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I Won American Idol

Nic Nusbaumer

Reflection

When my cousins and I sang karaoke in the Carigara rice fields, we were just sounds and bodies and no money and full stomachs. Growing up, I never got to bring Pinoy home to Missouri, and *Pinoy* home always was an ocean away.

Home is a funny and unfixed thing. And, like anything that can be loved or hated, home is where we harbor a lot of our memories, space, and time. Whether home is rooted in one place, no place, or many places, we embody and live it even while we're away. I wrote this story thinking a lot about Olga Tokarczuk's *Flights* and Neisha-Anne S. Green's "The Re-Education of Neisha-Anne S. Green." Code-meshing and embodying a reflexive identity is material, rhetorical, and contextual. If you're anything, especially visibly, outside of the/a status quo, or have difficulty reconciling your histories, probably you also know what it's like to mesh into and out of some contexts—to be denied the opportunity, even. This story is about allyship, home as more than a roof over some heads, and how funny the truth can be. Because I *am* a farmer's son, and I *did* win American Idol. That's the truth!

Most people display visceral resistance when I tell them I won American Idol, perhaps confounded by the "American" part, but probably because they had no idea they were talking to a *star*.

Okay, it was my middle school's "Nixa's American Idol" competition. Where I'm from, everything is characteristically bombastic. Huge strip malls are erected but never leased. We're running out of fast-food corporations with red marketing to bid for space but are always told to "shop local" (more on that later). We have "historic downtown" everything, the only Sucker Day and Sucker Day Parade on earth, and the scraps from trends that began five years ago in other places. We like to embellish. So: *I. Won. American. Idol.*

After a month of auditioning in front of faculty and our hardass music teacher, Mrs. Willnauer, they chose two winners. The prize? We got to sing at Dolly Parton's *Dixie Stampede* down in Branson, which has only recently been renamed "Dolly Parton's Stampede." Without the "Dixie." You have to see it to believe it, but I'll just say: Civil War, rotisserie chicken, horses jumping through rings of fire.

"There's such a thing as innocent ignorance, and so many of us are guilty of that," Dolly said. But the show goes on.

We semi-affectionately refer to Branson as *Hillbilly Las Vegas* because that is indeed what it is. It is where people from Willard, Ozark, Rogersville, and Fair Grove—who all think Springfield is a bustling metropolis—go to "get away." It is where people from all over the world fly in to answer the questions: "No fucking shit? No way?

That. That exists?” It is where you can, in the same day, have lunch in the Titanic, see a B-list Bellagio-esque water show at the outdoor outlet mall, have second lunch at Applebee’s, take a selfie with wax Michael Jackson, have first dinner somewhere nice like Ruby Tuesday, and buy a last-minute rifle for your kid’s birthday.

In Branson, we have our own “strip” of dilapidated motels and once-opulent theaters showcasing ex- or wannabe Vegas performers—many of whom perform *as* famous stars like Elvis. My favorite was Yakov Smirnoff, a Ukrainian comedian who did all but tell the locals to their face how dumb he thought they were, and did so in a religiously preserved Ukrainian-English accent. We have Silver Dollar City, the most enigmatic and over-the-fucking-top amusement park in the entire world, romanticizing early settlement white plantation life in southern Missouri. Kettle corn, Bald Knobbers, and live glassblowing, *baby*. We have Ride the Ducks—closed and reopened as Branson Duck Tours—for those who’ve ever wondered what screaming into a duck call while driving a truck directly into the lake might be like. In 2018, sixteen passengers drowned after one such duck truck launched despite thunderstorm warnings. The show goes on. We have all the pseudo-discounted commerce and hyphenated steak the working class could ever ask for. We have manmade beaches (only men would build a fake beach next to a dam on a lake) and lots of free parking. There are mountains formed out of glacial melting and tectonic shifts, too, but yada yada let’s go to Applebee’s for first dinner instead of Ruby Tuesday.

Dixie Outfitters Southern Heritage Store is a mile down the road from Dolly Parton’s Dixie Stampede. Since 1861, they’ve worked a revisionist lens into their marketing of Confederate flags, apparel, gear, and all to our local communities. They even have a short history lesson on their website, as well as a news section with anti-progressive and insurrection-apologist propaganda. The orange 1969 General Lee Charger has been parked out front since I was too short to ride Thunderation at Silver Dollar City. Car guys always say things like “Oh, man, if I had that thing, I’d do right by it.” Doing right by the Lee would be painting it yellow and driving it into Table Rock lake blowing into a duck call.

“Long live Dixie!” the Dixie Outfitters president writes on the website homepage, mindlessly screenprints onto cotton. Fratboys at the private liberal arts college in Springfield yell “Long Live Dixie” when I’m home from school partying with my hometown friends. How would you rather have it? Rings of fire with a whole-half chicken or honesty?

