

White as *Milk*: Proposition 8 and the Cultural Politics of Gay Rights

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Abstract

As part of the U.S. federal elections in November 2008, voters in California narrowly passed Proposition 8, a ballot initiative that eliminated same-sex marriage rights in that state. Against this political-legal backdrop, the movie *Milk*, based on the life of gay activist Harvey Milk, was released to audiences across North America. Proposition 8 and its aftermath infused social and cultural meaning into the critical acclaim *Milk* publicly received, and the movie itself became a way to both galvanize and anchor support for gay (marriage) rights. I contend that there is a particular racialization of queer sexuality and proximity to whiteness that links this moment of law and culture together. The paper examines the “knitted-togetherness” of the film’s racially normative representations and the racializing of homophobia that occurred on both sides of the Proposition 8 debate, one that continues the protracted fractioning of race as separate from sexuality within mainstream lesbian/gay politics.

Résumé

Dans le cadre des élections fédérales américaines de novembre 2008, les électeurs en Californie ont réussi à faire passer de justesse la *Proposition 8*, une initiative de scrutin qui a éliminé les droits des personnes ayant effectué un mariage de même sexe dans cet état. Le film *Milk*, réalisé contre cet environnement politiquement légal, et basé sur la vie du militant Harvey Milk, est sorti sur les grands écrans en Amérique du Nord. Suite à la sortie *Proposition 8*, ont infusé un sens social et culturel dans au succès publique de *Milk*. Le film est lui-même devenu un moyen de galvaniser et d’ancrer du support pour le droit du mariage gai. J’affirme qu’il y a une racialisation particulière de la sexualité gaie,

et une proximité à la race blanche, qui lie ce moment légal et culturel ensemble. Cet article examine l’union des représentations normatives racialisées du film, et la racialisation de l’homophobie qui advient des deux côtés du débat sur *Proposition 8*, un débat qui continue le prolongement de la fraction de la race, comme une séparation de la sexualité au sein des politiques gaies et lesbiennes.

As part of the November 2008 federal elections in the United States (U.S.), voters in California narrowly passed a ballot initiative eliminating same-sex marriage rights in that state. Six months earlier, the California Supreme Court had ruled that the state’s law prohibiting same-sex marriage was unconstitutional under the privacy, due process, and equal protection guarantees of the California Constitution.¹ By a 52 to 48 per cent margin, Proposition 8 overturned this decision and added a new section to California’s constitution, limiting the definition of marriage to a union between a man and a woman. Almost immediately, opponents challenged Proposition 8 as an illegal revision because it significantly altered the equal protection measures guaranteed by the Constitution. Following a judicial review, in May 2009, the California Supreme Court upheld Proposition 8 as a valid constitutional amendment; however, it also ruled that Proposition 8 would not retroactively invalidate the estimated 18,000 same-sex marriages performed in California between June and November 2008. Two same-sex couples, with the legal support of the American Foundation for Equal Rights, filed a federal district court challenge on the heels of this judgment.² In August 2010, the court released its decision in which it was determined that Proposition 8 did indeed violate equal protection guarantees under the U.S. Constitution and that same-sex couples should be allowed to marry again in Califor-

nia. Although vigorously appealed by proponents of Proposition 8, the Supreme Court of the United States issued a ruling in June 2013 that found the Proposition unconstitutional. Same-sex marriage is now (again) legal in California.³

Against the politico-legal backdrop of the success of Proposition 8, a critically acclaimed feature film entitled *Milk* (2008) was released to audiences across North America. Directed by Gus Van Sant, the movie focuses on the final eight years of the life of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay politician elected to office in the U.S. Supporters of same-sex marriage sought to make a direct link between the activist efforts to challenge Proposition 8 and the movie's plot line of the 1978 political campaign to defeat Proposition 6, an initiative on the California state ballot which would have banned lesbians and gay men from working in California's public schools.

