When I sent out the CFP for this issue, one of the first responses I received was surprisingly vehement. A professor sent this message via email:

Tell the drivers who are systematically pulled over and racially profiled by the police that race is now irrelevant. Who are these alleged “critics and commentators?” Moreover, considering your university affiliation, you can just step outside campus and make a quick empirical observation. Personally, I find these academic exercises quite ludicrous.

While I was initially taken aback by this response, I realized later how much I appreciated such an honest reaction; it was my proof that post-identity was a provocative and timely topic that demanded further exploration. As the essays in this issue reveal, post-identity works as an excellent theoretical starting point for re-examining identity within a contemporary nexus of social, political, cultural and economic contexts.

The prefix “post” has been used extensively within academic circles, particularly to characterize a historical period or artistic movement: post-colonialism, post-modernism, post-humanism, post-feminism. While on a surface level suggesting an “after,” the above terms have come to represent much more than a historical succession from period to period; rather, the terms have generated controversy about history itself – about the “befores” and the afters” – and subsequently blurred straightforward trajectories of past, present and future. The concept of post-identity, while debated for some time within gender studies, queer theory, critical race theory, and legal studies, among other fields, has not truly entered the public lexicon until the recent election of President Barack Obama.

Obama’s election to office was an undoubtedly historic event, yet the frenzy surrounding his campaign, election and presidency thus far has been a fascinating glimpse into the American public’s range of reactions and emotions towards race, celebrity, politics and history. Politicians, pundits, and public intellectuals have heralded Obama’s presidency as a symbol of true “post”-ness – of race, of black suffering, of the long political battle for recognition in the eyes of the American state. Recent popular reflections on the changing nature of race and racism have focused on the notion of historical progress, a constant move towards better (read: more equitable) times. As Matt Bai points out in his New York Times article, “Post-Race: Is Obama the End of Black Politics?,” while the older generation of civil rights leaders faced a violent and explicit kind of racism, their sons and daughters – Obama’s generation – were subjected to much more subtle jibes and taunts within white, middle-class suburbia. Bai references a conversation he has with Cory Booker, 39-year-old black mayor of Newark: “There is a universality now to the middle-class black experience, he told me, that should be instantly
recognizable to Jews or Italians or any other white ethnic bloc that has struggled to assimilate." One of the popular stories circulated around blackness, then, has been a narrative of assimilation, based on the idea that blackness, like Irish identity, will soon blend into the common fabric of being “American.” Looking briefly at popular representations of blackness in Hollywood film, for example, often reveals a similar elision of blackness in favor of American identity. Actor Will Smith has starred in six recent science fiction blockbusters where he plays a lone black protagonist who must break the rules to save humanity (Independence Day (1996), Men in Black (1997), Men in Black II (2002), I, Robot (2004), I Am Legend (2007), and Hancock (2008)). While Smith is identified as “black” in the world off-screen, his on-screen characters disavow a relationship to black identity; his everyman heroes suggest that in the futuristic worlds occupied by Smith on-screen, “blackness” has been seamlessly integrated in “humanity,” and fears of the Other have been transferred to more explicit enemies, such as robots or aliens. Smith’s characters suggest the contradictions and complications involved in ignoring race within fantastic worlds, while racial identity has undeniably tangible and material consequences in “reality.” It is no surprise that Obama identified Smith as the most suitable candidate to star in the filmed version of Obama’s life story.

The “post” in the “post-racism” proposed by public figures and popular culture does not signify a revolutionary moment in identity politics, then, but rather a tacked-on ending to a narrative that is ongoing rather than finished, circular rather than linear, and fractured rather than unified. The unfinished business of identity reveals itself continuously within current events; the recent furor over state-issued bans of gay marriage, the perverse and prejudiced negligence of particular communities revealed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Representative Joe Wilson’s “You lie!” outburst during Obama’s health care address, the continuation of a gendered and raced glass ceilings in the American workforce, an economic crisis based on the sale of subprime mortgages to low-income populations, the sale of ethnic “designer drugs” that ignore social and cultural contexts for illness – the list goes on and on. What these moments collectively reveal are the continuing struggles for power and recognition being fought within politics, economics and science, struggles that must be acknowledged and analyzed before even entertaining utopian thoughts of a world full of “posts.”

Within academia, the “post” of “post-identity” is constantly troubled and challenged; the essays in this collection reveal the ways that reading “post” temporally, as “finished” or “over,” is a provocative
way of reconsidering contemporary uses and abuses of marginalized identities. While critical race theorists such as Paul Gilroy and Walter Benn Michaels have been encouraging a theoretical and sociological move away from “racial thinking,” more scholars are challenging the utopia suggested by “post” and re-purposing it as an important critical and analytical tool. For example, N. Katherine Hayles’ work on posthumanism leads the author not to the future(s) of human-technological fusion, but rather to the past, to the history of cybernetics and the distinctions between embodied and disembodied information; Hayles’ work highlights the changing role of human subjectivity in the face of technology and its implications in contemporary society. Building on Hayles’ scholarship, Alexander Weheliye’s research into sound technologies and black cultural production suggests a corrective to cybertheory with “a posthumanism not mired in the residual effects of white liberal subjectivity.”

