

Staging Overcoming: Narratives of Disability and Meritocracy in Reality Singing Competitions

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Abstract

With the American Dream seizing center stage, reality television competitions often feature disabled auditionees and their moving tales of overcoming adversity. Musical—and frequently singing—abilities potentially normalize and envoice contestants while silencing vital conversations about the exploitation, stigmatization, and corporate politics at work in these seductive narratives. How do chronicles of overcoming overcome consumers? And how might inspiration porn about disability disable beholders' emotional, intellectual, and rhetorical faculties? As fans and scholars resist or succumb to the tearfulness induced by sentimental stories, they must chart tricky routes through the heady skepticism of Scylla and the naïve waterworks of Charybdis.

With head held high, a twenty-one-year-old man strides into a room and sees four celebrity judges. Identifying himself as a Cuban immigrant living in Florida, he speaks with a stutter—haltingly, laboriously, unsteadily. But as he goes on to sing, he does so fluidly and effortlessly and confidently. The judges compliment his beautiful voice and positive vibe. A couple of them even tell him that he should just sing all the time. As grateful tears stream down this auditionee's face, a resounding quartet of *yeses* sends him through to the next round of the competition.

With assistance, a twenty-six-year-old woman walks cautiously onto a large stage. She does not identify herself to four judges who are, for the moment, turned away from her. Hearing her musical cue, the woman sings marvelously, winning applause from the studio audience. After the performance, she tells the judges—who have since swiveled around in their chairs to face her—that she cannot see them due to her glaucoma. One judge asks her why she has chosen to try out for the show. She says she was attracted to its format: how the judges initially could not see her, just as she could not (and still cannot) see them. Her response elicits delighted chuckles from the judges and audience members. A double-blind audition, a rare promise of parity . . . maybe.

With uneven gait, a man of unknown age makes his way into a gigantic auditorium to greet four judges and an audience of hundreds. His limbs appear unusual in length and form. When asked how old he is, he replies that he is not sure: as a child, he was rescued from an Iraqi orphanage by a woman who became his adoptive mother. As he sings, his performance draws cheers and tears. Afterward, one judge commends this contestant for his courage. Another judge says he won her over as

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Figure 1a. (Color online) Lazaro Arbos on *American Idol* (2013). YouTube video screen shot. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Et7xmr4kAUc>

soon as he stepped onto the stage. He is voted through unanimously. The crowd goes wild.

Supercrip Stories

Tales of overcoming have dominated reality competitions since this television genre took global flight at the turn of the millennium. The three preceding vignettes describe the respective auditions of Lazaro Arbos on *American Idol* (2013), Andrea Begley on *The Voice UK* (2013), and Emmanuel Kelly on *The X Factor Australia* (2011) (Figure 1). These singers have joined the vast ranks of reality contestants with wide-ranging disabilities—disabilities that rarely go unremarked on the shows, but rather become illuminated as the crux of inspirational stories. Such auditionees in recent years include a breakdancer with arthrogryposis, a fourteen-year-old comedian with cerebral palsy, a Deaf fashion designer, a virtuoso kite-flier with epilepsy, and an armless boy who plays piano with his toes.¹ Through demonstrations of specialized abilities, individuals with disabilities exemplify the rags-to-riches ideals of reality competitions more broadly.² For hopeful contestants dealing with impairments, strife, loss, poverty, or trauma, the meritocratic dream coheres in a tempting belief that talent, ambition, and hard work can trump all ails and adversity.

Producers of reality competitions expertly play up disability narratives to maximize emotional impact and popular appeal. Before showing an audition, a pro-

¹ The respective names of these contestants are Luca Patuelli on *So You Think You Can Dance Canada* (2010), Jack Carroll on *Britain's Got Talent* (2013), Justin LeBlanc on *Project Runway* (2013), Connor Doran on *America's Got Talent* (2010), and Liu Wei on *China's Got Talent* (2010).

² On *American Idol* and the American Dream, see Christopher Bell, *American Idolatry: Celebrity, Commodity and Reality Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 157–58; Amanda McClain, *American Ideal: How American Idol Constructs Celebrity, Collective Identity, and American Discourses* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 41–43; and Katherine Meizel, *Idolized: Music, Media, and Identity in American Idol* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 16–50.



Figure 1b. (Color online) Andrea Begley on *The Voice UK* (2013). YouTube video screen shot. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVf5G2p-b4>



Figure 1c. (Color online) Emmanuel Kelly on *The X Factor Australia* (2011). YouTube video screen shot. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W86jlvR654o>

gram usually offers glimpses into the contestant's life via on-site interviews, off-site footage, and solicited materials such as childhood photos and home videos. Accompanying these mini-biopics are stirring musical underscores and the contestant's reflective voice-overs. Cross-fades, slow-motion, and visual effects conjure sympathetic, sentimental auras. Some series go to even greater lengths to ramp up the theatrics. On his lengthy *X Factor Australia* audition segment, Emmanuel Kelly is first shown walking through a backstage area filled with machine-generated fog, which dramatically sets up his subsequent onstage declaration that he was born in an Iraqi battle zone (think: fog of war). During Kelly's audition, home viewers see abundant close-ups of the weeping, transfixed faces of the judges and studio audience. Later, as the judges praise the performance, we hear triumphant

background music—the song “Kings and Queens” by 30 Seconds to Mars—which revs up (and drops a thumping bass) just as a beaming Kelly receives his final *yes*-vote and walks off the stage into the outstretched arms of his ecstatic mother and disabled brother.

Inspirational auditions like Kelly’s boast high viral potential and become eagerly shared among friends and coworkers as heartwarming pick-me-ups. But insofar as reality competitions cash in on token appearances by contestants with impairments, the format may end up treating adversity in exploitative, reductive ways. Disability, neatly packaged, enables producers to turn stories of plight into profit. As David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder observe, disability frequently serves as a “narrative prosthesis,” a construct “used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight.”³ Narratives of overcoming disability are prone to sliding from good-natured celebration into patronizing lionization. Media hyperexposure of “savants” and “supercrips” erects problematic hierarchies within disability communities, implicitly devaluing impaired individuals who are not deemed sufficiently *extra-extraordinary*.⁴ (The flawed yet pervasive slippage: *If this blind contestant can dance so beautifully, shouldn’t all blind people manage—or at least try—to do so?*) Supercrip stories can further fetishize the extraordinarily ordinary, lauding disabled individuals for accomplishing feats that fall within easier reach of “normates.”⁵ On reality competitions, specific talents (musical performance, dance, fashion design, culinary arts) sparkle as golden foils for otherwise down-on-their-luck contestants. In these arenas, then, there are actually two narrative prostheses at work: first, contestants’ disabilities, which are extensively captured, distorted, and simplified by reality television’s presentational strategies; and second, the contestants’ valorized abilities that, when cast in a compensatory light, function as putative counterweights to physical, neurological, or social deviance.

Stories of disability and overcoming supply reliable comfort food to the millions of viewers who consume reality shows as part of their weekly media diets. Mixing sentimental narratives with sensational performances yields feel-good television,

³ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 49.

⁴ On stereotypes, terminologies, and metaphors of savants and supercrips, see Brian Watermeyer, “Claiming Loss in Disability,” *Disability & Society* 24, no. 1 (2009): 91–102; Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, “Introduction: Ablenationalism and the Geo-Politics of Disability,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 4, no. 2 (2010): 113–25; Brendan Burkett, Mike McNamee, and Wolfgang Potthast, “Shifting Boundaries in Sports Technology and Disability: Equal Rights or Unfair Advantage in the Case of Oscar Pistorius,” *Disability & Society* 26, no. 5 (2011): 643–54; Wendy L. Chrisman, “A Reflection on Inspiration: A Recuperative Call for Emotion in Disability Studies,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 5, no. 2 (2011): 173–84; and Joseph Straus, “Idiots Savants, Retarded Savants, Talented Amateurs, Mono-Savants, Autistic Savants, Just Plain Savants, People with Savant Syndrome, and Autistic People Who Are Good at Things: A View from Disability Studies,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2014), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3407/3640>.

