

2009

## "You're going to Hollywood"!: Gender and race surveillance and accountability in American Idol contestant's performances

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“You’re Going to Hollywood!”: Gender and Race Surveillance and Accountability in  
*American Idol* Contestant’s Performances

by

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Women’s Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:  
April 1, 2009

Keywords: stereotypes, reality television, heteronormativity, repetition, gaze

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Accountability in *American Idol* Contestant’s Performances

Amanda LeBlanc

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the reality competition television program *American Idol* serves to reinforce gendered, racialized and heteronormative stereotypes, particularly for female contestants. Through its “democratic” style of public audience voting, those competitors who not only sing well, but also perform their gender and race to standards which have been deemed by the judges to be appropriate mainstream American culture, prove to be the most successful on the program. Through a content analysis of the show’s first four seasons, I find that those female contestants who begin their tenure in the contest by fitting into categories which would be considered stereotypical for their gender and race, and continue to appear and behave in this manner, move farther along in the competition than their peers appear to be more innovative. I also find that while the judges comments suggest that *American Idol* purports to be looking for someone “unique,” the contestants who do well in the competition are in fact not exceptional, but rather fit into “conventional” performances of either white or African American women. Those who present themselves as too different, that is, “deviant” from gendered or racialized performances end up being voted off the show before getting their chance to be crowned *American Idol*.

## Chapter One

### “We Got a Hot One Right Here!:" The *American Idol* Phenomenon

We all have our vices and I have mine: *American Idol*. For the past seven springs I have literally rearranged work and school schedules in order to be able to watch the live performances, well, live. Watching a recorded episode simply will not do for this devoted fan. Every Tuesday, I need to see for myself what the *Idol* contestants will choose for songs, outfits, hair styles, and even makeup. As an educated woman who barely cares about such details concerning my own friends and relatives, how is it that I am obsessed with the superficial facts about complete strangers? As both a viewer and a voter, I am made to feel as a stakeholder in the contestant's success or failure. The premise of the show, of course, is that I at home, along with the 25 million American viewers (Nielsen Media Research, 2009) get to decide a person's fate; who stays, and who goes home.

There is much more to *American Idol* and other reality voting contests than meets the eye, yet because of these show's ability to razzle-dazzle their viewers with whatever entertainment they are providing, for most people, only the surface is visible. The incredible success of "reality" shows like *Idol*, *Dancing With the Stars*, *Survivor*, *The Bachelor*, or *The Apprentice* are demonstrative of the American public's fascination with the unscripted as well as the capability of seemingly everyday people to participate, and, sure, we want to know what is happening behind the scenes of the *Idols* or B-list

celebrities each week, but we often forget that there is something very structured going on behind those supposedly unprompted scenes.

My project focuses on the gender performance of *American Idol* contestants. I chose this particular program because it is among my favorite television shows, and in fact the only reality program I watch at all. Many other, very successful, reality programs seem to insult intellect on the basis that they overtly<sup>1</sup> perpetuate stereotypes and are often explicitly contrived, as so-called confessionals are clearly in an interview format where the contestant is answering a production member's question. However, I continue to tune in to *Idol* each week because not only does the program dispense with the backstage, the-camera-is-on-you-at-all-times premise, but I also like to sing very much. So like much of the *American Idol* fan base, I am a wanna-be, and derive much pleasure in critiquing the *American Idol* contestants' performance based on my own experiences with vocal coaching, a sense of identification with the contestants and the joy derived from determining the fate of others while at the same time ensuring my own success by identification with the winners and their subsequent fame.

The first televised talent show was *The Original Amateur Hour*, hosted by Ted Mack, which premiered in 1948 (Huff, 2006). Winners of the program include Frank Sinatra, Gladys Knight and Pat Boone, and those who did not make the cut include Elvis Presley and Wayne Newton (Huff, 2006). After this, the *Gong Show* and both the original *Star Search* and its late 1990s incarnation were all mildly prosperous successors

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<sup>1</sup> I will argue that *American Idol* rewards behavior and appearances that are considered stereotypical, or "the norm," albeit less blatantly.

(Huff, 2006). It was in the early 1990s when America's first credited reality show debuted- MTV's *The Real World* (Johnston, 2006). Since this wildly popular docudrama, now in its 21<sup>st</sup> season, about spoiled and often drunken strangers being forced to live together under 24 hour camera surveillance, over 300 other reality shows have entered the airwaves in the U.S. (Johnston, 2006). Johnston (2006) also points to a 2001 demographics study which showed that forty-five percent of Americans watched at least one reality program, with twenty-seven percent of those people admitting to being "die-hard fans" (p.115).

In the late 1990s, in the United Kingdom, a singing and performing group competition program called *Popstars* garnered a lot of attention and decent ratings, but after only one season its producer, Simon Cowell, was toying with the idea of finding the one pop star rather than a boy/girl band (Huff, 2006; Cowell, 2003a). The winner of the first season of *Pop Star* sold two million records in the U.K in the year 2000, and Cowell and his partner Simon Fuller saw an opportunity for big time success in the United States (Cowell, 2003a). In the summer of 2001, *American Idol* made its debut as a summer fill-in show on the Fox Network.

The basis and progression of the show is simple. The first four weeks are devoted to the airing of the national auditions, which took place months earlier and are now edited down so the public can see a few talented individuals go in front of the judges, as well as many awful crooners simply included for comic relief and sensationalism. The judges are former Journey bassist and music producer Randy Jackson, 80s dancer, choreographer and pop star Paula Abdul and British music mogul

Simon Cowell. Those who do make it to Hollywood must now audition for the judges in groups, alone with assigned songs, and alone a capella with songs of their choice. Thirty two finalists are chosen from this stage to the next, which begins the popular voting of who will be the next *American Idol*. Once the pool is whittled down to twelve finalists, the show moves to a bigger auditorium with a much larger stage and studio audience. The performances are now live, and with a full band to back up the singers. These performances take place on Tuesday nights, and viewers have two hours after the show closes to vote *for* their favorite contestant or contestants. On Wednesday night, after about twenty eight minutes of filler, the contestant with the least number of votes is eliminated from the competition. This continues for the twelve weeks until one singer is ultimately crowned the American Idol, and is given a one-year, one million dollar contract with 9 Records, a subdivision of Arista Records, under the legendary music producer Clive Davis. While the first season of *American Idol* aired during the summer of 2001, by the September showdown between Kelly Clarkson and Justin Guarini, twenty-six million people were tuning in (Cowell, 2003b). Now in its eighth season, *American Idol* averages twenty-seven million viewers a week for both the singing and the results portions of the show (Nielson Media Research, 2009).

Those millions who are glued to their televisions every week have most of the same motivations for watching the show that I admitted to above. Reality shows, and more specifically talent shows like *American Idol*, *Nashville Star* or *Rock Star* “...promise to collapse the distance that separates those on either side of the screen by cultivating the fantasy that it really could be you up there on the screen...” (Andrejevic, 2003, p.9). The



premise of *American Idol* plays off the notion that not only is there such a thing as the American Dream, but you at home can achieve it. Or rather, anyone can attempt to achieve it (Cowell, 2003). Even those with no discernable performance talents have the opportunity to gain visibility, whether through a ghastly audition, a camera-catching costume, or such outrageous behavior that the producers are sure to notice you. While the ridiculous people in the preliminary auditions will most likely not gain the status of the *American Idol*, they have acquired that much coveted visibility (Cowell, 2003b). Those with some singing talent will advance in the competition, however, and will withstand almost constant visibility. It is this public pedestal that I argue creates a surveillance and accountability system for the *Idol* contestants, whereby much more is at stake than simply their vocal abilities. When the voting audience holds the *Idol* contestants to rigid standards of what is considered “appropriate” regarding gender, race, class, and body-type (rather than just singing talent), the audience is reflecting, and furthering, the “performances of self” they themselves are supposed to live by. Further, while detailed demographics of who is watching the program are not available, regardless of the actual racial makeup of this voting audience, the “American audience” that is voting for their favorite contestants is perceived to be “white.” That is, *American Idol* caters to a white palate in that the competitor’s performances are expected to be both pleasing and entertaining to a perceived dominant, mainstream audience, which is assumed to be white.

Reality competition television shows such as *American Idol*, while seemingly advancing those contestants who possess the most talent, also reward those whose

appearance and behavior (that is, their overall image), seem to “get it right.” How the contestants embody themselves is of the utmost importance to their success on the show, for even if they make it past the preliminary rounds where only the judges reside, they will soon face a much higher, and stricter, authority; the American public. *American Idol* serves not only to perpetuate the constant surveillance of male and female bodies as they appear in the public eye, but also literally reinforces our accountability to appropriate performance when America votes for who should stay and who should go. The viewing public uses its understanding about how young people, particularly women, are supposed to dress, behave, and speak, to either reward or penalize those on the *American Idol* stage. Since it is the young *Idol* competitors in the spotlight every week, we take for granted that it is only their fate that is at stake during the contest, yet the voting public has much to gain or lose when people who look or act like them are either voted to move along or off the program. If the *Idol* contestant who looks like me did not “get it right,” then maybe neither did I.

For my analysis, I will focus mainly on the scrutiny faced by the female competitors on *American Idol*, for females have long been the ones who have been oppressed by mainstream conceptions of beauty, created and perpetuated by privileged men. The female contestants who do best on *American Idol* are those who sing well, but also who conform to mainstream ideals of the feminine body. *American Idol* not only portrays stereotypical images of men and women, but also seeks to reinforce expectations of race, class, and sexuality. While my main focus is on the reward and punishment system that *American Idol* contestants face based on their perceived gender

performances, I additionally examined how the competitors are held accountable for their representation of stereotyped notions of their ethnicity, class, and sexuality. As noted above, those female contestants who advance far into the competition must possess singing talent and approximately the ideal feminine body, but additionally an appearance that conforms to expectations concerning their (perceived) race, class, and sexuality. Through an analysis of the program's first four seasons, I found that those female contestants who betray the image that they began the show with are penalized both verbally by the judges, and often by the American audience by the withholding of votes. I also found that while the judges often praise contestants who they deem as unique, success on *American Idol* lies in limiting one's individuality. Conformity to a "type," as well as to what is often considered appropriate gender and racial boundaries are what ultimately the key to success on *American Idol*, not individuality.

Further, the demands to conform to "appropriate" gender standards placed upon the *Idol* contestants speaks volumes about the voting audience's implication in the production and perpetuation of heteronormativity. If "we" are the ones voting for our favorite competitors each week, then "we" are the ones reinforcing the stereotypes, rewarding and punishing those who "got it right" or who "look all wrong." Since we have been held accountable to standards regarding our gender, ethnicity, class, and (sometimes perceived) sexuality, the voting audience of *American Idol* further passes this judgment on to those on the stage. We have all felt the impact of this surveillance, and yet the voters of this program continue to hold the *Idol* contestants accountable to physical values based on white, middle-class, heteronormative "performance of self."

## Chapter Two

### “Ok, so check it out...”: Literature Review

Although it can be argued that what we know as reality television has been around since about 1990 (MTV's *The Real World*), the genre has exploded in popularity over the last decade for a number of reasons, including relatively low production costs and a large amount of drama being played out by “the average American.” While feminists have long been interested in analyzing the media as a site where misogynistic, homophobic, and xenophobic ideals have been perpetuated, what little work exists on the social analysis of reality television is not being produced by feminist scholars.

