained through the discursive negotiation of politics of identity. Dialogue on electronic message boards consistently shows that viewers relate to contestants (characters) not solely based on aesthetic qualities, but also on the singers’ regional, ethnic, and religious affiliations. These associations constitute elements of a politics of identity contextualized as particularly American, a politics appropriate to a particularly American *Idol*. Producers are not unmindful of these issues, and take them into account during the course of the show. Furthermore, such elements figure in the ways viewers relate to each other. In virtual communities or even in a more physical space, they may coalesce into groups unified both by loyalty to a particular singer and identification with his or her particular sociocultural background. Whether this background is publicly acknowledged by a singer or simply presumed by viewers, such associations clearly constitute a powerful force in the creation of

meaning from the televisual experience. The present essay will address the ways in which these processes contribute to the unique construction of *American Idol* and its audience.

Regional solidarity

For *American Idol*, the viewer-to-viewer relationship develops in two primary ways: in person at audition sites, and online at web sites. Some viewers who aspire to be cast in the show encounter each other in person at the preliminary auditions, where thousands of hopefuls wait together to sing for producers. Many auditions are held at stadiums and sports arenas to accommodate the large turnout. This arrangement means that singers wait their turn in numbered stadium seating, already spatially organized into the shape of an audience. The formation of identity-based bonds begins early. At the auditions, the producers encourage regional solidarity, giving the crowd a location-specific song to perform together (en masse) on camera. In the Las Vegas auditions of summer 2004, this song was the Elvis hit “Viva Las Vegas” (Interview, Alexandra Rajaofera, 2 November 2004). In San Francisco, where I attended auditions for the 2005 season, it was first announced that we would collectively perform the Otis Redding song “Dock of the Bay,” but when the morning of the auditions came, we were asked to sing “The Star Spangled Banner” instead. The local pride quickly shifted to patriotism. Immediately after the group sing, a chant of “U.S.A.! U.S.A!” broke out among the crowd (field notes, 5 October 2004). These performances of regionalized and nationalized solidarity show that in the negotiation of audience identity, both the producers and the participants/viewers may conceive of the audience in geographically defined terms.

There is often considerable expression of regionally-based support for certain finalists as the season progresses. Political leaders of a hometown, even a home state, may make appearances with contestants, particularly when the final three singers pay an *Idol*-arranged visit to their families and local fans. In 2004, the most impressive example of such geographically delineated support involved two finalists from the state of Hawai’i, Jasmine Trias and Camile Velasco. Velasco left the competition early in April, but Trias endured to become the second runner-up.

Hawai’i’s region-specific interest in *American Idol* in fact had shown a promising start during the previous season (2003), with the appearance of Jordan Segundo in the “top 32” round (audience voting begins when the top 32, or similar number, are to be narrowed down to twelve). It has been reported that the number of Hawaiian residents watching *American Idol* during Segundo’s critical round rivaled the ratings from the home area of eventual Season 2 winner Ruben Studdard (Tsai 2004). In 2004, Velasco and Trias rose to the “top 32” group along with the Honolulu-born Jonah Moananu, whose performance, however, did not generate even half of the land-line votes (dialed through Verizon Hawaii) recorded for each of the two women (Tsai 2004). Toward the end of the season, after Velasco had been cut, 98 percent of the votes from Hawai’i residents were placed in Trias’ favor (Harada 5 May 2004). When she made her last stand, as one of the final three contestants, the numbers of Hawaiian calls reached 5.9 million (Tsai 2004). It should be noted that these calls are reported as “attempts,” as high call volume and busy lines may prevent many calls from resulting in successful votes. Throughout Velasco’s and Trias’ time on *American Idol*, local newspapers such as the *Honolulu Advertiser* and the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* followed each episode of the show closely, detailing their statuses every week. In April, during the last week that both contestants remained on the show, the *Star-Bulletin* reported some voting statistics:

> Verizon Hawaii reported yesterday that its land-line calls to the "American Idol" numbers from Hawaii totalled 926,878. While that figure was lower than last week's 1.68 million and 2.98 million from two weeks ago, it still represents the third largest volume of calls for that time period in Verizon's nationwide network, behind the states of New York and New Jersey. (Lopes 2004)

May 13, 2004 was proclaimed “Jasmine Trias Day” by the Lt. Governor of Hawai’I, James Aiona (Jasmine Trias Proclamation 2004), and the following week her home county of Honolulu had its own Jasmine Trias Day. *American Idol* flew its top three finalists to their hometowns between episodes, to collect footage for an upcoming broadcast. Trias arrived in Hawai’i to attend the statewide celebration in her honor, accompanied on her trip by producer Simon Lythgoe (Serrano 2004). It is evident that both Trias and *American Idol*’s producers intended to portray her as a representative of Hawai’i, and that she was readily received as such by members of the audience. The singer’s reception, and her audience, were cooperatively engineered by producers, by Trias as a “character” on the show, and by viewers as fans.