⁵ Coined by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, the term “normate” refers not simply to a person who identifies as nondisabled, but furthermore to “the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (*Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1997], 8).

plotting out predictable trajectories that culminate in thunderous applause and messages of hope. Granted, not all viewers buy into reality television at face value. Many express skepticism toward the format's narrative conceits, complain about producers' ulterior motives, wonder whether judges' responses are scripted, and venture theories about rigged votes.⁶ Exacerbating such speculation are the shows' ubiquitous product placements (Coca-Cola, Subway, Starbucks), which heighten consumers' cynical impression that reality shows may be selling out in general, valuing commercial appeal over authentic talent.⁷

But here's what is so evidently potent about reality television and its overcoming narratives: even viewers who protest the shady business of these programs are sometimes nevertheless the same people who tune in faithfully, contribute to online discussions, and take time to upload videos of their favorite contestants. The fanbase of *American Idol*, describes Katherine Meizel, "negotiates the product/text puzzle in a scenario where awareness of manufacture, as a central theme of the show, is high, but somehow belief remains strong as well. It is one of *American Idol*'s most intriguing properties that viewers can maintain a skeptical attitude about the show and its processes, and yet still sit down in front of the television every Tuesday with their AT&T phones at the ready to log their votes."⁸ Despite the knowledge that reality television doesn't offer unfiltered reality or absolutely fair procedures, fans appear socially and monetarily willing to embrace the shows. One reason is that overcoming narratives have tremendous ability to instill feelings of compassion, empathy, and spiritual conviction. Producers of reality shows bank precisely on the timeless appeal of human interest stories—on how even if people *see through* these stories, this means they are at least *watching* and bumping up ratings.

In the disability studies literature to date, scholars have critiqued overcoming narratives mainly with analyses of their representational strategies, cultural contexts, and semantic nuances (in films, television shows, plays, memoirs, and news reports), in effect probing what the texts *mean* and how they signify.⁹ In this article, I carve out a different path, one that grapples with what overcoming narratives *do* and how they act on the people who consume them. I'm interested here as much in feeling as I am in meaning. With reality competitions, stories of overcoming proffer inspirational tropes that stand to *overcome* audiences in turn. By bringing viewers' bodies, agencies, emotions, and perceptual faculties into focus, tales of uplift can be so viscerally compelling that they leave us at a loss for satisfactory criticisms. Before we know it, sensations take over and the waterworks undam, sending us grasping at words and groping for tissues. For even if some overcoming narratives

⁶ See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 59–92; and Richard Rushfield, *American Idol: The Untold Story* (New York: Hyperion, 2011), 86–87.

⁷ See Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 90.

⁸ Meizel, *Idolized*, 21.

⁹ See M. F. Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Lennard Davis, *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 1994); and Johnson Cheu, "De-gene-erates, Replicants, and Other Aliens: (Re)defining Disability in Futuristic Film," in *Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory*, ed. Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare (London: Continuum, 2002), 198–212.

might come off corny and contrived, the fact remains that they have extraordinary powers to charm and disarm, undermining viewers' self-determination and efforts at adjudication. Triumphant tales can seem grand yet also cheap in multiple senses of the word—formulaic (cheaply conceived), easily manufactured (cheap in labor costs), and manipulative (cheap shots to bleeding hearts). At the same time, viewers might take pleasure in exactly this loss of control, allowing themselves to suspend judgment upon surrendering to an irresistible montage. Overcoming narratives therefore have the ability to leave consumers feeling ambivalent and, in some senses, disabled (discursively, critically, even physiologically). Beyond identifying the resonances of vulnerability, precarity, and resistance in disability and its metaphors, I'm invested in how these affects play out at the interface between disabled performers and the spectators who celebrate or criticize them.

Although reality competitions have blossomed into an international phenomenon—with *Idol*, *Voice*, *Got Talent*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, and *X Factor* variants spanning dozens of countries—shows in the United States offer an opportune lens to critique overcoming narratives drawn from the meritocratic ideals of the American Dream.¹⁰ And of all the talents featured on reality shows, singing ability has long stood out as a compelling and romanticized corrective for disability.¹¹ Singing competitions highlight the lyric voice as a natural instrument, a catch-all vehicle for subjectivity, sincerity, and an ably communicative body. For performers with mobility impairments, the singing voice ostensibly overcomes kinesthetic limits and the challenges of *space*, filling up auditoriums and projecting into viewers' living rooms across the country; for performers who speak with a stutter but sing fluently, signs of *crip time* (delays and temporal vicissitudes related to disability) likewise sound smoothed over.¹² Beautiful singing inspires discourses of transcendence and ineffability, yet it also fulfills an ironically normalizing function in cases of already-extraordinary bodies. As reality competitions glorify lyric proficiency as evidence of a contestant's normalcy, they simultaneously conceal, mitigate, or draw attention away from impairments at hand, potentially curbing

¹⁰ On reality television in cross-cultural perspectives, see Tasha Oren and Sharon Shahaf, eds., *Global Television Formats: Understanding Television across Borders* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Koos Zwaan and Joost de Bruin, eds., *Adapting Idols: Authenticity, Identity and Performance in a Global Television Format* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012); and Amir Hetsroni, ed., *Reality Television: Merging the Global and the Local* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2010).

¹¹ For (primarily) celebratory readings of the lyric voice in song and opera, see Carolyn Abbate, "Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women," in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 225–58; Mary Ann Smart, ed., *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Jane Bernstein, ed., *Women's Voices across Musical Worlds* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004); cf. William Cheng, "Hearts for Sale: The French *Romance* and the Sexual Traffic of Musical Mimicry," *19th-Century Music* 35, no. 1 (2011): 115–46.

¹² On "crip time" and activist perspectives on accommodating people's diverse pacing and temporal needs, see Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 61–63; Julie Cosenza, "SLOW: Crip Theory, Dyslexia and the Borderlands of Disability and Ablebodiedness," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 6, no. 2 (2010): 1–22; Irving Kenneth Zola, "Self, Identity and the Naming Question: Reflections on the Language of Disability," *Social Science and Medicine* 36, no. 2 (1993): 167–73; and William Cheng, *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016) 44–46.

rather than generating much-needed conversations *about* disability. Whereas matters of disability are liable to leave audiences at a loss for words (out of anxieties about, say, political correctness), people may feel relatively at ease using safe, standard vocabularies to pass technical judgment on voice alone, on music as music. A normate-sounding song, in other words, offers listeners a comfortable locus of critical fixation. Autonomously conceived, musical ability makes for a potent alibi, enabling representations and assessments of performers as though disability were inconsequential or dispensable. Across these exercises in imagination and elision, it is ultimately ableism and prejudice that most urgently need overcoming.

Voice Alone

Meritocracy is an American power ballad, a fight song, a national anthem, and an earworm prone to reach fever pitch during election seasons when politicians build campaigns on dreams of upward mobility. Slogans for meritocracy are legion: the cream rises to the top, you get out of life what you put into it, and additional platitudes that stress individual achievement through labor, skill, and sheer will. But recent scholars have denounced meritocracy as a myth, a seductive ethos that belies disparities arising from genetics, inherited wealth, nepotism, and luck. “[T]he tenets of the American Dream comprise an ideology of inequality,” explain Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller, Jr. “For a system of inequality to be stable over the long run, those who have more must convince those who have less that the distribution of who gets what is fair, just, proper, or the natural order of things.”¹³ Common critiques of meritocracy peg it as a philosophy favoring the (already) privileged—a retroactive, top-down justification of hierarchical status quo. And even though meritocracy is not an official form of government, it implicitly poses as *the* rule of law in employment, academia, popular culture, and everyday life. Meritocracy is a virtual reality.

On a show such as *American Idol*, which peddles virtual realities in both name and format, the American Dream is the star, promising every contestant a shot at fame. With the modern music industry’s preponderance of lip-synching and pitch correction, the live singing on reality shows lends an air of authenticity: sing proficiently enough, on your own merits, and maybe the world will listen. In these competitions, however, it is no secret that contestants’ longevity depends on far more than vocal ability. Image, personality, marketability, and other intangibles (so-called star quality or x-factor) all come into play.¹⁴ More accurately, this is an open secret: for while judges, hosts, contestants, and fans know that adept singing alone can never ensure victory, they still sometimes talk about vocal prowess as if it were an isolatable, reigning criterion. Stressing the importance of singing ability champions a musical meritocracy that responsibly prioritizes measurable

¹³ Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller, Jr., *The Meritocracy Myth*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 3. See also Lawrence R. Samuel, *The American Dream: A Cultural History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 9–13; and Manuel Peña, *American Mythologies: Semiological Sketches* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).

¹⁴ See Simon Cowell, *I Don’t Mean to Be Rude, But . . . : Backstage Gossip from American Idol & the Secrets That Can Make You a Star* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 5–7.