When analyzing contemporary media culture, utilizing a postmodern lens is critical, as, “postmodern theory shares...a commitment to analyzing the politics of culture and the relations of culture to political and economic power” (Bignell, 2000, p.5). Additionally, the postmodern (philosophical) movement aims to critique Enlightenment reason and the notion that there are universal Truths. Rather than theories and ideas that are rooted in essentialist and foundationalist discourse (as is characteristic of a “modernist” philosophy), that is, something that is true for all people at all times, postmodern theory is, “...explicitly historical, attuned to the cultural specificity of different societies and periods and to that of different groups within different groups and periods (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990, p.35). Fraser and Nicholson (1990) and Nicholson (1994) note that these concepts developed concurrently in the second-wave of the feminist movement, and while there is no perfect marriage between the two viewpoints, a

postmodern-feminism would be beneficial in that theories would become “...comparativist rather than universalizing” (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990, p.34), as was a characteristic of many earlier second-wave theories (see Firestone, Chodorow). Flax (1990) similarly points out that a postmodern-feminism is useful for explaining and interpreting the human experience with recognition of a metatheoretical method of raising questions and critiques about theory and the process of theorizing itself. Nicholson (1994) sums this thought up well in her desire to expand the widely held feminist declaration “The personal is political” to include “The epistemic is political,” as well (p.85). So when examining texts of contemporary popular culture (such as *American Idol*) through a postmodern-feminism lens, I must seek to analyze contestants performances in the context of not only our specific time and location (21<sup>st</sup> Century North America), but also account for the differences between and among different groups of people. Additionally, it is important to note that while I have given this particular reality television program much thought and critical examination, we must remember that the voting audience that I am also holding accountable is presumably not theorizing about *why* they are voting or not voting for a particular contestant, so my metatheorizing is only as important as it lends itself to the question of: So what? It is vital that we (both theorists and those watching these programs at home) then be able to see our favorite so-called reality programs through such a critical eye, and while still enjoying them, be able to see past their claim of authenticity.

Reality television operates through an assertion of legitimacy, distinguishing itself from earlier forms of popular broadcasting, such as the daytime soap opera, or thrilling

drama (Trottier, 2006). The viewers are told that they are being provided access to “reality” through surveillance, and are “thereby invited to adopt the position of the ‘pure gaze’” (Andrejevic, 2003, p.189). The concept of this “pure gaze” is that when we witness the joy, pain, accomplishments and suffering of those who participate in the reality show, we are supposed to be seeing the real emotions of real people as opposed to those being acted out by professionals. Since it is (supposed to be) unscripted, our gaze should be “pure.” Andrejevic (2003) also notes that when it comes to the majority of reality television, such as *Survivor*, *Real World* or the now-canceled *Temptation Island*, it is most often the suffering, the crying and the anger that make it on screen, while the displays of other emotions are left on the cutting room floor. Further, many of these programs contain dialogue, conflicts, and emotional moments which may have been set up by the show’s producers (Levin, 2001). In a 2001 lawsuit, an ousted *Survivor* first season contestant alleged that producers wanted to keep a more dramatic competitor on the show so badly that they went so far as to manipulate the voting process, clearly violating the rules of “reality” TV (Hartlaub, 2001). So clearly there are problems with the “reality” in Reality Television, and yet millions of Americans continue to tune in to the drama. Even if and when the producers’ hands have not been directing the drama, the “reality” of these programs certainly do not correspond with the drama which occurs in most people’s daily lives. While we tune in on the premise that these are “real” people and not actors living their everyday, unscripted, daily lives, we still expect them to behave and react as though they were on *As the World Turns*. That is, these shows are shot from perspectives that *we want to see them through*. While the majority of Americans do not spend their nights navigating torrid love triangles and their days

attempting to win outlandish physical, intellectual and financial challenges, for the sake of ratings, it is still critical that reality television stars engage in such extreme behavior in an attempt to capture our attention.

### *Surveillance of Bodies*

Douglas Kellner (1995) notes: “Media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil” (5). Further:

The media are a profound and often misperceived source of cultural pedagogy: They contribute to educating us about how to behave and what to think, feel, behave, fear, and desire-and what not to. The media are forms of pedagogy that teach us how to be men and women; how to dress, look, and consume; how to react to members of different social groups; how to conform to the dominant system of norms, values, practices and institutions (5)

The competitors in the *American Idol* contest, like those of other reality television programs, offer themselves up to situations whereby they are under constant surveillance. Reality contestants seek to move from their virtual obscurity to the “...highly scopic arena of the competition” (Cowell, 2003b, p.3) in the hopes of someday soon becoming a household name. However in doing so, they offer their bodies as the tools of public pedagogy to, specifically, those young people watching from their homes.

The pervasive messages about how to act, look, and articulate ourselves in public is generally how surveillance happens in our everyday lives; “a kind of institutional force surrounding us constantly giving us instructions on how to behave appropriately” (Crawley, Foley & Shehan, 2008, p. 136). When we examine *American Idol*, an example of the concept of surveillance and accountability emerges. We feel the effects

of pervasive surveillance in our everyday lived experiences, yet rarely spoken are the words that keep us from straying from what is “normal” or “appropriate.” The instant celebrity, coupled with the potential stardom that the young Idols face leaves them especially open to the public’s surveillance of their bodies and behaviors. When they take the stage each week, we not only critique their vocal performances, but their hair, clothes and even their reactions to the judges’ comments. The critiques from the three judges also are not always content-based, as judge Simon Cowell (2003a) points out; rather appearance has much to do with who America wants as its next pop star. In his book, Cowell points out how he thought of runner-up Clay Aiken as “the kid with the big ears” (p.159) and that he thought much more of Kimberly Locke’s performances when she tamed her “weird hair” (p.186). On the one hand, we may not think of hair style and vocal performance as necessarily having to do with one another, while they are on the big stage singing in front of America, how the contestants, particularly the female competitors, embody themselves is critical.

Through the media, the *American Idol* contestants can actually hear what the voting audience is presumably saying about each one of them, for while actual voting tallies are not released, it is made public which contestants are in the “Top Three” vote-earners, and which are in the “Bottom Three.” Throughout the competition, the audience watches them individually perform, and then makes (what they believe to be) objective judgments about them, such as commenting to a roommate about a hairstyle, and then continue to make a very real judgment about what was just witnessed when they pick up the phone and vote for their favorites. The voting process is different from the system



that many Americans are familiar with, for example, local and national government elections that are held every two years. One of the significant differences includes the fact that while it is announced on the results portion of the program who earned the most votes, and of course the least number of votes, the actual number of votes for any particular contestant is never revealed. Under the Frequently Asked Questions about Voting section of [www.AmericanIdol.com](http://www.AmericanIdol.com), the only question *or* answer about the subject of voting results yields this ad-like answer: “The voting shows will air on FOX each Tuesday (see your local listings for show times) and the results will be broadcast on FOX every Wednesday. So, make sure you don't miss the results show if you want to see how your vote affected the results.” Also, unlike other voting processes that many are familiar with, the voting audience may vote as many times as they can get through using their home or cell phones in a (usually) two hour voting window, and that while voters may text in votes, this method will cost them money (phoning in to the 1-866 number is free). The *Idol* contestants, as well as the voting public, then experience this judgment when they read in the tabloids about how awful a journalist thought their outfits were last night and then again if and when they are voted out of the competition. Interestingly enough however, the *American Idol* competitors can never see America individually making these judgments, rather they are only seen as “the masses” which yield the gavel of the judgment of talent. Again, while *American Idol*, is technically a singing competition, it often serves as a venerable popularity contest (Poniewozik, 2007), and while the three “expert” judges can say someone is a great singer, it is purportedly up to the public to cast the votes for who should actually win (Huff, 2006).

Immediately we can see two examples of the literal surveillance that the *Idol* contestants endure, starting with their first day of auditions when they are thrust not only in front of three strangers to be literally picked apart and critiqued, but this process also takes place in front of the cameras. Oddly, Andrejevic (2003) notes how reality stars do not seem to be “...particularly troubled by the commoditization of their private lives for mass consumption” (p.96). Rather, this is their euphoria, an answer to their, and most of America’s, fascination with voyeurism and fame (Andrejevic, 2003). For many, simply making it in front of the three celebrity judges (there are two rounds of auditions before one can even see Randy, Paula and Simon) in high hopes of making it on the air is the answer to their wishes to be seen by millions, if only for a few minutes. Once they have performed in front of the judges, they are immediately gratified with a criticism about their appearance, behavior and eventually their vocal performance. Common responses are about an auditioner’s outfit, facial expressions, age or appearance of age (Season 5’s silver-haired winner Taylor Hicks had a hard time convincing judges that he was, in fact, 29 years old). Age itself is an interesting area of analysis, for there are strict limitations, as the minimum age at audition is 16 years, and the oldest a contestant may be at the time of first audition is now 28 years (up from 24 in 2005) ([www.AmericanIdol.com](http://www.AmericanIdol.com)). So not only are competitors surveyed by the voting audience as to their gender and racialized performances, but producers of the show do not even let those considered too old for pop (read: contemporary) music on to the stage to *be* judged. Additionally, contestants who are deemed to be too young (read: the public will see them as inexperienced), too unique looking (public will see them as un-relatable) or too unique sounding (unable to make pop records) are often passed on during the preliminary rounds.

The constant surveillance of how the *Idols* embody themselves will not stop in Hollywood though, it will only become deeper as they continue on in the competition and America gets to know each one a little better. Once we feel we feel acquainted with celebrities, the mediated public begins to feel as though we have earned the right to pass our own judgments on more than just the Idol's performances. It is their relationship to the public in which we see the second example of the literal surveillance that the *Idols* are put through, as well as the incredible amount of accountability that we hold them up to. After their appearance on the program, we often see reports of *Idol* contestants exploits or personal stories in the entertainment section of the news, such as Clay Aiken's coming-out as gay, Fantasia's declaration of bankruptcy, and tragically, in a story which made much headline-news, the violent slaying of Jennifer Hudson's mother, sister, and nephew. Not only are we judging them in internet polls about who is more attractive, but we are also telling the competitors, "Yes, do more of the same" or "No, you are doing it wrong" when we dial in their telephone extensions at the end of the show to vote for who we think deserves the coveted title of American Idol. Crawley, Foley and Shehan (2008) point out that accountability plays out for most of us by way of how others treat us based on how we interact with them and the rest of the world however, with the *Idols*, we hold them nationally accountable for how they interacted that night through their performances, and often again in their ensuing lives. If we liked how they sang, dressed, and wore their hair and makeup, then we reward them with our votes, and continue to enact surveillance in their lives for as long as it entertains us.

Eventually, the *Idols*, much like the contestants on other reality shows, do not even need the cameras or the public to be constantly watching and judging them for them to begin watching and judging themselves. For many other reality shows, while almost every detail of the participants lives are being filmed, only a tiny portion of footage actually makes it to air. The *Idol* contestants do not have cameras in the house they share while the show is taped, yet while not everything they are doing is taped and watched, due to their constant red carpet exposure, highly publicized charity work, advertisement filming and televised rehearsals, the *Idols* also "...have to live with the knowledge that their words and actions could, at any time, be recorded for broadcast" (Andrejevic, 2003, p.103). Like the contestants in the other reality programs, the *Idol* competitors live in a "virtual panopticon," not being able to see those who are judging them, yet feeling the effects of such criticism nonetheless. In his *Time Magazine* article, Pontiewozik (2007) notes that part of the fun of *American Idol* is judging how contestants change in response to the voting. Again, the contestants cannot see who is out there in TV land, yet they know they are being watched. Make one wrong move, and they might not get a second chance to redeem themselves. If they do not learn their lesson and try harder to conform, then they will be packing their bags. Trottier (2006) notes that this ever increasing synopticism can now be more clearly seen through internet networks such as MySpace and YouTube, where anyone and everyone can watch whatever you want them to provided you have a minimal amount of computer equipment (Andrejevic, 2003). Every week, millions of Americans turn their sets on to examine the performances of a handful of people who just a few months ago were also sitting in their homes. Those

people are on the stage now where we can see and ultimately judge them as favorable or not, giving the masses the upper hand.

