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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Televising Talent: Musicality, Meritocracy, and the Aesthetics of Exclusion

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Abstract

Throughout the history of television, American audiences have participated in a tradition of programs that follow a consistent structure: Amateur musicians and entertainers are offered an opportunity to display their talent on stage, competing for audience votes to win first prize and a chance at stardom. This article contributes to a growing literature on the significance of televised talent shows, demonstrating how their remarkable longevity and representational power stems from their configuration as a "format," the set of guidelines that structure and constrain the content of each broadcast—an aesthetic process grounded in exclusion. Through their formatting, I argue, these programs reify the notion of "talent" at the heart of talent shows, transforming a multidimensional and context-contingent assemblage of musical abilities into a seemingly stable object able to be recognized, rated, and ranked. Musical auditions offer a microcosm of formatting's role as a means of training audiences' attention. They normalize the practice of eliminating whatever (or whomever) is deemed unworthy—on these programs and in the wider world. Through analyzing examples from Ted Mack and the Original Amateur Hour (1948), The Gong Show (1978), and The Voice (2017), the article demonstrates how beneath the widely discussed content of contestant demographics, judge commentary, or audience voting results, the talent show format serves to obscure the contradictions upon which meritocracy's cruel optimism rests.

"The structure is the argument."[1]
Toni Morrison

Introduction

The scene opens with a shot of a white man on a tractor.[2] Airing in January 2016, it was a seemingly typical moment for *American Idol*, one of the most popular and profitable programs in the history of television.[3] Over bucolic images of grass and long-horn cows, a voice-over by host Ryan Seacrest introduces the next contestant as 24-year-old Trent Harmon, who lives on his family's Mississippi farm and sings to the resident cattle. "To achieve anything of merit in music," Harmon remarks over a slow-motion shot of him symbolically crossing a street with his guitar, "you've gotta leave the farm." About 40 seconds later, Harmon's mini-biopic transitions to the scene of his audition with celebrity judges Harry Connick, Jr., Keith Urban, and Jennifer Lopez. Harmon offers the judges a condensed version of his story and launches into his chosen audition song, "Unaware" by contemporary blue-eyed soul singer Allan Stone. Harmon is indeed from the country, and he looks and speaks the part. However, viewers soon discover that his voice is something more: As Jennifer Lopez whispers

[1]Toni Morrison, "The Art of Fiction No. 134," *The Paris Review*, 1993.

[2]Airing on January 7, this was the third episode of the program's fifteenth season—supposedly its last. In 2017, however, ABC acquired the rights to the television format, which returned to the air in 2018.

[3]Among other accolades (including its unprecedented profit margins), the program broke records when it held first place in the Nielsen Ratings for eight consecutive seasons and hit a record average of over 30 million weekly viewers in its 2006 season.

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incredulously to Keith Urban seconds after he begins, "It's not country. He's an R&B singer. I can't even." Lopez cannot stop expressing her surprise as the white man in front of her croons with resonant clarity and soulful flourishes, strumming effortlessly on his guitar. He sings the last phrase of the exactly 60-second excerpt, "push, pull, tear," with his eyes closed, pushing out a final agile melisma before his jaw quivers on the final note with a Whitney Houston-esque vibrato.

Three months later, after the roster of first-round talent was winnowed to 24, then 14, then 10, 8, 6, 5, 4, 3, and finally 2, America voted one last time. Harmon was pronounced 2016's *American Idol*, defeating finalist La'Portia Renae. Whether motivated by antipathy or nostalgia, millions would return to clips of Harmon's earlier auditions on YouTube and elsewhere to inspect the seconds-long glimpse of the musical talent hiding within, waiting to be discovered.

Regardless of the verdict's fairness or predictive accuracy, for many, the meritocratic model presented by this reality television program felt all too realistic—and familiar. The following day, a wave of reactions swept across the internet. "Surprising no one, white man bests black woman to become final 'American Idol' winner."[4] "'American Idol' Crowns Its Final Winner, And It Feels Like We've Been Here Before"[5] "I knew it! And the trend continues, WGWG, White Guy With Guitar… Trent Harmon!"[6] At that moment, a year after the #OscarsSoWhite controversy had intensified public scrutiny of representational politics across the media, all but two of the previous eleven winners of *American Idol* had been white men, which only provided further fodder for longstanding appeals for equity within the entertainment industry and the wider world it strives to portray.

In the ensuing years, agreement that "representation matters" has only increased within and beyond American cultural discourses. Academics, activists, and corporations alike have called for more effective meritocratic systems that enable people—across categories of race, sexuality, gender, physical or cognitive ability, class, and region of origin—to occupy positions of power and visibility in media contexts and beyond.[7] This agreement stems from a widespread belief that representation operates as a tool of social justice as well as a metric of the current meritocratic system's effectiveness.[8] This belief underlies the ubiquitous #representationmatters hashtag on social media; this belief is a starting place for many scholarly discourses about the complex mechanics of representation in media.[9] Indeed, even as fantasies of attaining an ideal meritocracy continue to fray in the wake of mounting economic and social inequalities,[10] and even as critiques of meritocracy proliferate,[11] the pursuit of a system that recognizes and rewards some concept of merit—rather than social rank, wealth, or nothing at

[4]Justin Wm Moyer, "Surprising No One, White Man Bests Black Woman to Become Final 'American Idol' Winner," *Washington Post*, April 8, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/04/08/surprising-no-one-white-man-beats-black-woman-to-become-final-american-idol-winner/

[5]Hugh McIntyre, "'American Idol' Crowns Its Final Winner, And It Feels Like We've Been Here Before," *Forbes*, April 8, 2016, accessed March 14, 2022, https://www.forbes.com/sites/hughmcintyre/2016/04/08/american-idol-crowns-its-final-winner-and-it-feels-like-weve-been-here-before/

[6]j (@jacarrelyn), "I Knew It! And the Trend Continues, WGWG, White Guy With Guitar… Trent Harmon! @TrentWHarmon #AmericanIdolFinale," *Twitter*, April 8, 2016. https://twitter.com/jacarrelyn/status/718258649693581315

[7]This general stance is embraced in scholarly as well as popular discourse. Stuart Hall formatively noted that "identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think," arguing that it is shaped by systems of power, "never complete, always in process, and always within, not outside, representation." Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 68–81.

[8]This argument about the power of a "talented" few to serve as a force of change through representation has been a pervasive one, if also widely debated, since well before Du Bois popularized the notion of the "talented tenth" in the context of Black American representational "uplift" politics. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in *The Negro Problem*, ed. Booker T. Washington (New York: James Pott and Company, 1903).

[9]To offer one branch of this discourse, a robust literature on media representations of Blackness includes Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation"; bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Racquel J. Gates, *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

[10]Many measurements support the argument that social inequality is increasing. For example, see Eric A. Hanushek et al., "Long-Run Trends in the U.S. SES-Achievement Gap," Working Paper, Working Paper Series (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, February 2020), https://doi.org/10.3386/w26764

[11]Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller, *The Meritocracy Myth* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap: How*

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all—remains a common cause.[12] For many, then, the triumph of another literally blue-eyed soul singer on *American Idol* was disappointing, if unsurprising, because it proffered further evidence that this shared meritocratic fantasy was still a distant dream. Even as talent shows' viewers acknowledge that the reality they portray is not "real" and their production is primarily profit-driven, these programs evoke such widespread and heated reactions because they participate so undeniably in this potent politics of representation.

A growing scholarly literature has expounded upon the ways popular televised talent shows represent and produce broader social meanings, especially around issues of identity, democracy, and meritocracy.[13] Matthew Stahl has explored how *American Idol*'s "representation of subjugated populations […] suggests the potential fairness of the meritocratic system."[14] Katherine Meizel has analyzed *Idol* as a site "in which the negotiation of American identities is played out" by contestants in relation to narratives of the American Dream.[15] William Cheng has argued that talent shows proffer meritocratic fantasies through presenting affectively powerful and problematic narratives of disability and overcoming.[16] These projects and many others have parsed the messages of talent shows by attending carefully to (reality) television's affordances as a medium. In approaching talent shows' significance in this way, however, this body of scholarship has overlooked what is arguably their most essential and influential feature—one established long before the invention of television.