Figure 2a. (Color online) *The Voice* coach Usher looks as though he's having a hard time deciding whether to push his button for Season 4 auditionee Caroline Glaser (2013). YouTube video screen shot. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UtzyEbd5L8>

talent over appearance and artifice. Appeals to merit-based results dangle a utopian brand of fairness, spinning out false yet comforting justifications for who wins and who loses.

Valorization of vocal merit is the central gimmick of NBC's *The Voice*, which premiered in 2011 and delivered a twist on the formulas of its generic predecessors.¹⁵ *The Voice* kicks off each season with blind auditions, during which four seated coaches start by facing away from the onstage singer, who performs a piece with prerecorded accompaniment (Figure 2).¹⁶ Coaches who like what they hear can hit a button to turn around in their electronic swivel-chairs before the audition ends. Contestants advance in the competition if their performance nabs at least one chair-turn. During the auditions, the coaches snatch almost as much screen time as the singer. In close-up shots, they variously scrunch up their faces, crease their eyes, purse their lips, verbally consult with one another, and keep their hands hovering above their all-important buttons as if agonizing over whether to take a chance on the contestant. More so than other reality singing shows, *The Voice* places critical listening on display. As auditionees perform, the coaches *perform audition*, putting on a melodramatic show of their own. With displays of taut auralty and tantalizing ambivalence, coaches indicate they are listening for a meritable voice—and for voice alone.

Although coaches on *The Voice* often maximize suspense by waiting until the end of an audition to hit their button (or not), they do choose, on rare occasions, to turn around almost as soon as a contestant begins singing. Season 5 contestant Matthew Schuler made headlines by simultaneously winning all four judges just seconds into

¹⁵ The U.S. series *The Voice* is based on *The Voice of Holland*, a Dutch reality singing competition that premiered in 2010. Sianne Ngai theorizes gimmickry in ways reminiscent of Meizel's earlier descriptions of reality shows' allure: "Repulsive if also in an important way attractive, maintaining a degree of charm we often acknowledge grudgingly" (Sianne Ngai, "Theory of the Gimmick," *Critical Inquiry* 43 [2017]: 467).

¹⁶ On *The Voice*, the judges are called "coaches" because they work closely with contestants throughout the competition.



Figure 2b. (Color online) Season 5 auditionee Matthew Schuler quickly manages to tempt four judges to turn around (2013). YouTube video screen shot. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9AnbcySoaU>

his rendition of “Cough Syrup,” a song by Young the Giant.¹⁷ An early chair-turn represents exceptional praise, signaling a coach’s high confidence in the singer. It epitomizes the belief that stardom can reside in a voice’s infinitesimal grain (timbre, tone, color) irrespective of the performer’s endurance, consistency, technical range, and dramatic arc.¹⁸ Such preemptive judgment is curious not least because it is typically *sight* that we presume to be a no-lag faculty, and *hearing* as a process that necessarily unfolds over time.¹⁹ (The speed of light, the blink of an eye, love at first sight: it’s no coincidence that idioms of instantaneity rely overwhelmingly on optical and ocular metaphors.) Yet despite music’s status as a temporal art, singing invites snap judgments all the same, reducing appraisals of excellence to a few good vibrations. In the case of *The Voice*, coaches have pride at stake. Swiftly endorsing a great voice allows them to appear confident and knowledgeable, like busy A&R talent scouts who are so good at their jobs that the first line of a demo tape is all they need to hear. During *The Voice* auditions, moreover, the sooner coaches turn around for a contestant, the more they can claim afterward that they believed in this singer from the beginning—a strong advantage if multiple coaches end up fighting to recruit the same person. Thus while blind auditions on this show may eschew the trappings of visual prejudice, they ironically encourage a degree of hasty judgment and even guesswork.

Despite the show’s emphasis on vocal merit, blind auditions make up only the first round of *The Voice*. Subsequent rounds do away with anonymity, and the final live performances solicit votes from viewers. Even prior to reaching the televised blind auditions, however, prospective contestants must first perform in full view for

¹⁷ Following the audition of Andrea Begley on *The Voice UK*, coach Danny O’Donoghue recalled, “I knew straightaway from the first line of that song. I was like, ‘This is something special,’ because the mood just changed in the room. That’s what a megastar is” (“Andrea Begley—Angel,” 30 January 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flx0KntmVk>).

¹⁸ See Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 179–89.

¹⁹ Regarding the “audiovisual litany,” which “idealizes hearing (and, by extension, speech) as manifesting a kind of pure interiority,” see Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 15.

producers at the open call auditions and the callback auditions. At the producers' discretion, these contestants must then "voluntarily submit to and complete a background check" and to "examinations to be conducted in Los Angeles, CA, by medical professionals selected by and paid for by the Producer."²⁰ Only after the preliminary visual, legal, and medical scrutiny does a tiny pool of remaining contestants get to sing for the celebrity coaches at the blind auditions. No less so than any other reality competition, then, *The Voice* flashes a banner of vocal meritocracy to distract viewers from the shadier (more mundane) factors in people's shots at stardom.

Proof of artifice indeed lies in the mundanities—the fine print—of reality competitions. Release forms lay out the producers' extensive liberties to control, concoct, and knowingly misrepresent any aspect of a contestant's image, sound, and backstory. To audition for *America's Got Talent*, for example, contestants must sign a legal agreement containing this clause: "My appearance, depiction, and portrayal in connection with the Program or in any aspect or phase thereof (including, without limitation, the interview and audition process), may be disparaging, defamatory, embarrassing or of an otherwise unfavorable nature, may expose me to public ridicule, humiliation or condemnation, and may portray me in a false light."²¹ Contracts further bar contestants from ever denying or denouncing the ways in which they have been factually or fictionally portrayed by a program. Contestants who violate these stipulations stand to owe millions of dollars in liability. Given the high stakes of top-grossing reality shows, contracts are expectedly filled with absolutist language that neatly closes loopholes in the producers' favor: "including but not limited to," "throughout the universe in perpetuity," "for any reason or for no reason at all," and other stern jargon that shackles participants between a boilerplate and a hard place.

Draconian, daresay Faustian, contracts are standard occupational hazards of the entertainment industry, but excess publicity about reality television's terms and conditions can threaten the wholesome image of talent-scouting shows. During the first season of *American Idol* in 2002, Los Angeles music attorney Gary Fine obtained the show's release agreement from a contestant and leaked its contents on the Internet. A scandal broke out as news sites and blogs ripped into the contract's severity, notably a clause that granted producers "the unconditional right throughout the universe in perpetuity to use, simulate or portray [. . .] my name, likeness (whether photographic or otherwise), voice, *singing voice*, personality, personal identification or personal experiences, my life story, biographical data, incidents, situations and events which heretofore occurred or hereafter occur."²² Here, the word "simulate" gave producers the legal prerogative to mold contestants however they wished. No less distressing was the inclusion of "singing voice" as a variable deemed fair game

²⁰ NBC's *The Voice*, "Eligibility Requirements," 2015, <http://www.nbcthevoice.com/auditions/eligibility>.

²¹ Marathon Productions, "America's Got Talent, Season 10 Release Form," 2015, <http://www.americasgottalentauditions.com/wp-content/uploads/Personal-Release-Website-Fillable.pdf>.

²² Quoted in Eric Olsen, "Slaves of Celebrity," *Salon*, 18 September 2002, http://www.salon.com/2002/09/18/idol_contract, emphasis added.

for dissemblance and manipulation. If a reality show about singing were allowed to fake the voices of its singers, then what real vestiges of verifiable meritocracy could remain?

To expedite on-site auditions, several reality competitions make their release agreements available online. But while these contracts are not confidential *per se*, they hide in plain sight: first, because contestants who sign the forms are unlikely to read them carefully, if at all; and second, because casual viewers of these programs have little reason to go looking for this paperwork. Poring over the legal minutiae of one's favorite reality show can be a disillusioning and killjoy exercise. The realities of fakery on these shows are inconvenient truths that most fans wouldn't care to face. Release agreements, after all, paint a suspicious image of shows, arguably setting out terms of indentured servitude masquerading as avuncular concern and mutual welfare. Contractual prices of admission can be so high because, according to a reality show's paternalistic conceits, participants receive a shot at something supposedly priceless—namely, celebrity. Contestants, the subtext goes, should be willing and downright grateful for the chance to be rescued from lives of obscurity, mediocrity, and, in some cases, disability. As much as a reality program may depict its competitors pulling themselves up by their bootstraps through talent and hard work, viewers are reminded at every turn—via interviews with thankful contestants, the testimonials of proud family members, and the host's sentimental announcements—that the show is ultimately responsible for furnishing these lucky breaks to begin with.

