Introduction

I begin by sharing a story that illuminates for me the focus of this book. As I was conducting my research, an article in the Columbia University student magazine *The Eye* caught my eye. It noted that one-third of all Columbia students were now international students. The same article quoted one international student from Guangdong province, China, as saying that before enrolling at Columbia, he hoped to immerse himself in American culture in New York City, where he expected to make White friends who have “blue eyes, yellow hair, and a hairy face.” Since arriving, however, he had come to accept a different social reality: he had not ventured far from his network of Chinese friends. What was striking to me was not that his network was mainly Chinese, for as strangers in another land we tend to seek out those who speak our language and share our customs. What was striking to me was his expectation that American culture in Manhattan would be filled with White friends with “blue eyes, yellow hair.” Many variables may have contributed to his preconceptions of the United States in general and of New York City in particular. The article didn’t address this, but, I wondered, how had his expectations been informed by his viewing of US television? To what degree was he aware of the influence of American television on his perceptions of what New Yorkers would be like? Did his preconceptions—and those of others who have also come to study or work in the United States or New York City—limit or open up his understanding once he arrived? Finally, to what degree were his preconceptions and views similar to or different from those of millennials raised in the United States? Do US millennials from other states also anticipate New York City (or the United States, for that matter) to be similarly populated? And to what degree are they aware of the influence of US TV on their own perceptions?
The Foreign Born and American Television

My research had shown me that many Chinese students watch American TV as a way to learn the English language and American customs (Gao, 2013). My research had also taught me that in some countries with restrictive government policies (like China) or where television has been limited—by law or otherwise—US TV programs are viewed on the Internet, cell phones, and computers more often than through traditional TV channels. In many countries, and in many regions (e.g., Eastern Europe), translation cells (often social groups) have sprouted up to add subtitles to US television programs and make them available—for free—to anyone with an Internet connection. Websites, such as Hulu in the United States, have also made television programs readily available for viewing and downloading. Films have been similarly subtitled and distributed, but television is still in many cases more economical; and, unlike movies, TV programs allow viewers to develop a more continuous familiarity (and perhaps an ongoing identification) with characters and plots—often in weekly segments.

But, as I read the article in The Eye, I was struck by what seemed to be an unconscious residue of this student’s watching American media, perhaps television in particular. This was his somewhat innocent expectation that, after coming to New York City, he would be surrounded by and become immersed in an American culture where he would make White friends with “blue eyes, yellow hair, and a hairy face.” Having lived in New York City for almost all of my life, I have known it to be a majority-minority city for decades. Indeed, few people who visit fail to notice this. Why, then, would this Chinese student have such a different idea about the type of people he would meet? I wondered: is it that our American media project the city so differently from the way it is—and has been—in reality?

Patterns Found in US TV Serial Programming

For quite some time, a number of works (including my own) have examined racial, ethnic, gender, and class representations in US media and in network television. A consistent finding has been the under-representation of these groups relative to their proportion of the US
population—and relative to their actual (proportionate) presence in the settings that are featured on US TV programs. It has also been found that the way in which gender and particular racial and ethnic groups are portrayed tends to convey and reinforce views of these groups as marginal, of lower social status, and irrelevant (as groups) to the main story lines. Researchers have also found that when racial and ethnic characters are included, they tend to be cast not in lead roles but in supporting or silent-extra roles. In addition, the way that certain racial and ethnic characters are drawn (e.g., as Latina/o villains, vixens, or victims; or, as Zia [2000] notes in the case of Asians, as gangsters, gooks, geishas, and geeks) often suggests that they are not or should not be seen as an integral or important part of the “legitimate” social structure that is central to the story on the screen. They are, in essence, “othered”—depicted as being “other than us.”

These misrepresentations have powerful impacts, as Merskin (2007:135) reminds us when discussing accumulation theory:

[I]f the mass media, including advertising, present information in ways that are consistent, persistent, and corroborated, this instruction is likely to have long-term, powerful effects. Stereotyping, as a media effect, gains power and credibility the longer and more regularly the same information is presented, in the same way, to the same audiences. These (re)presentations remain largely unchallenged so that carefully cultivated cultural constructions of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender become normalized in the American popular imagination.

