"It's Still a White World Out There": The Interplay of Culture and Economics in International Television Trade

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☐ —*Drawing on interviews with more than thirty international television executives from around the world, this article provides a case study of how distribution and acquisition practices in international television trade extract profit from television culture. While previous research in international television has tended to ignore or to oversimplify the importance of the distribution industry, this article demonstrates how studying distribution gives us insights into the contents and directions of transborder television flows that other methods and research foci miss. Specifically, the article explores how economic and cultural forces intersect to shape the global flow of African American situation comedies. As the television industry continues to globalize, cultural differences such as race will prove pivotal in attracting multinational viewers, and this article calls for more research into how such differences are commodified by the international distribution industry.*

The international television trade is a booming business. According to the Motion Picture Association of

America (MPAA), which represents the major Hollywood studios, sales of its members' television programming and films to international television outlets doubled between 1995 and 2000, from $1.9 billion to $3.8 billion ("Cable, overseas," 1996; Hollinger, 2001). And yet most television executives remain in the dark about why particular imported series become popular in different markets. A veteran American executive specializing in Eastern Europe presents a typical analysis of the popularity of the situation comedy *A.L.F.* in Russia, which features an extraterrestrial hand-puppet who lives with a suburban family: "I'm hard pressed to find an answer why it became so popular here. But I think one of the contributing factors—and this is my own little thumbnail analysis—is it's a perspective of an American home from someone who's totally alien" (personal commu-

nication, May 1999). Perhaps. But international executives, particularly experienced ones, are the first to admit that they really don't understand the cultural dynamics of international television trade: they're too busy thinking about economics and business.

Contemporary television scholarship has equally little to say about international television trade, as most research focuses on *either* economic issues *or* cultural ones. In this article, I look at how *both* economic and cultural forces play out in international trade, including distribution to and acquisition from the international programming markets. Such a focus is necessary because assumptions about a series' cultural resonance in international markets determine its economic value. These assumptions, in turn, are based on seller's perceptions of buyers' preferences, and buyers' perceptions of their target audiences. Ultimately, both economic and cultural forces come together during international television trade to shape programming flows. What is the balance between these forces, and precisely how do they influence one another?

This article provides a case study of how distribution and acquisition practices in international trade extract profit from television culture. Specifically, I examine what international television executives think about the marketability of African American situation comedies abroad, and how distributors and buyers treat such programs. Focusing on a single genre allows us to explore closely the relationship between cultural value and economic value, because different genres require different levels of funding, fetch different prices, appeal to different demographics, and allow for different scheduling strategies. In addition, as the television industry continues to globalize, cultural differences such as race increasingly shape international television flows. Studying how race is commodified on a global scale allows us to understand better the implications of this phenomenon.

Decisions about distribution to and acquisition from international markets also influence television reception and production practices. Buyers determine the kinds of international programming that viewers can access and the kinds of pleasures and meanings available from the programming through scheduling. Thus, *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* would attract different audiences and engender different pleasures if scheduled during prime-time rather than during a teen lineup. On the distribution side, perceptions about a show's international marketability influence the kinds of shows that get produced and their production budgets, as expectations of sales revenues in international distribution "windows" are calculated into production budgets from the outset (Owen & Wildman, 1992). Because most African American situation comedies are considered unsuitable for international distribution, their production budgets are accordingly smaller than other programs.

Close analysis of the relationships between economic value and cultural expression in international television trade forces us to rethink the theoretical distinction in television studies between moments of production, text, and reception. Not only is each of these moments shaped by economic and business practices that are increasingly global, but considerations of production values and textual pleasure are present in all stages of distribution and acquisition. Furthermore, as we will see, each stage of the process of international television trade, from deciding

which series to promote internationally to selecting and scheduling imported programming, alters the range of available international texts and their likely meanings. Hence, an analysis of international trade tells us a great deal about the cultural politics of global television that even sophisticated explorations of production, text, or reception miss.

Theorizing International Television Distribution

Television studies has been deeply influenced by Hall's (1980/1993) "Encoding, decoding" essay, which argues that both of these "relatively autonomous" moments in television's cultural circuit must be studied in its own right. Though Hall distinguishes four distinct moments in mass communication—production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction—the majority of the essay and subsequent research in television focuses on the production/circulation of meaning or its consumption/reproduction. Questions about distribution are typically left in the background. Although he recognizes that professional ideologies shape production practices, Hall fails to account for distribution as a significant moment *between* production and consumption, where economic value is created from the televisual commodity. In the public service broadcasting landscape that Hall analyzed, the marginalization of distribution may have been warranted, but contemporary American-style commercial television is being replicated worldwide, and distribution is vital to such operations.

International television scholarship reflects the inattention to issues of distribution that characterizes television studies in general. While a handful of mainstream media economists have addressed certain economic and business features of international distribution or acquisition (Dupagne, 1992; Dupagne & Waterman, 1998; Waterman & Rogers, 1993; Wildman & Siwek, 1988), these studies fail to consider how cultural assumptions mediate economic value. Political economists, meanwhile, conceptualize international trade in terms of "flows" of programming across national borders, focusing on aggregate trade surpluses and deficits to demonstrate how net-exporting nations in the West dominate international communication and threaten the cultural sovereignty of net-importing nations (DeBens & de Smaele, 2001; Guback & Varis, 1982; Hamelink, 1977; Herman & McChesney, 1997; Nordenstreng & Varis, 1974; Varis, 1984). However, the exclusive focus on quantitative data and the power of exporting nations leads political economists to downplay the complexity of the distribution process and the ways in which textual pleasure and cultural meanings shape international television flows. Curtin (1999), for instance, argues convincingly that contemporary "neo-network" distribution circuits have, for the moment, enabled diverse media representations of feminine desire worldwide.