### *The Gaze*

The *American Idol* contestants do not actually witness the voting process, as is made public in other elections, most notably a Presidential election; rather there is an understanding of a large body of American citizens who are casting their ballots for those competitors that they approve of. The voting results from *American Idol* are more than simply the sum of the individual votes garnered from the American audience, as they reflect the power inherent in the viewer's gaze. But is the gaze through which we watch reality television as "pure," or as Andrejevic suggests, as in *American Idol*, as well as its reality counterparts, shot through a specific lens which dictates how the viewer is to watch?

In 1975, Laura Mulvey noted the pervasiveness of scopophilia in modern film making, in which movies were shot through the perspective of the heterosexual male viewer. In her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey argues that movies and the media speak in the language of the patriarchy, and that we all must view cinema through the male gaze, even female viewers. A blatant example of how critical this notion is to female television viewers even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is the popularity of the show, *The Bachelor*, in which the female contestants, in their attempts to win the heart, and engagement ring, of The Bachelor, act and speak in ways that will please him. Shows such as *The Real World*, *Big Brother*, and *The Surreal Life*, also enjoy a majority

of female viewership, and yet still focus on women in bikinis in hot tubs, on beaches, and even fighting one another.

Mulvey also notes that film makers and directors use deliberate and specific techniques when attempting to tell their stories: "...the function of the film is to reproduce as accurately as possible the so-called natural conditions of human perception. Camera technology (as exemplified by deep focus in particular) and camera movement, combined with invisible editing all tend to blur the limits of screen space..." (1975, p.16). A contemporary example of such a technique is evident in the shameful, yet seemingly popular *Girls Gone Wild* series of DVDs, where young women lift up their shirts and pull down their pants for the rolling cameras, for no other reason than a man asked them to. These videos, as well as in music videos and pornography, reinforce Mulvey's argument that the camera moves in a way such that the resulting image will be pleasing to a man. In 1979, Erving Goffman noted these same techniques in *Gender Advertisements*, whereby women used in magazine ads and television commercials are often shown, "...on beds and floors much more than men. In addition, women are constantly shown 'drifting away' mentally while under the physical 'protection' of a male, as if his strength and alertness were enough" (Jhally, 1989, p. 133).

In 1989, Sut Jhally further analyzes why advertisements are timelessly shot through a male's perspective, arguing that while every culture has individual definitions of gender which suit its purposes, contemporary Western culture has become obsessed with explicit representation of gender relations. Jhally finds the power of advertisement to lie in those portrayals of sex and gender, for, "...as hyper ritualistic images,

commercials offer an extremely concentrated form of communication about sex and gender” (p. 136). Not only are the advertisements that we endure every day communication then, but they are in fact another form of public pedagogy. We are to learn about what is appropriate for women and men to act like, think like, and desire according to these commercials. And without using the language, Jhally recognizes the scopophilic eroticism in these advertisements, particularly when he makes his argument that, “I believe that is the reason why the feminist critiques concerning regressive representations in advertising have not been very successful; they have not recognized the basis of its attraction...People thus feel guilty about being attracted to the images of advertising while being told that they should not find it attractive” (p. 137). While almost twenty years old now, his critique furthered Mulvey’s notion that women are attracted to the portrayal of other women in movies, and when Jhally later updates his own theory to include music videos (1990, 1995, 2007), he argues that not only do women sympathize with the portrayals of these women on the screen, but they often long to be them. Similarly, the promise of reality competition-format television programs such as *American Idol* is that *you too* can be like ‘them. It is not surprising then that television shows which offer the opportunity to act out fantasies have been so incredibly popular because they promise that “anyone” can be like Kelly Clarkson, Fantasia, or Jordin Sparks, if they only follow the rules outlined by the images seen on the television. Of course those images, contrary to the supposed format of the program, are not spontaneous, or “real,” rather they very scripted and controlled by those in charge of the television program, just as the images in the music videos are.

Also in the late 1980s, feminist film theorists were more closely examining Mulvey's "male gaze," and noting that while a feminine presence is certainly marginal both in front of and behind the camera, her theory was criticized as heteronormative and not racialized. Portrayals of those who have for too long been considered an Other (for instance, anyone who is not white, heterosexual, Christian, of at least the middle-class) also need to be scrutinized, for it is also not their stories which are being told, or at least wholly and accurately. According to Karen Ross:

Popular mass media play a significant role in the transmission and maintenance of cultural identity, through a repetitive display of cultural norms and values which eventually become seen as simple 'truths'...The way images of black communities have been historically constructed from a white perspective and, moreover, from a position of considerable domination, has had clear consequences for the perception and portrayal of those black communities in Western societies...Studies of media rest inevitably on the tension between who or what has ownership and control over the words and pictures. (xix)

Roach and Felix (1989) note the intersection of (the lack of) race and gender in media studies when they point out that, "We live in a culture in which the dominant gaze is not only male, but white...when Black culture has been recognized, when a Black perspective has been expressed, it has been overwhelmingly a male one" (p.130). In 2003, bell hooks challenged viewers, particularly female viewers of color, not to accept the images of women of color that are presented to them on screen, and to actively critique them. She argues African Americans have a unique relationship with "looking," as merely the ability to view contains power, as slaves were severely punished if their eyes landed in the wrong place (p.94). However, if there is power in the gaze, then hooks also sees an opportunity for viewers of color to grasp that power, and interrogate deeply



what they are being presented, particularly from white authors. In response to Mulvey, hooks adds:

Watching movies from a feminist perspective, Mulvey arrived at that location of disaffection that is the starting point for many Black women approaching cinema within the lived harsh reality of racism. Yet her account of being part of a film culture whose roots rest on a founding relationship of adoration and love indicates how difficult it would have been to enter that world from “jump” as a critical spectator whose gaze had been formed in opposition. (p.101)

hooks believes that women of color fundamentally view images and representations of women on screen differently from women who have typically had more ability to lay their eyes wherever they please. Taken together, however, both Mulvey and hooks’ theories provide a self-consciously constructed framework through which we can analyze how the American audience is viewing the contestants of *American Idol*.

Another critique of Mulvey’s original theory regarding the male gaze is that it prioritizes the heteronormative sexual relationship, that is, one between a man and a woman. Jackie Stacy (1989) critiqued the “gaze” theory for not including lesbian audiences and the relationships between and among women in the screen, and ultimately posits that lesbian desire on screen is often portrayed as “masculine.” She continues to wonder: “...what is the place of women’s desire towards women within this analysis of narrative cinema?” (p.112). And Moore (1989) points out that men’s sexualized bodies have been used as a tool to garner the attention of both heterosexual female and gay male viewers. Stacy’s analysis of two films whose plots revolve around female characters’ close relationships with other female characters further demonstrates that not all story lines prioritize heterosexual relationships, thus the original theory can be limiting.

With the various revisions and critiques to Mulvey's second-wave theory, coupled with the fact that it was originally written for narrative cinema, that is, a visual story which someone wrote, produced, filmed, and/or acted in (presumably all from a (white) man's perspective as the theory goes), can these frameworks be useful to the analysis of a contemporary talent-seeking television program which is supposed to be unscripted and based in "reality"? The answer most certainly is yes. . The application of these theories can also be useful when noting how the program is clearly supposed to be viewed through judge Simon Cowell's perspective. He is always the last judge to make his critique, and while he has noted that his often harsh remarks are simply to "get results" (Cowell, 2003a, p.3), they can also be viewed as very sensational and entertaining (depending, of course, on your idea of entertainment). His perception of a performance is supposed to be the ultimate authority, compared to Randy's often repetitive remarks about "being pitchy," and Paula's frequently bizarre and non-sensical interpretation; therefore, it is through Cowell's (white, male) eyes that the voting audience is to be watching the program.

### *Gender, Race, and Sexuality*

Several theorists assert that gender itself is a performance that we put on everyday, both for ourselves, and very importantly, for others (Frye, 1983; Kessler & McKenna, 1985; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1990). Butler posits that with everyday acts, words, gestures, and behaviors, we produce what we think we know to be gender. It is through the repetition of these concepts that gender begins to feel both

natural (that is, of the body) and also real (in the sense that gender exists in and of itself) (Frye, 1983; Butler, 1990). Further, Kessler and McKenna (1985) and West & Zimmerman (1987) add that we work to create and recreate our genders, fine-tuning them constantly, for if we do not perform them correctly, we will be held accountable by those around us who subscribe to the same gender binary “standard.” Similarly, authors utilizing Foucault’s arguments on the power of discourse argue that the pressure from discourse (for example, the things our friends, colleagues, the media, and especially our parents say to us about our appearance) to perform our gendered selves well is so strong that eventually it is not even how those around us are judging us, the judgment has become internalized: we have become our own jailers (Butler, 1990; Crawley, Foley, & Shehan, 2008). Kessler and McKenna (1985) note that this self-accountability *also* begins to feel real, as though there is something inherent about the way men and women dress, speak, and behave. Yet, there is simply nothing natural about only women wearing eye shadow and men wearing baggy pants.

While these theorists note that such performances affect both men and women alike, the experiences of those who are held accountable as “women” are embedded in a extensive history of oppression and misogyny. If the male body has been typically seen as the “stronger sex,” or at the very least, the neutral, then the female body has been understood to be the inferior one; the one that is not man. Additionally, as Mulvey (1975) points out, women are often the ones “to be looked at,” and while presumably women are “supposed to be” gazed at by men, many women themselves have adopted techniques for gazing at and subsequently judging each other (for example: *Glamour*

magazine's "Do's and Don'ts" section; a magazine edited by women, targeting women, and then, publicly judging women). Hence women are judged, by both men and women, based solely on their appearance more frequently a man. The problem then is not just that there (currently) exist two categories each for sex and gender, but that they are ranked. Since de Beauvoir (1949) most feminist theorists have questioned and critiqued the gender-binary system, that is male vs. female, along with the insistence that such a dichotomy exists. Further, when feminist theorists insist on placing gender theory solely at the center of feminist politics, they seek to reinforce the very dualisms which they are critiquing.

Taking this notion a step further, Toril Moi (2001) (taking inspiration from Simon de Beauvoir) offers a theoretical framework surrounding the *lived body* rather than that of sex and gender. Such a concept places people at the center of their world, always in context with place and time. The bodies of men and women are fluid and multifaceted, and "...experience desires and feeling in diverse ways that do not neatly correlate with sexual dimorphism or heterosexual norms" (Young, p.17). This theory is particularly important when discussing women's bodies and experiences, for they have been historically seen as simply not men. Moi (2001) gives the following example to describe the problem with second wave feminist analyses of sex and gender:

Whether I consider a woman to be the sum of her sex plus gender, to be nothing but sex, or nothing but gender, I reduce her to her sexual difference...All forms of sexual reductionism implicitly deny that a woman is concrete, embodied human being (of a certain age, nationality, race, class, and with a wholly unique store of experiences) and not just a human being sexed in a particular way. The narrow parameters of sex and gender will never adequately explain the experience and meaning of sexual difference in human beings... To think of a woman as sex plus

gender plus race and so on is to miss the fact that the experience of being white or Black is not detachable from the experience of being male or female (35-6)

Both the men and women who participate in the *American Idol* contest are held to bodily standards which, while having been laid out for them by others, they serve to reinforce each week by publicly attempting become even better at their bodily performance.