In addition, although we are increasingly taught that race and gender are both social constructions, most of us still tend to look for markers of race and gender to evaluate people. We are still a race-conscious and gender-conscious society (Ryan, 2010:54). And, as many others have noted, the media, or the “Fourth Estate,” not only reflect and sustain such predispositions but also produce them, making them appear universal and a natural reflection of reality (Hall, 1982).

How do people in other countries receive these patterns that have been identified in US TV? Does the overrepresentation of White (male) characters in lead roles come to stand for or represent the universal, normative, average person? In the global market, does US Whiteness
represent or signify the successful, modern human? How does the way that US media portray women and people of color influence people in other countries?

Also, how does US TV’s coverage of controversial topics—e.g., crime, education, religion, and class—influence perceptions of “othered groups” in the United States and in other countries? Chavez (2013) provides an interesting illustration of how the coverage of immigration hyperbolizes and sensationalizes certain dimensions of immigration, while ignoring other aspects. He notes that when the Minuteman Project volunteers arrived in Tombstone, Arizona (population 4,800), in 2005 to monitor the border and the flow of illegal immigrants from Mexico to the United States, “The number of media members here Friday to cover the volunteer border patrols nearly outnumbered the Minutemen. Reporters from around the world descended on Tombstone.” Indeed, one of the organizers of the Minuteman Project, Chris Simcox, who was also editor of the Tombstone Tumbleweed, a local paper, seemed to blame the media for manufacturing the event when he wrote: “The media has created this frenzy and this monster. They are looking for Bigfoot, the Loch Ness monster, the vigilant.”

In this case, the focus was on the Minutemen as opposed to the struggle of immigrants to survive economically or politically in their home countries. The story was not about the contributions of immigrants to the US economy, for example; it also wasn’t about the role that US businesses play in contributing to undocumented immigration, and the advantages that they net when hiring the undocumented. But the question here is this: How influential is such media coverage? Does coverage like this influence views on immigration and immigrants in other countries? Stated more broadly, how does US television—including entertainment programming and coverage of news events—affect the views of people from other countries about immigrants and gender, racial, and ethnic minority groups not only in the United States but also in their own countries? And do these views change (or not) after these global viewers come to the United States?
The Sun Never Sets on TV . . . the TV Is Usually On . . . and It Continues to Show Mostly US TV

The impact of television is generally omitted from studies of globalization, the second generation, transnationalism, and diasporic communities. This may be due in part to the view that TV is seen by some as dumbed-down nonsense and that the Internet has taken viewers away from TV—both in the United States and abroad. Yet people in the United States, as well as in other countries, still spend many hours consuming television content.

TV Viewing in the United States

Despite a clear shift toward more social media, recent Bureau of Labor Statistics data show that in 2015 Americans still watched television an average of close to three hours a day, with daily TV viewing increasing on weekends. Indeed, as Figure I.1 indicates, “Watching TV was the leisure activity that occupied the most time . . . , accounting for more than half of leisure time on average, for those age 15 and over”—with young adults (20–24) watching more hours than youths (15–19). This included watching television over the air, through cable, fiber optics, or satellite, on a television set or computer, and on a DVD player or other device (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Can we think of any other non-work activity (except sleep) that we participate in for close to three hours every day? Do students spend that much time on their homework assignments?

Moreover, despite the shifts to cable and to TV alternatives (e.g., social networking and web-based activities) in the United States, the major network shows still, as they say in advertising, brought in the greatest number of eyeballs. For example, hour-long prime-time dramas still averaged between 12 and 19 million viewers in the United States in the spring 2012 seasonal Nielsen ratings—much above their highest rated peers on cable. Also, many viewers of network and cable shows now access them via the Internet. So, despite the much-merited excitement about YouTube viewing, downloading, online gaming, social media, and Twitter—to name just a few alternatives—the death of TV, in particular TV content, has been greatly exaggerated, to paraphrase Mark Twain.
Moreover, in order to understand the intersection of old and new media, we need to cover the history and the reality of the BT (or Before Twitter) period. It used to be that you watched TV together in your living room and (maybe) shared your reactions to the programs you saw with the other viewers there; or you discussed them later with friends and colleagues on the phone, at school, at work, or in your everyday travels. Now you can tweet your reactions in real time and reach thousands of people; or you can post them on blogs, Facebook, and websites. You can also watch alternatives to network programs or access the same or different network programs on the Internet. Again, TV is not dead; what has changed is how we share our reactions and how we access TV. Consequently, in this text, “watching TV” refers to consuming US TV programs, regardless of how they are, or were, accessed. And my focus is on what viewers take away from the content they view in terms of their perceptions of race, ethnicity, class, and gender.

