Conclusion

Transnational Televisual Aesthetics and Global Discourses of Race

The circulation of culture predates the formation of nations, and probably only a small fragment of the world's cultural exchanges ever travels through the formal circuits of commercial media institutions. The other, unsanctioned, spontaneous exchanges originate in highly localized and communitarian impressions of cultural similarity and difference, allure and repulsion. Though undoubtedly shaped by the forces of history, xenophobia, and the bloody rivalries between nations, the exchanges initiated outside the formal logics of modern institutions tend to be more idiosyncratic, more impressionistic, and less consciously theorized than the kinds of exchanges that emanate from commercial institutions.

The exchanges in black and African American television we have considered here constitute highly institutionalized exchanges. The argument of this volume is not that these are the most interesting or even, politically, the most important exchanges. They are, however, distinct from the more idiosyncratic kinds of exchanges that less organized and less formalized exchanges give rise to. They are also dominant practices: much as the circulation of white European culture and Christendom during the eighteenth century did not *determine* non-European identities, perceptions, and cultures, but did nevertheless *confront* those people and cultures, so the commercial media exchanges of today produce representations of distant and nearby cultures that confront viewers everywhere, participating in shaping worldwide perceptions of self, other, and the planet we inhabit.

Industry Lore and/as Racial Discourse

The argument that has underwritten all of the chapters of this book is the belief that television trade includes more than the circulation of programs, genres, and formats: it also entails the sharing of ideas, strategies, textual readings, perceptions of viewers, and perspectives on the medium, the world, and humanity at large that together form what we might call institutionalized discourse—or institutionalized *discourses*—of race in the contemporary world. These discourses emanate from the institutional labors that programming accomplishes for broadcasters around the world, and proliferate at the

three moments of interface that we have examined here: between producers and executives, between international buyers and sellers, and between broadcasters and viewers.

We have referred throughout this volume to the discourses that circulate among industry insiders as industry lore, a term that means to call attention to the status of these discourses as knowledge that produces real material effects in the industry, even as it is primarily a product of the collective imaginations of television executives, which are nevertheless shaped by the material conditions within which they work and the historical processes that influence their perspectives. Industry lore does not form in a vacuum, nor is it independent of the material processes of the industry; instead, it is part and parcel of those processes, as much a material force as patterns of transnational channel ownership or international intellectual property regimes. It is at the intersection of regulatory, macroeconomic, microeconomic, and cultural forces that industry lore forms and gathers its authority to shape television's worldwide circulation patterns and representational politics.

Industry lore works as an interpretive frame that makes the chaos of global cultural interactions appear manageable and predictable, identifying which genres, programs, actors, ideologies, and aesthetics have the capacity to overcome differences of nation and language and appeal to foreign viewers. Consequently, industry lore is a carrier of other discourses that are embedded within the representational regimes of specific television shows. While only theoretically distinguishable from the popular discourses that also drive the global circulation, meaning, and uptake of televisual representations of blackness, industry lore selects from and processes popular phenomena in ways that are institutionally useful. Thus, a study such as this, which centers on the development, circulation, and consequences of industry lore, cannot hope to account for the complex and diverse impact of globally traded black television. Instead, what I have intended to do in this volume is to sketch out some of the dominant ways the industry lore arising from popular practices shapes the flows, uses, representations, and markets for contemporary black and African American television.

Industry lore is, as we have seen, a consequence of a very particular form of textual exegesis, one designed to minimize risks and increase profits. Brokers, buyers, and programmers around the world engage in such exegeses as they try to leverage foreign cultural expressions into local cultural contexts in ways that not only make sense, but will also prove compelling enough to draw and hold viewers' interests. We have referred to the ways foreign buyers bend imported television to their own needs as the institutional labors of those programs. In the 1970s and 1980s, these labors had at least as much to

do with the immediate local political and cultural landscape as they did with the properties of the texts themselves or aims of distributors. Thus, the Hungarian public broadcaster could use the imported television miniseries *Roots* to navigate its conflicting status as a public service broadcaster and a party mouthpiece, while the antigovernment Bop-TV in South Africa could use integrated American situation comedies to cobble together segments of the viewing public in ways that challenged conventional apartheid-era divisions.