More than being simply “not men” however, women’s physical bodies have been shaped, or rather restricted, by a patriarchal society. In her essay “Throwing Like a Girl,” Iris Young points out:

Women in sexist society are physically handicapped. Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified. As lived bodies we are not open and unambiguous transcendences that move out to master a world that belongs to us, a world constituted by our own intentions and projections (42-43).

Not only are women’s bodies held to a higher standard of fitness and attractiveness compared to men’s, but we have not had a say in what defines a fit or a beautiful body. So while both male and female *American Idol* contestants are singing on the same stage, the female competitors are playing in a harder game than their male peers.

If females face more rigorous surveillance and, therefore, harsher consequences of failing to attain such “standards,” then women of color must not only deal with sexism in their everyday lives, but racism as well, for one does not “do gender” in the absence of race (or class, sexuality, body size, etc.). In 1977 The Combahee River Collective further pointed out that in fact sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism come together in an intersection of oppression for women for whom even one part of their identity does not fit

into the white, straight, patriarchal “norm.” The theory of intersectionality would be coined by Crenshaw (1991) and utilized by Hill-Collins (2000), who noted that, “...cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society, such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity” (p.42). Further, this inter-dependent system of oppressions often went unheard by second-wave, white feminism, as within the movement, there was a tendency to use gender as *the* analytical tool of subjugation and domination (Lorde, 1984). It was many women’s experiences that their voices were simply left out of the conversation. The end of second-wave feminism gave way to women of color, lesbians, and working-class feminists to begin to (publicly) speak out about their experiences (Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1983). While we are now well into the third wave of feminism, a period in which all feminists are to be examining all oppression from an intersectional perspective, women of color are still “othered,” that is, treated as not white. In my examination of *American Idol’s* African American contestants, as well as the separate stereotypical categories I created for them, it is clear that these young women are being judged based on much different standards and assumptions than their white counterparts. And, as noted above, while African American contestants on the program are still the numerical minority, they are at least represented, for in the first four seasons of the program there were only two biracial/multiracial contestants, two contestants who identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, and three who publicly made known their Latina/o background in the top 12 portion. In the seasons I analyze, *American Idol* breaks no pattern when it comes to reinforcing the harmful and exclusive notion that white is the norm, and all others, are Others.

While contemporary feminism has made strides in addressing the multifaceted issues facing people today, the fact that there has been no “out” contestant on *American Idol* thus far, and importantly, contestants who advance far in the competition adhere strictly to stereotypes which not only describe gender, but sexuality as well. Those who do not identify as heterosexual have been perpetually discriminated against, and as with those who do not identify as white, while progress is being made in some communities across the country, the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen only token efforts at equality. In 1978, Foucault argued that throughout different periods in human history, the discourse regarding sexuality was dispersed in a variety of ways and as the Catholic Church gained more power and the Industrial Revolution manifested, those who identified as (or engaged in behaviors considered to be) homosexual were subjugated (and in fact there was not even a name for homosexuality until these events). The second-wave of feminism saw an upswing of theorists declaring that not only were women subject to the effects of patriarchy, but the oppression that lesbian women experienced was not being addressed by either the mainstream feminist movement, nor the (androcentric) gay-rights movement (RadicalLesbians, 1970; Rich, 1980). For if a female *Idol* does not appear what would be considered feminine “enough,” she of course runs the risk of being considered a “dyke,” and since lesbianism has a rich history in subverting the traditional, patriarchal power structure, she therefore is rejecting all men, and can not be crowned *American Idol*.

## Chapter Three

### “It’s Up to American to Decide:” How to Play the Game (And Win)

Through an analysis of live performances, judges comments, time spent in the “Bottom Three,” and ultimately either an elimination or crowning of *American Idol*, a clear pattern emerges that those contestants, and in particular those contestants who embody themselves as women, who betray the stereotypical image that they began with during the show are punished both by the judges and the voting audience with negative comments, and a fewer number of votes. If the image a contestant portrays conflicts with the look or behavior that has been assigned as appropriate to that person’s gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or even class, that is, their stereotyped image, then they face fewer votes, and often are eliminated from the competition. After eight seasons of watching *American Idol* performances, even those viewers *not* doing research on the program can begin to pick up on repetitive feedback from the judges. As the last note of a song wraps up, the loyal viewers already have an idea of what the judges will say, as they themselves have become stereotypes: Randy with his, “Yea, dawg!”, Paula with, “You’re beautiful!”, and Simon with, “Hated it.” Other than staying in tune and remembering the lyrics, however, the judges often use an additional unit of measurement when critiquing performances, and that is the contestant’s perceived image by the viewing audience. By image I mean combination of dress, behavior, attitude, hair color(s) and style, and level of accessorization. It is not that the judges are predisposed to look for an image of a particular musical genre, but rather a dedication to the disciplined expectations of the



image of the genre. This perceived image is also the one that the entertainment industry and the mainstream television viewing audience have created through gendered, racialized, and sexualized stereotypes, thus, as Foucault (1977) predicted, the *Idol* contestants are disciplined into the bodies their viewing audience demands

### *Methods*

For my analysis, I focused on the reality competition program *American Idol*. Specifically I watched portions of the first four seasons. For these seasons, I examined the portions of the program where the female contestants first audition for the judges, perform in the semi-finals (America phones in votes at this stage, although the contestants do not sing live), and then for the top twelve rounds of the show. While as noted above, both men and women's bodies are subject to surveillance and accountability, since it is women's bodies and behaviors which are often more harshly scrutinized, my focus was on female contestants. I also decided to narrow my analysis down to these portions of the program because they are the ones in which the competitors face immediate judgment from the three judges, and then the next day, from the voting audience. I chose to exclude segments which showed the contestants auditioning in "Hollywood Week," the week of auditions immediately following the first auditions in front of the judges, because while comments are made by the judges at this point, judgment is handed down later during that week.

During the research process, it became evident that I could not simply perform a "gender analysis" of *American Idol* contestants, as one does not do gender in the absence

of race, class, sexuality, and a variety of other factors which influence individuals everyday experiences. I chose to analyze contestant's racialized performances and not those other factors because due to the editing of the program, a contestant's socioeconomic background was rarely made explicit. Thus, where class is referenced on the program for a certain contestant, I address it but otherwise it remains largely unavailable for analysis. And while there may have been homosexual *Idol* contestants, none have ever been "out" during the program's airing. Later, I respond to the overt presence of heteronormativity in performances but otherwise cannot access specific identity issues of contestants. Further, this analysis attests to the minimal inclusion of contestants of color who do not identify as African American on *American Idol*. For the most part, race is dealt with by the show via visually apparent cues of whiteness or Blackness with other racial or ethnic differences rarely discussed by contestants or judges. As such, the stereotypes I chose to work with refer to white women and then African American women. While these stereotypes, on the one hand, further the dimorphic notion that there is "white" and "Black," the numbers of contestants I analyze lend themselves to these two labels, that is, a thorough analysis could not be applied to the two biracial/multiracial contestants, the two who identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, or the three who made known their Latina/o background. Greater analysis of the experiences of all *American Idol* contestants who do not identify as white is surely needed, as their lack of inclusion in the program is indicative of a larger "silence" in the American community. Further, when the terms "Black" and "white" are used in my analysis, they refer to the broad ideological characteristics which are often categorically

applied to people with particular skin tones. While they are too simplistic to capture the specific experiences of people's everyday existence, the terms are common vernacular used to describe those who experience life by way of being placed into these two categories by others.. While to have dark skin does not necessarily mean one has an African ancestry, or to have light skin does not necessarily mean one's ethnicity is European, these terms, unfortunately, not only prevail, but the terms "white" and "Black" also represent the power binary of "White" and "Other." In my analysis, then, individuals who are known, through *American Idol's* behind-the scenes segments or the press, to be of African American ancestry are identified as such, while the phrase "Black" refers to the notion that individuals are being surveyed and held accountable to being "not white." Indeed, it is a central finding of this thesis that the "Black"/"white" binary is used to place individuals under surveillance which influences the outcome of their participation and success on the show.

I utilized a feminist intertextual analysis in order to examine how *American Idol* contestants are held accountable to appropriate performances. The term "intertextuality" was coined by feminist poststructural theorist Julia Kristeva in 1966 and refers to the reading of texts through our understanding of other texts we are familiar with (Agger, 1999). Kristeva notes: "...intertextuality replaces the notion of intersubjectivity" when we realize that meaning is not transferred directly from writer to reader but instead is mediated through, or filtered by, "codes" imparted to the writer and reader by other texts" (1966, p.69). Roland Barthes similarly pointed out that the meanings of artistic works do

not originate in the author, rather the meaning is actively created by the reader or viewer (Wasserman, 1981). This method is particularly applicable to contemporary media, where it is extremely common for popular fictional television shows and movies to reference characters and story lines from others (in fact, many programs are reliant on such references, for example *Family Guy*). *American Idol* is similarly dependent on its viewers' knowledge of music which permeated popular culture throughout the last fifty years, as the judges and the voting audience alike are charged with evaluating contestants' performances compared to their original recordings. Further, Goldman & Papson (1994) note;

Intertextual references work as a hook to anchor the association of [a] commodity with the everyday life of the consumer. One way to do this is through musical referents...Music, like images, has been broken down into signifier and signified...Each form of intertextuality is based on abstracting a slice or even a particle of a musical text, a photographic style, or a scene from a previous mass-media production. The signifier is the bracketed text and the signified becomes the 'appreciation of American pop culture' attached to the commodity in question...Each signifier is a reminder of a previous cultural production or a star or an event, now reframed as an "American Original" (Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, Sugar Ray Leonard, Neal Armstrong on the moon).(40)

The contestants are among the many commodities sold by *American Idol*, and a critical method in this transaction is the viewer's reliance on not only the familiar songs that the young men and women sing each week, but also their "familiar" gendered, racialized, and sexualized performances. In order to examine this phenomenon, I noted depictions of contestants either maintaining or breaking the stereotypes that have been established for not only their gender, but for their race as well. I also observed instances

of contestants changing or maintaining their appearances and behaviors (as they related to stereotypical looks and conduct) immediately following criticism of praise from both the judges (literally spoken to them just after a performance) and the American audience (as measured in votes).

For stereotypes for young females, I utilized labels used in a 1972 study (Williams & Bennett, 1975), as well as its 1988 follow-up (Bergen & Williams, 1991), regarding sex-stereotypes held by college students in the United States. I chose five adjectives, as well as some of their synonyms, which were regarded by the surveyed sample (in both studies) to be “typical” or stereotypical of young women, as well as three adjectives which were found to not represent the “archetypal” woman. While there were over three hundred adjectives on the list given by the researchers, many very common female stereotypes were not appropriate for my analysis of *American Idol* contestants, such as sacrifice/martyr, for while some female competitors lives’ may include giving up their priorities for others, the program does not allow the view to have knowledge of such instances. The five stereotypical characteristics I focused on, and their synonyms, are:

Small-petite in stature, does not take up space/attention

Attractive-pretty, lovely, cute, sexy

Nice-friendly, personable, talkative, polite, submissive

Emotional-cries, complains

Nurturer-mother, cares, gives, does for others

The categories I chose for words and phrases which are in opposition to these stereotypical characteristics of women are:

Slut-easy, sexual, promiscuous

Big-large in stature, loud, obnoxious

Assertive-aggressive, argumentative

Those conducting this study, as well as those other compiling lists of common female stereotypes, did not specify any race or ethnicity which may be attached to these stereotypes, therefore, as problematic as the notion of “white is the standard” is, these were the stereotypes that I have assigned to Caucasian contestants. Several researchers of color have noted that stereotypes for African American women are rooted in a long history of racism and ethnocentrism, as many of these so-called archetypes comes from the idea of the Black woman as “mammy,” “jezebel,” or “sapphire” (Turner, 1994; Devine & Elliot, 1995). The categories for stereotypes of African American women then stem from this literature, and are:

Big-large frame, large bust

Spiritual-soulful, joyful

Loud-bossy, sassy

Uneducated/able-unintelligent, unwilling to learn

Antonyms then for the stereotypical appearance and behavior of African

American women were categorized as:

Submissive<sup>2</sup>-gracious, polite, humble

Quiet-calm, unemotional

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<sup>2</sup> While the archetype “mammy” was submissive to her white boss (Turner, 1994), Devine & Elliot (1995) found that this was no longer a stereotype held by the contemporary generation.

