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Unveiling Identities: Exploring Race, Gender, and Cultural Legibility on The Voice

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Music

by

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September 2023

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August 2023

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by

Daniel Kentaro Oshiro

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ABSTRACT

Unveiling Identities: Exploring Race, Gender, and Cultural Legibility on The Voice

by

Daniel Kentaro Oshiro

This thesis explores the multifaceted dynamics of voice, performance, and identity within the context of NBC's popular singing competition, The Voice. The show's blind audition format, which focuses solely on the sonic qualities of contestants' voices, sets the stage for an investigation into the complexities of acousmatic sound and the decoupling of sight from sound. By examining the journeys of two contestants, Rayshun LaMarr and Jordan Smith, this study aims to uncover the theoretical contributions they bring through their exploration of voice.

Chapter 1 delves into the audition of Rayshun LaMarr, a Black male contestant in season fourteen. Through the lens of acousmatic sound, the chapter explores LaMarr's performance, analyzing how issues of race and gender intertwine with the perception of his voice. It delves into the active role of listeners in shaping the sonic feedback-identity loop and engages with philosophical questions of perception raised by scholars like Nina Eidsheim.

Chapter 2 focuses on Jordan Smith, the winner of season nine, whose trajectory on The Voice offers insights into the intersections of race, gender, and performance. Examining Smith's blind audition, the chapter uncovers how he taps into a longer history of minstrelsy

and Blackface, highlighting the ways in which audiences consume music influenced by Black vocal techniques presented within different racialized and gendered contexts. The chapter traces Smith's progress through various rounds, illustrating the destabilization and simultaneous reward of gender, sexual orientation, and race.

The thesis also explores key terms such as the voice, genre, and identity. It investigates the voice as both a material and metaphorical entity, considering its significance as a sonic signifier. Genre is examined as a proxy for identity, illuminating how categories and boundaries are constructed and sustained. Additionally, the study embraces an intersectional understanding of identity, drawing upon the racial formation framework proposed by Omi and Winant.

In conclusion, this thesis acknowledges the role of structures in shaping social legibility and emphasizes the power of storytelling in relation to the voice and the identities it embodies. By critically examining The Voice as a cultural phenomenon, this research uncovers the nuanced ways in which sound, performance, and identity intersect, ultimately contributing to a broader understanding of the voice as a complex and transformative medium.

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Introduction

Since premiering on National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in April of 2011, *The Voice* has declared a total of twenty-two winners, each with one hundred thousand dollars in prize money and a recording contract with Universal Music Group. Of the twenty-two winners of the program: nine were white men, six white women, four Black men, one mixed-race man, one mixed-race woman, and season twenty-one's winner included a folk trio with two white men and a white woman. Interestingly, despite their continued and sustained contribution to pop music in the United States, Black women are underrepresented among winners of *The Voice*. This underrepresentation occurs despite the show's "blind audition," part of what distinguishes *The Voice* from similar programming.

The blind auditions, or "the blinds," consists of a singer performing a song they choose for coaches whose backs are turned toward the vocalist. The program's website explains, "During the Blind Auditions, the decisions from the coaches are based solely on voice and not looks. The coaches hear the artists perform but they don't get to see them…" ("The Voice - NBC.Com" 2022). This description by NBC introduces what Pierre Schaeffer termed *acousmatique*, which was developed further by film scholar Michel Chion through acousmatic sound (Chion and Gorbman 1999). Chion theorizes two types of sound related to audiovisual medium (i.e. film): the first type being ocularized, then "embodied," sound that is "identified with an image, demythologized, classified;" and a second type of sound that is acousmatic in nature, where it is sonic first and made ocular at a later moment, a device that is "a dramatic feature that is commonly used in mystery and suspense based cinema" (Chion and Gorbman 1999:72–73). The blind auditions capitalize on the acousmatic arrangement

between coach and contestant, centering how the voice can be a site of performed ambiguity, a venue where singers contend with the decoupling of sight from sound.

The blind auditions on the program utilize the dislocation of the sonic voice from its visual body. The show employs rotating chairs that, at first, position judges' backs toward the contestant. Performers sing through a microphone that is mixed down with the backing band and amplified for the live audience and coaches to hear. When a coach decides to offer a spot on their team for a performer, coaches press a button to audience fanfare, and the coach's chair rotates, allowing them to see the remainder of the performance.

Slots on coach's teams are valuable from both supply and demand perspectives, where coaches need to evaluate the marginal value each singer brings to their team, and singers must evaluate the value-added nature of each coach. From the coach's perspective, it would be advantageous for each singer to possess a different specialty so as not to overcrowd the market. This is especially complicated by the battle and knockout rounds, which I will cover in detail later. The marginal cost of each spot increases, as spots become scarcer, and singers who are left competing for spots must increase their value to prospective "buyers," coaches, in this marketplace. Because of the operating supply side logic, vocalists who achieve the coveted "Four Chair Turn" are considered frontrunners in the show and recontextualizes the situation as a demand side equation. Singers start by trying to win approval with a coach, but after a coach turns their chair, they have shown their hand, so to speak. Post chair turn, they are offering to recruit this vocalist. If more than one coach turns their chair, it becomes a value-added proposition that measures coach's specialization as part of the calculus in choosing a mentor. The vocalist now has the power of choice between coaches. For example, if a contestant perceives themselves as a "country" artist, it could

make sense to go with a coach that has history and clout in the genre, such as Blake Shelton. However, some vocalists choose to invert the logic and leverage the odds they will be a unique asset to a team; for example, a country artist choosing to work with a self-identifying R&B artist such as Alicia Keys. When viewed as a market saturation problem, singers may actually benefit from their distinctive style during battle and knockout rounds, as they would have less competition in their respective genre category.

This is due to the battle and knockout rounds, where coach's teams are sifted, cultivated, and ultimately winnowed to a selected few that proceed to the playoffs. Importantly, coaches make the ultimate decision in these rounds, and that selections between vocalists happen intra-team rather than between separate coach's teams. In each the battle and knockout rounds, two vocalists from the same coach compete against each other, but only one moves to the next round. In the battle round, singers work closely in rehearsal with a teammate on a duet arrangement of the song, assigned to them by their coach, and usually in mentorship with a celebrity advisor. In this round, the vocalists are headed into the round knowing who they compete against, due to prior rehearsal time. Conversely, in the knockout round, vocalists prepare a solo song, and are judged against a teammate's performance of a different song, both songs being assigned to them by their shared coach. Coach's song choices are thought to be important opportunities to feature each vocalist in their most appropriate genre setting. This will be problematized later through a discussion of genre.

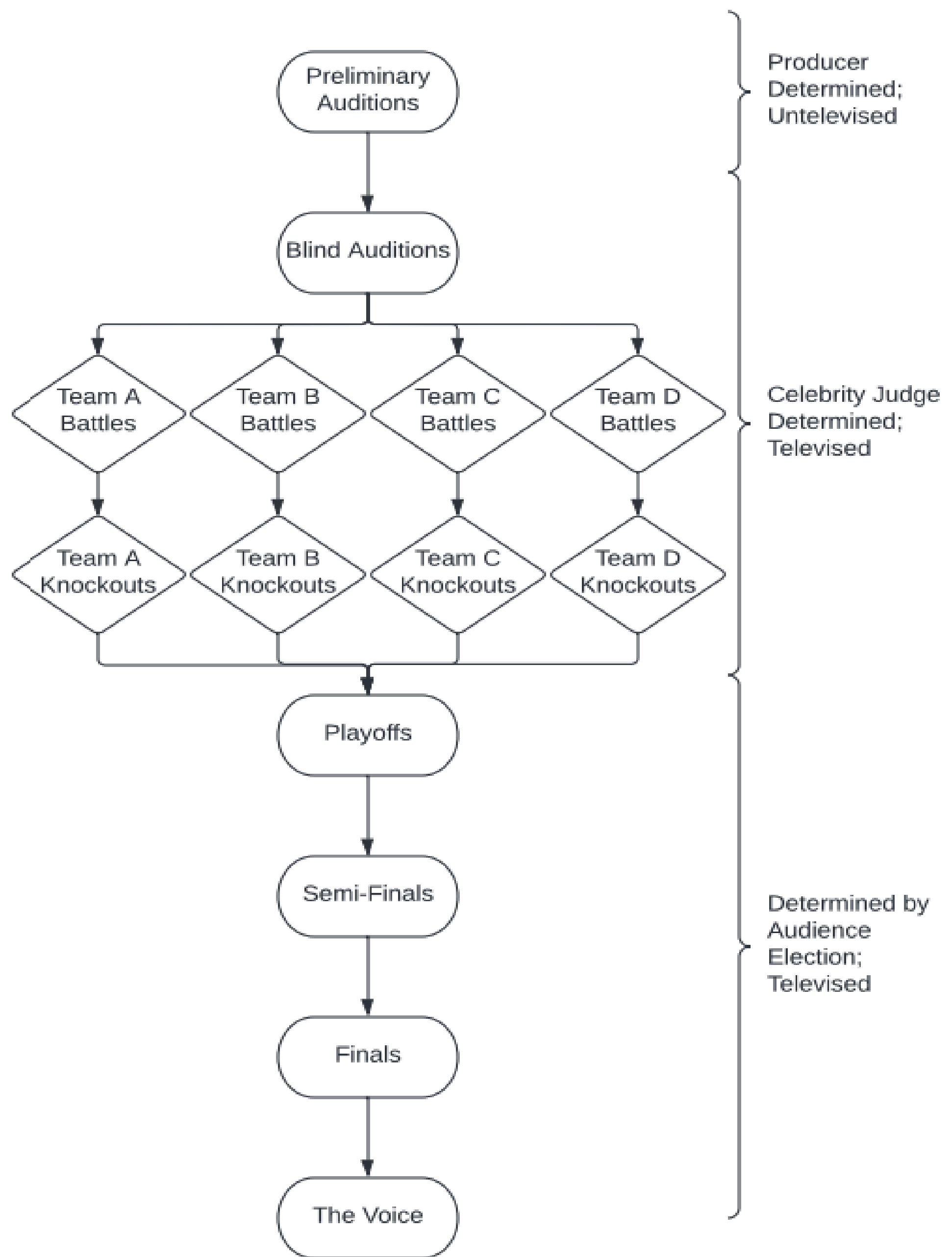

Figure 1: Flowchart demonstrating the inter-round structure of *The Voice* and the governing system each round uses to determine winners.