In this paper, I offer a critical analysis of *Milk* as a cultural text that actively constructs racialized meaning; that is, I argue that it functions as a contemporary site where gay is made white. Here, I follow a method offered by Melani McAllister (2001, 5) who argues that we need to position cultural texts in history as active producers of meaning, rather than assuming they merely reflect or reproduce some pre-existing social reality. She argues that the cultural field exists in continuous relationship with other fields in the larger social system, and thus cultural productions are part of concrete debates of their time. In this way, analysis of cultural artifacts becomes less about what these texts may mean than how they participate in the socio-political world. The method she suggests is to examine the "knitted-togetherness" of culture and politics, that is, to explore the ways in which world events and cultural texts construct meanings for each other (82). Knitting the politics of Proposition 8 together with the movie underscores the ways in which law and culture deeply constitute one other. Proposition 8 and its aftermath breathed social and cultural meaning into the critical acclaim *Milk* received, and the movie itself became a way to rouse and anchor support for gay (marriage) rights. More than this, though, I con-

tend that it is whiteness as a relation of power that enables the politico-legal event of Proposition 8 and the cultural text of the movie to find and construct meaning for, and in, each other.

"How Timely *Milk* Feels": Galvanizing Legal Struggle through Cultural Text

There are a number of similarities between the campaign chronicled in the movie and the "real life" campaign over Proposition 8: both were nationally watched campaigns and close in the polls; both figured children and schools as a central concern; both political moments featured Republican governors (Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger) siding with gay Californians; and both anti-Proposition 8 and anti-Proposition 6 linked support of "gay rights" with imaginings of what "America" stands for. Indeed, it is worth noting that the website of the American Foundation for Equal Rights does not feature any conventional gay iconography (rainbow flag, pink triangle), but rather the American flag, a signal to homonationalist inflections underpinning this gay rights legal project.

The movie also contains a ready-made inspirational message for contemporary activists. Fearing a loss over Proposition 6, Sean Penn (as Harvey Milk) says to fellow activist Cleve Jones (played by Emile Hirsch), "If this thing passes, fight the hell back." Anti-Proposition 8 activism was grounded in this spirit in a number of ways. Significantly, the movie's release was carefully timed. An interview with Gus Van Sant reveals the political implications of the movie's various release dates⁴:

By the time the film comes out, the election will be over, although we will be having screenings, including the big opening at the Castro, before the election. I hope that some of this will have some effect on California's Proposition 8...We thought about whether to release the film before the election, especially if it could affect Prop 8. The end decision was not to have the film speaking directly to the election, because if it was seen to be just about the election that might take away its chance of having a life after the election. We decided to straddle the election, to have the

opening affect the election and the release be after the election. (Bowen 2008)

Furthermore, both Sean Penn (best actor) and Dustin Lance Black (best original screenplay) used their acceptance speeches at the Academy Awards to denounce the passage of Proposition 8; Penn exclaimed, for example, that,

“For those who saw the signs of hatred as our cars drove in tonight, I think that it is a good time for those who voted for the ban against gay marriage to sit and reflect and anticipate their great shame and the shame in their grandchildren’s eyes if they continue that way of support. We’ve got to have equal rights for everyone.” (81st Annual Academy Awards 2009)

Additionally, Sean Penn (as himself) and the “real life” Cleve Jones are spokespeople for the marriage equality component of the Courage Campaign, an online network for progressive Californians. For his part, Dustin Lance Black sits on the board of the American Equal Rights Foundation, has publicly participated in efforts to officially designate May 22 of every year as Harvey Milk Day in California, and was one of three Grand Marshalls in the 2009 New York City Pride March (the other two being Cleve Jones and Anne Kronenberg, who was Milk’s campaign manager and aide). Finally, and perhaps most significantly, queers and the general public alike were strongly encouraged to view the movie as an inspiration for activism and to learn about “our history.” A review of the movie in an online edition of *Newsweek* claims that for those people “coming to Milk’s story for the first time, [the movie] will be a rousing experience. In the wake of California’s gay-marriage referendum, it’s hard to overstate how timely ‘Milk’ feels” (Ansen 2008). Similarly, a *Rolling Stone* review read,

If you want to hate on this movie, bring it on. To those who say it’s ancient history since Harvey’s battle is no longer an issue, I say wake up and smell the hate crimes, and the bill banning gay marriage that passed on Election Day. To those who say its focus limits its audience, I say

Harvey’s focus was human rights and therefore limitless. (Travers 2008)

A discussion thread about *Milk* on the online LGBTQ activist network <jointheimpact.com> features affective expressions of desire to harness the momentum of the film to anti-Proposition 8 activism, perhaps best summed up by the post, “Do yourself a favor, WATCH the movie. Learn, Educate, and continue to fight for our rights” (“Do Yourself A Favour” 2008).