It is critical to note here that many of the stereotypes that are still held today regarding African American women are the very same labels that are placed on “bad” or “deviant” women in general. As I will demonstrate for the *Idol* contestants, which then applies to the audience at home, since African American women by definition do not fit into the dominant discourse that white is the “standard,” it is understood as more palatable to the mainstream (presumably predominantly white) audience that African American women can have larger bodies. African American women who fit into the stereotypes laid out for them are seen as “entertaining” to a mainstream audience, so long as they are seen as non-threatening, and therefore both African American and white women are subject to surveillance and accountability, albeit with different standards, to a mainstream, predominantly white audience.

For each of these stereotypes, I viewed instances of the female contestants from the first four seasons of *American Idol* auditioning for the first time in front of the judges, singing live in the semi-finals, and singing live in the Top 12 portion. For every appearance, I noted if their appearance (style of dress, level of accessorization) and attitude (as much as could be perceived from a two minute song as well as their reaction to the judges’ comments) fit in or not with the chosen stereotype categories. Because I watched multiple performances of several contestants, I also noted when and if contestants were moving in and out of categories, and if so, which ones (for instance, talking back to the judges one week, and then quietly taking criticism the next) because my hypothesis depended on contestants reaction, and action or non-action, to the punishment or reward they were garnering for fitting in, or failing to, to these stereotypes.

### *Sticking to Stereotypes*

Throughout the course of *American Idol*, very few contestants who make it to the Top 12 portion of the competition have never been in the Bottom Three at one point or another. The competitors who obviously do not possess the talent that it will take to win the competition, typically appear in the Bottom Three category every week until they are (sometimes mercilessly) eliminated. Even Fantasia and Ruben Studdard had been in the lowest vote category at least once before going on to eventually win the contest.

Contestants who fail to sing, as well as appear, up to the measure of “appropriateness” but are not ultimately eliminated must then work the following week to overcome their failing. Successful *Idols* such as Fantasia, who appeared in the Bottom Three twice, must renegotiate their “image” if they want to stay out of the bottom category for future episodes. A few contestants, however, always seemed to be both judge and audience favorites, staying out of the Bottom Three category for their entire run on the program, most notably Kelly Clarkson and Carrie Underwood.

Season 1 winner Kelly Clarkson was a white waitress from Texas who was found by *American Idol* after a failed music career on her own in Hollywood. While her Texas drawl and Southern charm were traits that the judges noticed immediately, from her very first audition in front of the judges she established that she had a bluesy, sometimes raspy singing voice by successfully attempting Etta James’ “At Last.” Clarkson would go on to find that the judges were most impressed when she chose up-beat typically recorded by African-American female artists, in particular Aretha Franklin. During the Top 10,



Clarkson performed Franklin's "Respect" a total of three times, as well as two of her other songs. During Burt Bacharach week, Clarkson decided to forgo the distinctive Bacharach-ballad for a song he penned for Dionne Warwick. During Season One's Top 10, she also performed songs by Marvin Gaye, Vanessa Williams, and The Weather Girls, all African American singer/songwriters with distinct, and significant, vocal talent. While many *Idol* contestants have been criticized by the judges, and snubbed by voters, for performing songs for which their voice was not adequate, Clarkson only received higher and higher praise.

So how does a tiny white woman from Texas, belting out *Its Raining Men*, continue to receive such a large proportion of the votes? According to my analytical categories, Clarkson fit almost all the stereotypes for a young, woman: She was fairly petite (5'3"), and while not skinny, her body conformed to the size standard that is typically used in our culture for young white women. While she had an attractive face, she didn't possess any striking beauty that may have been seen as threatening, or even overly sexual. And, what I believe to be critical in her success on the program is that while she sang many songs by African American artists, her personality did not fit into the stereotypes for young, African American women. Rather, she spoke and behaved like the stereotypes dictate of a nice, white, girl: polite and humble. Further, Kelly Clarkson did herself no disservice by singing the songs of African American artists, for white artists have been performing Black music for decades (Garon, 1995). The co-opting of blues (turned rock and roll), jazz, and eventually hip-hop and R&B by several, prominent

white artists, such as Elvis Presley, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Bonnie Raitt, Eminem, and Robin Thicke, for example, has impacted the way we hear this kind of music. Garon points out: “Indeed, if we did start talking about race and the way we hear the blues, we'd find out that many (white) people like to hear the blues played by whites more than they like to hear it played by Blacks; many Blacks vastly prefer to hear the blues played by Blacks; many, many, people lie and say they don't care who plays it.” So Clarkson singing “Respect” only served to help her cause by making an already popular song into one that felt more “accessible” to the sensibilities of a presumed “white” viewing audience. By sticking with her stereotypical, sweet girl-next-door image and attitude, and singing songs that suited her voice and helped keep the white voters comfortable, Clarkson was a sure bet to win the program’s first season.

Season Four’s Carrie Underwood would go on to be considered the most successful *American Idol* winner to date. While the program does not release actual voting tallies, it has been reported by *Idol* producers that the former beauty pageant competitor from Oklahoma dominated the voting each week ([www.AmericanIdol.com](http://www.AmericanIdol.com)). Since her victory, she has gone on to sell the most records (11 million) of any show winner, and her debut album still holds the record for best-selling solo female country debut ([www.billboard.com](http://www.billboard.com)). While she is an obvious vocal talent, Underwood’s wholesome country image was surely a major contributing factor for her tremendous success. A young, blonde, sorority woman (Associated Press, 2005), Underwood embodies almost entirely the girl-next-door image. In a 2005 article in which friends and

family were asked to reminisce about the former *Idol* champion, a friend noted, “She’s smart, polite, and respectful,” while her grandfather commented that growing up, “She never did anything out of line” (Associated Press, 2005). While thin and beautiful, as with Clarkson, her body is physically non-threatening, that is, her breasts and buttocks are size that meets the beauty standard typically used in America’s popular culture today, and she is of average height for a female. Upon her first audition in front of the judges, Simon Cowell accurately predicted that she would not only win the competition, but that she outsell all previous *Idol* winners. Such a declaration, and accurate prediction, after hearing someone sing one song attests to the power given to Cowell by the American audience. Underwood was literally the woman that young, white, American girls were supposed to strive to be like. Her body was not only what mainstream; white America deemed appropriate, but in fact the “standard.” Underwood’s post-*Idol* success is absolutely no coincidence, rather the perfect combination of singing talent, and picture-perfect gender and racialized performance.

Kelly Clarkson too was certainly rewarded by both the judges and the American audience for her performance as a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman. Also from the first audition, Clarkson came off as the girl-next-door. She was sweet, attractive, and while dressed fashionably, she was neither over-, not under-dressed for an everyday-woman kind of standard. As with Underwood, her body did not command much attention, not too thin, yet not overweight; think pear-shaped, Rachel Ray. Physical bodies, particularly female ones, have long been an area of scrutiny for the producers and

viewers of *American Idol*, never more highlighted than with the ousting of Season 2's Frenchie Davis. Davis was a heavy, African American contestant who during early rounds seemed to have enough vocal talent to make it all the way to the finale. While Frenchie's outgoing and playful personality fit into the "soulful" and "sassy" stereotype, physically, her body seemed to surpass the stereotypical "large-framed" body-type. Additionally, before the Top 12 was chosen it was discovered that years earlier Davis had posed nude for a pornographic website and was summarily dropped from the competition. While judge Simon Cowell (2003a) states that he had high hopes for her and wanted Davis to remain in the competition, Cowell (2003b) notes that the disavowal of Davis' ability to participate demonstrates *American Idol's* troubled relationship with bodies. He notes, "She exceeds the limits of embodiment that the program[me] sets through a hyper visible display of her own naked body"(p.9). The majority of Americans did not, and will not ever even see her naked photos, yet the knowing that they were out there was enough for *American Idol* producers to decide she was not someone that they wanted to participate in the contest. Frenchie's untimely scandal and subsequent exit provided an easy means to avoid the topic of female weight issues on *American Idol*. Since stereotypes of African American women include that they are heavysset (compared to the current "American standard" ), have large breasts, and possess an "attitude", it's entirely possible that Frenchie Davis may have competed with some success on the program, as the (largely "white") audience may have found her to be "entertaining" enough to be voted for. So while her ousting from the show makes her ineligible for my analysis about stereotypes and vote-getting, Frenchie's nude photos

placed her in the category of “slut” or “easy” (although her actual sexual history was technically not on record), rendering her too much of a “bad girl”—that is, threatening to a mainstream sensibility—for the program.

Contestants with large bodies would continue to be an interesting issue for *American Idol*, however providing quite different experiences for male contestants, as Season Two winner was overweight, African American male contestant Ruben Studdard. While Studdard definitely possessed a wonderful singing voice, he would sweat and become exhausted by the end of programs where he had to perform two and three songs. While America, and presumably Simon Cowell, decided that he could still be its *American Idol*, the standards for female contestants are much different. The “appropriate” female body does not take up much space and does not attract undue attention. Further, as Young (2005) points out about how young girls are expected to embody themselves, “The girl learns to hamper her movements. She is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are dangerous for her. Thus she develops a bodily timidity that increases with age. In assuming herself to be a girl, she takes herself to be fragile” (p.43). In other words, girls, and then women, are supposed to be small. Since men are undeterred by such restrictions, a large man’s success on *American Idol* is much more predictable than that of a large woman. Further, the overlap of the “bad” or “wrong” white woman stereotype and the stereotypical body of a African American woman are important here, as larger African American women have progressed to at least sixth place in the

competition, where an “overweight” white woman has never even made it to the Top 12 portion. It is clear, then, that if the American beauty standard is to be young, thin, and white, African American women are necessarily deviant, and it is more acceptable for them to possess larger bodies. Even so, to date, there has been no heavy female winner of the program, demonstrating that regardless of race, our American Idol should not stray from the stereotyped category of not taking up space.