After the knockout rounds conclude, each coach submits their remaining singers to the playoffs. From this point forward, all determinations are made by popular vote, cast by audiences across the US, either through iTunes sales, Twitter, SMS (texting), or the official

NBC *The Voice* app. Singers perform solo with their competition comprising of every other vocalist that season. The change to audience election and away from individual coaches making unilateral decisions, offscreen producer input notwithstanding. It is completely possible for all of a coach's team to be eliminated before advancing into the live semi-final, or for multiple contestants in the top five coming from the same coach. The eventual winner is voted for amongst the top five singers and is crowned "The Voice" for that season.

In this study, my focus is on exploring the implications of the associations between race, gender, and the voice, and how these connections are actively shaped by listeners in the sonic feedback-identity loop. A central concern is the potential for misidentification, such as when a man's voice is mistakenly perceived as a woman's voice. I also delve into the multifaceted nature of the voice as both a material and metaphorical entity, and its role in understanding the intersection between performance and identity on The Voice.

The evaluation of singing ability on the show raises questions about fairness and identity. For instance, if a man's voice is misidentified as a woman's, should he then be judged against the expectations associated with a woman's voice? Additionally, I inquire about the role of genre as a proxy for identity and the social processes underpinning the formation of categories and boundaries. The song choices made by contestants paradoxically relate to how they are evaluated, with performances influenced by considerations of gender and sexual orientation. This exploration extends to broader discussions within the sociology of knowledge, seeking to comprehend how social actors respond to and modify culturally significant boundaries.

Throughout this investigation, the underlying processes of boundary-making are highlighted, underscoring the impact of structures that contribute to cultural legibility. The

significance of storytelling surrounding the voice and the identities it embodies within these structures is a central theme in this study.

The structure of this thesis unfolds in two chapters, each performing a close reading of a contestant on *The Voice*. Chapter one centers around Rayshun LaMarr, a Black man in his mid-thirties that auditions for season fourteen of *The Voice*. As a theoretical node, I analyze LaMarr's audition through the lens of acousmatic sound and unpack how the voice can be a productive site to think through the nexus of identity and performance. I try to tease out how issues of race and gender become associated with the sound of a voice, and how the listener who is perceiving the voice is an active participant in the sonic feedback-identity loop. Lastly, I attempt to grapple with the philosophical problems related to perception in light of interventions by Nina Eidsheim (2018). The second chapter considers the longer trajectory or arc of Jordan Smith, who auditioned for, and won, season nine of *The Voice*. Smith describes himself as a Christian singer from Harlan, Kentucky and credits a lot of his formative training to the church. I analyze Smith's blind audition and through a close reading of his performance of race and gender, I argue that he has tapped into a longer history of minstrelsy and Blackface. I argue that perception of his desexualization, coupled with his white race, allows audiences to consume music inflected by Black vocal technique, because it is presented in different gendered and racialized contexts. I then map his trajectory on *The Voice* as he progresses through different rounds, underscoring the ways in which gender, sexual orientation, and race are destabilized, yet simultaneously rewarded.

Before progressing further, I'd like to take a moment to consider a few key terms that I will be working with through the thesis. The voice as an intellectual framework has had a long and storied history as part of the philosophical canon, with authors such as

Barthes exposing voice as part material and part metaphor (1977). The voice is not only the media for content delivered in words or music, but also the sonic signifier in and of itself. I am particularly interested in what the voice itself, and our phenomenological experience of it, can teach us about the nexus of performance and identity. Put in other words, what is at stake when we consider what the sound object itself is composed of? The voice is simultaneously a product of the singer, as well as the active perception of the listener and the stories they construct for themselves.

Another term I address is genre, especially as it functions as a proxy for identity. One of the richest problematics in the sociology of knowledge tries to understand how people come to generate boundaries, categories, and groups around things. Understanding the problem of genre gets at this very question. How, and more importantly, why, do people form connections between things and coalesce durable convictions around essentially arbitrary categories? There is nothing inherent within Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* that "makes" it jazz, but in fact, it is the multiplicity of instruments, harmonic series, melodic invention, sense of "pocket," and improvisation that come to define jazz as well as *Kind of Blue*'s role in establishing these as hallmarks of the genre. The question then shifts toward defining which characteristics are most useful to study. As we will see with Jordan Smith, his adherence to 2010s femme-forward pop put him squarely in conversation with questions related to identity and vocal inflection that relied on histories and legacies of minstrelsy in the United States.

The last intellectual node I would like to unpack is my understanding of identity as it relates to race, gender, and sexual orientation. I use Michael Omi and Howard Winant's racial formation framework as a guide for how I think about identity in a broad sense. In

their words, racial formation is "the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed" (Omi and Winant 1994:109). The meaning of race shifts with context. Not only is race socially constructed, but it is socially and historically contested. Omi and Winant see the active tense in race and race making; I want to extend this same sort of allowance and framework to identity in general. Understanding identity as intersectional is important because it leads to richer analysis. Instead of isolating single categories, like race or gender alone, understanding how the complexities and nuances of these identities come together to form a more complete whole is critical as a steward of good scholarship. In light of Omi and Winant, identity can be thought of as constantly changing and shifting, much like the boundaries of genre, with enough permeability and flexibility built into the equation to allow for intersectional identities to compound. I also want to note that the readings and analysis of identity that I provide in this thesis about LaMarr and Smith both are deeply inflected by my own positionality. The overall point that I attempt to make with the identity piece is that the process of identifying voices is directly linked to complex legacies of how we describe and categorize ourselves and others. Matching identities to voices become an active process that is constantly renewed and contested.

I would like to conclude this introduction by sitting with the idea that structures, large and small, are there to produce a certain kind of legibility on the level of the social. The shorthand that identity categories allow us to speak in mobilizes a type of cultural legibility and emphasizes the shared experiences that are found in macrosocial experiences. The making and coalescence of categories has always been a problem of the humanities, and I want to explore how we tell stories about the voice and the identities that embody it.

I. Rayshun LaMarr and the Promise of the Acousmatic Voice

NBC's *The Voice* has built a dedicated following amongst American households since it first aired in 2011, becoming an instant hit with over fifteen-million viewers by its second season. NBC alleges other televised singing competitions as being too visually biased, and instead purports that *The Voice's* judges make decisions based only on the voice. Eric Deggans, writing for NPR, quotes NBC as promoting *The Voice* as explicitly "Anti American Idol." He writes that a common lament among Idol watchers is when great singers lose because they lack a "Idol-extruded generic popularity" (Deggans 2011). *The Voice* proposes to eliminate bias from their show by facing coaches away from the singer in the first round, called the "Blind Auditions." By removing vision as a determining factor for coaches as they build their teams, singer by singer, producers of the show are theoretically increasing the diversity of the program through similar logics that govern the widespread adoption of blind auditions in professional orchestral positions (Goldin and Rouse 2000). According to a paper by economists Claudia Golden of Harvard and Cecelia Rouse of Princeton, the widespread adoption of blind auditions in major professional orchestras resulted in women advancing past preliminary rounds 50% more of the time (2000).

The logic should lead one to believe that blind audition is an equalizing force that isolates sound as the only determining factor, somehow more wholly meritocratic. However, this understanding of the blind audition flattens the contours that sound possesses, and underestimates the power of sound as a reference, index, or proxy. The voice is especially fruitful as a site that demonstrates how categories of race, gender, class, age, and sexual orientation become associated with their respective sonic indicators. What does it look like when voices travel from singer to listener, and what gets lost in between? Can certain

sounds be misidentified, and can our ears distort a reality that our eyes can somehow see? What is at stake when listeners make incorrect assumptions about who they hear? In this chapter I hope to address these questions through a case study of Rayshun LaMarr and his trajectory on *The Voice* in order to illustrate how singers and listeners engage with identity and genre formations as macrosocial structure.

