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## **Globalization and the Public Cartographies of *Vietnam Idol***

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This essay addresses the limits of global popular culture as an index for measuring Viet Nam's modernization and impact by globalization processes. Contemporary discussions consider Viet Nam a major emerging market, one exemplary of increasing capitalist production in Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> Such a projection is premised on not only this socialist country's reorientation toward free trade but also its participation in the *global popular* through sociocultural "liberalization." As Viet Nam's development into a more "open" society after decades of isolation<sup>2</sup> entails moving toward a cosmopolitan "*culture-consuming* public,"<sup>3</sup> I believe we need to scrutinize certain assumptions about cultural progress and difference underlying such developments, especially as this model extends the notion of the bourgeois public sphere and "communicative rationality" elucidated by thinkers such as Jurgen Habermas by suggesting intercultural convergence and exchange

through new media and communications.<sup>4</sup> Such a model ignores the challenges of postcolonial nations to assume full membership in the “global village”<sup>5</sup> by establishing a universal world order in which all countries and people share a common mode of social interaction under the auspices of mass consumerism.

This essay takes issue with this general premise, which ignores what Arjun Appadurai identifies as the “tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization,”<sup>6</sup> an issue crucial to apprehending the vexed conditions under which cultural globalization operates within postcolonial settings. Using the television program *Vietnam Idol* as a case study, I demonstrate that although shows such as *Idol* aim to bring Viet Nam into the fold of global culture, they serve only to create contradictory notions of “culture.” Rather than showcasing Viet Nam’s entry into the cultural zeitgeist of modern entertainment, this show reifies a planetary cartography of public cultures, one that I suggest opens up the spliced, contradictory nature of such cultures. At the very moment it brings this so-called third world country up to speed with pop trends, *Idol* reveals the neocolonial processes and culturalist terms under which global modernity is both engendered and unhinged. I contend that global mass media—seen as free flowing, immaterial, and unbounded—reinforces a traditional “peoples and cultures” paradigm for understanding human geographies.<sup>7</sup> Through what can be called “geocultural publics,” I recognize *Idol*’s attempt to mobilize different levels of public culture—national, local, international, regional, national—to enact geospatial forms of cultural place making and belonging. While there is growing scholarship on the idea of postcolonial publics,<sup>8</sup> I emphasize the term *geocultural* to mark new forms of cultural racism<sup>9</sup> anchored in particularized notions of space and time, where formerly colonial peoples remain stuck in the “past” even as they embark on the quest to be modern outside the realm of geopolitics which tends to focus on international state relations.<sup>10</sup> The geocultural media zones, for instance, created by the proliferation of *Idol* worldwide (e.g., *Serbian Idol*, *New Zealand Idol*, *Brazilian Idol*) set a baseline for global culture very much complicated by the cultural imaginaries and perceived differences of each country.

This study follows past critiques of globalization and its ideal of a global

cultural public.<sup>11</sup> One major criticism of globalization discourse involves its tendency to situate mass media as an abstract arena for communal sharing, consciousness, and witnessing. Against this sort of generalization, media scholar Joseph Straubhaar suggests that global “televisual” culture needs to be analyzed within its capitalist conditions and specific contexts to reveal moments of opposition within an otherwise atomized, homogenous picture.<sup>12</sup> Political theorist Nancy Fraser argues that a critical approach is necessary given current calls for a global public sphere so as to “illuminate the emancipatory possibilities of the present postnational constellation.”<sup>13</sup> For Fraser, the public sphere as a social domain must not describe a universal communicative context. When this becomes the case, the transnationalization of the public sphere via media culture is seen as producing a kind of Hegelian “world-encompassing superculture.”<sup>14</sup> Following these critics, I suggest that rather than being transhistorical and transcultural, global mass media messily rewrites cultural geographies in ways I believe offer “emancipatory possibilities” for critiques against the totality of the global present. In the process, I question how cultural and capitalist value are generated and to whose benefit such value is accumulated.

In this essay, I use *Vietnam Idol* to interrogate the construction of the global popular media as a site of shared public and collective awareness. My investigation reveals a process of cultural adaptation and (mis)translation demanding a critical “optics of globalization”<sup>15</sup> that recognizes the cultural specificity and context of non-Western public cultures, interrogating public spectacles such as *Idol* to uncover the workings of cultural and economic globalization often perceived as smooth, systematic, and organized processes. In the case of *Vietnam Idol*, subglobal media publics (local, national, youth, etc.) are necessary as platforms for countries such as Viet Nam to move onto the international stage. Rather than importing foreign culture into an already existing “indigenous” culture, *Vietnam Idol* demarcates Viet Nam as a geocultural site whose “glocal” spaces invite alternative readings against the calculus of area-specific thinking.

### Capitalizing on Youthful Idolization

*Idol* is a type of singing contest now a worldwide phenomenon. It is a talent platform where amateur contestants are judged and eliminated according to popular voting by a television-viewing audience. Winners receive a recording deal, money, and the crown title of “idol” for their countries. Forty spin-offs have been made after the introduction of Britain’s *Pop Idol* and the more recognizable *American Idol* (the number-one rated US television show for the 2000s). With worldwide name-brand recognition, these permutations owe their success to a standard format in which aspiring singers audition for a chance to gain instant stardom in one of the biggest venues for the culture industry. In the case of *Vietnam Idol*, everything about it—the show’s poor lighting, cheesy theme song, and cheap production (though expensive by Vietnamese standards)—appears as an inferior version of its Western counterparts. The show’s legitimacy is derived from its homology with the West insofar as international differences in production value, for instance, are explained away by the image of a creative global community, one united but also segmented by their geocultural formations.

The importation of *Idol* to Viet Nam arrives with the promise of a participatory cultural politics cohered around a sense of nation building based on youth and novelty. Where such contests thrive on direct audience participation, *Idol* aims to cultivate a consumer-oriented generation of youth to expand its human and cultural capital. Like other *Idol* programs, *Vietnam Idol* exclusively prefers young adult contestants aged eighteen to thirty. This restriction coincides with a tracking system based on the rags-to-riches teleology in which individuals are followed from their moment of obscurity into fame. Contestants perform live in front of TV audiences, and text messages, phone calls, and Internet votes help eliminate them one by one until a single winner triumphs. This “coming of age” progression promulgates an individualist narrative of upward mobility and the American Dream tailored for Viet Nam, one that masks the heterogeneous social realities facing youth who are solicited to envisage Viet Nam as urbane, energetic, and primed for success. Though *Vietnam Idol* emphasizes the geographic diversity of participants, it encourages a national identification among youth who are made to appear as an aggregate community of self-interested

individuals. Amid funny auditions and teary rejections, heart-wrenching stories are showcased to make the *Idol* program emotionally resonant; for example, a visually impaired contestant from Da Nang claims that *Vietnam Idol* will enable him to support his parents and pay for eye surgery, and another considers *Idol* fame to be the best thing to ever happen in her life, which consists of working at her family's fishing farm. We never know these types beyond fleeting appearances made for the camera. While such sentimentality is symptomatic of the drama in any *Idol* competition, such stories play out against the dramatic backdrop of Viet Nam's development toward a free-market modern economy.