Throughout the broadcast season, Trias spoke often on air of Hawai’i. For most episodes, she wore a flower above her right ear, and its disappearance toward the end of the season did not go unnoticed among fans. Several

verbal, gesticulatory, and sartorial symbols served as essentializing (if strategic) accessories, establishing Trias as an embodiment of regional Hawaiianness. In one of her earliest appearances on the show, she was shown smilingly calling “aloha” as she exited a vehicle, and flashing the “shaka” sign. The significance of this hand gesture, in which the three middle fingers are folded down, leaving the thumb and little finger visible, is strongly associated with Hawai’i, and with surf culture in both Hawai’i and California. 2 It also has ties to politics, popularized as a logo by Honolulu politician Frank Fasi during his third successful mayoral campaign in 1976, and throughout his tenure. Trias’ campaign was national, where Fasi’s was local, and in this larger context her “shaka” gesture carries a heavier political burden—the election this time would not result in a regional representative for the state of Hawai’i, but potentially in a national representative both *from* and *of* Hawai’i. Trias saw the broader significance of her hoped-for success, as well. Later in that early segment, she was briefly seen teaching hula motions to other contestants and to her vocal coaches, and she firmly declared her mission to “bring Hawai’i to the rest of the world” (*American Idol*, FOX Network, 3 March 2004). Not just to the rest of the U.S., but the *rest of the world*.

Ethnicity

This distinction proved important in the context of Trias’ situation, in that, in addition to her explicitly Hawai’i-based fan community, she also drew significant support from both fellow Filipino Americans and Filipino viewers outside the U.S., in the Philippines. (*American Idol* is broadcast to the Philippines, but votes may only be cast by telephone from within the U.S.) *The Honolulu Advertiser* reported dozens of daily e-mails regarding Trias and the paper’s coverage of *American Idol*, sent “from the Mainland and the Philippines” (Tsai 2004). Toward the end of the season, one post on *American Idol*’s official Web forum (accessed through a link labeled “Community”) urged:

> Fellow Filipinos, Fil-Ams, people from Hawai’i and Asia…please don’t forget to vote for Jasmine Trias… (*Idolonfox.com*, 12 May 2004)3

Messages sometimes included text in Tagalog (Pilipino), establishing certain electronic threads as a point of contact for a very specified group of viewers. Following her tenure on *American Idol*, Trias began to develop a career strongly reliant on her overseas support. She performed during the fall of 2004 in the Philippines, where she met with President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, and the palace in Manila issued a statement calling Trias an inspiration to Filipinos (*MSNBC News* 2004).

It is worth noting the inclusion in the aforementioned post of “Asia” among the several targets in its exhortation to fans to support Trias. Numerous additional posts were submitted praising the singer as a representative of “Asian Americans.” Thus, Trias’ onscreen character is constructed, in a telescoping fashion, as a representative of Hawai’i, of Filipino Americans, of the Philippines, and of Asian American panethnicity. Detailed analysis of the etiology and implications of this identity network, through which are woven threads of imperialism and the political institutionalization of ethnicity, in all its “multiple levels” (Espiritu 1992:7-12), regrettably lies outside the scope of the present study. However, it must be mentioned that in Trias’ case, the juxtaposition of Hawaiian symbols onscreen with identification among Filipino American, Filipino, and Asian American viewers highlights the complicated and intertwined construction of ethnicity and regional identity in Hawai’i.

The diversity of thinking and terminology surrounding Trias’ appearances on *American Idol* sparked a flurry of discussion threads about labels and definitions, the practice of voting based on ethnic identity, and racism. Online dialogue regarding racism escalated in April, when an African American finalist, early favorite Jennifer Hudson, was eliminated from the competition. In response to speculation about racism as a cause for Hudson’s departure, *American Idol* judge and producer Simon Cowell said, "There are a lot of passive viewers who complain about the results but don't pick up the phone or text a message…We needed a shake-up and I think it will change…” (*BBC News World Edition* 2004). In his scenario, the allegations of racism would result in greater viewer investment and involvement—a more highly interactive audience.