Here, I argue that these programs' most profound representational and ideological power is located neither in the *content* of contestants' performances nor the *medium* of television itself, but rather in their enduring formal and (infra)structural[17] properties—what I theorize as their "format." Taking seriously Toni Morrison's assertion in the epigraph above,[18] I contend that the lasting structure of talent shows is their principal argument, serving to naturalize "talent" and "merit" as stable objects able to be recognized, rated, and ranked.[19]

America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite (New York: Penguin, 2019); Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

[12]"Merit" is as slippery a term as the "talent" most definitions of merit invoke. As *New Yorker* contributor Louis Menand put it, "Merit was originally defined as 'I.Q. plus effort,' but it has evolved to stand for a somewhat ineffable combination of cognitive abilities, extracurricular talents, and socially valuable personal qualities, like leadership and civic-mindedness." Louis Menand, "Is Meritocracy Making Everyone Miserable?," *The New Yorker*, September 23, 2019. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/09/30/is-meritocracy-making-everyone-miserable

[13]Regarding "meaning" in media, television scholar John Fiske formatively argued that television produces "meanings that serve the dominant interests in society" and "circulates these meanings amongst the wide variety of social groups that constitute its audiences."

[14]Matthew Wheelock Stahl, "A Moment Like This: American Idol and Narratives of Meritocracy," in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, eds. Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno (New York: Routledge, 2004), 212–32.

[15]Katherine Meizel, *Idolized: Music, Media, and Identity in American Idol* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

[16]William Cheng, "Staging Overcoming: Narratives of Disability and Meritocracy in Reality Singing Competitions," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 11, no. 2 (May 2017): 184–214.

[17]"Infrastructure is not identical to system or structure […] because infrastructure is defined by the movement or patterning of social form. It is the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure." Lauren Berlant, "The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (June 1, 2016): 393–419.

[18]The relationship between form and content has of course been the subject of extensive examination across disciplines, in addition to the context of poststructuralist literary theory to which Morrison speaks. For example, as Susan Sontag famously noted in 1966 in the context of visual art, "the very distinction between form and content […] is, ultimately, an illusion." Within musicology, building upon a long line of assertions about the inseparability of these two elements in musical contexts, Susan McClary proposed treating "the entire complex as content—social, historically contingent content." Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009); Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[19]Innate musical talent is widely discussed and experienced as a biological fact, as an innate gift or set of aptitudes that some possess, and others do not. I argue, however, that musical talent is best theorized instead as a social fiction—a performative accomplishment that naturalizes and perpetuates unequal distributions of power. Talent is thus best understood as a floating signifier: Not moored to a single meaning or specific biological facts, but rather invented and performed. In this way, talent functions analogously to race, gender, and other ubiquitous social signifiers that rely upon "the use of classification as a system of power," as Stuart Hall has discussed. Stuart Hall, "Race, the Floating Signifier," in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 359–73.

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Not unlike "media," the term "format" has acquired a variety of definitions, appearing as a key word in contexts as diverse as literary studies, radio studies, art history, the global television industry, data science, and elsewhere. While I discuss format's floating signification further in the following section, it is important to note that this project engages primarily with work in media and communication studies that theorizes format in its most inclusive sense—as a set of guidelines for shaping a media object from a vast expanse of possible data, a process of limitation necessary for that object and the idea guiding its creation to be successfully transmitted and received.[20] This broad understanding of format, in other words, is not limited to the televised examples offered here. Rather these examples offer a case study in formatting as a much broader phenomenon, one analogous in scope to oft-cited definitions of media as "extensions of ourselves" or "our infrastructures of being."[21] In this way, formatting can be described as an exercise in exclusion, a set of decisions that harness the size, shape, dimensions, and internal organization of a media artifact.[22] If, as John Durham Peters put it, "media are not only devices of information, they are agencies of order," then formats represent specific embodiments of that order.[23] Theoretical work on formats has drawn insights from a range of illustrative examples, from the book page to the painting to the MP3.[24] Talent shows offer a valuable addition to this conversation, as this entertainment format and the wider meritocratic systems it represents are not only the *result* of a formatting process, as are all media objects; they are also an ideologically charged *performance* of these processes of excerpting, excluding, winnowing down. In this way, talent shows can be characterized as a meta-format: A format about formatting itself.

While many varieties of televised "elimination programs" have aired in recent years, it is no coincidence that the earliest and most popular of these have featured music.[25] The historical popularity of music-based talent shows certainly stems partly from music's widespread appeal, as well as profitable media convergences and collaborations between these programs, social media platforms, and the music industry.[26] However, more significantly, the brief musical auditions at the heart of talent shows highlight and exemplify how formats (like media) are aesthetically constituted.[27] Musical performances of talent, in other words, make particularly palpable the power of form, not only in shaping the ontology of a musical object and the talent rendering it, but also for reflecting and reproducing the social circumstances that prompt and receive that talent.[28] Indeed, musical excerpts' relationship to a talent show's larger structures, and the larger social structures with which it converges, exemplifies the co-constitutive nature of experiences of art and of life: As Lauren Berlant put it, "the aesthetic trains us to think about mediation, and

[20]For instance, see the essays in Marek Jancovic, Axel Volmar, and Alexandra Schneider, *Format Matters: Standards, Practices, and Politics in Media Cultures* (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2020).

[21]Marshall Mcluhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994); John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

[22]As Axel Volmar has put it, "the most fundamental feature of formats concerns limitation." Axel Volmar, "Formats as Media of Cooperation," *Media in Action. Interdisciplinary Journal on Cooperative Media*, no. 2 (2017): 9–28.

[23]Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds*, 1.

[24]Bonnie Mak, *How the Page Matters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); David Joselit, "Painting beside Itself," *October* 130 (2009): 125–34; Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

[25]When I refer to "talent shows" in this essay, I am considering music-only programs like *American Idol* as well as variety-based talent shows that prominently feature musical acts alongside a range of other entertainment genres.

[26]Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 59–92.

[27]In referencing media aesthetics, I am considering a disciplinary and theoretical orientation along the lines of Dan Marchiori's description of media aesthetics as a "questioning the borders between the notion of 'medium' (a means for expression) and 'media' (a means for communication), and between art techniques and cultural means." Dario Marchiori, "Media Aesthetics," in *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art*, ed. Julia Noordegraaf et al., Challenges and Perspectives (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 81–100.

[28]The audition excerpt genre's contribution to discussions of musical ontology merits further study; this project's understanding of music and musicality works to balance a radical constructivism with the realist or determinist perspectives privileged in the production of talent shows. For a succinct summary of this discourse, see Georgina Born, "On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity," *Twentieth-Century Music* 2, no. 1 (March 2005): 7–36.

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about the production of form. And so, rather than thinking about it as some alternative to the real, it's actually a training in attention."[29]

As the following sections demonstrate, musical auditions therefore present a microcosm of formatting's complex ideological function as a training of attention that acclimates audiences to the process of cutting out whatever (or whomever) is deemed irrelevant, unseemly, gratuitous, unworthy. It is this relationship between musical and social structures, and between material form and ideological argument, that I invoke by theorizing the talent show format as an *aesthetics* of exclusion.[30] After further exploring the relevance and utility of studying talent shows through the lens of formatting, the subsequent sections examine these programs' aesthetics of exclusion from different vantage points: Within the limited timeframe of a single audition, through the tradition of incorporating and eliminating conspicuously unqualified acts, and despite efforts to repurpose them as forces of inclusion and representational diversity.