Reception scholars have been quick to point out the limitations in political economic models of transnational cultural circulation, showing how viewers' pleasures and the cultural politics associated with them are complex and unpredictable (Gillespie, 1995; Miller, 1992; Morley, 1992; Penacchioni, 1984). In this way, reception research demonstrates that cultural realities complicate the business of television importing and exporting. In their efforts to correct the perceived overemphasis on

macro-economic analysis, however, reception analysts have tended to conceptualize viewer preferences as wholly derived from a viewer's social background and cultural surroundings, rather than recognizing them as "forced-choice" decisions among available options (Meehan, 1990). Program offerings do not materialize wholecloth on the screen, but are the result of such forces as license and production fees, channel identities, and perceptions of viewers' tastes. Analysis of how specific programs get to viewers in the first place and the kinds of pleasures that are folded back into the revenue circuits of the television industry helps avoid the tendency toward uncritical populism that runs through some reception analysis.

A number of "middle-range" scholars who examine how concrete business practices mediate between macroeconomic forces and the micro-social contexts of reception have suggested that cultural realities strongly influence international television flows. Language, in particular, seems to channel international television programming into "geolinguisitic regions" that share the same language (Hoskins, McFadyen & Finn, 1997; Sinclair, Jacka & Cunningham, 1996; Straubhaar, 1991). Hence, Mexican and Brazilian programs are popular throughout the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking regions, respectively. Insights into how language shapes international audiovisual trade have led to broader arguments about the influence of culture in general on global trade. Straubhaar (1991) conceives of transnational cultural trade in terms of the "proximity" between different cultures, which includes such factors as shared histories, similar values, and congruence of dominant narrative forms. Together with a

nation's position in the international economic system, these cultural homologies determine television imports and exports. Working with similar assumptions, Hoskins, McFadyen & Finn (1997) argue that a "cultural discount," or loss of value, applies to audiovisual products when they are syndicated overseas, because most viewers prefer local programming in their native language (Pool, 1977). Although cultural commodities in the domestic market are also highly volatile (Hirsch, 1972), the international markets are seen as particularly unpredictable due to global cultural differences. Each of these theories demonstrates that a combination of economic and cultural forces govern international television trade. In this essay, I explore how distributors and buyers imagine the cultural value of "Blackness" in a variety of markets, and how specific representations of Blackness create profits for distributors and buyers on the international market. While middle-range research has tended to explore business practices in specific national or regional markets, this article extends middle-range research into the international television business.

A clearer understanding of the mechanisms of international distribution not only gives us a more nuanced picture of cultural trade in the twenty-first century, but may also bring critical media scholars closer together. Meehan (1999) has suggested that the cleavage of media studies into production, textual, and reception analyses has tended to lump together scholars from divergent paradigms studying the same phenomena, while blinding critical media scholars to the possibility of dialogue across specialization. She cites the work of Stabile (1995) on *Roseanne*, Meehan's work with Byars (Meehan &

Byars, 2000) on the Lifetime Channel, and others as exemplifying such a dialogue. On the international scene, Gripsrud's (1995) study of *Dynasty* in Norway, which ranges over the production, distribution, acquisition, scheduling, and reception of the series, is one of the best examples of such a combination of critical research foci.

As the foregoing review of international television research makes clear, media scholars have not dealt sufficiently with the syndication industry when studying the worldwide circulation of television programming. Instead, syndication has generally been ignored altogether or seen as little more than a mechanistic manifestation of deeper economic forces. In order to flesh out our bare bones understanding of the international television business, this article investigates the people who know the most about international syndication—the men and women who trade programming on the international market. Through a series of interviews with thirty-three international television executives from around the world, I examine the ways in which their cultural assumptions and the economic priorities of the companies they represent combine to shape the global flow of African American situation comedies. In addition to these interviews, I also conducted an extensive review of ten years of industry trade journals, primarily *Variety, TV World,* and *Television Business International,* and attended two prominent international sales markets, MIP-TV 1999 (Marché Internationale des Programmes de Télévision) and NATPE 2001 (National Association of Television Programming Executives), where I observed the markets and spoke with participants.

Due to the scarcity of previous re-search on which to draw, I adopted an emergent approach to my interviews, altering the questions and the areas of inquiry as I learned more about the business in general and the international circulation of African American sitcoms in particular. Although I had studied trade journals and scholarly research prior to conducting the interviews, I still found large gaps in my understanding once I began. Consequently, the later interviews tended to be more informed, and therefore more useful, as I became familiar with the language and practices of the international television business. Despite difference among the interviews, however, similarities do exist. In most of the interviews with distributors, I began with general questions about the importance of international sales and the distributor's primary markets before turning to the kinds of programming that "travel" well internationally. Because all of the distributors I interviewed either currently sell or previously sold African American sitcoms internationally, I then explored their opinions about the genre as a whole and specific series in their catalogs. Several distributors were leery about discussing African American sitcoms, so the depth of questioning about the genre varied considerably from interview to interview. The interviews that I conducted with buyers began with similarly general questions about the amount of imported programming they buy, their main suppliers, and the decision-making process surrounding foreign acquisitions, before turning to specific questions about programming preferences. Unlike the distribution executives I interviewed, most of the buyers shared their opinions about African American sitcoms freely.[1]

In analyzing the interviews, I exam-

ined all of the transcripts to find common and divergent themes and practices, and I attempt here to give voice to the full range of opinions that I encountered. Nevertheless, due to the varying lengths and depths of the interviews, some figure more prominently in the forthcoming analysis than others. In addition, I have relied on my own sense of which interviews were more candid, and I tend to consider those interviews more fully below. I analyze the interviews for evidence of prevalent industry practices as well as the deeper "conceptual structures" (Geertz, 1973) through which executives imagine the world of transnational television trade. This approach aims at demonstrating how cultural assumptions and business practices intersect. In the interest of space, the quotations I use here are only the clearest, most eloquent, or most colorful instances of the broader trends I identified.