In addition, although their preferred sources differ, many people in the United States and other countries still get their news about national and international issues primarily from television programming. Furthermore, although viewers are increasingly turning to Netflix and other
avenues to access programs not available on “regular” TV, the digital divide\textsuperscript{16}—both in the United States and throughout the world—prevents many viewers from having steady, reliable access to content online. There are also issues of preference for live-time viewing and an aversion to the multitude of programming options available on the Internet—what some refer to as “choice paralysis.” This is to argue not that Internet (or TV) viewing will cease to grow but that different arguments can be made as to the rate at which they will grow, where they will grow most, and, ultimately, what role traditional US TV programming and content will continue to play in both arenas.\textsuperscript{17}

But more relevant to the focus of this book is the fact that, to date, many of these programs are also lacking with regard to racial, ethnic, class, and gender representation (Hunt and Ramon, 2015; Kim, 2016).\textsuperscript{18} In essence, content is king, and the content with regard to these particular variables has been slow to change (Edgerton, 2007).\textsuperscript{19} In addition, it is important to focus on TV because, as Edgerton (2007:415) has noted, “Television is still the 800-pound gorilla because of how much the average person is exposed to it.” It is also, in many ways, the common denominator, what ordinary citizens—including youths—watch or are exposed to the most in the United States, and what viewers in other countries may have the most access to as well.\textsuperscript{20} It is also, for many, the most economical source of entertainment.

\textit{TV Viewing in Other Countries—Also Widespread}

Europeans also watch a considerable amount of television. For example, according to one estimate, the average German consumes more than three hours of television a day, placing Germany third in the world, after the United States and Britain (tied for first) and Italy (second).\textsuperscript{21} Although precise numbers are difficult to obtain, American TV is also both readily accessible and widely consumed in non-European countries outside of the United States. According to one study, globally 86 percent of TV viewers still watch TV live and on television screens, although the percentages vary considerably by country. For example, viewing TV on desktop computers and laptops is more common in China (52 percent) and Russia (43 percent), while streaming from the Internet to TV screens is more popular in Turkey (44 percent).\textsuperscript{22} Titcomb (2015) also
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noted that, according to the 2015 International Communications Market Report, the United States and the United Kingdom were both leaders in terms of the number of hours spent watching television. Who actually watched the most depended on whether just live TV was measured, or if hours spent watching recorded programs, live television, catch-up television, and online streaming were combined—if combined the United Kingdom led the pack, otherwise the United States did. As Woods (2016) notes, these countries were followed by Japan, Italy, Poland, Russia, the Netherlands, and Spain, all of which watched over 239 minutes of TV a day in 2014. Countries in the Asia-Pacific region and in Australia also watched TV, with China watching up to 157 minutes per day, South Koreans up to 196 minutes, and Australians just over 204 minutes. In essence, as Woods concludes, “people all over the world are watching more and more TV, whether it is live television, recorded or indeed streaming online.”