Since her (oft-reported premature) departure from *American Idol*, Jennifer Hudson has enjoyed a tremendously successful career. The first *Idol* Oscar winner, Hudson was eliminated from Season 3 in just 6<sup>th</sup> place. Hudson’s body type would be considered heavy by contemporary predominantly white, American beauty standards, and from early on in the competition, she demonstrated what I categorize as a “sassy” attitude. For example, during a semifinal round, *Idol* judge, Paula Abdul commented that she was surprised Hudson appeared demure, as “we are used to mouthy from you.” Despite obvious vocal talent, Hudson struggled from the very beginning of her tenure on the program, for she was originally not even voted (by popular phone-in vote) in to the Top 12 round, but was chosen by the judges as a Wild Card contestant. I argue that this was most likely a combination of two related factors; her physical body and her contradictory images. As a large African American woman with a powerful singing voice, she not only fit into many of the stereotypes laid for her, but she would also be expected to have an “attitude” and to sing songs by artists who looked and sounded like her. Yet when she strayed from these supposed guidelines, her votes suffered. During

the aforementioned semi-finals where she was not voted in by “America”, she sang John Lennon’s “Imagine,” hardly a song for belting, and Randy Jackson commented that it, “...wasn’t her best.” Hudson’s second to last *American Idol* performance, in which she chose “The Circle of Life” from *The Lion King*, demonstrates a few contradictions. During the Elton John-themed week, Hudson, for the first and only time, chose to straighten her naturally curly hair, and wore a subdued, all black pant suit. For the previous weeks in the competition, Hudson’s flashy (that is, attention getting) clothing, (small amount of) breast cleavage, curly hair, and “sassy” attitude, had helped her acquire votes, she was almost immediately reprimanded by the viewing audience for dramatically changing this image in one week. While she was not voted off that week, rather the next, I wonder if a performance of a song from a story about Africa may have fit into what the voting audience had deemed appropriate for her enough to save her for another week. However, her shift out of the stereotypical categories she had been playing into for so many weeks ended up costing her, as she finished the program in only sixth place.

Kimberly Locke’s (Season Two’s third place runner-up) trajectory on *American Idol* makes an interesting comparison to Season Three’s Jennifer Hudson, as Locke was also a heavy (by contemporary American beauty standards) woman of color with a powerful singing voice. Her skin color was much lighter than Hudson’s, however, as she was biracial and we were shown in a “behind-the-scenes” segment that she had a white mother. Locke’s success on the show followed very closely her effort at achieving “better and better” gendered and racialized performances. In his book, judge Simon

Cowell notes that when he first caught a glimpse of Locke, she reminded him of an “overweight librarian,” (p.186) suggesting that she was not achieving the appropriate look for a young woman who wanted to be a musician. Additionally, Cowell, both on the show and again in his book, commented on her “weird hair” (p.186), suggesting that she was not performing her ethnicity correctly either. Towards the beginning of the competition, Locke performed more Motown and disco type songs, with flashier, sleeveless tops, and wild (naturally) curly hair, thus, she was attempting to fit into the stereotypical categories for African American women. After a performance of “Heat Wave,” Cowell commented that the song stunk, and even Paula Abdul said it was not her best performance. Two weeks later, Locke appeared on stage for the first time with freshly straightened hair, and although she stuck to the same, up-tempo Motown inspired genre, she was also dressed far more conservatively, this time in dress slacks and a tailored jacket, thus, “whitening” her appearance for both the audience and the judges. This time Randy Jackson shouted that it was brilliant, and Simon Cowell noted that she was sensational. It was evident that as a woman who herself walked the borders of white and Black identities was supposed to also perform those identities, and of course stereotypes, carefully as well. Possibly because of her light skin, Locke was rewarded by both the judges and the voting audience when she conformed to the stereotypes of good, white woman. When she showed off cleavage and kept her hair naturally (and “ethnically”) curly, she possibly came across as offensive to appropriate dress for a nice, light-skinned girl. In contrast to the darker-skinned Jennifer Hudson, Locke would go on to only appear in public (to this day!) with straight hair, while Hudson rarely appears in



public without curly hair. It would seem that the audience will accept African American *Idols* and runners-up, but only if they appear as non-threatening (that is to whites) stereotypes--“sassy,” “large,” women, or “soulful,” “quiet,” “polite” men (as Studdard).

Additionally, Locke lacked the attitude that has been stereotyped to belong to young women of color, as Cowell also pointed out, “Kimberly was probably the best singer in the competition, technically, but she didn’t seem to have a personality...the fact remained that she lacked star quality” (p.166). Upon reviewing her early auditions, however, Locke comes across as a pleasant, if a little quiet, young woman. Was she simply not the representation of what Cowell expected her to be? If she was not, then perhaps some of Season 3 winner Fantasia’s success is due to the fact that she *was* what judges and audiences expected from a 19-year-old single African American mother who dropped out of high school. Fantasia came from a family of talented vocalists, and she immediately wowed the judges with her amazing voice. Also from the beginning of her *American Idol* journey, she displayed several characteristics which fit into the stereotypes regarding African American women, including a sassy attitude when she declared, “My lips are big, but my talent is bigger!” As noted above, here is an example of where the stereotypes for African American women overlap with those of “bad” white women; taking up space/attention, arrogance. While a white contestant may have turned off her audience with such a statement, Fantasia received a round of applause from the studio audience, as she “entertained” them. Further, Fantasia may have been playing into such stereotypes in her attempt at winning the contest. To say that those who embody

stereotypical appearances or behaviors do so ignorantly or unwillingly is to rob them of agency. Fantasia's behavior in this example, as well as the other instances of *Idol* contestant's conforming to stereotypes, poses the notion that not only are the *Idols* aware of their gendered and race expectations, but that they, then, deliberately play into them in order to win the coveted title of *The American Idol*. This active complicity to stereotypical appearances and behaviors is reflective of the audience's participation in its own stereotypical expectations in an attempt at whatever an individual considers to be "success."

Although she never struggled vocally, Fantasia did land in the Bottom 3 category twice, the second of which she was joined by Jennifer Hudson and another talented woman of color, Latoya London. While the rumors swirled about how the three obviously most talented contestants could have garnered the fewest number of votes, including the speculation that their fan base was divided, although Sir Elton John (the previous week's guest mentor) decried it simply as racism (Reuters, 2004). What actually went on during this week was most likely a combination of both theories. Although the demographic data on voters and their voting patterns is inaccessible, it is probably that Americans of color were among the only ones voting for these women at this point, as the only other woman left in the contest was (by American beauty standards) adorable, seventeen year old (white) Diana DeGarmo, who had not spent time in the bottom three in several weeks, suggesting at this point that she was excelling at obtaining (white) votes. So, if a largely white audience saw Fantasia, Hudson, and

London as stereotypical African American women (“sassy,” taking up space and attention, in other words, threatening), and DeGarmo as a stereotypical white woman (“sweet,” “polite,” otherwise non-threatening), then their votes were most likely going to the young DeGarmo, leaving the African American vote to be divided up among the three extremely talented vocalists. This was the week that Jennifer Hudson was sent home, and Fantasia would go on to perfect her image until she eventually won the coveted spot as “American Idol.”

While the other performers waivered in performing stereotypes, Fantasia played into ethnic and class stereotypes and expectations, and toyed with her gender performance until the finale of the show where she elegantly and powerfully performed “Summertime” from *Porgy and Bess* in a graceful evening dress, and had the contest easily won. A tall, slender young woman with an athletic build and a short hairstyle, it seemed as the weeks went on, that Fantasia purposefully chose dresses and heels, as to never appear too masculine, so while her physical body did not fit into the stereotypes of African American women, she still did not betray those of other categories, such as attractive, pretty, and sexy. While she kept the “attitude” with fun and colorful prints, as an African American woman, she was sure to maintain a light, non-threatening image. And while some in the media critiqued her as a bad role model for young women for having a baby at age 16, her inspirational story of a functionally illiterate teenager to *American Idol* perfectly played on the premise of the American Dream, although the “American Dream” as it is viewed through a white perspective That is, African

American women have also been stereotyped as not only having the ability to sing, but also possessing a specific kind of singing voice, the “soulful” belter, for example Aretha Franklin or Whitney Houston (similarly, the dominant “American Dream” whites tend to stereotype for young Black men is, of course, that of the successful athlete). Fantasia’s powerful vocal abilities played right into this notion of how Black women are supposed to sound, and images of Fantasia singing in the church choir, as displayed on one of *Idol’s* behind-the-scenes segments, only served to solidify the “joyful singer” stereotype for the voting audience. Fantasia also played right into other stereotypes about women, particularly that of “mother,” and those of African American women, notably, “uneducated.” However, Fantasia’s success on the program plays into more than just the fact that she did work to maintain several gendered and racialized stereotypes, perhaps helping the audience be at ease with her, but her story also showed that she beat the odds, overcome poverty and heartache, and still be crowned America’s next superstar: so can you! Fantasia’s fairy tale *is* the archetypal, individualistic, American Dream, as well as a marketing sensation, even spawning her own inspirational *Lifetime* movie. The viewing audience who voted for Fantasia to win then was voting for themselves, for *their* inspirational stories to come true, if only they follow the rules. While Fantasia may not have followed those rules earlier in her life, once on stage she seemed to ease into the stereotypical appearance and mannerisms of a young African American woman, and as a result, along with her wonderful singing voice, was crowned *American Idol*.

The analysis of these women who spent a grueling four months in front of the cameras in order to achieve their dream of superstardom says many things about not only the contestants on stage every week, but also those at home viewing and voting for them. While contenders of any reality program must surely realize they are signing up for a certain amount of camera, producer, and viewer surveillance in their attempt at fame, that audience at home who believes it is tuning in mindlessly is (most likely) unaware that it is participating in the cycle of its own surveillance. By turning on “reality”-based shows, particularly ones in which the audience votes such as *American Idol*, viewers witness contestants either acting in stereotypical ways, or not, and then judge them accordingly. While one may argue that the audience votes on merit alone, by the latter of the program, the majority of the contestants are quite good, almost all worthy of the final prize, so my findings indicate that throughout the competition, it is contestants who mold themselves neatly into their stereotypical looks and behaviors to be palatable to the dominant white audience, and stay there, who end up doing the best. Yes, these young people are very good singers, but so was their competition. I find that what sets those who go the farthest apart from those left behind is adherence to a stereotypical gendered and racialized performance week after week.

## Chapter Four

### “This is Who You Are:” Unique Need Not Apply

Another theme which emerges when examining judges' critiques is that they often praise contestants, at all levels of the competition, for being “unique.” Even if a contestant's vocal performance was out of tune, ahead of the beat, or otherwise subpar, the judges will speak favorably about a competitor's ability to “bring something different” to the competition. Whether it is a distinctive-sounding voice, an original style of dress, or just a personality that stands out in the crowd, judges' comments emphasize that successful contestants should have “star quality” (Cowell, 2006a, p.166). When the Top 12 contestants emerge, however, both the judges and the audience at home seem to in fact reward a limited amount of distinctiveness. While in the search for America's next superstar, the audience is told that they should be rewarding those competitors whom they deem as different, their level of uniqueness is anything but: truly unique contestants, again, particularly female, do not win *American Idol*.

Much of the success of *American Idol* lies in its reliance on notions of individualism and patriotism in an effort to motivate viewers to not only tune in each week, but also to pick up their phones and vote for their favorite contestants, and further still, to sell the products of the companies which sponsor the program. In a 2003 study of fifty-three countries across five continents, the United States of America has been found to be the most individualistic country in the world (Kozulin), meaning the country's

political and cultural philosophy prioritizes independence and self-reliance, not surprising given the history behind the establishment of the country, the liberal, democratic, Bill of Rights, the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century's "Red Scare" which emphasized the fear of communism, and even the Republican Party's current anxiety regarding "socialism" (Scollen, 2001). Whether we vote Republican, Democrat, Other, or not all, the ideology of American individualism is deeply ingrained in our beliefs, patriotism and individual identities. Hence it is not surprising that *American Idol*'s voting audience has been influenced by this kind of "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" ideology. Further, American society values hyper-consumerism, that is, Americans tend to equate happiness with personal possessions. Acquiring wealth leads to the mass globalization of our culture. *American Idol* is one example with its broadcasting in over 100 countries (Barber, 2008; see [www.americanidol.com](http://www.americanidol.com)). The two principles seem to be closely related as both focus on the needs and wants of the individual over the group or community. If Americans fail to be able to acquire as many goods as they desire ("keeping up with the Joneses"), then the message is to keep trying harder; it's the American Dream! Such values are rampant on the set of *American Idol*, where each judge is famously perched directly in front of a red Coca-Cola cup, and where the contestants are regularly seen being picked up and dropped off in Ford automobiles. In addition, while friendships certainly develop throughout any given *Idol* season, the focus of this show, unlike its British predecessor *Popstars*, or MTV's *Making the Band*, is solely on the individual; the *One American Idol*. The judges' favorable comments pertaining to "uniqueness" then seem at first to be in line with such libertarian values, as the American Dream is to be who/whatever one desires.