To shore up their role as purveyors of opportunity, reality competitions favor participants with attractive overcoming stories. Producers scope out auditionees' backgrounds from the outset. Prospective contestants for *America's Got Talent* must fill out a questionnaire asking:

Who in your life do you want to make the most proud and why?

What obstacles have you overcome in pursuing your act?

Please describe a major event that has affected your life.²³

Such questions work to extract tales of struggle. Common obstacles reported by contestants include physical impairments, injuries, near-death experiences, unemployment, impoverishment, eviction, divorce, single parenthood, familial alienation, domestic abuse, substance abuse, bereavement, professional rejection, and loss of faith. Even with persistent talk of talent and technique, reality shows' barrage of human-interest stories sends an imperative message to fans and hopeful auditionees alike: merit alone isn't enough.

Stories of overcoming are easy to love. They arouse, uplift, invigorate. Inspirational though they may be, however, these tales can come across as exploitative maneuvers that unfairly take consumers' intellectual faculties hostage. For how does one objectively judge a singer who has confessed to recently losing her mother or losing her sight? How and why would one nitpick technical shortcomings when

²³ "Performance Questionnaire," *America's Got Talent*, 2013, <http://americasgottalentauditions.com/wp-content/uploads/AGT8-VTR-YES-FAQ-FINAL.pdf>.

confronting a hopeful, tearful contestant determined to stand as living proof of survival against all odds? And what larger purposes and priorities would such stark adjudication serve anyway?

Feeling Overcome

Sob stories, when outed as such, can spark indignation. They might send listeners scrambling for emotional sanctuary, a place of hardened hearts where pleas for pity fall on unreceptive ears. But even though it's easy to be cynical and dismissive when contemplating these stories in the abstract, it proves considerably more difficult when hearing a specific tale with vivid stakes and faces attached. A touchy-feely story compels us simultaneously to raise our defenses and to let them down. It sets off a tug-of-war between the skeptic and the sucker within us all. No one wants to be taken for a sap, yet there's little virtue in shutting down sympathy altogether.

In reality singing competitions, a spectacular tapestry brings these affective tensions to life. Emotions run high amid montages of contestants' tribulations, sentimental background music, dazzling acts, and free-flowing tears of pathos and pride. As performers, judges, and audience members cry, their faces serve as visual loci of identification for the home viewers who may be moved to mirror these sobs in kind (Figure 3). With today's public growing ever more mindful of reality television's controlled artifice and power over fans, it can be gratifying for consumers to witness someone losing apparent control on a show.²⁴ Teary outbursts, laughing fits, and spontaneous altercations expose the famous faces on these programs as humanly susceptible to emotive whims.²⁵

Disabled or nondisabled, a contestant who appears genuine can win strong favor with judges and fans.²⁶ "Hard work, happiness, familial moments, tears, stress, laughter, and joy add to each contestant's authenticity," Amanda McClain points out regarding *American Idol*, "paradoxically adding to their celebrity by being normal."²⁷ Contestants' displays of emotion and exertion make an attractive mix

²⁴ On how public crying can subvert bodily and societal protocols, see Elizabeth J. Donaldson and Catherine Prendergast, "Disability and Emotion: 'There's No Crying in Disability Studies!'" *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 5, no. 2 (2011): 129–35; and Nick Hodge, "Unruly Bodies at Conference," *Disability & Society* 29, no. 4 (2014): 655–58.

²⁵ Just as reality shows' viewers might find pleasure in noticing cracks in a program's veneer, so opera-goers, as Carolyn Abbate notes, might feel especially thrilled and moved when hearing an unintended, unexpected crack in a singer's voice ("Music: Drastic or Gnostic?" *Critical Inquiry* 30 [2004]: 535).

²⁶ See Matthew Wheelock Stahl, "A Moment Like This: *American Idol* and Narratives of Meritocracy," in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, ed. Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno (New York: Routledge, 2004), 212–32; Charles Fairchild, "Building the Authentic Celebrity: The 'Idol' Phenomenon in the Attention Economy," *Popular Music and Society* 30, no. 3 (2007): 355–75; Dana Heller, "Calling Out around the World: The Global Appeal of Reality Dance Formats," in *Global Television Formats: Understanding Television*, ed. Tasha Oren and Sharon Shahaf (New York: Routledge, 2012), 39–55; McClain, *American Ideal*, 25–32; and Meizel, *Idolized*, 77–79.

²⁷ McClain, *American Ideal*, 94. A contestant's "amateur" status also contributes to the image of authenticity and the narrative of overcoming. The rules of *Idol* and similar shows stipulate that contestants may not be signed with any record labels at the time of their auditions, but even ex-contracted contestants can nevertheless receive flack for being "too experienced" for the competition (see Rushfield, *American Idol*, 105–12).



Figure 3a. (Color online) Tears from coach will.i.am on *The Voice UK* (2014). YouTube video screen shot. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJZycGUPCS0>

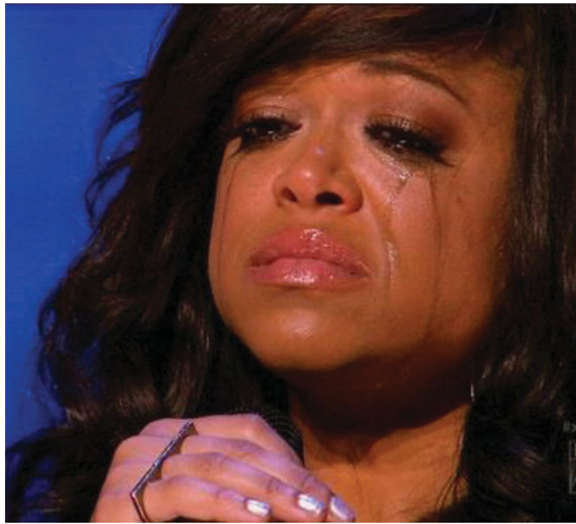


Figure 3b. (Color online) Tears from contestant Stacy Francis on *X Factor USA* (2011). YouTube video screen shot. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FbsmvXzMJY>

of vulnerability and confidence—the confidence to *appear* vulnerable, to let go, to bare tender souls to a live audience of millions. Fallibility is relatable; it wins hearts. Backlash, however, can be commensurately severe if viewers suspect contestants' expressions to be affectations or prevarications.²⁸ For all the sympathy that honest tears elicit, phony crying can come off both awkward and insulting. A fraudulent

²⁸ See Bell, *American Idolatry*, 170–72.

show of emotion fuels fans' disdain not simply for its deceit, but also because such fakery vexingly calls attention to the artifice of reality television's melodramatic programming writ large.

For an example abroad, take the case of singer Alice Fredenham, who, during her audition for *Britain's Got Talent*, remarked that she suffered from serious stage fright. On camera, she wrung her hands, spoke timidly, and wiped tears from her eyes no fewer than nine times. She went on to sing "My Funny Valentine" and received high praise from the judges for a winning exhibition of nerves overcome. Unfortunately, fans later cried fraud upon seeing Fredenham behave confidently during her appearance on *The Voice UK*, which aired around the same time as this *Britain's Got Talent* episode. The *Daily Mail* reported viewers who believed that Fredenham's "apparent shyness on *Britain's Got Talent*, filmed three months after her audition for *The Voice*, was nothing more than a cynical ploy to win votes."²⁹ To be clear, it didn't matter to some viewers whether Fredenham was, beyond doubt, deliberately faking. Rumors sufficed to sour people's enthusiasm (Figure 4).

Given the well-known currencies of overcoming narratives on reality shows, hopeful contestants have ample incentives to embellish or even outright fabricate stories of woe. Sometimes, people get caught. High-profile scandals in past years have included two unrelated instances of contestants, on *America's Got Talent* and *American Idol* respectively, lying about having sustained severe injuries in the line of military duty. One of these cases was Timothy Poe, who, in his 2012 audition for *America's Got Talent*, declared that he had suffered a broken back and brain damage from a grenade explosion while serving in Afghanistan.³⁰ On the show, he explained how his injuries have caused him to speak with a stutter, but how he doesn't stutter when he sings thanks to his work with a speech therapist. Poe's performance of "If Tomorrow Never Comes" by Garth Brooks won a standing ovation from the audience and the judges (Howie Mandel, Sharon Osbourne, and Howard Stern). Mandel told him, "Everything about you is amazing—I have to say: you, sir, are a phenomenal talent," while Osbourne praised Poe for his "rich, beautiful tone."³¹ Later, when Poe returned backstage and proclaimed his excitement about his successful audition, the show's host Nick Cannon gushed, "Man, that was awesome. And I don't know if you just noticed, but this whole sentence that you just said, you didn't stutter one bit."