Eleven of the executives I interviewed work in television distribution, twenty are responsible for purchasing television from the international market, and two have held numerous positions in international television syndication and currently work for NATPE. All participants were offered partial or complete anonymity. Distribution executives included seven representatives from the major Hollywood studios and four executives from medium-sized U. S. firms, usually presidents and vice presidents of international television departments or regional sales managers. Many of these executives had worked with other distribution houses and in other regions, and shared their previous experiences as well. I also interviewed nine European and eleven non-European buyers from every region of the world. Most of my

Western European contacts had worked in the industry for over a decade. Again, because of previous experience, many were familiar with other markets. The interviews include buyers who have worked in the following markets: UK, Australia, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Hungary, Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Latvia, China, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, India, South Africa, Kuwait, Jordan, Mexico, and Chile.

The Business of International Television Markets

Before turning our attention to the specific question of how Blackness gets commodified in international television, we need to understand the general relationships between business and cultural considerations in international television trade. In the following two sections, I explore these interactions from the perspective of American distributors and international buyers.

Creating Value in International Television: Distribution and Sales

Although international distribution has been a part of US syndication since the 1960s, it was only in the late eighties that these markets came into their own. During this period, satellite and cable delivery, along with worldwide deregulation and privatization of public broadcasting, led to an explosion in channels and broadcast hours around the world. In Western Europe alone, the number of cable and satellite channels increased nearly twenty-fold between 1984 and 1996 ("Europe's 'other,'" 1997). Meanwhile, domestic production costs skyrocketed, network audience shares plummeted, and aver-

age network license fees plateaued ("Navigating," 1999; Westcott, 1997). US distributors turned to international sales to recoup production costs, especially in the years prior to a series' domestic syndication. Though domestic sales offer significantly higher profits than international, domestic buyers demand about three seasons' worth of episodes in order to "strip" a program on weekdays. Therefore, prior to completing three seasons of a network run, international sales are the only source of revenue for distributors beyond a network license fee, which rarely covers production costs (Hoskins, Mc-Fadyen & Finn, 1997). Today, more than sixty percent of revenues can come from international sales in a series' first three seasons (M. Kaner, President, International Television and Worldwide Pay Television, Twentieth Century Fox International Television, personal communication, 24 June 1999; H. Lazarus, President, Carsey-Werner International, personal communication 11 May 1999; G. Marenzi, President, International Television, Paramount Pictures, personal communication, 13 May 1999).

The major Hollywood studios dominate international television trade. In 1997, the MPAA, which consists of Disney, Sony Pictures, Metro-Gold-wyn-Mayer, Paramount, Twentieth Century Fox, Universal, and Warner Bros., netted $2.6 billion in sales to foreign television outlets, while independent producers in the American Film Marketing Association (AFMA) earned $736 million. The primary consumers of US programming are Western European markets. In 1996, the top eight importing countries, which accounted for 72% of MPAA/AFMA revenues, included only one non-European nation, Japan, whose total US

acquisitions are minimal compared with its GDP (Dinerman & Serafani, 1997; Guider, 1998).

Blockbuster Hollywood films and top-rated television series are the most successful properties in international syndication. These commodities benefit from massive worldwide promotion and Hollywood's status as the center of global popular culture, which gives its most popular products a universal cachet. Distributors leverage the worldwide popularity of such programming to overcome the uncertainties of international trade. The major studios "package" blockbusters with less predictably popular television fare, such as situation comedies, so that buyers who want the rights to current blockbusters are required to buy television series as well. The major distributors also strike output deals with overseas media conglomerates, giving the buyer access to all of the distributors' releases for the contract period, while providing a consistent "pipeline" for distributors' products (B. Johansen, personal communication, 25 March 1999; Mahamdi, 1992).

Unfortunately for distributors, most international television trade consists of programming with less guaranteed success than blockbusters. In spite of the appeal of packages and large-volume output deals, individual sales remain the most common type of deal in international trade (Mahamdi, 1992). Individual sales require the distributor to convince the buyer that the product will appeal to the buyer's target market. Often, distributors market their programming as "universal" in an attempt to convince buyers that it can surmount cultural barriers. A Carsey-Werner promotional flier for *That '70s Show*, for example, claims that "It's all funny because it's based on universal

family themes that everyone can relate to." Mark Kaner, President of International Television and Worldwide Pay Television for Twentieth Century Fox International Television, similarly explains that "if you have something that is absolutely and totally American, then it's going to be more difficult to sell than something that has a broader, more universal subject matter" (personal communication, 24 June 1999).

Major American distributors maintain divisions solely responsible for collecting international ratings data about their series and assisting buyers with marketing and promotions campaigns abroad. Of course, the quality and quantity of international ratings data available through the majors depends on each market's economic importance for the distributor. For instance, ratings data on German audiences is more sophisticated than data on Hungarian audiences (anonymous Hungarian television executive, personal communication, July 2001). Regardless of the amount of ratings data available, however, the popularity of a newly-released series is always unknown. Though distributors may have data for similar series in the target market or the same series in similar markets, they still must convince buyers of the worth of their wares. International programming markets, then, are wholly imaginative and discursive constructs.