As the transnationalization of television program markets, channels, and organizational configurations began to grow in the late 1980s, so did the business culture of global television, through shared industry gatherings, trade journals, training courses, and the like. The result of this continuing globalization has been the production of a transnational interpretive community of industry insiders who now look to one another to produce industry lore about what audiences find appealing in television and why. This does not mean that transnational industry lore is monolithic; rather, it means that broadcasters and producers of all kinds today look beyond national boundaries for their understandings of television trends, audiences, and pleasures.

The institutional labors of imported television programs emphasize particular textual potentialities over others. While those labors cannot limit the variety of ways local viewers read and get pleasure from imported programs, they do encourage certain kinds of meanings and pleasures and discourage others. Scheduling and promoting *The Cosby Show* as a children's program in the United Kingdom, for instance, worked to de-emphasize the romance between Cliff and Clair Huxtable, which remains a rare and prominent example of a dignified romantic relationship between a black man and a black woman on television. Similarly, airing *bro'Town* in Canada on the Aboriginal People's Television Network, surrounded by animation from indigenous minorities from around the world, encourages viewers to read the program as an expression of a similarly situated ethnic minority, rather than just another iteration of the global adult animation genre.

The model that these pages have uncovered about how media globalization influences televisual representations of blackness can be summarized as follows: importers identify and exploit particular elements of imported programming, based upon their perceptions of audience tastes and which programs meet those tastes in which ways; some of these practices find their way back to exporters, depending upon the degree of globalization of the exporters' business models, their integration into larger transnational corporate structures, and how important specific markets are for the exporter's bottom line; those institutional labors that do find their way back to exporters have the ability to influence the exporters' future catalogs, promotional and

pricing practices, and, ultimately, the representational strategies of producers, depending upon the relationship between the exporter and the producer.

In practice, of course, none of the three interface sites is solely responsible for initiating industry lore; instead, the lore circulates among the sites. Exporters, for instance, work hard to convince buyers to use their programs in particular ways, and importers derive a substantial portion of their textual exegeses and institutional labor plans from ideas that originate with distributors, as well as programmers in other territories and executives elsewhere in the organization. Furthermore, industry lore does not develop independently of the kinds of historical discourses that structure reception. Rather, industry lore, much like reception, is the result of historical discourses filtering through particular fields of human knowledge and activity.

If we view it in this manner, we can begin to see that globalization does not homogenize television content or block diverse portrayals of blacks and African Americans. Rather, the institutional structures of television produce conditions where certain kinds of representations are more likely than others. In today's world, those institutional structures almost always include foreign markets. The commercial nature of global television exchanges, the multiplication of channels and fragmentation of audiences due to cable and digitization, and worldwide disparities in per-capita GDPs among nations have led to dominant representational practices in the United States that favor integrationist portraits of African American men and women at work, multicultural portraits centered around young African American male experiences in the home, hyperrealist "quality" programs that center around black criminality and drug use, and satirical portraits that travesty both minority and majority cultures at the same time that they tend toward juvenile humor. While the institutional structures in different nations, such as those attending Nollywood videofilms, do permit different kinds of representational practices, the *transnational* institutional structures that would permit these practices to become widespread and a concomitant industry lore to develop that consciously works to define cross-cultural black linkages do not yet exist. Hence, something like the Belizean serial drama *Noh Matta Wat* can find audiences in many countries, but cannot sustain itself financially because it lacks transnational institutional status and backing.

Industry lore, then, arises from a combination of sociohistorical and institutional forces, and derives its power from its status as an institutional discourse. These institutionalized discourses are a prominent feature of modernity, and are what distinguish institutionalized cultural flows from noninstitutionalized ones, particularly the ways they provide the intellectual scaffolding upon which choices about the production and distribution of culture

get made. Perhaps most prominently for my concerns, the institutionalized discourses about race that circulate within the global television industries are conscious efforts to articulate understandings of race to the needs and priorities of these powerful institutions, much as powerful economic interests, governments, and churches articulated race to their own institutional needs in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The articulation of race to the institutional needs of transnational capitalist media can, ironically, produce progressive portrayals of blackness. For example, the need to find cheap imported programming for its Cartoon Network Latin America lineup that would speak to the perceived interests of young, middle-class viewers led Time Warner executives to endorse the metaphor of watching *bro'Town* as a "cultural journey" in order to embed edgy programming designed for an audience segment in one culture into the lineup of a niche channel in a very different culture. Meanwhile, industry lore about "quality" programming facilitated the worldwide circulation of *The Wire*, which exhibits a wider range of African American character types and cultural allusions than any series in recent history. In this instance, black masculinity becomes articulated to an aesthetic of gritty realism, the crime drama genre, and the needs of subscription-based cable channels in the United States and Europe, specifically through the trope of inner-city drug culture. Industry lore about quality television, then, operates as both a limiter, in that the portrayal of black men as street criminals is quite conventional, and an expander, in that it permits the very different generic, aesthetic, narrative, and ideological features of *The Wire*.

