

Chapter 1

Pop Goes Democracy

Mediating Race, Gender, and Nation on *American Idol*

Parallels between presidential elections and the hit TV series *American Idol* are not hard to make. Indeed, they had become punch lines in comedy routines: from Comedy Central's Stephen Colbert complaining that it took too long to determine the next American Idol (in a gag that had audiences assuming he was referring to the next U.S. president) to ABC's Jimmy Kimmel quipping that, after watching the vice presidential debate during the U.S. presidential campaign in 2008, he "voted four times for Sarah Palin and six times for David Archuleta," in reference to the popular Republican vice presidential candidate and *American Idol's* frontrunner contestant that year. Interestingly, movie critic Roger Ebert mounted criticism against Palin for being "the American Idol candidate," in which he argued the following:

I think I might be able to explain some of Sarah Palin's appeal. She's the "American Idol" candidate. Consider. What defines an "American Idol" finalist? They're good-looking, work well on television, have a sunny personality, are fierce competitors, and so talented, why, they're darned near the real thing. There's a reason "American Idol" gets such high ratings. People identify with the contestants. They think, Hey, that could be me up there on that show! . . . My problem is, I don't want to be up there. I don't want a vice president who is darned near good enough. I want a vice president who is better, wiser, well-traveled, has met world leaders, who three months ago had an opinion on Iraq. (Ebert 2008)

Ebert's observation that Palin's appeal relies on the same charisma as *American Idol* contestants is not necessarily revelatory. However, he has pinpointed a concern for how an image of "reality" has pitted ideals of ordinariness against values of exceptionalism.

Both entities of the presidential election and the reality TV show are predicated on ideologies that we have learned to accept about our public figures—celebrities and political leaders—as well as on media manipulation of their image. Because the presidential elections and *American Idol* both rely on "popular votes" to determine a winner, I find it fruitful to intersect our popular culture with our politics. In fact, I would argue that the construction of "reality" vis-à-vis entertainment, regular Americanness, multiraciality, and myths of meritocracy and democracy—as offered through the spectacle of *American Idol*—encourages the belief that, if anyone could become the "next American Idol," anyone could also become the "next American president," thus enabling the kind of atmosphere that made it easier for Americans to vote for an African American man with a name that signals the dreaded Other, which we had come to identify in a post-September II "war on terror" world of immigrants, racial difference, gender norms and deviations, and global conflicts. Added to this is a raced and gendered presentation of popular music constituted by marginal bodies.

In this chapter, I explore the political, social, and cultural contexts of *American Idol* and consider how its musical representation was shaped by a black female vocality in its earliest seasons. I further analyze how the show has mobilized such American values as democracy, multiculturalism, meritocracy, and capitalism, which then get reduced to a "national sound." Although the show creates a number of illusions, the "hyperreal" setting of this reality TV program has superimposed onto the national imaginary a political and popular discourse on race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality. However, just as the election of Obama conceals the realities of race relations in the United States, so too does *American Idol* distort national narratives on racial, ethnic, and gender inclusions. What follows is a rumination on how a reality TV show articulates our collective desires for and anxieties surrounding political participation and social inclusivity.

THE RETURN OF THE HYPERREAL

It is no coincidence that a show such as *American Idol* emerged in the wake of our collective disenfranchisement in the Presidential Elections 2000 debacle and after September II, 2001. Both events built a need within the national consciousness to believe our votes can count for something and to also believe

in something trite and fun, such as a talent competition. Itself a spinoff of a British hit TV show, *Pop Idol*, created by music producers Simon Cowell and Simon Fuller in response to decades-long talent shows in European culture, such as *Eurovision*, and reality shows that have dominated nineties television, *American Idol* came to U.S. television programming at a time when “reality TV” offered low-budget opportunities in which screenwriters and actors were replaced by unscripted amateur talents. These “real-life” characters proliferated in a culture shaped first by the popularity of drama-filled TV talk shows, then later by MTV-based youth programming that constructed “real world” and “road rules” entertainment, and, finally, by a digital high-tech culture that routinely blurs the lines between privacy and the public through MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube sites that have trained an entire generation toward exhibitionism and instant celebrity status.

As academic John L. Jackson Jr. comments in *The Chronicle Review*:

These days, acting is considered a kind of faked sincerity, and faking sincerity, no matter how stellar the performance, is hardly enough anymore. We want “the real thing,” not its well-performed simulation: real tears, real anger, real oddity, real sex. . . . It is this unquenchable thirst for “the really real” that drives paparazzi’s flashbulb frenzies. Celebrity is predicated on it, this backstage access, this pretending of transparency. (Jackson Jr. 2008)

The pretense of “transparency” has much in common with what Baudrillard called the “hyper real,” which becomes “more real than the real, that is how the real is abolished” (Baudrillard [1981] 1994, 81). Here, Baudrillard uses Borges’s absurd story of a map of an empire as illustration of this phenomenon.¹ We may recall that, in this story, the map became so huge in its attempts at “exactitude” that it actually took over the “real” territory it represented, with only brief glimpses underneath the wear and tear of the map of the “desert of the real.”