The format is the message

Since the turn of the twentieth century, American audiences have participated in a tradition of shows—on live stages and broadcast media, and in local, national, and international contexts—that follow a consistent formula. It goes something like this: Amateur performers are offered a chance to display their "talent," musical or otherwise, for a live audience. After a first round of off-stage winnowing, a balanced assortment of amateurs performs for the audience, punctuated by commentary from some combination of an avuncular host, humorous master of ceremonies, panel of judges, and supporters of the contestant. The audience is then called upon to participate in selecting the most talented amateurs from that day's batch, voting with applause, paper ballots, calls, texts, or online "likes." After those deemed untalented are ceremonially eliminated from the competition, those who remain are rewarded either with the pride of first place, publicity, a monetary prize, professional opportunities, or the ability to participate in a subsequent round of the program. Different talent shows have elaborated upon this basic format as media affordances and cultural norms have shifted. The consistency of this general template, however, is noteworthy.

What insights can the notion of "format" contribute to our understanding of this enduringly popular tradition of programs—and vice versa? The previous section forwarded several related claims about talent shows: They can be understood as a format that itself represents the process of formatting; their characteristics as a format are pivotal to their popularity and discursive power; this formatting process is an aesthetic enterprise on multiple registers, from the individual song to the season. To clarify the theoretical framework guiding the following sections, here we linger a bit longer on these points.

Discussions of formats have long been "troubled by a semantic indeterminacy," as Jancovic, Volmar, and Schneider have discussed.[31] In some contexts, the term has been used almost synonymously with genre, that mode of categorization based on stylistic conventions to which audiences bring particular aesthetic and affective expectations.[32] Additionally, especially within the entertainment industry and television scholarship, format has referred more specifically to a certain "program concept"—a formula or framework licensed, replicated, and adapted for different regional or

[29]Lauren Berlant, "Forms of Attachment: Affect at the Limits of the Political" (Workshop, ICI Berlin, Berlin, July 9, 2012), https://doi.org/10.25620/e120709

[30]While aesthetics as a discipline and approach is associated with a diverse web of scholarly practices and politics, here I align with a more recent body of work that affirms the importance of the aesthetic in relation to the cultural, historical, and political, seeking "to overcome the science/art, politics/art, and art/culture divide" through examining the decisions and judgments that go into the creation and reception of artistic forms. L. H. Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 9–13.

[31]Jancovic, Volmar, and Schneider, *Format Matters*, 8.

[32]Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 4. This slippage between definitions of genre and format is common in television contexts as well as musical ones. In many understandings, genre rules include but surpass form and format alone. Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 91.

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national audiences.[33] Indeed, talent shows are a frequent point of reference in this sense of the term; *Got Talent*, for instance, holds the Guinness World Record for the most globally successful television format.[34] Although talent shows' important role in the history and global economics of television merits further study, here televised talent shows function as one rich case study in a much longer history.

This project, therefore, defines "format" as a set of conceptual and concrete guidelines that determine the limits and structures of a media object. More so than genres, media, or technical specifications, invoking this notion of format highlights the fundamental influence of a media object's formal and structural features, as well as the ubiquity of formatting as a process.[35] Formatting always involves a negotiation: Between the goals of more vividly or expansively encapsulating an abstract conception of the object on the one hand, and heeding unavoidable material or temporal constraints required for its successful production and transmission on the other. In his work on the MP3 format, Jonathan Sterne described these opposing forces as verisimilitude and compression.[36]

Although this essay focuses on nationally broadcast televised talent shows, these programs represent just one chapter in the entertainment format's longer history, which preceded and will likely outlive the era of network television. In this way, talent shows offer a provocative example of cross-media formats, which Sterne has described as operating "like catacombs under the conceptual, practical, and institutional edifices of media."[37] Rather than being subsidiary to media, then, formats operate on equally expansive scales and equally complex contexts. A brief history of the entertainment format illustrates this point. Talent shows first became standardized around the turn of the twentieth century. Generally known as "amateur nights," these shows became popular on vaudeville stages in New York's Bowery district, and then on stages across the country. In the wake of the disillusionment of reconstruction and the rampant corruption of the Gilded Age, the ethos and structure of amateur nights embodied the Progressive Era's sweeping commitment to upward mobility, direct democracy, and bureaucratic transparency. The format reached wider audiences with the arrival of radio, first as "opportunity nights" on local stations and then nationwide, most prominently on *Major Bowes' Original Amateur Hour* (1934) and Arthur Godfrey's *Talent Scouts* (1946), both of which attracted unprecedentedly large audiences. The format transitioned to television in the late 1940s, first with continuations of *The Original Amateur Hour* (*OAH*) and *Talent Scouts*. It was during this golden age of television, and talent shows, that the term "meritocracy" entered Anglophone discourse, offering terminological specificity to discourses about the American Dream and focus to ongoing debates about resource allocation and gatekeeping systems based on "talent" and "merit."[38] A continuous stream of televised talent shows followed in the footsteps of this first generation; notable examples include *The Gong Show* (1976–1980), *Star Search* (1983–1995), and a surge of 2000s-era programs including *American Idol*, *America's Got Talent*, and *The Voice*. This unprecedentedly popular set of programs epitomized and invigorated reality television's (re)popularization of participatory media, unscripted content, and an eroding of divisions between the categories of amateur and professional.[39] Indeed, the talent

[33]Here, I refer to "television format" when discussing this more specific understanding of the term, instead of the broader category I'm theorizing. Sharon Shahaf and Tasha Oren, *Global Television Formats: Understanding Television Across Borders* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2.

[34]Kevin Lynch, "Simon Cowell's 'Got Talent' Confirmed as World's Most Successful Reality TV Format," Guinness World Records, April 7, 2014, http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2014/4/simon-cowells-got-talent-confirmed-as-worlds-most-successful-reality-tv-format-56587

[35]"Wherever there are media, there are also formats." Jancovic, Volmar, and Schneider, *Format Matters*, 7.

[36]Sterne, *MP3*, 5.

[37]Sterne, *MP3*, 16.

[38]While used first by Alan Fox in 1956, the term was widely popularized by Michael Young's satire, *The Rise of The Meritocracy* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1958). For a thorough critical history of meritocracy as a term, system, and idea, see Littler, *Against Meritocracy*. In this project, I approach meritocracy (the common notion that with enough hard work and talent, anyone can rise to the top) as a structural impossibility and fantasy that perpetuates inequality rather than abolishing it.

[39]This project draws upon and contributes to a growing literature on musical amateurism. For a broad contextual history and one musicological discussion of the significance of paid and nonpaid "musical labor in creating social distinctions," respectively,

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show format has arguably migrated to online platforms like YouTube and TikTok, where amateur performers compete with millions of others for viewer engagement, accruing vote-esque views and "likes" rewarded by algorithmic bestowals of opportunity for wider circulation. Amateurs who accrue a particularly large following have been picked up as professionals by record labels.[40]

Although formatting can occur in various dimensions, from the height and width of visual media to the bandwidth occupied an MP3, the talent show format is primarily temporal in nature. These programs trade in the currency of time granted or denied, offering select contestants 90 seconds to sing under the spotlight or seize their first 15 minutes of fame. For each contestant, the first note of their performance (signifying the beginning of their "life" on the program) is the only given time, which makes it both the most common and the most consequential. Each audition and each step in the competition are rendered from the negative space of denied time and suspended opportunity. Through this temporal shaping of audition pieces and meritocratically narrowed pools of finalists, the concepts of "musical talent" being displayed and "merit" being measured are constructed. In other words, talent shows' formatting is inherently a meaning-making process, presenting particular ontologies of musical talent and merit through this temporal structuring. Indeed, if representation is the channel through which meaning is created, as Stuart Hall has argued, talent shows can be understood as representations of structures as much as individual identities. Though scholars have examined how these programs replicate and represent larger meritocratic systems, focusing on their operation as a format highlights how meritocracy itself (whether in its idealized or existent form[41]) can be understood as a format; like the talent shows portraying it, this meritocratic formatting process occurs over time, structurally guaranteeing the bestowal of disproportionate power to a privileged few.

