

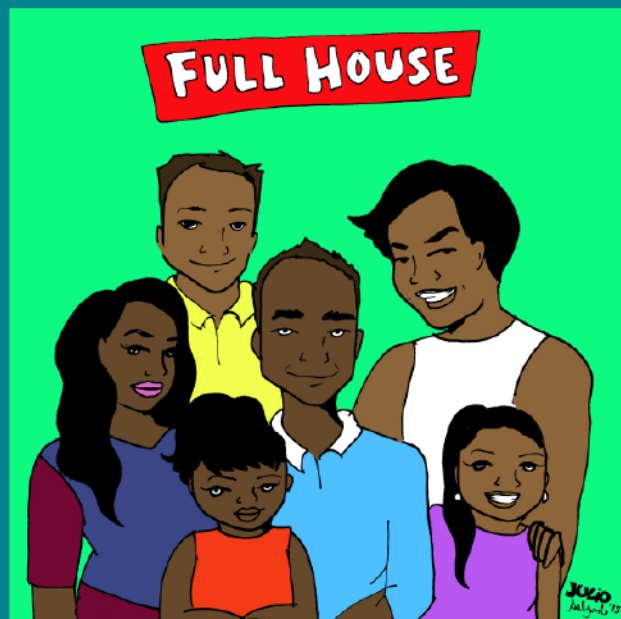
February 2016

# #PopJustice: Volume 5

## Creative Voices & Professional Perspectives

featuring René Balcer, Katy Borum Chattoo, Nato Green, Daryl Hannah, David Henry Hwang, Lorene Machado, Mik Moore, Karen Narasaki, Erin Potts, Mica Sigourney, Michael Skolnik, Tracy Van Slyke, Jeff Yang

# 5



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## Introduction

In the preceding volumes we've presented our case for popular culture as a powerful tool that can be leveraged for social change.

This volume is given over to some of the thought leaders who have generously shared their insights for this report series. Each has a singular professional and/or personal understanding of how pop culture can and does influence public opinion. Cultural strategists, social justice warriors, creative practitioners, industry insiders, and fans—these are their voices, unfiltered and direct.

Three television writer/producers—David Henry Hwang, René Balcer, and Lorene Machado—answered questions via email, providing great insight in helping us to understand how social justice advocates could most effectively engage with television professionals. And a number of others were commissioned to write original short thought pieces: Daryl Hannah on *Empire*, Karen Narasaki with some history and insights about the fight for diversity and representation in Hollywood, Caty Borum Chattoo on her mentor Norman Lear, Michael Skolnik on athletes and activism, Erin Potts on micro-donations for touring artists, Mica Sigourney (AKA VivvyAnne ForeverMORE!) on RuPaul, Mik Moore on *The Birth of a Nation*, and Nato Green on comedy. Jeff Yang, an opinion columnist for CNN, offered permission for us to reprint a post about “peak TV,” originally published in Unbound Philanthropy’s winter 2015 newsletter. And, finally, Tracy Van Slyke kindly granted permission to reprint an excerpt from her report *Spoiler Alert!* regarding the GLAAD model, an oft-cited point of inspiration about the power of popular culture to move the dial on social justice.

We thank them and the many others who contributed to the *#PopJustice* report series.

Enjoy.

# 1. Q&A with David Henry Hwang

*What role do you think TV shows can, and should, play in improving public opinion of (and behavior toward) people of color, immigrants, and others historically marginalized?*

I believe TV shows can and should play an important role in humanizing communities of concern to social justice advocates. Many would argue that TV did play a critical part in moving this country towards marriage equality, and I agree. Though that stands as an example of success, TV has a long way to go to achieve equal opportunity, behind the camera, and in front of it. With some notable and welcome exceptions in recent years (e.g., *Orange is the New Black*, *Jane the Virgin*, *Fresh Off the Boat*, Shonda Rhimes' shows), our current "golden age" of quality television has not yet yielded a creative world that "looks like America." The good news is that the television industry recognizes the need for more diverse programming, motivated not by social justice concerns, but by commercial demographics, as America transforms to a majority-POC nation. ABC set out consciously in the 2014-2015 season to schedule more ethnically-diverse shows, and the results, while mixed, were arguably positive. Every *Scandal* or *Empire* or *Jane* which becomes a hit encourages the networks to take more risks, since Hollywood decision-makers are motivated largely by fear.

It's important to stress that increasing diversity overlaps, but is not the same, as "improving public opinion." The latter can too easily fall into an imperative to create characters who are "positive" role models, whereas the former involves putting characters from diverse perspectives and communities into mainstream media stories, then writing them as well as possible. POC, immigrants, women, LGBT characters, etc., do not need to be "good," they merely need to be human. There's no such thing as a "positive stereotype." Stereotypes are simply bad writing; good writing leads to characters who feel three-dimensional and to whom audience members can relate, whether they be gangsters, computer scientists, professors, prisoners, cooks, White House officials, etc.