In the context of reality TV, we may recognize how this “hyperreal” construction of reality surrogates for real world events, real people, and real lives. On the other hand, in the “real world” sense, we have become constant actors with so-called unscripted lives, except that we are under constant high tech surveillance with omnipresent cameras; therefore, we are constantly “ready for our close-ups.” Shows such as *American Idol* rely on this belief of constantly being on the lookout for the “next American Idol,” who could be “you,” the average TV viewer. All “you” need is a great voice, and if “you” don’t have that, “you” may stand to gain five minutes of fame by making a

spectacle of yourself—should “you” be so lucky to be featured during the auditions segment of the show, in which those *without* talent receive the same level of attention as those *with* talent. Indeed, auditioners such as William Hung and General Larry Platt—whose ditty “Pants on the Ground” became an Internet remix hit—capitalized on their publicity as comedic untalented *Idol* contenders. Incidentally, both Hung and Platt are men of color, thus lending themselves to the racial spectacle that *American Idol* has often relied on in its promotion of “diversity” and “inclusion,” albeit through stereotypical buffoonery, as these examples illustrate.

On the other end of this constant unscripted yet fabricated reality of “ordinary citizen becomes a Hollywood star in the course of a TV season” is the spectacle of the viewer. This particular marketing strategy is one that I recognize as “hyperreal democracy,” through which a TV viewer is transformed from passive watcher to active participant and democratic voter: taking part in the unscripted script and, subsequently, being granted absolute power in determining a superstar celebrity in the making by simply casting a vote (or numerous votes) through a phone call or text message for the viewer’s favorite contestants. These contestants eventually advance week after week in the competition before they are either voted off the show—for receiving the least number of votes from the public—or succeed in capturing the *American Idol* title during the season finale. Some TV viewers take this “popular vote” to the next level of democratic participation: from generating Internet campaigns on Facebook and YouTube for their favorite contestants to purchasing go-phones that facilitate texting and dialing across different time zones, to even subverting the show’s objectives by voting for undesirable contestants, best represented by Web sites such as *Vote for the Worst*.

This aspect of the TV show is perhaps its most brilliant tactic, as it utilizes various forms of mass communication technologies, mainly provided by its sponsor AT&T, to literally draw TV viewers into the show by breaking down the imaginary fourth wall that is the TV screen and shaping the drama of choosing contestants week after week. Indeed, *American Idol* boasts of creating the contemporary trend in texting among our youth. It has since spawned other viewer-voting reality TV talent shows from *America’s Got Talent* to *So You Think You Can Dance* to *Dancing with the Stars*.

Not surprisingly, the show became an instant success, and with the superstar makeover of the first *Idol* winner, Kelly Clarkson, the show proved to be credible when its winners began dominating the music scene. Not long afterward, this item of pop frivolity became its own institutional power (a *New York Times* article called the *Idol* franchise a “schoolyard bully” with regard to its domination over TV ratings)² and, later, a force to be reckoned with

in the music industry, as established artists began clamoring for opportunities to perform on the show as guests. Beyond its mainstay status in popular culture, its cross-marketing efforts with various phone and cable companies and other major corporations have created an entire consumer culture that has become obsessed with text messages and go-phones. It is important to note this mobilization of social media was also a significant force behind the Obama presidential campaign in 2008.

Interestingly, philosopher Slavoj Žižek commented in his essay, “Welcome to the Desert of the Real,” that the September 11 event exposed the “unreality” of reality TV, but I would argue that *American Idol* distracted us from contemplating what this exposure means for us culturally by returning us to the hyperreal. As Žižek ruminates:

It is when we watched on TV screen the two . . . towers collapsing, that it became possible to experience the falsity of the “reality TV shows”: even if these shows are “for real,” people still *act* in them—they simply *play themselves*. . . . Of course, the “return to the Real” can be given different twists: one already hears some conservatives claim that what made us so vulnerable is our very openness—with the inevitable conclusion lurking in the background that, if we are to protect our “way of life,” we will have to sacrifice some of our freedoms which were “misused” by the enemies of freedom. This logic should be rejected. (Žižek 2001; emphasis in the original)

Žižek reminds us that the September 11 event introduced the most unexpected and unscripted televised moment of horror, which should have ushered in the “return to the Real.” Instead, the media spin cycle, which scrambled to narrate an acceptable storyline that simplified the events into an “us versus them” rhetoric, with easy lines dividing the American from the un-American, the Good versus the Evildoers, enabled us to actually return to the hyperreal and, specifically, to a reality-TV version of our American ideals wrapped up in the freedom of leisure (*vis-à-vis* TV viewership and talent shows), the freedom of the vote, and, of course, the “free market” of capitalism predicated on our consumer culture. That *American Idol*, itself a British import, would expand into different national versions across the world—*Canadian Idol*, *Australian Idol*, even *Iraqi Idol*—indicates the continued global expansion of Western consumer culture.

Such a return to the hyperreal makes possible “a world where there is more and more information . . . and less and less meaning” (Baudrillard [1981] 1994, 79). In other words, even as *American Idol* reinforced traditional

American values, the very nature of the parade of citizens aspiring to be celebrities offered a remarkable spectacle of our multiracial society, which is more and more indicative of the globalizing world in which we live, since the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed a huge increase in immigrant populations in the global North. While the “war on terror” highlighted anxieties about American nationality and immigration issues, *American Idol* itself highlighted that the “average American” was no longer typically white.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, beginning with the show’s debut in 2002, *American Idol* only featured three white male winners, and 2008 was the first time—through heavy manipulation of media spin, I might add—that the show’s finale included two white male contestants competing against each other. Even then, one of the contestants, David Archuleta, was of Latino descent, practiced a marginal Christian faith, and freely admitted to the influence of black female soul singers on his vocal style. Over time, however, the show’s contestants who made it to the finals had become increasingly white, thereby suggesting a voting TV audience either increasingly invested in whiteness or reflective of a specific race, gender, and class demographic that continues to vote for contestants (or perhaps who votes maniacally through multiple text messages) while others have either ceased their interest or cannot keep up with the latest digital communication technologies that facilitate the voting process. These patterns also shed light on what constitutes the “Americanness” of an *American Idol*. In the remaining segments, I explore the raced and gendered narrative of this “Americanness” that shapes our popular music and also how this frames the national dramas that unfold on this show.

