Introduction

African American Television Trade

On December 8, 2005, the Museum of Television and Radio in New York broadcast an interactive panel discussion where television writers, actors, programming executives, and viewers at colleges across the country discussed new opportunities for women in dramatic television series. I called in with a question about why dramas featuring women of color have not enjoyed the same success as those with white leads. Susanne Daniels, president of entertainment for Lifetime Entertainment Services, fielded the question:

It is my understanding . . . this is . . . how I’ve been educated . . . that one of the ways we make money from these shows is selling them internationally, and that the international marketplace will pay less for shows with certain ethnic leads than they will for white leads. . . . When I’ve asked that question before, I’ve heard that answer.

Daniels’s comments are not idiosyncratic. I have heard similar assessments from more than a dozen television executives, demonstrating just how widespread the assumption is, and how much perceptions of international salability influence domestic portrayals of African Americans and their potential to circulate transnationally.¹ In this instance, globalization places limits on which genres are and are not likely to feature African Americans. As we shall see throughout this volume, globalization also shapes the characterizations, narratives, settings, themes, and cultural politics of African American and black television programs in more complex and ambivalent ways.²

In the pages that follow, I view media globalization not as a restrictive or liberating force, but as productive of certain kinds of representational outcomes rather than others. In some ways globalization has expanded the diversity of African American television, while in other ways it has severely restricted that diversity. With respect to genre, for instance, globalization has helped expand innovations in African American situation comedy, sketch comedy, animation, and even, to a much smaller degree, drama. Globalization has also resulted in more diverse portrayals of African American men, especially young men, in terms of class, politics, and professions. For African American women, by contrast, globalization has helped narrow the diversity.
of portrayals or eliminate them altogether, in large part because African American characters and cultural allusions are most frequently used to attract young male demographics across multiple racial and national boundaries.

The Production of Racial Discourse in the Cultural Industries

The institutional changes associated with global television—selling to and acquiring from international program markets, buying or starting channels in multiple territories, developing global channel brands, and designing programs with foreign viewers in mind—have influenced U.S. television for a long time, and African American television series have been at the forefront of several worldwide trends. However, American television executives have frequently been slow or unwilling to recognize the importance of black characters and themes in facilitating the globalization of those series. One of the main aims of this book, then, is to reclaim the history of African American television travels in an effort to correct and counteract this predominant industry lore.

A second aim of this book is to understand in detail how the globalization of the media industries shapes the representational politics of African American television. Media globalization entails identifying, developing, and exploiting popular culture trends over as wide a geographic area as possible. It is an attempt to exert corporate control over both producers and consumers of popular culture—to predict and control viewers’ tastes and behaviors, to initiate and manage cultural trends. As such, media globalization is unequivocally an exercise in corporate capitalist power.

My approach to corporate power draws on Michel Foucault’s perspective that power produces both social realities and available forms of resistance:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it “excludes,” it “represses,” it “censors,” it “abstracts,” it “masks,” it “conceals.” In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. (1979, 194)

When it comes to African American television, the power of transnational media conglomerates creates the conditions within which particular African American portrayals are and are not thinkable. Furthermore, as we shall see in several cases throughout this volume, the efforts of these corporations to shape African American programming in particular ways also produce the dominant forms against and within which creative workers strive to tell different kinds of stories about African American life and culture.
As I will argue, the power of the global cultural industries to produce reality operates on both popular and institutional levels, through distinct yet interwoven discursive practices. My main interest lies with the institutionalized discourses, why they activate certain popular trends rather than others, and how they form, circulate, and change. While I certainly attend to the popular reception of African American television abroad and some of the enlightening and inspiring purposes it can serve, these popular uses are not my primary focus. Indeed, I consider the production of reality within the industry generally more powerful than the production of popular realities, given that institutional perceptions determine in the first instance whether and how to represent African Americans, how and where those representations will be seen, and how the preferences and priorities of minority and majority groups around the world filter back into the television industry’s representational practices.

**Industry Lore in Global Television**

In examining institutional discourses about race and the globalization of African American television, I focus predominantly on industry intermediaries who work at three main moments in the value-chain of commercial global television: the moment of broadcast abroad, the moment of program exchange, and the moment of program production. These moments of interface serve as locations where cultural values like pleasure and popularity get transcoded into commercial values like profit, market share, and business strategies (Lampel, 2011). For example, foreign broadcasters work to integrate the tastes and interests of viewers with self-produced or acquired programming, all the while operating within the institutional priorities of their organizations (whether those priorities are commercial, cultural, democratic, etc.). The global programming markets, meanwhile, involve such obvious institutional considerations as the price and fit of imported programs. At the same time, program trade is an act of cross-cultural interaction and imagination that requires executives to envision the possible resonances and dislocations between foreign programs and local audiences—again, within the institutional demands of their organizations (Bielby and Harrington, 2008; Havens, 2006). Finally, television production serves as an interface between the creative visions of those involved in making television and the institutions that shape, direct, limit, and encourage their efforts (Newcomb and Alley, 1983).

The intermediaries I study serve as organizational “linking pins” (Turow, 1996) between different divisions and firms, bearing intelligence as well
as interpretations of popular trends from one field of business activity to another. As such, media industry intermediaries are members of overlapping interpretive communities who actively work to decipher viewers’ tastes, textual meanings and pleasures, and industry priorities and trends, and to spread those perceptions as widely as possible. While these interpretive communities operate primarily at the domestic and local levels, they increasingly intersect with executive interpretive communities elsewhere, including the wealthy and powerful Hollywood executives who still tend to reign over global television.

Despite the differential power relationships among executives and firms in global television, however, institutionalized discourses—or what I term “industry lore” throughout—are not monolithic. Indeed, industry lore is inherently characterized by a good deal of disagreement because definitions of what can and cannot travel well internationally help determine such practical business realities as program prices, demographic slant, and sales revenues. Consequently, different firms and executives compete to shape industry lore in ways that benefit them and their organizations.

Industry lore functions essentially as a carrier discourse; its main function is to carry the discourses encoded into television programming, which I refer to as *televisual* discourses (or, more frequently, televisual representations), from one location to another, much as carrier waves in radio communication do not possess broadcast content, but transport that content from the source to the receiver. Industry lore similarly moves television programming between nations; it is a way of talking and thinking about audiences and programming that permits television insiders to imagine connections between audience members and television programming from around the world.