Blackness and Transnational Televisual Aesthetics

In concluding, I want to focus on the aesthetic dimensions of African American television and how different kinds of institutional practices encourage different kinds of aesthetics. In particular, I want to advance an aesthetic argument that, since television's inception, its institutional formations in most locales encouraged the use of realist aesthetics. Ironically, today's global, digital, post-network era supports highly *localized* aesthetics of hyperrealism and travesty, though the institutional forms and aesthetics of the prior era are still with us. Thus, the institutional labors of narrowcasters targeting transnational or subnational audience segments give rise to industry lore about viewers embarking on cultural journeys, viewers who are comfortable with—and even seek out—cultural difference and ambiguity.

For the moment, I want to largely bracket questions of ideology in addressing aesthetics, though of course both of these textual features are

interwoven and only theoretically separable. In concluding, I will bring back in questions of ideology in order to argue that what is distinct about contemporary commercial flows of black culture is precisely their adherence to aesthetic consistency over ideological consistency, even as their aesthetic practices encourage certain ideological orientations.

Before moving on, let me reiterate my argument in general: since its earliest days, the institutional labors of television programs in most nations—and the labors of imported programs in particular—gave rise to industry lore about audience tastes that encouraged realist aesthetics. These labors were anchored by the institutional forms of television, which generally operated as nationwide broadcasters, as well as the technology of broadcasting, which could be made to conform more or less to national boundaries.

Increasingly, current television channels aim to reach ever-shrinking audience niches and sub-niches, either across or within nations, and require consistent interaction with the circuits of global television in order to operate. This set of conditions gives rise to institutional labors and industry lore that transcend national boundaries and privilege aesthetics of hyperrealism and travesty that give programming and programmers the "edge" they need to reach their viewers. This is particularly true of Internet-delivered television, where distribution is inherently transnational and viewer attention is highly furtive and fragmented. At the same time, these aesthetic practices also connect with the histories and institutional needs of minority broadcasters around the world seeking relevant entertainment at affordable prices.

Broadcast Realism, 1950–1990s

In the early decades of television, when terrestrial broadcasting was the main delivery technology and most commercial and public service broadcasting institutions centered on homogeneous national audiences, the global circulation of television culture was sporadic and disorganized. Certainly broadcasters in the United States and beyond made substantial use of internationally traded programs, but most imports tended to be used as filler and most foreign syndication revenues were merely icing on the cake. However, as was the case with the miniseries genre, when opportunities for foreign syndication did appear, they quickly became central to producers' and distributors' business models. In such a climate, portrayals of African American suffering and nobility could serve a range of institutional labors, particularly when they were contained within a twelve-hour format such as *Roots* that fit the scheduling practices of European public service broadcasters. As perhaps the most egregious example of the exploitation of nonwhite people during

colonialism, slavery, as portrayed in *Roots*, provided an effective way of thinking through issues of white guilt, minority exploitation, the difference between commercial and public service broadcasting models, and the history of Western capitalism. While black history and contemporary struggles were central to the institutional labors that *Roots* performed abroad, it was easy for both exporters and importers of the miniseries to ignore or overlook those labors and focus instead on the supposed universal themes of family struggle and European history. In other words, given the institutional arrangements and the technology of broadcasting at the time, which could be made more or less to respect national borders and favored a small number of channels, it was easy for television executives to hold universalizing perspectives on global cultural flows: little economic or institutional incentive existed at the time to try to think through the complexities of transnational cultural appeal.

The institutional and technological arrangements of broadcasting made realism the primary televisual aesthetic of the network era, at least among most Western national broadcasters, who were the main producers and suppliers of the world's television fiction at the time. Realism helped both public service and commercial broadcasters smooth over subnational differences among viewers by focusing on settings, locations, and ideologies familiar to their primary audiences. While in public service nations, such as the United Kingdom, broadcasters' prime audiences may have sometimes been working-class families, rather than the middle-class families that commercial U.S. broadcasters targeted, both emphasized domestic settings, ordinary characters, and a hierarchy of ideological perspectives, where the dominant ideology was represented as the norm (Fiske, 1987; Jordan, 1981). These practices of broadcast realism served both institutional needs—privileging dominant ideological perspectives helped guarantee that most viewers would accept the program's perspective as natural—and technological ones—locating series in domestic settings made production easier and less expensive, and fit the small screen size and poor image quality of broadcast television. Thus, the U.K. working-class serial *Coronation Street* privileged moral perspectives familiar to the working class, while *The Cosby Show* privileged perspectives much closer to the middle class, but both relied on realist aesthetics to create their worldviews.