Rayshun LaMarr, a semi-finalist on *The Voice* (Season Fourteen, Winter 2018), was born in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and describes himself as an "actor, singer, and songwriter" who is "currently preparing to release his debut album titled 'Can't Hold Back.'" Before coming to The Voice, LaMarr performed in "leading roles [such as] 'Fool in Love,' the story of Frankie Lymon, 'Freedom's Song,' 'Samson the Musical,' 'The Wiz,' 'Shake Loose,' 'Blackberry Daze,' 'Ragtime,' and the soon to hit Broadway 'Gun and Powder'" ("About Me – Rayshun LaMarr" 2022). One mechanism the producers of *The Voice* use to generate emotional purchase from the audience is featuring montages of the performers before they sing, often detailing their life and careers before auditioning on the show (McCracken 2018:9). In LaMarr's case, he was diagnosed with lymphoma and multicentric Castleman's disease in 2012 and had loss of hearing and vocal ability; he subsequently recovered and continued to perform in the years leading up to *The Voice* ("About Me – Rayshun LaMarr" 2022). As he puts it, "the extensive training he received coupled with his natural talent is remarkable."

Despite the rhetoric surrounding *The Voice* that situates the program as distinctly "Anti-Idol," both singing competitions share a feature that elicits emotional responses from the audience through compelling contestant backstories before they perform. The biographical sketches of the performers are almost formulaic, introducing the name and

hometown of the contestant, sometimes introducing supporters such as family and friends, and normally ends with some kind of hardship that the singer has faced before arriving to the audition stage. For LaMarr, the show introduces him as someone who has overcome great odds, even losing his ability to sing due to illness (and by extension, the ability to express himself), but through hard work and perseverance, regained his skills and confidence as a performer. To be clear, not every contestant that auditions on *The Voice* will receive a vignette; some singers, such as John Holiday, are given no introduction. In the case of John Holiday, who auditioned in October 2020, the countertenor's audition visually framed mostly the coaches onscreen and delayed revealing his name, age, and clear image until the last 5 seconds of the song. Coaches, during the post-audition recap, commented that they confused his voice with a woman's. While some contestants' biographies are featured prior to their audition, attempting to affect an emotional connection between viewer and singer, it is important to note that a competing concern of producers on *The Voice* is maintaining an experience of a blind audition for the audience as well. Sometimes the most emotionally active response you can produce is one of surprise, such as hearing and interpreting a woman's voice, then realizing you were wrong, and a man was singing. Of course, defining categories and making sense of gender as a fluid construct requires a more nuanced approach to our expectations of what voices are produced by particular bodies.

The blind audition begins, after we were just introduced to LaMarr through his biographical montage, he is centered in the camera's frame, pulling closer to his face; a Black man in his late twenties wearing a white leather jacket and black jeans comes into view. The "blind audition" begins with the familiar piano opening to *Journey*'s "Don't Stop Believing," and he starts the verse, "Just a small-town girl, living in a lonely world." Before

LaMarr is done singing the first complete line of the song, Adam Levine, front person of Maroon 5 and longtime coach of The Voice who has since separated from the program, turns his chair. This chair turn signals that the coach is interested in recruiting the singer to their team. Soon after, fellow coach Alicia Keys turns her chair for LaMarr and exclaims on camera "I wasn't expecting that."

Adam Levine, in his comments to LaMarr immediately after the performance, said, "Ninety-nine percent of the time on this show, we say 'We can't believe it was a white dude.' It might be the first time on the show… 'Black dude, I can't believe it, oh my God.'" Levine, here, points out the proverbial elephant in the room: white men who perform gender and racial fluidity are featured more often on the program. Levine also goes on to say, on the topic of the emotional performance LaMarr gave, "You really needed to see it, seeing it helped." Something about connecting the visual spectacle with LaMarr's voice helped to equal more than the sum of its parts.

Acousmatic Sound and Witnessing Identity

Alicia Keys does not get the chance to explain to the camera what she meant by, "I wasn't expecting that." I cannot speculate what Keys' state of mind was at the time, but what I can offer is unpacking the logic at work in a show that describes itself as egalitarian, meritocratic, and ultimately, reflective of larger national aspirations. The program's website describes that "During the Blind Auditions, the decisions from the coaches are based solely on voice and not looks. The coaches hear the artists perform but they don't get to see them" ("The Voice - NBC.Com" 2022). This approach by NBC introduces what Pierre Schaeffer termed *acousmatique*, which was then developed further by film scholar Michel Chion (1999) through acousmatic sound. Acousmatique, as first used by Pierre Schaeffer, referred

to sound art that was experienced behind a veil, thus obscuring the source of the sound. Without being able to visually confirm what or who was making the sound, suspense and tension could be built amongst the listeners. In the more contemporary usage of the term, acousmatic sound refers to a type of sound that is audible first, and visually confirms the source after. Chion theorizes two types of sound related to audiovisual medium (i.e. film): the first type being ocularized, then "embodied," sound that is "identified with an image, demythologized, classified;" and a second type of sound that is acousmatic in nature, where it is sonic first and made ocular at a later moment, a device that is "a dramatic feature that is commonly used in mystery and suspense based cinema" (Chion and Gorbman 1999:72–73). Acousmatic sound exists in the tension between expectation and reality, and the blind auditions in *The Voice* allow the exploitation of our misjudgments when asking the question, "Who is singing?" By momentarily suspending the primacy of vision, we are able to imagine new and exciting sonic futures that are wholly beautiful and based on different modes of being. It asks us, even if just for a fleeting moment, to consider the sonic potentialities in an audition and rely less on the ocular ideology and primacy of visually observable phenotypes to determine our relational identities.

For *The Voice*, the show employs rotating chairs that position judges' backs toward the contestant. Performers sing through a microphone that is routed through cables, preamps, mixing consoles, and combined with the backing band before being amplified for the coaches and audience to hear. This process of mixing is crucial to the overall balance of the show, that is, how loud individual voices or instruments are in relation to the others. When a coach decides to offer a spot on their team for a performer, they press a button, normally to great audience fanfare, and their chairs rotate, allowing them to witness the performance for

the remainder of the audition. Despite slight variations in rules from season to season, the basic format remains the same in that when more than one coach turns their chair, the person auditioning gets to choose the team they belong to. This almost inverts the power distribution located in this first round.

Using the lens of Chion, the program, *The Voice*, expands on the ways that voices can challenge us by being an indicator of identity, or an indicator of anything other than sound in and of itself. In fact, building on these ideas, Nina Eidsheim in her monograph *The Race of Sound*, argues that the perception of a sound may say less about what made the sound than about who is listening to and interpreting that sound (2018). When Alicia Keys turns her chair and sees LaMarr, her expectations become challenged, possibly by LaMarr's physicality, as the body that his voice belongs to, and through her changing perception evolves into an interpretation of the sound itself.

For my discussion about sonic perceptions of identity, it seems obvious but noteworthy that LaMarr's voice and his ensuing performances happen in *relation to* his identity and not in absence of it. Producers of the show seem to think judges can make these evaluations "identity blind" but my argument is that these performances, visual spectacle or not, is always in relationship to the history of the song/genre and to the perception of identity through the voice. These two logics work in tandem. As LaMarr moves about the stage during his performance, we see that he appears to be Black, able bodied, and masc-presenting (Marchetti 2018). This view of LaMarr, one that supposes the visual before the sonic (focusing on how the camera frames LaMarr before he sings), is what Chion would read as "embodied" sound. This function of embodied sound, a moment that is seen first and attached with sound second, is the "mass" reading of the blind audition (Williams

1985:144). Meaning that the everyday viewer of The Voice has a relationship to the performer that starts with ocularity and, second in order but not by importance, is imbued with a voice. The mass understanding of the blind auditions can be taken as a "system which is governed by uninstructed or ignorant preferences and opinions" (Williams 1985:144). In this case, I mean that the majority of viewers of *The Voice* do not have experience with formal vocal training, training that might allow them to diagnose possible problems, and potentialities, of a singer. Contrary to this notion of the "public" and its influence, judges use their status as celebrities and musical professionals to bolster their legitimacy as they select who they think can win the season's later rounds of audience popular vote.

The competitive aspect of *The Voice* underscores how each coach must consider not only what personally sounds pleasing, but also what has the potential for being commercially viable in the marketplace. Genres allow listeners to render performances legible, providing cultural touchpoints to compare and contrast, and ultimately this helps audiences make value judgements that form and reform our expectations. Perceptions of performance quality are bound by the relational aspects that exist between what someone has experienced in the past, and how the performance they are evaluating measures against what they expected to happen. This tension between genre expectations and vocal excellence is complicated when audiences ask whether an identity can disqualify a singer from participation in genres that exist "outside" their purview. The word outside should be used cautiously, though, as I do not want to reify the ways in which genres have coalesced, often along racial or gendered lines; instead, I use it to highlight the ways that audience judgements are contingent upon their perception of a singer's membership to the genre in

question. In particular, I'd like to focus on genre as a macrosocial structure that scaffolds larger understandings of identity and expectation.

Genre Formation and Indexicality

LaMarr's performance of the *Journey* classic "Don't Stop Believing" is visually obscured by the rotating chairs, and the judges are only aware of the sensory phenomena that are available through sound. From the coach's perspective, I want to explore the possible considerations they experience when selecting who might advance to the next round, using LaMarr as a case. The song begins with the piano introduction, allowing the song to index the judge's experience with, and expectations of the track before the vocalist begins. Operationally, the indexical power of music draws on the urge to classify and normalize what we interpret into frameworks with familiar and recognizable touchpoints that someone might come to reasonably expect. For example, *Journey* might call forward ideas of pop music, rock music, the late 1970s or early 1980s, elaborate costuming, masculinity, whiteness, or possibly none of these things. What I am trying to illuminate here is not the particular thoughts that come to mind when listening to a particular track, but the ways that genres coalesce and become reified through the processes of category formation. How do certain boundaries and expectations around race and gender become associated with genres, and what processes are used to solidify these categories?