As a carrier discourse, industry lore operates within distinct fields of knowledge and serves quite different functions than televisual discourse. Industry lore is parasitic on televisual discourse, seizing only on those elements and insights that are useful for institutional goals and discarding all else. This “institutional point of view,” as Ien Ang (1991) calls it, “[allows] these institutions to realize their ambitions to govern and control the formal frameworks of television’s place in contemporary life” (2). While industry lore does not determine either television content or the meanings that television carries for real viewers, it does shape what gets produced as well as how, where, and when productions get watched. Industry lore provides the conduit through which the economic demands of the cultural industries get transcoded into concrete representational practices. Despite its real power to produce markets, representations, and subjectivity, however, rarely does industry lore become visible to the general public.
Industry lore, then, is a distinct form of power/knowledge (Ang, 1991; Foucault, 1979). When it comes to industry lore about blackness and race in general, the particular forms, functions, and cultural manifestations of power/knowledge within the global cultural industries differ significantly from the power/knowledge of the state, where cultural representations of race traditionally resided. For the state, race acts as a form of “biopower” that helps manage perceived internal threats to bourgeois rule by ensuring the purity, legitimacy, and longevity of the bourgeoisie (Foucault, 1980; Goldberg, 2002; Stoler, 1995). For the cultural industries, by contrast, race acts as a potential transnational conduit for connecting consumers and commercial culture: a global market.

Obviously, the commercial cultural industries are primarily interested not in the continuation of bourgeois or elite rule, but in profits. In their focus on economic power rather than biopower, the cultural industries follow quite different logics than the state in producing and circulating racial discourses. Because their measure is popularity, not political efficacy, the cultural industries rely on the aforementioned, two-pronged discursive strategy, where televisual discourses travel widely and serve a range of institutional labors, while industry lore constantly scavenges for profitable, reproducible practices and trends to exploit on a global scale. Televisual discourse, then, is centrifugal, while industry lore is centripetal (Curtin, 2008). Such an arrangement works to maximize the diversity of uses for programming itself to enhance profitability, while ensuring that commercially viable, local trends get reproduced in as many places as possible. Moreover, as mentioned above, because commercial cultural industries, unlike branches of state, are competitive rather than cooperative, the motivation to innovate in representational practices, institutional labors for imported programming, and industry lore is strong.

Industry lore arises from and influences the myriad institutional labors that imported television programs—including African American series—perform for broadcasters around the world. While such uses may appear at first blush to be little more than business decisions, they shape the ideologies and representations that circulate through popular television, the audience makeup for specific shows and channels, and the shared cultural experiences and sympathies among segments of the viewing public. These decisions are neither accidental nor arbitrary, but are rather calculated efforts to press imports into the service of domestic institutional goals, a fact that the term “labor” is intended to signify. Institutional labor, then, refers to various forms of encoding, or the process that media professionals go through to create meaningful programs and program lineups that intersect with viewers’ lifestyles and cultural sensibilities (Hall, 1993b).³
Blackness in Industry Lore

What I offer in these pages is a chronicle of the various institutional labors that African American television has performed in different historical eras, as well as a reading of the dominant racial cartography of the world among television industry insiders, which those labors have given rise to. This institutionalized racial cartography has become more organized over the decades examined in Black Television Travels as the global markets themselves have become more organized, predictable, and important for television producers and broadcasters everywhere. What were once mostly sporadic and idiosyncratic uses of African American imports became conventionalized in the late 1980s around an industry lore about the “universal” appeal of some television shows, which supposedly tapped into shared human themes that audiences everywhere could relate to. African American programs fared poorly under this discursive regime for several reasons: (a) a good deal of African American popular culture tries to distinguish itself from mainstream white culture, making it unlikely that white executives would recognize such anti-mainstream representations as universal; (b) the television industries were organized as national markets, endorsing the perception that nationality was the primary organizer of human identity and blinding executives to the possibility for transnational forms of identity such as race to bind audiences together; and (c) nationwide European broadcasters serving predominantly white, middle-class family audiences were the most lucrative markets for American distributors.

Due to changes in delivery technologies, government policies, funding sources, politics, and the unexpected success of some African American shows on the world markets, industry lore in the mid-1990s began to accommodate the potential appeal of some African American themes and characters for certain transnational audience groups, specifically youth. However, while these newer uses of African American imports made it clear that the discourse of universals did not cover all instances of successful export, a formalized industry lore did not cohere until the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Today the idea that viewers who watch imported television are on a “cultural journey” has begun to seep into industry lore. Though by no means dominant, the nascent lore of cultural journeys has begun to take hold in certain sectors of the global television industries. The discourse of cultural journeys and the discourse of universals work today to anchor four distinct representational regimes of blackness in television: integrated workplace dramas, multicultural domestic comedies, hyperreal “quality” serials, and satirical travesties.
A Note on Terminology and Method

For the purposes of this study I use the phrase “African American television” to refer to series that make consistent reference to African American political, thematic, or cultural concerns. I make this definition intentionally broad in order to allow us to explore the widest possible diversity of trade routes suggested by the history of U.S. exports. Because the global trade in African American television has been intermittent and often limited to shows produced primarily for middle-class white viewers in the United States, I hesitate to limit my analysis to shows that meet only particular standards for fear of overlooking important examples due to an overly narrow initial definition. In other words, I take the history of African American television trade as an index of potential routes, rather than the last word on the kinds of programs that are capable of worldwide travel and their possible uses. Consequently, I include integrated series such as Benson (1979–1986) and Diff ’rent Strokes (1978–1986) that might arguably be said to focus on white concerns about integration and fantasies of egalitarian white folks. Nevertheless, integration was an issue facing a growing number of African Americans in the seventies and eighties, and shows such as these were not wholly absent of African American concerns. In some respects, integrated programs offered fantasized depictions of black and white cooperation in personal and professional arenas that had the potential to serve as momentary escapes from the realities of everyday discrimination for black viewers from the United States to South Africa, much the same as The Cosby Show (1984–1992) did later in the decade (Downing, 1988; Havens, 2000). For these reasons, I cast a wide net when looking at the worldwide circulation of U.S. programs that depict aspects of African American life.