Just as *American Idol* highlights personal stories to impart ideals of American exceptionalism and meritocracy,<sup>16</sup> so too does *Vietnam Idol*'s narration of individual uplift and opportunism make opaque the social inequities among a youthful people seen as "making it" despite incredible odds. Ads that first ran for the show proclaimed to make a "youth Idol" manufactured from "a star-making industry" honed into "perfection."<sup>17</sup> Young adults are trained in singing, attire, and public speaking as part of their "professionalization." *Idol* judge Ha Dung admits, "The contestants chosen, though not excellent, they have enough qualities to be trained as a professional."<sup>18</sup> Ha Dung goes on to say, "In the semifinals, audiences actually witnessed on the small screen efforts by the candidates to custom improve their abilities, voice training, skills, and performance to create new [good] impressions for the judges and audiences."<sup>19</sup> *Idol* demarcates youth as a key demographic while belying the increasing generational and income gap between younger and older generations in a rapidly industrializing country, indigenous/ethnic minorities occluded from this Vietnamese-specific "national programming," and the gendered division of labor involved in organizing Viet Nam's worker-citizens toward an export-oriented economy. Who gets hidden or disavowed from *Idol* mania is never completely brought into discussion. In encouraging Vietnamese youth to become professionals as well as nationalistic within a profit-driven model of commerce, we can ask therefore what kind of media "public" is privileged and what subjectivities are left out in an industry of youthful idols?

Although it seems to proffer a new public space where youth exercise their will in a country where political dissent is discouraged, *Vietnam Idol*'s

nation-building project is seen as a matter furthering cultural democracy in Viet Nam when it can actually reinforce certain populist tendencies. Nguyen Chi Tan, Ho Chi Minh City Television's deputy director said, "We want to create more opportunities for young people, particularly those in rural areas, who love music and want to be involved in singing." *Vietnam Idol* brings to fruition the idea of Viet Nam as ripe for economic success embodied in youth aspirations: "Our competition will encourage young people to develop their abilities and make their dreams come true," Tan also said.<sup>20</sup> Despite the stated goal of elevating youth in poor rural areas, auditions were held only at four major urban centers: Can Tho, Hanoi, Da Nang, and Ho Chi Minh City. Rather than focusing on the countryside, *Vietnam Idol* aired on *Ho Chi Minh City Television (HTV9)* under the aegis of *Vietnam National Television (VTV)*. This action anticipated the urbanization of an agricultural society in which 70 percent inhabit rural areas, many of whom do not often have the means to get to the auditions. *Vietnam Idol* judge Ha Dung nevertheless believes "*Vietnam Idol* is actually a competition meaningful for the young generation who dares to dream, dares to express."<sup>21</sup>

Alongside an imagined rural to urban spatialization, *Vietnam Idol* calls for the enhancement of Viet Nam's technoculture to forge broader public engagement. I-POP Networks (the premier mobile media services company in Asia), along with Gapit Communications (Viet Nam's leading mobile content services company), shepherded commercial development as the exclusive mobile service provider, alongside FreemantleMedia (the European company in charge of the *Idol* franchise worldwide) with Viet Nam Advertising Company, a leading TV production company.<sup>22</sup> In concert, they manage the show's mobile media elements: SMS text messaging, telephone voting, online contests, mobile phone alerts, videos, games, wallpapers, screensavers, and ring tones. In a country where less than a fifth of the population are able to access the Internet and its affiliated technologies, *Vietnam Idol* producers hired the first Web-based employee, Tommy T, for any *Idol* adaptation in the world, a webmaster able to interact with everyday individuals on the official website,<sup>23</sup> a prerequisite to establishing the broad electronic landscape that a show like this demands in a developing country with a small electronic public sphere.<sup>24</sup> Web host Tommy T explains why this diffuse multimedia system did not succeed overnight: "New things do

not make a red carpet splash; they need more time to be accepted or rejected as fraudulent waste, which explains the failure of *Pop Idol* in Singapore. The design of *Idol* must be ‘beyond ourselves’ if you plan on conquering audiences, but those responsible for the program had to overcome a series of challenges last year to bring a Vietnamese musical television show with all the right cultural ingredients.”<sup>25</sup> Tuan Khanh echoes this statement: “With the audience, *Vietnam Idol* is not just an entertainment game show, it’s a business and a serious contest. This contest showed that there were too many inconsistencies in the selection process that are not always in accordance with Vietnamese musical environment.”<sup>26</sup>

Efforts to distinguish *Vietnam Idol* from other *Idol* shows in the global market through its production and programming can be understood as a neoliberal subsumption of difference into market consumer personal choice, but one that remains spliced by its own internal contradictions. As these communication technologies operate primarily through faceless interaction, this technocratic mediascape idealizes a postmodern autonomous subject (the global cultural consumer) able to tap into sophisticated media tools. Anthony Giddens, David Harvey, Sassia Sasken, Zygmunt Bauman, and others have called attention to the profound social dislocations engendered by globalization, arguing that modernization never entails full democratization and individualization but a reinvention of existing hierarchical systems. In that regard, the media craze shaped by *Vietnam Idol* exacerbates an existing technological and “digital divide” in Viet Nam by emphasizing an abstract sense of technoculture over indigenous cultural practices and spaces, and this fails to initiate all Vietnamese into the world of *Idol* domination even as it seeks to incorporate and interpellate all.