TOWARD A NATIONAL SOUND

The main focus of *American Idol* is its musical competition, primarily featuring singing contestants, who compete for a million-dollar recording contract. Judging from ten seasons, between 2002 and 2011, different vocal styles and musical genres have emerged on the show, but for the most part, a standard vocal stylization dominates the competition: it is a style that can be termed *black female vocality*, framed by the show’s predominately black female backup singers and also by the current “sound” that prevails in the American popular music scene. Because of its reliance on musical spectacle, as well as its emphasis on a “national” identity not unlike the representational politics of the Miss America beauty pageant, *American Idol* has come to signify a national image and sound. While R&B soul represents a niche market compared to the more mainstream rock and pop music genres, its prevalence in the vocal

styles of *American Idol* singers suggests that it might, indeed, serve as “the sound of nation,” to cite musicologist Pavitra Sundar.

Borrowing from Roland Barthes’s “The Grain of the Voice,” Sundar considers the ways that vocal music has been mobilized to define nationality, and while she concerns herself with Indian nationality, I find this analysis of vocality useful in addressing how American nationality is similarly constructed through musical representations (Sundar 2008, 172). Barthes describes the “grain of the voice” in the following way:

Something is there, manifest and stubborn (one hears only *that*), beyond (or before) the meaning of words, their form (the litany), the melisma, and even the style of execution: something which is directly the cantor’s body, brought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages, and from deep down in the . . . language, as though a single skin lined the inner flesh of the performer and the music he sings. (Barthes 1977, 181–82; emphasis in original)

How does this voice then become a “national” voice? Moreover, how is this national voice gendered and raced?

If we consider the specific example of the black female vocalist, she is deeply ingrained in American music culture; she is both hyper-visible and hyper-audible. As Farah Jasmine Griffin argues, the black woman’s voice is a “quintessential American voice. . . . It is one of its founding sounds, and the singing black woman is one of its founding spectacles. But because it develops alongside and not fully within the nation, it maintains a space for critique and protest” (Griffin 2004, 119). Nonetheless, this marginality, even within the context of its hyper-audibility, reinforces black women’s “voicelessness” in cultural discourses on American music heritage and, ironically, in political narratives, since black women are often singing in service of someone else rather than for themselves.

By labeling black women’s public discourse as one of “voicelessness,” I specifically draw on black feminist theories addressing black women’s historical strategies of the “politics of silence” (Higginbotham 1992) and the “culture of dissemblance” (Hine 1995), which discourage any public disclosure of black women’s private lives. Although music—especially blues music—allowed black women to articulate a public discourse about their personal lives, it nonetheless created the illusion of openness, when in actuality it “shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors” (Hine 1995, 380). Do their performances reinforce what Evelyn M. Hammonds calls a “problematic of silence,” in which “black women’s bodies are always already

colonized” (Hammonds 1997b, 171)? Or, as Griffin argues, do their voices—as extensions of their bodies—transcend colonization to carve out spaces of social protest? These questions resonate as we witness the continued appropriation of black female vocality in the dominant culture—especially on a TV show such as *American Idol*. Because black women’s singing is thus a critical site of struggle between objectification and agency, it also becomes a site of resistance, which is embedded in the “space for critique and protest” that Griffin describes.

North American black music is itself a tradition of “protest”: keeping alive a memory of African culture during slavery, when the essence of African music—the percussion sound—was banned by enslavers. The percussion eventually became embodied through foot stomping, handclapping, and vocal improvisation, while spirituals coded the pain of the slave experience and the slaves’ desire for and actual attempts at freedom. Harriet Tubman was known for singing spirituals and hymns to communicate secret codes during her rescue missions, thus inaugurating an important chapter in black feminist musical resistance.

In contrast to Tubman’s fugitive slave spiritual singing, her contemporary Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, a free black woman and the first African American female opera singer, employed musical resistance simply based on her ability to perform in the classical musical genre and in concert halls during the antebellum period. Consequently, Greenfield distracted her audience, because she sang classical music from the Western tradition. Her classically trained voice was outlaw, subversive, and it had to be separated from the very body that produced it. According to nineteenth-century racial views, her body should *not* be able to produce sounds so “sweet and pure.”³ As such, Greenfield’s voice transcended her status as a black woman, and it was this transcendence that some in her audience found threatening. Hence, to contain her within a white hegemonic framework, her voice was often disembodied from her blackness—inviting the audience to accept and praise the voice but to separate it from her black body.

Whether singing spiritual songs or confounding audiences by singing operatic themes, the black female vocalist functions outside the national narrative while also shaping it through her “protest songs.” How, then, do black women continue in this tradition of resistance? Can their subaltern voices of protest be heard, or do their bodies merely function as vessels, coded in culturally specific ways in which black women’s singing already connotes suffering and, thus, constitutes an appropriate instrument to voice political and social discontent?

In his essay, “Many Thousands Gone,” James Baldwin argues the following:

It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear. (Baldwin [1955] 1998, 19)

Baldwin identifies a different phenomenon here, which we might call the “problematic of hearing” in the mainstream American reception of black music, which has contributed to black women’s “problematic of silence.” However, the protest song is communicated subtly, understatedly, even ironically. Such songs derive from the spirituals and blues traditions, which included secret codes—as Tubman already demonstrated—and double entendres so that different audiences would always hear differently. More importantly, I would argue, such “double consciousness” singing, to borrow from W. E. B. DuBois, necessarily shielded black women’s private lives from the public view, already inclined to distort their reality.