So, like I said, I won Nixa’s American Idol. It was April 2006. I was in fifth grade, chubby and cute as a tender little button. A couple months before, my parents took me on a pity cruise to ease the pain of my forthcoming knee surgery (I was a bit too chubby). I needed some holes in my knee so I could keep jumping high and throwing far. We all hated it.

My favorite stop was Aruba, where the loveliest women played with and twisted my hair into beaded braids. For many moments on that cruise, seeing my silky Asian hair jacketed in braids—protected—made me forget that I was too chubby for my own body, that leaving this hellacious cruise in the islands meant being unable to walk for two months post-op at home. I remember the ladies gossiping with my mom about

how easy it was to make money off tourists at the harbor, wondering then but knowing now how beautiful it is to see your mom get to laugh about the struggle with other badass women.

We get home to Hillbilly Heaven, I win the final round of American Idol with Jet's "Look What You've Done," and I'm going to Dixie, baby! Mrs. Parsons tells me she's so proud of me. We didn't get teachers like her in Nixa: so poised, charming, altruistic. She looks and seems like young Dolly Parton, with the curliest curls, the most inviting peach tea accent, and a confident wrist flick-and-point across her torso when she knows she's right. We all loved Mrs. Parsons.

Since I was on crutches for six weeks after surgery, she took it upon herself to help me elevate my leg before she drew on transparent ELMO sheets for the class. She used to chauffeur me to and from American Idol auditions, wait for my mom with me on the sidewalk after school, and always looked me right in the eyes with the pure gloss of a badass woman who *sees* you. Even my mom loved her. Once, Mrs. Parsons told me she knew what it was like to feel invisible even when you see yourself so clearly, even when your mom raised you damn good.

We all loved Mrs. Parsons.

I needed a song for Dixie Stampede. It was killing me. Between missing an entire season of baseball (i.e., delaying the only thing that bonded my dad and me back then), enduring the weird interactions around my crutches and fucky leg, and the anxiety of looking like *this* while singing in front of a crowd of cowboys and gals, even my cool beaded braids took a backseat to the fuckery. In fifth grade, the Black Eyed Peas were *huge*; like, "Where is the Love?" and "Let's Get it [Started]" huge. Mom's best quirk has always been telling me mainstream celebrities are Filipino, and when I found out that Black Eyed Peas' member Allan Pineda Lindo (APL) is not only Filipino but that BEP had a song in *Tagalog*, it was easy: I'd sing "The APL Song."

But, I was afraid singing in Tagalog would be too weird, maybe even too proud, that maybe I should pump the brakes and just sing something purely American. "Louisiana Woman, Mississippi Man." Mom reminded me how much I laughed when I sang karaoke with my cousins in the Philippines; how little I cared then. I felt my toes strapped into thong flip-flops and remembered what it was like to sing into the silent jungle. Like water under a bag of tea, Mrs. Parsons supports me, too, reminds me I'm already on crutches, that I've already won. She could've just said, "Have you *seen* your hair?" This was an experiment in having just enough power and just enough privilege and just enough positionality to make weird work. It was getting to use my language in *my* voice. I got to use *my* chubby brown body to sing about *my* Pinoy people in a place that thrives on censure and forgetting. That way, they can't forget.

That is the fucking American dream.

Mom cried the first time I hit the chorus in rehearsals, a second time after I got to sing at Dixie Stampede:

*Lapit mga kaibigan
At makinig kayo*

*Ako'y may dala-dalang balita galing sa bayan ko
Nais kong ipamahagi ang mga kwento
At mga pangayaring nagaganap sa lupang 'pinangako*

[listen closely, everyone, I have news for my hometown. I want to share what's going on in the so-called "promised land"]

I got all the shine from my friends and classmates, ate my rotisserie chicken, and humbly fell down the stairs after the show because Branson is somehow nicer to Asian bodies than temporarily disabled ones. I missed a step with my crutches and toppled over gracefully. The guttural gasps of everyone around me were simply mouthwatering. Surely I was more broken than before. Mrs. Dolly Parsons' curls cut into the frame. Mom was stunned, but they both laugh when I do. They set me right and got my crutches back under me. Nothing hurt. I won American Idol, who gives a shit!

Author Bio

Nic Nusbaumer (he/him) is a Filipino American writer raised in Nixa, Missouri who enjoys cycling, Magic: The Gathering, hardcore punk, and jasmine rice. He is also a Writing and Rhetoric PhD student at George Mason University, studying institutional ethnography and the rhetoric of education policy. This year, Nic is a Jacob Volkman Human Rights Fellow with Herstory Foundation.