Upon closer inspection of the program however it is made clear that who Americans want to “buy” are far from distinct.

Paradoxically, consumerism does not create individuals, but rather produces mass audiences who want to consume the same, popular, fashionable thing. This is the epitome of Foucault’s “docile bodies” (1979)--a nationwide audience of consumers seeking the products pushed on them by advertisers while at the same time believing they want it uniquely for themselves. *American Idol*, then, is the perfect device for creating the appearance of individualism (looking for “unique” performers, having a “democratic, voting audience”) while in actuality homogenizing viewers through the advertising of commercial products which creates the desire for mass marketed goods.

This paradox becomes clear in a comparison between electoral voting and reality television voting where Juliet Williams (2005) notes:

On *American Idol*, the most successful contestants prove themselves exceptional in their lack of anything to take exception to--those who succeed are the ones who can perform Burt Bacharach songs from the 1970s one week while paying a heartfelt tribute to 1940s swing classics the next. The victors are the most agile parrots, not the most distinctive musical personalities, for personality is inevitably a liability in a showdown among aspiring pop chameleons. Watching the weekly winnowing process, one can only wonder, will the American Idol be the one who proves to be the most outstanding, or the least? (642)

Successful *Idol* contestants, then, walk a very strategic line of standing out in a crowd of hundreds during the initial auditions, while at the same time not embodying themselves in a way that may turn off too many voters when their fate lies in America’s hands. Even those who at first seem as though they possess some qualities that make them different



from the average 25 year old still fit into a “type.” Most seasons of *American Idol* include a contestant who is labeled as “the rocker.” While not always a male, the most famous of these contestants is Season Five’s fourth placed Chris Daughtry, who went on to considerable post-*Idol* success. His recent pop-chart achievements, however, have come at the expense of some of his original *Idol* fans accusing him of “selling out,” that is, to those who are critical of our mass-consumerist society. Even so, Daughtry’s case shows us that betraying a former image and moving towards a more mainstream pop sound sells records, which equates to mainstream success.

Female contestants who attempt their own brand of uniqueness are held to additional scrutiny of how women are supposed to act and dress, that their male peers do not endure. The Season 6 “rocker” was a white woman named Gina Glockson, who performed songs by The Rolling Stones and The Pretenders. After her mediocre performance of “I’ll Stand by You,” the judges’ critiques focused mainly on Glockson’s physical appearance, which consisted of a shiny minidress, knee high boots, and visible bra straps. Randy commented that he liked the song choice and the boots; Paula noted that she liked the look; and Simon praised her for “knowing who you are.” These comments are interesting because not only are they almost exclusively about her appearance (rather than vocal performance), but the judges are also ascribing to her “her” look, dictating “who she is” and importantly, who she is “supposed” to be. While Glockson was purportedly sticking with the “rocker image,” and as noted in the previous chapter, adhering to a look is critical on *American Idol*, she also had to appear feminine

enough to garner votes. Had she appeared on stage in ripped, baggy jeans, and wore a bandana which covered her hair so as to appear as “the bad girl,” as was the Season 4 male-rocker Bo Bice’s look, she would have not been able to advance in the competition. To not dress in a manner that would emphasize her femininity enough would risk the American audience questioning her sexuality and adherence to gender performances, and she would certainly have lost votes.

Another example of a female contestant balancing “being herself” and conforming to stereotypes was 17-year-old Season 3 runner-up Diana DeGarmo. During her initial audition tape (a little interview that producers tape to spotlight some contestants background stories), the baby-faced and bubbly DeGarmo, who is Caucasian, noted that she always wore some combination of black and pink clothing. Upon finishing her first audition song, while the judges like her voice, the judges thought she was almost “too cutesy” and should ditch the black and pink wardrobe. After a performance in the semi-finals, DeGarmo, in a very trendy (although still black and pink) outfit, was praised by Simon Cowell as “remind[ing] me of when Christina Aguilera was nice.” In 2004 of course, Christina Aguilera was wearing backless leather chaps, had a hit single called “Dirty,” and was going by the nickname, Xtina. Two things then are happening here: a condemnation of females who assert themselves too sexually, which breaks the categorical stereotype for white women and kudos for the girl who looks and acts wholesome and “cutesy.” This image would prove to be tremendously successful for DeGarmo, who, as noted above, went on further in the competition than Jennifer Hudson

and other possible favorite LaToya London, despite not having the same vocal ability. Physically, however, DeGarmo was a mass-marketer's dream, based almost totally on the fact that she was not incredibly "different." As with many other contenders, she was short, blonde, seemingly-sweet, and yet again, "the girl-next-door"<sup>3</sup> altogether *not* unique. Even the definition of the phrase "girl-next-door" (typically white, straight, Christian, middle-class, and whose body size fits into the mainstream, American "standard" of thinness) is indicative of the kind of audience that shows like *American Idol* are attempting to appeal to, and the limited uniqueness that is expected of successful *Idol* contestants. Interestingly, DeGarmo switched up her look during the show's finale, possibly in an attempt at seriously challenging competitor Fantasia and wore a drab, all-black pantsuit and sang a power ballad that was way above her vocal ability. The judges did not like the performance at all. While DeGarmo, because of her age and perceived innocence, was previously not seen as a sex symbol, dressing in a more mature suit perhaps unsettled the audience, for maybe they could now see her as a woman, rather than a girl. She now possibly became more sexual, which betrayed how the audience thought they felt about her. Both DeGarmo's vocal and bodily performance that night did not allow her to go on to become the next *American Idol*.

While *Idol* contestants may be unique enough to gently push gender and sexuality "rules," in the end, they are not rewarded with the judges' approval or America's votes. While not part of my systematic analysis, the examples of two of *American Idol*'s male

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<sup>3</sup> I believe my use, and possible over-use, of this term is indicative of *American Idol*'s reliance on young white women who fit this description.

contestants provide examples of how even the show's men are held accountable to gendered and racialized standards. Season One's Justin Gaurini had a lot going for him from the outset of the competition when Simon commented on his first audition, "Justin...you're very privileged when you do a competition like this to hear someone undiscovered who has a voice like yours." With such high acclaim from one of the most discriminatory judges, Gaurini still did not win the competition. With a higher speaking and singing voice, long curly hair, and a generally cheery and pleasant attitude, Gaurini most likely came off as possessing characteristics that would fit into feminine stereotypes. Interestingly enough, Season Two's runner-up, Clay Aiken, also possibly lost the competition due to non-conformity of to masculine stereotypes. While Aiken would officially come out of the closet six years after his turn on *Idol*, one journalist noted that it was his lack of sexuality that both got him to second place, and yet did not allow him to ultimately win. Poniewozik (2007) claims Aiken was as sexual as a Ken doll. So while Aiken was unique enough to do well in the competition, with his red hair and "big ears" (Cowell, 2003a, p.159), he was too different to become the next *American Idol*.

Much of the success of *American Idol* lies in the various ways that the show manages to give the viewers pretty much the same thing over and over again, a concept that would not work on many other reality programs. Cowell (2003b) then contends that "...repeated viewing is itself encouraged by the repetitious aspect of the show" (p.8). Success on the program is not only rooted in the repetition contestant's performances of

self, but also the degree to which her/his gendered performance is heteronormative, that is, the way a contestant appears and behaves is congruent with the belief that heterosexuality is the standard. As with Butler's theory on gender performance, heteronormativity is also something which is "achieved" through repetitious dress, speech, and action which are considered "appropriate" for heterosexual men and women, and failure to emanate heterosexuality on a daily basis can result in severe punishment by putting one outside the privilege of heterosexual identity, for both *Idols* (with the loss of votes) as well as the audience (with stigma, as well as brutality). By tuning in to *American Idol* each week, twice a week, the voting audience is then complicit in creating and perpetuating the concept that heterosexuality be the dominant system of sexual orientation in American society, setting standards that not only are their *Idols* supposed to represent, but then themselves as well. Further, regardless of a contestant's race, these heteronormative performances are playing to a largely white audience, demonstrating how gender performance and heteronormativity is racialized. Notions of not being straight parallel notions of not being white in that identifying as anything but straight and white (as well as middle-class, thin, Christian, etc.) deviates from the socially-constructed "ideal" American body (Somerville, 2000). For those *American Idol* contestants who may not be heterosexual, they can, and indeed, must perfect their performance each week of passing as straight, while *Idol* performers who are not white must repeatedly perform their prescribed stereotypes in an effort to be palatable to the (mostly white) voting audience.

It is through these reiterated effects that we come to feel almost intimate relations with the young contestants on *American Idol*, and applying Butler's theory of performativity, Cowell (2003b) argues that "we know them as subjects idols-in-becoming, rather than subjects with an ontological priority" (p.8). One embodies the status of *American Idol* by the repetition of performance, viewed and decided upon by the voting public. Butler (1996) herself goes on to wonder about the dangers of having to continually keep up with a performance, albeit her thoughts are focused on the work involved in performing a heteronormative identity every day rather than that of reality television. She asks: "If repetition is the way in which power works to construct the illusion of an...identity...then this identity is permanently at risk, for what if it fails to repeat, or if the very exercise of repetition is redeployed for a very different performative purpose?" (p.309). If through the routine of performing and receiving judgment, the *Idol* contestants are supposed to be creating their identities, and by extension we are solidifying *our own*, Butler is saying that they run the risk of faltering, of losing that identity every week. I argue that this is in fact the case, for those competitors who advance far in the show and began their campaign on the basis that they were unique certainly end up watering down their distinctive image.

That crisis of the repetition being redeployed actually does have a place in *American Idol*, where although repetition plays a key role, obviously something must be switched up week to week to keep the program mildly interesting. What changes weekly is the genre of songs that the Idols must perform. One week they are crooning to the classics, while the next they must pick a disco song which shows their talents. They

must work at re-creating themselves in any given image that week in order to garner the most votes. Until the grand finale, the idols perform no original music in the competition, “the voice performing is always a performance of another’s voice” (Cowell, 2003b, p.8). By performing the works of another, the “original” artist is reaffirmed as the original through the copied performance, and a repetition of a standard can be achieved (Butler, 1996). In going along with the aesthetic of mass-market America, who shell out big bucks every summer for a string of sequels and buy pre-fab houses, *American Idol* is about re-interpretation of the same, not creation (Poniewozik, 2007)

I find that this repetitive imitation, above almost all the other hurdles the *American Idol* contestants face, is probably the hardest challenge for them. On the one hand, they are performing the works of some very talented and legendary artists each week, which immediately invokes comparisons to the original works. To this end, the contestants are somewhat expected to respect the original and stay true to the original rhythm, key and message of the song. On the other hand, contestants are constantly criticized if they inject no originality of their own into a performance. The winning combination for a potential *American Idol* then is to mix the multi generational nostalgia with a current pop twist (Poniewozik, 2007). As I pointed out above, the formula of just the right amount of, as well as what kind of, personality to embody is also problematic for the *Idol* competitors. Yet whoever does win the title of American Idol is not just like us, and we expect him or her to behave in such a way that a champion, and not pop star should. We want confidence and graciousness, but not too much. We now expect original work from them, but it shouldn’t stray too far from what we are used to. If one

performed well in the country music week of *Idol*, then he/she had better put out a country-feeling record, etc. This contradiction of expectations is very visible during the length of each season, with each *Idol* contestant handling it differently, and ultimately succeeding or failing on its basis.