### **Bringing Modern Social “Reality” to the Third World**

Viet Nam’s immature consumer market presents fertile ground for an experimental show such as *Idol* in its offering of “modern reality.” Indeed, the first *Vietnam Idol* episode opened with the following message: “*Pop Idol* comes to Viet Nam. It is a global phenomenon, a place where dreams come true . . . a place where all musical stars shine. . . . You do not have to wait any longer. . . . *Idol* has finally arrived in Viet Nam. Can you believe it?” *Vietnam*



*Idol* sought a mass audience at the outset by offering a unique TV format (reality TV) to rival other domestic talent shows that feature hand-picked professional singers rather than amateurs. *Idol*'s personalized tracking system of following young adults as they evolve from unknowns to celebrities under media "real time" reveals a documentary process evocative of Michel Foucault's notion of the disciplinary subject making technologies of the panoptic. But the challenge of implementing a reality TV show in a place where the concepts of "live" television and "instantaneous" communication are rudimentary impedes the impact and personal immediacy *Idol*'s creators sought to initially exploit. The contestant selection process and voter participation fell short of expectation because the producers overestimated the reception of *Vietnam Idol* in light of the renown and availability of *American Idol* on Vietnamese cable channels.

Offering an explanation as to why *Vietnam Idol* did not make a huge immediate impact, Executive Producer Roshan Dutt says the program attracted low ratings because "the contestants are very confident, but very controlled in their emotions, which makes it difficult for me to turn it into a reality show." Dutt goes on to say, "One of my toughest challenges was teaching my own staff how to create reality TV. The concept is completely new to them." He calls Viet Nam a "special" case given the challenges of bringing an audience-driven contest to a regimented authoritarian country. "I've done about ten reality shows around the world, but I can easily say that Vietnam is the toughest market to work in," he explained, but *Idol* remains important because it gives everyday people a shot at "entertainment world glory." Dutt claims, "This is an experiment, and people are slowly accepting it."<sup>27</sup> We can interpret this statement about *Idol*'s experimentalism in relation to the experiment of social capitalism in Viet Nam. The transference of *Idol* to a native population lacking a sense of "modern reality" and its attendant performative habitus obligates producers to reform them into new modes of public behavior. In as much as foreign-imported television seems like a manifestation of cultural imperialism, it is imperative to posit *Vietnam Idol*'s cultural productions within the contradictions of the global political economy to shed light on *Idol* as a value-laden enterprise not bound up with the governing logic of cultural imperialism in its variegated forms.

As a means of unifying its fragmentary publics, *Idol* uses the logic of cultural difference as a way of suggesting Vietnamese as passive receivers and domesticated consumers of foreign Western culture. Producer Thanh Thao attributes the Vietnamese's slowness in adopting reality TV to cultural differences between Viets and US citizens: "Doing *Vietnam Idol* is almost how I expected it to be, but the contestants here are not as wild [as in *American Idol*]—the Americans are usually very confident and 'look at me' as soon as they come in, but the Vietnamese just love music and love to sing." Thanh Thao believes reality TV will break through to Viet audiences and the show will become successful as viewers watch hopefuls enter the competition from scratch, get a glimpse into their personal lives, and follow their progress.<sup>28</sup> In general, producers such as Thanh Thao are uncritical of the preconceived idea of Vietnamese people as not exposed to this modern model of social interaction and realism. This reinforces the notion of essentialized cultural traditions as temporary barriers to the cultural revolutionary power of mass public culture, the latter seen here as originating in the West and foreign to the East. Another entertainment commentator observes, "These shows seem to be a cultural misfit in Vietnam since participants are too shy to express themselves on camera."<sup>29</sup> This perception of Vietnamese as culturally unsophisticated, conservative, or too reserved to understand the performance staging of reality TV caricatures them as backwards and anachronistic. This imputes a cultural premodern "realness" to the Vietnamese people, whose traditional "private" selves are not yet seen as ready for the "direct-access" demands of modern (read Western) forms of representation. (The Viet Nam War holds the distinction of being the first live televised war in history, so the question of seeing Vietnamese bodies "live" under the Western gaze is ironically not seen here.) Against this sort of nebulous promise of change, we find the media hype tempered by *Vietnam Idol's* three judges. In an Internet interview, they offer critical assessment of the "Vietnamese version" of *Idol* in comparison to its more famous US/British counterparts:<sup>30</sup>

**Tuan Khanh:** According to what I understand, *Vietnam Idol* is a format copied from England's *Pop Idol*, it is the search for the new star in the new generation with free thought and sudden interest which will cre-

ate the criteria for *Idol's* success through every period of time and every contest. The most important thing is that if every country and person is willing to accept this new trend or not.

**Ha Dung:** If you can perform like those famous people [judges of *American Idol*], it's not an easy job. Because it's a copy of *American Idol*, *Vietnam Idol* by principle it has to match *American Idol*. However, we cannot be like the judges of *American Idol* because we are the judges of *Vietnam Idol*.

**Siu Black:** The Vietnamese people are very straightforward and honest, full of personality. However, each country has a different culture and behavior. Therefore, the *Vietnam Idol* contestants will be also different from the behavior of *American Idol*.

**Ha Dung:** As you know this is a copy of *American Idol* with a newer incarnation. Therefore we can predict all the planning; however, you can follow the news about this contest through other media [beyond Vietnamese media sources]. Audiences have their own power.

These oppositional voices from the judges, even from a perspective of privilege, frame the character and behavior of Vietnamese people in terms of a collective agency against external imposition of Western influences. Rather than adopt a rational-critical approach described by Habermas that privileges symbolic interaction and “communicative rationality” as conceived in Western bourgeois society, we find a subaltern counterpublic and alternative sensibility to the implicit forms of US media imperialism that *Idol* offers, one that nevertheless remains circumscribed by its own corporate and cultural nationalism. The consumerist “freedom” and agency attributed to Vietnamese people disguise their encapsulation and circumscription as a targeted market audience seen in singular terms.