Unlike the domestic television market, the primary audience for the American majors is not viewers, but fellow international television executives. In order to cultivate favor and influence, distributors maintain permanent sales representatives for every major market and each region of the world. In addition, distributors and buyers meet several times per year at international and regional trade fairs,

where sellers try to woo buyers with plush surroundings, impressive spreads of free food and drinks, and guest appearances by television and film stars. Due to such frequent contact, international television trade is "probably the most socially intimate of all commodity trades" (Mahamdi, 1992, p. 237).

Creating Value in International Television: Acquisition and Scheduling

Because it is nearly always cheaper for foreign buyers to purchase US programming than it is to self-produce, American programming dominates international trade, reportedly accounting for 68% of worldwide prime-time viewing, compared to 13% for British programming, its closest rival (Murphy, 2000). *Screen Digest* reported in 1997 that European television channels paid between 1.2 and 7.4 times less to acquire US programming than they paid to self-produce ("European TV," 1997). Outside Europe, price differentials between acquisitions and self-production are often more stark. In 1996, Indonesian channels paid $1,000–$1,500 for one hour of acquired drama, while local production costs were about $40,000 per hour (Deal, 1997; Television Business International, 1997).

In spite of the glut of cheap American series on the international markets, most buyers reduce their reliance on American imports over time. Because viewers generally prefer local programming in their own language (Pool, 1977; Wildman & Siwek, 1988), channels in well-developed television markets in the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, and Latin America seldom schedule American imports during prime-time, because they don't compete effectively with local programming (O. Barzelatto, CEO & Chairman, Representaciones de Television [Chile], personal

communication, 27 July 1999; Hoskins, McFadyen & Finn, 1997). Instead, most general entertainment channels use American imports to target particular demographics or fill out schedules in less popular dayparts (Akyuz, 1996; Millichip, 1995). In addition, upstart channels often rely heavily on cheap imports in their early years to build their identities and audiences, then slowly increase domestic programming, although some niche channels construct their identities around American imports (A. Blicq, Head of Programming and Acquisitions, Canal Jimmy [France], personal communication, 12 May 1999).

Acquisition preferences and scheduling practices rest chiefly on how buyers understand their channel's purpose, its relationship to other channels in the domestic market, and the viewing preferences of their channel's target market. In other words, such decisions almost always involve cultural considerations. The importance of cultural considerations comes across starkly in how unwanted series obtained in package deals are treated. Although the rights to these series have already been purchased, many channels refuse to air them, or "burn" them during off hours because of the series' perceived shortcomings (T. Dewi, Commissioning Producer of International Co-Productions, Prosieben [Germany], personal communication, 11 May 1999; T. Y. Lau, personal communication, 6 March 1999).

Buyers have varying degrees of audience research to work with when acquiring programming, depending upon their channel's operating budget. For channels with small budgets, advertising revenues do not cover the price of ratings data. Moreover, the audience share of such channels is often too small for conventional ratings measurements to be meaningful (B. Jankai, Vice President and Director of Programming, SatElit Television [Hungary], personal communication, 24 June 2001). Although the growing importance of international distribution for American producers has led to more international audience research (Mahoney, 1991), they are primarily concerned with large, lucrative markets.

In addition to ratings data, some buyers screen potential imports for focus groups. These may be randomly selected samples of viewers or a collection of the buyers' friends and family members (F. Mulder, Director of Programme Acquisitions and Sales, NOS, personal communication, 16 April 1999; G. Licis, Head of Acquisitions and Sales, Latvian TV, personal communication, 14 April 1999). While this practice adds to the base of knowledge buyers can draw on when making decisions, the impressions gleaned from such research cannot alone decide acquisitions, especially since follow-up research on unexpected successes or failures is not conducted (I. Duran, Vice President, International Affairs, TV Azteca, personal communication, 15 April 1999). Given the lack of usable audience research in international television, then, buyers must rely a great deal on their own impressions of what kinds of programming their target audiences will find culturally relevant. In fact, Mahamdi (1992) reports that many buyers claim they simply "know" culturally relevant programming when they see it (p. 246). Certainly, considerations of program price, business relations, and other aspects of the deal figure prominently in buyers' purchasing decisions, but these are all framed by assumptions about cultural relevance.

Selling African American Sitcoms: "Universal" and "Ethnic" Series

According to distributors, the universal appeal of television programming differs from genre to genre. Michael Solomon, former President of International Television explains that, "If you have a suspense drama, an action-adventure-type drama, that sells abroad. . . . It's got to have that universal theme" (Schapiro, 1991, p. 29). Kaner from Twentieth Television concurred: "Comedies are always more difficult to sell on a general basis than are dramas, especially action and thriller dramas" (personal communication, 24 June 1999).

Most distributors believe that the cultural specificity of humor makes the situation comedy genre less capable of crossing national borders than other genres (G. Marenzi, President, International Television, Paramount Pictures, personal communication, 13 May 1999; M. Puopolo, Manager of International Research for Warner Bros. International Television, personal communication, 11 May 1999). Regardless of the challenges of selling sitcoms internationally, however, the genre is popular in domestic syndication because it attracts desirable, young demographics, facilitates flexible scheduling, and "repeats" better than other genres (Heuton, 1990). Therefore, American distributors find their libraries stocked with sitcoms in need of international buyers.

In situation comedy, the definition of universality is limited to plots and themes centered on middle-class nuclear families. Frank Mulder, Director of Programme Acquisitions and Sales for the Dutch buying consortium NOS, clarifies that universal themes are "all these things that happen in your own household. Children steal from the cookie jar, or whatever. That is, all these things which [are] recognizable from your own situation" (personal communication, 16 April 1999). In its prevalent usage, "universal family themes" refer to settings, situations, and themes associated with middle-class family life in developed capitalist societies, a definition that fits the target demographics of the US networks and the large European general entertainment channels who are the main buyers of US product.