If we have trouble hearing the black female voice ingrained in American music, then calling it the “national sound” of America might be just as risky. Yet, few would argue that black musical genres—from spirituals to blues to jazz to rock ’n’ roll to hip-hop—are anything *but* quintessential American music. And embedded within the foundations of black music is the black female soul singer. Consider the unnamed narrator in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, who peels away the layers in Louis Armstrong’s own protest song, “Black and Blue,” to uncover the original source embodied by black female suffering:

I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths. And beneath the swiftness of the hot tempos there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz as flamenco, and beneath that lay a still lower level on which I saw a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother’s as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body, and below that found a lower level and a more rapid tempo and I heard someone shout: “*Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the ‘Blackness of Blackness . . .’*” (Ellison [1947] 1995, 9; emphasis in original)

Enigmatically, Ellison’s description of the gendered origins of the blackness of blues music—from the “old woman singing” to the “mother’s

voice” heard on the auction block, emanating from a naked and mixed-race slave—recalls the sexualized nature of racial oppression, as well as the original text sung first by Edith Wilson, who performed “Black and Blue” in the 1929 *Hot Chocolates* musical by Fats Waller. The song is a lament by a dark-skinned woman who “protests” colorist sexism in which she is overlooked because of black men’s preference for lighter-skinned women. That Armstrong could improvise upon and appropriate this specifically gendered protest, which is then elevated to a national lament on black people’s suffering en masse under white supremacy, complicates theories of cross-dressing and gender-bending performances; the black male performer becomes the feminine, vulnerable speaker powerless in a world where whites can “overlook” and “pass” him over in a racist society.

Ironically, the “protest” of the original black woman’s performance of “Black and Blue” becomes “invisible” through preoccupations with black men’s experiences of racism, from Louis Armstrong’s rendition to Ellison’s signifying text in *Invisible Man*. However, Toni Morrison recuperates the original protest song with her own novel, *The Bluest Eye*, which restores the original concerns of colorist sexism, while Claudia the narrator heralds the power of blues singers such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Billie Holiday—captured in her mother’s voice—when she proclaims: “I looked forward to the delicious time when ‘my man’ would leave me, when I would ‘hate to see that evening sun go down . . .’ ’cause then I would know ‘my man has left this town.’ Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother’s voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet” (Morrison 1970, 26). As is often the case, by the time the expression of suffering, grief, and rage finds musical release, the original “pain” dissipates and becomes a thing so sweet it transcends suffering.

Nonetheless, is this an example of the “subaltern cannot speak because the subaltern cannot be heard” (Spivak 1988, 301)? Even as black women’s bodies are “already colonized” in the public sphere, their voices often tell a different story when raised in song, for they complicate the “politics of silence” by presenting a multilayered and emotionally rich vocality that confounds the listening audience as much as it speaks a subaltern language that inspires marginal voices to emerge from their historical void. Once this silence has been broken, their singing becomes an act of resistance, voicing feminist protest and altering the political soundscape. What remains in question is how (and if) these voices maintain their power when they become a musical spectacle on a reality TV show.

RACE, GENDER, AND THE POLITICS OF VOCALITY

The legacy of black women's "protest" singing is long and varied. Whether we point to the quintessential protest song that was Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit"—recorded the same month that Marian Anderson performed at the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday, April 9, 1939, in the wake of the Daughters of the American Revolution refusing to permit her performance at Constitution Hall⁴—or to Fannie Lou Hamer's televised singing of "Go Tell it On the Mountain" during the civil rights movement, this musical resistance has a rich vocabulary and tonality. More recent protest performances include Mary J. Blige's duet with Bono on U2's song, "One," during the *Shelter from the Storm* Hurricane Katrina Relief telethon in 2005, which Daphne Brooks describes as "a sage, sobering, brutally honest summit between two figures who are iconographically conjoined in America's miscegenated history . . . here rewritten and recast in the voice of black female difference and resistance" (Brooks 2008, 191).

A similar "black protest" can be heard in Quincy Jones and Lionel Richie's remake of USA for Africa's "We Are the World" on the song's twenty-fifth anniversary—both as an updated benefit for victims of the Haitian earthquake on January 12, 2010, versus the Ethiopian famine victims in 1985, and a tribute to the late Michael Jackson. This remake—replete with auto-tuned vocals and a rap bridge—invokes black survival, strength, and national pride: a stark contrast from the pitiable images, conjured by the original song, of emaciated African bodies, thus requiring the imperialist intervention of well-to-do Americans called upon by the chorus of our musical heavy hitters to do our moral missionary duty of charity. On the other hand, never has hip-hop, a musical genre just emerging in the mainstream conscious back in 1985 and known for refuting black victimhood, been put to better use in a popular song than in this remake, which mobilized again for charity toward a black nation.

The aggressive delivery of the rap by the deep, gravelly voices of the black male rappers, followed by the unearthly yelp by Haitian-born hip-hop artist Wyclef Jean, grounds the song in the stark realities of Haitian survivors and bridges the two countries in a diasporic discourse of solidarity. That these black masculine voices are then followed and amplified by black female money-note vocals, offered by the church-trained Jennifer Hudson and the gospel duo Mary Mary, while the chorus builds with another layer of Haitian voices singing the refrain in Creole French, indicates how men and women, African Americans and Haitians, and the global North and global South can

literally build on each other's strengths to create community. What we hear in this remake, then, is a narrative of black power and survival intersecting with multiracial solidarity expressed by others around the world in the wake of disaster. Regardless of the realities that do not reflect this, at least the musical delivery keeps hope alive, as music has always done throughout the black diaspora.