²⁹ Alasdair Glennie, "'Shy' Britain's Got Talent Contestant Alice Fredenham Accused of Faking Her Stage Fright as She's Seen Looking Confident in Low Cut Top on The Voice," *Daily Mail*, 19 April 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2311837/Britains-Got-Talent-contestant-Alice-Fredenham-accused-faking-stage-fright-shes-seen-looking-confident-bubbly-The-Voice.html>, emphasis added. As the title of this *Daily Mail* article suggests, public criticisms of Fredenham displayed problematic signs and vocabularies of slut-shaming.

³⁰ The other case was Matt Farmer (*American Idol*, season 12), who invented a story about military injuries and thereafter issued a public apology for lying. See "Matt Farmer, *American Idol*'s 2013 Timothy Poe," *Guardian of Valor*, 2013, <http://guardianofvalor.com/matt-farmer-american-idols-2013-timothy-poe>. To gain eligibility, some contestants have also lied or omitted details about criminal records and personal scandals. See "*American Idol* Contestant Jermaine Jones Booted over Criminal Charges," *Rolling Stone*, 14 March 2012, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/american-idol-contestant-jermaine-jones-booted-over-criminal-charges-20120314>.

³¹ The full audition can be viewed at "America's Got Talent 2012—Tim Poe, Singer/War Veteran," 5 June 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiItDgDxfMs>.

“That’s amazing!” Poe replied.

Within days, military records came out attesting that although Poe had served in the Minnesota National Guard, there were no reports that he was ever injured in combat. The media blew up, accusing Poe of playing the “disabled vet card” and putting on a stutter.³² Veterans and military personnel were among those who most vigorously sought to expose him. Although Poe did not fully acknowledge his lies, he admitted having problems with self-delusion and apologized tearfully during interviews with ABC News and the *New York Post*. He also confessed that, despite his earlier claims of never having sung before, he had in fact sung in a band. In light of this new information, judge Howie Mandel went on to complain in an interview:

On so many levels it is so irritating. The truth is, especially at this time in our lives, in this country, I am so thankful for anybody, in any service, for whatever they are doing, and wherever they are stationed. And when [Poe] showed up with this story that he never sang before and the stuttering was part of a brain injury, he captured the hearts and minds and ears of all of America. It certainly helped him in this competition. [. . .] Last week he was publicly praised and honored. Now he is publicly humiliated and he deserves to be publicly humiliated. [. . .] I feel violated. Other service people feel violated. [. . .] We should not be judging at all on a back story. Whatever the judges do will be based on the talent and whatever he does in Vegas.³³

Unsurprisingly, Poe was eliminated from *America’s Got Talent* during its Vegas call-back week. In that episode, however, none of the judges mentioned the scandal. Instead, they concluded out loud, for the cameras, that Poe was not a good enough *singer* to move on in the competition—the same singer whom they had earlier praised for his “phenomenal talent” and “rich, beautiful tone.” Here, we see the rationalizations of meritocracy cutting both ways. By playing up the priority of vocal merit, judges and producers had a convenient excuse to eliminate Poe without addressing any stories of disability, deception, and special dispensation that were otherwise being foregrounded in the news and social media.

When fans suspect contestants of lying about impairments or injuries, the resulting anxieties serve up reminders of how easily overcoming narratives can sway opinions more generally. Given disability’s symbolic capital on reality shows, contestants have strong motives to game the system, and many likely get away with it. Because even in spite of viewers’ skepticism, tales of adversity and achievement are ultimately narratives people may *wish* to believe. Without accepting a contestant’s tearjerking story wholesale, consumers recognize the value of believing in its believability (compare this, say, to the common situation of a person who tells a loved one suspected of lying: *I really want to believe you, I really do*). Although we

³² See Bryant Jordan, “*Talent* Contestant’s Afghan Wounds in Question,” *Military*, 6 June 2012, <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2012/06/06/talent-contestants-afghan-wounds-in-question.html>.

³³ Jacqueline Cutler, “*America’s Got Talent*: Tim Poe ‘Deserves to Be Publicly Humiliated,’ Says Howie Mandel,” *Screeners TV*, 8 June 2012, <http://screenertv.com/news-features/americas-got-talent-tim-poe-deserves-to-be-publicly-humiliated-says-howie-mandel>.

could call this bad (or misplaced) faith, it jibes with a staple affect: hope.³⁴ Clichéd as they are, sentimental stories are formidable and, at times, seemingly irresistible. Aptly named, overcoming narratives overcome us in turn, dampening our eyes and giving us chills. As they flood us with feelings, they leave us raw, tender, beside ourselves, *despite* ourselves.

If the overcoming stories on reality shows can cause fans to feel disempowered and disillusioned, these competitions' voting allowances have sought to restore viewers with a sense of power and an illusion of meritocracy. Every major American reality singing contest in recent years—*The Voice*, *The X Factor*, and *American Idol*, along with the variety show *America's Got Talent*—has allowed viewers to vote for their favorite contestants. The message: America decides. Such participatory agency, granted, doesn't add up to an egalitarian model of suffrage. A viewer's capacity to vote depends on financial means (calling and texting plans cost money), place of residence (connection speeds and services differ across the country), and disposable time (some viewers can materially afford to spend more hours voting than others). Each individual fan, moreover, can cast multiple votes and is outright encouraged by shows to do so since every call or text fills the coffers of the programs and their partnering service providers. Given the commercialist bent of such voting, fans have theorized conspiracies about miscounts, power-dialing (voting via enhanced technical apparatus), producers' interference, and flat-out vote-tampering.³⁵ With so much suspicion in the mix, meritocracy seems but a dream. Yet even if "viewers may question the level of agency actually afforded them in the innovative *Idols* voting processes," observes Katherine Meizel, "the *implications* of agency remain crucial."³⁶

Voting aside, among the central draws of a reality competition is how it affords viewers a fantasy of community, an opportunity to *feel together*—crying and emoting and being overcome along with contestants, judges, studio audience members, and other fans watching across the nation. Before YouTube and DVR, this opportunity typically meant tuning in to a live show. Today, fans further claim participatory agency through the everyday sharing of videos, memes, and tweets. Although the concept of virality dominates contemporary descriptions of digital circulation, Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green remark that an uncritical reliance on this metaphor impedes understandings of how media objects spread. A model of virality, they say, implies that "the spread of ideas and messages can occur without users' consent and perhaps actively against their conscious resistance."³⁷ But while it is important to recognize consumers as active, generative, and cognizant agents,

³⁴ See Daniel Todd Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); and Tali Sharot, Christoph W. Korn, and Raymond J. Dolan, "How Unrealistic Optimism Is Maintained in the Face of Reality," *Nature Neuroscience* 14 (2011): 1475–79.

³⁵ As Richard Rushfield points out, "The question of whether *Idol* is 'fixed' remains the subject of perennial rumors and Internet theories," given fans' endless "talk of busy signals, crossed numbers, and changed vote totals" (*American Idol*, 179).

³⁶ Meizel, *Idolized*, 216, emphasis in original. Fans may also derive feelings of agency by voting in ways that snub the meritocratic operations of a show. They could, for example, "Vote for the Worst" so as to subvert a program's expected metrics. See Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 91.

³⁷ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 18.

my larger point pertains to how some examples of media can seem so powerful and pervasive that they appear capable of self-replication. A beautiful, clever, or hilarious video *virtually* begs to be passed along to friends and coworkers. We share this material almost *as though* we were overcome by a need to do so.

Given the rapid rates of media circulation, the last thing a modern consumer may want is to feel left out or left behind. Accelerated online dialogues and 24-hour news cycles have intensified societal pressures to keep up with the headlines, to share a timely clip on Facebook, and to seize a story before its moment has passed. Amid all this speed, however, we may forget to account for the temporal idiosyncrasies—in some cases, the slowness—that result from, among other things, the lived conditions of disability and neurodiversity. In rushing to praise or to lambast a reality contestant's voice or narrative, we might forget to take the necessary time to think and talk through disability itself, including vital issues of how different people live according to different parameters, requirements, and sensations of time.

