On November 4, 2008, the same day that Barack Obama was elected President of the United States, California voters passed Proposition 8, a statewide ballot initiative that limited marriage to the union of a man and woman only. While the Presidential election inspired jubilation over the nation’s first black President – the event was seen by many as proof that racial differences had been overcome – Prop 8’s passage instead provoked public outcry for being “a dangerous and discriminatory step backward,” especially in a state with such a progressive reputation. The coincidence of these two events revealed triumph on the racial front concurrent with the powerful renunciation of lesbian and gay rights. Black comedienne Wanda Sykes, who publicly “came out” during the Prop 8 campaign, articulated this paradox in her 2009 HBO stand-up special: “That night was crazy. Black President – yay! Oh Prop 8 passed, shit, now I’m a second-class citizen.”

In this socio-political environment, discussions about racial and sexual identities have dominated U.S. media, especially television. Media coverage about the fight for the marriage rights of lesbians and gays has underscored, exaggerated, and reinforced social and religious conflicts between sexual and racial identities. For example, when Prop 8 passed by a slim margin, media reports attributed its adoption to black voters; exit polling indicated that seven out of ten blacks voted in favor of Prop 8 and this bias was broadly attributed to cultural and religious beliefs that firmly opposed homosexuality and the right of lesbians and gays to marry. Critics such as The Nation’s Richard Kim, The Atlantic’s Ta-Nehisi Coates, and The San Francisco Chronicle’s Matthai Kuruvila quickly published critiques of this claim, re-framing and re-contextualizing Prop 8’s passage. Just twelve days after the vote, Kuruvila wrote: “demographers say the focus on one race not only disregards the complexity of African American identity but also overlooks the most powerful predictors affecting views on same-sex marriage: religion, age and ideology, such as party affiliation.”

Critics in the popular media who offered more complex analyses of the factors contributing to Prop 8’s passage often gestured toward theories of race and sexuality developed by scholars including Jasbir Puar, Barbara Smith, Roderick Ferguson, and Patricia Hill Collins among others. Popular interventions into the assertion that Prop 8 passed because of black voters, for example, echoed Puar’s concept of “homonationalism,” which describes the ways that the “good” U.S. citizen depends on the consolidation of a normative homosexuality based on categories of race and class in particular. Despite these nuanced critiques, national TV news commentators from ultra-conservative Bill O’Reilly (Fox) to ultra-liberal Rachel Maddow (MSNBC) used Prop 8 as a platform for discussing
the eruption of a “culture war” between race and sexuality in the nation.⁷

Political tensions have been equally high about the country’s stand on immigration and citizenship, a debate focused primarily on race and ethnicity, especially on undocumented Latino immigrants. As Esteban del Río notes about media representations of Latinos, “when times are bad, as they are now, Latinos are lumped into moral panics about illegal immigration and invasion from Latin America.”⁸ Laws like Arizona’s SB 1070, which criminalizes illegal immigration by defining it as “trespassing” and allows police to question and arrest a person they suspect of being undocumented, underscore the divisiveness of immigration reform battles in the country. SB 1070, the strictest bill on immigration in the U.S., has further ignited controversy and protest about racial profiling and discrimination, topics that have been central to 21st century American discourse since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Scholars such as del Río, Herman Gray, Chon Noriega, L.S. Kim, Sasha Torres, Kara Keeling, Celine Parrenas Shimizu, and José Esteban Muñoz have offered compelling investigations of racialized sexualities in media. Muñoz’s Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (1999), for example, reclaims agency as a method of examining race, ethnicity, desire, and the queer body. Drawing on psychoanalysis and theories of revisionary identification in productive ways, Muñoz explores the process of identification/disidentification in performances of film, television, pornography, literature, and visual culture. For him, the artists and performances, each on their own terms, transgress “repressive regimes of truth” in order to create their own truth.⁹ In this way, Muñoz offers a theoretical framework that allows one to trace the lineage of marginal sites, locating alternative spaces for queers of color.

In The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, The Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense (2007), Keeling analyzes popular films such as Eve’s Bayou, Foxy Brown, and Set It Off in order to articulate the ways in which film and processes of production help prop up structures of racism and homophobia, denying and exposing alternative social constructs. She contends that Deleuze’s concept of the cinematic produces the space “for a nuanced and critical understanding of film as part of reality rather than as a reflection or representation of it.”¹⁰ Texts like Muñoz’s and Keeling’s provide valuable interventions into theorizations of racialized sexual minorities, analyzing a broad range of media and making use of interdisciplinary approaches.

Building on and expanding these influential works, the aim of this collection is to offer ways to think through representations of racial and sexual minorities, especially queer characters and personalities of color, in the context of the modern U.S. television industry. In this introduction, “queer” stands for the range of non-heteronormative identities rather than an oppositional stance to categorization.