At face value, then, the movie has achieved considerable meaning within the politico-legal context of Proposition 8. It can be understood as a cultural artifact deployed to (re)mobilize political energies to support same-sex marriage, particularly in the months leading up to the 2009 Supreme Court decision that upheld Proposition 8 as constitutional. The film is a contemporary retelling of the life of an important historical figure, who, in the words of one reviewer, “lives in this strangely real world from the past as well as in our imaginations. He is a figure who still speaks to us” (Bowen 2008). Yet, however much this movie is called upon to create inspirational meaning for and labour on behalf of marriage equality, it does so in a way that depends upon a proximity to whiteness. In what follows, I contend that the film reproduces the logic of a single-axis identity and politics that racializes gay as white, one that ultimately works to entrench whiteness at the heart of lesbian and gay equality seeking projects.

Racializing Queerness: The “World Politics” of *Milk*’s Cinematic Representations

Featured as a biopic, the film offers a cinematic snapshot of a movement coming of age. The opening sequence of white gay men in bars being harassed and arrested by the police and the film’s final footage of thousands of people walking in a candlelight vigil after the assassination of Harvey Milk recuperates a developmental narrative of gay identity that begins with a hidden, unliberated homosexual practice and culminates in a liberated, out, politicized, modern gay subjectivity (Manalansan 2003). What is troubling about this portrayal is its representation of

“gay liberation” as almost exclusively white and male. There are neither queer bodies of colour nor any women visible in the movie’s opening footage of arrests. This is a significant misrepresentation as well as misremembering of genealogies of the birth(s) of the gay liberation movement, given that drag queens and people of colour led the 1969 Stonewall revolt and riots and ultimately made a figure like Harvey Milk possible (Retzloff 2007; Stryker 2008).⁵ Similarly, we meet only one lesbian in the movie (Anne Kronenberg, played by Canadian actor Alison Pill), when in fact a vibrant lesbian community existed in San Francisco at the time. Furthermore, as Harvey Milk’s campaign manager, Kronenberg herself was key to forging alliances with lesbian communities that gained Milk his political support and that became part of the large grassroots movement to defeat Proposition 6 (Epstein 1984; Shilts 1982).

Further compounding the gendered and racial erasures of the movie’s opening sequence is the marginalization of (queer) characters of colour with speaking roles and therefore as substantial characters in the film as a whole. There is only one African American man who delivers a single line in the movie as he walks past Harvey Milk’s storefront during an election campaign, saying, “Gonna win this time, Milk?” In another scene, the (straight) character Michael Wong, one of Harvey Milk’s key political advisors (played by Kelvin Yu), is chastised by Milk with the line, “Don’t you have someone’s laundry to do?” (referencing the classic stereotype of a Chinese laundry worker); Wong’s response to Milk, “Shouldn’t you be at a hairdressing convention?” is one of his two substantive lines in the entire movie (*Milk* 2008). As Harvey Milk’s second lover in the film, Jack Lira, a Latino man, is portrayed as needy, jealous, emotionally unstable, and a problem to Milk’s political aspirations; little or no validity is given to their relationship. When Milk’s former lover Scott Smith (played by James Franco) tells Milk that he can do better, with a head nod to Jack, the response is, “When I come home to Jack, I don’t have to talk politics; I don’t have to talk intelligently; I don’t have to talk at all.” Significantly, Lira kills himself in the midst of the anti-Propo-

sition 6 campaign, and, in the following scene, Sean Penn’s voice-over as Harvey Milk says, “Jack was gone. I didn’t have any time to mourn. There was no choice. I had to keep on, keep on fighting” (*Milk* 2008). Towards the end of the film, Milk has a telephone conversation with Smith in the early morning of the day that he is assassinated. The conversation hints at an abiding affection and the possibility of rekindling the relationship were it not for Milk’s untimely death. One way to interpret this is that, in contrast to his relationship with the troubled and volatile Lira, Milk’s relationship with Scott Smith is offered as true love. While biographies of Harvey Milk do point to such aspects of Lira’s personality and the catty humorous exchange between Milk and Wong might indicate a form of inclusion within Milk’s close network of political advisors, such representations compound the already striking marginal presence of (queer) characters of colour in the movie, given the historical record. The movie’s overarching narrative frame of a movement coming into political and social visibility, recounted without the tangible presence of bodies of colour or where such bodies mediate the whiteness of gay male self-determination, produces an erroneous discursive construct that equates gay as white.