Slow Stigma

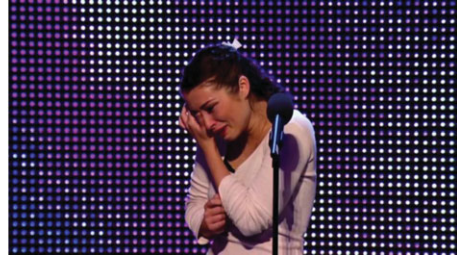
Critical conversations about disability feature plentiful references to time and duration: medical diagnoses of lifespan, philosophical forays into finitude, and disclaimers about the always-temporary nature of able-bodiedness (should one live long enough).³⁸ People with disabilities are commonly stigmatized as unable to meet deadlines, bound in asexual or presexual states, stunted in physique and intellect, or otherwise trapped in slow bodies and minds.³⁹ By exhibiting deviance, disabled individuals also get stared at, reified, catalogued, and contained—in short, stuck—in strictures and stereotypes. Especially where mobility and speech impairments are concerned, disability leads to discrimination and exclusion in terms of not just space (unaccommodating architecture and terrain) but also time (daily schedules and temporal frames).

Many reality shows have spotlighted contestants who speak with impediments—slowly, unevenly—yet sing fluently.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding the controversial Timothy Poe on *America's Got Talent*, recent examples include Carlos Guevara on *The X Factor USA* and Harrison Craig on *The Voice Australia*. A high-profile case was Lazaro Arbos on Season 12 of *American Idol*, which premiered in January 2013

³⁸ See Michael Bérubé, "Afterword: If I Should Live So Long," in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, ed. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 337–43.

³⁹ See James Charlton, "Peripheral Everywhere," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 4, no. 2 (2010): 195–200; Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 132–75; and Tom Shakespeare, *The Sexual Politics of Disability: Untold Desires* (London: Cassell, 1996).

⁴⁰ Abilities of fluent singing despite impediments in speech have been well documented but remain only partially understood by speech pathologists, music therapists, and cognitive scientists. See Catherine Y. Wan, et al., "The Therapeutic Effects of Singing in Neurological Disorders," *Music Perception* 27, no. 4 (2010): 287–95; and Minae Inahara, "The Rejected Voice: Towards Intersubjectivity in Speech Language Pathology," *Disability & Society* 28, no. 1 (2013): 41–53. See also Andrew Oster, "Melisma as Malady: Cavalli's *Il Giasone* (1649) and Opera's Earliest Stuttering Role," in *Soundings Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, ed. Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus (New York: Routledge, 2006), 157–71.



Figures 4a and 4b. (Color online) A nervous-looking Alice Fredenham on *Britain's Got Talent* (2013). As judges praise Fredenham, the show underscores the sentimental moment with "Somewhere over the Rainbow." YouTube video screen shots. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IChJ6e03k48>



Figures 5a and 5b. (Color online) Lazaro Arbos receives praise from the *American Idol* judges (2013). The hashtag overlay reads "#idolinspire." YouTube video screen shots. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WG4YaVPffrl>

and featured judges Mariah Carey, Randy Jackson, Keith Urban, and Nicki Minaj (Figure 5). In the episode, Arbos stutters as he answers Carey's basic questions about his name and place of residence. At this point, the show cuts to Arbos's backstory through a montage of childhood photos and a recorded interview with his parents, who speak in Spanish about their son's difficult assimilation into American life. The montage concludes with Arbos saying to the camera, with optimism but apparent effort, "You can't let things get you down, 'cause you have to keep going"—setting the stage for (what the viewer hopes and expects will be) a lyrical display of overcoming.

Below is a transcript of Arbos's exchange with the judges before and after his performance. For the first half, during which Arbos speaks on many occasions, I plot enunciations along a scaled time graph to visualize the temporal flux in play. More so than typical text representations of stuttering's phonics (namely, with repeated consonants and dashes, e.g., "L-L-Lazaro"), this graph aims to represent the relative pacing of the dialogues and interruptions.

Carey Hi! How are you, handsome? Tell me your name, and how old you are, where you're from.

Arbos Good.

0:01 0:02 0:03 0:04 0:05 0:06

Carey Okay.

Arbos My name is L_____azaro. I'm from C_____

0:07 0:08 0:09 0:10 0:11 0:12

Carey Okay.

Arbos _____uba. And I'm _____oved to

0:13 0:14 0:15 0:16 0:17 0:18

Carey

Arbos Fl_____orida when I was ten.

0:19 0:20 0:21 0:22 0:23 0:24

Carey Tell me about the way you speak. Is that something you're working on, or...

Arbos It's like a r_____

0:25 0:26 0:27 0:28 0:29 0:30

Carey

Arbos _____ollercoaster.

0:31 0:32 0:33 0:34

0:35 to 2:35—Arbos and his parents tell his backstory via montage and voice-overs. Interview footage is intercut with pictures of Arbos as a child.

Carey What are you going to sing for us today?

Arbos I'm going to sing "Br_____

2:36 2:37 2:38 2:39 2:40 2:41

Carey "Bridge over Troubled Waters [sic]?" Okay.

Arbos _____idge over Tr_____oubled Water."

2:42 2:43 2:44 2:45 2:46 2:47

Carey Great song. Great choice. Okay.

Arbos

Urban Mmm.

Jackson Amazing song.

2:48 2:49 2:50 2:51 2:52

2:52 to 3:55—Arbos performs Simon & Garfunkel's "Bridge over Troubled Water."

3:56 to end (transcript):

Jackson: Wow, wow.

Urban: You should sing all the time.

Carey: Randy, what do you think?

Jackson: Very pleasant. Really, really nice, man. Love your voice. It's amazing that, like, the stammering doesn't happen when you sing. So, Keith just said, just sing all the time.

Minaj: Your story is very, very inspiring. I think you brought a really great vibe into the room, so . . .

Urban: I love your tone. I love the way you sing. I love that you did that song. That's one of my all-time favorite songs. It's just so—it just elicits so much emotion.

Arbos: Thank you.

Carey: I think you have a beautiful voice . . .

Arbos (to Carey): I love you so much.

Carey: Thank you. So let's vote!

Jackson: I feel like this is going to be unanimous, guys, so should we do it together?

Carey: I'm ready.

Jackson: One, two, three . . .

All judges: Yes!

As Arbos approaches the judges to thank them, a background track begins to play The Script's "Hall of Fame," the chorus of which goes: "Standing in the hall of fame / And the world's gonna know your name."

Arbos's singing bore no discernible traces of disability. His performance of a Simon and Garfunkel standard was fluid, mostly in tune, and stylistically conventional (with controlled vibrato, clear diction, and minimal melismas). And although Arbos sang *a cappella*, he did so in strict time—on the beat, enunciations snapped to grid, the pulses of phrases marked out by his subtly swaying body and gesticulating hands.

Predictably, the judges lavished praise on Arbos's "very, very inspiring" story and proficient singing. A rhetorical wrinkle came out, however, in Urban's and Jackson's tongue-in-cheek recommendation that Arbos should "just sing all the time." Maybe these two judges meant to say simply that because Arbos sings well, he should perform frequently to share this gift with others. More likely, Urban and Jackson were alluding to Arbos's speech impediment and noting that because Arbos does not stutter when he sings, he could presumably overcome the practical inconveniences of disfluency if only he could habitually sing his troubles away. Of course, Urban and Jackson weren't being literal, since it's not realistic or socially viable for anyone to sing through daily communications, as if inhabiting an opera or Broadway musical. But while intended as an off-hand compliment, this comment evinces a familiar ableist mindset. Urban and Jackson didn't just blithely posit a facetious "cure" to a complex condition; they also evoked an ideal scenario deemed pitifully unattainable (as in, too bad you *can't* just sing all the time).⁴¹ In the least generous terms, their statements come across as self-serving, to wit: *You should sing all the time so that we (and others) don't have to hear you stammer.*

⁴¹ For a critique of "cure narratives," see Samantha Bassler, "'But You Don't Look Sick': Dismodernism, Disability Studies and Music Therapy on Invisible Illness and the Unstable Body," *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy* 14, no. 3 (2014), <http://voices.no/index.php/voices/article/view/802/668>.