The Globalization and Commercialization of Black Popular Culture

The globalization of African American television raises two related concerns: the impact of commercialism on the content, relevance, and politics of African American popular culture and the impact of globalization. Given the countercultural ethos of many black communities and their general exploitation by modern capitalism, it is tempting to assume that those forms of culture that are most intimately tied to global commerce, such as television, are inherently less relevant for black communities than less commodified forms such as dance or poetry. Karen Ross (1996), for instance, suggests that the globalization of the media industries increases “[t]he potential for negative
media stereotypes to circulate internationally” (172) and relegates “less popular and more challenging oppositional work to the margins” (175). This argument, however, is accurate only if we assume several things: first, that stereotypes are somehow universal, while other forms of televisual expression are not; second, that globalization leads to a mainstreaming of expression, which ignores the fact that globalization and commercial audience fragmentation go hand in hand, leading to complex centrifugal and centripetal cultural and institutional configurations; and third, that the global audience is somehow a white audience that prefers negative black stereotypes over other kinds of black characters and stories.

In the pages that follow, I reject the idea that the relevance of African American cultural forms is inversely proportional to their sales revenues. While a relationship between economic goals and cultural forms surely exists, it is a complex and ambivalent one, where competing and sometimes conflicting cultural, political, historical, and institutional priorities put their stamps on the final cultural product. For some contemporary critics, the poet Langston Hughes’s collection *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) was largely irrelevant for African American readers, while for many television critics, *Roc* (1991–1994) and *Frank’s Place* (1987–1988) were quite relevant (Gray, 1995; Jackson, 2005, 16; Zook, 1999), despite the fact that the latter were decidedly commercial ventures. The point here is that the cultural consequences of African American television trade cannot simply be inferred from sales records and balance sheets; they need to be examined in specific cases.

Notwithstanding commercial television’s potential for connecting with black communities around the world, we still need a way to analyze and interpret the cultural politics of transnationally circulated African American television programs. This may seem like an easy task of identifying which shows contain negative stereotypes and which do not, but such identification is far from an exact science. Nor does the presence or absence of recognizable stereotypes exhaust the cultural politics of a television program.

In a particularly stark example of the inexactness of defining what is and is not a negative portrayal, Alvin Poussaint in his foreword to Robin R. Means Coleman’s (1998) book *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy* praises *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990–1996) as one of the only programs in the late nineties that was not a throwback to “old-style Black sitcoms” that “affirm White superiority and Black inferiority” (xii). A few pages later, however, Coleman herself refers to the same show as “contemporary minstrelsy” (115), drawing a direct connection between racist stereotypes and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*.

The approach I take to stereotypes here is central to my analysis of the
global trade in African American television. However, I want to distinguish my understanding of television stereotypes and their functions from some dominant forms of stereotype analysis popular among scholars who implicitly or explicitly adopt a cognitive psychological model. Such a model sees stereotypes as trans-historical, transcultural characterizations that give audiences either “positive” or “negative” attitudes toward African Americans (Dixon, 2000; Gandy, 1998; cf. Goldberg, 1993, 121–33). The limitations of this view have been debated in a variety of other places (Acham, 2004; Torres, 2003; Zook, 1995), so I do not discuss them at length here. Suffice it to say that stereotype analysis deflects attention from other features of the televisual text, including narrative, visual, and audio elements, which work with and against character elements to complicate the text’s meanings and cultural politics. In addition, such analyses rely on an oversimplified idea of positive and negative “images” that does not do justice to the range of emotional and intellectual responses that television viewers have to characters. Most importantly, for our purposes, the model of media and society that underlies stereotype analysis tends to isolate viewers and programs from their cultural surroundings, assuming that stereotypes feed directly into deep cognitive structures of the viewer, which is what causes them to operate in the same way in all historical periods and cultures. By contrast, I would argue that stereotypes derive their power precisely because they are embedded in specific cultures and eras. Hence, the Sambo stereotype, which dominated American cultural projections of African American men from the 1660s through the 1960s, served quite different functions in different places and eras: its durability owed not to the singularity of its cognitive impact, but to the flexibility of its cultural and political uses (Boskin, 1986).

Stereotype analysis can call our attention to how similar character types recur throughout history and serve a variety of racist ends, and in my opinion this is when the method is at its strongest. Stereotype analysis is at its weakest when it prescribes certain types of programs or representational practices as inherently superior or inferior to others. In these instances, the method can restrict rather than expand the diversity of African American cultural expression in television. Let me be clear here that my critique of the excesses of some forms of stereotype analysis is not an endorsement of those stereotypes in any way. There can be no doubt that brutal stereotypes of African Americans have been integral to justifications of extreme forms of physical, psychological, cultural, and economic violence. Unfortunately, the animus behind those stereotypes cannot be done away with simply by replacing them with positive images. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994) observe regarding film stereotypes, “A cinema in which all the characters resembled
Sidney Poitier might be as much a cause for alarm as one in which they all resembled Step'n Fetchit” (204). Thus, rather than ask whether the worldwide traffic in African American television is filled with stereotypes, we need to ask whether particular series, portrayals, and uses of African American television serve oppressive or liberating racial projects at home and abroad.

For the reasons just outlined, I do not use positive and negative stereotypes as a way to evaluate the cultural politics of African American television exports. Instead, I understand all televisual representations of African Americans as inherently dialectical, exhibiting oppression and liberation, assimilation and difference, capitulation and resistance. A good deal of recent scholarship in African American television studies, in fact, has sought to reclaim the more redemptive dimensions of this dialectic, even of long-disgraced television series that are, for some, the epitome of racist representation, such as Amos ’n’ Andy (Ely, 1991; Watkins, 1994) and Sanford and Son (Acham, 2004). These studies share a commitment to the historicity of television, its embeddedness in the time and place of its origin, along with a recognition that popular culture is never univocal. Instead, as Stuart Hall (1993b) has written, “black popular culture [enables] the surfacing, inside the mixed and contradictory modes even of some mainstream popular culture, of elements of a discourse that is different” (111).

The method of analysis I employ throughout this volume, then, begins with the assumption that television programming is complex and dialectical, integrating a range of social and political perspectives that are drawn from contemporaneous developments in society at large. Much as with industry lore, however, this diversity of perspectives is both limited in its range and structured hierarchically by the production process, such that certain perspectives are more prevalent and more easily decoded by viewers, while other voices tend to be textually submerged and require a good deal more effort on the part of viewers to ferret them out (Fiske, 1987; Newcomb and Hirsch, 1983).