In the seventies and eighties, television series featuring African Americans that aired in the United States and abroad utilized realist aesthetics almost exclusively, a practice that permitted those series to speak to the realities of nonblacks within and beyond the nation in a universal—or at least, Western—language. At the same time, while African American series, especially,

integrated other aesthetic traditions, such as vaudeville-inspired camp, satire, and popular music, the variety of subgenres of realism they incorporated was significantly smaller than white series. Not only were African American portrayals limited primarily to the situation comedy, but also to the subgenres of social realism (*Good Times*, *Sanford and Son*) and bourgeois realism (*Benson*, *The Jeffersons*, *The Cosby Show*). Meanwhile, white series encompassed these subgenres as well as magical realism (*I Dream of Jeanie, Wonder Woman*), documentary realism (*American Family, Candid Camera*), historical realism (westerns, historical miniseries), soap-opera realism (Jordan, 1981), and more. While *Roots* added diversity to the repertoire of African American television stories in terms of both programming genre and subgenres of realist aesthetics, the majority of African American portrayals in historical realist settings remained marginal to the story, designed mainly as backdrops that lent visual accuracy to scenes.

As this litany of the various subgenres of broadcast realism suggests, the specific aesthetics of realism differ among programming genres. Similarly, because cultures, genres, histories, and target audiences differed among broadcasters in different nations, the aesthetic practices of one national system did not necessarily fit comfortably with those of another system. Nevertheless, shared investments in realism as an aesthetic capable of smoothing over internal national differences did permit broadcasters in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere to exchange programming with comparatively minor aesthetic dissonance. Thus, while *Roots* incorporated elements of historical and social realism that sat uncomfortably alongside the series' melodramatic programming genre for European broadcasters, the practice of programming panel discussions on historical and contemporary realities effectively dampened that dissonance, at least to broadcasters' satisfactions.

If broadcast realism requires fidelity to both the everyday surroundings *and* the dominant ideological perspectives of a majority of audience members (Fiske, 1987; Jordan, 1981), we can understand how industry lore during the network era had difficulty recognizing and admitting the possible appeal of African American television abroad, given that both the lived experiences and the ideological orientations of African Americans were assumed to be radically different from those of their fellow countrypersons, much less viewers abroad. As one major Hollywood executive put it, "Typically, a black American experience is dissimilar to a black experience anywhere else in the world. Certainly, a great many other countries in the world *have* a black population, but they don't have the same experience as black Americans. They don't have the same history" (interview with the author, 1999). Here we can see how the assumption that viewers need to identify with characters and

situations in order to get pleasure from television is rooted in the belief that the medium is inherently realist, presenting "experiences" that either enable or block identification.

Again, a confluence of institutional arrangements, technological properties, historical and cultural forces, microeconomic practices, and macroeconomic structures worked together to articulate television as a realist medium and to restrict the diversity of realist subgenres within which African American characters and themes were likely to appear. And, though realism was far from the only aesthetic option on television, especially among experimental public broadcasters such as "second" channels throughout Europe, it thoroughly dominated commercial television trade during the network era due to the institutional labors that imports were called upon to perform, namely, appealing to an undifferentiated national audience. It is not surprising, in such an environment, that the most popular African American export of the network era was *The Cosby Show*, which presented both surroundings and ideological perspectives that were aggressively middle- to upper-middle-class. After all, these were the worlds and the worldviews that viewers around much of the world were thought to share.

Of course the broadcast aesthetics of African American television did not determine their potential ideological functions abroad. Bophuthatswana Television in South Africa, for instance, programmed integrated African American imports in a way that essentially collapsed their "simulacral" and "mimetic" realist elements (Harper, 1998). In other words, while these series portrayed a version of reality *as it ideally should be*, rather than a version that mimicked the realities of African American life, Bop-TV's consistent, back-to-back scheduling of integrated imports reinforced the impression that the ideal *was* the reality in the United States.