Due to domestic industry practices, few contemporary sitcoms featuring African Americans fit prevalent criteria for universal family themes. For much of the history of American television, the settings, characterizations, narratives, and themes of African American sitcoms were created by White producers and designed primarily for White, middle-class viewers. The restructuring of the television industry in the mid-eighties, including increased cable competition, the growth of the Fox Network, and ownership changes at the networks, led to renewed interest in African American viewers in the industry, and a new crop of "multicultural" programs with a broader range of character types, thematic concerns, and available viewing positions (Gray, 1995; Zook, 1999). While the emergent Warner Bros. (WB) and United Paramount (UPN) Networks have followed the Fox strategy of using African American programming to build their audience base, they have also capitalized on racial cross-over viewing among teens and young adults, airing Black and White shows that feature teenage life and problems with a liberal dose of hip-hop references (Hass, 1998; Zook, 1995). Inevitably, such series downplay family themes, and are

considered less universal. From the multiple ways that African Americans could be represented in television, then, domestic producers have chosen to focus on "coolness" marketed to teenagers and young adults, especially affluent Whites (Boyd, 1997), and family togetherness marketed to middle-class White and African American viewers.

When it comes to international markets, the distributors I interviewed distinguished between universal African American sitcoms staged from a White, middle-class family perspective, and "ethnic" shows associated with other aspects of African American life, history, and culture. In middle-class African American series like *The Cosby Show* that achieve universal status, race is seen as something transcended, rather than something the series embodies. When discussing *The Cosby Show*'s international success, distributors discounted race completely, insisting that universal family themes made the show popular in spite of the race of the characters. "*The Cosby Show* did quite well [internationally] . . . because it . . . was about family," a president of international sales at one of the majors told me. "It was about real issues between parents and children, their school, the environment and so on" (personal communication, 1999). Another veteran executive explained that, "*The Cosby Show* . . . is such a universal experience of a man trying to raise children. . . . these are like universal issues of family" (personal communication, 1999). The perception of *The Cosby Show* as universal led Viacom, its international distributor, to market the series aggressively. Between 1985 and 1986, *The Cosby Show* featured prominently in Viacom's international advertising campaign, appearing in full-page ads with the claim that "this highly-ac-

claimed series has transcended language and culture" ("Viacom advertisement," 1986).

Several scholars have noted that *The Cosby Show*, unlike many of its generic predecessors set in middle-class surroundings, gave a rare glimpse into the habitus of well-off African Americans (Boyd, 1997; Dyson, 1993; Gray, 1995). Evidence suggests that this particular combination of race and class gave the series much of its international appeal, especially outside European markets (Havens, 2000). However, many White Americans, including the executives I interviewed, read the middle-class setting as an absence of Blackness because they associate Blackness with poverty and struggle (Jhally & Lewis, 1992). Here, then, we see that White American television executives make textual interpretations quite similar to those of White viewers. Furthermore, these interpretations govern their understanding of why a series succeeds or fails internationally.

Distributors distinguished universal African American series from ethnic shows that incorporate such features as African American dialect, hip-hop culture, distinct humor, racial politics, and working-class or poor socio-economic settings. As examples, distributors mentioned *Living Single, Martin, The Wayans Brothers*, and *Jamie Foxx*, but many simply referred to "those WB shows." The primary marker of such series was the presence of distinctly African American speech. An executive at one of the majors who has distributed many ethnic African American sitcoms explained, "most African American sitcoms produced today . . . definitely have a very urban skew to them, meaning there's no Russian word for 'whassup homeboy.' There's no translation for it, and most of our sitcoms really

skew toward our urban African American viewers" (personal communication, 1999). Bob Clark, a White American and president of the commercial Russian network Story First Communications, agreed: "A lot of ethnic comedies in America don't travel particularly well to foreign audiences, because there's . . . a different language in them" (personal communication, 3 May 1999). As I demonstrate in the following section, most buyers, including Europeans, dispute this claim. Nevertheless, this opinion dominates among the American distributors I interviewed, and influences their international sales efforts.

Opinions about the limited universal appeal of African American sitcoms influence the amount of effort distributors put into selling them internationally. "I think there's a general sense that if [a show is] too tied to the Black American experience, then it won't work internationally," says a vice president of sales at one of the majors (personal communication, 1999). In practice, this means that African American sitcoms do not get promoted as heavily or included in blockbuster package deals as readily as White shows (S. Borden, President, ABV Productions [Turkey], personal communication, 14 May 1999; Anonymous vice president of international sales at a major Hollywood studio, personal communication, 1999).

Sometimes, ethnic African American sitcoms do benefit from the majors' high-pressure sales techniques. For instance, in 1999 Warner Bros. had five movies starring African American comedian Jamie Foxx slated for release. "We actually internally have a big push with *The Jamie Foxx Show*," admitted Michael Puopolo, Manager of International Research for Warner

Bros. International Television, "because we really feel that if he gets established from a movie career perspective, then the series will move" (personal communication, 11 May 1999). Even if the series does perform well, however, it is unlikely to revise attitudes toward the genre as a whole, because distributors will probably interpret the success as evidence that Foxx's international film star power overcame the limitations of the series' portrayals of Blackness.