### **Global Culture and the Nation-State**

Though a multinational undertaking, *Idol* instills national pride as a means to propel public interest in its global enterprises. The *Idol* franchise favors the nation-state model, and participation is limited to national citizens. By this measure, the large overseas Viet communities, despite their dominance

in the diasporic culture industry, are precluded from producing, auditioning, or voting in *Vietnam Idol*.<sup>31</sup> The show can only be made in Viet Nam, intended for domestic residences, even if its producers and audiences are globally dispersed. This “commercial nationalism” reinforces the sense of publicly shared identity based on ethnogeographic affiliation. But in circumscribing Viet Nam’s media culture to the nation form, the program posits Viet culture and society as temporally behind the West. The nationalist ethos enabling *Vietnam Idol* marks a temporal differencing, the delayed or deferred sense of progress ascribed to developing countries within world historical time.<sup>32</sup> According to Akhil Gupta, “In the Third World, utopian time of the nation is profoundly shaped by a sense of lag . . . visions of the future are predicted on this sense of belated arrival, of being born into a world of nations competing against each other, but in which the new arrivals are positioned in the starting blocks of a race already underway.”<sup>33</sup>

*Vietnam Idol* receives less circulation and prestige than Western-based shows owing to a number of factors such as the omnipresence of Western economies in global media structures, the dominance of English as the lingua franca of global commerce and communication, and the extensive reach of cultural products such as *American Idol*, which is shown in nearly one hundred countries in contrast to other *Idol* contests that are never broadcast beyond their local national contexts. *Idol*’s global culture (*IDOL*world) and its communal public continue to be construed in differential terms, and this geopolitical schema prevents a simple reading of *Vietnam Idol* as an analogue to *American Idol*. The novelty of the *Idol* shows lies in their links to each other as hybrid products of globalization. The inclusion of national *Idol* competitions within a supranational community of *Idol* locates cultural difference within the universalizing time frame of the dominant Eurocentric culture. This “worlding” of public and popular culture asserts the ingenuity and positive creativity of US Western culture through the disavowal of non-Western cultural formations.

On *Vietnam Idol*, contestants sing songs running the gamut from Korean ballads to US rock and hip-hop to Vietnamese folk music, thus showing the musical range and repertoire of contemporary Viet music.<sup>34</sup> Most English-language coverage gives no evidence of the significance of this. Rather, *Vietnam Idol* is taken as a kind of evidence of global happenings made possible

by the “arrival” of a particular form of US cultural expression. Newspaper headlines proclaiming “Vietnam Gets Its Own *American Idol*” and “Vietnam Gets on the *Idol* Bandwagon” suggest the country’s eagerness to follow the precedent set by the West and the degree to which *American Idol* provides the point of reference for all other *Idols*, as though shows such as *Vietnam Idol* hold no validity or even cultural authenticity on their own. In “The Local and Global,” Stuart Hall claims globalization is able “to recognize and absorb those differences within the larger, overarching framework of what is essentially an American conception of the world.”<sup>35</sup> Hall suggests we are witnessing a globalization driven by Americanization, a process decidedly “American” but not restricted to the United States.

While conceding to the contributions of US cultural influence, those invested in *Vietnam Idol* are quick to stand by its originality and cultural integrity. When judge Siu Black was asked whether the show is a rip-off of *American Idol*, Siu Black responded, “Although we know that the contest is a ‘copy’ of *American Idol*, this is a first for those young people who love to sing in our country and this comes as a shock [for us and many of them].”<sup>36</sup> Producer Duc Tri, responsible for managing the *Idol* winner, said, “*Vietnam Idol* is not just a contest but more a star-making technology. We will learn how [to succeed by looking at how] the professional manufacturing industry in the United States was successful,”<sup>37</sup> only to ensure it is “going [in] the right direction along the original version of *American Idol* to attract Eastern audiences.”<sup>38</sup> Thus *Vietnam Idol* “translates” US media culture in such a way that, while attempting to show the primacy of Vietnamese cultural identity, it exposes its contradictory claims. As music producer Vo Thien Thanh claims, “When *Pop Idol* came to Vietnam, basically we bought the rights to make sure the central core of the program and its content has been adjusted to suit the Vietnamese culture.”<sup>39</sup> However, this cultural adjustment, which aims to protect the core of the program (more in terms of its corporate aims than its European cultural origins), did not prevent the insinuation made by some that this was perhaps a Western copy rather than a taken-for-granted process of cultural/capitalist exchange between the United States and Viet Nam. The natural process of this translation, in short, did not go smoothly without some questions about it (whereas *American Idol* did not have to face

itself as a copy or successor of *Pop Idol*). Where national culture and corporate culture are concerned, issues such as gender, for example, prove problematic in terms of who it must domesticate in order to make that corporate transition happen.

### **The Gendered Nationalism of Corporate Culture**

Perhaps the moments of contradiction between *Idol*'s objectives of creating diffuse mass public spheres and the differential structures or effects of those spheres of influence can be found within the issue of gender. As a kind of gendered production, *Vietnam Idol* finds itself anchored within a heteronormative rendering of Vietnamese culture. The series' staging features a panel comprising one female celebrity singer (Siu Black) flanked by two male judges and musical producers in a contrived gendered design that follows so many other *Idol* shows. Alongside the Vietnamese custom of using a male-female duo as ceremonial emcees, this gendered configuration seemed more pronounced when Phuong Vy, an attractive college student hailing from Ho Chi Minh City, became the winner of the inaugural series, beating Ngoc Anh, her brooding male competitor from Ha Tay, one of the oldest historic provinces in Viet Nam. Through Phuong Vy, the urban beauty of Viet Nam's commercial hub can be seen in the way of a postcolonial/post-war future in which female bodies provide the fulcrum for cultural belonging and national progress. This is made apparent by Phuong Vy's cool persona and clothing style, one reminiscent of contemporary singers such as Ho Ngoc Ha. It suggests a new female musical identity, but one that remains traditional, in which women's voices and bodies are the preferred vehicle for enshrining the changing landscape of the motherland. While male and female contestants on *Idol* are encouraged to look their best and "glam up," the female contestants unsurprisingly bear the brunt of comments related to physical appearance. One judge, Do Trung Quan, had been criticized by the government and the public for his outrageous comments, telling one contestant for instance that she had "too strict a dress code," while trashing another paradoxically for being "too outrageous."<sup>40</sup> In the cultural politics over national identity and morality, female beauty is central to structuring

the mainstream public culture, even as it also provides a locus for *Vietnam Idol*'s form of "national entertainment" operating through the global appeal of sexualized female bodies.<sup>41</sup> Asked if she won because she was better looking than the other contestants, Phuong Vy responds,

I think *Vietnam Idol* is not merely a singing contest. It also assesses performing skill on the stage as well as the interaction with the audiences and jury. Any regular viewer of the program surely understands that the winner not only has to sing beautifully but must also know how to charm the audiences. To this end, being beautiful is an advantage. But if anyone says I won just because of my beauty, it's not a fair assessment.<sup>42</sup>

Locked within the superficial pretense imposed by *Vietnam Idol*, Phuong Vy discloses the role she must perform to charm an audience and the beauty standards that can be strategically deployed as the means to such ends. She cues us to the knowledge and compact shared between performer and audience who are both cognizant of *Vietnam Idol* as public activity and publicity stunt. In many ways, however, Phuong Vy's female agency plays into such, even as it detracts from the intent of Vietnamese producers who seek to also mark the show as somehow "their own"—both implicated in the same modes of cultural production that incorporate and interpellate them as free agents.