Consequently, *American Idol* recreates its viewing audience in our own image each week to reaffirm to its public that *we* are successful participants and quality judges of “authentic” (but really stereotypical) performances. Participating in the voting process each week gives the audience at home a perceived power, yet it is exact same “power” under whose control we are also under. Thus, we “know” that while we may want to stand out from the crowd a little with a new outfit, a funky hairstyle, or striking new shoes, those that value the comfort and “safety” of popular trends will stay exactly that: trendy, not unique, not deviant, and certainly not the worst of all, weird. Should we stray too far from our stereotypical gender performances, we risk being labeled gay, which in our culture, at this time, is still a stigmatized identity. Should we stray from our stereotypical racial subjectivities, we risk being “wiggers [white artists who emulate urban Black speech and mannerisms],” or “not-Black enough.” While the judges seem to praise contestants on *American Idol* for being “unique” or “bringing something different to the table,” they, and the at-home audience, make sure that the discourse remain that there is “structure” and there are rules, and in order to succeed on the program, and at life, one should obey.



## Chapter Five

“I Don’t Mean to be Rude, But...” Loving and Critiquing *American Idol*

At any given moment I can tune to a top 40 station on satellite radio, and hear a song from an *American Idol* contestant. As I have pointed out, the artist I hear may not even have won the contest, but another record company picked him or her up upon being eliminated. During the course of only the last one hour, I have heard songs from Kelly Clarkson, Carrie Underwood, Elliot Yamin (Season Five’s third runner up), last years two competing Davids, (David Cook and David Archuleta), and most incessantly Chris Daughtry (Season Five’s fourth runner up). Oprah’s Broadway musical version of *The Color Purple* set house attendance records since Season 3 winner Fantasia joined the cast, while even the defamed Frenchie found success performing the much-coveted Seasons of Love solo in *Rent* (Zoglin, 2007). Jennifer Hudson, of course, won an Academy Award for her role in the movie version of the musical, *Dreamgirls*. And with all the assaults that take place in Tampa each week, it took the *American Idol* connection to get Season Three's Jessica Sierra in the papers for getting into fights in Ybor City. They are everywhere, whether an individual enjoys the program or not, *American Idol* is pervasive. They have become part of the American mass media, consumerist machine.

There really is no comparison to the contestants and even winners of other reality competitions when it comes to the impact that *American Idols* make on popular culture. Each year millions and millions of hopefuls wait, sometimes for days, in line outside their city’s football stadium for their shot at celebrity. With all that the *American Idols* go

through however on their path to stardom, the anxiety, the constant surveillance and criticism and the sheer probability that their journey will not end in the titular crowning, why would one put herself through such an expedition? As Andrejevic (2003) notes about our times, pervasive surveillance is seen as a hip attribute of the contemporary world, where being watched all the time is as gratifying as it is exploitative. If we are constantly being watched, then we are being paid attention to, we are willing to sacrifice the privacy we once enjoyed. And due to the particular notoriety that *Idol* contestants face, whether they win or do not even come close, these once average citizens will most likely be watched by the masses long after their season of *American Idol* is concluded. Right after the show closes, the Top Ten contestants of each season embark on a multi-month, multi city tour through the United States, raking in their final profits for the show, as if they owe it something. Even those who are voted off every week must complete the obligatory talk show circuit for the rest of the week, as though they owe it to the viewing public.

The desire to be gazed at, then, is the crux of *American Idol's* popularity. For both *Idol* contestants as well as the audience at home, this gaze has lasting effects. Those contestants who proceeded far into the competition demonstrated to the voting audience that the way they performed each week contributed to their "American" approval, thus changing the way those at home will view not only other television programs, but each other as well. In turning the gaze onto the individuals on the *American Idol* stage, the message is (often unknowingly) reinforced to the viewing audience that not only are they supposed to be watching through a particular point of

view, but also that they are to examine and scrutinize their own performances through this vantage point. While this viewpoint is that of the heterosexual, white male, those who do not fit one, if any, of these descriptions, still judge their *Idols* based on ideals and standards which may not then even be congruent with their lived experience. The white, male, gaze forces the voting audience to hold the “American Idols” accountable to gender and racialized performances which fit into stereotypes that have been given to them by these very same white, straight, institutions.

### *Future Directions for Feminist Research*

I did this work because there is a definite need to transcend the rigid boundaries put forth by patriarchal values and definitions of “appropriate.” I see in reality competition shows the site to begin work on this issue, for while feminist, performance, race, and queer theorists have been working on this subject for some time, the audience of these theorists and activists is infinitely more limited than that of television in general, and reality television specifically. The constant surveillance that occurs on programs such as *Idol*, *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, and *The Real World*, are far from innocent. Rather than an important tool of self-policing, this panopticon serves to reinforce the notion that bodies, particularly women’s, need to look a certain way to be accepted in the American mainstream culture. It makes sure that people whose bodies do not reflect the prevailing stereotypes regarding gender, race, class, and sexuality, know that they should strive to fit in to the categories that have for too long been considered dominant. The surveying of both white women’s bodies and bodies of women of color (and men as well, however based on different standards) continues to perpetuate heteronormative stereotypes about

what these women are supposed to look and act like, creating serious consequences for those who do not comply. For white women contestants, not only must they “uphold” an appearance which conveys that they are good and pure, but it is also understood that their appearance and behavior should be that which will be desirable to men. When the surveying audience rewards these characteristics, they are also reinforcing these “standards” for themselves. And as noted above, many stereotypes for “bad” white women are precisely those labels used for Black women (not “good” or “bad” Black women, just Black women (Turner, 1994)). So to appear “acceptable” to those doing the surveying, that is the ideologically “white” audience, many Black contestants are held to stereotypes which provide “entertainment” to that audience. This notion of how bodies of color are supposed to look and act is then carried out of the television set and into the experiences of women (and men, with their own stereotypes and set of expectations) of color, where the (largely white) population demands this set of appearances and behaviors as well. Every vote for an *American Idol* contestant, regardless of gender or race, tells her that she is either performing “herself” well or failing to perform up to these stereotypical standards which have been set out for her, while simultaneously telling the person who is doing the judging that she, too, is under constant surveillance and must also conform the set of stereotypical expectations set out for her if he wants to find success.

There are a few (too few) examples of reality television shows which treat male and female bodies of all colors in a more egalitarian manner, such as *Survivor* or *The Amazing Race*, where all participants are pushed to their limits both physically and

emotionally. However, if shows such as *American Idol* could address that what their contestants are achieving is in fact performance, both performing gender as well as ethnicity, then that would be a huge step forward in the recognition of bodies as doing gender rather than these traits being inherent in the body. Further, we need to recognize that these gendered and racialized traits that are considered “natural” are also ranked, as certain characteristics are seen as inferior to others, as we saw with Kimberly Locke being rewarded for passing as white, or Fantasia for passing as more feminine.

As noted above, I began watching the show because the concept intrigued me as someone who liked to sing: That could be me up there! I continue to watch, along with the millions of Americans who still follow the program through its eighth season, partly because I still enjoy singing, popular music, and the (pseudo-) drama of who will stay and who will go. Being drawn to the program for these reasons makes me much like those millions who are also viewing the show. The other reason I am still parked on my couch every Tuesday and Wednesday night, however, is in an attempt to critically examine the “reality” program for seemingly “scripted” gendered and racialized performances, rendering me a different kind of audience than many of the viewers in this respect. Long before I took on this project, I observed how those who progressed far into the competition did not necessarily have the most talent, or the most unique look or sound. I found (and still do find) it incredibly hypocritical that the judges incessantly comment that they are looking for someone who “brings something different” to the pop scene, and yet those who win, as well as the runners-up, seem to be carbon copies of all the pop-stars who have preceded them.

It would be of little use, however, to blame the judges for the success of such lackluster “stars,” for it is “America” after all who is crowning them the *American Idol*. Who this “America” is exactly is hard to identify, as demographics for this program’s viewership are difficult to obtain, or even if it is the voting audience who decides the winners each week. Even so, approximately thirty million Americans tune in each week and (literally) judge these young men and women as either “good enough” or “not good enough” to be their next pop star. *American Idol*, however, will probably not last forever, and like its predecessors (*Star Search*, etc.), it will eventually be replaced in the popular culture by a newer, hipper, edgier, competition show, and yet, the viewing audience will remain unchanged. The surveillance and accountability that the audience exercises during *American Idol* is the same form of judgment and scrutiny that Americans implement on each other every day. Worse yet, individuals begin to internalize these judgments so that they often hold themselves accountable to sometimes crippling stereotypes and “standards” in an attempt to be popular, accepted, and ultimately, successful. Programs like *American Idol* are then changing the “American” audience, working tirelessly to shape its young people into the mold of the “standard” American body. Gazing at the *Idol* contestants through the white, straight, male lens has impacted the audience such that they have turned the focus on themselves in an attempt to ensure that their performances are not deviating from their prescribed routines. While *American Idol* can certainly not take credit creating docile bodies, the program provides an enormous medium through which these dominant “ideals” can be perpetuated, and thus maintaining the “docile” bodies.

Theory, and the act of theorizing, has been long criticized as not being useful to people in their everyday lives. Often trapped in academia and written in inaccessible language, even some feminist, queer, and post-modern theory can seem useless when attempting to actually make a difference in a person's lived experience. As noted above, too few feminist theorists are devoting attention to media studies, particularly those of reality television, and while on the surface this subject can seem trivial, faddish, and unimportant, the fact that so many Americans are tuning in to them every week, year after year, suggests that there is a definite need for feminist theorists to critically examine these programs and the impact they have on the viewing audience. More importantly, though, how can we turn this critical theory into actual activism? I still want to watch my favorite superficial, reality competition show, yet I also want to alert the rest of the viewing audience of the homogenization that such mass-marketed programs create. While most viewers are surely aware of the fact that commercial products are being pushed upon them during the episodes (the Coca-Cola cups and Ford commercials are regularly satirized on programs such as *Saturday Night Live* and *Family Guy*), the awareness that the audience itself is pushed as a product is surely missed. Here is where the feminist conviction of praxis is needed: feminist media theorists must reach the masses in order to expose the viewing audience to its adherence to homogeneity. Rather than suggest that we eliminate these reality programs, I propose that the work of those who are critically examining this material be made accessible to those viewing the shows. Critical feminist, race, and queer theory pertaining to the media that Americans are so rapidly consuming needs to be published in more popular magazines, newspapers, and

online media outlets in an effort to shed a broader light on how deeply reliant on the dominant “ideals” their lives can become, and often already are.

In any given season, if that particular Top Twelve were not there, there would be another crop of young, idealistic hopefuls waiting right behind them, making each season’s contestants feel almost disposable. And sure enough each season ends and another begins with that new group of fresh-faced Americans ready to make their mark on popular culture. The last group, however, has had a taste of stardom and rather than slink back into the obscurity from whence they came, much like the winners of *Survivor*, *Big Brother* or *The Amazing Race*, the young *Idols* seek record contracts, movie and television deals or Broadway headlines. More than any other reality shows on television today, the “American Idols” are here to stay, whether we like them or not. Money and numbers talk however, and they say, we “Yes, we like you, we approve.” So it is vital then that these programs never stray from the critical eye, and those of us who are drawn to the show season after season continue to be their biggest critics.



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