Around this time the content of the forum messages became so heated that Web site moderators deleted dozens of posts deemed “mean spirited” or offensive (pers. comm. Steve Brock, forum moderator, 9 February 2005). A week later, producers stepped in. For a brief time, FOX replaced an advertisement for its new show *The OC* at the top of the Forum screen with a banner that successively flashed the phrases:

> Be a fan. Not a hater.
> It’s about talent.
> Hard work and dedication.
> Not racism.
> Be a fan. Not a hater.
> (*Idolonfox*.com, 6 May 2004)

With the introduction of this banner FOX and the show’s producers submitted a direct response to the concerns preoccupying forum members at the time. It also seems an apparent attempt to ensure that voting is undertaken for what the producers feel are the “right” reasons. We are to understand that because it is “about talent,” then voting practices based on ethnic identity are not appropriate. The language of the admonition is also noteworthy, a world of layered implications present in the loaded use of hip-hop jargon (“hater”) and the epigrammatic reinforcement of the myth of the American Dream. Work hard, and no matter what your origins, you can be successful.[4]

The American Dream

According to *Idols* co-creator Simon Cowell, he and 19 Entertainment executive Simon Fuller took the idea for the *Idols* format unsuccessfully to the U.S. before they produced it in the U.K. They “tried to sell it initially as the great American dream, which is somebody who could be a cocktail waitress one minute, within 16 weeks could become the most famous person in America” (King 2006). The idea was turned down, so Cowell and Fuller took it home and turned it into the U.K. sensation *Pop Idol*. It may seem ironic that their American Dream sold in the U.S. only after it became a hit in the U.K., but in light of another, earlier, British Invasion, it is perhaps not so surprising. As The Beatles and The Rolling Stones fashioned a new rock ‘n’ roll from the American (particularly African American) model and returned it to the U.S. transformed, the *Idols* version of the Dream reconfigures an American product for reintroduction, re-naturalization.

In 2004, *American Idol* took pains to encourage faith in the Dream ideology, in its familiar narratives of immigration, assimilation, and the transcending of economic boundaries. During preliminary episodes summarizing the early audition process, particular emphasis was placed on the family history of contestant Bao Viet Nguyen. “His parents escaped from Indochina to realize the American Dream,” viewers were told in a voiceover by host Ryan Seacrest. “Now *he* may just do that” (original emphasis). Mr. Nguyen’s father was shown, wiping tears from his eyes, and though he was speaking English, subtitles appeared at the bottom of the television screen. They read, “My wife and I land here as Indochinese refugees. We have nothing and we hope the first generation will do something with America. Because, America gives us a lot of opportunity…” In the subsequent clip from his audition, Mr. Nguyen was asked by judge Simon Cowell if he believed that he could be a star. “Actually,” the singer replied, “I believe in myself as a businessman. I want to make myself a lot of money, and a lot of you a lot of money.” Elated at his acceptance to the next round, he exited the audition room exclaiming that he was “representing my mom and dad here! Boat people, 1980. Went on a boat here for two weeks, ate with rats and stuff, man. That’s deep love, man!” (*American Idol*, FOX Network, 27 January 2004).

The history of Mr. Nguyen’s family since their arrival in the U.S. (after the fall of Saigon) does indeed follow the refugee-to-thriving-middle-class outline. But in the context of *American Idol*, its apparent adherence to the contours of the Dream became the basis of careful strategy. By the time clips from his audition aired in January 2004 [5], the judges had long since cut Mr. Nguyen from the “top 32” group of contestants, and he watched with interest as his story unfolded onscreen. He was surprised at the focus on his father’s emotional statements, but he had suspected throughout his *Idol* experience that the narrative constructed around him might be angled in such a direction. Watching the broadcast, he did not initially recall having emphasized his parents’ situation so strongly at the first audition, but acknowledges that when he arrived at the later rounds in Hollywood, he made a conscious decision to do so:

> This wasn’t shown on TV, but I actually did “Right Here Waiting” for the first day, that song. And they tell you to say something about yourself, and so my dad convinced me to kind of play up what he did, the whole American Dream thing, and I did. I did play it up, saying “I want to be the American Idol because—“… I kind of put myself out there as representing this whole refugee American experience, like “For my parents, who have been through this…” (Interview, 15 September 2005)

If the Nguyens saw the potential appeal of their story, they were not alone. Footage filmed of Mr. Nguyen during the Hollywood rounds (though never aired during the highly edited early broadcasts) had continued to stress an obligation to the realization of his parents’ Dream.