The aesthetics of broadcast realism worked hand-in-glove with the universalizing tendencies of industry lore and the institutional priorities of nationwide broadcasters seeking to reach undifferentiated audiences. It is not that other forms of television were incapable of international appeal at the time, but rather that the institutional, technological, and cultural forces that worked to propel television across national borders could accommodate only realist aesthetic practices.

Things began to change with the introduction of cable and satellite broadcasting to more and more areas of the world in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As terrestrial broadcasters and cable operators began to program more time for youth audiences, especially in Europe, they were confronted with the question of what those viewers would watch and how to provide them relevant programming in the cheapest possible manner. They began to realize

that realism was not the only, or even the best, vehicle for reaching those viewers. Instead, program brokers involved with niche channels began to talk about street slang, irreverent humor, and satirical references to popular culture as textual features that could draw, rather than alienate, viewers. This set of conditions led to forms of industry lore that extolled the virtues of African American exceptionalism, particularly male exceptionalism, in reaching fickle viewers worldwide.

The dominance of broadcasting and network models of television has continued to erode in the twenty-first century, as have the easy assumptions among industry insiders about the universal character of globally popular television programs. As cable and satellite channels have carved up the viewing public into smaller and smaller niches, production houses have followed suit, splintering into boutique operations that specialize in particular genres and audiences. Institutionally, transnationalization has taken on three major forms: transnational ownership and investment practices, a heavy reliance on international syndication revenues, and the construction of similar or identical channel brands targeting the same demographics in almost every competitive television market. All of these developments have forced television producers, syndicators, and programmers around the world to think more consciously about, and work more actively on, articulating what cultural similarities might exist among audience niches in different parts of the world who, though they may be demographically identical, are nevertheless historically, culturally, and linguistically distinct.

The need for far more nuanced understandings—one might say, theories—of race, ethnicity, and other forms of difference among industry insiders has been exacerbated by ongoing technological changes. As broadband Internet access expands and digital video coder-decoder (codec) software becomes more sophisticated and interoperable, the Internet has increasingly become an important new video delivery technology. Much of the video material on the Internet is directly accessed by users, perhaps most famously the website YouTube, which permits users to upload, view, and share amateur video and short professional clips. Many of these sites are free, including those that feature "catch-up" episodes that allow fans to watch recently aired episodes they may have missed. However, as commercial media organizations become more and more involved in Internet television, they are looking to develop a variety of business models, including pay-per-view and subscription options, as well as a variety of "channels" to help users navigate the potentially vast number of choices online. We see the beginnings of this emerging model in content aggregation services such as Netflix and Hulu that stream content over the Internet directly to home and mobile screens.

Michael Curtin and Jane Shattuc (2009) have referred to this evolving world of digital television as the "matrix" era, in an effort to distinguish the contemporary media environment from both the network and post-network eras. The changes associated with the matrix era of television have led to programming practices that favor the immediate cultural sensibilities of viewers, practices that "seek less to homogenize popular culture than to organize and exploit diverse forms of creativity" (Curtin, 1996, 197). Often these more relevant, edgy programs integrate aesthetic forms other than conventional broadcast realism, in particular the aesthetics of hyperrealism and travesty.

Hyperrealist and Travestied Aesthetics, 2000–Present

If different kinds of aesthetic practices are to become popular in a global matrix era of television, different forms of industry lore need to evolve that imagine audience pleasure and identity differently than the lore of "universal themes" that dominated Western television in the era of national broadcast realism. We see the beginnings of this sensibility in the industry lore of cultural journeys, which we discussed in chapter 6, and which permits thinking about the irreverent, nonrealist aesthetics of global animation as transnationally appealing. I would argue that industry lore within the television industry will need to continue to evolve more and more models of transnational cultural alliance and interaction in the years to come, as white media consumers become more and more of a minority both at home and globally. Much like many other industries that have long taken minority consumers for granted, Western television industries will need to change decades of conventional practice and thinking in order to compete in an increasingly global capitalist world.

Hyperrealist aesthetics are articulated with industry lore about quality television, and are not limited to televisual portrayals of blackness, but can be found in popular film, music, and literature as well. It is perhaps not surprising to find such practices dominating portrayals of African Americans today, as the variety of claims on blackness in general, and black masculinity in particular, have multiplied in recent decades as various political factions concerned with black masculinity have flourished along with new channels of communication. Under such conditions, where reality becomes a political football, concerns about identifying, representing, and recognizing reality become all the more urgent.