In 2009, "Don't Stop Believing" was covered, rearranged, and reimagined by the cast of *Glee*, sparking somewhat of a renaissance for the song's popularity in the contemporary cultural consciousness. The *Glee* version queered many of the masculine presenting aspects of the song: an acapella introduction, no band for the first minute, lyrics are interpreted through the female vocalist, and a sound that was closer to the superhuman

session musicians of LA—stage bands for *American Idol* or *The Voice*--than a 1980s era rock band. "Don't Stop" was recast in a new light, and this demonstrated how songs having their own afterlives that exist alongside notions of an original or album version. In other words, not only is LaMarr engaging with the sonic entanglements of Journey proper, but he is also triangulating a position among the many afterlives the song represents.

The song moves with a fluidity between genres, but inevitably collides with an audience's own subjectivity. If you heard "Don't Stop Believing" on the radio in 1981, and that was your only experience of that song was through the medium of the radio, you may associate the song with a singular sound, a singular voice, and a singular example to set your expectations of what the song should sound like. However, if you are part of the Millennial generation, maybe the first time you heard the song was in a movie or TV show, not knowing what the song was exactly. Maybe the next time you experienced it, it was *Glee*'s performance and that is how your expectations around what the song sounds like are formed. LaMarr's performance cannot account for everyone's preferences or expectations, but what LaMarr can deliver is a performance that is true to his personal expression.

Without detailing a comprehensive history of Journey, I want to attempt to introduce a portion of the context surrounding the band to illustrate how genre categories intersect with perceptions of performer's identities. Journey was comprised of a rotating clique of musicians from the San Francisco Bay area, including singers Gregg Rollie (active 1973-1977), Robert Fleishman (active 1977-1977), Steve Perry (active 1977-1987, 1995-1997), Steve Augeri (active 1998-2006), and Arnel Pineda (active 2007-Present). The band also declared a hiatus between 1987-1995 and 2006-2007. All of the singers share a similarly masculine visual presentation that is slightly queered by the extremely high ranges of the

three most recent vocalists. They rose to prominence during the Steve Perry era, with chart topping albums such as *Escape* and *Frontiers* in the early 1980s. It included hit singles "Who's Crying Now," "Still They Ride," "Open Arms," and "Don't Stop Believing" (Daniels 2011:53–55). Their most popular, and arguably most influential hit was "Don't Stop Believing'" which topped the charts at number nine and was included in the Library of Congress National Recording Registry in 2022 (Library of Congress 2022). Despite the song sung by three different voices over the Perry, Augeri, and Pineda eras, listeners valorize the authenticity of each iteration, whether performed live or in the studio. Jonathan Cain, keyboardist, and rhythm guitarist of Journey, described the arrival of Pineda this way:

> We recorded our greatest hits with our brand-new singer from the Philippines, Arnel Pineda, and it's unbelievable when you listen to it. We paid a lot of attention to the details because everybody loves those hits and we weren't about to step all over it...We're excited because we think Arnel is the future for our franchise...We knew that if we were ever gonna move on, we had to get somebody that was really gonna be our future and sound like Journey is supposed to sound...I think Journey fans are in for a real treat ("Journey Interview on KNBR" 2008).

Cain's comments are revealing about concerns the "franchise" had about recruiting someone to perform as their front-person. Franchise in this case can be thought of through the literal franchising of the band to different front people, and the ways that the band is a standardized form and adapted to different contexts through the use of a facade. Materially, the voice is *not* superficial as a facade, it is dense with meaning and indexical power, but it does share the characteristic of wide aesthetic variation. There also seems to be a dialectic between wanting to satisfy "everybody" who "loves those hits," and an awareness of

"moving on" to the "future" of how "Journey is supposed to sound." This discourse creates the perception of a binary, where appealing to fans' nostalgia with the greatest-hits era *Journey* is at odds with the direction the band sees themselves moving in. The rotating cast of vocalists for the band calls into question the boundaries of authenticity and authorship by challenging the singularity of performance. Put another way, the performances of "Don't Stop Believing" by Perry, Augeri, and Pineda all represent the discursive formation that comprises the song itself. Aaron Fox describes discourse as generative of the power that is afforded to voice and talk, the very act of discussing "the real" in "real country" was constitutive of the dynamics it was attempting to name (Fox 2004:214–16). "Don't Stop Believing" exists as singular text but takes on different subjectivities when the contexts change. What determines a good performance of "Don't Stop Believing" is that we are able to stitch into this rich discourse and make determinations for ourselves, with our agency. We are able to decide the rules of the game, and what is and is not beautiful. So, when Fox underscores the circular logic that undergirds the "real" in "real country," listeners are able to participate in the making and remaking of vocal excellence while simultaneously experiencing "Don't Stop Believing" through their personal subjectivities. We can also recognize how different social registers of performance, in the form of YouTube covers and karaoke renditions, contribute to the narrative of the song.

For Arnel Pineda, these two seemingly separate realities of YouTube cover and performing with Journey have collapsed in on each other to further complicate our understanding of vocal excellence. Born in the Philippines and growing up partly in Hong Kong, Pineda made a career as the singer of various local bands, but rose to international prominence when covers of Queen, Led Zeppelin, Aerosmith, and Journey were posted by

his band Zoo. These videos circulated online, and eventually made their way to Neil Schon, Journey's guitarist, who asked Pineda to formally audition as lead singer of Journey (Rolling Stone 2007). In this way, Pineda reconfigures the unidirectional flow of authorship with Steve Perry and Journey serving as the arbiters of originality; instead of covering Journey, Pineda performs *as* Journey. More importantly, it destabilizes the static notion that covers are just covers, and highlights how the hyper connectedness of the internet affords the chance at a more diverse and inclusive understanding of what constitutes a "real" performance.

When LaMarr sings "Don't Stop Believing" during his blind audition for *The Voice*, judges and audiences set different expectations because of the audio-visual ordering. For audience members, LaMarr appears *first* on screen and is then embodied with sound. I see him as a seemingly able-bodied Black man, and then, secondarily in chronological order, hear him sing Journey's song. The blind auditions are not blind for audiences, and instead reinforce limited notions of vocal classification based partly on phenotype. Conversely, the coach's visual perception is suspended, at least until they turn their chairs in a vote of confidence, inherently passing an acousmatic judgment. But choosing to endorse a singer's voice without visual markers does not relieve stakeholders of possessing racial bias, it merely shifts the emphasis of importance from seeing to hearing. If the point of any performance is to present your vocal ability at the highest level, the genres that coalesce around a vocalist's identity quickly becomes a limiting factor on the types of virtuosity that can be performed. LaMarr could clearly sing a power ballad, but because of the entrenched racism that continues to exist, he might be expected, maybe even required, to sing slow,

downtempo R&B hits. Identity and genre expectations come together at this crossroads that can actually be seen paying out in later rounds of the show.

On the other hand, when the judges hear "Don't Stop Believing" with their backs turned to the performer, they each approach the song with a different and unique expectation. These expectations, guided in some part by popular culture and collective readings of the song, can also be affected by hyper specific encounters that matter for only one person. Queer studies and popular music scholar Karen Tongson reminds us that even the personal relationship we have to this song is bound by time, that its origins as a song of white working-class rock and roll can change as it plays through Asian-owned grocery stores in immigrant communities, to a girl who is trying to make sense of what it means to believe in something (Tongson 2011:141–43). The collective memory of "Don't Stop Believing" also reckons with its association with *Glee*, demonstrating the unstable nature of media afterlives. Then, to say there is ever an authentic, or even "original," performance of "Don't Stop Believing" misses the very point of performance as a verb, that it occurs in the moment. However, with the fracturing of authorship among multiple vocalists, the exercise of determining vocal excellence shifts from an appraisal of "fit" – does LaMarr's voice mimic Perry, because Perry is the original standard to measure all subsequent attempts – to one that must consider the post structural possibility of discursive forms. In fact, an aesthetically pleasing voice is one that is recognized through the process of ascribing cultural significance to it, it becomes beautiful because we believe it to be beautiful. A testament to the shifting nature of beauty is realized when the judges and audiences make all their subsequent decisions for determining a winner knowing what the contestants look like.

No other point of the program will acousmatically relate contestants' voices to the visual presence of their body on screen, as for the coaches in the blind audition.

I want to recall Levine describing his shock with LaMarr, “Ninety-nine percent of the time on this show, we say ‘We can’t believe it was a white dude.’ It might be the first time on the show… ‘Black dude, I can’t believe it, oh my God.’” The acousmatic arrangement obscured at least part of LaMarr’s identity to Levine, and signals that Levine was turning his chair anticipating that the singer was white. Despite Levine *thinking* he was recruiting a white man to his team, LaMarr must continue on the show with his Blackness on display. When Levine chooses who to advance in the subsequent rounds of the show, he continues to be impressed by LaMarr and endorses his talents. However, when audiences vote for LaMarr, their enthusiasm is correlated with performances of “Black music” and have a negative correlation when boundaries of genre ownership are challenged, a Black man performing “white music.” I use scare quotes here to signal how ideologies of cultural boundaries and genre ownership have become naturalized; that these genres are socially constructed, often influenced by powerful institutions such as media firms, and with a functional purpose.