Temporal limitations in general are unavoidable in the creation of a 30- or 60-minute weekly program; the decision about which moments to cut and which beginnings to interrupt, however, is never neutral or objective. As David Joselit has pointed out, "Formatting is as much a political as an aesthetic procedure" because it "introduces an ethical choice about how to produce intelligible information from raw data."[42] Every formatting decision, in other words, is bound up in the politics, aesthetics, and ethics of its exclusions, from the elimination of contestants with particular racial or cultural identities to the cutting-out of particular musical genres or song segments.[43]

Louis: aesthetics of exclusion

On Sunday, May 15, 1949, a sixteen-year-old musician named Louis stepped into the spotlight of *The Original Amateur Hour*, just one year after the popular program transitioned to television from radio. The kinescope recording preserving the footage is fuzzy, and the size and dimensions of the image serve as a reminder of the historical vicissitudes of television's verisimilitude. Regardless, these first seconds of the teenager's television debut present an array of introductory details in shades of black and white for onlookers mining the image for evidence of undiscovered talent buried within. Louis's lanky frame dons a dark suit and patterned tie; he holds a violin, delicately tucked under his right arm; he is Black.

Ted Mack, the program's affably avuncular host, launches into his customary introductory interview. "Louis, I see here you're quite a fellow up there in Boston. Says here that you're a track runner at English High School and that you've equaled every record in school. Right?" The violinist's tall frame

see Stephen Knott, *Amateur Craft: History and Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015); Glenda Goodman, *Cultivated by Hand: Amateur Musicians in the New American Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[40]While analyzing TikTok as a twenty-first century iteration of the talent show format merits its own study, there are many examples of TikTok artists ascending from amateur to celebrity, from Lil Nas X to more recent stars such as Olivia Rodrigo, Priscilla Block, and Tai Verdes.

[41]Jo Littler has pointed out that meritocracy can be understood both as a more abstract ideological system, and as an actual social system. Littler, *Against Meritocracy*, 8.

[42]David Joselit, "What to Do with Pictures," *October* 138 (2011): 81–94.

[43]As Jacques Attali has discussed, "Every code of music is rooted in the ideologies and technologies of its age, and at the same time produces them." Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985).

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swayed with restrained restlessness as Mack looked up from his piece of paper. "Yes sir," the violinist replied, bowing his head deferentially. "I hope to break some next year when I put on a little more weight." Following this pre-audition banter's standard formula, Mack steers the conversation topic from this initial identificatory anecdote to the talent the teen would show. "How about your violin: can you play that as fast as you can run?" Louis follows Mack's lead, indulging the metaphor. "Well, not quite. I've got a lot to learn. I hope to break some records with this someday." He pats his shiny instrument on the shoulder, performatively, almost parodically—his trusty steed waiting at the gate. "You're just a champion at heart, aren't you?" Louis looks down, smiles, nods.

Thirty seconds after first stepping into the spotlight, the violinist offers his final words of the audition, announcing that he will be performing "Csárdás" (1904) by Italian composer Vittorio Monti. Without a moment of hesitation, the off-camera piano accompanist ripples through an introductory chord, cutting the usual four introductory measures short and prompting Louis to transition quickly into playing position. He holds his head and his bow arm high, his stance suddenly less reminiscent of a fiddler or beginner violin student than the distinctive posture of Russian-born violinist Jascha Heifetz (Figure 1). With a sweeping upbow, the widely recognizable first four notes of the piece's melody radiate from the violin's G string with tone and clarity, his left hand faintly shimmering with vibrato before shifting an octave up on this lowest string to land on A_4 with a delicate glissando.

Louis plays this first straightforward eight-measure theme of the multisection showpiece with expressive vibrato, rubato, full bows, and controlled shifts around the signature *sul* G passages—a display of facility with some of the many techniques that make the piece so popular in pedagogical contexts as a concise introduction to the more advanced techniques idiomatic to Romantic-era string repertoire (Example 1). Instead of playing the second half of the piece's first section, which adds more complex elaborations in an improvisatory style requiring the performer to comprehend and convey the underlying melodic arc, Louis proceeds to the second *Allegro vivo* section's flashy finger-twisting runs and propulsive syncopations. He omits the second half of this section, with more harmonically complex and challenging arpeggiated sixteenth note runs. He also bypasses the entire subsequent *Multo meno* section, which presents a less conspicuous challenge of rendering double stops and full chords with melodic continuity, expression, and intonation accurate enough for the notes to resonate fully.

Instead, the teenager moves on to the *Meno, quasi lento* section, which features stopped harmonics that send the sounded pitch up two octaves, the violinistic equivalent of a vocalist's dazzling whistle register—a technique as striking as it is difficult for a student to master. Louis plays the final three sections (Example 2) in full, which progressively barrel toward the double bar line through elaborations of the *Allegro vivo* theme, finally ending the minor piece in its parallel major key on a double-stop unison D_3. The live studio audience erupts into applause.

In all, the violinist's rendition of "Czárdás" lasts less than half the length of a performance without cuts to the score; when combined with his conversation with Mack, Louis's appearance on *Amateur Hour* lasts under 3 minutes. Much takes place within this short time, however. As with every other audition (and any typical musical performance) the contestant's audition ushers into existence one version of an imagined musical object, with an identity and an ontology, borrowed briefly from its imaginary museum to display on the talent show stage—here, a work called "Czárdás."[44] However, in contrast to a professional classical performance, in which a performer's abilities serve primarily as a vehicle for the aesthetic experience of a musical work, in this talent show the musical work is offered primarily as a vehicle for the aesthetic experience of a performer's abilities—a musical template carefully formatted to allow Louis's talent to be inserted and clearly displayed. Just as the teenager's performance manifested one version of the imagined thing that is "Czárdás," it manifested one version of the imagined thing that is his musical talent: Note by note, his performance extracted a discernable object from the unique, ever-shifting, expansive cloud of his musical abilities. Like any musical performance (classical, popular, or otherwise), this assemblage of abilities never generates the same sonic object or representation of his musical talent. They materialize differently—sometimes quite radically

[44]Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

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Figure 1. Louis Eugene Walcott (1949), and Jascha Heifetz (1952).

so—with every performance context and repertoire choice; they evolve with every lived experience and ever-fluctuating state of his mind, mood, or body.

Though fundamental, an explanation of talent's reification does not tell the full story of these 3 minutes, as it does not address the chief question the audition was designed to answer: If Louis has any innate talent to show at all, what is the nature of this talent—how does it measure up?[45] It is here that the role of formatting becomes crucially important: For all that was included and achieved in the violinist's brief appearance, far more was excluded, inhibited, barred from existence. The program's brief, standardized audition format limits a performance not only to one piece, but a small piece of that piece—a process of exclusion that is essentializing by definition.

In the case of Louis and "Czárdás," the formatting process reflects and reproduces a racially essentialized aesthetic rendering of his talent. Within the discarded sections of the piece represented by the red Xs in the reproduced score are discarded musical opportunities, challenges, affordances—discarded pieces of his identity. To draw upon the analysis of Louis's audition above, these red Xs represent opportunities to perform the presence of a quiet inner vision (accompanist introduction)[46]; creative maturity (improvisational latter half of *Largo*), individuality (the *Allegro vivace*'s imaginative repetition of the second half of *Allegro vivo*, and the two repeats in the *Allegro vivo*), interpretive and technical nuance (*Multo meno* double-stop voicing). Collectively, in other words, these omitted sections offer the most direct opportunities to demonstrate a particular type of musical mastery, one historically denied classical musicians without claims to whiteness.