Each chapter below includes an analysis of the dominant forms of televisual representation of African Americans in the era under analysis, along with a discussion of the dominant social and political developments of the era that inform those representational practices. Next, the analysis turns to consider how programmers abroad exploited those representational practices to meet their own institutional ends, focusing especially on which perspectives and themes embedded in the programming they found useful. Thereafter, the chapter charts how these international institutional labors found—or failed to find—their way into dominant industry lore among distribution and production executives, and whether and how that lore encour-
aged future representational practices. Throughout, I try to attend closely to political and cultural changes, changes in technology and industry structure, changes in institutional practices and industry lore, and changes in representations of African Americans, as well as the complex determinations that exist among each of these fields.

Commercialization and Authorship in African American Television

The discussion of stereotyping and representation is closely linked to concerns about African American authorship in television. Questions of authorship among African American media scholars have been a particular concern, given the long history of objectification of African Americans at the hands of white popular culture and the intimate connections between popular portrayals and racist political projects (Nederveen Pieterse, 1992). In general, scholars have treated television as an ambivalent site for African American portrayals, at once closely linked to traditional racist stereotypes in the service of white political and economic interests, while also offering the potential for African Americans to tell new and distinct stories that can reach a multiracial audience.

Most observers have located authorship in the hands of either writer-producers or corporate owners who advance, neglect, or exploit the interests of African American communities. However, much as scholars have sought to reclaim the racially progressive dimensions of long-disparaged television series, they have also identified an ever widening scope of creative and institutional actors who contribute to authoring particular series. Much of the early work on African Americans and television originated among mass communication scholars examining the effects of television stereotypes on viewers, especially minority and children viewers. These studies almost invariably included discussions about why the commercial television industry consistently produced racial stereotypes as well, although examinations of ownership, gatekeepers, and production remained secondary and empirically thin (Poindexter and Stroman, 1981).

Beginning with Herman Gray’s book Watching Race (1995), which offered the first sustained analysis of how the commercial television industry and African American representation interact, cultural studies scholars began to examine the production of African American representations alongside the representations themselves. Rooted in set visits and interviews with African American program producers, Gray’s work demonstrated how the technological and economic changes associated with the post-network era—the
introduction of cable and the VCR and the founding of the Fox Network—gave African American writer-producers more leeway to reflect the complexity of African American life than they had enjoyed during the network era. Kristal Brent Zook (1999) employs methods similar to Gray’s in her investigation of the “revolutionary” African American programs produced by the Fox Broadcasting Corporation in the 1990s.

The analysis of African American authorship that Gray and Zook introduced has subsequently been expanded upon to include performers (Acham, 2004), popular critics (Acham; Harper, 1998), audiences (Bodroghkozy, 1992), and corporate owners (Smith-Shomade, 2007; Zook, 2008). All of these examinations of authorship in African American television have focused on creative (or journalistic) personnel who work above-the-line or corporate owners and strategists whose business plans set the agendas of their television operations. However, as I have already discussed, in fictional television at least, a layer of programming personnel mediates between corporate strategies and creative visions. It is these programming executives who are ultimately responsible for producing industry lore about global audience tastes, which constitutes the main vehicle whereby economic and technological globalization influences cultural representations on television.

The analysis of authorship in African American television has also tended to focus on moments of significant upheaval within the industry, which permitted African American creators, producers, and performers a good deal of leeway in trying to tell stories in their own manner. Given those extraordinary historical conditions, it is not surprising that these studies have not for the most part attempted to theorize the degree of authority and agency that various stakeholders enjoy in day-to-day production, distribution, and programming decisions under more conventional circumstances. For a study such as this, however, which aims to untangle the articulations between institutionalized and popular discourses of race in television, a theoretical understanding of such autonomy is vital.

Among scholars working from a “critical media industry studies” perspective, questions of creative authority and agency have tended to take center stage (Havens, Lotz, and Tinic, 2009). In particular, these scholars address how a range of institutional actors serve as cultural mediators who ultimately shape the representational politics of television programming. In approaching authorship, critical media industry scholars have focused on the complex articulations between production, representation, and reception as a way of conceiving of the process as more than a matter of individual expression, while retaining the crucial role of authorial intent in the creation of cultural meanings. In other words, this line of research conceives of meaning-making
as an intentional activity, while retaining a critical understanding of intentionality as embedded within history, discourse, institutions, relations of power, and cultural traditions. Consequently, the hallmark of critical media industry studies is that it addresses neither the agency of producers and consumers nor the meanings of texts, but rather the interactions among these sites as a way to comprehend the impact of communications technologies and industries on contemporary culture.

Critical media industry scholarship adopts anthropological and sociological methods to examine questions of power, authority, and agency within media industries, particularly the methods of fieldwork. Among those who have focused on the television industries, at least in the United States, the writer-producer has long been the main locus of authorship (Newcomb and Alley, 1983; Newcomb and Hirsch, 1983). From this perspective, producers are understood as the visionaries behind their series and as cultural bricoleurs who translate cultural trends and industry demands into finished programming, which nevertheless varies only mildly from standard formats due to industry pressure. Early scholarship in this vein also emphasized the production company, as well as competition among national networks and broader cultural changes, in shaping aesthetic styles and ideological content in fictional television programming (Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi, 1983; Turow, 1981).

Carefully researched and argued, these studies were also, in some ways, products of an era during which independent producers flourished because of the FCC’s Financial Interest and Syndication Rules, which forbade the national networks from owning or profiting from the shows they broadcast. Because the real money in U.S. television had long been the local syndication markets, the FCC’s rule effectively created lucrative markets for independent television producers. After the repeal of the rule in 1993, television producers found themselves with generally smaller revenues and, in many instances, with less creative control than they had enjoyed in the seventies and eighties. In today’s fragmented multimedia environment, executive producers/head writers, or “show runners,” have reasserted their authorial agency within the television industry, due to their ability to convince both audiences and industry executives that they have their fingers on the pulse of contemporary cultural trends and tastes.

While most scholarship on television authorship continues to concentrate on the producer-as-author, most analysts also recognize the importance of other corporate actors, funding mechanisms, and industry practices as limitations on producerly independence. However, they tend to view the interventions of business executives (or “suits”) as limitations on creativity,
rather than as productive of programming practices, styles, and genres. Todd Gitlin’s *Inside Prime Time* (1983) and John Thornton Caldwell’s *Production Culture* (2008) offer two noteworthy departures from this focus on the limitations of business intermediaries, examining, among other things, the influence of executives on programming, the importance of studying the intersection between production cultures and representational strategies, and the variety of ways that executives, above-the-line talent, and below-the-line workers, not just writers and producers, exert agency over television texts as cultural bricoleurs.