Concerns about the Dominance of US TV

Countries have taken action to deal with long-standing concerns over the dominance of American TV, and some have established quotas for how much US TV can be aired on television. For example, quotas of 50 percent European content were originally enacted by the Council of the European Community, which in 1989 established a single European Union market in television and the Television without Frontiers (TWF) Directive, now referred to as the AVMS (Audiovisual Media Services) Directive. As Jones (1997) notes, the TWF Directive required member states to “ensure ‘where practicable’ and ‘by appropriate means’ that broadcasters reserve for ‘European works’ a majority of their transmission time, exclusive of news, sports events, games, advertising, and teletext services.” The intent of the directive was dual: (1) “to protect 50% or more of transmission time” from non-EU competition and (2) to counter the “threat to cultural and linguistic diversity in Europe” (Jones, 1997). This policy evolved as a result of the overwhelming dominance of US TV in the European community and growing concern about that trend, which surfaced during the late 1980s and early 1990s, and which has continued despite changes in technology and the increased ability of consumers to access the kind of TV content they want, when they...
want it. Canada also requires that 60 percent of all programming and 50 percent of prime-time programming be of Canadian origin (Picard, 2011:226).

Despite the quotas imposed on American TV products and the fact that member countries are periodically reviewed to see if they have met their local content quotas, the number of hours of American programming on major European networks increased from 2000 to 2008. Indeed, as recently as 2011, the Council of Europe still acknowledged the continuing prominence of US TV in Europe, saying: “American programmes and formats have retained their prime position in European TV Programme Schedules and in the list of the most-watched programs.” Kuipers (2010:183n1, 180) also notes that although “figures on television imports are hard to come by and not easily comparable,” there is general agreement that “Hollywood is still the largest exporter of TV in the western world” (Kuipers, 2010:180).

In addition, numerous US studies have shown that most countries love US popular culture—regardless of what they may think about US foreign policy (see Cohen, 2009; Wike, 2013). As one reporter put it, Batman is Batman, regardless of who is in the White House (Arango, 2008). In sum, for many years American TV has been a commonplace, steady part of life in many countries. Moreover, it is often viewed as representative of a, if not the, major political and economic world power of the day. But, regardless of viewers’ perceptions of the US position in the world, US TV often reflects a life quite different from what exists in the viewers’ countries in terms of gender, class, race, and ethnic relations. Consequently, American TV has influenced and, in many cases, continues to influence how America is seen by people who have never been to the United States. It may also influence, in terms of social/psychological remittances, people who are not in the United States but who are in touch with others from their countries who are in the United States (Levitt, 2001).

People in other countries also worry that US TV may crowd out their own cultures and traditions. Indeed, in the Pew Global Attitudes study, majorities or pluralities in 17 of 20 countries said “it is a bad thing that U.S. ideas and customs are spreading to their countries” (p. 4). The researchers further noted that although American “soft power” (especially as expressed through the media that are exported) may be ap-
pealing, there are concerns about the impact of Western media in some countries. Of particular concern in some countries is the fact that US media—both film and television—are particularly appealing to young people in other countries (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2012:24). In a more recent series of face-to-face interviews conducted with a nationally representative sample of 3,649 adults in China, researchers also found that most “believe that their traditional way of life is getting lost and that it needs to be protected against foreign influence.”

So, in effect, in spite of the increasing popularity of other media, TV content still occupies a huge amount of our waking life, and it is perceived by many in other countries as having substantial effects, such as challenging the way in which their citizens, in particular their youth, think about their own cultural and social traditions, personal goals, and preferred lifestyles. It may be that as Wike (2013) concludes, “The reality is that resistance to American culture often goes hand in hand with a strong attraction to it.”

Clearly, there are also economic concerns (e.g., trade imbalances), and there have been attempts to address this dominance of American TV in several countries. Changes have occurred with, for example, the development of domestic, glocal, and diasporic programming, and joint partnerships between US media companies and media companies in other countries. But the fact remains that globalization is a worldwide phenomenon within which US media have played, and continue to play, a dominant role (Liebes and Katz, 1990; Imre, 2009). This is not to deny the ability of peoples to filter media in their own way (Bielby and Harrington, 2015) and thus ignore or counter hegemonic narratives and develop hybridized programming or their own independent programming (see Straubhaar, 2007; Esser, 2010; Steven, 2003; Artz and Kamalipour, 2007). But, regardless of the precise nature or degree of global media impact, the fact remains that US media have an influence that is relatively understudied.

In addition, the US populace seems to have little awareness of what the impact has been, or what questions might be raised in relation to this situation. For example, has the United States’ success in exporting its popular culture been more effective than “boots on the ground” in terms of spreading views of democracy and equal rights for all groups, such as women, gays, transgender people, and those of African or indig-
noxious descent? Or has it retarded such movements? Has it inflamed or reinforced opposing views? 