This is not to say that the program's production team consciously excluded these sections according to this logic. More probably, they overlooked this sonic negative space and directed their attention toward what to include: In this case, the most-recognizable main theme (*Largo*), fast and flashy sections with syncopated figures and athletic passage work (*Allegro vivo*, and the final three sections), and the crowd-pleasing technical trick of stopped harmonics widely associated with the piece (*Meno, quasi lento*). In the end, however, the talent that this audition piece formatted into existence did not offer clear evidence of musical maturity, creativity, or expressive nuance. Instead, it was a talent undeniably powerful, fast, and exciting.

Within the audition's confines, however, Louis is still able to exert his own musical agency: Within the piece's structure, we can hear traces of a very different argument from the violinist about his talent. It peeks out in thoughtful renderings of rubato and vibrato; in creative choices around the

[45]The specific belief that a musician's innate talent can be measured through a standardized evaluation was popularized by music psychologist and eugenicist Carl Seashore, who developed the first music aptitude tests in the early twentieth century. Carl E. Seashore, "The Measurement of Musical Talent," *The Musical Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (January 1915): 129–48.

[46]For a detailed discussion of this valued archetype in the context of Romantic classical performance practice, see Karen Leistra-Jones, "Staging Authenticity: Joachim, Brahms, and the Politics of Werktreue Performance," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 397–436.

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CZARDAS
pour Violon Solo
avec accompagnement de Piano ou Orchestre
V. MONTI
VIOLON SOLO
Largo maestoso
Largo
4a corde
crescendo
molto rall.
Veloce
rall.
a tempo
rall. molto
Allo vivace
sautillé
pp sautillé
crescendo molto

Example 1. "Csárdás" by V. Monti, ed. G. Recordi & C., 1904, p. 1–2.

choreography and articulations of his bow strokes; and in his overall posture and comportment, which conveys no trace of a minstrelesque Blackness more commonly represented in the program's contestant selection around this time.[47] We can also hear moments where Louis pushes his fingers just beyond their speed limit in an effort to fulfill the expectation of an athletic musicality, losing pace with the

[47]For an analysis of this racialized politics of representation in earlier years of the *Original Amateur Hour*, see David Goodman, "'On Fire with Hope': African American Classical Musicians, Major Bowes' Amateur Hour, and the Hope for a Colour-Blind Radio," *Journal of American Studies* 47, no. 2 (May 2013): 475–94.

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2 VIOLON SOLO

sautillé

sautille

pp

sautille

pp

cresc. molto

f

Molto meno

f

mf grazioso

f

molto rall.

f

Meno
Harmonique

p

rall. molto

ppp

109510

Example 1. Continued.

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VIOLON SOLO

3

All° vivace

sautille

p

cresc.

poco rall.

Allegretto

1

f

sautillé

rall. poco a poco

a T° più presto

stentato

f

molto più vivo

stringendo sempre

f

tr

109510

Example 2. "Csárdás" by V. Monti, ed. G. Recordi & C., 1904, p. 3.

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bow and causing brief blips in the spaces between quick notes. Within the audition format's limits, in other words, are the residues of a larger representational struggle—around the extent and nature of Louis's musical skills and future potential, around who he is and will be more generally, and indeed, around what all Black musicians might be capable of.[48]

Following this television debut, Louis Walcott indeed continued to find opportunities to appear in public—although his trajectory offers another argument against the self-evidence or immutability of talent.[49] After several years as an accomplished violinist and later as a Calypso musician, Louis left behind the version of himself represented by the score with red Xs in Example 1, turning toward a different type of X. In 1955, he changed his name to Minister Louis X and later to the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan, the name he currently holds as the head of the Nation of Islam.[50] Minister Farrakhan's recollection of his experience on *The Original Amateur Hour* in a 2010 interview offers one final demonstration of formatting's complex politics and aesthetics of exclusion on the scale of the audition. He recounts,

> I'm on the Ted Mack show, and when they ask me what would I like to do with my violin, and I say—'cause Jascha Heifetz was my great inspiration then and now—and I said, "I want to be able to play like Jascha Heifetz." Well, for a little black boy to want to play like a man that plays the violin like no other in this modern time, that's a little bit too high for a black boy to aspire. So they changed my words and write you a script: "I hope that one day I'll break some records on this." And they say, "Oh, you're a record breaker, you're so and so running track," and then I pat my violin and say, "Well, I hope one day I'll break records in this." But that wasn't what I said.[51]

Although an audition's formatting sometimes allows fragments of a contestant's own presentational agenda to shine through, Minister Farrakhan's recollection of this interview segment of his appearance offers a reminder that what is left out is so often entirely erased, untraceable. In cutting out Louis's original comment, in likening his musical ambitions to that of an athlete rather than a figure like Heifetz, the conversation's formatting complements that of his musical performance. It carves away pieces of the essentialized self and forwards just one of many possible arguments about the nature of Louis's musicality and identity.

Not every audition involves the same type or degree of exclusions, of course. Some present a relatively less problematic, if still incomplete and essentializing, representation of the contestant's transient cloud of possibilities; some are more flattering than degrading, portraying contestants' talent as the tip of an implied iceberg of musicality that might never be further substantiated. Nevertheless, the case of Louis demonstrates the ideological nature of formatting's aesthetic choices, even and especially on the most granular level—an essential element to talent shows' aesthetics of exclusion, giving salience to aesthetics' status as "affectively invested form," to recall Berlant's definition.[52] The following section turns to the affective element of these aesthetics.

The gong: affects of exclusion

In July 1978, almost three decades after Louis Walcott's *Original Amateur Hour* audition, a different kind of act was preparing to perform for a different televised talent show. "Folks, you won't believe who's coming," host Chuck Barris proclaims in anticipation of their appearance. "They are coming.

[48]Herman Gray offers a helpful history and critique of representations of Blackness on screen, beginning in this post-war "golden era" of television. Gray, *Cultural Moves*.

[49]Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rick E. Robinson, "Culture, Time, and the Development of Talent," in *The Systems Model of Creativity* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), 27–46.

[50]In the Nation of Islam, the surname X signifies the rejection of a name and identity Black Americans inherited from their ancestors' white enslavers.

[51]The Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan interview by Julieanna L. Richardson, November 29, 2010, A2010.111, session 1, tape 3, story 5, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. The Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan remembers appearing on *The Original Amateur Hour*.

[52]Berlant, "Forms of Attachment."

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Example 3. First 4 measures of The Waiters' 1978 performance of "Hello Dolly" on The Gong Show. Transcription by author.

And here they are! The Waiters!" The curtain opens to reveal thirteen shaggy-haired young men in matching tuxedo shirts and black vests. As the audience cheers and whistles, the house band launches into the peppy four-bar introduction of a selection suspiciously apropos for the uniform-clad ensemble: The title song from the musical *Hello, Dolly*, then in the midst of its second Broadway revival. However, after the live band's introduction, on the downbeat of what should have been the song's first line, only a smattering of the ensemble starts to sing (Example 3), a few legs drifting into a vaguely Rockettes-style kick accompanied by a swell of derisive laughter from the audience. The band reacts quickly, looping back in time to repeat the chromatic ascent to the introduction's anticipatory half-cadence. On the second try, enough of The Waiters join in for the band to proceed.

More legs kick, a few arms flail, and gradually a melody and choreography reminiscent of the musical's familiar number emerge from the discordant din of chest voices and audience boos. As The Waiters shift left and right, their negative space reveals a sign with "GO FOR IT!" emblazoned on the rear stage wall. The camera cuts to the three celebrity judges, already standing in front of the large gong behind their table and each brandishing their own huge red-headed mallet. (Was this "go for it," one begins to wonder, directed toward the contestants or the judges?). Simultaneously, the judges take a swing. Just as the large gong gongs, a "time's out" buzzer buzzes from above, and, just in case the message wasn't adequately clear, the live band blurts out the familiar descending chromatic "sad trombone" wah-wah sound effect. Over the audience uproar, Barris says to the judge whose mallet barely beat the others to the punch, "That was a dastardly thing to do to these young men trying to make their way in the world. Why did you do that, Patty?" "I *had* to gong them," she replied. "They were lining up to leave the theatre." Barris seems satisfied with this response: "Ahh, you had to save our audience."