Beyond these examples of individual characters, there is another more systematic representation of a gay political movement as white and male—that of the “phone tree” scene. As the repeal of various gay rights protection ordinances in municipalities across the United States compounds the struggle against Proposition 6, this particular scene features Cleve Jones telephoning a friend whose image appears in a small box at the top right of the screen: “Hey, we’re losing Wichita; so, rally tonight, sundown, at Market and Castro, OK?” They both hang up and the screen then multiplies into nearly 100 small boxes of white men phoning each other to spread word of the rally. The point that I want to emphasize here are *the terms* through which people of colour are included in the movie’s cinematic representations, that is, either as a marginal presence or altogether absent. Such terms have the effect of abstracting such bodies from a contemporary

cultural retelling of a particular historical moment.⁶ This racial otherness functions to normalize white gay male sexuality to a mainstream audience, where the self-determining white gay activist emerges out of the shadows of the closet into his rightful place in history. The metaphor of the closet, however, spatially and temporally suggests access to privacy not collectively experienced by all sexual minorities (Perez 2005, 177). The privacy this metaphor takes for granted requires specific economic, cultural, and familial circumstances. Similarly, the “coming out” metaphor suggests a kind of mobility not universally available. Coming out promises liberation and celebrates a form of freedom and self-determination, both of which are premised on the property of whiteness. These two canonical narratives of the closet and coming out, Perez argues, “violently excludes or includes the subjects it names according to their access to specific kinds of privacy, property, and mobility” (178; see also Charania 2005 and Ross 2005). As Spade and Willse (2009) observe, focusing on Harvey Milk as an individual not only gives the contemporary lesbian/gay/queer movement a white idol, but also canonizes a certain white gay male history as *the* story of queer liberation.

What I am problematizing here is the movie’s screenplay and not Milk himself; in fact, it is instructive to watch the 1984 documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* alongside this Hollywood retelling, as it reveals the great extent to which Milk sought to establish alliances and coalitions with a wide variety of communities, including communities of colour. There is, in fact, a telling scene in the movie where the character of Milk asserts, “I am not a candidate. I am part of a movement. The movement is the candidate” (*Milk* 2008). Yet in an interview discussing the writing of his screenplay for the film’s production, Dustin Lance Black remarked,

“The thing I wanted to do in the script was get much more personal. The documentary doesn’t have most of the stories that I was drawn to. It doesn’t have Cleve Jones’ story, which is a father-son story, which I related to the most. And it doesn’t have Scott Smith and Harvey’s story. It doesn’t have Jack Lira. It doesn’t have any of the

actual love stories...I just thought it was an opportunity to get more into the personal stories—of what it was to be gay in that transformative time.” (Cline 2009).

The focus on love stories is an interesting one given the ubiquitous appeal to love and romance in contemporary struggles for lesbian and gay rights, a far cry from transgressive gay liberation politics of the 1970s which sought to wrest and unshackle sex from love (Manalansan 2007; Patton 1998). An intriguing sidenote to this arose in June 2009, when photos of Black allegedly having unsafe sex appeared and circulated on the Internet. A short article appearing in *The Advocate* that same month, however, states that, “the pictures won’t stand in the way of the Oscar winner’s work in support of gay rights.” Black is quoted in this article as saying, “More important than the embarrassment of this incident is the misleading message these images send. I apologize and cannot emphasize enough the importance of responsible sexual practices” (2009). The repentant tone, as if he can no longer be a spokesperson for same-sex marriage, is deeply telling of the extent to which both the advocacy for, and the meaning of, “gay rights” evince notions of respectability, where safe sex is the civic obligation of the “good gay” citizen (Patton 1998, 363).