To what extent are world leaders influenced by American TV content? Some thought-provoking examples of this can be found in the Financial Times’ March 9, 2014, article on “Why China’s Leaders Love to Watch ‘House of Cards.’” This article notes that “Xi Jinping, the Chinese president, reportedly considers the American classic The Godfather his favourite western cinematic indulgence,” and “Wang Qishan, the former vice-premier of finance and ultimate arbiter for discipline on the Communist party’s standing committee, is said to favour House of Cards,” telling those in “the cloistered leadership compound, to keep abreast of the Netflix hit” and instructing his staff to check the release date for season 2. Although this American TV show is adapted from a BBC series from the 1990s, the article goes on to say that it is likely viewed as “quintessentially American” (Campbell, 2014). We do not know to what degree leaders or their followers are influenced by American TV content—and in what way—but clearly it should not be dismissed as mere entertainment by those who seek a better understanding of international relations.

I do not mean to imply that the primary intent of American TV is to influence people around the world in any particular way. For while this book examines various results of watching TV, it should be remembered that American TV is a business (Picard, 2011) and, therefore, is driven by business interests. Corporations produce media and sell them to viewers and advertisers in order to make money. In other words, regardless of the mode of distribution, such as cable, Netflix, Apple, Amazon, Hulu, or traditional network channels on the terrestrial TV set, and regardless of the content delivered, the driving forces are, simply and always, the seeking of revenues, net earnings, and other value by the various players.

Beyond the political, economic, and cultural considerations, are there other, perhaps more social or psychological, consequences to the steady diet of American TV that many countries consume? Is this a diet mainly enjoyed by the privileged in some countries? Does watching American TV influence the views that citizens of other countries have of the United States; and how does it influence the expectations they may have of the United States before coming to country? What surprises them the
most when they come to the United States? Do they see US TV as helping them to be more economically mobile, to better integrate into the United States or into global occupations? Does watching American TV in their home countries influence their own aspirations, desires, consumption practices, and preferred lifestyles? If so, does it, in this sense, operate as a form of soft power that contributes to the view or notion of American exceptionalism?\(^{34}\)

Given the patterning we have discussed in US TV with regard to race, ethnicity, class, and gender, how does watching American TV influence their views in these areas? What happens when these global viewers come to the United States? Are their media-inflected views of the United States altered? Do they now see US TV as encouraging or discouraging “otherness”? Do they now see US TV as accurately reflecting racial and ethnic relations in the United States? What do their US counterparts, that is, youths of similar educational or socioeconomic backgrounds who also watch US TV, think about these same issues? This book seeks to address these questions.

Why Study This? Why Now?

*International Students, Faculty, Researchers, and Other Professionals*

Beyond their clear academic value, why are these questions important today? They are important because clearly we live in an increasingly globalized world.\(^{35}\) A growing number of international students, faculty, researchers, and other professionals are collaborating with US colleagues (both in the United States and abroad) to drive research, financial markets, and corporate expansions. This has been particularly evident in the upper tiers of our educational institutions.\(^{36}\) In-depth academic research on these groups has been limited. So it is important to study this rapidly growing group of international scholars, students, and foreign nationals who have come to study and work in the United States, especially at US educational institutions, for a number of reasons.\(^{37}\)

For one, although the 2013 Open Doors Report indicates that international students made up less than 4 percent of total student enrollment in the United States at the graduate and undergraduate levels, their numbers have been growing significantly and consistently over the past
seven years. As the report indicated, “There are now 40 percent more international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities than a decade ago, and the rate of increase has risen steadily for the past three years” (Downey, 2013).

Second, there are large and increasing numbers of such students in tier 1 universities and in large metropolitan areas: “All of the top 20 host universities and the top 10 host states had more international students in 2012/13 than the previous year.” Large public universities are also important hosts to foreign students. Of the top 25 schools, 18 were public universities, including 8 in the Midwest (Porter and Belkin, 2013). In addition, many top-tier universities, including Columbia, New York University, and Cornell, are establishing campuses in other countries, which often encourage more faculty and students to come to the United States.