I want to distinguish my fairly narrow use of the term "hyperrealist" from more general theories of hyperrealism associated with postmodern theory: I mean to refer *not* to the processes whereby representation comes

to dominate and ultimately subsume lived reality, but rather the aesthetic practices of extreme detail in reproducing the look, feel, and atmosphere of specific locales, events, and people. When it comes to televisual portrayals of African Americans, hyperrealist aesthetics are primarily deployed in revealing the lives and experiences of the urban poor, specifically through imagery of blighted cityscapes, drug use, violent crime, and the sex industries. I affix the prefix "hyper" to these aesthetic practices to signal how these cultural forms move beyond fidelity to realism to a fixation on, and even a fetishization of, the real. Put another way, while earlier televisual forms required *ideological* realism in order to orient the viewer to the world of the text, hyperrealism invests considerable effort and expense in creating the *look* of reality. Importantly, while broadcast realism favored familiar settings and stories, hyperrealism tends to concentrate on the lives and milieus of characters who are quite distant from the target viewers.

Beyond the social roots of this turn toward hyperrealist aesthetics in African American television portrayals, technological and industrial developments are also responsible. The shift toward hyperrealist aesthetics is part of a broader aesthetic development in television dating back to the introduction of digital editing techniques and cable competition. In particular, as competition between traditional networks and cable outlets intensified in the 1990s, the networks have increasingly turned to expensive, filmic aesthetics to try to distinguish themselves from cable (Caldwell, 1995). Some of these filmic elements include location shooting and the kinds of hyperrealist aesthetics that television had tended to shun because of its traditionally poor image quality. In the past few years, as HDTVs and high-definition delivery technologies (BluRay DVD, HD Internet videos) have become more and more common, televisual image quality has begun to rival the image quality of film screens, making hyperrealist imagery more prevalent on television. Of course today it is not the traditional networks but the premium channels that take the lead in these kinds of aesthetic developments due to their ability to spend heavily on programming and their need to distinguish themselves from competitors in order to retain subscribers. In addition, due to legal regulations on broadcasters and industry restrictions on basic cable channels, premium channels try to distinguish themselves through graphic depictions of sex and violence, which shape the kinds of realities that contemporary quality television tends to depict.

Regardless of the broader social and technological developments that have aided the spread of hyperrealist treatments of African American life, in all forms of popular culture, they tend to incorporate themes of sexism, heterosexism, criminality, and deviant sexuality. Film and music lead the global

circulation of hyperrealist black aesthetics, but the specific articulation of these aesthetics to broader social and political themes differs depending on the medium. With regard to episodic television, the aesthetics of hyperrealism as they relate to African Americans guarantee that the police genre is the dominant representational form, due to the genre's conventional interest in criminality, realistic settings, and adult storylines and imagery. Episodic television tends to highlight character development over narrative development, facilitating complex portraits of criminals as well as the police officers and other institutional actors who pursue them (Anderson, 2000). The resulting combination of fetishized black bodies engaged in street drug use, violence, and sex, and complex character portrayals of criminals, the police, and institutional authorities is what leads me to define hyperrealism as a distinct form of multicultural televisual discourse (Gray, 1995).

Let me hasten to add that, simply because I identify hyperrealism as multicultural does not mean that I find it unproblematic or even laudatory. As I suggested in chapter 5, shows like *The Wire* perpetuate some fairly common and disturbing images of African American men that can too easily be deployed as backdrops for racist, homophobic, sexist—and just plain bad—television programming. However, such series certainly do not offer us a singular version of what it means to be an African American man. Nor do they portray black criminality from a white, middle-class vantage point, but often identify such criminality as only the most visible symptom of a corrupt and collapsing political, economic, and social system. Hyperrealist televisual discourses of blackness, then, are politically conflicted: they perpetuate the ugliest stereotypes while simultaneously airing ideologies and perspectives rarely seen on television. They perpetuate the idea that black male bodies are out of control in many ways—sexually, violently, and mentally—but rather than marking these excesses as racial inferiority, they identify them as indexes of the failures of capitalist modernity.

Televisual aesthetics of hyperreal blackness, then, depart significantly from traditional transnational portrayals over the centuries, in which similar stereotypes supported the ideology that blacks were uncivilized and uncivilizable, forever incapable of joining in the project of modernity. By contrast, hyperreal television represents African Americans as thoroughly urban, as the most vulnerable members of a crumbling modern world. In this way, the portrayals of blackness in such series parallel the portrayals of blackness in Nollywood films as both urban and abject.