Vietnamese public spheres as social formations depend on a particular kind of domesticated gendered body that is both a commodity and a consumer of commodity. The gendered terms on which women such as Phuong Vy are placed demand a corporate presence of cultural authenticity and national purity, but these women must individually work to make their own stardom and exploit their own natural talents and resources. Critics used the words *beautiful*, *cute*, *pretty*, *sweet*, or *graceful* to characterize the musical ingénue, and while not often impressed by her singing abilities,<sup>43</sup> suggest Phuong Vy is a good "face" for Viet Nam with the adequate "standards of a professional singer" manufactured by *Idol*'s intense training process.<sup>44</sup> This rising star construes a prototype suggesting the increased stature of women in society, their prominence in media, and their efforts to claim a public space outside traditional domestic roles. At another level, the "rising star" prototype serves as a smoke screen for material reality, inasmuch as the

glossy sheen of televisual sensationalism masks the hidden costs involved in the country's attempt to convert female bodies into productive labor: "gendering" is less about beautification than it is about exploitation. In particular, sexual exploitation and the cheap Fordist forms of labor production that enable and develop modern state nationalism reveal themselves.<sup>45</sup> *Vietnam Idol's* commercial nationalism—in which "the people" chose a nubile girl to represent their country—takes place through the registers of the feminine singing voice and the deification of the "diva" at a point in time when Vietnamese women embody not the idyllic virtues of the nation but its rapid expansion and modernization. According to Giorgio Agamben, this is a time when the female bodily form is the most commodified thing in consumer culture.<sup>46</sup>

Beyond its explicit valuation of femaleness, *Vietnam Idol* puts forth a masculinist agenda underpinned by the propulsions of global capital. Tani Barlow argues that there is a kind of global hypermasculinity "currently permeating the world political economy . . . dispersed through and disguised as modernization and internationalization. . . . Under the rubric of globalization, local and global media (backed by state and corporate capital, respectively) naturalize hypermasculinity as part and parcel of the economic development of manly states,"<sup>47</sup> where Asian women are used to "reregionalize" Asia in terms of a new "macroregion-making."<sup>48</sup> *Idol* is predicated on a masculine nationalization of society, although audiences can choose to identify with male or female singers and take vicarious pleasure from watching all untrained singers take on the high stakes of becoming a star before their very eyes. Positioned in an anonymous objectifying gaze, the masses make meaning of their idols by recognizing them as public figures for mass adoration; this matter of "publicness" involves the penetration/expansion/anticipation of capital that produces maleness as a norm, in which crossing into "adulthood in the form of new income as a pop music idol is a way to embed valuable elements of the means of production within oneself."<sup>49</sup> This telos inserts class-based meaning onto the multiscalar female body, where women symbolically embody the nation and anchor cultural domesticity within the often-alienating deterritorialized movements of capital.

Iconic females such as Phuong Vy calibrate multiple sites of cultural belonging in the national, transnational, and supranational spheres, produc-



ing a domesticated spatial metaphor that “far from providing an innocent if evocate imagery, actually taps directly into questions of social power.”<sup>50</sup> In an *Idol* episode entitled “On the Road to Asian Idol,” Phuong Vy is shown during her audition with a plain cotton shirt and pants, no makeup, hair tied back in a pony tail, bearing an unpretentious demeanor when suddenly the screen shifts to a montage of images of her radical transformation from childlike virgin into sexy adult icon through the feminine incarnations she performed during the show (chic professional, seductress, androgynous). From a glamour shot of Phuong Vy’s teary finale triumph gracing various magazine covers in a glittering sequined gown, the metamorphosis from humble college student to flashy global starlet, from girl to mature woman, from an ordinary person to extraordinary being shows her transference from the private “insular” domains of school, family, and home into the world public eye that nevertheless maintains an ascribed gendered quality.

In a video clip shown during the program, Phuong Vy is found hanging out with children at a charity house for disabled children where, according to the video, in her spare time she “helps young kids for them to have a better life”; many of the children were born to parents “affected by Agent Orange used during the war.” There is a snapshot of her feeding a child in a moment of maternal tenderness, but then suddenly the camera shifts to Phuong Vy trying out costumes for the upcoming *Asian Idol* competition and fans giving testimonials in support of their national idol in this transnational contest. What can be gleaned from this intimate portrayal of a mother/daughter to the nation is the sense of Viet Nam’s gentrification and modernization within one girl’s makeover. Despite this national beautification process, Phuong Vy’s decision to bring the ugly, lingering legacy of chemical warfare into the bubble of *Idol* world serves as a political act that punctures the innocent gaze of mass entertainment by reminding viewers that Viet Nam remains affected by historical events even as it seeks to create new forms of public charity and welfare that are all about advertising Viet Nam’s new national consciousness.

As an ideological force, *Vietnam Idol* hopes to succeed in producing a malleable and captive domestic consumer base by emphasizing the tenets of neoliberal market individualism and consumerism. This stands in contrast to the mass incorporation and domestication of the “docile” labor by mostly

women and children in the cheap labor markets and consumer-export economies of developing countries such as Viet Nam. *Idol*'s special brand of corporate nationalism therefore privileges a complex gendered schema in which the "hi-tech" immaterial nature of its culture industry (electronic voting) can be traditionally read as feminine (leisure) and/or masculine (the public sphere) over the various forms of hyperfeminized, privatized "low-tech" material labor so prevalent in the country—forms in which gender is not simply a category of being but a manufactured process that exploits the potentials of productive femininity.<sup>51</sup> Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong reminds us we must be attentive to various norms and forms of labor that constitute the "performances of class and national identity, predicated on a gender difference."<sup>52</sup> In this regard, the hyper-commodification of Phuong Vy as national icon works to conceal the hyper-commodified bodies and dirty labor performed by many Vietnamese women undergoing their own transformation under their newfound freedom for work in Viet Nam's booming economy, one that demands the flexible commoditization of gendered bodies at all levels. Recognizing the contradictory forces operating between resistance versus complicity, social relations versus commodification, privatization versus public welfare, postnationalism versus nationalism, and other binaries that undergird *Vietnam Idol*, requires attending to the various economies of desire, pleasure, and risk that connect gendered subjects in its cultural production.