Beyond inspirational music, the sentimental space of *American Idol* would also contribute to similar "protest songs," perhaps best exemplified, some might even say caricatured, in the diva-esque anthem, "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going," in the musical *Dreamgirls*, immortalized by Broadway Tony winner Jennifer Holliday before it was first performed on *American Idol* by Season I fourth place finisher Tamyra Gray and then later aggrandized in the 2006 movie version of *Dreamgirls* by *American Idol* Season 3 contestant Jennifer Hudson, who portrayed the scorned diva character, Effie White. In many ways, the critical acclaim Hudson received for playing this role—including a Best Supporting Actress Oscar—is not only tied to her performance of this "protest" song in the movie but also to her role on *American Idol*, when she was famously voted off in seventh place while other, lesser talented contestants outlasted her.

The TV show deliberately staged Hudson's ouster to heighten the racial spectacle in which she and two other black female contestants, Fantasia Barrino (who won that season) and Latoya London, were the bottom three contestants who received the least number of votes that week. When even pop star Elton John, who had appeared that season as a guest "mentor" for the contestants, decried this state of affairs as "incredibly racist," we might recognize how music becomes a political arena in which race and gender not only have a distinct "sound" but a distinct audience. What do such musical expressions and reception reveal about a "national" sound?

It would seem that black vocality—both female and male voices, but especially and iconically portrayed in the black female vocalist—provides the "rebellious," "suffering," and "survivor" spirit that America proudly heralds as a national persona. However, this spirit is also captured in other "white" musical genres—rock, heavy metal, and country music. Interestingly, soul singing and country music singing are often racially pitted as flip sides of the same coin, perhaps because they both share roots in the blues but also because they represent distinct racially segregated American groups (the "soul" black audience versus the "country" white audience). As such, a soul singer such as Whitney Houston can be positioned in the patriotic display of America's military power with relative ease—as represented by her performance of the national anthem at the militarized sports pageantry of the Super Bowl in

1991 during the nation's engagement with the Persian Gulf War—while the similar placement of the Dixie Chicks at the Super Bowl in 2003, in the midst of the war on terror (and only months before the war in Iraq began), works just as easily in staging a “national sound.”

Nonetheless, the raced and gendered expectations for black female “protest” contrast with expectations for white female “acquiescence,” which were powerfully dramatized in the blacklisting of the Dixie Chicks after lead singer Natalie Maines infamously expressed “shame” that then president George W. Bush “was from Texas” at a London concert on March 10, 2003, only a matter of months after patriotically singing the national anthem at the Super Bowl. As Katz Claire argues, “The Dixie Chicks were not simply called unpatriotic, they were called ‘Dixie Sluts’ and ‘Dixie Bitches,’ terms reserved only for women and, in particular, women who, in almost every case, act contrary to the prescribed passive role assigned to them” (Claire 2008, 151). The Dixie Chicks’ verbal protest against the war in Iraq may have proven too strong for their country music—listening audiences, and perhaps would have been better greeted in a song—hence the chauvinistic “shut up and sing” remarks hurled at them.

However, at the core of the outrage against the Dixie Chicks emerging from the conservative, country music audiences—as Claire aptly describes—was an expectation for both “patriotic” and “obedient” subservience from an “all-American” white female singing group, even though the Dixie Chicks have been adept at singing various protest songs—from the murder-advocating anti-domestic violence song “Goodbye Earl” to their unapologetic “Not Ready to Make Nice” in the wake of the censorship they experienced. The imagery of straitjackets, white corsets, and white picket fences employed in the video for “Not Ready to Make Nice” illustrates the ways that the Dixie Chicks are cognizant of their transgression from passive “white American femininity,” which made them targets for the rampant misogyny tossed their way.

This is not to say black female vocalists would not be similarly targeted if they made similar “unpatriotic” comments. However, there is a vibrant tradition of protest in black music, as I have already documented, which would position such vocalists as already existing outside the national narrative—to reiterate Griffin’s point. When I once taught both Dolly Parton and Whitney Houston renditions of the heartwrenching popular ballad “I Will Always Love You,” students invariably described Parton as a “passive victim” in comparison to the “strong survivor” they interpreted Houston as audibly representing. Of course, such interpretations point to the vocal power of Whitney Houston, as her soul-singing spin on the country ballad not only turned the song into an international standard but made it her

signature song, especially when it was heard ubiquitously in the wake of her untimely death on February 11, 2012. These representations of female vocality certainly contribute to our national narratives on the role that race plays in constituting women's bodies.

This too gets dramatized on *American Idol* when Fantasia, who overcame the racial controversy of Jennifer Hudson's ouster, captured the *Idol* title in 2004. She became the second black winner of the show in its then short three-year history, and as a sort of reconciliation, Fantasia sang the coronation song, "I Believe," written by Tamyra Gray, whom many viewers of *American Idol* believed was also ousted prematurely, like Hudson, during her season. Fantasia's gospel spin on the sentimental song salvaged it as a sort of "protest song," in which the lyrics, which spoke of dreams and overcoming obstacles, recast her in the role of a "survivor" of "America's" biased voting, even though her win simultaneously positioned *American Idol* as a legitimate vehicle in which anyone, regardless of one's race, gender, class, and sexuality, could become the "next American Idol."