> [I]t’s really cheesy, the purpose is to be cheesy and to stand out, and I thought that—my dad convinced me that one way to do that, to get yourself past there, is to play up that ethnic experience, because you know they’re looking for it… And during my interviews and stuff they would ask those questions directed there, not anything about *any*thing else. You know, “How do you feel? How do you think your dad feels? How do you think your mom feels?” A lot of things dealing with parents, as if—you know, playing on that stereotype that I do report to my parents. Kind of familial, filial duty… The questions were kind of directed at that refugee experience—which, I was born here, so I don’t get it. But a lot of it was asking about my parents, “what do they do? Yeah, they’re really hardworking Americans, what do you think of that? Supporting you in this dream…” (Interview, 15 September 2005)

When Mr. Nguyen first appeared on *American Idol*, friends alerted him to online discussions regarding the clips from his Pasadena audition. Reading posts on several electronic message boards, he found much support, but controversy as well. Some viewers objected to his father’s use of the word “Indochina,” and to the way host Ryan Seacrest echoed this choice. According to Mr. Nguyen, his father later explained that he had chosen the term over “Vietnam” because it encompassed “most of South East Asia,” and because “[he] wanted to include everyone” (Interview, 15 September 2005). However, the name, and Seacrest’s repetition of it, seemed unsettlingly colonialist to some. Additionally, opinions were split over the juxtaposition onscreen of the parents’ former refugee status with certain symbols of affluence—the father’s digital camera, the mother’s Louis Vuitton purse, the sister’s Von Dutch hat. Were these accessories symbolic of the American Dream fulfilled, or merely incompatible with the repeated references to an economically humble background? Furthermore, viewers asked, was the portrayal of Mr. Nguyen a positive contribution to the marginalized representation of Asian Americans in the media, or simply a reprise of familiar stereotypes?

Mr. Nguyen himself is keenly aware of these contradictions and tensions. A communications major at a prestigious university, he looks back on his own choices, and the screen time he was allotted, with a critical gaze:

> I mean, from a liberal standpoint you’re not supposed to believe that much in that whole American Dream thing, you know, you deconstruct it, it has a lot of faults. But it did work out for my family, and I do believe—if I didn’t believe in the American Dream, I wouldn’t be here [at the university], or anywhere… So [during his *Idol* experience] I was just thinking, “yeah, this is very important,” but then it’s not until I watched it that the issues started arising (Interview, 15 September 2005)

When members of an Asian American web site invited him to give an interview, he declined, concerned that they were only fishing for evidence of racism in his dismissal from the show, or in the music industry. Since he felt that he hadn’t experienced this kind of discrimination, he did not want to participate. He has also considered some of these issues in an academic context, having written a few class assignments on the topic of *American Idol*.

The portrayal of Mr. Nguyen on the show, then, shows a dialectically co-constructed narrative, subject to interpretation and reinterpretation among contestant, producers, and viewers. The narrative is based in certain hallmarks of American identity discourse, particularly movement and transformation: emigration/immigration, upward economic (and social) mobility, “going to Hollywood.” No matter that Mr. Nguyen was born in the U.S., and already a resident of Los Angeles when he first appeared in front of *American Idol*’s judges. In the few miles to Hollywood, he was traversing the unquantifiable ideological space between two indivisibles-- ethnicity and Americanness.

Religious solidarity

At the end of the 2004 season when Fantasia Barrino, an African American, single, teenaged mother won the title of American Idol, satisfied fans again invoked the concept of the American Dream. One bulletin board post read:

> This season's American Idol is a wonderful rags to riches story that speaks volumes for the American dream. In America, a person is supposed to be able to accomplish anything with lots of hard work and determination. This is why so many foreigners come into this country each day....in search of that "dream" they hear about (*Idolonfox.com*, 27 May 2004)

Barrino’s case demonstrates the ways in which, on *American Idol*, faith in the American Dream is intertwined with ideas about American morality, and about religious faith. The singer drew fan support throughout the season not only based on her singing and on the compelling details of her socioeconomic status, but also related to her publicly demonstrated faith. Early in the season, upon being voted into the “top twelve” group, Barrino gestured skyward and proclaimed, “I thank God. I’m happy. It’s a blessing, and I love you all” (*American Idol*, FOX Network, 11 February 2004). One viewer wrote this message online, in response:

> FANTASIA!!! You did it!!! Praise GOD!…I loved what you said tonight. God sure blessed you with true talent…Keep acknowledging God and I know you will come out on top everytime! (*Idolonfox.com,* 11 February 2004)

Some support even came from viewers purporting to have a personal spiritual relationship with a contestant, as in the case of a poster claiming to be the pastor of finalist George Huff’s church. He initiated message-board prayer chains for the singer when he was ill, and at other particularly difficult points throughout the competition. Huff’s fans identified themselves collectively on the board as members of “HuffNation,” and responded enthusiastically to the pastor’s messages. This type of communication constructed a uniquely virtual sacred space for worship.