These international students, faculty, and professionals also tend to specialize in those areas that will continue to be important in future global development, that is, business, engineering, math, and computer science (Porter and Belkin, 2013; Institute of International Education, 2013). As such, we can expect or hope that they will continue to work with US and other global colleagues in these developing areas. Furthermore, and as the 2013 Open Doors Report indicates, they also contribute to America’s scientific and technical research and bring international perspectives into US classrooms. In this sense, they help prepare American undergraduates for global careers, and their education and experiences in the United States often lead to longer-term business relationships and economic benefits for the United States and other countries. Consequently, it is important to study US TV and our global colleagues’ perceptions of US TV as this may encourage communication and the kind of mutual understanding that could foster even more successful international collaborations.

Translating through American TV

In the course of conducting my research (more on that later), people would occasionally ask me what my research was about. When I told them, practically everyone had a story to share with me. One of those stories illustrates the extent to which international students consume US TV. An administrator at an urban university in the US Northeast was
charged with shepherding the newest group of graduate business students from China after they had arrived in the United States. She did not speak Chinese. As she struggled to describe the venue where they were planning to meet later that day, one student said, “Oh, you mean like Cheers?” referring to the popular US TV sitcom set in a friendly Boston pub, where, as the theme song said, “everybody knows your name.” She nodded “yes” and then heard from the group of 60 or so a unanimous “oh,” as in, okay, now we get it. This illustrated for her how the show, which had developed its own iconic image in the United States, had now also become a global cultural metaphor. For me, it reinforced the ubiquity of US TV programming in other countries.

Implications for the Future

International students are generally supported by and come from countries that are projected to be (or already are) dominant players in the world’s global economy. Indeed, the top three senders are China, India, and South Korea, and they now account for half (49 percent) of international students in the United States, with China sending almost as many students as the other top-sending nations combined. What does this bode for future international cooperation and development? International students from around the world not only bring back their impressions of the United States but also often see their home countries in new ways. Since other countries often invest in such students, they may wonder how their investment is paying off—in understanding the United States and, indirectly, in feelings about their countries of origin.

Last, and as my own sample (described below) indicates, international students often come from fairly privileged backgrounds and, as such, can be expected to play important roles in the global economy, whether in the United States or elsewhere. We need to have a better sense not just of their US experiences in their educational settings but also of their absorption of US culture via US media before coming to and after living in the United States for a few years. In terms of my particular interest, what views of the United States do they bring, and how have these views been influenced by the American TV they have seen, especially with regard to issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender? If they return to their home countries, what will they take back?
My Questions and My Methods

As I became increasingly aware of the large numbers of foreign nationals working in the United States and of international students attending US universities—and of the extent to which American TV was consumed in the United States and in other countries—I began to wonder: did the youths and young adults who came to study or work in the United States see much American TV before they came? If so, why did they watch US TV? Did it influence their expectations before they came? Did they see US TV as undermining their culture? Or did they see American TV as helping them in some way? How did their views change—or not—after they came to the United States? Did the racial, ethnic, gender, and class depictions characteristic of our media influence their views of the United States, and of the minorities in their country? What did US millennials, that is, youths of similar educational backgrounds, think about these same issues? How true to life did both groups view American TV to be?

What I did to answer these questions is addressed in more detail in the appendix, but suffice it to say that I conducted, over a three-year period (2013–5), personal and in-depth interviews with 71 foreign-born young adults who had come to the United States fairly recently and were living in the US Northeast at the time of the interview. I also administered electronically a shorter version of my questionnaire to 171 US undergraduates at a university also in the Northeast in order to see what differences or similarities might exist between my foreign-born group and the US undergraduate group with regard to how watching US TV had influenced them, and, in particular, how it influenced their views of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. I discuss the results of my analyses in subsequent chapters, but first, in the next chapter, I review and focus on those parts of the research literature in this area that pertain to my core question of how preconceptions or perceptions about race, class, and gender are influenced by watching US TV, and to what degree viewers are aware of this influence.