The racialized terms produced by the film are part of, and I would argue, contribute to, a larger socio-political context—its “world politics” (McAllister 2001)—in which both lesbian/gay/queer activists and seemingly progressive Western state discourses of anti-homophobia racialize “pro-gay” and anti-homophobia discourse as white. Within this discursive terrain, people and communities racialized as, for example, Muslim become marked as over(t)ly homophobic, and the freedom to be “out” as gay or lesbian becomes a marker in the distance between barbarism and civilization in the post 9/11 geopolitical context (in the British context, see Haritaworn, Tauqir, and Erdem 2008 and Douglas, Jivraj, and Lambie 2011; in the Canadian context, Lenon 2008; and in the Dutch context, El-Tayeb 2012; Jivraj and de Jong 2011). Queer anti-racist scholarship and

activisms delineate the thick relationship between access to citizenship rights (e.g., marriage) for (some) lesbians and gay men, the war on terror, and the racisms that accompany it. As Jasbir Puar (2007) has argued, the (limited) welcome of lesbian/gay/queer subjects into market and legislative registers is enabled only through a parallel process of a queer necropolitics, that is, targeting queerly raced bodies for dying. Haritaworn, Tauqir, and Erdem (2008, 79) track the hegemonic whiteness of mainstream queer activism in Britain and its participation in the construction of Muslim homophobia. Western nation states claiming gender equality and “gay rights” as symbols of their modernity, the authors argue, signals not progress in gender and sexual politics, but rather a regression in racial politics. Transformed into indicators of Western values, “gay rights” (as well as gender equality) are held up as measures of civilized modernity in a transnational sphere, thereby playing an intrinsic role in the re-making of a white family of nations as part of the “war against terror” (Arat-Koç 2010; Thobani 2007). The concerted deployment of respect for gay rights as a marker of distinction between the modern civility of the West and “backwardness” of Islam, for example, is a terrain shared by diverse actors and various “sides” of the political spectrum, including forms of lesbian/gay/queer political organizing. Such homonationalism breathes new life into, and revives, long histories of the deployment of gender and sexuality in imperial and racist projects (Douglas, Jivraj, and Lambie 2011; Puar 2007).

The politics of Proposition 8 also contribute to this racializing of pro-gay/anti-homophobia discourse. In its aftermath, many commentators latched onto the apparently high numbers of African Americans and other communities of colour who voted for Proposition 8 (and thus *against* same-sex marriage), as announced by media reports of exit polls. The National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll claimed, for example, that 70 per cent of black voters supported Proposition 8 (Egan and Sherrill 2009, 9). The *San Francisco Chronicle* (Knight 2008) reported on a demographic breakdown of the vote in San Francisco itself based on race, age, and

education, showing results that, the more white people living in a precinct, the more likely that precinct was to vote against the proposition (and thus for same-sex marriage); the opposite was true for precincts with many Asian or African American residents. A study released by the National Lesbian and Gay Task Force, however, found quite different results. By combining precinct-level election returns, demographic data, and a survey of California voters, the authors’ analysis indicates that party identification, religiosity, and age had a much greater impact on the outcome than any other voter characteristics, such as race. Their data suggests that, among Californians who attend religious services at least weekly, support for Proposition 8 was nearly uniform across *all* racial and ethnic groups. Furthermore, in contrast to the NEP exit poll, their data suggests that African American support for Proposition 8 was in the range of 57 per cent, not the 70 per cent that was initially reported (Egan and Sherrill 2009).

What is of interest here are not the numbers per se, but rather that such an explanatory strategy belies the complexity of reasons for the failure of the “No on 8” campaign. Indeed, one of the strongest critiques directed at this campaign was that its organizational structure had little or no accountability or transparency to wider LGBT communities (Marriage Equality USA 2009, 2; see also Ehrenreich 2008 and McKinley 2008). Moreover, directives given to queer of colour organizations were followed through with limited financial and material resources to do the work, despite raising an estimated \$43 million (Shin 2009, 4). Additionally, there was a lack of advertising in communities of colour other than a last-minute public service announcement featuring a voice-over by Samuel L. Jackson (but not his image) entitled “Proposition 8 is Discrimination,” which drew analogies between marriage equality and other historical exclusions of citizenship (Marriage Equality USA 2009, 5, 7). While organizations representing communities of colour were included as coalition partners, this diversity was not for the most part demonstrated in the visible “No on 8” campaign spokespeople or leadership other than during

specific targeted outreach rallies held once in the large cities (Marriage Equality USA 2009, 5). In fact, official “No on 8” campaign commercials did not feature *any* same-sex couples or their families, regardless of racial background (6, 7).