*How could social justice advocates most productively engage with writers, producers, and/or studio executives that would be both positively influential and genuinely useful to industry professionals?*

What will ultimately bring change to TV is greater diversity in all aspects of the industry—actors, writers, executives, producers, crew, etc. I'm currently creating a TV show of my own, and in the meantime, working as a writer/producer on a Showtime series. The staffs, creative teams, and crews with whom I work are overwhelmingly white. So when I notice something that feels to me like a stereotypical representation of a POC, I end up being the person who brings that up. I happen to be in an incredibly privileged position, with my colleagues respecting me, yet it still feels a little uncomfortable. I can only imagine what a young writer of color, with few credits to her name, would feel in a similar situation.

What justice advocates can do is pressure the industry to hire and train more diverse artists in all areas of creation and production. We need people who understand both what it means to belong to these diverse communities and have the craft and experience to create great TV. In addition, justice advocates need to support those shows that do move the needle, even a little. The condemnation of Margaret Cho's sitcom *All-American Girl* in the late-90s stands as an object lesson about how social justice advocates should NOT behave. True, that show included many objectionable aspects, but also much that was revolutionary. By focusing on the former and protesting the show, advocates only succeeded in disempowering Margaret, sending it to an early death, and ultimately scaring Hollywood away from making another Asian-American sitcom for 20 years.

*David Henry Hwang is a Tony Award-winning playwright and screenwriter (M. Butterfly, Golden Child, Yellow Face).*

## 2. Q&A with René Balcer

*How could social justice advocates most productively engage with writers, producers, and/or studio executives that would be both positively influential and genuinely useful to industry professionals?*

What would be most useful is for social justice advocates to help me solve my problems as a showrunner/head writer, by giving me story areas, ideas, and useful information. For example, if I'm doing a show set in the military, it might be worthwhile for me to know that there are presently an estimated 15,000 transgender service personnel serving our country. That fact alone might give me an idea for a story.

But please, don't ask me to service your advocacy.

*What kinds of policies and practices exist in terms of diversity hiring, and does who's behind the camera, or who's making greenlight decisions, influence what ends up on our screens?*

There has been a concerted effort by studios and networks to encourage the hiring of diversity writers and directors. These programs have been ongoing for at least the last dozen years. They are often framed as suggestions rather than dictates, with mixed results. I think there have been genuine strides made in the hiring of diversity writers for drama series. Not so much in comedy, and not so much on the directing side overall.

A lot of the advances on the drama side are driven by an ever-bigger demand for TV series. The industry started running out of qualified (and even marginally-qualified) white male writers, so it had to look outside its comfort zone for new talent. Regardless, the status quo has been shaken up for good. In television, who is in the writer's room has a lot to do with what ends up on the screen. A powerful showrunner can force sea changes. As more diversity writers become showrunners, the whole variety of human experience will be better and more accurately reflected on TV shows.

But even powerful showrunners answer to studio and network executives—and often that's where the bottleneck exists, especially in terms of casting, and especially in feature films where the faces on the big screen are almost exclusively white and male. The greenlighters' excuse is that casting decisions are driven by the international market. No doubt some markets won't accept black actors or characters in any significant role (my own experience with the French network TF1 and with Chinese producers bear this out), but the same was true of the American market until the mid-1960s when Sidney Poitier and other black actors broke through.

*René Balcer is an Emmy Award-winning TV writer and showrunner (Law & Order, Law & Order: Criminal Intent).*

### 3. Q&A with Lorene Machado

*What role do you think TV shows can, and should, play in improving public opinion of (and behavior toward) people of color, immigrants, and others historically marginalized?*

TV can do a lot. Mainly because, for the most part, it's free. We can't deny the reach of TV. On a bad night, a crappy show will get half a million viewers. TV is powerful because people still believe what they see on screen. I can't believe how often I am the bearer of bad news when I tell someone that their favorite show is completely fake.

But if we're talking about quality programming, at least some attempt should be made to represent cultural diversity and our everyday reality. It does weigh heavily on my mind that people believe what we tell them. Why not tell them something positive or something useful?

*How could social justice advocates most productively engage with writers, producers, and/or studio executives that would be both positively influential and genuinely useful to industry professionals?*

This might sound like preaching to the choir, but maybe it would be best to engage high-profile showrunners/execs who are already social advocates and then the little fish will follow. It can be very difficult to start at square one with someone whose life experience does not include any kind of social conflict—difficult to convince that person that diversity matters. But hey, if Shonda Rhimes is behind a cause, then they'll listen. That sounds kind of shallow, but whatever gets you there.

*What kinds of policies and practices exist in terms of diversity hiring, and does who's behind the camera, or who's making greenlight decisions, influence what ends up on our screens?*

Honestly, I hear a lot of talk about diversity hiring, but I don't see it in action as a policy. I see this more as an individual situation. When I'm in a position to hire, I make sure that my staff and crew is diverse. I don't do this in response to any policy or metrics—it's just ingrained in who I am. I like different perspectives and I think that's important to the creative process. I am a woman and I'm a minority and I am incapable of seeing the world through any other eyes. I can't compartmentalize my personal experiences from my work experiences. I know this is the same with many of my friends. They will cast and hire outside of the box, and they will push back when someone questions their choices. As a result, their cast looks different than it would with anyone else at the helm. So who's behind the camera matters very much.