In certain genres of popular music, as Laurie Stras reminds us, a “damaged voice continues to be accepted, even preferred,” as in the case of “the gravel-voice of the rock singer” or “the subtle hoarseness of the jazz vocalist.”⁴² An aesthetics of damage can indeed convey authenticity, integrity, and overcoming. But Arbos, whose speech disability was already explicit, arguably won over the judges not because he sang exceptionally well, but by singing well—just normally—*enough*. His extraordinarily ordinary performance gave his auditors an epistemic lifeline, a comprehensible aesthetic experience that they knew how to talk about and fixate on *apart* from Arbos’s speech (which, based on Mariah Carey’s awkward questions and comportment, did not seem to be a topic that the judges wanted—or were equipped—to address in depth). Disability can pose a critical quagmire to anyone who lacks the vocabulary, patience, and understanding to confront it. Especially when coming up against a disability that involves speech and communication, normates may feel relatively powerful in terms of verbal and physical ability, yet somewhat powerless in their rhetorical capacity to address the deviance in question. Public discomfort with the facts and fictions of disability shows up in little signs here and there: grasping at politically correct terms to minimize one’s air of insensitivity or ignorance; looking differently at people who look different (the arched eyebrow, the inquisitive squint, the averted gaze); or straining the ears to understand someone’s atypical speech, trying to make out the words while trying not to look like there’s much trying involved.⁴³

Make no mistake: the capacity for disability to make the nondisabled uneasy does not mitigate the systemic realities of ableism and able-bodied privilege. Yet by contemplating how disability can disable its beholders, and how overcoming stories can overcome consumers—emotionally, physiologically, epistemologically—we gain deeper knowledge of the ways in which power gradients unexpectedly shift and shatter alongside disability’s upheaval of expectations. If disabled bodies can “seem dangerous because they are perceived as out of control,” according to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, then a contestant’s fluent vocal performance reins in this danger with a safely controlled voice.⁴⁴ Skilled singing provides a bountiful target for calculated criticisms and congratulations regarding pitch, tone, and easily denoted musical parameters. The fluent singing of an otherwise disfluent performer demonstrates power by virtue of vocal ability, but also returns adjudicatory power to the listening critic. As much as we may idealize the singing voice as a thing of lyric flight—free, transcendent, out there—the voice still functions as an anchor, grounding a performance in concrete metrics and rubrics, here and now. So whereas disabled characters in literature, film, music, and freak shows have often served as exploited foils to reaffirm readers’ and spectators’ sense of self-normalcy,

⁴² Laurie Stras, “The Organ of the Soul: Voice, Damage, and Affect,” in *Sounding Off*, 174. See also Alex S. Porco, “Throw Yo’ Voice Out: Disability as a Desirable Practice in Hip-Hop Vocal Performance,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2014), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3822/3790>.

⁴³ See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴⁴ Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 37.

the stereotypes of savants and supercrips are valorized as sufficiently conventional and conversable through their performances of relatable, appraisable abilities.⁴⁵

The story of Lazaro Arbos points up the plural identities entangled in understandings of normalcy, disability, and overcoming. *American Idol* showed Arbos grappling with not just his stutter, but also his immigrant status (coming from communist Cuba to capitalist United States) and language barriers (Spanish to English). In the pre-audition interview, Arbos's mother remarked that his stutter became more pronounced when he moved to Florida and faced the requirements of speaking in a new language; Arbos recounted that he felt lonely at school in part due to his difficulties communicating with classmates. Similar intersectional concerns abounded in the journey of *X Factor Australia*'s Emmanuel Kelly, shown trying to overcome not simply his physical disabilities, but furthermore his former orphaned status and even his Iraqi origins (no small feat amid local climates of Islamophobia). Xenophobia, as much as ableism, has long stewed in the shadows of the American Dream. The exclusionist conceit is that the Dream should be reserved for Americans. For people confronting stigma and stereotypes, even a spot on *American Idol* can neither guarantee the status of national belonging nor fend accusations of seizing unmerited gains.

Despite the numerous controversies of reality competitions, many contestants nonetheless express gratitude for the opportunities to share their talents with enormous and appreciative audiences.⁴⁶ There's nothing inherently wrong with celebrating the abilities of musicians who live with (and have in some ways overcome) impairments, illnesses, and adversity. Complications arise, however, when claims of meritocracy and fair judgment silence crucial conversations about disability and inclusion. Judges, fans, and even contestants themselves sometimes describe musical aptitude as a sufficient or necessary source of cure, consolation, or recompense. Highlighting certain talents as miracle correctives additionally risks implying that disabled people who do not display obvious, marketable talents are somehow more hopelessly disabled and less deserving of attention and compassion. As reality shows raise up singing ability as facile proof of pseudo-normalcy, this emphasis on the lyric voice consistently threatens to bring disability under erasure, obscuring the practical, political, and lived realities of bodily difference and oppression.

Conclusion: All Stories Aside?

Like any great love, great art requires great sacrifice. This cliché is especially prevalent among musicians, who are taught narratives of sacrifice and overcoming from Beethoven's deafness and Schumann's crippled hand to Robert Johnson's visit to the crossroads and Kurt Cobain's suicide. As musicians, we rely on our bodies to express our art, and when our bodies fail us, or rather fail our expectations by becoming impaired or incapacitated, we return to these narratives, seeking

⁴⁵ See Frank Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and David Gerber, "The 'Careers' of People Exhibited in Freak Shows: The Problem of Volition and Valorization," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 38–54.

⁴⁶ See Susan Boyle, *The Woman I Was Born to Be: My Story* (New York: Atria Paperback, 2010); Andrea Begley, *I Didn't See That Coming: My Story* (London: BBC Books, 2013); and "Exit Interview: Rion Paige—The X Factor USA," 6 December 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-GYNaufW67A>.

comfort and community in romanticized tropes of tragic artists. But those caught by physical limitations must find a way to live with them—not to overcome and triumph, as the consoling disabled-hero narrative has it, but rather to live with the new and changing structures of our lives.

—M. Celia Cain⁴⁷

In spring 2015, I taught a class on music and media with a unit on reality shows. At one point, students watched videos of Emmanuel Kelly, Lazaro Arbos, and other contestants with disabilities. By the time we got to Timothy Poe and the controversies surrounding his deceptions, I felt the room growing jaded. As millennials, most of these students were already savvy to reality television's formulas and falsehoods, but viewing so many clips in close succession—capped off with Poe's scandal, no less—was leading some people in the class to roll their eyes as soon as a contestant started recounting tales of adversity. Students began lamenting how contestants unapologetically play the sympathy card, how producers manipulate viewers, and how the programs' clichés sow cynicism in consumers. Halfway through the unit, several students looked as if they weren't even listening to contestants' stories anymore. Perhaps they felt they knew these narrative conventions so well that there was no need to pay attention. Were these the lessons I wanted my students to learn? Hypervigilance, defaulted skepticism, emotional hardening? For my part, having researched reality shows for the last three years, I likewise instinctively find myself these days trying to resist feeling overcome when watching an auditionee's backstory and performance.

Celia Cain's epigraph reminds us that overcoming narratives have long pervaded the biographies of artists, musicians, and writers. Romantic tropes prop up the tortured creative soul whose authentic greatness springs from embattlement and suffering. In our age of reality television, such stories have become more visible than ever before. Chronicles of overcoming on these shows can take both cheap and costly shots at our defenses, pulling at our heart strings and our purse strings. In turn, it's easy for discerning consumers to slam these stories for their coercive conceits. But recognizing the exploitativeness of overcoming narratives does not automatically immunize a viewer against their power. Consumers' relationships to these persuasive tales are anything but straightforward: people might love to hate on the shows; hate that they love them; feel ashamed for loving them; admit them as guilty pleasures; or profess to "hate-watch" them.⁴⁸ Vulnerability and resilience have recurred as problematic themes in representations of people with disabilities. Here, I've emphasized how these themes can apply just as vitally to nondisabled people who encounter disability's stories and manifestations.⁴⁹

Today, there's reason to be ever mindful of how disability gets packaged, distorted, sanitized, and mobilized to commercial and ideological ends. Abundant

⁴⁷ M. Celia Cain, "Of Pain, Passing and Longing for Music," *Disability & Society* 25, no. 6 (2010): 747.

⁴⁸ Darren Franich, "The Rise of Hate-Watching: Which TV Shows Do You Love to Despise?" *Entertainment Weekly*, 16 August 2012, <http://www.ew.com/article/2012/08/16/newsroom-smash-glee-hatewatch>.

