

## Fandom Performing Ethnicity

### **Race/Ethnicity\* as Performance**

In an increasingly progressive society, it becomes harder and harder to deny the notion that race is a socially-imposed construct almost entirely devoid of fact. I do not mean to say that we now see white people acting “black” or Asians acting “white,” and this reappropriation of racial norms somehow devalues them. That would only further support the essentialist ideas that maintain these categorizations. I also do not mean to deem these constructs nonexistent. I do mean to assert, however, that although these categories persist, it is widely accepted that ethnic stereotypes are understood as roles that bodies can occupy, rather than characteristics that are innately linked to them. As such, bodies thereby “perform” race.

When performance is inexorably linked to the practice and embodiment of a particular ethnicity, the “definition” of it takes a malleable form that is reshaped and redefined by the agent which occupies it and vice versa. There are standards to which these agents adhere that govern the credibility of their performance. Like many cultural phenomena, there is a minority christened by privilege and power that place value on specific cultural items and deem them “authentic.” Characteristics such as clothing, speech, and sexual orientation, and music tastes commonly inform the construction of an authentic race.

### **Fandom as Performance**

\* For the sake of my argument, I will use the terms “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably.

The fact of a given person's fandoms offering insight into their personal and cultural makeup is easy to swallow. When we look at fan studies from this perspective, and take into account the racial policing done in the name of authenticity, we are led to believe that one's prescribed fandoms are in fact potential proclamations of racial authenticity, just as the rejection of certain other fandoms is equally **telling**. In Algernon Austin's *Achieving Blackness*, he relates a story about black economist, Glenn Loury, who was disappointed at the fact his son showed an affinity for ice hockey rather than basketball:

"Because many black males play basketball and very few play ice hockey, this descriptive fact has developed into a normative compulsion. Loury stated that he wanted his son to play something 'respectable' for a black male, like basketball."<sup>1</sup>

This example further supports the notion that individuals often feel the need to take into account racialized expectations when choosing what to participate in.

Fandoms are no exception to this rule. Indeed, individuals that identify as black prescribed to certain fandoms that assert their authenticity just as Glenn Loury wished his son participated in an activity widely accepted as "black." But, in the context of fandom, from where are such standards derived? It is consistent with much of fan studies to automatically lay blame to the producers of fan objects, depicting them as motivated solely by profit gains. And as we have explored, the ethnic fan also seeks gains in the form of approval and authenticity by his/her chosen fandom. It would therefore seem wise for producers to profit from this need by attaching the prospect of cultural capital to attract particular ethnic groups. The Arizona Diamondbacks did exactly this in 2007; at a tournament designed to bring in more international fans, the overwhelming presence of Mexicans old and young,

emigrants and non, encouraged the organization to make their stadium more accessible to a once overlooked demographic by hiring bilingual workers, distributing tickets to nearby schools with high numbers of Hispanic students, and broadcasting more games on Spanish networks.<sup>2</sup>

The other end of the spectrum: in a 1991 study done by University of Illinois professor, Lawrence Kahn, and University of Pennsylvania's Peter Sherer, they found that fan attendance and revenues at NBA games were significantly changed by the racial makeup of the team.<sup>3</sup>

It is clear that both parties stand to benefit, but due to the mutual advantages, the precedence for exchange remains uncertain. The first example illustrates the process in which the fans explicitly communicate a demand which is satisfied by the producer, whereas the second is a producerly concern whereby fans offer the solution. It is crucial here to recognize that this racially coded system places agency on both the shoulders of the individual fan and the people that enforces such standards.

Access to modes of fandom is equally bound to racial performance. The inseparable link between race and class is such that certain ethnicities carry associations with varying levels of economic status. Whether a given fan, a racialized body, actually belongs to this class is virtually irrelevant; an authentic performer of race will only subscribe to fandoms that are allowed by the socioeconomic strata that their race occupies. Because the black experience is widely accepted as one of financial tribulation, black people will only become fans of objects that are universally accessible, given those means. Thus, the internet, cable television, and

<sup>2</sup> Alltucker, Ken. (2007, April 8). *Arizona Diamondbacks pitch to Hispanic fans*. Associated Press & Local.

<sup>3</sup> Myers, Jim. (1991, Dec 19). *Fan Preference Cases Pay Disparity*. *USA Today*, pp. 4C.

high culture fandoms become inaccessible and the fan objects that they offer all consequently become labeled “not black enough.”

### **Fandom as Racialized Performance**

It is important to note that it does not matter if a person does not necessarily fall into the category his or her ethnic group does. More often than not they will blindly assume that role in hopes of authenticity. Questions of identity immediately arise if one chooses to diverge from her predetermined path (we return to the Tiger Woods issue). This proves that, like clothes, language, and food, one’s fandom becomes part of the act. Expected identities become self-fulfilled prophecies, and people continue to play their part for the same reason: a sense of belonging.