As the previous section demonstrated, a talent show's unavoidable temporal constraints require each contestant to whittle down their expanse of possible performances to fit inside a standard audition slot —a formatting process that reifies a musician's "talent" as a measurable object. Individual performances, however, represent just one register of the aesthetics of exclusion shaping these programs. Just as many sections of "Czárdás" were cut from Louis's audition, a vast majority of talent show applicants are turned away before the first broadcast, beyond the bounds of the audience's gaze. The small percentage of aspiring stars invited to appear on television, however, are not simply those determined most likely to win. Neither is this small sample representative of the overall population of applicants, whose distribution of audition scores likely resembles a Gaussian curve with a vast middling majority of literally "unexceptional" performances.[53] Instead, talent shows have consistently featured

[53]This issue merits much more discussion, given the history of racist and sexist conflations of measurable performance and innate potential on a bell curve. Further, the distribution would look different depending on the specific program, the applicants it attracts, the program's evaluation criteria, and much more; as Angela Duckworth has noted, for example, "objective measures of achievement are typically log-normal in distribution." Regardless of these details, however, a vast majority of contestants would still fall into this middle "unexceptional" category. Angela L. Duckworth, Johannes C. Eichstaedt, and Lyle H. Ungar, "The Mechanics of Human Achievement: Newtonian Model of Achievement," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 9, no. 7 (July 2015): 361.

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conspicuously "bad" or "untalented" acts like The Waiters alongside exceptionally skilled ones.[54] In addition to contributing another popular category of entertainment to these variety-style programs, this particular formatting of contestants contributes to an affectively and ethically charged argument about the nature of musical talent: Namely, some clearly "have what it takes" and some clearly do not. There is talent and anti-talent.[55]

The Waiters' audition presents a concise summary of the archetypical anti-talent act. Crucial to this archetype is the very first instance of their performance, when a missed entrance (ghost notes in Example 3) betrays the group's inability to respond to an obvious introduction from the band, one of the most fundamental musical skills needed by live performers. Indeed, since early talent shows' adoption of the hook, time has been the format's primary currency of exclusion, with anti-talented acts being yanked from the stage as soon as it became apparent that they were unworthy of the audience's valuable time. Like all anti-talented acts, the insult of The Waiters' inability elicits intense affect in the audience, who protest the act's continuation with a schadenfreude-laden mixture of disgust and delight and increasing intensity with every moment of their continued presence on stage. As a proxy for the audience, the judges urgently interrupt the noise of the anti-talent's act with a more forceful sonic blockade—in this case, the sounds of the physical gong *and* a buzzer *and* a musical topic signifying failure, all of which definitively denies the act the opportunity of more time. The Waiters are ushered away from the stage lights and back into the darkness from whence they came, their unrealistic dreams deferred. Order is restored.

It is no accident, however, that this group offers an amusingly exaggerated example of anti-talent: *The Gong Show* that featured them was designed by Chuck Barris precisely to satirize the popular talent show tradition—and especially the anti-talented acts whose cruel expulsions had been a popular feature of talent shows since their inception on vaudeville. Indeed, the formatting of The Waiters' audition and *The Gong Show* overall offers a particularly absurdist and sinister critique of the aesthetics of exclusion at work in the talent show tradition. As Barris himself darkly summarized, "*The Gong Show* gave the little person his or her moment in the spotlight—and the consequences thereof. The rest of the world was given the opportunity to be jealous and kick shit in the little person's face (a microcosm of life?)."[56] To offer just one specific example of the way the program's format forwarded this argument, contestants were guaranteed a minimum number of seconds to perform before the judges could gong them—a constraint that sometimes resulted (as for The Waiters) in all three judges waiting impatiently to deliver the fatal blow concurrently. This occurrence was known on the program as a "gang gong" or "gang bang," a term used with full awareness of its disturbing double entendre, which only further emphasized the extreme degree of ruthless schadenfreude at the heart of an audience's gleeful humiliation and elimination of contestants deemed unworthy.[57]

The Gong Show's title emphasizes the centrality of this sonic, material object to this program—as well as the tradition of talent shows it satirizes. Indeed, interactive objects that perform and signify exclusion have always been central to the talent show format, from its first popularization on the stage of Miner's Bowery Theater, where a discarded blackface minstrel's cane was first transformed into "the hook" which was called upon by raucous audiences to drag unworthy amateurs offstage by their throats.[58] Indeed, the hook, gong, and buzzer give physical and sonic shape to the ambient gleeful

[54]On some talent shows (including *The Voice*, discussed in the following section), this culling produces a small pool of performers the production team deems most worthy of consideration on air. Clearly unskilled acts, however, were included in the earliest talent shows and many of the most successful televised programs, as well.

[55]I employ the term "anti-talent" because the presence of these "bad" acts presents a dialectic model of talent and operates as a type of counterproposition, preventing an onlooker from assuming everyone has talent. This term is employed in a related sense in Trajce Cvetkovski's analysis of reality television's relationship with the popular music industry, where the term refers to television personalities who gain celebrity status for their ordinariness rather than extra-ordinary skills. Trajce Cvetkovski, *The Pop Music Idol and the Spirit of Charisma: Reality Television Talent Shows in the Digital Economy of Hope* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[56]Doyle Greene, *Politics and the American Television Comedy: A Critical Survey from I Love Lucy through South Park* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2007), 149.

[57]Greene, *Politics and the American Television Comedy*, 149.

[58]Henry Clay Miner, *Get the Hook* (New York: Miner's Vaudeville Theatre, 1908).

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rage audiences direct toward unworthy performers, which embodies Jo Littler and Steve Cross's theorization of schadenfreude as a "negative capacity in socially affective relations, one that desires equality, but is primarily unable to think it as anything other than 'leveling through humiliation,'" a sentiment that serves "the flip side of meritocracy whilst imbricated in its logic."[59] In this way, to summon Gaston Bachelard's oft-cited description of scientific instruments, the *Gong Show*'s gong and other physical implements of exclusion offer a "materialized theory" of the talent show format itself.[60]

Audience participation is central to anti-talent's role in talent shows' overall formatting process: As noted earlier, talent shows are not only the result of formatting—as is the case with Louis's song and the first televised round of contestants—they are a meta-format. As such, they offer an ideologically charged representation of the process of formatting that invites the audience into the mechanics of the meritocratic process through voting for the contestants they judge to be talented, deserving, meritorious. As a part of this system, anti-talent acts offer something of an appetizer into the evaluative nuances of formatting and an introductory-level practice at dashing some contestants' American Dreams through declaring them undeserving of further opportunity. Additionally, the participatory democratic processes on these programs are driven less by standardized evaluation rubrics than onlookers' affective responses. Indeed, the mechanisms of hooks, gongs, and buzzers and the structural interventions they enact forward the argument that the recognition of talent occurs prior to thought. As the celebrity judges perform by enthusiastically striking the *Gong Show*'s gong or displaying their goosebumps or tears in response to a particularly "talented" contestant, talent (like love) is something you "just know" when you feel it, requiring little deliberation.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the structures *The Gong Show* satirizes encourage audiences to conflate the aesthetically bad with the ethically bad.[61] The talent show format's reification of the categories of talent and anti-talent alongside its celebration of affectively driven elimination of anti-talented contestants, serves not only to facilitate but ethically validate these processes of exclusion. By narrowing the pool of contestants down to a stark dialectic of musical skill—or, in the case of *The Gong Show*, excluding highly skilled contestants altogether—helps justify onlookers' decision to declare a contestant as inferior or not meriting of further time. If talent is a commodity upon which to capitalize, to summon the biblical parable from which the term etymologically derives, these structures forward the argument that some people are simply worth less.[62] In other words, anti-talent serves as a stark reminder that to offer certain aspirants limited time and resources, whether in the world talent shows create or the one they represent, others need to be denied, excluded, and soon forgotten. As Barris summarized the *Gong Show*'s dark commentary on this general phenomenon, "When someone or something was 'gonged,' that person or thing was deemed to be too awful to exist any longer."[63]