In their talk of ethnic and universal African American series, we can see that a pervasive rhetoric of Whiteness underwrites American distributors' definitions of universality. We have seen that supposedly universal family themes refer, in fact, to middle-class themes. Distributors further associated such themes with White families and culture, as evidenced in the way they talked about *The Cosby Show*. Distributors' use of phrases like "reaches out," "transcends," "overcomes," or "has a broader sense of humanity" to describe the series mirrors White viewers' interpretations of the series' characters as "normal," because they "transcended their racial origin" (Jhally & Lewis, 1992, p. 100). Jhally & Lewis (1992) argue that, rather than identifying a category of experience that is racially neutral, these definitions of normalcy are based in the assumption "that being white Anglo-Saxon is the norm from which others deviate" (p. 100). If the term "normal" masks an underlying yardstick of Whiteness among these viewers, the term "universal" masks similar assumptions about White, middle-class family themes among White Western executives. Frequently, when distributors mention the universal family themes of *The Cosby Show*, they distinguish them from the show's

portrayals of Blackness, referring to the show instead as "not Black" or "White."

The Black sitcoms we've been involved in have been the Cosbys. And that's not a Black sitcom. (H. Lazarus, President of International, Carsey-Werner International, personal communication, 11 May 1999)

The reason [for the success of] shows like *Family Matters, Fresh Prince,* and *Cosby* . . . is the fact that a lot of them are very White. (Director of international research at a major Hollywood distributor, personal communication, 1999)

[*The Cosby Show* was about] a person who happened to be Black. . . . Black skin doesn't mean it's a Black comedy. (Veteran international executive, personal communication, 1999)

In these comments, the link between Whiteness and universal family themes is made explicit: if *The Cosby Show* tells a universal tale of family, and *The Cosby Show* is also "White," then the archetypal middle-class family these executives imagine is White.

The way in which American distributors define universal and ethnic African American sitcoms demonstrates their reliance on an underlying discourse of Whiteness. According to Fiske (1996), the articulation of Whiteness and White culture as universal depends on the simultaneous exnomination of Whiteness and particularization of nonWhite culture. Among the American executives I interviewed, the definition of universality proceeded primarily by defining what it is not. Hence, about the only affirmative definition of universality I encountered was "strong family themes," while the definition of ethnic African American programming included speech patterns, popular cultural references, humor and family structures, and several thematic situations. Such negative definitions of

what is not universal gives credence to the claim that White American shows lacking those elements must be universal. This discourse of Whiteness facilitates exports to distributors' most important European markets.

The interviews I conducted demonstrate how industry imperatives and cultural considerations go hand-in-hand when American distributors market African American sitcoms overseas. Each of these forces works to limit the kinds of African American programming that are available internationally and the likelihood that buyers will purchase them. The distinction between universal and ethnic African American sitcoms not only restricts the kinds of shows that are aggressively marketed, but reduces the potentially endless variety of explanations for a show's differential performance in television cultures around the world.

A pervasive rhetoric of Whiteness naturalizes the idea that African American culture is insular, simultaneously valorizing the impression that White American culture is universal, while absolving industry practices and executives of any responsibility for the sad state of international trade in African American programming. In spite of protests such as "I'm not a sociologist," American distributors constantly make judgments about a series' international marketability based upon often unexamined beliefs about why people watch television, what viewers want to see, and how cultural resonance in imported television programming operates. In the case of African American sitcoms, distributors' opinions become self-fulfilling prophecy: because they are perceived as incapable of international appeal, they receive little promotion, and therefore do not sell well.

Buying Blackness: Acquisition and Scheduling Practices around the World

In many ways, attitudes toward African American sitcoms among buyers mirror the bias toward middle-class, domestic comedies that we encountered among distributors, especially in European markets. However, even among such buyers, differences in channel type and target audience lead to different preferences in buying and scheduling African American sitcoms. When we turn our attention away from Europe, we find an even greater diversity of uses for African American programming that derive profit from decidedly multicultural markers of Blackness.

Several European executives voiced a preference for universally appealing domestic sitcoms, and, like their American counterparts, referred to these shows as "White." Mulder, representing the Dutch buying group NOS, for instance stated that, "It happened to be that all the actors in [*The*] *Cosby* [*Show*] were Black, because it could have been a White comedy" (personal communication, 16 April 1999). Dewi from the German channel Prosieben made a similar observation: "We don't have an audience for [African American shows], so we have to build a strictly White audience for that. So the Black sitcom works best if it's as, let's say, White as possible, which surely is the case with [*The Cosby Show*]" (personal communication, 11 May 1999). Here, we again see the conflation of universality with "middle-class family themes" and Whiteness. In addition, we can note the assumption that White viewers naturally prefer White programming. Several buyers explained that all viewers "naturally" prefer same-race series, because television is a familiar, domestic medium where viewers want to encounter images of similarity, not difference.

The idea that viewers naturally gravitate toward representations that match their own racial identities reflects entrenched racial ideologies. Yet, the racial identity that White Americans and White Europeans share is a product of historical and cultural forces, not biological ones (Goldberg, 1993). For example, the preferences of some Asian buyers for White programming over Black programming demonstrate that racial preferences in international television distribution are constructed, not natural. The director of acquisitions and programming at a large, general entertainment Taiwanese cable channel explained candidly, "I do think the race is a factor to influence our decision making. The audience of Taiwan will feel distant and alienation from Black. . . . Especially for the series and the sitcoms, the audience more easily accept the White people than the Black ones" (personal communication, 1999). Buyers and distributors working in Indonesia and Singapore noted similar racial preferences among viewers (former CEO for a commercial Indonesian channel, personal communication, 1999; "Singapore's majority," 1992; Vice president of international sales to Asia for a medium-size American distributor, personal communication, 1999). Whiteness, then, achieves the status of a default racial category among Asian buyers, bolstering the industry-wide impression that African American programs are ill-equipped for international sales. In addition, a staunch anti-Black bias exists among acquisition executives in several Eastern European markets and Turkey (S. Borden, President, ABV Productions [Turkey], personal communication, 14

May 1999; Vice president of international sales for a major Hollywood distributor, personal communication, 1999).

