

## Position Paper for “Talent-Based Reality Shows and the American Dream” Roundtable

by Mobina Hashmi

In August 2004, the national media briefly turned its attention toward a popular Spanish-language reality show *Gana la Verde* (“Win the Green”) produced by KRCA-TV in Los Angeles. Contestants on the show performed dangerous or disgusting stunts à la *Fear Factor* for the ultimate prize of the services of an immigration lawyer who would help them apply for a green card. Roundly criticized from both the left and the right for either exploiting or encouraging illegal immigrants, the show’s executive producer, Lenard Liberman, defended himself, saying: “The only thing that’s different [about other shows] from my show is the prize. So what are we telling people? That I can give Jose a year’s worth of Armani clothes and dress him for success for a year, but if I want to give Jose legal representation for a year and help improve his life and make him a real success, they have a problem with that.” (CBS Evening News, Aug. 31, 2004)

Although it is not a talent-based reality show, I begin with this particular example because it starkly highlights the harsher realities of work, success, and survival (it is noteworthy that this show was consistently compared to NBC’s *Fear Factor*) that are presented, as Liberman suggests, in a much more palatable manner in talent-based reality shows such as *The Apprentice* that are also offering their contestants a shot at achieving the American Dream.

Talent-based shows have a long history on television, but it is, I would argue, the feeling that shows such as *America’s Next Top Model*, *The Apprentice*, or *I Wanna Be a Soap Star*, illustrate broader truths about contemporary realities of work and success that makes them intriguing. This popular sub-genre of reality television in its dramatization of the job hunt seems to demonstrate the victory of neoliberalism in defining the route to success for workers. The ideological force of the American Dream derived from its emphasis on success as the reward for honest, hard work. It assured immigrants and native-born alike of class mobility and the essentially democratic nature of American society. However, on these eerily *Running Man*-like shows in which contestants compete, if not for their lives, then at least for the guarantee of a livelihood, success or failure depends as much, or more, on their ability to flexibly adapt to any challenge and their willingness to form instrumental alliances with others, as it does on their actual credentials, skills, or commitment to hard work. As such, these shows suggest an acceptance of the idea that achieving the American Dream is a matter of knowing how to play the game and of knowing how to produce oneself as commodity. An obvious example is *American Idol* where contestants become more and more slickly groomed and packaged as the season proceeds. And, a brief look at the post-reality show careers of the winners of *The Apprentice* also shows the extent to which they continue to capitalize on their appearance on the show.

The neoliberal emphasis on a flexible, adaptable workforce that has to bear the burden of economic risk is most evident in the notion of part-time and contingent labor. Contestants on talent-based reality shows may be able to win by molding themselves into the ideal

model, chef, pop star or business mogul, but their prize is not job security, but simply a short-term contract that allows them to jump the line for a *chance* at the American Dream with no promise that it will be anything more than a fabulous and fleeting experience.

If the spectacle of the higher echelons of the service society jockeying for position wasn't interesting enough, the workplace politics backstage are worth touching on: the impact of reality television on writers, the reliance on product placement and sponsorship which makes consumerism an even more integral part of the viewing experience that it is for other forms of television, and the expansive branding strategies used by reality television programs in general have been a productive lens through which to study the changing economics of television in the United States.

In conclusion, I want to suggest that these talent-based reality shows should be studied within the context of a broader field of reality/documentary representations of work that include shows *Dirty Jobs*, *Made in America*, or the *Deadliest Catch* which showcase downright unglamorous occupations and seem to offer a counter-discourse on authenticity that keeps an older vision of the American Dream alive.