Hyperrealist representations of blackness are not widespread in contemporary television. Before *The Wire*, the most prominent example was Charles Dutton's HBO miniseries *The Corner* (2000). Nevertheless, similar kinds

of imagery have begun to seep into other television series that focus predominantly on street crime, despite the fact that this trend also conflicts with dominant industry practices of avoiding portraying African Americans as street criminals due to potential political fallout.[1] *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), the NBC series *The Black Donnellys* (2007), about a group of Irish brothers turned mobsters who live in Hell's Kitchen, and *Detroit 1-8-7* (2010), focusing on police detectives working at Detroit Homicide, for instance, occasionally featured African American criminals peopling their re-creation of contemporary urban landscapes. Given the critical and economic success of *The Wire* and its subsequent incorporation into industry lore about quality, we should expect an increase in quality television series that place African American street criminals close to the center of their stories.

The televisual aesthetic of travesty, meanwhile, gets articulated through industry lore about "edgy" programming, and tends to appear on low-rent specialty channels, particularly those carried by digital cable and satellite. These channels share similar audience profiles and identities across multiple nations and regions, and their heavy reliance on transnational television imports places these channels center stage when it comes to trying to deal with the complexities of cultural difference. Televisual travesties sometimes exhibit multiculturalism in that they derive from a decidedly black or minority perspective on race, politics, society, and the media. In their engagement with contemporary trends and debates in each of these areas, such programs offer a range of black perspectives, even as they tend quietly to endorse sexism, masculinity, homophobia, heterosexism, and, to some degree, classism.

I use the term "travesty" to refer to these kinds of television programs because of their tendency to ridicule—or, at least, their reputation for ridiculing—all groups and issues, particularly sensitive issues that are considered off-limits in polite society. Like literary travesties, which date back at least to the Greek classical period, televisual travesties entail an "undignified or trivializing treatment of a dignified subject" (Baldick, 2009, 340). Of course, in practice, such programs inevitably exhibit blind spots, or groups and attitudes that are not ridiculed, such as heterosexuals and sexism, as well as others that are frequent targets of ridicule, such as women and the poor (Gray, 1995). Herman Gray (1995) develops a reading strategy to analyze the cultural politics of such programs that focuses on identifying common targets of ridicule, and uses this strategy to argue that one of the progenitors of the sketch comedy genre, *In Living Color* (1990–1994), exhibits a sexist and anti-poor bias. In addition, travesties typically include scatological and ribald material that offends adult, bourgeois sensibilities. These "carnivalesque" features of television may be read as moments when the hierarchies of society

are suspended or brought down by the "bodiliness" that all human beings share. As John Fiske (1987) argues, television's carnivalesque tendencies enact "the bringing down of all to the equality of the bodily principle" (243). At the same time, these bodily functions, at least in the series and episodes I've screened and analyzed for this book, typically do not refer specifically to female bodies: for example, menstruation is almost never a subject of humor, while erections and tinea cruris (jock itch) are. Regardless of how we read these bodily jokes—or what Daniel Lennard (2004), director of animation for the Cartoon Network, Toonami, and Boomerang channels in Europe, calls "farting and fighting"—in the lore of the industry, they help account for the global appeal of edgy programs among young men and boys worldwide.

While televisual travesties incorporate references to male bodily functions as well as several of the aesthetic practices of globally popular genres, such as allusions to anime in *The Boondocks*, those that are staged from a black or ethnic minority perspective also tend to show reverence for indigenous cultural practices and to draw on a longer tradition of satire within postcolonial cultures. This celebration and ridicule of the ethnic, combined with ridicule of the dominant local and global order of things, are what mark these programs as distinctly local in orientation and require industry insiders to revise their conventional notions about the universality of particular cultural practices and themes. As I have already suggested, the aesthetic of satire or travesty is common among the world's nonwhite and minority populations (Bhabha, 1994; Buell, 1994; Gates, 1989; Watkins, 1994). However, these satirical aesthetics have been adapted specifically to the audiovisual medium, and as such they mock not only dominant and minority cultures, but dominant, global media institutions and practices as well.

Despite their political blind spots and shortcomings, I believe that travestied televisual aesthetics constitute a global discourse of race that is quite distinct from racialized discourses that have come before, and are intimately tied into the medium of television. Specifically, although these kinds of discourses have been around in minority culture for centuries, they now enjoy an institutional status and a concomitant carrier discourse, in the form of industry lore about cultural journeys, that facilitate their worldwide circulation.