Ultimately, in its focus on programming executives, *Black Television Travels* follows Gitlin’s study more closely, though it also attends to the ways industry lore filters down to producers and writers, as well as how these “creatives” work with the grain of industry lore to tell the kinds of stories they want to about African American culture on television. Executive culture provides a crucial site of investigation, because it translates between technological, economic, and popular forces, as executives seek to take advantage of new media and new trends to maximize profits within the institutional and economic structures in which they work.

Global Television Basics

This volume limits its analysis to television because television offers a unique combination of words, images, and practices that distinguish it from other cultural forms, even as it draws upon, amplifies, and recirculates discourses from elsewhere. First, television has traditionally been an oral medium, which arises from and portrays everyday life, due to its small screen size, its moderate image quality, and the domestic nature of its reception in most cultures (Fiske, 1987). Television, therefore, reflects the dialects, rhythms, settings, and stories of our immediate day-to-day lives. When it comes to international trade, television’s stories are more difficult to unmoor from their immediate cultural surroundings than more spectacular cultural products such as film. At the same time, it is significantly cheaper to buy television program rights than it is to produce one’s own programming, and the international markets offer an attractive, low-cost option for most of the world’s broadcasters. Consequently, the economics of television make international distribution and acquisition attractive options, while the cultural specificity of television confounds trade.

Second, television is distinct from other cultural forms in that it has historically included a duality of address, one encoded within the program itself, the other encoded within television’s overall flow, the lineup and identity of
the channels that broadcast the program, and, within multichannel environments at least, competing programs that vie for the viewer’s attention in real time. Unlike film or music, which tend to retail as distinct cultural products, television primarily comes to us prepackaged with a range of cues about how we should interpret it—cues that also profoundly influence industry-wide interpretations about whether imported programs succeed in fulfilling institutional goals. For instance, foreign broadcasters of the miniseries *Roots* (1977) and the situation comedy *Benson* (1979–1986) repositioned the programs with distinct local scheduling practices to better serve their institutional goals.

Finally, television trade must navigate distinct economic and regulatory pressures that other cultural forms do not, specifically, the vagaries of the advertising industry, which often directly or indirectly funds production, and the maze of different national regulations surrounding broadcasting and communications around the world. Because my interests here are not the articulations of discourses across multiple cultural sites, but rather those articulations that exist among industrial conditions and representation, it makes most sense to focus on the operations and portrayals of a single cultural industry.

With more than 1.2 billion households owning a set in 2009, television remains the most widely used communications medium in the world and the primary way—whether we like it or not—that the world’s residents gain knowledge about African American culture and people (IDATE, 2010). Commercial cultural discourses, such as those that circulate through television, are the dominant discourses of blackness and race in today’s world. While popular and commercial representations of blacks and African Americans have always been central to the racial projects of Western nations, these representations traditionally operated in the service of imperialism and the exploitation of labor and raw materials (Nederveen Pieterse, 1992; Goldberg, 1993; Stoler, 1995). By contrast, popular discourses of blackness today travel in search of audiences, acceptance, and popularity in as many locations as possible. The institutional and technological forces that shape and support these flows operate relatively independently of state interests, much as the interests of capital in general have grown increasingly independent of state interests over the past few centuries (Ruggie, 1993).

The Cultural Politics of Program Exchange

The history of nationwide public service and state broadcasting, combined with the quotidian modes of reception and representation common in tele-
vision, puts a premium on connecting with the most immediate viewers of a television channel, as do the typical practices of selling advertising time based upon Gross Rating Points measured every fifteen minutes or so. Practically speaking, these historical and institutional forces give the local programmer a good deal of authority when it comes to designing channel lineups and making programming decisions; perhaps more authority than music retailers or movie theatre operators abroad. Even Western-owned transnational television brands, such as MTV Germany, HBO Latin America, and Cartoon Network Poland, typically employ local programming executives who select and program a range of television shows, some identical to their U.S. sister channels, and some quite distinct.

The exceptions to this rule are low-rent transnational channels, which target large swaths of territory with little if any variation in programs, schedules, or advertisements. These channels, encompassing a wide array of channels devoted to reality TV, pornography, telenovelas, and action series, really do very little to conceptualize difference in audience tastes across national or cultural boundaries. The business model that they work from permits them to turn small, consistent profits because of the cheapness of programming and delivery costs, but they are generally not a significant presence, either in the markets where they are imported or in the construction of industry-wide discourse about programming and audiences.4

In most instances, then, local programmers, or acquisitions executives, make active choices about which programs to purchase, even as distributors try their utmost to influence those choices in order to increase overall sales numbers and maximize sales of particularly expensive programming. While acquisition choices are driven by economic considerations, especially pricing, cultural considerations are rarely absent. In this way, acquisition is a form of cultural interpretation; it is an effort to imagine the cultural similarities and differences between foreign programs and domestic viewers.

Acquisition and scheduling decisions work to privilege certain elements of programs over others in particular markets. These elements, in turn, are sought out or avoided in the global marketplace, depending on how a series performs. If a buyer is important for a distributor, her perception of the performance of prior purchases, as well as her interpretations of why the programming performed as it did, will shape the distributor’s efforts to promote new shows. Moreover, if the distributor has influence over future production decisions, as is the case with the major Hollywood studios that produce and distribute most African American television, an important buyer’s tastes can shape production practices as well. We can see this phenomenon quite clearly in Susanne Daniels’s comment above that the preferences of
important international buyers depress domestic production of dramas featuring African Americans.

Just how important international revenues are for domestic production financing depends on the relationship between the distributor and the producer, the genre of programming, and also the sales potential of the programming in the domestic syndication markets. Most U.S. network television series have traditionally required three seasons’ worth of episodes before they can be sold in the domestic syndication market. Because domestic U.S. syndication revenues far outstrip international revenues in most cases, American television series tend to be heavily reliant on international revenues in the first three seasons, prior to their domestic syndication; the longer they stay on the air thereafter, the larger the percentage of their revenues that comes from domestic syndication. So international syndication revenues tend to be important in the short run, but less important in the long run.

Again, as we will see throughout the following chapters, both the genre of programming and the historical period in which it was produced and syndicated influence the importance of international markets and their subsequent sway over domestic production decisions. When it comes to contemporary, mainstream Hollywood productions, international sales executives from within the organization are “fully involved” in the decision-making process (Kaner, 1999), whereas independent distributors, even moderately sized ones that carry U.S. network series, only suggest “little things, or touches” to make programming more translatable to international markets (Lazarus, 1999). Still, while the level of involvement may differ, more and more television productions, both at home and abroad, attempt to account for foreign viewers’ tastes. Even the producers of the animated New Zealand series bro’Town, a culturally distinct animated series featuring Samoan and Māori teenagers living in the Morningside suburb of Auckland, report taking the preferences of foreign viewers into consideration during production (Mitchell, 2009).