However, a year later, the next American Idol winner, Carrie Underwood, provided a stark contrast. Unlike Fantasia, who was removed from the markers of white femininity and who was a teenage mother, illiterate, and edgy with her "street cred," country twang, and quirky vocals, Carrie Underwood sang country music with flawless vocals and looked like a blond "all-American" beauty pageant contestant. If, the year before, "America" proved they were not "incredibly racist," as Elton John accused them of being, by voting for Fantasia, they seemed to have shifted from the unconventional contestant that Fantasia represented to the more traditional celebrity-type winner that Underwood appeared to be. Underwood's post-*American Idol* music career, which includes multiplatinum music sales and mainstream popularity beyond the country music audience, also confirms this widespread acceptance of a conventional portrayal of the "all-American" American Idol.

MOBILIZING DIVERSITY AND THE "SOUL SINGER"

During the first seven seasons of the show, black female contestants often ranked highly and placed among the top five remaining contestants. As previously mentioned, during Season 1, Tamyra Gray placed fourth, while the expectation was that she would make the finale with Kelly Clarkson. Some even expected her to win that season. Instead, Kelly Clarkson, perhaps in the tradition of Elvis Presley who was once described as "the white boy who can sing colored," became the "white girl who can sing diva," *diva* becoming the moniker for just about every black female contestant,

whose soaring powerhouse vocals emulated great “diva”-like songstresses, from Aretha Franklin to Whitney Houston to Mariah Carey to Mary J. Blige. Interestingly, after winning *American Idol*, Kelly Clarkson’s musical career blossomed once she sidestepped the adult contemporary/ R&B soul genre to pursue the more mainstream rock-pop genre where she would function less as a derivative Celine Dion or Whitney House and, instead, followed a musical path reminiscent of other young white female vocalists, such as Alanis Morissette, Avril Lavigne, and Pink. In contrast, Tamyra Gray had to compete with more established black female vocalists, including Mary J. Blige, Mariah Carey, and Beyoncé, and has had more success on Broadway—curiously, a musical path that *American Idol*’s most infamous judge Simon Cowell has derisively dismissed as a legitimate music career. As an aside, Simon Cowell represents a different sort of vocalicity—he is the speaking, as opposed to singing, voice of authority, whose British accent recalls an imperialist English “father” tongue, which is why, when he passes judgment—in comparison to the other judges (Randy Jackson, an African American musician, and Paula Abdul, a woman of color pop star and then regular judge since the inaugural season)—Cowell’s acidic, brutally honest comments hold more weight.

In the wake of that first season, other black female “divas” included Kimberly Locke during Season 2, Fantasia who won Season 3 alongside famously booted-off contestant Jennifer Hudson and Latoya London, Vonzell Williams during Season 4, Paris Bennett during Season 5, the trio Melinda Doolittle, Lakisha Jones, and *Idol* winner Jordin Sparks during Season 6, and Syesha Mercado during Season 7, who was the last remaining female contestant in a year when the male contestants were wildly popular. During Season 4, the winner Carrie Underwood avoided comparisons to black female vocalicity by singing country music, which fit with her image of the all-American girl and who met with tremendous success when *American Idol*’s management team, 19, turned her over to Nashville’s music scene. However, while such contestants are viewed as offering something new and unique to *American Idol*, black female contestants, most notably Season 6’s phenomenally talented Melinda Doolittle, a professional backup singer, kept receiving comparisons to Tina Turner, Gladys Knight, and a host of other heavy hitters, and were invariably held to a higher standard. Somehow, they became the measuring stick for everyone else, precisely because such vocals are guaranteed to shore up everyone else’s—hence the reason we often find black women as backup vocalists, even on this show.

The first white male winner, the gray-haired and bombastic performer Taylor Hicks during Season 5, was one who appropriated soul singing, hence relying on a voting fan base called the “Soul Patrol,” while the first

male winner, African American soul singer Ruben Studdard, recalled an R&B stylization reminiscent of Luther Vandross that allowed him to win Season 2. However, Studdard's image as a heavysset man perhaps hindered his mainstream success, while the white male runner-up, Clay Aiken, enjoyed platinum sales and widespread popularity. Taylor Hicks, on the other hand, is often viewed as a "failure" because he became the first *Idol* winner who did not reach platinum sales with his debut album—an unfair expectation foisted on *Idol* winners in the wake of the runaway success of Idols Kelly Clarkson and Carrie Underwood, both of whose gender facilitated their acceptance as winners of a "cheesy" TV show (since female vocalists in general are not taken as seriously as male musicians) while their race and youth enabled mainstream access and acceptance (something that black *Idol* winners Ruben Studdard, Fantasia, and Jordin Sparks have not found beyond the R&B/urban music market). Yet, Hicks's fellow white male finalist of Season 5, Chris Daughtry, dominated music charts with his pop-rock band and persona. Despite the reliance on the musical spectacle of "soul singing" on *American Idol*, the music industry tells a different story with the mainstream dominance of pop music, rock, hip-hop, and country while R&B soul remains either a niche and segregated market or a submerged category under the hip-hop umbrella.

The edgier "rock persona" reflected by Chris Daughtry was crafted onto Season 7's *Idol* winner David Cook, who defeated the very popular and gorgeously voiced David Archuleta. While Cook's more mature image edged out the younger, softer soul-influenced vocal style of Archuleta, his success in the competition was based on his creative rock-based appropriation of soul music. Interestingly, Cook, who won his season by being branded as unique and risky, received this reputation by turning pop R&B hits such as Lionel Richie's "Hello," Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean," and Mariah Carey's "Always Be My Baby" into rock ballads. On a show that featured soul songs as a regular staple, it is not surprising that a white male contestant would then be praised as "edgy" and "original" when he spun black music and rearranged it for a "white" aesthetic (such as rock or emo), while soul-singing contestants such as Archuleta, that season's runner-up, and third-place finisher Syesha Mercado were often dismissed for either sounding "boring" or "bringing nothing new."