The example of George Huff’s fan community also illustrates the significance of viewer-contestant bonds based on identity markers like religious faith. “HuffNation,” as members called it, was a distinct, self-defined subgroup of the *American Idol* audience, founded on loyalty to a specific contestant and on its members’ mutual awareness of specified Christian religious code.

That faith is important to some *American Idol* fans is clear; what kind of role it plays in their voting practices is more ambiguous. As Rhys Williams notes, religion as an identity marker is considered to exert a powerful influence in the context of the political election (1996:368-369). Discourse on the Fox message boards suggests a similar effect in the choosing of the American Idol. One third-season contestant mentioned his attendance at Brigham Young University (associated with the Church of Latter-Day Saints) in his online profile. He and another singer whose Mormon affiliation was somehow surmised became the objects of frequent forum posts by co-religionists. One message thread asked the question “Mormon vote: John PETER or John PREATOR” (*Idolonfox.com*, 6 February 2004). Fans writing in favor of another Season Three contestant, Leah Labelle, point out her history singing in a Gospel choir and her mother’s career in a Christian rock band (*Idolonfox.com*, 6 February 2004).

However, while several fans have expressed to me their approval of contestants’ publicly acknowledged faith, they all deny that such factors have guided their voting. Along with Huff, Season Two runner-up Clay Aiken was an all-time favorite of fans at two dress rehearsals I attended during Season Four (2005). A mother and adult daughter from Arizona, who told me that they listen primarily to Christian rock, recognized and commended Aiken’s Christianness, but considered religion unimportant in their voting decisions (personal communications, field notes 24 May, 2005). But even if there is not always a direct correlation between a singer’s religious faith and his or her ultimate success on *American Idol*, another, related issue may be at stake here. A 65-year-old woman who “wore out two phones” voting for Aiken said that she respects and admires him for his openness about his faith, especially because he “practices what he preaches” and is a good *role model* (personal communications, field notes 24 May, 2005). This comment points to the weight placed on contestants’ apparent adherence to certain *moral values*, distinct but not entirely separable from religion.

The prayer chains for George Huff demonstrate that faith is understood as a kind of intermediary directly between contestant and audience. This is a two-way street: Jasmine Trias told one reporter, “I pray Tuesday night [the night votes are submitted]…I pray, ‘Please make the people vote for me’” (Harada 8 May 2004). Bringing God into the audience equation adds a new dimension to the interaction among viewers, characters, and the Powers That Be in the media industry.

Though online forum members writing to support contestants’ Christianness in 2004 rarely verbally identified

themselves as African American, producers seemed to effectively conflate faith and ethnicity in a referential reliance on elements of gospel music. When Fantasia Barrino performed guest judge Barry Manilow's "It's a Miracle," Manilow rearranged the song for her to sound, as he described it, "like it would come right out of a church" (*American Idol*, FOX Network, 20 April 2004). Judge Randy Jackson proclaimed in response "I feel the spirit in here tonight!"

The final broadcast of the 2004 season, in which Barrino was awarded the title of American Idol, concluded with her performance of a new song written in advance for the show's winner by Louis Biancaniello, Sam Watters[6], and Season One finalist Tamyra Gray. It is very nearly a gospel song, performed complete with a robed, choreographed choir, and is titled "I Believe." The song includes many religiously allusive lyrics, marking the sacred-secular confluence in symbolic terms: *heaven*, *soul*, *love that saves the world*. The singer's "dream" has come true, because, we are told, belief makes anything possible. However, belief in God has plainly been replaced with belief in a (The) Dream. In the song's final fade-out moments, Barrino and the choir proclaimed, "Love keeps lifting me higher." Whose love? The strongly Christian, and African American Christian, overtones of the performance were augmented by Barrino's emotion upon winning the competition, as she dropped to one knee, weeping, at the last phrase, "I believe" (*American Idol*, FOX Network, 26 May 2004).