We can therefore read Phuong Vy's corporal presence as a sign of women's objectification under a discourse of advancement that fails to address the systemization of Southeast Asian women's labor under the specter of global restructuring.<sup>53</sup> Through her figure, we recognize their status within the phallogocentric imaginary of the nation-state and multinational *capitalism*. In early promotional interviews, Phuong Vy assumed the role of the family-oriented girl, characterizing herself as "kittenish" and too "shy" to speak up. It was a surprise, then, when Phuong Vy broke from the demure self-image cultivated by the show to blaze her own path after the show ended. Rather than accept her newfound life as a national star, following other female singers from Viet Nam, Phuong Vy aspired toward becoming a global superstar. She released a debut album, *Luc moi yeu (Just Falling in Love)*, full of pop songs that include the English single "Leave Me Alone," a

love song that can be reinterpreted as a challenge to the Vietnamese media industry that made her and hounded the budding star about rumored affairs with a show producer, comments on her cold attitude toward reporters, accusations that she “bought” votes to win, and a personal rivalry with a fellow *Idol* singer. Phuong Vy’s unruliness motivated some to call her a “defiant” personality.<sup>54</sup>

Represented by one of the most prestigious entertainment firms in *Vietnam* (Music Faces), Phuong Vy plans to enter the MTV Asia market as a gateway to global stardom but is restrained by her country’s poor standing in the international market: “Most local singers, including me, aspire to become internationally known but how to achieve that goal is the question.”<sup>55</sup>

*Vietnam Idol* pulls women such as Phuong Vy into the dual role of ambassador for culturally anchoring the mother country in its outward expansion, and she represents the alienated worker living under flexible capitalism. Phuong Vy sought to break with the notion of Vietnamese singers as lesser ethnicized versions of famous American singers. Her yearning for international recognition lays bare the failure of *Idol*’s promise of recognition within postcolonial modernity. Against this imposed provincialization, Phuong Vy predicts the Vietnamese version of *Idol* may even surpass the American one in a way: “It’s a fact that the full rights to decide [the winner] are in the hands of the audiences, [therefore] *Vietnam Idol* should raise this fan phenomenon to an extreme art form.”<sup>56</sup> These comments are telling of Vietnamese actors’ resistance to the spatio-temporal positioning of their country within the vantage of the West. Insofar as *Vietnam Idol* is produced within a global market that supposedly welcomes everyone within a “postnational” global culture, Phuong Vy’s celebrity is diminished by the shadow of *American Idol*’s pop icons. Her expressed desire to make it big foregrounds the circumscribed and ambiguous roles of Viet women within “global media” and their attempts to navigate such treacherous terrain on their own terms in the age of global capital. At the same time, her transition from common girl into a public performer who provides “clean labor” of entertaining consumers disguises the privatized labor and production systems that implicate so many people who are also part of Viet Nam’s historical transition. Phuong Vy’s desire for international stardom is purely

individualist but symptomatic of Viet Nam's changing status on the global scene, where the structural frame and fantasies of geocultural publics make invisible the modes of production that create such publics in the first place.

### **The Regional Geopolitics of Pan-Asianism**

Like the “third world,” the image of Asia as a definable geocultural place is a fabrication born out of colonial cartographies in which the West stands as the referent for mapping the rest of the world. One can see this in the creation of regionwide *Idol* contests for the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, and Asia, but interestingly enough, none for Europe or North America. This is a testament to a global geocultural cartography that fixes non-Western territories into discrete points of interest from the West as origin based on their cultural and geographic difference. In 2007, the winner of *Vietnam Idol* was invited to compete against five other *Idol* winners from Asia. Linking these various Asian idols together is a generic musical sense of pancultural regional identity. Despite different backgrounds, all singers are required to sing one song in their native language (a requirement suggesting that divergent ethnic musical styles can be judged similarly) and one song in English despite singers' differing language abilities and fluency. This English requirement set a benchmark of US pop/rock genre with ethnic inflections of a Westernized formula of “world music.”<sup>57</sup> In such spaces, cultural hybridity is emphasized to follow the cultural logic of globalization.<sup>58</sup> All *Asian Idol* participants, including Phuong Vy, underwent vocal coaching, choreography lessons, and media interviews as part of their preparation. Fans of every contestant chose the song they wanted their respective idol to perform.<sup>59</sup> In an emphasis on nation-state sovereignty, a “double-country” voting system was implemented to prevent bigger countries from dominating smaller ones, but this did not prevent countries such as India or Indonesia from having an unfair comparative advantage based on population size and affluence.

This cultural regionalism retains certain geopolitical distinctions that get read simply as multiculturalism. As an allegory of progress, *Asian Idol* employs the language of pluralism and diversification to shore up ideas of

socioeconomic progress. As it takes place in Southeast Asia and countries in that area, it tells of the region's maturation from premodern societies to consumerist ones. But does *Asian Idol* represent an ersatz of first world cultural practices or a moment of Asian regional empowerment? More "modernized" Asian nations such as Japan, China, and Korea find no need to create their own *Idol* shows or participate in *Asian Idol* since they enjoy their own national singing contests. These well-developed economies also enjoy a privileged status within the world market and politics. Thus countries elided from our "modern" Asia (usually South and Southeast Asia), it can be argued, use *Idol* as a way to make their mark on the global cultural economy. The appearance of *Idol* shows in less-established countries such as India, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Viet Nam suggest those countries' attempts to register a strong regional presence. The disproportionate representation of developing ASEAN countries under the banner of *Asian Idol* tells of member countries' demands for recognition in the global popular.<sup>60</sup>

To establish a panregional audience, *Asian Idol* reduces the complex cultural heterogeneity and incommensurability among its participants. Viet Nam's Phuong Vy competed against victorious idols from the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and India in a contest. In an episode called "Road to Asian Idol," the singer argued the following: "To win this contest, I've got to prepare myself thoroughly, selecting a song that suits rehearsing my movements and practicing my English too so I can communicate and mix with my regional friends better." A record producer echoed these statements by saying, "The selected songs are not simply great songs but they have to suit her voice and (the songs) must be appreciated by the regional audience who will vote for her too."<sup>61</sup> The geocultural public evoked here refers to a pan-Asian regionalism similar to other regional contests such as *Superstar* (Arab) and *Idols West Africa*. Against the celebratory tenor of these contests, *Asian Idol* failed to generate a massive amount of pan-Asian unity or marketing success.<sup>62</sup> The regional cultural sphere occasioned by *Asian Idol* attempted to coordinate the national media of numerous countries including Viet Nam, yet took for granted its own ability to transmit the sense of a regional cultural identity. Like the now nonexistent *World Idol* competition, which drew *Idol* winners from around the globe, *Asian Idol*

wrestled with too many geocultural publics at once (to the dissatisfaction of audiences), while attempting to mix Asian and Western cultural elements in rather contrived ways that could not reconcile their cultural, aesthetic, and vernacular incompatibilities.<sup>63</sup> We can see here a failed example of global pop culture's appropriation of intercultural diversity. *Asian Idol* is ultimately a failed experiment that believes everyone could be easily fit into the one-size-fits-all *Idol* world formula.