This issue of visibility and representational practices of the “No on 8” campaign echo in the movie. There is a scene that captures Harvey Milk expressing his disgust with the lack of gay visibility on early anti-Proposition 6 materials. To a group of political elite he states, “People need to know who it is that’s being affected. You need at least one old queer on this flyer” (*Milk* 2008). Indeed a key message of Harvey Milk’s activism was rooted in gay liberation tenets of visibility that sought to generate public, positive consciousness of lesbian and gay lives. This stands at some distance from the homonormative impulses implicit in current forms of gay marriage advocacy that insist on both visual and discursive representations of respectability and sameness in order to secure legal rights within the domain of private domesticity.

The limited outreach and resources proffered by the “No on 8” campaign to lesbian/gay/queer communities stands in contrast to the “Protect Marriage/Yes on 8” campaign. Spearheaded by the Mormon Church, this coalition included prominent Christian Right organizations including Focus on the Family, Concerned Women for America, the Family Research Council, as well as the Roman Catholic Church, all of which raised an estimated total of \$40 million (Shin 2009, 4). The coalition pursued an extensive door-to-door canvassing program, with more than 100,000 volunteers knocking on doors in every zip code in the state. It produced and distributed materials in 14 different languages (in contrast, the “No on 8” campaign offered materials on their website in only four languages other than English), and campaign organizers purchased advertising space in Chinese, African American, Spanish, and Korean media weeks in advance of the election (Khan 2009; Kim 2008). In short, the “No on 8” campaign was out-strategized by its social conservative opponents. The extensive efforts of these coalition partners to “Protect Marriage” follows and continues a long-held

strategy of the white-led Christian Right in the United States to convince communities of colour that the lesbian/gay movement is white and wealthy, hence undeserving of civil rights (Carbado 2000; Hutchinson 2000). Furthermore, their key messaging was not one of overt homophobia, but rather one of “saving families,” a discourse that resonates in an era of profound economic insecurity and uncertainty where heterosexual marriage stands as the linchpin institution that binds “family” together as the primary social safety mechanism under conditions of neo-liberal privatization (Goldberg-Hiller 2004).

Initial analyses that racialized the results of Proposition 8 thus occlude several important factors that account for its failure. The failure of the “No on 8” campaign to achieve its desired outcome is much more complex than this interpretive framework that engenders a descent into racism. Given that gay marriage rights in California were overturned at the same moment that Barack Obama was elected President, comparisons have been made, somewhat predictably, between the civil rights struggles of lesbians and gays on the one hand, and African Americans on the other, succinctly captured in the catchphrase “Gay is the New Black” (Gross 2008). With the subtitle, “The last great civil rights struggle,” this turn of phrase was the feature cover page for the December 16, 2008, issue of *The Advocate*, a widely distributed and long-standing LGBT publication in the U.S. Such wording is troublesome not only for the resonance it gives to the “post-racial” era Obama’s victory is said to herald, it also signals a queer political and rhetorical convergence with the conservative/Christian Right that has long sought to posit “gay rights” and (racial) “civil rights” as antithetical. Encapsulating the structural racism of the Proposition 8 moment (Spade and Willse 2009), the phrase only makes sense when discourses of queerness and raciality are divided from each other as identity categories (“people of colour” versus “gays”) and as systems of power (racism versus heterosexism). Queer/critical race scholars have long theorized and critiqued such a single-axis understanding of identity and power: it essentializes identities, privileges a

forgetting of contemporary racial injustices, recentres whiteness, denies homophobia among white people, and relieves lesbian/gay/queer movements from accountability to anti-racist agendas (Carbado 2000; Grillo and Wildman 1991; Hutchinson 2000).

In an online open letter posted in the days following the loss of Proposition 8, Adele Carpenter (2008) acutely observed that other propositions on the state ballot dealing with affordable housing (Proposition B) and decriminalization of prostitution (Proposition K) were defeated by voters in San Francisco. She writes, "I saw no media reports released on November 5th scrutinizing the voting trends of white LGBT San Franciscans on Propositions B, N, K, 5, 6 or 9, as juxtaposed to the numerous articles scrutinizing the voting habits of black and Latino voters on Prop 8." Furthermore, she argues, despite the negative outcome of several of these propositions, "outcry among the wider LGBT community seems to have been reserved solely for the passage of Proposition 8." Carpenter's analysis challenges the premise of normative lesbian and gay politics that prioritizes marriage as the central equality goal and, in so doing, resists a logic that would separate class, sexuality, and race from each other (see also Abrams 2010).⁷