My interest in this topic stems both from the work of scholars such as those discussed above and with my own work as a volunteer for GLAAD (the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation). In 2006 and 2008, I served on the television jury, which along with GLAAD’s film, music, and print/journalism juries, meets monthly to discuss and assess the previous month’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) representations. As a national media watch-dog organization, GLAAD believes that calling attention to “accurate” as well as to “defamatory” LGBT media images significantly influences the way society views LGBT citizens and the fight for civil rights; within this framework, media visibility is a necessary strategy to gain entry into the political establishment. I joined the jury eager to understand and contribute to popular responses to representations of sexual minorities on television, a medium with a history of LGBT invisibility. Television, widely considered a cultural mirror and arbiter of shared values and norms, has been a perpetual lightning rod for discussions about representational politics.

On the jury, conversations often focused on how much a character’s motives and storylines revolved around her or his sexual identity. These discussions highlighted what’s known as a “post-gay” rhetoric; while in academic circles, “post” can denote a clearly marked artistic or historical period as well as a transition that blurs temporal distinctions, in popular discourse, “post” usually signifies social progress wherein differences are no longer significant or consequential. With this approach, a character’s sexuality is a “non-issue,”
neither defining the totality of the character nor driving their actions. GLAAD jurors especially praised TV characters and personalities who were LGBT and of color, when those identities were not an integral part of the narrative. These evaluations also picked up on the “post-race” rhetoric that entered the mainstream with Obama’s election. Consistently, many jurors argued that the less relevant race and sexuality were to a character, the more “progressive” the representation.

My experience with the jury underscored the ease with which queer representations of color are categorized as either “stereotypical” or “progressive/groundbreaking,” with little room for negotiation, ambiguity, or intricacy. As Stuart Hall reminds us, though, “representation is a complex business and, especially when dealing with ‘difference’, it engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer.”

Popular culture’s use of “post-gay” and “post-race” rhetoric provides an opportunity to examine the cultural and political complexities of modern identity formations. This topic seems especially pressing as contemporary television shows including The Wire, Six Feet Under, Greek, Hell Date, The L Word, RuPaul’s Drag Race, The Real World, The Wanda Sykes Show, Pretty Little Liars, and A Shot at Love with Tila Tequila have provoked strong reactions about their representations of queer characters and personalities of color.

**Why Television?**

The sheer volume of TV production creates a steady stream of programming that engages with contemporary cultural pleasures, anxieties, and tensions; television, unlike film, produces vast quantities of programming in short amounts of time. While the rhetoric of new digital technologies promises to displace television as the medium of the future, this Spectator issue approaches TV as an apparatus and representational form that is intertwined with newer technologies. Several of the articles collected here examine TV programming in the context of convergence culture, accounting for the aesthetic, economic, and technological demands placed on television in the early 21st century.

This collection then frames the television industry as a social, political, and economic entity, grounded in particular logics, formal characteristics, financial structures, and regulatory practices. Characters such as Calvin Owens on Greek, Kima and Snoop on The Wire, and reality TV stars such as Tila Tequila (A Shot at Love with Tila Tequila) and Ongina (RuPaul’s Drag Race) have emerged during a time of unprecedented industry deregulation, consolidation, and expansion. While the advent of the VCR, cable TV, and premium subscription channels in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s impacted audience’s viewing habits substantially, the changes that occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s drastically altered television as a whole. These shifts exist at each level of the industry including ownership, technology, program creation, distribution platforms, advertising models, and systems of audience measurement.

Amanda Lotz writes that these shifts demarcate a new era in the industry, what she calls the “post-network” era. This issue of Spectator reflects two of the most talked about trends in this post-network era: the proliferation of cable channels and the surge in reality TV programming. Of the six articles in this issue, five examine cable TV shows and three analyze reality TV stars and programs.

In the contemporary media landscape, scholars have consistently tied the increase in television images of LGBT characters and personalities to the rise of cable TV. Unlike broadcast channels, which are subject to heavy regulation because they use public airwaves, cable is a private industry, subject to less stringent regulations. Cable’s fewer regulations tend to mean more sex, violence, and profanity, as well as more images of racial and sexual minorities. Cable channels also provide the largest revenue streams for the major media outlets. As industry journalists have noted, “Cable is… king when it comes to driving the revenue and profits of Hollywood’s entertainment giants.”