European satellite and cable channels that target youth audiences, as well as general entertainment channels that program youth dayparts, form a market for distributors' teen-oriented African American sitcoms, which often incorporate a degree of multiculturalism. However, none of the European buyers I interviewed believed that multicultural themes could appeal to viewers outside the children and youth demographics. Taking advantage of increased channel competition and audience segmentation in the mid-nineties, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* became the first youth-oriented African American sitcom to gain popularity in Europe. When the series was first sold internationally in 1990, it suffered from the impression that it was "idiosyncratically American." European buyers wondered, "How are we ever going to subtitle rap?" (Schapiro, 1990, p. 29). However, the series subsequently became one of the most popular US sitcoms in recent history, aired in at least as many territories as *The Cosby Show* in an era of greater international competition (Curtis, 1997).

The European buyers I interviewed believe that the global appeal of African American youth culture paved the way for the popularity of *Fresh Prince* and similar shows among youth viewers in their markets. "Apparently, there was no relation between those characters and Spanish people," says Paloma Garcia Cuesta, International Executive for Research and Development at Spanish broadcaster Antena 3, who programmed the series during the 2–3 p.m. teen slot. "Teenager slot of programming . . . make the difference," she explained. "The

Black people is related to the teenage and American culture that they know through the cinema, music, etc." (personal communication, 14 June 1999). Jeff Ford, Controller of Acquisitions at British Channel Five, suggested that African American sitcoms may perform better than White American sitcoms among teen viewers: "I think because they're a little more hip and the culture of music is obviously a very important part of those comedies, and therefore it does touch with youth far more than possibly White sitcoms" (personal communication, 7 July 1999).

The unexpected popularity of *Fresh Prince* led to a surge of interest in teenage African American sitcoms in Europe in the late nineties. Lisa Gregorian, currently Executive Vice President of International Research and Marketing for Warner Bros., believes that, "*Fresh Prince of Bel Air* broke the barriers of many territories that previously wouldn't have touched comedy like this" (Curtis, 1997, p. 36). Eric Schnedecker, Program Director for the Universal Studios Network in Italy, comments:

I was working at Disney Channel in Spain. And, in Spain, the [*Fresh*] *Prince of Bel Air* was working like crazy. That's why at Disney Channel we bought *Moesha*. We bought *Moesha* because we knew that Black comedies are [a] great success and so we thought the *Moesha* . . . would work also very well. (personal communication, 3 May 1999)

The popularity of such series has opened European buyers' eyes to the fact that some distinctive forms of African American television culture can find resonance in their markets. Still, their perceptions about the kinds of portrayals that can travel overseas are limited to shows with the same characterizations, settings, narratives, and themes of White American sitcoms or

those that target teenage viewers with African American pop stars and hip-hop culture.

The negative evaluation of African American sitcoms among many buyers leads to acquisition and scheduling practices that further restrict their popularity and the range of meanings viewers are likely to come away with. We saw above that American distributors sometimes promote African American sitcoms heavily by including them in package deals. Some buyers resist these strategies when African American programming is involved. Scott Borden, a program broker for several American distributors in Turkey and President of ABV Productions, says, "if you're going to buy a Warner Bros. film package, and they require you to take a comedy, you're going to insist on *Friends* and you're going to refuse no matter what to take *Moesha*" (personal communication, 14 May 1999).[2] If buyers cannot avoid acquiring unwanted series, they may simply not air them. "*In the House,* for example, was never aired in Germany," according to Dewi. "And I'm sure somebody has [the rights to] it" (personal communication, 11 May 1999).

We have seen how target demographics, industry structures, and attitudes toward White and nonWhite cultural values among European and Asian buyers combine with the business priorities and cultural assumptions of American distributors to severely restrict the diversity and flow of African American television culture worldwide. However, some non-European buyers I interviewed located cultural resonance and economic value in African American sitcoms that differed markedly from the understandings of race and television viewership among American and European executives.

Buyers in Mexico and the Middle East who target family audiences that are less affluent than Europeans identified a connection between Blackness and economic struggle that their audiences prefer. Ignacio Duran, Vice President of International Affairs at Mexican broadcasters TV Azteca claimed that, "Black comedies will do better in Mexico or in Latin America because the element of the underdog is there ... and this will probably cause an identification with the audience" (personal communication, 15 April 1999). In a similar vein, Bassam Hajjawi, President and CEO of International Distribution Agency, which brokers programming for US distributors to channels throughout the Middle East, explained:

Most of the Black situation comedies are about middle class or lower middle class people. For many people in the Middle East, they associate and sympathize with that kind of life ... and if they see these [White] situation comedies always with the high-brow politicians or the millionaires, they don't sympathize as much. (personal communication, 28 June 1999)

For Khalid Abdilaziz Al-Mugaiseeb, CEO of Kuwait Television Channel 2, African American sitcoms target family audiences much better than White sitcoms. "In White comedy," he says, "it's like the aliens talking from another planet. They're talking about rednecks and hotdogs. Black people, they talk about things in the house" (personal communication, 13 October 1999). In fact, Al-Mugaiseeb notes a good deal of cultural resonance between African American and Kuwaiti communication styles and comedy. "Most of what we accept from all the comedy is Black," he explains. "Culturally, it's more similar. . . . Black comedy, especially the women, the way

they act it's like Arabic women–the shaking of heads and such, some of it's Arab. . . . And the way [men] hit [on women] is like Arabs."