The enabling and disabling influence of global syndication markets on African American television portrayals is well captured in the case of Soul Food (2000–2004), a Showtime drama focused on an African American family trying to recover from the death of their mother, particularly through family cooking and gatherings. The series was adapted for television from the 1997 film of the same name and was jointly produced by Paramount Pictures and Twentieth Century Fox Television. Soul Food was a critical and ratings success for Showtime at a time when it aired very little original programming, but problems with its international syndication revenues were a perpetual headache for Paramount. Originally included in the company’s output
deal with KirchMedia, a German firm aggressively seeking program deals in the late 1990s in advance of its launch of a digital satellite service with hundreds of channels, Soul Food lost its international syndication revenues when KirchMedia declared bankruptcy in 2002. For the remaining seasons, Soul Food’s budget was in constant jeopardy, creating numerous conflicts between Paramount and the series’ executive producer, Felicia D. Henderson, as well as perpetual efforts to cut production costs. While the series was able to struggle through for two more seasons, making it the longest-running television drama with a predominantly black cast to date, the case of Soul Food provides some crucial insights into the globalization of African American television (Henderson, 2010). First, it demonstrates how African American shows can benefit from the revenue opportunities that foreign markets represent, especially in periods of significant technological and industrial change. Second, it shows how important those revenues are for African American shows to continue on the air. Third, it shows that when there is no robust industry lore supporting them, African American television dramas are vulnerable to the vagaries of the world’s television industries. That is, absent the faith of distributors and broadcasters in the appeal of African American dramas, their hold on foreign syndication revenues can only ever be tenuous.

Race, Globalization, Institutionalization

The global travels of African American television take place within a much longer history of cultural trade, racialization, and economic exploitation, even as they build upon and alter those processes. In its modern incarnations, dating from the eighteenth century, race has referred to transnational categories of identity whose members are thought to share similar physical, emotional, and cultural traits (Goldberg, 1993; Omi and Winant, 1994). Omi and Winant refer to these racial categories as racial formations, or “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (55). Racial formations are produced by particular racial projects, which involve “an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (56). The strength of Omi and Winant’s conceptualization of racial projects is that it connects representational systems with economic and political structures, or cultural practices with institutional ones.

In their concentration on legal and political structures, however, Omi and Winant tend to privilege domestic racial projects, while racial formation has also been a transnational undertaking since at least the nineteenth century.
(Goldberg, 1993; Stoler, 1995). Ann Laura Stoler, drawing on Michel Foucault's arguments in *The History of Sexuality* and later lectures at the Collège de France, identifies racial discourses as central components of the establishment of bourgeois rule within and beyond Europe in an era of colonialism.

“Race,” she writes, became

the organizing grammar of an imperial order in which modernity, the civilizing mission, and the “measure of man” were framed. And with it, “culture” is harnessed . . . not only to mark difference, but to rationalize the hierarchies of privilege and profit, to consolidate the labor regimes of expanding capitalism, to provide the psychological scaffolding for the exploitative structure of colonial rule. (27)

In Stoler’s understanding of colonial history, then, racial ascriptions and racism served to solidify the superiority of European civilization and rationalize the economic and physical exploitation of non-Europeans. Not only did race identify transnational human groupings, but, in its modern incarnations at least, it also grew out of economic and political structures.

European efforts to establish and enforce racial categories and hierarchies around the world inevitably met resistance among non-Europeans. While much of this resistance was local, historical evidence suggests that resistant cultural tactics also traveled worldwide, a phenomenon that Arjun Appadurai (1996, 10) has called “vernacular globalization.” Scholars of the African diaspora have been central to efforts to demonstrate that, “despite some five hundred years of disruption and relocation, such links [between black communities in the Western world] have endured and are incontrovertible” (Gomez, 2006, 18). The links between Africa and black communities worldwide include intellectual, political, and cultural exchanges that maintain a persistent yet fluid idea of “blackness” as a utopian counterculture that seeks “to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity” (Gilroy, 1993, 19).

Several recent publications address the aesthetic and theoretical bases of African diaspora culture (Elam and Jackson, 2005; Gomez, 2006; Clarke and Thomas, 2008). While *Black Television Travels* owes many of its insights to such publications, I am less interested in specifying how the content of African American television speaks to audiences abroad or how television creators in different black communities incorporate and recirculate diasporic television culture than I am in understanding how the commercialization, institutionalization, and globalization of cultural expression work to produce certain forms of racial subjectivity while excluding others.
The main contribution of this volume to our understanding of African diaspora studies, then, lies in its exploration of how the globalizing cultural industries shape and channel the cultural products of the diaspora. Although other black cultural forms such as music, literature, and poetry may seem immune from the influences of global corporate capitalism, they still must navigate the priorities and preferences of their respective institutional gatekeepers. As the organizational sociologist Paul Hirsch (1972) has explained,

In modern, industrial societies, the production and distribution of both fine art and popular culture entail relationships among a complex network of organizations which both facilitate and regulate the innovation process. Each object must be “discovered,” sponsored, and brought to public attention by entrepreneurial organizations or nonprofit agencies before the originating artist or writer can be linked successfully to the intended audience. (640)

Most studies of black cultural traffic to date have addressed the creation, meaning, and community uptake of diaspora culture, sideling crucial questions about how institutions and industries shape culture and communal bonds. Nevertheless, as Kennell Jackson (2005) reminds us, “[black] cultural traffic [always] involves some system of exchange or commerce” (8).

A growing number of scholars have begun to examine how institutions and industries process black culture. A collection of historical essays edited by the critical anthropologists Kamari Maxine Clarke and Deborah A. Thomas (2008) traces the long and complex “relationships among racial ideologies, trade networks, capital mobility, and governance” (5). Contributors to the volume explore the racial projects of a variety of institutions, including the church, the state, and capital, in different locales and time periods. My study takes up similar concerns, albeit from a critical cultural studies perspective that addresses the contemporary cultural industries. As I suggested above, the cultural industries are particularly significant for understanding contemporary racial discourse, given their ubiquity and the ways they simultaneously encourage and discipline difference via the twin logics of industry lore and televiusal representation.