Satirical animation and sketch comedy are primarily limited to television, and are also ideally suited to the migration of television to online environments, due to their tendency to provide brief scene "bites" that do not require additional narrative material or knowledge to appreciate. Their articulation of minority aesthetics, global generic elements, and the carnivalesque shape the cultural politics of these programs. Unlike globally distributed satirical

discourses of race that have been around since the sixteenth century, which emphasize the ridiculousness of nonwhite, non-Western people in order to secure the superiority and normalcy of white Westerners, these new, travestied televisual discourses ridicule both whites and nonwhites, locals and foreigners, even as they tend to reserve their most scathing critiques for white culture and the institutions of capitalist modernity, such as colonialism, the church, and the media. These aesthetics serve to introduce and exemplify shared historical, political, and aesthetic interests among minority cultures around the globe. At the same time, they also harness shared biases against women, gays, and the poor in an effort to cobble together transnational audience segments around shared identities of gender and age.

Hyperreal and travestied aesthetics can accommodate both progressive and regressive ideologies. In fact, while modernist discourses of race emanating from the state and the church emphasized *ideological* consistency across *aesthetic* differences, postmodern televisual flows emphasize *aesthetic* consistency across *ideological* differences. That is, popular culture, church doctrine, laws, and European philosophy all shared similar ideological positions on the racial superiority of whites in the eighteenth century, while in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the television series *The Corner* and *The Wire* shared striking aesthetic similarities, but the former promoted an ideology of individual responsibility and boot-strapping and the latter critiqued the excesses of global capitalism.

At the same time, both hyperrealism and travesty possess ideological tendencies that tilt toward conservative and progressive ends, respectively. Thus hyperrealism, much like realism, leaves viewers with the impression that the images they see are accurate and unmediated, and this impression radiates onto the ideological perspective of the particular program. Additionally, because hyperrealist texts tend to focus on life experiences that are quite unfamiliar to the viewer, they have a tendency to recapitulate the same kinds of voyeuristic curiosity and racial superiority that early anthropological films did among viewers. Travesty, as I have already suggested, is an aesthetic of disorientation that puts viewers on unfamiliar and uncomfortable footing, requiring them to ferret out the viewpoint of each individual sketch and position themselves in relation to that viewpoint. This disorientation makes travesty a risky aesthetic gambit for creators as well as critics. However, these aesthetics and their disorientations have long been a part of the cultural weaponry of oppressed minorities fighting white, Western domination.

In the final analysis then, media globalization has, at least temporarily, expanded the range of aesthetic and ideological diversity in African American television, the types and locations of viewers who watch African

American and black television, and the industry lore that underwrites the worldwide flow of African American television. We can now see poor and rich African Americans populating conventional dramas, quality programs, sitcoms, and sketch comedies, as well as black and black-identified groups from around the world on television screens everywhere. At the same time, African American women remain largely typecast as the bearers of a deracinated middle-class ideology, while elderly, gay, and rural African Americans and non-American blacks remain largely absent from the world's screens. The commercial logics of global television, in other words, favor a limited range of aesthetic practices primarily centered on the lives and sensibilities of young African American men. But these aesthetic limitations do not determine the ideological practices of the series, many of which are produced by creative individuals and teams intent on telling progressive new stories about African American life.

To return to the question of whether commercial globalization envisions African American culture as worthy of attention and preservation, which began this volume, the answer we have discovered is ambiguous. For some African Americans and minorities around the world, television promises to intensify the opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue and multiply the sites of creative expression and struggle. For others, however, the opportunities to speak to and with similarly situated people about their specific life experiences, in ways that are aesthetically true to those experiences, have only grown more rare. If channels continue to expand, if Internet delivery becomes more and more widespread, and if audience niches continue to fragment, we may see greater opportunities for these other kinds of stories as well. However, the political economy of global television, as it currently stands, militates against the worldwide circulation and recognition of these other more complicated, oppressed, and less profitable forms of difference, primarily because of the range of industry lore about the pleasures associated with transnational minority cultural circulation. Put slightly differently, the carrier discourse of industry lore has not kept pace with some of the most prevalent and promising popular discourses by and about African American programming that are currently traversing the globe. To the extent that industry can and must change to accommodate these contemporary black television travels, it will produce the necessary conditions for the production of less domineering and more culturally relevant minority television programming flows.

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