## Conclusion

Global cultural phenomena such as *Idol* enable the movement from what Walter Benjamin calls the mechanical “age of the world picture” into a “post-mechanical” view of world as a “global village.” In this essay, I sketched out preliminary thoughts on the different geocultural publics formed through *Vietnam Idol* and the contradictions they embodied. Displaying new forms of colonialism as well as resistance, these publics recognize “the postcolonial condition” as one defined by an ever-shifting sense and politics born out of the asymmetries of a globalizing consumer culture. Insofar as third world countries such as Viet Nam have been constructed as “behind,” homologous and subordinate to Euro-American influence, the transnationalization and importation of popular culture in this global “periphery” demands a negotiation of what Viet Nam and Vietnamese-ness means today. *Vietnam Idol* epitomizes the impetus for turning and exploiting the local into the global. In doing so, it attempts to imagine a global public order in which the “local” and the “public” are still being defined.

## Notes

I would like to thank Fiona Ngô, Mimi Thi Nguyen, Viet Nguyen, Quan Tran, and the two anonymous reviewers who helped me to improve this essay.

1. In East Asia, Viet Nam's economy is second only to China's in terms of growth. Muthukumara Mani and Shreyashi Jha, *Trade Liberalization and the Environment in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: World Bank, Environment Dept., 2006); James Riedel, “Vietnam: On the Trail of the Tigers,” *World Economy* 16, no. 4 (2006): 401–22; Hans Stockton, ed., *The Future of Development in Vietnam and the Challenges of Globalization: Interdisciplinary Essays* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006); Vu Thanh Tu Anh, “Essays on the Political

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  3. Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 162.
  4. See Jurgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979); *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).
  5. Marshall McLuhan, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
  6. Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” *Public Culture* 2, no. 2 (1990): 295.
  7. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Beyond Culture: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” in *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, ed. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 33–51.
  8. For discussions on postcolonial publics, see Kavita Daiya, *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and National Culture in Postcolonial India* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008); Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
  9. Immanuel Wallerstein, *Geopolitics and Geoculture: Essays on the Changing World-System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
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  11. See Peter Marden, *The Decline of Politics: Governance, Globalization, and the Public Sphere* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2003); Kai Hafez, *The Myth of Media Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2007); John A. Guidry, Michael D. Kennedy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Globalizations and Social Movements: Culture, Power, and the Transnational Public Sphere* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Ulrich Beck, Nathan Sznajder, and Rainer Winter, eds., *Global America? The Cultural Consequences of Globalization* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003).
  12. Joseph D. Straubhaar, “(Re)asserting National Media and National Identity against the

- Global, Regional, and Local Levels of World Television,” in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Doug Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).
13. Nancy Fraser, “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere,” Republicart, March 2005, [www.republicart.net/disc/publicum/fraser01\\_en.pdf](http://www.republicart.net/disc/publicum/fraser01_en.pdf) (accessed March 2, 2012), 1.
  14. Tani Barlow, “Sex Machine: Global Hypermasculinity and Images of Asian Woman in Modernity,” *positions* 7, no. 2 (1999): 279.
  15. Arjun Apparadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000): 1–19.
  16. Matthew Wheelock Stahl, “A Moment Like This: American Idol and Narratives of Meritocracy,” in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, ed. Chris Washburne and Maiken Derno (New York: Routledge, 2004), 212–32.
  17. “Vietnam Idol: Dai cat tim than tuong,” TimNhanh.com, June 5, 2007, [www.tintuc.timnhanh.com/van\\_hoa/am\\_nhac/20070605/35A60139/](http://www.tintuc.timnhanh.com/van_hoa/am_nhac/20070605/35A60139/) (accessed March 2, 2012).
  18. “Vietnam Idol: Mot buoc thanh sao?” (“Vietnam Idol: A Step to Stardom?”), TimNhanh.com, May 23, 2007, [www.tintuc.timnhanh.com/van\\_hoa/am\\_nhac/20070523/35A5F75C/](http://www.tintuc.timnhanh.com/van_hoa/am_nhac/20070523/35A5F75C/) (accessed March 2, 2012; translation mine).
  19. “Vietnam Idol 2007: Co tim ra ‘than thuong’ that su?” (“Truly ‘Finding an Idol’?”), TimNhanh.com, July 23, 2007, [www.tintuc.timnhanh.com/van\\_hoa/am\\_nhac/20070723/35A62D4F/](http://www.tintuc.timnhanh.com/van_hoa/am_nhac/20070723/35A62D4F/) (accessed March 2, 2012; translation mine).
  20. Nguyen Chi Tan, Ho Chi Minh City Television’s deputy director, quoted in “Vietnam Set to Have Its Own ‘Idol,’” Reuters, March 26, 2007, [www.reuters.com/article/gco8/idUSHAN7829120070326](http://www.reuters.com/article/gco8/idUSHAN7829120070326). (accessed March 2, 2012).
  21. “Cuoi va . . . meu voi ‘Vietnam Idol’” (“Laughing and Crying with ‘Vietnam Idol’”), TimNhanh.com, June 28, 2007, [www.tintuc.timnhanh.com/van\\_hoa/am\\_nhac/20070628/35A617E3/](http://www.tintuc.timnhanh.com/van_hoa/am_nhac/20070628/35A617E3/) (accessed March 2, 2012; translation mine).
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  23. See *Vietnam Idol 2010*, [www.vietnamidol.com.vn/](http://www.vietnamidol.com.vn/) (accessed March 2, 2012).
  24. The country has 13 million Internet users in a population of 85 million. See Presley Lim, “Vietnam Joins the Amateur Idol Brigade,” *Asia Sentinel*, July 13, 2007, [www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=579&Itemid=213](http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=579&Itemid=213).
  25. “Vietnam Idol: Van chi la mot cuoc choi,” [www.tuoiitre.com.vn/Tianyong/Index.aspx?ArticleID=22182&ChannelID=10](http://www.tuoiitre.com.vn/Tianyong/Index.aspx?ArticleID=22182&ChannelID=10) (translation mine).
  26. Ibid. (translation mine).
  27. Lim, “Vietnam Joins.”
  28. “Star Struck in Vietnam,” [www.asialifehcmc.com/?m=article&a=detail&cateparent=&articleid=267](http://www.asialifehcmc.com/?m=article&a=detail&cateparent=&articleid=267) (accessed 28 August 2008).