With the proliferation of cable channels, advertisers and television executives have intensified efforts to reach smaller and more distinct segments of the population in the hopes of finding ever more efficient ways to market to consumers. As Joseph Turow observes, marketers try to build “primary media communities,” which are formed when “viewers or readers feel that a
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magazine, TV channel, newspaper, radio station, or other medium reaches people like them, resonates with their personal beliefs, and helps them chart their position in the larger world. In this framework, racial and sexual minorities are desirable and commodifiable niche audiences and markets. However, as Evan Brody's article in this collection demonstrates, network television has had to keep pace with cable's "edgy" content and high production values to compete for audiences and advertisers. In 2011, network shows are receiving unprecedented credit for both reviving the flailing broadcast industry and for doing so by creating diverse casts with queer characters that are "changing hearts, minds, and Hollywood." Over the first decade of the 21st century, reality TV shows established themselves as popular and standard fare on broadcast and cable networks (premium cable has largely distanced itself from associations with reality formats in its focus on producing "quality TV"). As Taylor Nygaard's article in this collection explains, TV networks use reality shows to offset the soaring costs of fictional programming in a society defined by media saturation. The genre's significance, as Laurie Ouellette and Susan Murray note, lies in its status on "the cusp of developments in media convergence, interactivity, user-generated content, and greater viewer involvement in television." As a cultural form, reality TV raises pressing questions about power, authenticity, surveillance, and representational practices. In addition, scholars such as Larry Gross, Hector Amaya, and Christopher Pullen contend that racial and sexual minorities "have been consistently included as part of the social lineup in the reality television world." As the articles by Nygaard, Hargraves, and Ault in this collection detail, reality TV relies on inter-personal conflict to create high drama; these shows tend to pit racial, sexual, gender, class, and religious-based identities against each other. In reality TV's discourse of "difference," queer personalities often face off against heterosexuality and heteronormativity. Moreover, race is sometimes aligned with and other times opposed to queer identities, offering particularly dramatic sites of conflict in shows such as The Real World (MTV), College Hill (BET), Survivor (CBS), and Wife Swap (ABC). As this collection demonstrates, racial and sexual identities are central to TV characters' and personalities' storylines, playing an integral role in how they navigate the televisial universe.

The articles in this collection explore the complex relationships among race, sexuality, and television in this competitive, multi-channel, conglomerate environment. "Race," "sexuality," and "television" each offer their own distinct histories, theories, economics, and aesthetics. Yet, what ties these articles together is a deep investment in how images of or issues concerning race, sexuality, and television are constructed, represented, and received in various contexts of contemporary culture. While these articles traverse a broad range of television shows, theoretical frameworks, and modes of analysis, they all account for the ways that post-network television engages with, constructs, and delimits representation. In the first article, "Selling the Hypersexual Body: Tila Tequila's 'Alternative' Gender Performance Across New and Old Media Platforms," Taylor Nygaard examines Tequila's racialized sexuality as a Vietnamese, bisexual woman in the contexts of celebrity branding, reality television, and convergence culture. With an eye to the economics of the media industries, Nygaard addresses the range of forces that construct Tequila's celebrity text. She sees this process as a contradictory one – for racial and sexual minorities like Tequila, celebrity is both a success story of the democratic potential of convergence culture and a troubling tale of commodification and exploitation from the top-down. Nygaard's article makes a significant contribution to understanding the interplay of television, convergence culture, gender, sexuality, and postfeminism at a time when these discourses are in flux.

In "You Better Work: The Commodification of HIV in RuPaul's Drag Race" Hunter Hargraves continues to explore the interweaving of commercial imperatives and queer politics. He uses Ongina, a Filipino-born contestant on Logo's RuPaul's Drag Race who disclosed her HIV-positive status on the show, to consider the implications of having a reality TV star as a celebrity spokesperson for HIV. Hargraves expands the scope of research on HIV/AIDS disclosure and celebrity by situating his analysis of Ongina within a discussion of labor, race, gender, sexuality, commodity production, and reality television. Pointing out the problems
inherent in the commodification of HIV positive individuals, particularly HIV positive individuals of color, he ultimately argues that public disclosure on reality TV programs reframes the disease within both commercial and mainstream LGBT culture.

Evan Brody’s essay “Categorizing Coming Out: The Modern Tevisual Mediation of Queer Youth Identification” also engages in discourses of disclosure, focusing on the “coming out” narratives of two teenage boys on network television. Using *Glee*’s Kurt Hummel and *Ugly Betty*’s Justin Suarez, Brody traces the ways that each show reinforces and contests the normalized process of “coming out.” Closely examining how performativity and confession function differently in Kurt and Justin’s queer self-identification, he demonstrates the varying possibilities for representing the “coming out” story as a simple recognition of the self rather than as a life-altering marker of sexuality. His comparison of the two characters, importantly, suggests that Justin’s racialized “coming out” narrative provides a compelling challenge to the formulaic “white” “coming out” story offered by Kurt and numerous characters before him.