Genre, according to Franco Fabbri in a paper delivered at the First International Conference on Popular Music Studies, is “a set of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules” (1982:51–52). This definition helps us to understand the bidirectional relationship of genre formation, with its capacity to coalesce similar “ideal types” (to use Max Weber’s term) as well as its power to differentiate and exclude music that does not adhere to rubrics established by gatekeepers. Jennifer Lena and Richard Peterson, writing in the *American Sociological Review*, approach genre as a

problem of classification, and create typologies based on the type of institutions that are responsible for gatekeeping (2008). Their four genre categories are: avant-garde, scene-based, industry-based, and traditionalist. Industry-based genres employ industrial corporations as the primary institution responsible for the production and distribution of a genre, and in some cases manage the creation of entirely new ones (Motown, Sugar Hill Records) (Lena and Peterson 2008:705). Traditionalist genres - such as bluegrass, punk, or salsa - and their fans who are responsible for "perpetuating a genre put a great amount of effort into constructing its history and highlighting exemplary performers who they deem fit into the genre's emerging canon of exemplars" (Lena and Peterson 2008:706). This process of canon formation is critical in the maintenance and continued reification of genre boundaries, simultaneously affirming selections while excluding others. The logic of genre formation oftentimes has little to do with characteristics describing the music as object, and more to do with characteristics about the musicians that practice it:

> "Performers' race, class, educational attainment, and regional origins are often used as markers of authenticity. To play bluegrass, for example, it is said a musician must be White, working class, rural, and preferably from the Appalachian Mountains (Rosenberg 1985); you must be young, White, and an underachiever to perform punk music in an exemplary fashion (Laing 1985); and to really play salsa, a musician must be Latin American" (Lena and Peterson 2008:706).

Genre's power to index identity centers problems of authenticity and de facto ascribes descriptors most salient for the genre. Other ways to instantiate identity come from the communities that are built around a genre, and how these may shift with location and time. These communities of patronage, or fan communities, can sometimes be ideological as

well, such as for punks. Journey's rock sensibility, though, is "always already" in relationship to their whiteness (complicated by Pineda's Asianness), maleness, and working-class narratives. Journey's music then *becomes* part of the discursive ontology that determines what makes music "white."

Identity and musical interpretation become linked in a cycle of ontologies that requires the existence each other to maintain legitimacy. LaMarr performs his own identity as a Black man, but his performance of "Don't Stop Believing" is measured against a sliding scale of legitimacy based on this racial component. So that while the relationship between identity and genre aesthetics is bidirectional, the constitution is not always fifty-fifty. The conventional hierarchy of senses uses vision/ocularity as the default sense, while senses such as hearing (a voice, perhaps) are supplementary. The acousmatic voice builds in ambiguity to the calculus, and as a result, in the latter rounds with LaMarr, a Black man who "sounds" white, his performances of white artists results in little audience support. I argue that the lack of audience enthusiasm for LaMarr's performance of white artists, post blind audition, demonstrates the inability for Blackness to carry white vocal aesthetics.

For contestants such as Jordan Smith, who I will discuss in the next chapter, being a white, sexually ambiguous, cis-gendered man allows him to perform female power ballads by both Black and white singers. There, we see the power of whiteness to subsume "supplementary sensorium," such as sound objects, in the form of Black vocal aesthetics. The discursive formation of whiteness is able to hold those contradictions, and still maintain legibility *as* whiteness. Matthew Morrison traces the practice of minstrelsy and how the shape of copyright law in the United States "made popular music a space in which to hear, see, and interrogate the circulation and commodification of the black performance property

that serves as the aesthetic basis of the industry and identity formation" (Morrison 2019:817). Whiteness is able to use vocal aesthetics as a veneer to present Blackness to audiences in commercially successful ways.

II. Jordan Smith and the Power of Whiteness

Jordan Smith is a self-described Christian singer-songwriter from Harlan, Kentucky, and winner of season nine of the NBC singing competition, *The Voice*. His 2015 appearance on *The Voice* was his second time auditioning for the program; the first time he was eliminated during the pre-production rounds of the show. For his season-nine win, Smith was awarded $100,000 and a recording contract with Universal Music Group subsidiary, Republic Records. The resulting debut album, *Something Beautiful*, was released in March 2016 and received mixed reviews from the *Knoxville News Sentinel* and *AXS*, a local newspaper and trade publication, respectively. The album peaked at number two on the charts and sold a total of 73,000 copies. In April 2018, Smith released his sophomore album, *Only Love*, which did not appear on the charts. In the years following his time on *The Voice*, Smith has remained an active performer, and in the 2022 season of *American Song Contest*, came in third place representing Kentucky. Aside from his career as a recording musician, he also wrote the song "Ashes," which was performed by Celine Dion for the *Deadpool 2* soundtrack,

Blind Auditions

The camera pulls in on coach Blake Shelton, he looks excited to hear the next vocalist. A synthesizer starts the introduction, and the singer begins, "Party girls, don't get hurt, don't feel anything, when will I learn." Shelton immediately exclaims "Yeah!" All the coaches appear to listen intently to Smith's rendition of the first verse of Sia's 2014 song "Chandelier." At thirty-seven seconds, during the chorus, Blake nods and shows that he is impressed. He is the first coach to turn his chair in support. The vocalist continues to sing at the top of their register, their gender still a mystery for audiences and judges alike.

We see Jordan Smith for the first time forty-three seconds into his performance. The camera pulls out and reveals a contestant who is as androgynous visually as he is sonically. At fifty-two seconds, still in the chorus, Usher and Christina Aguilera both turn their chairs simultaneously. When she sees Smith, Aguilera's leg points straight up in the air and she exclaims, "What!" Usher nods his head knowingly in response.

Adam Levine is the last coach to turn his chair, but at 1:09, he smirks widely and turns around after a very high ornament that Smith performs flawlessly. The entire audition lasts less than one minute and forty seconds, but ends with all four coaches, chairs turned, and a standing ovation for Smith. Aguilera runs onstage and proceeds to hug Smith, and tells him "Oh my God, you shocked me, you're so amazing." Smith's family, friends, and girlfriend are waiting for him off stage, and people are wiping their eyes. This was clearly a big moment for Jordan.

Interestingly, the portion of the program when coaches attempt to convince the contestants to join their team was not televised. Instead, Shelton asks Smith, "Who do you want to be your coach?" Smith thinks about it for a moment, a suspenseful sound affect is added, and he shouts, "I pick Adam!" The crowd erupts in applause, Adam runs onstage to thank Smith and gives him a hug. The camera zooms in on the seated coaches, Usher, Aguilera, and Shelton; they begin praising what they see as the equalizing aspect of the show: the blind audition.

What is interesting in the case of Jordan Smith is how he embodies his race and gender and performs it through his voice. He is a large, white, cis-gendered man who, visually, presents closer to a large, white, queer woman. The disjuncture in the blind auditions between the body a voice suggests and the body we eventually see highlights the

ways that Smith indexes femininity through song choice and performance. Smith seems to capitalize on this vocal ambiguity by choosing songs (during the program) that not only highlight his range and command of the instrument, but also overrepresent the output of Black women and white queer persons. I do not think this relationship between song choice and outcome is arbitrary but is informed by who the singer thinks best represents their artistry.

Jordan Smith is the only person who can perform Jordan Smith's voice, and that even if he were to be impersonating or mimicking a voice that was outside his "own," his ability to perform said voice would be tempered by the limits of his training and socialization as a white, cis-gendered man living in the United States. I am referring here to the ways in which a person using their voice can only ever perform themselves; and even though Smith may be (mis)read as sexually ambiguous and androgynous, his performances represent a masculinity rather than the erasure and replacement of it. Suzannah Showler writing in *Slate Magazine* comments that Smith's voice is "genderless and expansive," noting especially the ways in which these aspects intersect with his Christian faith (Showler 2015). Further, Showler opines that Smith is "sort of regular-looking: pale and doughy, a bit hunched, wearing glasses that contract his eyes into wet-looking seeds" (Showler 2015).

At his audition, Smith was asked by the coaches to share his story, and he responded by acknowledging that "my voice is different." He went on, "I've had to learn that being different is actually what makes me special. It's my gift. This is an amazing opportunity to share that it's OK to be different, and it's OK to be yourself. Because you're made that way, and that's how God intended you to be" (Jenn Blue 2017a). Remarkably, Smith seems to be balancing what can be thought of as the reconciliation between Christianity's mandate for

love and acceptance, while simultaneously acknowledging his difference by saying it is not a bad thing to "be yourself." In other words, Smith seems to be contending with the ways that alternative displays of masculinity run against cultural conservatism (found in Harlan, Kentucky, where Smith grew up) yet finds solace in Christianity that accepts and loves those who come as they are.

While I acknowledge the material differences between individual voices and their associated identities, I do not want to reinforce the notion of an apriori racial or gendered voice. That there is no presupposed, innate, and universal "Black" or "Female" voice, only personal interpretations and experiences that inform how *listeners* might hear someone (Eidsheim 2018). Instead, I do want to think through what the voice as a sonic signifier might contain; that if we only focus on the performance of listening, we might lose a major aspect of how singers might exercise their agency.