29. "Reality Shows Yet to Find Takers in Vietnam," [www.thanhniennews.com/2007/pages/200787122422030760.aspx](http://www.thanhniennews.com/2007/pages/200787122422030760.aspx), August 7, 2007.
30. "Cuoi va . . . meu voi" (translation mine).
31. Not to be left out, Vietnamese in the United States created their own *Idol*-like talent search program at the same time. Calling it *Vietnamese Idol* to connote shared ethnicity rather than national affiliation, *Thuy Nga Productions* (the diaspora's largest entertainment company) sought to reinforce its cosmopolitan, bourgeois ethnic identity forged out of exilic culture in opposition to the rise of a domestic market in Viet Nam.
32. Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
33. Akhil Gupta, "Imagining Nations," in *A Companion to the Anthropology of Politics*, ed. David Nugent and Joan Vincent (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 275.
34. Vietnamese contemporary music (*tan nhac*) borrows and transforms the rhythmic, tonal, acoustic, and harmonic elements of Khmer, Chinese, and other Asian music in conjunction with Western idioms such as Latin cha-cha, bolero, paso doble, and tango as a result of centuries of colonial interaction. See Phong T. Nguyen, ed., *New Perspectives on Vietnamese Music* (New Haven, CT: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1992); Le Tuan Hung, *Dan Tranh Music of Vietnam: Traditions and Innovations* (Melbourne: Australia Asia Foundation, 1998).
35. Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Post-colonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 179.
36. "Vietnam Idol 2007" (translation mine).
37. "Vietnam Idol: Dai cat tim than tuong" (translation mine).
38. "Vietnam Idol-Mot buoc thanh sao?" (translation mine).
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40. Quynh Le, "Vietnam Unsettled by 'Pop Idol' Contest," BBC Vietnamese Service, [www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3895265.stm](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3895265.stm), July 15, 2004.
41. Lisa Drummond, "The Modern 'Vietnamese Woman': Socialization and Women's Magazines," 158–78, and Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong, "The Class Sense of Bodies: Women Garment Workers Consume Body Products in and around Ho Chi Minh City," 179–209, in *Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam*, ed. Lisa Drummond and Helle Rydstrøm (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2004).
42. "Defiant Idol," *Intellasia*, May 19, 2008, [www.intellasia.net/news/articles/society/111243942\\_printer.shtml](http://www.intellasia.net/news/articles/society/111243942_printer.shtml) (accessed March 5, 2012).
43. Tuan Khanh reluctantly complimented her quality of voice while admitting singing is not smooth. [www.intellasia.net/news/articles/society/111243942-printer.shtml](http://www.intellasia.net/news/articles/society/111243942-printer.shtml), May 19, 2008 (translation mine).
44. N. M. Hà, "than tuong se di ve dau?" ("Where Will Idol Go?"), [viet.bao.vn/Van-hoa/Than-tuong-se-di-ve-dau/70099517/181/](http://viet.bao.vn/Van-hoa/Than-tuong-se-di-ve-dau/70099517/181/), October 5, 2007.

45. For works on Viet Nam and women's labor, see for instance Mila Rosenthal, "Facing a New Revolution in Vietnam: State Textile Workers in the Post-Reform Economy," in *Women and Work in Globalising Asia*, ed. Dong-Sook Shin Gills and Nicola Piper (New York: Routledge, 2002), 112–30; Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).
46. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), sect. 48.9.
47. Barlow, "Sex Machine," 277.
48. Tani Barlow, "Asian Women in Reregionalizations," *positions* 15, no. 2 (2007): 286.
49. Stahl, "Moment Like This," 222.
50. Neil Smith, "Homeless/Global: Scaling Places," in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, ed. Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putnam, George Robertson, and Lisa Tickner (New York: Routledge, 1993), 97.
51. Leslie Salzinger, *Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico's Global Factories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
52. Nguyen-Vo, "Class Sense of Bodies," 25.
53. See Marianne H. Marchand and Anne Sisson Runyan, eds., *Gender and Global Restructuring: Sightings, Sites, and Resistances* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Jane L. Parpart, Shirin M. Rai, and Kathleen Staudt, eds., *Rethinking Empowerment: Gender and Development in a Global/Local World* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
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56. Hà, "Where Will the Idol Go?"
57. Simon Frith, "The Discourse of World Music," in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 305–22.
58. See Marwan Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).
59. Every voter had to submit two votes for two idols, thus forcing people to vote outside their own obvious choice. Secondly, half of all the votes from each country went to the second option and the converting of country votes to percentages ensured a fair playing field.
60. Daniel C. Hallin, "Broadcasting in the Third World: From National Development to Civil Society," in *Media and Public: Rethinking the Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communication*, ed. James Curran and Tamar Liebes (London: Routledge, 1998).
61. "Vietnam Idol Winner to Compete for Asian Crown," [www.vietnamtourism.com.vn/news/detail/337/9204](http://www.vietnamtourism.com.vn/news/detail/337/9204) (accessed April 4, 2012).
62. This is partially to blame on Singapore's Hady Mirza's winning the first *Asian Idol* in what many considered a fluke based on his "luck," charm, and good looks rather than talent. Assuming all persons voted for their respective idols based on the national loyalties

cultivated in these countries (as that is the role of *Idol* in each case), Singapore's win seems far-fetched given the island-nation's demographics compared with much larger neighbors. Did the victory of the arguably least-talented singer, an outcome that destroyed the credibility of the event, signal a cosmopolitan cultural Asianness that can look beyond national identity and cultural tastes? Some speculated his Malay Muslim roots culled votes from all countries with substantial Muslim countries except Viet Nam, whereas many suggest his boyish good looks attracted an overwhelming female audience. There remains no final tally by country, so no one knows why Mirza, the weakest singer of all the idols, emerged as the regional victor.

63. It was also institutional, as seen in the cases of the Kazakhstan, Malaysian, and Singapore franchises, which prematurely ended after a season, and the delayed launching of the following contests in India and Viet Nam as well as the cancellation of *Pakistan Idol*.