Chances are, as any kind of minority, if you've achieved success then you've struggled just a little bit more to get there than the average straight white dude. Maybe that's a generalization, but there is some truth to it. In turn, you are more motivated to help that next person coming up. I was lucky because I had a mentor, Nancy Malone, who was one of the first female studio executives and a founding member of Women In Film. She was tough, and she kicked down a lot of doors.

*Lorena Machado is a TV and feature film director and producer (Margaret Cho's I'm the One that I Want, Notorious C.H.O., CHO Revolution; the reality series Wicked Tuna: North vs. South).*

## 4. Teaching Families Acceptance: *An Appreciation of Empire*

by Daryl Hannah

Growing up in rural South Carolina I was the only gay person I knew. There weren't any out gay people in my school, church, or community. I also didn't know of any out gay musicians in the hip hop music I listened to or gay characters on my favorite television shows—*A Different World*, *The Cosby Show*, or *Family Matters*. In fact, it wasn't until my freshman year at Morehouse College that I saw a proud black gay man on television and watched him marry his partner. I remember sitting in my dorm room that evening and crying profusely at the conclusion of the episode because it was the first time I realized that one day I too might be able to marry the man that I loved.

That experience taught me the power of media and the importance of LGBT visibility. It's also why, when I heard that Fox's *Empire* would prominently feature a young black gay character, I couldn't help but to acknowledge the potential impact it would have on countless gay and lesbian youth of color and their families who, in small pockets around the world, are grappling with how to accept their son or daughter.

Jamal Lyon, the middle, even-tempered gay son of music mogul Lucious Lyon, is a powerful and groundbreaking character. Not only because he helps to raise visibility for gay men of color—something largely missing in popular culture—and directly challenges the rampant homophobia in the hip hop community, but also because of his relentlessness to be unapologetic about who he is and whom he loves. This forces his family to deal directly with the issue of LGBT family acceptance in front of millions of viewers who may also be dealing with the same issue.

While Lucious initially objects to Jamal's sexual orientation, it's through Cookie's love and fierce defense of her son—and Jamal's own fortitude—that Lucious ultimately capitulates. Eventually he recognizes Jamal's self-determination to be himself and realizes Jamal, of all his three sons, is most like him despite being gay. This is a powerful moment in the series and for television as a whole.

To be sure, while the show has raised visibility for issues affecting gay men of color, it is still riddled with sexist motifs and does little to challenge the exploitation of women in hip hop, particularly black women. In fact, one could argue that Cookie Lyons' character, outside of her relationship with Jamal, is stereotypical of women in hip hop and hypersexualized. The show is also mum on issues affecting the trans community, which is also dealing with family acceptance, sexism, and transphobia from the hip hop community.

However, as a black gay man who has been deeply involved in the LGBT movement for nearly a decade, I applaud the show's bravery to write Jamal as a character outside of what we're accustomed to seeing in television, because words and images matter. And there are several LGBT youth who are now able to have a less uncomfortable conversation with their friends and family members as a result of Jamal, Cookie, and yes, even Lucious.

*Daryl Hannah is a Brooklyn-based writer.*



## 5. Diversity Doesn't Happen Overnight

by Karen Narasaki

The diversity that is exploding on network television is the result of over a decade of advocacy and investment. It began in 1999 when *Los Angeles Times* reporter Greg Braxton wrote a scathing article about the lack of minority leads in any of the major networks' upcoming fall season prime time shows. The National Hispanic Media Coalition, who had been formed years earlier to advocate for greater diversity on television news, reached out to the NAACP who had already blasted the networks, Asian American Justice Center (which I led) and American Indians in Film and Television, with an invitation to form a coalition to force the networks to take action. The groups met and decided to announce a boycott. Braxton, an African American, continued to cover the controversy. The public attention led to a meeting with the heads of each of the major networks.

AAJC worked with East West Players and other Asian American groups to form the National Asian American Media Coalition. In November 1999 we joined with the NAACP, Hispanic Media Coalition, and American Indians in Film and Television to present a list of demands to ABC, CBS, FOX, and NBC, and negotiate memoranda of understanding which continue to be honored today.

The agreements committed the networks to: increase the diversity of their boards and executives; increase diversity of actors, writers, directors, and producers; create a high level diversity executive position able to work across the company to identify where change is needed and to push and cajole executives within and stakeholders without (like talent agencies), to act. The agreements also called for data collection and regular meetings to assess progress.

I suggested that the coalition create an annual report card for different job categories by minority group to track progress and give the media stories to cover to keep the public pressure on the networks. This proved critical to increasing focus on Hispanic, Asian Americans and Native Americans. Writers are key to television so an early investment was made in programs to increase opportunities for minority writers. Mindy Kaling who got a show on Fox and Alan Yang, co-creator of the acclaimed *Master of None* on Netflix, both came out of NBC's writers program. An ABC initiative provided opportunity for Shonda Rhimes, who now has three hit series.

Networks respond to public pressure and profit. Those leading diversity efforts inside the companies need to be able to leverage outside advocacy to push change and have partners who can help them identify and attack systemic problems. Litigation tends not to work in an industry that uses "creative choices" as a defense against discrimination charges and where industry retribution is a reality.