Voices are "material embodiments of social ideology and experience," able to be both iconic (embodiment of particular qualities) and indexical (able to point to identities) in their power (Feld et al. 2004:321–22). The sonic qualities of the voice can be studied with how singers use words to describe timbre, such as the qualities Amanda Weidman lists in her Annual Review of Anthropology article: "'warm,' 'bright,' 'open,' 'husky,' 'gruff,' 'creaky'—are all seemingly subjective and highly culturally variable, they are also an extremely socially meaningful aspect of vocal sound, performance, and discourse" (Weidman 2014). The discourse and ideologies embedded within these terms helps bring to light the contradictions that occur within the voice. A voice's quality is both materially and culturally determined; for example, a voice that has a bright quality may also be synonymous, for some people, with nasal or brittle, and may also be effeminate or gay. The

timbre, or color, of Smith's voice is as clear, bright, and light as his range is wide, which is to say, extremely. He mobilizes this clear, easy, and unburdened sound to sing "Chandelier" in a way that calls for the question, "Is that a woman singing?"

Battles and Knockouts

The battle and knockout rounds are the two rounds of the show that come after the blind auditions. These rounds essentially cut each coach's team size in half, once in the battles, and then again in the knockouts. For example, if Team Adam started off with six singers, after the Battle rounds, three would be left on Adam's team. Then, for the Knockouts, a pair of artists within a team are selected to perform a song of their own choosing and coaches determine which of the two singers may advance. Coaches may also use "steals" to recruit singers who have been eliminated by another coach to their team. For example, if singer X is eliminated from Team Adam after the Blinds, coach Shelton can recruit this singer on to his team. If singer X is eliminated after the Knockouts, there is a possibility for coach Aguilera or Usher to recruit singer X to continue on their team for the playoffs.

While the battle and knockout rounds share many similarities in terms of general layout and format, singers do not prepare their knockout song choices with knowledge of who they will compete against. The calculus for a strong song choice gives you a different answer; while in the battles, singers work and collaborate with the person they are trying to eliminate. In the knockouts, singers compete against an unknown teammate and convince coaches they will garner audience driven support in the playoffs. In other words, battle rounds give the opportunity to the singer to practice their strengths in a specific context, against a specific person, and with a specific song. Knockout rounds, through the

randomness of the opponent, privilege singers and songs that coaches perceive will have a broad base of support with the voting eligible audience.

Jordan Smith and Regina Love enter the coaching studio and are greeted by their shared coach, Adam Levine, and their celebrity advisor, John Fogarty. Levine explains to the singers "I think you guys are different, but you're both really powerful. So great singers should complement each other, and should be singing together." He goes on to comment "I gave them 'Like I Can' by Sam Smith. This is the perfect match, song wise, for those two singers. Sam Smith is such an emotional singer because he draws you in. So, their challenge is gonna be standing up to that same level" (Jenn Blue 2017b). The irony of any matchup in the Battle rounds is that the coach must eliminate one of the two singers *they chose themselves*, and Levine openly admits that he will have a difficult time deciding who to keep on his team. Levine also seems to indicate here that the strengths Jordan Smith and Regina Love share are their "powerful" voices, and their challenge will be to channel their emotions and ability to grab the audience's attention.

"Like I Can" by Sam Smith is the fifth single from their 2014 studio album, *In the Lonely Hour*. Sam Smith is a white, gay, nonbinary musician based in the UK whose well known hits include "I'm Not the Only One," "Stay with Me," and "Too Good at Goodbyes." These three tracks all have one-billion streams on Spotify. Jim Farber, writing in *The New York Daily News*, comments that Sam Smith is "utterly unafraid to sound feminine —to leave himself prone" (Farber 2014). Mary J. Blige, iconic Soul and R&B singer, has been reported to have mistaken Smith's voice on Disclosure's *Latch* as a Black woman (Adams, no date). Sam Smith responded by saying "I love it when people think I'm a woman, it's a huge compliment… All I do is listen to female voices. That means my voice has been

massively influenced by who I listen to" (Adams, no date). What is particularly interesting are the ways that Sam Smith represents a type of gendered performance that draws upon lineages of Black women and does so with commercial success.

Performing Sonic Bluesface

Daphne A. Brooks, William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of African American Studies at Yale, writing in *Women & Performance,* historicizes the white female soul singer and their presence in popular culture (Brooks 2010). By using Amy Winehouse as a case study, Brooks tells the story of how the grain of the voice, referencing Roland Barthes, can be used as a framework to begin to answer the question, "What makes Amy Winehouse so special?" Brooks answers by reading Winehouse's voice through Barthes' "pheno-song" as it progresses to the "geno-song." For Barthes, the pheno-song is governed by a grammar that informs the communicative power of the voice. Language, or text, is often cited as a part of the pheno-song. Geno-song, on the other hand, references the "the body in the voice" or "where the melody really works at language —not at what it says, but the voluptuousness of its sound-signifiers, of its letters— where melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work" (Barthes 1977:182). The grain of the voice, as Barthes puts it, is the friction that exists between geno-song (music) and pheno-song (message).

For Winehouse, the grain of her voice comes from the performance of vocal gestures that index "throwback, nostalgic, retro-soul aesthetics" as well as "hip hop soul phrasings and lyrics that pull from contemporary urban colloquialisms" (Brooks 2010:45). In her song "Tears Dry on Their Own," Winehouse can be heard working "the edges of words with her slinky (contr)alto alternating between clipped, sassy phrasings that hold the traces of hip hop velocity as well as scat insouciance, and at other times bearing down at the end of verses to

take you to the nether regions of deep anguish or sage contemplation" (Brooks 2010:45). Brooks is essentially arguing that Winehouse's oscillation between "creamy-smooth jazz grace notes" to "rap-inspired spits and alliterative exclamations" are the kinds of vocal gestures that might explain why Barthes was weary of treating the voice as a fixed object (Brooks 2010:46). In other words, while the voice has the potential as an indicator of the body, Barthes reminds us to be skeptical that we might "know" anything about a performer from their voice. Instead of focusing on what is unknowable about a voice, I am inspired by Brooks' ability to spin context from the sonic signifiers we *can* know about the voice. Just as Brooks lends a critical ear to Winehouse's vocal performances, I attempt to build similar context around the vocal gestures of Sam Smith and Jordan Smith to put them in dialogue with the "blues face" tradition.

The vocal gestures that Winehouse performs activates the nostalgic sounds of Black female soul singers and can also be heard in Sam Smith's music. Daphne Brooks beautifully summarizes what Amy Winehouse's voice invokes, "Winehouse performs the 'rock snob's' memory of black female vocalizing, a much savvier form of archival aural blackface, one in which the listener is challenged to constantly figure out who the artist is invoking and mimicking in her work" (Brooks 2010:51). Much in the same way, Sam Smith can often be heard grunting, gasping, and panting in their music, incorporating sounds that have little value to the pheno-song, but that might activate certain affects that reinforce "the body in the voice." Furthermore, Sam Smith uses vocal techniques and styles pioneered by women such as Diana Ross, Aretha Franklin, and Tina Turner, yet at the same time, elides criticism for his effacement of this Black female lineage due to his positionality as a white queer person. I do not invoke this critique of Sam Smith lightly but do so in order to consider how

race and gender work according to different sets of terms. The unequal terms in this case are a product of Sam Smith's whiteness functioning as a buffer for their gender and sexual expression; whiteness is working by offering Sam Smith flexibility for alternative displays of identity, often in ways that are prohibited by other racial epistemologies (see chapter one for discussion on Blackness and flexible identities). whiteness affords Sam Smith the privilege to sound like, and be heard, as a woman and connect with audiences in that in ways Black singers like Rayshun LaMarr or Regina Love do not. However, it is also important to note that Sam Smith's gender-queerness is not the same context as Jordan Smith's misreading as queer, further evidence that constructing a voice (or a body from a voice) cannot only consider the performance of listening. For Jordan Smith, the popular reading of his gender and sexual identity being ambiguous feeds the narrative of his voice being "androgynous" and mythical, like a "unicorn." But the friction comes from the fact that Jordan isn't sexually ambiguous or androgynous, he has reinforced multiple times on the show that he is a straight cis-gendered man who is engaged (now married) to a woman.

Just as Sam Smith's vocal gestures resemble Black icons such as Diana Ross, Aretha Franklin, and Tina Turner, Jordan Smith's vocal gestures are informed by the second layer of femme pop icons such as Beyonce, Adele, and Sam Smith. This lineage that is engaged, from singers such as Ross and Turner, to Amy Winehouse, through Sam Smith, and finally Jordan Smith, reads like a game of telephone. However, this allows us to observe is the relationship between gender and race that works counter to what was discussed in the previous chapter on LaMarr. Rayshun LaMarr, a Black man, lost support when singing songs by white artists, a pattern touched on in chapter one. My argument here is that Jordan Smith, by virtue of his whiteness, finds success in performing songs by Beyonce, Adele, and

Sam Smith as well as Christian hymns ("Great is Thy Faithfulness") or other spiritually related tunes like "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen, or "Mary Did You Know" by Kenny Rogers and Wynona Judd.