Scholars such as Judith Halberstam, Jennifer Gonzalez, Tara McPherson, Anna Everett, Aihwa Ong, Roopali Mukherjee, Martin Kevorkian, and Kodwo Eshun continue to explore the possibilities and consequences of “posts,” and the essays in this issue further the dialogue within the fields of critical race theory, queer theory, transnationalism, popular music studies, and new media theory.

The collection begins with Marcia Dawkins’ “Mixed Messages: Barack Obama and Post-Racial Politics,” where Dawkins looks closely at the “post-race” ideal, analyzing its contemporary popularity in light of recent historical events. Dawkins goes on to analyze the rhetoric used by President Obama in his historic “A More Perfect Union” speech. Dawkins concludes that both the language used by Obama and his iconic mixed-raced status do not exclaim a “post-race” moment, but rather open a meaningful dialogue about race and racism in the United States. The next essay, “Dignity, the Sacred, and the Ends of Black Performance,” explores a different facet of the “end” of blackness. Author Sarah Cervenak examines the use of destruction and absence in the work of two performance artists, William Pope L. and Adrian Piper, and their creation of unique and productive ways of approaching black representation. The artists, using Kantian and Eastern philosophies, explore the idea of “lack” as a way of re-claiming racial dignity, where a theoretical destruction of blackness becomes a form of performative activism and an opportunity to criticize the social and material objectification of black bodies.

Kristopher L. Cannon’s essay, “Cutting Race Otherwise: Imagining Michael Jackson,” examines the representation of a highly visible black body – Michael Jackson’s – and the instability of racial and gendered categories prompted by Jackson’s constantly shifting racial identity. Cannon explores the instability of racial visibility, particularly the disjuncture between images of blackness and whiteness and what these chromatic details imply about identity in general. Cannon uses Jackson’s body within his various music videos as a “transitional” figure, one that slips in and out of blackness and whiteness and exists on a cyborgian border between artificial and natural, ultimately challenging the emphases placed on visual signifiers of identity in popular culture. Nadine Chan continues to examine the instability of identity, this time of national identity, within film by reading Danny Boyle’s recent hit, Slumdog Millionaire (2008), from both nationalist and transnational positions, looking closely at the limitations and possibilities of both perspectives. While not aiming for a theoretical solution to the problem of “nation” within film theory, Chan’s analysis highlights the importance of not only using the nation as a space of resistance within a culture of globalization, but also of not forcing films to “speak” for one culture or country. Her piece emphasizes the necessity for media scholars and cultural theorists to constantly interrogate their own subject positions and tools of analysis.

Karen Sichler critically examines the scholarly position and methods of analysis of queer theorist Judith Butler in “Post queerness: hyperreal gender and the end of the quest for origins,” analyzing Butler’s research through the lens of Jean Baudrillard’s idea of hyperreality. Sichler first goes through Baudrillard’s different orders of hyperreality – counterfeit, production, simulation and virtual – emphasizing that Baudrillard’s definition of the “virtual” does not require a referent in reality. Sichler subjects Judith Butler’s deconstructions of gender in Gender Trouble, Bodies that Matter and Undoing Gender to Baudrillard’s definition of the virtual, suggesting that removing even the idea of an “original” from Butler’s work would allow the theorist to further challenge hierarchical structures of gender and sexuality in her work.
EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

The last two essays in the issue support Sichler’s analysis of the virtual by exploring the erasure of specific facets of identity within new media platforms. In “The Problem with WHOIS: Hidden Assumptions about Identity and Social Networking,” Rachael Sullivan examines the commonalities between different reactions to social media such as Facebook and Twitter, finding that most arguments for and against social media are founded on specific ideas about subjectivity and self-identification. Critics of social media, argues Sullivan, assume there is a core identity that is being somehow violated by social media sites, but in actuality, these web sites are merely extensions of the already fluid narratives of identity that define postmodern society. Sullivan uses the 1995 film The Net to portray the paranoia that surrounds the separation of bodily and virtual identities, as its protagonist chases after her identity within a limbo world between personhood and non-personhood. Moving on to representations of new media and identity, in “Always Already Post: On the Machineries of Buildings and Bodies”, Amy Falvey uses the techno-imagery of Regina Spektor’s song, “Far,” to examine the philosophical position of posthumanism, arguing, along the same lines as Marcia Dawkins, that post-humanism does not have to signify going “beyond” the human, but rather can be a starting point for rethinking the place of bodies within racial, cultural, political and national boundaries and for letting go of nostalgia for “past purity and unification.”

The issue ends with two book reviews of recent scholarly texts that explore and problematize sexuality in two different contexts. Joy Yue-Zi Cheng reviews Song Hwee Lim’s Celluloid Comrades: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas, which challenges previous categorizations of nationality and sexuality in Chinese cinema by viewing popular Chinese films through the lens of cultural materialism, a combination of textual, historical, and political analysis. Mike J. Pence reviews the collection Hetero: Queering Representations of Whiteness, edited by Sean Griffin, where various media scholars take a closer look at historical and contemporary representations of heterosexuality, queering and complicating seemingly straightforward representations of masculinity and femininity in popular Hollywood cinema. These reviews provide a fitting end to a collection that aims to rethink multiple facets of identity in visual culture, suggesting that it is only by interrogating the utopian nature of “post”-ness that we can better understand identity’s past, present and future.

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End Notes

2 See Janani Subramanian, “Alienating Identification: black identity in The Brother from Another Planet and I Am Legend,” Science Fiction Film and Television (Spring 2010).