Herman Gray’s (2005) Cultural Moves, meanwhile, comes closest to this volume in examining both the globalization of television and its significance for African American cultural politics. The book is a meditation on the changes in African American culture and cultural politics at a time when black creators have gained access to and influence over dominant U.S. cultural institutions. Arguing that cultural critics must go beyond “a conception
of cultural politics that continues to privilege representation itself as the primary site of hope and critique” (2), Gray examines the multiple and complex ways African American cultural producers have come to “[occupy] and use . . . institutional cultural spaces and the politics that emanate from them.” In other words, Gray sees the successful institutionalization of some forms of African American culture as a move that “complicate[s] rather than simplif[ies] the very notion of black cultural politics.”

Gray examines a range of cultural practices, from classical jazz to avant garde art to computing, including the globalization of American television. Regarding television, he writes that “black shows, where they were developed at all, were and are selectively developed and deployed by major commercial networks as part of their overall marketing and branding strategy, a strategy and ideal demographic that in all likelihood does not include black people as a prime market” (84). For these reasons, he notes, few television series incorporating African American themes, concerns, and viewers get produced today, while those that “finally do make it to a network or cable schedule . . . are required . . . to speak in a universal language” (85). Going beyond a concern with writer-producers, he attributes authorial control, in particular control over whether and where African American programs appear on television, to global institutional priorities and practices, such as corporate brands.

Of course, all television series aimed at transnational audience segments have to speak a “universal language” and today, international sales executives participate in the development of almost every television series produced in the United States (Caldwell, 2008, 258; Havens, 2006). However, industry lore about what constitutes a universal language and who can and cannot speak that language changes over time and crucially depends upon the locations, channel brands, and institutional priorities of a distributor’s main clients and competitors, which shape overall corporate strategies. While Gray is right to be concerned about the consolidation of institutional and discursive power within carefully branded, transnational commercial organizations, it is also the case that industry lore about universality has fragmented in recent years as general broadcasting has given way to increasingly tailored programming and channels—a process that began with the unexpected global popularity of The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air in the mid-1990s, which led some industry insiders to believe that African American youth culture provided a kind of adolescent lingua franca. In fact, programmers at niche cable and satellite channels, as well as publicly funded minority channels, increasingly deploy an industry lore about “cultural journeys” rather than “universal language” that, I will argue, can help sustain African American and minority programming.
Gray’s book was written prior to the worldwide success of *Chappelle’s Show* (2003–2006); *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005–present), which features a larger African American cast than any network television drama since the short-lived *City of Angels* (2000); and HBO series such as *The Wire* (2002–2008) that have set a worldwide standard for “quality” television, which includes the representation of gritty drug scenes populated by young African American men. In other words, the evolving logic that Gray identified in *Cultural Moves* has produced specific textual tendencies that bear analysis and help clarify the influence of globalization on contemporary African American television.

**African American Television Trade Routes**

Beginning with the limited circulation of *Amos ‘n’ Andy* (1951–1953) to Kenya, Bermuda, Nigeria, England, Australia, and Guam in the early 1960s, African American programs have shown up in predictable and unexpected places, often traveling alongside or slightly behind other African American cultural forms, especially popular music and film. I have decided to periodize the history of this trade in order to examine how changes in the television industries and technologies around the world have altered the global circulation of African American television and institutional labors and industry lore that sustain those travels. Each of the following chapters concentrates on a different historical era, examining the social and political issues surrounding blackness in America at the time; how American television selected, framed, and represented those issues; where those representations traveled and were used abroad; and the ways dominant industry lore explained and tried to capitalize on those uses abroad that seemed to offer worthwhile opportunities.

Chapter 1 address the miniseries *Roots*, broadcast in 1977 in the United States, which went on to become a worldwide sensation: more than thirty years later, people from around the world can remember vivid details about watching the broadcast of *Roots* in their countries. The chapter looks at how *Roots*’ portrayals of blackness, particularly black masculinity, drew on black nationalist and Black Power discourses circulating in American society at the time, and how those discourses served the quite different institutional needs of American, Western European, and Eastern European broadcasters, as well as some of the ways other features of the miniseries helped and hindered its export potential. By concentrating primarily on how lucrative Western European broadcasters programmed the miniseries, however, American television executives failed to take notice of some of the more interesting uses, as
well as the opportunities for trade in African American dramatic television that *Roots* opened up. While *Roots: The Next Generations* (1979) went on to rack up impressive international syndication revenues as well, even the limited elements of black nationalism and Black Power that helped propel *Roots* around the world failed to register in the dominant industry lore of the time. Consequently, the American industry primarily focused on producing historical miniseries centered on white American and European history in the wake of *Roots*’ success.

Because miniseries addressing white American history were the main beneficiaries of the international popularity of *Roots*, the generally expensive miniseries genre did not become a vehicle for African American stories in the early eighties. Instead, most recurrent African American characters were relegated to integrated situation comedies that featured one or two African American characters in an otherwise white cast and white cultural surroundings. With the racial and political turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s behind them, the television industries began to focus on color-blind characters and television series championing “assimilationist” politics (Gray, 1986). Chapter 2 addresses the acquisition and programming of these integrated sitcoms in apartheid South Africa. The majority of the chapter analyzes how the commercial South African channel Bop-TV used integrated sitcoms to construct an overtly antiapartheid program schedule and channel identity. In addition to dismantling the prevalent industry lore that programming must have “universal themes” in order to appeal to international viewers, the story of integrated situation comedies in South Africa demonstrates the variety of different institutional labors that broadcasters could make imported African American programming perform, as well as the centrality of African American themes, even in highly integrated series, in explaining the value that foreign broadcasters often find in such imports.

The sale of low-end genres such as sitcoms to less developed television markets like South Africa accounted for the majority of African American television trade through much of the eighties, but the unexpected popularity of *The Cosby Show* in dozens of markets abroad suddenly made U.S. distributors aware of the international sales potential of situation comedies. Chapter 3 addresses the worldwide phenomenon of *The Cosby Show*, in particular how the growing internationalization of U.S. syndication markets increased the variety of programs and genres traveling worldwide and industry explanations about why they failed or succeeded. *The Cosby Show* enacted a scrupulous reclamation of the African American nuclear family and its access to the American Dream at a time when rap music had begun to highlight black male poverty, criminality, and “hardness” and conservative racial discourses
focused on the antisocial behaviors of street thugs and “welfare queens” (Gray, 1995). The series’ global success subsequently led to a popular perception among industry insiders that African American series with “strong family themes” could overcome the supposed insularity of African American culture. As the series’ distributor put it, in the minds of television executives at the time, *The Cosby Show* succeeded abroad because it was “not black.” During this period, the series appeared in more than eighty markets, surpassing the international sales record of *Dallas* (1978–1991). However, much as the industry lore surrounding *Roots* downplayed the role of African American history in the miniseries’ worldwide success, so did explanations of *The Cosby Show*’s popularity abroad tend to ignore the importance of distinctly African American elements of the series that are evident in viewer responses from around the world. In addition, *The Cosby Show* marks the beginning of the development of a coherent *transnational* industry lore regarding the audience appeal and proper institutional labors of African American television programs abroad.