In effect, Cook mobilized "soul music" for rock music expression and, consequently, hinted at a troubling history of the "cultural theft" of black music by white musicians. This is especially problematic when we consider how this practice enabled him to triumph over the "soul-singing" contestants. These particular raced and gendered power dynamics are often overlooked

in the competition. However, they do beg the question of what constitutes “difference” and the politics of inclusion. Not only that, but have game changers, represented by the likes of Carrie Underwood and David Cook, subtly altered the chances of another Ruben Studdard, Fantasia Barrino, or Jordin Sparks from winning *American Idol*?

CULTURE WARS AND DIFFERENT KINDS OF “DIVAS”

Complicating this popular body politic is the intersection of race and ethnicity, spectacularly dramatized by the wildly popular and sexually ambiguous Sanjaya Malakar, a charismatic South Asian-American teen contestant during Season 6. Offering a new representation via the brown male body, underrepresented on *American Idol*, Malakar did not exactly represent “model minority” status with his mediocre vocals. Curiously enough, his less than stellar singing voice and his famous long hair met with an abrupt end when he was voted off the show the same week that the Virginia Tech shootings occurred in April 2007. We could say that, during such a solemn week, his shtick was no longer funny, but who knows how much of the Asian identity of the killer also led to Malakar’s demise when he placed seventh in the competition (the killer’s birthplace in South Korea was played to the hilt in news coverage even though he migrated to this country at age eight and became a naturalized citizen).

Such emphasis on the killer’s “foreignness”—combined with our ridicule of Sanjaya Malakar—reinforced how our culture refuses to affirm anything beyond a white-centered concept of Americana, shored up by our fascination with black entertainment, a presence that defines and frames the boundaries of whiteness. Added to this is the reduction of race relations as a primarily black-white issue with everyone else functioning as “illegals” or “foreigners.” On the flip side, this same image of ethnic difference can be erased altogether, as illustrated during Season 7 when three of the Top 4 finalists—David Archuleta, Jason Castro, and Syesha Mercado—were Latin@s but whose ethnic identities were neither referenced nor recognized among TV viewers or in the media. Instead, they were cast as either “white” (in the case of Archuleta and Castro) or “black” (in the case of Mercado).

I raise this issue because, the season before, when the Top 4 finalists on *American Idol* included three black girls and a white boy, many headlines queried if we would have an all-black finale for the first time. We did not, and as it turned out, of the four finalists, the mixed-race black contestant, Jordin Sparks, and the white contestant, Blake Lewis, made the finale. And, incidentally, the “all-American” white guy (David Cook) beat out the Latin@s

the following season. Interestingly, Blake Lewis, like David Cook, engaged in musical appropriations of black culture by incorporating hip-hop beat-boxing in his vocal styling, which garnered for him the “original” and “innovative” label, much like Cook.

Maybe race, gender, and ethnicity had a hand in voting decisions, maybe not. However, there does seem to be a distinction made in which blackness is a recognizable “difference” that media calls our attention to and which whites can co-opt for their musical expressions as signs of “innovativeness,” while Latinidad is often times made invisible, or “heard but not seen” (if one has an “accent” or speaks Spanish, then Latinidad becomes recognizable). During Season 8, for instance, Puerto Rican contestant Jorge Nuñez’s accent became an issue on the show and, as a result, he failed to advance to the finals. However, Allison Iraheta, whose Latina identity was less pronounced, advanced farther as a fourth-place finisher. Talent may shape these results, but how much do these issues bear on our sense of what constitutes being an “American” Idol?

Beyond the spectacle of race and ethnicity is the spectacle of sexuality, and far flashier than Sanjaya Malakar was Adam Lambert, Season 8’s runner-up. More than Lambert appearing on *American Idol* as the first “out” gay contestant was the show’s amplified script concerning his sexuality. There seemed to have been an expectation that—if Lambert functioned as a gay contestant, simply because of his attempts at gender-bending performances, replete with vocal screeching, painted nails, and eye makeup akin to the ’80s glamour rock band era—such flamboyant performances were indicative of what a “gay Idol” would look and sound like. He appeared “different” in a way that generated buzz for the show, even though he had lost the title—after the show’s script created the expectation that no one else was worthy to win.

Lambert’s “difference” also allowed for a backlash. Not long before the finale during his season, Bill O’Reilly’s ultraconservative show—which airs on the same Fox network as *American Idol*—fabricated a narrative about the “culture wars” represented by the final two white male contestants, Lambert and eventual winner Kris Allen, who was billed as a “Christian” contestant from Arkansas (a curious identity to highlight in these “culture wars,” considering that the majority of *Idol* winners have always been church-trained and churchgoing contestants but never openly identified as such until this moment) and who became the subject of a “conspiracy theory” in which AT&T sponsored a phone drive in his hometown to generate enough votes for his win. During this time, the popular culture magazine *Entertainment Weekly* also featured Lambert on the cover with the question: “Is Adam Gay?” Such prevalent media discourse suggests that *American Idol* was equally invested in

the spectacle of gayness around Lambert and in the potential backlash that might occur with the more conservative elements of *American Idol* TV viewers.

To some extent, this media spectacle garnered enough interest in the show because numerous conversations occurred that questioned whether or not Lambert lost the *Idol* title because of his sexual orientation. Because such popular voting is difficult to prove, it is safer to point fingers at the TV show for generating interest in this “hot button” issue if for no other reason than to benefit from the spectacle of difference—a spectacle that eventually reverberated in interest in another Fox Network show debuting that year, *Glee*, a TV musical focusing on racial, ethnic, able-bodied, and sexual diversity. There is always a market for “difference,” it seems, a lesson that *American Idol* has learned all too well during its years on TV—drawing as it does from an illusory politics of inclusion and “reality.”