Conclusion

There is, then, a particular racialization of (queer) sexuality that knits *Milk* and the political moment of Proposition 8 together. Viewed and interpreted by audiences who live and consume media in the larger socio-political field that racializes queerness, the movie itself also produces such a dynamic. While I do not want to overstretch the connections between the movie and activism over same-sex marriage and "gay rights" more broadly, what is noteworthy are the *continuities* between the film's racially normative representations and the racial/racist marginalizations evident in the "No on 8" campaign. Both foster an anti-intersectional understanding of queer lives and bodies, thereby leading to the place where gay is made (and stays) white. Assumptions that gay marriage and/or cultural representations of (some) gay/queer lives signal a progressive politics requires

critical wariness when such representational practices depend upon a proximity to whiteness and articulations of homonationalism.

Pairing the cinematic "othering" of *Milk* with the racial politics of Proposition 8 raises critical questions of *who* is the proper subject and *what* is the proper object of "gay rights" agendas. Read in the same frame, the connection between this instance of politics and culture has its routes and roots in the marginalization of people/communities of colour as central to queer politics. I would wish to end this paper in a hopeful tone and say foregrounding the multivalence of queer politics, queer bodies, and queer lives would deprivilege the primacy bestowed on marriage as desirable for everyone, by both mainstream lesbian/gay politics and the Christian Right, and might this not be or result in more exciting, and possibly anti-racist, queer political agendas? However, given the perilous times we live in and given the complicity of feminist and "gay rights" activism with racist state agendas, queer politics must necessarily undertake a struggle against, and disidentification with, hegemonic whiteness in gay/queer spaces themselves, including the space of cultural representations.

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Endnotes

1. The city of San Francisco began issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples in February 2004. The California Supreme Court held that the city lacked authority to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples and thus invalidated the licenses already issued; however, it declined to rule on whether the exclusion of same-sex couples from marriage violates the state constitution (see *Lockyer v.*

City and County of San Francisco 2004). Numerous challenges, both opposing and in favour of same-sex marriage rights, were filed and the case made its way through the court system with the resulting May 2008 California Supreme Court ruling (see *In re Marriage Cases* 2008).

2. Known as *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*, this case was financially and legally backed by the American Foundation for Equal Rights, an organization specifically established to launch this legal challenge. The lawyers were Ted Olson and David Boies, who represented George W. Bush and Al Gore, respectively, in *Bush v. Gore* (2000). Their case argued that Proposition 8 violates the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Furthermore, because California's already existing domestic partnership law does not provide all of the legal and government benefits and protection that marriage does, Proposition 8 singles out gay men and lesbians for a disfavoured legal status, thereby creating a category of "second class citizens."

3. For the challenge at the Ninth Circuit of Appeals, see *Perry v. Brown* (2012); for the challenge at the United States Supreme Court, see *Hollingsworth v. Perry* (2012).

4. *Milk* premiered in San Francisco on October 28, 2008, and was more widely released November 26, 2008.

5. See also Susan Stryker and Victor Silverman. *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria* (film). San Francisco: Frameline Distributors (2005), which documents a riot by drag queens, transsexual, and transgender folks in response to police harassment in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco in 1966, three years prior to Stonewall.

6. Martin Manalansan (2007) traces a similar trajectory in his analysis of *Brokeback Mountain*, whose cinematic narrative relies on a colonial hierarchy of racialized spaces and locations of bodies of men of colour that privileges whiteness.

7. One should note that the June 2013 U.S. Supreme Court's rulings to reinstate same-sex marriage in California and to partially repeal the *Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA)* coincided with a devastating ruling that severely curtails the *Voting Rights Act (VRA)*, a landmark civil rights piece of legislation that prohibits discrimination in voting. As some observers have noted (McCarthy and Moore 2013), lesbian and gay people celebrated both the Proposition 8 and *DOMA* rulings without critiquing the racist outcome and racial discrimination resulting from amendments to the *VRA* that could disenfranchise many voters in states throughout the U.S. In other words, depending on which state they live in, queer people of colour can get federal benefits when they marry but might not be able to vote.

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