If *The Cosby Show* blazed a trail on the global program markets for U.S. situation comedies with pro-family themes, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* demonstrated that shows steeped in African American youth culture could become even more successful. Chapter 4 examines the international viability of African American youth television in the late nineties and the early part of the twenty-first century, when audiences across Europe and Latin America continued to fragment due to increased competition from commercial broadcasters and cable channels and as young viewers in non-peak hours became an appealing demographic. Many channels turned to imported U.S. sitcoms as a cheap way to lure such viewers, in particular sitcoms featuring African American pop stars, including *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. During this period, black youth culture became a lingua franca of revolt, sexuality, and coolness among adolescents around the world. By 1997 *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* had sold into more markets than *The Cosby Show*, and in a time of greater competition among internationally syndicated series. The series’ runaway popularity led global television merchants to revise their explanations about what kinds of African American television programs travel well. For the first time, international buyers began to value certain distinctly African American cultural allusions in youth-oriented sitcoms, and these preferences filtered back into the dominant industry lore and production practices of American executives. In fact, European channels pioneered the use of African American sitcoms to attract youth demographics, which practice only later appeared in U.S. schedules and production practices. Although this trend had largely passed by 2005, as European channels replaced imports
with domestically produced youth series, the idea that youth-oriented shows with African American pop stars and hip-hop cultural references are globally appealing remains prevalent in industry lore, as evidenced by the recent popularity abroad of Chris Rock’s situation comedy *Everybody Hates Chris* (2005–2009) and especially the ease with which its success has been accepted in dominant industry lore as unsurprising.

The preferences of program buyers from predominantly white European markets continue to shape the kinds of African American programs that get made, as well as their budgets. However, in recent years new television technologies have expanded the variety of African American television series in the United States, from sketch comedy on Comedy Central’s *Chappelle’s Show* (2003–2006) to the adult animation series *The Boondocks* (2005–present) on Cartoon Network to high-end dramas on HBO and Showtime. Chapter 5 examines the international circulation of these newer forms of African American television, in particular how different network organizations and audience configurations create opportunities for new kinds of African American television flows. While these new developments have altered and in some ways expanded the range of African American television series that get produced, the variety of foreign channels that purchase them, and the types of viewers they reach abroad, they continue to encourage certain kinds of representations rather than others. Specifically, the institutional priorities of premium cable channels, general entertainment broadcasters, and comedy channels abroad, combined with industry lore about “edgy” and “quality” programming, lead to a heavy reliance on black masculinity, heteronormativity, crime, violence, and frequent use of the word “nigger” in contemporary series. These same aesthetic choices tend to dominate web-based television series as well, in large part because online producers often strive to have their programs noticed by more traditional television outlets. These textual tendencies do not determine or exhaust the cultural politics of the series, as I make clear in this chapter. Instead, series creators need to navigate these institutional expectations of what African American television should include in order to get their shows on air.

Finally, chapter 6 shifts our focus beyond the United States and African American television to consider how black programming produced elsewhere navigates the circuits of contemporary commercial television and global, digital distribution platforms, as well as the interactions between the institutional labors, industry lore, and representational practices that these different trade routes exhibit. Specifically, we will look at three examples of non-American black television and video programming: the global circulation of the animated Samoan/Māori television series *bro’Town* (2004–2009),
which has enjoyed widespread international syndication on a variety of public service and commercial channels; the booming Nigerian videofilm industry known as Nollywood; and the transnational pirating of the first Belizean television drama *Noh Matta Wat* (2005–2008), which undermined DVD sales and led to funding problems serious enough to halt production. Together, these cases demonstrate several important trends in black television during an era of digitization, globalization, and marketization. First, we see an obvious increase in the variety of video and television programming featuring non-U.S. blacks circulating internationally, as well as a complexity of venues and trade routes. Second, these programs retain significant cultural specificity, again revealing the fallacy that globally popular television must possess universal themes in order to travel. Third, we can see that much black television programming travels through disorganized, parallel markets, which, while they permit a range of representational practices, make production funding highly precarious. For Nollywood video producers, who make almost all of their money from domestic markets, such parallel markets do not make the business model unworkable, though they do depress revenues. For smaller markets like Belize, however, piracy prevents commercial television producers from developing workable business models to cover production costs.

Ironically, while new technologies of television recording make it economically possible for a nation like Belize to produce television dramas in the first place, new distribution technologies make it impossible to profit sufficiently from DVD and other sales to keep the production afloat. By contrast, a series like *bro’Town* shows how a culturally specific black television series can find legitimate commercial and noncommercial buyers in today’s fragmented television landscape. However, despite the unique elements and global success of this series, as a satirical adult animation hailed as “The Simpsons of the South Pacific” (Nippert, 2004), *bro’Town* also incorporates into its aesthetic practices a good deal of conventional industry lore about what does and does not travel well globally.

Together, these chapters demonstrate how transnationally shared industry lore about African American television has become more and more widespread as sales opportunities abroad have opened up and international sales revenues have become central to financing domestic production. At the same time, industry lore about black and African American television has splintered into a handful of theories that serve different types of producers, distributors, and broadcasters. Today the industry lore surrounding African American television does more than just influence the circulation of African American imagery; it also determines whether series get made and what
kinds of series get made. But more is at stake here than what Charles Taylor and Amy Guttmann (1992) have called the “politics of recognition,” or the presence and diversity of African American representations on the world stage. Indeed, the global television industries and the lore that circulates through them ultimately set up hierarchies in which certain kinds of cultures are more valuable and more globally relevant than others, ultimately forming some of the most powerful understandings in today’s world about who can and cannot communicate across national boundaries. These understandings, in turn, influence broader social beliefs about which cultures are and are not worth exploring, respecting, and preserving.