⁴⁹ See Emily Hutcheon and Bonnie Lashewicz, "Theorizing Resilience: Critiquing and Unbounding a Marginalizing Concept," *Disability & Society* 29, no. 9 (2014): 1383–97.

overcoming narratives simplify disability by pitching certain achievements and capabilities as compensatory remedies, which, in an effusively celebratory mode, might halt conversations about disability altogether. Curiously, aside from cases of performers with speech impediments, most of reality shows' singing contestants who have disabilities are actually not seen dealing with impairments related to vocal ability. That is, few of these contestants purport to have hearing loss, throat damage, reduced lung capacity, amusia, muteness, or comparable conditions that bear directly on singing and musical talent. On the one hand, then, it shouldn't come as a surprise when someone who is blind, impoverished, or grieving demonstrates proficient singing. On the other hand, it's easy to assume that hardship, pain, and any misfortune can take a toll on one's voice overall (materially as well as metaphorically)—on the will and the ability to sing. Given the voice's implications of natural expression, an adequate singing voice can resound, to optimistic ears, as instant proof of disability overcome, as wholesale triumph over an afflicted body.

With grace and caution, there are productive, respectful ways to tie concepts of inspiration and sentimentality into disability discourse. Wendy Chrisman writes, "If we consider all the circumstances in which we might truly need inspiration, perhaps we can envision the need for recuperating inspirational narratives: the inspiration needed to confront a struggle, to seek justice, to right wrongs, to set examples of encouragement."⁵⁰ Catherine Prendergast similarly challenges the assumption that "an inquiry that boils down to pathos must somehow fail to reach the political. [...] The field [of Disability Studies] would be most advanced by participating in the circulation and recirculation of emotion, rather than trying to arrest it."⁵¹ But for every nuanced article, we see plenty of repugnant statements about inspiration. Psychiatrist Darold Treffert, in his work on "savant syndrome," flies close to appropriative territory. He insists:

"Acquired" savants are normal (neurotypical) persons who, having previously shown no particular special savant skills or abilities, suddenly, *after* a head injury, stroke, or other brain disease or disorder, develop art, music or math skills, for example, sometimes at a prodigious level. These cases heighten the possibility that savant capabilities—a little *Rain Man* perhaps—might be buried, but dormant, within us all. If so, it also presents the related question as to how one might access such dormant potential without having a head injury, stroke or other central nervous system catastrophe.⁵²

As ambitious as these musings might be, Treffert frames inspiration selfishly. People with disabilities can inspire others, but they do not live to edify the nondisabled. (Case in point: after hearing Emmanuel Kelly's tale of hardship on *X Factor Australia*, judge Natalie Bassingthwaight cradled her head in her hands and sighed: "It just makes everything that you worry about seem so pathetic." In a response to

⁵⁰ Chrisman, "A Reflection on Inspiration," 179.

⁵¹ Catherine Prendergast, "And Now, A Necessarily Pathetic Response: A Response to Susan Schweik," *American Literary History* 20, nos. 1–2 (2008): 241–42. See also Howard Sklar, "What the Hell Happened to Maggie?": Stereotype, Sympathy, and Disability in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 5, no. 2 (2011): 137.

⁵² Darold A. Treffert, *Islands of Genius: The Bountiful Mind of the Autistic, Acquired, and Sudden Savant* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2010), xvii, emphasis in original.

this episode, disability activist Stella Young fired back: “Natalie Bassingthwaighte, disabled people don’t exist to remind you to be less shallow.”⁵³) Critiques of “inspiration porn” have appeared in recent memoirs and reflections, such as Young’s article “We’re Not Here for Your Inspiration” and Harilyn Rousso’s book *Don’t Call Me Inspirational: A Disabled Feminist Talks Back*.⁵⁴ Maybe witnessing oppression, adversity, and deficits in accommodation should inspire the nondisabled not just to do well, but foremost to do good—that is, not to fuel one’s personal ambitions and merits, but to fight for a more compassionate and accommodating world where the hurdles in these paths of overcoming aren’t so copious and prohibitive in the first place.

As media consumers, as academics, and maybe especially as musicologists schooled in critical listening practices, we have reason to remain wary of how stories of overcoming on *American Idol* or *The Voice* incur special treatment, swaying our perceptions of a performer’s abilities. Trying to set these stories aside, we might pick on the notion that the audition of Lazaro Arbos was a little off-pitch and off-kilter, at times shaky and lacking control. But maybe we pick on things like pitch and tone and timing because these are the technical elements that are easiest and safest to talk about, the musical dimensions for which we have authoritative and precise technical vocabularies. Emotional stories, by contrast, are messier, touchier, quirrier. Perhaps, then, the burden falls on listeners to learn to listen differently; to listen to difference differently; and to reflect on the stakes, costs, and incentives for either upholding or uprooting standards of aesthetic merit.

Any suspicions we’ve developed lately toward ideals of musical autonomy (art for art’s sake) should translate to similar disavowals of autonomous musical ability.⁵⁵ If we believe that all artwork is made meaningful by living acts of creation, reception, and revision, then we should be equally inclined to believe that no artistic ability can meaningfully exist without considerations of the artist and the audience. Yet on reality shows, judges continue to express praise and critique *as if* they could separate song from singer, performance from story, and disability from musical ability. When Kelly performed John Lennon’s “Imagine” on *X Factor Australia*, judge Guy Sebastian told him: “Emmanuel, you’re a great singer. And I’m not saying that because you’ve had a hard life, [but] because it’s the thing to say. Compared to the other people here, *regardless of your story*, you’ve got a beautiful gift, and you moved everyone in this room.”⁵⁶ On *China’s Got Talent*, judge Annie Yi offered similar comments to a twelve-year-old Mongolian boy who was mourning the death of his parents: “*No matter what your story is*, Da Mu, the most important thing is

⁵³ Stella Young, “There Is No X-Factor in Patronising Judgement,” *ABC Australia*, 20 September 2011, <http://www.abc.net.au/rampup/articles/2011/09/20/3321673.htm>.

⁵⁴ Stella Young, “We’re Not Here for Your Inspiration,” *ABC Australia*, 2 July 2012, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-07-03/young-inspiration-porn/4107006>; and Harilyn Rousso, *Don’t Call Me Inspirational: A Disabled Feminist Talks Back* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 158.

⁵⁵ See Max Paddison, “Music as Ideal: The Aesthetics of Autonomy,” in *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music*, ed. Jim Samson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 318–42.

⁵⁶ “Emmanuel Kelly,” *The X Factor 2011 Auditions*, 29 August 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W86jlvR54o>, emphasis added.

that you truly sang the song very well.”⁵⁷ And on *X Factor USA*, judge Simon Cowell told Carlos Guevara, an auditionee diagnosed with Tourette syndrome: “You know what I like about you is that you’re not a victim. You know, I mean, you’ve got this, you know, this issue, but most importantly, you haven’t let that stop you doing what you’ve dreamt of doing. *Forget about all of that*, you’ve actually got a great voice.”⁵⁸

Regardless of your story. No matter what your story is. Forget about all of that. Are personal stories things to be disregarded, no-mattered, or forgotten? People are no more reducible to their singing abilities than they are to their disabilities. We can try to set stories momentarily aside for the sake of objectivity (in the name of fairness, professionalism, and meritocracy), but the very imagination of ability as detachable carries the cost of misrecognizing the complexity of human experience and the urgency of outreach. Stories matter; they matter so long as we believe people matter.

And so this was what I ended up proposing to my students on the last day of our unit about reality shows. After offering them so many examples of overcoming narratives—during which some students scoffed, some watched with apparent interest, and one student fought back tears (occasionally giggling at herself as she did so, maybe out of concern that she would be teased by her classmates)—I told them that they, to some extent, get to decide how they wish to take in and take on these stories. Down the line, as they watch reality shows on their own, they can assume that every contestant is a potential Timothy Poe and turn a stone heart to emotional tales. Maybe this will make them feel smart, strong, and in control. Alternatively, they can aim to give contestants the benefit of the doubt and conceive of how, despite the overt exploitativeness of reality programs, there’s value in allowing oneself to be moved—moved to tears, sure, but more importantly, moved to social action, to foster disability awareness and promote human rights. On or off the stage, overcoming narratives remind us that what ultimately needs overcoming is prejudice at large, and that this has to be not just the story of any one extraordinary singer, but a dream that all of us work to make a reality.

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⁵⁷ “China’s Got Talent 2011 12-yr-old Mongolian Boy Singing ‘Mother in the Dream,’” 6 June 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IY7ChkI6c8A>, emphasis added, author’s translation. Annie Yi’s statement in the original Mandarin was: 「不管你的故事怎麼樣，達木最重要是你歌唱的真的很好。」

⁵⁸ “Carlos Guevara’s Struggles Won’t Hold Him Back,” 18 September 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rUWDvuBOHY>, emphasis added.

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