Lack of resources for advocacy has limited progress. Without full time staff, groups can only focus on one issue at a time and can't sufficiently broaden the work to the guilds, talent agencies, and other industry stakeholders. They can't expand beyond the networks to movie studios or the new players like Netflix and Amazon; educate and engage companies whose advertising dollars pay for the shows; organize media consumers or create more training opportunities. Nor can the coalition obtain research tying diversity to better storytelling and profitability.

*Karen K. Narasaki is an independent civil and human rights consultant, a senior advisor to the State Infrastructure Fund, the chair of the Asian American Diversity Advisory Council for Comcast/NBCUniversal, the immediate past president and executive director of the Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC, and the past chair of the Asian Pacific American Media Coalition.*

## 6. Reflections on Norman Lear

by Caty Borum Chattoo

The first time I met Norman Lear many years ago, I knew immediately I had found a kindred spirit, 50-something-year age difference and all.

What emerged from a scheduled half-hour meeting in his office was a three-hour passionate conversation about young people and civic engagement, the power of media and storytelling to change hearts and minds, social justice, and probably some embarrassing know-it-all tidbits from my 20-something self, who was a bit of a well-meaning bull in a china shop in those days. The next day, he called to ask me to come to work for him, effective immediately. And thus began my journey learning from—and having adventures with—the greatest master teacher I never expected to have.

In 1999, when President Bill Clinton bestowed upon Norman the nation's highest cultural honor, the National Medal of the Arts, he summarized Norman's impact in a beautifully accurate and succinct way: "Norman Lear has held up a mirror to American society and changed the way we look at it." When I watch his TV shows today, I am routinely stunned by their contemporary relevance, which amazes me even more as I contemplate how insanely ahead of their time these stories and themes must have been 30 and 40 years ago. Through his TV shows—*All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons*, and so many others—America faced up to its worst truths about inequality, homophobia, racism, sexism, and a host of other isms.

But his imprint is also found in quieter, smaller moments—in his empowering of others who share a commitment to social justice and the power of storytelling to pave the path. These are moments that don't come with awards or public recognition, but they reveal so much more about why and how his legacy continues. His authenticity, generosity of spirit, and quiet mentorship of so many people are qualities and achievements as worth emulating as his award-winning stories.

About ten years ago, when I mentioned how profoundly Studs Terkel's 1974 portrait of the working class in America, *Working*, had inspired me, Norman called Studs on the spot and put us on speaker phone together in his office to share ideas. When I spent the better part of a year making a documentary about Walmart's devastation of small-town America, Norman called me regularly while I was out on the road—always wanting to know about the lives of the people who were most affected. When I produced a small documentary TV show about a chemical plant poisoning a community of people, he quietly funded an expanded investigation to create something bigger. There are so many stories like these for me, and for the many other people in his life. This is the Norman Lear I know and love—a man who is so authentically who he really is that it's impossible to separate his entertainment storytelling and cultural legacy from his personhood.

In his own groundbreaking TV work, he says he wasn't trying to do anything to change the world, or to advocate for a specific social issue, or to intentionally *do* anything other than to reflect the culture as it really was—and, most importantly, to entertain. That may be true, but to understand Norman as a person is to understand his sincere, earnest sense of humanity and his underlying commitment to shape a world in which we should all want to exist—a world that's just and equal and diverse and colorful. And in understanding this, we understand him as a producer and a storyteller, because his entertainment reflects every bit of his personal identity. It is this quality, I have come to think, that distinguishes storytelling that can shape and change the world—storytelling that manages to penetrate so deeply into the culture and the fabric of who we are as people. It is not only what the story shows us, but the distinction is the passionate, authentic commitment from the people creating and supporting the story to bring it to life.

Norman's kind of changemakers want and *need* to create, share, and produce untold stories so much that they will fight against prevailing forces that believe—in every generation—that some stories, and some people, are too “risky” or that the marketplace won't tolerate them; this is code for institutional racism or sexism and fear of “otherness,” of course. Yes, there may be financial rewards and public accolades for the work, but I—with a confessed earnestness about this topic that might rival Norman's—don't believe those were the lead ideas motivating him during his boldest hours. Norman's commitment fueled his fight against TV network executives of the 1970s and '80s who didn't want to discuss abortion or gay people or to skewer racism—to successfully win battles with Hollywood decision-makers who worried that showing a black woman and a white man as a married couple would be explosive. His commitment emboldened him to not only create and fight for these portrayals, but to infuse enough lightness and humanity into the stories to help America talk and share, and start to chip away at walls of intolerance.

Connecting people through a shared cultural experience, using those moments to shine a light on the lives and voices and perspectives that aren't always reflected, sparking conversations—this is the power and joy and potential of storytelling. Norman Lear created the mold, but he didn't break it behind him. Graciously, generously, and with sparkling moments of levity, he gifted it to us to continue the journey.