Cawe Mahlati, CEO of Black South African channel Bophuthatswana Television (Bop-TV) notes that African American youth culture and the history of African American political struggle are some of the main values she seeks when acquiring American programming.

African Americans have got a very, very great influence in South African Black urban culture, if you look at the music form . . . and the whole dressing style, the whole neighborhood thing. . . . Bop Television has [also] shown most of the movies that depict the African American experience in the US. There's a lot of resonance in South Africa for that kind of programming. (personal communication, 3 May 1999)

Among American distributors, the economic realities of international television syndication blunt the importance of Latin American, Middle Eastern, and African buying preferences. Although international sales revenues in general have become vital to domestic production funding in the US, European channels and their buying preferences are far more valuable. Several of the American distributors I interviewed simply assumed I was interested in European markets when I asked about international distribution. In 1997, high-end estimates for the price of one-hour of American programming were $24,319 in Western European markets. Latin American markets paid on average $3,301 for the same programming, while Middle Eastern and African buyers paid about $1,500 (Television Business International, 1997). In addition, due to heavy local production in some Latin American markets,

US distributors face stiff competition. The Middle East, meanwhile, is regarded as "small potatoes" for American distributors, in spite of the extreme wealth of some nations there (Veteran international television executive, personal communication, March 1999).

Conclusion

Distribution, as we have seen, refers in fact to several distinct business practices that restrict, frame, and reify particular production practices and viewing pleasures over others. On the international market, distributors differentially promote their series–and certain aspects of those series–through packaging and marketing. Buyers, selecting from an already-limited array of meanings and programming, further constrain them through their scheduling practices, which include not airing or "burning" unwanted series and placing them in particular lineups and dayparts. Because buyers' choices provide additional distribution windows and production funding for internationally successful series, their preferences also feed back into the production process. Just as Hall's (1980/1993) argument about encoding and decoding claims that "encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decoding will take place" (p. 100), so distribution practices delimit acquisition practices, and these two processes together influence production and reception.

In the case of African American situation comedies, discourses of race, class, and age intersect with the economic imperatives of buyers and sellers and the structure of domestic and international television industries to create a climate in which African American series do not sell well. Due

to niche marketing strategies and per-
ceptions of domestic audience prefer-
ences, African American sitcoms to-
day tend to be designed for middle-
class families or teenagers and young
adults. In ways quite similar to White
American viewers, distribution execu-
tives interpret the presence of middle-
class settings in these shows as an ab-
sence of distinctly Black cultural
markers, and accordingly refer to such
shows as "White," as opposed to "eth-
nic" situation comedies that target
younger audiences. Authorized by a
long-standing rhetoric of Whiteness,
the interpretation that these more
"White" middle-class sitcoms are more
universal leads distributors to expect
better international sales from them, to
promote them more aggressively at
market and through package deals, and
to give them larger production bud-
gets.

Trade journal articles, promotional
fliers, and formal and informal discus-
sions with fellow television profession-
als provide layers of encrusted mean-
ing that shape buyers' impressions of
which series will work with their audi-
ences, and why. Based on these impres-
sions, European buyers from channels
that target White, middle-class family
audiences generally mirror distribu-
tors' interpretations of universality and
the limited appeal of African Ameri-
can sitcoms, as do many East Asian
buyers. When such buyers acquire Af-
rican American sitcoms that deviate
from these specifications in package
deals, they schedule them in ways that
guarantee failure. Buyers who target
teenage and young adult viewers some-
times seek out ethnic programming that
features African American youth styles
and schedule them in ways that high-
light teenage themes and limit the types
of audiences that will tune in, thus

shaping the meanings and pleasures
available.

Some non-European buyers, select-
ing from the same program offerings,
locate different textual features that
they believe resonate with their target
audiences' unique preferences. Latin
American and Middle Eastern buyers
from general entertainment channels
identify the working-class settings, hu-
mor, and communication styles in Afri-
can American sitcoms as valuable. A
South African buyer claims that all of
these textual features, as well as the
history of African American political
struggle, help her connect with her
target audience. Each of these instances
shows buyers activating textual mark-
ers of Blackness that differ from those
intended by American distributors.

Non-European buyers must resist
prevalent industry assumptions about
the kinds of programming that appeal
to international audiences to find cul-
tural resonance and economic value in
American series, because the program-
ming, the promotional materials, and
the deals are not primarily designed
for them, but for general entertain-
ment, European channels. Whether this
trend will continue in the future de-
pends upon how important non-Euro-
pean markets become for American
distributors. Currently, it seems that
the ties between American and Euro-
pean conglomerates are only strength-
ening. New digital satellite platforms
in Europe offer countless new chan-
nels for premium American product.
American and European conglomer-
ates are acquiring one another. And
several American distributors have co-
production deals with European part-
ners.

Critical methods drawn from recep-
tion analysis, textual analysis, and po-
litical-economy are necessary to paint

a full portrait of the international television business and the cultural politics associated with it. If we hope to better understand the complex and evolving relationship between global capitalism and television in our world today, we need more grounded explorations of the various levels of factors that play out in international trade, and how they interact with one another. We need a clearer conception of distribution/acquisition as a vital node in the circulation of global television culture.

Notes

[1] All of the interviews were conducted in English, with which executives had varying degrees of proficiency. In the interests of accuracy, I have tried to reproduce the comments of all executives as precisely as possible in the body of the article.

[2] The example here is meant only to be illustrative of Turkish buyers' general attitudes toward African American sitcoms. In fact, *Moesha* was distributed by Worldvision at the time, not Warner Bros.

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