With “Nightmares of Neoliberalism: Performing Failure on *Hell Date*,” Elizabeth Ault moves us from in-depth character analysis to a broader critique of the cable network BET and its reality dating show *Hell Date*. Ault uses the show to study the logic of African American self-fashioning in light of neoliberal theories and practices. Her analysis reveals the ways that neoliberalism’s ties to cultural politics play out on a niche cable station dedicated to African American audiences. Ault examines an array of racialized stereotypes featured on *Hell Date*, positioning them as “hauntings” that must be repressed to ensure African Americans’ access to what she calls “entrepreneurial citizenship.” The article contributes to the growing body of research on television, racial and sexual minorities, and neoliberal regimes of power. *Hell Date*, Ault contends, presents the types of racial and sexual excess that have to be denied for neoliberal multiculturalism to prevail, but in doing so, makes visible the pleasure in these same cultural ruptures.

Also taking up the topic of racialized sexuality in cable television, Jennifer DeClue offers one of the first sustained critiques of the two queer black female characters on HBO’s *The Wire*. Interrogating the construction of Kima and Snoop through the lens of female masculinity, DeClue draws connections among conventions of quality TV, the conflation of gender and sexuality, discourses of television realism, and the historical treatment of black women’s sexuality in the U.S. Her analysis calls attention to the ambivalent status of these representations; they are powerful critiques of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia. Yet, they are also narrow depictions of queer black women, confined by the demands of quality TV.

Shifting from an analysis of queer black women to queer black men in “TV in Black and Gay: Examining Constructions of Blackness and Gay Crossracial Dating on GRΣΣK,” Alfred L. Martin, Jr. provides an examination of Calvin Owens, the lone gay black male character on the ABC Family show *Greek*. His article focuses on the ways that the show constitutes Calvin’s gay identity in relation to his black identity. Through a careful analysis of key scenes throughout the show’s four seasons, Martin details the ways that race and sexuality operate as discrete and often conflicting social categories. Rather than representing these identities as overlapping and intersecting, Martin argues that *Greek* shifts Calvin’s self-identification based on his social environment. Additionally, Martin complicates this discussion of identity by incorporating an analysis of the show’s treatment of interracial relationships between Calvin and his white boyfriends over the course of the series. This article moves beyond the kinds of evaluations offered by “post-gay” and “post-race” frameworks, sustaining the cultural and political complexities of gay and black identities.

The collection concludes with reviews of two recent books that interrogate contemporary constructions of racial and sexual minorities in the media. Lorien Hunter reviews Erica Chito Childs’s *Fade to Black and White: Interracial Images in Popular Culture*, which analyzes the ways that media including film, television, music, and the Internet depict biracial individuals and interracial couples, providing an account of modern perceptions of a range of racialized representations. Bryce J. Renninger reviews Samuel A. Chambers’s book *The Queer Politics of
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*Television*, which integrates television studies and political theory to read contemporary TV programming through the lens of queer theory. These reviews complete a collection that seeks to extend scholarship that examines the ways that the television industry produces, complicates, and co-constitutes images of racial and sexual minorities. Each article reveals that television remains a significant site of communication about racial and sexual identities, offering entryways into investigating the cultural and political nature of U.S. programming in the new millennium. Most significantly, this collection provides a cross-section of methodological approaches, creating scholarship that privileges the intersectionality of identity categories. Such analyses enable us to better comprehend how characters, shows, networks, audiences, and institutions define and challenge queer and racialized identities on TV. Together, these articles underscore the need for and importance of bringing multiple fields into conversation with one another. My hope is that people will consider the usefulness of a more rigorous integration of television studies, political economy of media, critical race theory, feminist studies, and queer theory; this collection is designed to encourage and inspire an interdisciplinary dialogue about race, sexuality, and television in the 21st century United States.

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End Notes

1 Prop 8 supercedes the California Supreme Court’s May 2008 ruling that marriage is a fundamental right, which cannot be denied to lesbian and gay couples. Since its passage, Prop 8 has been contested in state and federal courts and is widely considered a landmark case that will eventually reach the U.S. Supreme Court. For a timeline of the events following Prop 8’s passage and details of the legal proceedings see: http://www.afer.org/our-work/case-timeline/; http://www.nclrights.org/site/PageServer?pagename=issue_caseDocket_prop8legalchallenge_About; http://www.eqca.org/site/pp.asp?b=5716101&c=kuLR9MRKrH.
3 See Wanda Sykes’s comedy special *I’m a Be Me*, first broadcast October 10, 2009 by HBO.
4 One of the most basic counter-claims made at the time was that California’s black population was simply not large enough to have controlled the outcome of Prop 8. According to the 2006–2008 American Community Survey, the state’s black population is 6.7%, not nearly enough citizens to control the outcome of a statewide ballot initiative.
9 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 199.