*Caty Borum Chattoo is Co-Director of the Center for Media & Social Impact and Executive in Residence at American University's School of Communication in Washington, D.C., and a media and documentary researcher, strategist, and producer.*

## 7. How Athletes Breathe Life Into An Activist Movement

by Michael Skolnik

We marched for days. 9 miles. 11 miles. 15 miles. 4 hours. 8 hours. 5 1/2 hours. Every day marching with more and more determination for justice for Eric Garner. The grand jury in Staten Island had come back with a "no bill" in the case against Officer Daniel Pantaleo just a few days earlier when I arrived at CNN headquarters in New York City for an interview. I was tired. My feet were tired. My mind needed rest. But, there was no time to slow down, as bodies in the street were needed. But, in order to get more bodies, we needed louder amplification of the message. So, whoever could go on TV or the radio or get a quote in the paper, we needed it. Even more than the voices of the organizers and the activists, we needed the support of the ballplayers, the artists, the actors, the social media leaders, and the pop culture superstars. And by the time that I walked into the CNN headquarters, we had just pulled off an incredible, secret t-shirt operation, as part of our planned action, dubbed "The Royal Shutdown." When I walked into the green room, I was very pleased to see an image of LeBron James wearing an "I Can't Breathe" t-shirt as he warmed up for a game against the Brooklyn Nets at the Barclays Center. Mission Accomplished.

It took less than ten hours to execute that campaign. As a board member of Harry Belafonte's The Gathering For Justice, the executive director and her staff came up with the idea to get players at the Nets/Cavs game t-shirts as they knew the world would be watching, since Prince William and Princess Kate had tickets to the game. They called me for help, and I knew exactly who to call to get this done. Through a Jay-Z connection (thanks dream hampton) who connected with LeBron who connected with Nets point guard Deron Williams who connected with his assistant who connected with a security guard who connected with a box of t-shirts dropped off within minutes of the game by a member of The Justice League NYC (part of The Gathering For Justice), the message of the movement was seen around the world. And that mattered. It mattered because the ballplayers helped validate the work on the street by the activists and that gave the movement more energy to walk the extra mile or stay awake later into the night, to keep the march alive.

All of this work, where sports and pop culture meet a political movement has history. Jesse Owens defying Adolf Hitler at the 1936 Olympics. Muhammad Ali throwing his Olympic gold in the Ohio River. Tommie Smith and John Carlos giving the black power salute at the '68 Olympics. Jim Brown. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Muhammad Ali again protesting the war in Vietnam. Billie Jean King. The Miami Heat putting up their hoodies for Trayvon. The Los Angeles Clippers unifying against their racist owner. These are moments that have certainly opened doors for America to reach her highest potential. I am proud to have played a small part in one of them. I believe in the power of the message. And I believe in the power of the messenger.

*Michael Skolnik is a civil rights leader and political director for Russell Simmons.*

## 8. Changing Channels:

### “Peak TV” as an Expression of Establishment Privilege

by Jeff Yang, reprinted from *Unbound Philanthropy's* winter 2015 newsletter

A new meme has emerged in Hollywood: According to TV executives who've watched the number of shows, channels and platforms available for watching episodic video explode over the past half-decade, we've now arrived at “peak TV”—essentially, a “kid in a candy store” era of programming, where the selection of delicious content is far too great for viewers to reasonably consume. The net result, paradoxically, is that in a time that has rightly been dubbed a new golden age for television, the studios and networks responsible for creating much of it find themselves in a tooth and nail battle for survival.

The concept of peak TV may have been best summarized by John Landgraf, president of the cable programmer FX Networks, at this year's spring Television Critics Association summit. “There is simply too much television,” he said. “When we go out and talk to audiences ... television is less precious to them because there's so much of it. Television episodes, television shows, television programmers are all a dime a dozen.”

Although Landgraf is right that the quantity of television available has reached a historical high—this season saw the airing of some 400 scripted series, 14% higher than 2014, then the year with the most original programming on record—the question is whether sheer volume is really to blame for the TV industry's challenges.

More choices certainly mean a more fragmented viewing audience, and fewer eyeballs for any given program or channel. Network TV has seen live viewership drop by half in the past 15 years, due in no small part to the rise of cable television. And over the past five years, cable viewership has been similarly disrupted, as on-demand streaming services like Netflix and Hulu have dramatically increased their original offerings.

But people continue to find more screen time—in 2015, the average U.S. adult watched a staggering five and a half hours of video each day, up 12% from 2011—and more platforms on which to use it. And what Landgraf and other television leaders fail to note as they bemoan “peak TV” is that this continued growth in video consumption has been driven by audiences that have traditionally been poorly served by traditional television programming: ethnic consumers.

And the truth is, until the very recently, TV did little to represent America's vibrant and growing multicultural identity. According to a 2014 study by UCLA's Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies, just 5.1% of lead roles on broadcast TV and 14.7% of lead roles on cable were nonwhite as of 2012—a stark contrast to the actual makeup of the U.S. population, where blacks, Hispanics and Asians make up 37%. That “disconnect,” as the Bunche Center put it, might help explain why programs offering a reasonable representation of American diversity—with about 40 to 50% of the main cast being nonwhite—consistently score higher in ratings than those failing to mirror America's diverse reality.

At the time, executives dismissed the Bunche report as advocacy disguised as research. But only a year later, shows like *Fresh Off the Boat*, *How To Get Away with Murder*, and especially the ratings phenomenon known as *Empire* demonstrated that the Bunche Center's study was devastatingly prescient—that a significant pent-up demand did indeed exist for programming with diverse leads and authentic multicultural storylines.