At 02:51 of the Battle Round clip, Regina Love enters with an embellishment that scoops up before stepping down to begin the verse. Love's low register fills out her voice, it is deep, breathy, warm, and a tad muted as it carries the words, "He could be a sinner/Or a gentleman/Or a preacher/When your soul is damned." Jordan Smith comes in, "He could be a lawyer/On the witness stand/But he'll never love you like I can." He takes the start of the next verse, "A chance encounter/Of circumstance/Baby he's a mantra/Keeps your mind in trance." "He could be your silence/On this mayhem," cuts in Love—this is a battle after all. "He never loves you like I can, can, can" Love sings in harmony with Smith, as he supports the lower voice at an almost inaudible volume.

Starting at 03:30 of the same clip, the song enters the bridge section with Smith singing in his high tessitura on "Why are you looking/Down all the wrong roads/When mine is the heart/And the soul that is…" His voice extends very high for an average tenor, making his range remarkable, but also performs with such freeness and ease. He produces a very easy sound, there is no vocal strain unless it is being used as a tool for affect (which I will discuss more later).

Love starts powerfully at 03:41 "There may be lovers/Who hold out their hand/They never love you like I can." Her voice is rough, sounding graveled from years working as a professional backup singer, and carries with it a sense of heaviness and strain. She is performing in her highest range at this point, and she produces a wonderful, rich, dark color. I don't use these descriptors arbitrarily, but in trying to convey descriptions of sound vis-a-

vis language, I am aware that I reify the same processes I hope to deconstruct. The politics of timbre is another project I won't have space to address here.

At the absolute climax of the piece (03:50), both in formal structure and in drama around the voice, Smith repeats Love's last line, "They'll never love you like I can, can, can." He immediately follows it with a vocal run that had incredible pitch precision. This is the moment, though, that feels like a smoking gun. He changes how he sings from this pure, easy, unstrained voice, the "ungrained" as Simon Frith would have it, to immediately imitating Love's style, diction, and vocal gesture. The timbre of Smith's voice changes; it develops a grain. I can hear a body in the voice, and the crowd responds to him in huge applause (while the performance is still going). Coaches are out of their seats at this point (Usher). This is almost to communicate to his savvy, industry seasoned coach Adam Levine that Jordan Smith is capable of pulling off both ungrained sounds and developing the grain that exists in his voice *on command*. It literally becomes a problem of performatives. The audience was unimpressed and gave no applause mid song for Love when she sang this same line. Smith performs it in what I would argue is a deliberate stylistic choice, that activates the grain of the voice, that locates the body in the voice, but it's not *his* body; it is the imitation and mimicry of Regina Love's body in Jordan Smith's voice.

A kind of irony that happens during the Battle round that sets the context surrounding the vocal gestures that Jordan Smith makes, that they are inflected and informed by Black female soul icons, but that he wins and does it *better* than a literal professional Black female singer. He beats Regina Love.

After the on-stage performance, Blake Shelton was the first to make a comment, "Regina, such control, and such passion about what you're doing up there. But then,

Jordan… What the hell just came out of you, it doesn't make any sense to me. Your voice is like from another planet. There's not a wrong decision here."

Gwen Stefani told the audience "And you are just… I don't understand you. It was so unexpected. That just turns me on." Levine ultimately chooses Jordan Smith as the winner of the battle, and says after the performance, "Jordan's voice is the unicorn."

Playoffs

Charting Smith's path to his season nine victory also requires contending with the religious slant that the show takes, most often found in the program's on-screen dialogue between coaches and contestants. For example, after performing Beyonce's "Halo," coach Pharrell Williams told Smith, "Literally, it's totally true that God has signed your voice" (I World'sBestoftheBest I 2015). "All I can think of is God when he sings," said fellow coach Gwen Stefani. These comments by industry insiders reveal how Smith's voice is understood as synonymous with spiritual, maybe even evangelical, significance.

Jordan Smith starts Beyonce's song "Halo" in a relatively low register for his voice, "Remember those walls we built/Well baby they're tumbling down." For now, the backing band is sparse with only acoustic guitar, piano, bass, and strings peppering the arrangement. Starting at 00:32, his voice ascends, the melody begins to be carried higher, with the high point of the phrase, "I ain't ever gonna shut you out." The band's arrangement becomes denser, and the strings swell. The chorus follows and Smith is heard accompanied by a choir of backup singers, they fill in for the rest of the arrangement and offer counterpoint to Smith's melody. There is a minor iv chord that is included at 01:36 and gives a bittersweet, sentimental feeling. He continues to ascend to higher octaves and delivers each successive note with more intensity and power. At 02:03, on a held note that begins on third scale

degree and steps up to the fourth, the crowd cheers in a huge show of support, and is clearly in love with the song and interpretation.

The vocal style that Smith uses can thought of as being “ungrained,” or as Barthes describes Fischer-Dieskau, “everything in the (semantic and lyrical) structure is respected and yet nothing seduces, nothing sways us to *jouissance*” (Barthes 1977:183). Returning to our earlier discussion of the grain of the voice, Jordan Smith’s performance of Halo possesses qualities that are closer to the pheno-song that is embedded within Fischer-Dieskau than the geno-song heard in Panzera. What is important for Barthes is getting at the ways in which we can articulate, in words, why we like Fischer-Dieskau’s performance of songs, such as a Schubert song cycle. We can justify his performance by saying things like, “he had great pitch,” or “he floats his high notes,” or “he pronounces the text clearly.” However, the effect we receive from Fischer-Dieskau never rises to the level of the geno-song, where “the tonic metal hardens and is segmented, in the mask that significance explodes, bringing not the soul but *jouissance*” (Barthes 1977:183). For Barthes, the geno-song represents a totalizing experience that derives its power from the ways we hear the body of Panzera or of Beyoncé, within the music, and how at least part of the experience is ineffable. Just like Barthes with Fischer-Dieskau, I only ever seem to “hear the lungs" with Jordan Smith, and when I do hear the body, “the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose” it feels like a deliberate choice and curation of affect on the point of Smith—such as his performance in the Battles when he inserted his “body” (Barthes 1977:183).

What I find interesting about Smith’s performance is the ways in which contradictions are manifested in this gospel-inflected interpretation of Beyonce’s “Halo.”

The song appears as Beyonce's fourth single from her third studio album, *I Am… Sasha Fierce* (2009), and won Best Female Pop Vocal Performance at the 52nd Annual Grammy Awards. "Halo" is described as a pop and R&B power ballad, and received time on the *Billboard Hot 100*, and US Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs charts. Without detailing the entire comprehensive history of race records and creation of new categories for music to maintain the exclusion of Black Americans from participation in mainstream culture, I want to touch on the reasons why Beyonce's "Halo" is a particularly unique demonstration of contemporary racial politics.

Beyonce Knowles-Carter was named the highest-earning black musician of all-time by *Billboard* in 2014, and in the 65th Annual Grammy Awards (2023) earned an additional four Grammys, having the most awards total of any person—thirty-two. One of the most recognizable names in popular music, Knowles got her start in the 1990s and early 2000s era R&B girl group *Destiny's Child*. After her breakout solo success with *Dangerously in Love* in 2005, Knowles embarked on a solo career that has covered a wide variety of genres, yet the constant is Knowles' signature voice.

Jon Pareles, writing in the Arts section of *The New York Times*, describes Knowles' voice this way, "velvety yet tart, with an insistent flutter and reserves of soul belting" (Pareles 2005). Without making a value judgment on the usefulness of these terms to help describe Knowles' voice, I would instead like to look at the significance of these in what they help to illuminate how we conceive of R&B, Blackness, and the voice more broadly. Beyonce has a remarkable range, with estimates ranging from three and a half to four octaves, and has a dynamic range that is so remarkable, Chris Richards, of *The Washington Post*, comments that her voice is "capable of punctuating any beat with goose-bump-

inducing whispers or full-bore diva-roars" (Richards 2006). A point that both critics seem to want to communicate is the powerful nature of Knowles's voice, and more specifically I think these authors are trying to articulate Barthes's concept of the geno-song, or the way we can hear Knowles's body in her voice.

Belting is an extremely physical, verging on strenuous, form of singing that requires immense control and skill to do without damaging one's own vocal cords. For Knowles, belting has become a signature way that she, and many other Black female artists, communicate affect and create moments of tension within music.

In the original studio recording of "Halo," Knowles can be heard in the post-chorus belting the lyrics, "Halo (Halo)/ Halo (Halo)/I can see your halo (Halo)/Halo (Halo)." More than a merely catchy hook, the post-chorus is an opportunity for Knowles to showcase the different colors her voice can produce, since the melodic line is repeated. The belting she performs comes with a subtle rasp, a rasp one can hear more clearly when Knowles performs the second verse and sings in a falsetto voice punctuated by beautiful cracks in her delivery. These three qualities are some of the hallmarks that make up Knowles's voice.