The voice: disavowals of exclusion

It is the very first audition of the thirteenth season of *The Voice*, airing in September 2017 on NBC. Standing on a dimly lit stage, contestant Chris Weaver commences the familiar first verse of Otis Redding's "Try a Little Tenderness," backed by a delicate guitar and keyboard accompaniment. As the stage lights gradually brighten, they reveal four chairs—not facing Weaver and the stage, but into the darkened auditorium. Just four measures and eleven words into Weaver's performance, however, celebrity judge Adam Levine confidently whacks a red button installed directly in front of him

[59]Steve Cross and Jo Littler, "Celebrity and Schadenfreude," *Cultural Studies* 24, no. 3 (May 1, 2010): 395–417.

[60]Gaston Bachelard, *The New Scientific Spirit* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

[61]As Henry Jenkins has discussed, the symbolic relationship between musical talent and one's holistic deservingness has been a feature throughout the history of talent shows, where audiences bring a "moral intensity" and "firm belief that the outcome of a talent competition should be read in terms of questions of justice, honesty, and equity." Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 85.

[62]The Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14–30) tells a story of three servants given differing amounts of a currency known as talents. Ultimately, the servant given the most talents, who also invested them and produced a profit, was rewarded; the servant with the fewest talents, who hid them in the ground, was damned. Scholars generally agree that contemporary definitions of talent stem from this parable.

[63]Greene, *Politics and the American Television Comedy*, 149.

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(Example 4 downbeat of m. 5). A reverberating "thwap!" punctuated by audience applause adds a video-game-esque effect to Weaver's soulful rendition of the song. The inner glow of Levine's futuristic thronelike chair transforms from red to white right as a spotlight encircles him and the glowing throne rotates 180 degrees, permitting Levine to behold the body belonging to the Voice that just moved him. An instant later, judge and previous *American Idol* contestant Jennifer Hudson smacks her own red button (downbeat of m. 6), glancing contemptuously at Levine as her chair turns to face the singing, smiling performer. The scene cuts to the contestant's family, who are weeping and applauding backstage as host Carson Daily congratulates them on the chair turns. The accompaniment's texture gradually accumulates as Weaver skips over the next two verses to sing the final verse, "you won't regret it." Judge Miley Cyrus begins to dance in her chair as the band's intensity and Weaver's vocal register reach new heights, waving her arms suggestively over her red button and touching it softly before confirming her interest with a final punch. By the end of the 90-second audition, all four judges have turned to face the singer, with four "I WANT YOU" signs emanating from their chairs. After the cheering subsides and the triumphant nondiegetic music fades, the four judges commence a campaign to convince Weaver to choose them as his coach for the remainder of the season.

Premiering in 2011, amid a surge of elimination-style reality shows in the 2000s and 2010s, *The Voice* presented itself as a refreshing departure from programs like *American Idol* and *America's Got Talent*, which propelled the talent show format back to the forefront of the US entertainment industry in the early 2000s. "*The Voice* is a new kind of singing competition show," the voice-over on its original trailer proclaimed. "For the first time, it doesn't matter what you wear, it doesn't matter what you look like. All that matters is the voice." In contrast to other talent shows' superficial, sensationalizing, and often humiliating procedures, *The Voice* sought to model a more inclusive, supportive, realistic version of the meritocratic ideal of an amateur musician's ascent to stardom.

These ideological adjustments to the program, of course, were reflected by and implemented through its formatting, in what might be called the television format's structural middle-distance: Neither on the most local level, which maintained the basic unit of an audition with a standardized structure and time limit; nor on the most global level, in which a large initial population responding to an open call is winnowed down to a final winner. Rather, this middle level of formatting—the rules and procedures that guide a program's progression from initial auditions to final result—is often the most variable and frequently discussed. For instance, rather than allowing judges to judge (in the derogatory sense) a contestant according to their race, gender, body type, etc., the first round of performances on *The Voice* follow a "blind" audition format, as the vignette of Weaver's chair-turning illustrated.[64] Further, rather than including anti-talented vocalists in order to ceremonially exclude them, the program proudly includes only the most skilled vocalists who are ostensibly evaluated according to the most musically rigorous standards. As host Carson Daily put it, "this is a show by artists for new artists, no tricks, no B.S."[65] Although I have been referring to the celebrity gatekeepers as "judges," *The Voice* refers exclusively to these figures as "coaches." Each coach is responsible for mentoring their own team of singers—a formatting modification that gestures (if only feebly, in practice) toward the mutability of an aspirant's abilities. To emphasize this more objective, equitable approach, contestants' audition performances were never cut short—that traditional talent show feature most directly satirized by *The Gong Show*. Indeed, instead of sounding a gong or buzzer after hearing a particularly aesthetically displeasing moment to interrupt and aggressively exclude a contestant, *The Voice*'s judges press their button at a particularly promising musical moment in the first round to actively *include* a singer on the program's roster. As Example 4 illustrates, this moment of acceptance is

[64]This celebration of the "blindness" of a talent show audition—claiming that a lack of visibility is indicative of fairness or objectivity regarding racial, physical, or other visually classified marginalized identity categories—is reminiscent of the colorblind discourses that emerged when talent shows transitioned from live stages to radio. This portrayal of "ocularity as the central sensory praxis" of inequitable judgments, to summon Theri A. Pickens' words, serves to obfuscate the more complex dynamics of evaluation in the show—and the world. Therí Alyce Pickens, *Black Madness:: Mad Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 56–57.

[65]"The Voice Season 1 (2011 Commercial)." The Christina Aguilera Experience. YouTube video, December 16, 2012, https://youtu.be/PnqW4oIcZ6Y?si=_MJcnoYl-saqKUu8

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Example 4. First 7 Measures of Chris Weaver's 2017 performance of "Try a Little Tenderness" on The Voice, with chair turns added. Transcription by author.

both temporally specific and sonically marked: Like the original hook and the *Gong Show* gong, the button-activated chair turns in *The Voice* provide a musical annotation to the contestant's performance in a way that can not only be heard, but quantified: The location of the first two turns almost exactly on the downbeats of measures 5 and 6 show that Weaver's talent was clear from the first moments of his audition.

The Voice was not the first talent show to edit out some of the cruelest and most "unrealistic" elements of the more traditional model. The televised rendition of the *Original Amateur Hour* hosted by Ted Mack discarded anti-talent acts, which Major Bowes had gonged offstage during the show's popular radio days—though Mack elected to keep Bowes' large gong right beside him, its presence lurking as a quiet reminder that some rejection was still unavoidable.[66] Appearing a few years after *The Gong Show* concluded and possibly taking its satirical critiques to heart, *Star Search* also omitted anti-talent acts as well as the role of humorous celebrity judge, allowing its panel of silent expert judges only to confer scores after each performance. *The Voice* is the most recent iteration of this less schadenfreude-inducing group of programs and represents perhaps the most radical departure from the exclusionary politics and original format's oversimplifying model of music ability development. However, even as *The Voice*'s structural contours reflect an updated narrative of the meritocratic dream central to talent shows, the program's overall structure still necessitates and naturalizes elimination.