Since then, we've seen a bold proliferation of programming that "looks like America," with new shows like *Dr. Ken*, *Rosewood*, and *Quantico* joining the network ranks and finding substantial and loyal audiences. The reaction in some ranks of the old Hollywood establishment has been sharp: Earlier this year, industry mouthpiece *Deadline* ran a controversial piece in which "insiders" wondered whether the pendulum had "swung too far" in the direction of diversity.

While that story was quickly and appropriately shouted down, the recent refrain of "peak TV" has eerie echoes of that insider backlash. It hardly seems like a coincidence that the Hollywood conversation around "too much TV" is occurring only now, as diverse perspectives are being reflected in mainstream television in unprecedented numbers.

We've seen this rhetoric before, among critics and academics who've raged at the inclusion of fresh voices in the literary canon, and classical enthusiasts who sniffed at the noisy din of jazz, rock and roll, and hip hop; among suburban homeowners wondering about the neighborhood's "new arrivals," and parents anxious that affirmative action is degrading the standards of their children's schools.

Which is to say that at its core, peak TV is a notion devised by piqued TV insiders, watching as audiences for their single white professional rom-dramas, their gritty white cop procedurals, and their suburban white family comedies migrate to fresher programming pastures reflecting a truer demographic reality. Yes, television as we once knew it is dead. Long live television—now in living color.

*Jeff Yang is a featured opinion columnist for CNN, and contributes regularly to NPR, Slate, Quartz and other publications. His son, Hudson Yang, plays the lead role of Eddie on ABC's groundbreaking hit comedy Fresh Off the Boat.*

## 9. The Power of Micro-donations to Fund our Movements

by Erin Potts

Add-ons are micro-donations that RPM embeds into the businesses of musicians and comedians by adding 50 cents to \$3 to every ticket, merchandise item, or download they sell. These micro-donations are not optional—fans don't choose to donate or not. And add-ons are not creating new products to produce, promote, and sell. It is simply embedding a small donation into a product that already exists and that already sells exceptionally well.

Live music ticket sales are an immense revenue generator, and only one place where micro-donations can live. To give you a sense of scale and the potential of add-ons with just music, consider this: \$1 added to every ticket sold in North America by the top 100 musicians would generate \$40 million. And \$1 added to every ticket sold by Live Nation could result in \$140 million for change.

Every. Single. Year.

Through these add-ons, RPM is generating new dollars for our movements. But we are also working with artists to shift their focus on philanthropy that funds change over charity. In doing so, the artists themselves are feeling the benefit. As Merrill Garbus from the band tUnE-yArDs said about this work, "It has been deeply empowering to pair my music with my beliefs and to have a tangible impact on the causes I want to support. It's given every show I play more meaning."

*Erin Potts is co-founder of Revolutions Per Minute.*

## 10. What? A drag.

by Mica Sigourney AKA VivvyAnne ForeverMORE!

I am a drag queen. You can't see the size 15 yellow pumps or the big curly wig I'm wearing, but I am, and I am a drag queen. I started doing drag in 2007. It was an easy next step for me, a weird arty queer living in San Francisco surrounded by other weird arty queers, some of whom were drag queens.

By the time VivvyAnne ForeverMORE! came on the scene (that's me), RuPaul had been a pop culture and queer icon for over 20 years. She did everything from music (break out hit *Supermodel [You Better Work]* 1993; 7 total albums) to mass marketing (MAC Cosmetics spokesmodel, 1996) to TV (*The RuPaul Show*, 1996; 26 appearances) to the big screen (*The Brady Bunch Movie*. 1995; 22 appearances). But there really was only one RuPaul. She was a once-a-generation exception, where pop culture lets a gender variant (usually drag queen) star rise up beyond the usual bounds of homophobia and transphobia.

When VivvyAnne was one-and-a-half years old, RuPaul launched *RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR)*.

*Drag Race* was a new platform for like-minded dragsters across the nation, celebrities, and leaders in their own scenes and communities who had little renown beyond the bounds of their cities. RuPaul herself was a she-ro, a drag sister who had "made it" ("it" being recognition as a cultural icon, as well as a paycheck). It all felt so close and attainable; my own drag mother Glamamore was a part of the same 1990s New York City drag scene that gave birth to RuPaul.

*RPDR's* easily digestible format of reality TV competition taps into a zeitgeist in television programming allowing for popular audiences (many non-queer) to easily plug into a familiar form while also being exposed to unfamiliar content; queer identity, gender variance, poz identity, and homophobia. As a reality contest, *RPDR* allows for clowning, freak show, AND humanity, an ingredient that has often been erased when queer and gender variant people are presented in pop culture.

When *RPDR* first premiered I sent my mother a clip of the show to explain to her what a drag queen is. This small clip gave us a common ground to delve into a deep conversation about gender, transgenderism, and queer culture overall. I've witnessed a greater tolerance and sometimes even acceptance and celebration of gender variant persons and drag in public and non-queer spaces. I myself have experienced greater tolerance from neighbors, taxi drivers, and medical professionals.