Returning to Jordan Smith's performance of "Halo," I want to discuss the tension that exists between Knowles's vocal hallmarks and the interpretive choices Smith makes in his semi-final performance. The arrangement that backs Smith starts with an acoustic guitar that vamps between the I chord and its sus4 variant, very open and free leaving him ample room to maneuver in. This differs from the percussive quality and forward momentum of the piano in Knowles's original cut and foreshadows that Smith is taking a different approach with the song. Instead of feeling static, as the acoustic guitar does in Smith's cover, Knowles's original version contains more energy and sense of momentum. The most

striking thing that I notice about Smith's performance, though, is that even when he is singing in his highest tessitura, it never sounds harsh, pinched, or forced. Even when he has the opportunity to belt, even when Knowles belted in her own version, Smith chooses to use a free and easy sound. He leans on the pheno-song because it allows him to conceal what the geno-song never would allow him: Black femininity. Smith, with his brand of white maleness, sings the song perfectly from a technical perspective, maybe even from a musical perspective, but lacks what brings the listener *jouissance*. The ineffable quality that is supposed to possess Smith's voice escapes me, and instead, I have no trouble articulating some of the aspects that made this performance good.

I contrast the careful use of the geno-song that Smith employs in his Battles Round performance with the overwhelming safety Smith practiced with the pheno-song playoffs. To index his body in his voice, Smith has techniques available to him like making his voice huskier in its timbre but chooses not to do so in "Halo." This might be for many reasons, but what is knowable is he had an overwhelming support for his performance despite it having little sonic resemblance to the original song. He successfully "made it his own," so to speak, and was rewarded.

Conclusion

For Jordan Smith, his success on *The Voice* is demonstrative of the ways in which Whiteness is able to incorporate alternative displays of masculinity, sexuality, and racial aesthetics to produce a voice that is described as a "unicorn." Smith's voice is able to hold contradictions that run counter to hegemonic understandings of White maleness, and at the same time, complicates interpretations of US based conservatism. His song choices overwhelmingly included pieces by Black women and White queer persons, and earned

Smith near universal praise, despite contests to how he performed his identity. The relationship demonstrated in the previous chapter between Rayshun LaMarr's experience performing songs that didn't conform to his identity seemed to have been reversed for Smith. It makes me wonder why can Jordan sing "outside" his identity he finds massive success, but when LaMarr makes similar moves, he is punished?

One notable moment in Jordan Smith's vocal performance can be found during *The Voice* battle round. As Smith imitates and mimics Regina Love's vocal style and gestures, the crowd responds with enthusiastic applause. This ironic response reflects the dynamics of race and gender, where a white contestant is rewarded for his performance of vocal gestures associated with Black female soul icons more than a professional Black female singer herself. This victory underscores the intersectional complexities present in the reception and appreciation of vocal performances, where the dynamics of power, privilege, and cultural capital play a significant role.

A material reading of Smith's voice underscores the function that timbre and range play in determining how listeners may interpret and construct Smith's identity for themselves. Pitch as a perceived indicator of gender possesses a naturalized quality, such as the common sense of high-pitched as being feminine and low-pitched as masculine. But by interrogating this presupposition, we can see the ways in which Smith leverages both pitch and timbre to index queer and femme identities in vocal performance. We heard through his Battle Round and Playoff performances the different ways Smith sang through the pheno- and geno-song. In his pheno-song, he is able to mobilize the ways in which his voice affords him certain allowances when it comes to gender and the informal rules set up around which gender can sing which songs. However, contrasting the geno-song filled response to Regina

Love in the Battle Round, we can see that Smith has the power to fill his voice with his body, and chooses to ventriloquize Love's subjectivity in an attempt to "show her up."

Amy Winehouse's voice exemplifies a fusion of throwback soul aesthetics and contemporary hip hop influences. Her vocal gestures encompass a wide range, from the smooth jazz grace notes reminiscent of Billie Holiday to the rap-inspired phrasings that showcase her connection to the hip hop genre. This amalgamation of styles demonstrates the friction between geno-song and pheno-song, a concept introduced by Daphne A. Brooks. Geno-song refers to the essence of the artist's unique voice, while pheno-song encompasses the performative aspects that may draw from and emulate other vocal traditions. In the case of Winehouse, her performances can be seen as a sophisticated form of archival aural blackface, as she challenges listeners to decipher the artists she invokes and mimics. Her vocal range and adaptability enable her to traverse different sonic territories while paying homage to the Black female soul singers who have influenced her.

Sam Smith, on the other hand, operates within a different realm of vocal gestures and styles. Their music incorporates techniques and inspirations from Black female soul icons such as Diana Ross and Aretha Franklin. However, due to their positionality as a white queer person, Smith navigates a complex terrain where their whiteness affords them the flexibility to explore alternative displays of identity. This flexibility allows Smith to be heard as a woman, connecting with audiences in ways that are not accessible to Black singers. The performance of gender and the intersections of race and queerness become significant factors in their vocal interpretations. Smith's vocal gestures, though influenced by Black soul singers, can be perceived as filtered through their own unique experience and identity.

Overall, it is important to note how Jordan Smith's ability to "play" with gender and present as "genderless" through his voice are part and parcel of the functions of Whiteness. Whereas Rayshun LaMarr represented an outright rejection of originality and individuality vis-a-vis singing "outside" one's own identity, Jordan Smith's whiteness actually served to conceal the larger logics that possess *The Voice* and its audiences.

Conclusion

Through the combined reading of Rayshun LaMarr and Jordan Smith, we see the voice function as a site to understand race and gender, and gain a deeper appreciation of how performativity intersects processes of boundary formation. I want to revisit the first chapter's discussion of genre as actively negotiating categories and labels in light of Smith's case. Combining these two issues of performativity and genre allows us to understand the relationality of Jordan's performances with Regina Love. Jordan Smith was chosen over a Black woman, Regina Love, signing in a genre invented by Black women. Without the ability to create categories that can coalesce around socially shared understandings, how can we effectively evaluate a performance with the rubric of a given genre? By the nature of the question, audiences need a culturally relevant touchstone to use as a useful comparison, and everyone comes to that decision with different kinds of subjectivities. And for Adam Levine, the only vote that mattered at that stage of the competition, he heard the geno-song of Smith. In other words, the logics that discouraged Rayshun LaMarr from singing white music because of its genre baggage, are the same logics that rewarded Jordan Smith for singing in sonic blues-face. Both of these moments are predicated on socially formed boundaries around genre and audiences needing to understand what cues to listen for. Jordan Smith fit the song's genre despite his body because of his performative vocal inflections, while no amount of vocal presence for Rayshun LaMarr can overcome his racially marked body.

Creation of categories is one of the core issues at play when we consider the intersection of genre and identity in the voice. I recall Omi and Winant a final time to remind us of the ways that race is actively negotiated, created, and destroyed. Similarly, the sonic parameters of identity are in constant flux because of its relationship to the listener and

the listening subjectivities they bring. This is, however, always competing with the macrosocial structure of genre that is needed to maintain a cultural legibility. If we do not have a shared lexicon or vocabulary, the elementary forms, we cannot begin to understand judgment or taste.

Future research on this topic could revisit the voice as a field site that is situated between the nexus of identity and performativity and use ethnographic methods to understand how singers understand their own performances. I am also still very intrigued by how acousmatic sound, as in the blind auditions, functions in the larger imaginary of contemporary American life. For example, how does the acousmatic voice figure into other contexts, such as podcasting, where many listeners never learn what podcast hosts look like. The voice that continues to exist but without a visual body to attach itself to.

By delving into the relationship between sound, identity, genre, and acousmatic sound, we have begun to unravel the intricate dynamics at play within "The Voice" and beyond. This analysis not only enhances our understanding of the show as a cultural phenomenon but also opens up new avenues for examining the broader implications of sound in shaping our perceptions, experiences, and identities. Understanding the multifaceted nature of the voice and its role in boundary formation, genre negotiation, and identity construction can enrich our comprehension of music and its societal significance.

Scholarly interest in the vocal performances of popular musicians has grown, with a particular focus on the interplay between race, gender, and music. This academic discourse seeks to understand how artists engage with and evoke the legacies of Black female soul singers, while also examining the impact of societal and cultural frameworks on their reception and success.

In a similar vein, Jordan Smith's vocal gestures draw from the second layer of femme pop icons, including Beyoncé and Adele. As a white cisgendered man, Jordan Smith finds success in performing songs by these artists, while reinforcing a gender and sexual identity that aligns with societal expectations. The dynamic of a white male performer singing songs popularized by female artists, particularly those associated with Black female soul icons, raises important questions about appropriation and the complex interplay of race, gender, and vocal performance.

The religious undertones prevalent in "The Voice" and other similar talent shows also shape the perception of Jordan Smith's voice. His vocal abilities are often attributed to spiritual or even evangelical significance, emphasizing the perceived connection between his voice and divine intervention. Jordan Smith's performance of Beyoncé's "Halo" exemplifies his ability to deliver powerful and intense vocals while maintaining an "ungrained" quality, aligning with Barthes' concept of the pheno-song. Although his voice possesses remarkable technical skill and range, the affective power of his performance does not fully reach the level of geno-song, which encapsulates the ineffable and totalizing experience of the voice as embodied in the music. This disparity raises intriguing questions about the complexities of vocal authenticity, emotional resonance, and the negotiation of identity within popular music contexts.

By delving into the nuances of vocal gestures and performances, this extended analysis sheds light on the intricate dynamics of race, gender, and popular music. It highlights how artists navigate and engage with the legacies of Black female soul singers while operating within social and cultural frameworks that impact their reception and success. Through the exploration of concepts such as sonic bluesface, the grain of the voice,

and the notions of pheno-song and geno-song, this academic discourse unveils the multifaceted nature of vocal performances and their profound implications for identity, power, and representation in the realm of popular music.

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