While the general format of talent shows has remained remarkably consistent since the turn of the twentieth century—as has the general American meritocratic fantasy—every televised talent show's variations on this theme represent a different stage in meritocracy's ideological evolution. The aesthetics of exclusion surrounding Louis's audition, for instance, reflected a post-WWII color-blind liberalism that celebrated his achievements while holding him to a separate, unequal standard; *The Gong Show*'s set of exclusions reflected a 1970s-era disillusionment with and commentary upon the arrival of a post-civil-rights liberal multiculturalism. Accordingly, *The Voice* presents a particularly salient reflection of a twenty-first century post-racial neoliberal meritocracy, from its diversely representative cast of finalists (Figure 2) to its focus on competition between individual contestants as well as coaches, teams, and even musical genres.[67]

[66] As one newspaper contributor recounted in 1965, "I asked Ted Mack what ever happened to the old 'gong' that Major Bowes used to use when he wanted to stop a particular inept amateur. He said that the 'gong' still is part of the show but it is never rung to stop an amateur's act." Paul Jones, "Amateur Hour in Retrospect," *The Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution*, April 11, 1965.

[67] For a more robust discussion of this periodization of meritocratic and multicultural ideologies in the US, see Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Littler, *Against Meritocracy*.

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Figure 2. *The Voice* Season 17, top 11 contestants.

The result of *The Voice*'s inclusive gestures on this middle formatting level, in other words, is less an exclusion of exclusion than a quiet disavowal of it. From the strategic, essentializing musical cuts necessitated by the standard audition format to the mandatory cutting-out of all but one contestant who enters the competition, *The Voice* encapsulates a particularly twenty-first century discourse of meritocratic possibility replete with blind auditions and coaches-not-judges.[68] In fact, this disavowal of exclusion, essentialization, and cruelty is a fundamental feature of neoliberalism—and, as Grace Kyungwon Hong argues, the very mechanism through which denied opportunity is comfortably sustained and condoned. Hong describes neoliberalism itself "as an epistemological structure of disavowal, a means of claiming that racial and gendered violences are things of the past.[69] It does so by *affirming* certain modes of racialized, gendered, and sexualized life."[70] If "exclusions" replaced "violence" and "talent" replaced "life" in this statement, it would perfectly summarize *The Voice*'s approach. Indeed, as *The Gong Show* illustrated most plainly and *The Voice* most delusively, contestants' figurative deaths on these programs are thinly veiled representations of actual deaths; their musical worth serves as a synecdoche for their overall worth in the meritocratic system their format represents.

[68]These same dynamics, however, have been at play since the format's establishment. As Murray Forman has observed about the portrayal of contestants' aspirations during the early television era, "rather than communicating utopian ideals couched in the positive imagery of American promise or the virtues of a meritocratic system, what often resonates most loudly instead is the crisis of class inequality and capitalism's divisive character that produce deep-seated anxieties and fear." Murray Forman, *One Night on TV Is Worth Weeks at the Paramount: Popular Music on Early Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 82.

[69]For a case study that examines how this neoliberal meritocratic approach affects Black women on the *Voice*, see Steven Herro, "Representations of African American Women on Reality Television After the Great Recession" (PhD diss., Georgia State University, 2015). As Herro notes, "Black women are instructed that they should become entrepreneurs of the self by learning techniques and states of mind that allow them to be flexible in the face of the ever changing demands of free market competition."

[70]Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

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Conclusion

In the previous pages, I have argued that the exclusions and eliminations inherent to the structure of talent shows, as well as the meritocratic structures they model, are best understood as an aesthetic endeavor. Like all aesthetic objects, the products of these formatting processes (whether a single audition, episode, or line-up of finalists) bear traces of the affective and ideological forces that shaped it. Further, this aesthetic of exclusion is not an isolated process, but a naturalized cultural practice—a learned way of thinking rehearsed and reinforced on multiple registers of each program: On the most local, moment-by-moment scale of an audition; through the frequently modified and commonly scrutinized layer a program's specific rules and procedures; and the global scale of the inevitable cutting-down from many to one.

The television debut of a teenage Louis Farrakhan demonstrated how this aesthetics of exclusion is present even on the most microscopic level. Through the cuts to the violinist's audition piece and introductory conversation, the program forwarded a structural argument about the nature of his musical talent—as well as his personal and racial identity more broadly. *The Gong Show*'s critique of the long tradition of cruel, interruptive eliminations of anti-talented contestants revealed how formatting forwards a broader argument about talent. First, a contestant's innate musicality is either present or absent and discernible from the first moments of an amateur's performance; and further, contestants who meet their metaphorical demise are not only aesthetically "bad" but ethically so, deserving of their eradication from the program. *The Voice*'s ostensibly fairer and less cruel spin on the talent show format confirmed how, while formatting changes on the intermediary level (of rules and procedures surrounding auditions) can forward a slightly different structural argument, ultimately these attempts cannot negate the larger argument of the program's standard elimination format.

Regardless of scale, I have argued that formatting is not only a process of limitation, but one of reification. Just as the MP3 file format transforms a historically, contextually contingent idea and set of possible sounds into a "thing" usually understood as a "song," the talent show format transforms a multi-dimensionally contingent set of musical skills into a "thing" understood as an amateur musician's "talent." In this way, talent shows' reification of musical talent exemplifies Berlant and others' assertion that the aesthetic realm is not "some alternative to the real" but rather a training-ground in much broader formats of thinking and structures of feeling. In the case of talent shows, their formatting helps audiences feel justified in excluding aspiring performers from programs' financial, educational, and moral support systems.

This normalized elimination of contestants from the talent show stage has reinforced and replicated larger politics and ideologies throughout talent shows' long history. Indeed, when viewed through a wide-angle lens, the seemingly frivolous story of televised talent shows seems more like one thread within a much more complex and consequential history. Around the time *Major Bowes' Amateur Hour* and *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts* found ratings-topping popularity in the years following World War II, the United States was undergoing a series of tectonic shifts: Increased support for free-market competition energized by post-war economic expansion; multiple social liberation movements that challenged the ideological tenets of white supremacy and settler colonial relations[71]; a renewed pursuit of equal opportunity and social mobility through systemic educational reform, including the widespread adoption of standardized testing and increased enrollment in primary, secondary, and higher education—not to mention the popularization of the word "meritocracy" itself.[72] Scholars have discussed this period from the late 1940s to the present in terms of neoliberalism's longer history which, beyond the realm of economic policy, ushered in what Wendy Brown has called "an order of

[71]Hong, *Death beyond Disavowal*, 7.

[72]Congress of the United States Office of Technology Assessment, *Testing in American Schools: Asking the Right Questions. [Full Report]*, OTA-SET-519, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, February 1992, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED340770. Accessed March 10, 2022. They continue, "The timing of this upsurge in participation suggests that through decades of increased reliance on standardized tests, the progressive spirit in American education had not only survived, but had actually flourished" (128).

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normative reason" in which every realm of human pursuit is conceived as a competitive market and every individual hopes for social equality while also striving to get ahead.[73]

It is no coincidence that this series of television programs celebrating and normalizing these meritocratic values has found such widespread and lasting popularity. Beneath the widely analyzed content of contestant representations, judge commentary, or audience voting results, the standardized talent show *format* is responsible for naturalizing and obscuring the contradictions on which meritocracy's cruel optimism rests.[74] The elimination-style competition program in which all contestants except one are ultimately discarded in terms of musical resources, recognition, and opportunities, perpetuates beliefs in a meritocratic system in which a single performance reveals whether a musician possesses innate talent.

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[73]It is important to state that the economic foundations of neoliberalism—as well as the economics of television formats in and formats broadly—are inextricable from the cultural politics they animate. As this project has aimed to illustrate, however, it is just as necessary to analyze the nuances of formats' cultural dimensions as their economic ones. For one helpful example of work more focused on the economic dimension of television formats, see Silvio Waisbord, "McTV: Understanding the Global Popularity of Television Formats," *Television & New Media* 5, no. 4 (November 1, 2004): 359–83.

[74]As Berlant has discussed, optimistic ideals such as American meritocracy's promise of social mobility "become cruel when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially." Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

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