Seven years after the start of *RPDR* I can't seem to swing a wig without hitting a new trans/gender variant person in pop culture. While many factors contribute to Laverne Cox's television success (gorgeousness, passability, and talent cannot be discounted) where would she be without *RPDR*? *Drag Race* has greatly shifted entertainment frames, expectations, and norms, creating femme sized holes for all sorts of genders to sashay through. Would the Hollywood machine allow for the humanity of Caitlyn Jenner's trans-experience to flourish if not for *RPDR*?

Yet, when I watch *RPDR* (on the nights I'm not hosting my own drag bingo) I often cringe. This is not an unfamiliar reaction for those of us who suddenly become the pop culture consumers of subculture that is our lives. What is complex, dangerous, dirty, subversive, and a homecoming every Friday night at my club is boringly flattened by shaping it into a reality contest television show.

*RPDR* favors good TV over good art.

It should, that is its job, it's a business model. It created national recognition for great drag performers and overshadows local drag performers. It is a validating venue for drag artists, a bestower of value, and it monetizes what we do for the sake of creating community and art.



I will take the good of RPDR any day. I can't help but see the bad reflected in the corporate sponsorship of gay pride parades, or the push towards assimilation by mainstream gay rights groups. This push is to make gays normative, as opposed to making the normal more queer. It's too bad we have to trade uniqueness and variation for safety.

But that's not RuPaul's fault.

*Mica Sigourney/VivvyAnne ForeverMORE! is a drag queen and performance maker living in San Francisco and working internationally. He hosts the weekly Friday night drag/art party Club SOME THING at the historic Stud Bar.*

# 11. Combating History Written With Lightning

by Mik Moore

In 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* was released. The film was presented as an authentic history of the Civil War and Reconstruction, one that radically and dramatically rewrote the existing narrative. It claimed the Civil War was instigated by scheming mulattos and radical Republicans who divided white brothers from the North and the South. Lincoln (a great American!) was duped and should not be blamed by embittered Confederates. The film depicted Klan members as heroes because they protected white women from sexually aggressive black men, through lynching and other forms of terror.

*The Birth of a Nation* was endorsed by the President of the United States (“It’s like writing history with lightning!”) and screened at the White House. It inspired the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan in the fall of 1915. The new 20th century Klan unified southern and northern racists against blacks, Jews, and Catholics.

The film was directed by D. W. Griffith, one of the era’s premiere directors and innovators. He made big movies—spectacles. He saw the potential film had to shape how the public understood history. Griffith was part Oliver Stone, part Michael Bay. Only much, much bigger.

Faced with a movie glorifying lynching, blacks and Jews both protested. But they approached the issue differently. In cities with an organized resistance to the film, Jews would call for edits to excise the worst examples of anti-black defamation. African Americans would call for cities to ban the film to prevent it from inspiring violence that would take black lives.

These allies were on to something. They understood the power of popular culture to shape both public opinion and public action. So pushing back against dangerous depictions of marginalized communities was critical. But they were not united on the tactics.

While both approaches had merit, requests to edit or modify content had more success. In 1915, several cities did make changes to the film. None banned it outright. Over time, organizations like the Anti-Defamation League, which was founded in the wake of the unwarranted conviction (in 1913) in Atlanta of the Jewish Leo Frank (lynched in 1915), succeeded in “policing” public figures, the media, and popular culture. A press release or public statement or private meeting could sway a producer or director or artist to rethink his approach. Soon the knowledge that an unpopular depiction of a particular group could inspire outrage led to a measure of self-policing.

This early anti-defamation work, which predated *The Birth of A Nation* but was galvanized by it, paved the way for future interventions in popular culture.

*Mik Moore is a culture and communications strategist, and principal of Moore + Associates. He recommends reading Censoring Racial Ridicule: Irish, Jewish, and African American Struggles over Race and Representation, 1890-1930 by M. Alison Kibler.*

## 12. Comedians vs. Landlords

by Nato Green

As the country's only semi-functional hybrid of stand-up comedian and union organizer, I've been experimenting with involving comedians in social justice. My experiments with comedians have followed three principles:

Cultural change is diffuse, uncontrollable, and unpredictable. My goal is to plant many seeds rather than one decisive intervention.

Comedians are a community who can be organized based on shared interests and organic connections. It helps to understand the needs of campaigns as well as the economic and creative context for the development of comedy.

Comedians are most effective by being unreasonable. We can say stuff that advocates can't, so advocates should not limit our messages.

In San Francisco, gentrification is "The Nothing" destroying everything in its path. Comedians are as displaced as anyone else, from venues closing to comedians getting evicted or being unable to afford the rent to sustain a creative career.

Last year, I brought six comedians to a hearing at the San Francisco Board of Supervisors on proposed legislation to curb evictions. The legislation passed but is grinding through court challenges. We delivered comic public comment at the end of the hearing.

"I moved to San Francisco to come out of the closet and moved into an actual closet."—Kate Willett

"Limiting evictions could have unintended consequences, like an outbreak of homelessness."—Sean Keane

"I am a small-time landlord. It's free money. It's like finding a cauldron of gold doubloons in the yard."  
—Nato Green

Our participation succeeded on several levels:

- The public comment video was shared widely in San Francisco, and earned additional press coverage for the legislation.
- The supervisors were relieved to get a break from depressing testimony.
- The comedians were deeply moved by sitting through hours of testimony about the heartbreak of eviction. These comedians built longer involvement with the movement against evictions.
- The activists filling the chamber were inspired and energized by the public comment.
- Our arguments, by being ridiculous, revealed the ridiculousness of the real estate industry's arguments and armed the activists with new, clear, effective, and entertaining talking points that they subsequently used successfully in their organizing.