Though they wrote the song weeks before the show's winner was chosen, Biancaniello and Watters acknowledge that they had Barrino in mind (Hildebrand 2004). Barrino's television character had been written, performed, and read as Black and Christian, and, as a new pop star, the embodiment of the American Dream. Those behind the scenes clearly comprehended the combined significance to viewers of Barrino's devout faith, her ethnicity, and social position, and (literally) capitalized on it.

Conclusions

The overlapping identity discourses that contribute to *American Idol*'s persistent success serve as a reminder that the construction of race and ethnicity in the U.S. is firmly tied to political processes. As Yen Le Espiritu observes, (paraphrasing Joane Nagel), "the organization of political participation on the basis of ethnicity provides a rationale for, and indeed demands, the mobilization of political participation along ethnic lines" (1992:10, in Nagel 1986:98-106)). In *American Idol*, a similar process proves to be a self-perpetuating dialectic: onscreen constructions of American identities create a framework for the strategic participation of viewers, and the commercial success of this framework, in turn, makes identity construction an appealing strategy for those involved in what happens onscreen.

There are old, familiar representations, repackaged in nostalgic boxes, and less common ones, too, somewhat redressing lacunae in mediated representation. The show's largely historic, even canonic song repertoire is conducive to conventional stereotyping. Regardless of the contestants' ethnicities, Soul and R&B repertoire from the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s has been distinctly prevalent on *American Idol*, especially through its third season (2004). The favored repertoire is thematically "safe," and, more importantly, related to "safe" aspects of African-American and popular culture. In his dissertation on African American ballads of the early 1990s, Richard Allen Rischar remarks that ballad-singers are "not gangsta's…they are not heavy-metal artists…they do not reflect the inner city" (2000:155). Additionally, the idea that anyone, of any immigrant or non-White ethnicity, might prove an assimilated Americanness through the performance of African American music (or constructions of it) endures from the earliest days of American popular music.[7] And as first-generation Americans like Jasmine Trias and Bao Viet Nguyen make their way to celebrity with songs popularized by Aretha Franklin and Stevie Wonder, we revisit aurally the years that cemented the political institutionalization of ethnicity.[8] While those two singers were rare examples of Asian American (or Filipino, or Vietnamese) presence in mainstream television, their portrayals relied on essentializing symbols and discourses of place.

The banner advising the Web forum visitor to "Be a fan, not a hater" imagines the potential transcendence of ethnic prejudice, or even of ethnicity itself, through the realization of the American Dream. Popularized during the Depression, American Dream discourse has also consistently highlighted the transformation of the consumer. Ambition and effort earn the consumer the *power* to become a producer, or, as in the case of the Hollywood Dream, to become a highly desired commodity. *American Idol*'s stunning success is built on new manipulations and applications of this principle, offering both options without ever losing the consumers needed for the show's survival. The consumer can audition to become a star, or simply vote to select one, but on the way to such transformation never really stops being a consumer.

This essay has explored the layers of interaction that help to structure *American Idol* and its audience. Viewers are

members of a discrete and widespread community integrated through bonds with each other, between viewers and producers, and between viewers and the contestants on the show. These relationships are built in part through the negotiation of a multi-faceted and specifically American politics of identity. The televised show and its audience are mutually dependent, so that virtual contact and social contact, identities onscreen and identities online, are inextricably intertwined in the creation of a complex and deeply political cultural product.

Notes

1. For excellent studies on the interactive audience in recent reality television programming, see especially Tincknell and Raghuram (2004), Wilson (2004), Holmes (2004), Cruz and Lewis (1994), Bielby and Harrington (1994), Brooker and Jermyn (2001).

2. For a fascinating accounting of lore regarding the origins of the “shaka” sign, and its name, see Watanabe (2002).

3. This past Fall, when Trias performed in Manila, her concert was titled “Jasmine: Fil-Am Idol.” The *Manila Times* reported then that she “is a descendant of the revolutionary hero, General Mariano Trias” (Jorge 2004).

4. Su Holmes has written about stardom, capitalism, and the American Dream in relation to the U.K.’s *Pop Idol*, the first show in the *Idols* franchise (Holmes 2004b).

5. Early rounds are filmed in the summer and fall, with audience voting beginning a few weeks into the broadcast season.

6. In the early 1990s, Watters was a member of the “boy band” Color Me Badd, and also the group’s main songwriter.

7. Regarding this phenomenon among immigrant Jewish musicians in Vaudeville and Tin Pan Alley, for example, see Rogin (1996) and Melnick (1999).

8. Yen Le Espiritu details the 1960s social movements in which “ethnicity was institutionalized” (Espiritu 1992: 12).

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