By the time Season 9 rolled around, however, white male contestants had won the *Idol* title for three consecutive years, thus returning us to a normative representation of “Americanness.” Because of this, some in the media have pointed to the voting demographics, suggesting either a rise in “fangirl” voters—including “moms and daughters,” to cite music critic blogger Lyndsey Parker—or in the solidification of a conservative mega-church Christian voting base.⁵ Indeed, as previously mentioned, a significant number of *Idol* winners and finalists, such as Ruben Studdard, Fantasia Barrino, Jennifer Hudson, Carrie Underwood, Chris Daughtry, Taylor Hicks, Jordin Sparks, Melinda Doolittle, and Kris Allen, all have ties to the church.

If TV voters have changed in this direction, then perhaps contestants such as Crystal Bowersox, an early frontrunner and eventual runner-up for Season 9, no longer stand a chance at winning. Bowersox’s appearance on *Idol* had framed the female contestant beyond the conventional portraits of “power belter,” “pageant queen,” “eye candy,” or “diva.” She also offered a different spin on blonde, “all-American” womanhood in comparison to the power-belted beauty queen depiction of Underwood. In short, Bowersox may be less the girl next door and more the girl on the other side of the tracks—a role usually reserved for a woman of color.

Moreover, Bowersox embodied a really-*real* contestant for reality TV. She was the singer-songwriter “artist” with a guitar and dreadlocks, suggesting a grungy Janis Joplin throwback with her soulful vocals—the hint of black female vocality—and women’s empowerment lyrics. She was also a single mother—like Fantasia—but here white privilege lessened the impact on conversations about Bowersox’s ability to be a “good role model” when she admitted to looking for a bigger paycheck to support her musical gig and infant son. Behind the guitar strumming and bluesy voice, one detected

her heartbreak and her working-class struggles in her economically hard-hit hometown Toledo, Ohio. Bowersox also displayed a “survivor” persona as a woman with disabilities (diabetes, in her case) without health insurance, which she unabashedly shined a light on in interviews.

Curiously, Season 9, which was billed as a “girl’s year,” featured female contestants voted off week after week. Similarly, most of the contestants of color faced the same fate early in the season, thus leaving the impression that “diversity” and the spectacle of difference had run its course after nine seasons. Additionally, the show started to slip in ratings, which is also inevitable after a long run on television. Despite such race and gender discrepancies in the representation of contestants, Bowersox advanced to the season finale on the strength of her talent and performances.

Also relating to these gender representations in the later seasons of *American Idol* is the disappearance of the black female “diva” as a major contender in the competition. As I had previously mentioned, the show was shaped by a black female vocality in its early years. Following Season 7, however, black female contestants were no longer featured among the Top 5 finalists. Because black male contestants such as Michael Lynche in Season 9 and Jacob Lusk in Season 10 advanced in the finals, it became easier to overlook this disappearance since there was still a black vocal presence on the show—even though a contestant such as Lynche admitted that he altered his interests in pop music to fit the R&B persona he was expected to embody in order to advance in the competition, while Lusk’s sexual ambiguity and dramatic gospel runs intuited a “diva” presence.

Moreover, the “diva” presence of black female contenders was often relegated to the auditions segments in which significant numbers of caricatured and comical wannabe “divas” proliferated. This too is indicative of *Idol*’s reliance on black female vocality, in which the show had become so constituted by this style of singing that it could turn it into comedy. Nonetheless, as female contestants and contestants of color began to be voted off in early stages, viewers of the show had begun to comment on the inevitable “white guy with guitar” *Idol* winner, as had occurred with Season 10’s teen country singer Scotty McCreery and Season 11’s Phillip Phillips. Considering that black female vocality in pop music had also become either imitative (think of the styles of British pop singers such as the late Amy Winehouse, Adele, and Jenny J) or reductive “hooks” in hip-hop and electronic dance hits, perhaps it was only inevitable that the black female bodies originating this sound, much like the disappearing sixties girl groups after the “British Invasion,” would become, once again, marginalized and “voiceless.”

CONCLUSION: ILLUSIONS OF INCLUSION

Despite our exposure to *American Idol*-style diversity, our nation's retrogressive responses to various crises featuring racial and ethnic otherness—from September 11 to Hurricane Katrina to the Duke Lacrosse rape scandal to the Virginia Tech massacre to Don Imus to anti-immigration rallies—seem to reinforce the “new racism” of the twenty-first century: a racism that insists that we are all “color-blind,” thus ignoring the systemic racial hierarchies that continue to advance white supremacy or normalcy while nonwhite spectacle is always viewed as “different” or “unAmerican.” However, if we recognize the hyperreality of a reality TV show such as *American Idol*, we may note how the visions created of our multiracial society have reinforced in the public imaginary a nation that has come to accept “diversity” and the possibilities for the “best contestant,” regardless of color, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, to rise to the top. Despite various controversies, a respectable and talented contestant eventually seems able to capture the *American Idol* title.

This idyllic construction of our “American Idol” is one that I call an illusion of inclusion. Yet, this illusion can certainly be superimposed onto other hyperreal events, such as the voting for a U.S. president. And, while these public representations do not indicate the progress of the “Real” (that is, the lived realities of racism and other oppressions in America), they do lull us into accepting the “hyperreal” of what many like to call a “postracial society.” We must question this imposition of the imaginary map on the desert of the Real.