*Nato Green is the country's only semi-functional hybrid of comedian and union organizer.*

## 13. That's so gay.

by Tracy Van Slyke, excerpted from the report *Spoiler Alert*<sup>1</sup>

In 2012, *The Hollywood Reporter* (THR) conducted a poll of television viewers<sup>2</sup> and found that viewers of shows like *Glee*, *Modern Family*, and *The New Normal* were more likely to support gay marriage:

In the past 10 years, the THR poll of likely voters across the nation found, about three times as many voters have become more pro-gay marriage as have become more anti-gay marriage—31 percent pro, 10 percent anti.

Asked about how the shows influenced them, 27 percent said gay TV made them more pro-gay marriage, and 6 percent more anti. Obama voters watched and 30 percent got more supportive, 2 percent less supportive.

The poll also showed that 13 percent of Romney supporters watching these shows became more pro-gay marriage, while 12 percent got more anti.

This shift in the humanizing and mainstreaming of the gay community was no accident. Rashad Robinson,<sup>3</sup> former head of programs at GLAAD, says that at the “media and public relations arm” for the LGBT movement, culture was baked into the organization’s DNA. Upon Robinson’s arrival at GLAAD, high-level staff had already come out at entertainment networks such as Showtime and Logo. During his tenure, GLAAD had a multiple-spokes strategy with various departments targeting different cultural constituencies: a Hollywood department in Los Angeles, a news team in New York, a sports team that supported athletes to come out and to shape sports news, and even a religion department to help support the conversation on LGBT issues within the religious community.

“There are few bigger pillars than sports and religion,” says Robinson. “It’s how so many of us are socialized and find our place in [the] community. When LGBT people are excluded, we are excluded from full participation in society.”

One of GLAAD’s big areas of investment was and continues to be training spokespeople, working with people to refine their personal stories for the media, but also to take those individuals and stories into different writers’ rooms at television shows. “When Callie’s character was coming out on *Grey’s Anatomy*, we brought two lesbian women who had come out in their thirties into the writer’s room. When Rebecca Romijn’s character on *Ugly Betty* was coming out as trans, we brought a GLAAD staffer who is trans into the writer’s room and trained Romijn how to talk about the issue on the red carpet,” says Robinson.

Not that GLAAD’s relationship with Hollywood was always smooth. In 2006, GLAAD launched their first Network Responsibility Index<sup>4</sup>—which rates the television and cable networks on their LGBT content from Excellent all the way down to Failing—during the annual Television Critics Association (TCA) “up front” weeks, which is the place for showing new and current shows to advertisers. The publicity over failing grades put network department heads into a tizzy, but it also had an impact.

In one instance, Fox brought Robinson and colleagues to preview a new pilot by Ryan Murphy called *Glee*, prominently featuring a teenage gay character. “I didn’t think that show was going to last,” Robinson recalls with a self-deprecating chuckle.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.spoileralert.report>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/thr-poll-glee-modern-family-386225>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.spoileralert.report/road-tripping-traveling-to-our-vision#\\_ftn2](http://www.spoileralert.report/road-tripping-traveling-to-our-vision#_ftn2)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.glaad.org/tags/network-responsibility-index>

Another major moment was in 2010, when GLAAD gave the major networks a sneak peak of their grades ahead of their release. Nina Tassler, the president of CBS Entertainment, used the TCA event a week later to announce three new gay characters on the network, including on the hit show *The Good Wife*.

“We’re disappointed in our track record so far,” Tassler announced in reaction to the GLAAD grade. “We’re going to do it. We’re not happy with ourselves.”

Robinson contends that there has to be a balance of carrot and stick with the creatives and decision-makers in major pop culture arenas. “The carrot and stick have to be appropriate for your target. There has to be an incentive structure that makes sense. You have to understand what their wants and needs are. The stick is appropriate as much as possible early on. If you don’t use the stick—then you don’t send a message about what is out of bounds. You use the stick to build power.”

Robinson, now the executive director of ColorOfChange.org, is adapting the model he refined at GLAAD. With the mission of building power for the black community, Robinson has moved the online organizing group from reactive cultural campaigns to focus on its own model of proactive carrot-and-stick cultural strategies. Over the last few years, ColorOfChange.org has won multiple campaigns, including forcing Fox to stop airing<sup>5</sup> its exploitive show *Cops* after 25 years, to going after *Saturday Night Live*, or moving the Oxygen Network to cancel the show *All My Babies’ Mamas*<sup>6</sup> for its stereotypical and racist depiction of black families.

*Tracy Van Slyke is an expert working in the intersection of progressive organizing, strategic communications, and independent media. She is the director of the Culture Lab at CEL.*

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<sup>5</sup> <http://colorofchange.org/press/releases/2013/5/6/colorofchange-applauds-foxs-cancellation-cops-afte>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.colorofchange.org/campaign/tell-oxygen-and-its-advertisers-dont-exploit-black-families>

**Liz Manne**  
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