'The biggest show in the world': race and the global popularity of *The Cosby Show*

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Introduction

The Cosby Show changed the face of American television and set a new standard for representing African American families in non-stereotyped roles. It rewrote the book on syndication when Viacom required stations to bid for the privilege of airing the show (Heuton, 1990), and it fuelled the networks' efforts to have the FCC's financial-syndication rules repealed to allow NBC to share in the show's $600 million syndication revenues (Andrews, 1992). *The Cosby Show* also profoundly altered international television syndication, proving the international marketability of the now staple comedy format, establishing Viacom as a major distributor during a time of global deregulation, and drawing dedicated audiences as only *Dallas* and *Dynasty* previously had. While many scholars have addressed the show's domestic popularity (Boyd, 1997; Downing, 1988; Gray, 1995; Press, 1991; Taylor, 1989), its international acceptance remains a virtual mystery.[1]

Recently, the world has witnessed a dramatic increase in the export of middle-class African American situation comedies which are directly linked to *The Cosby Show*'s success. This article investigates the various economic, textual and audience practices that led to the show's international success, and that continue to make middle-class African American sitcoms lucrative international fare. In an era of increased interdependence of television markets, where shows must exhibit international appeal 'before anything moves forward' (Schapiro, 1991: 29) in domestic production, *The Cosby Show* set the representational and marketing standards that continue to determine what types of African American shows get produced, and where

those shows are sold. While the international syndication industry learned many lessons from *The Cosby Show*, including the global appeal of domestic sitcoms, this article suggests that deeper revelations regarding the importance of televisual representations of race in global programming remain unrecognized.

Race in international communication

Matters of race have figured prominently in discussions of international media flows and consumption practices. Race is seen as a transnational identity that can bind together audiences across national lines. Given 'the dual tendency toward globalization and localization of image spaces' (Robins, 1989: 156) in international television, homogeneous national identities are increasingly ineffective for drawing audiences. Instead, audiences coalesce around various transnational identities such as gender, ethnicity and race. Scholars of international television, however, have shown only passing interest in investigating how racial identities and televisual representations of race interact on a transnational level. Morley and Robins (1989), for instance, argue that the push to create a common market for European-produced television has resulted in a downplaying of ethnic differences and an exclusion of racial minorities from official definitions of European identity. Ultimately, however, their discussion only 'touches on the questions of race and ethnicity' (1989: 224) and their main interest lies in arguing for a politics of identity articulation that centres on domestic media practices.

   This tendency to 'touch' upon race is common in scholarship regarding international communication, but few writers give their full attention to the ways that racialized representations circulate and are consumed worldwide. Ross (1996) has investigated the history of black images in the USA and the UK, as well as the cross-fertilization between these two nations. She argues convincingly that black images have been severely limited in Anglo audiovisual culture, despite the long-fought, creative practices of many black cultural workers. Her concern in the final chapters is that the volume and inexpensiveness of Western popular culture on the world market will strangle oppositional minority voices. While her apprehensions are appropriate, we must be careful not to homogenize all forms of popular culture. As Stuart Hall has written, 'Black popular culture is a contradictory space . . . a sight of strategic contestation' within Western popular culture. It enables 'the surfacing, inside the mixed and contradictory modes even of some mainstream popular culture, of elements of a discourse that is different' (Hall, 1996: 470).

   Ross's (1996) adoption of an outmoded cultural imperialism thesis (see Tomlinson, 1991) causes her to ignore the subversive potential in popular

culture. In South Africa, for instance, *The Cosby Show* was so incendiary that a Member of Parliament publicly criticized the show for its 'ANC messages' (BBC, 1988). As the current study demonstrates, audiences around the world do find important pleasures in *The Cosby Show*'s dignified representations of an African American family. Their pleasures cannot be explained solely by the cheapness and ubiquity of US programming.

Contrary to Ross's (1996) argument, Gillespie (1995) has found that imported popular culture can be integral to the creation of new ethnic identities. Through extensive ethnographic research, she demonstrates how Punjabi youth living in London use domestic and imported audiovisual culture to understand their identities in relation to the family, the nation, the neighbourhood, the diaspora and the world. In their talk about the Australian soap opera *Neighbours*, for instance, these viewers work out their relationships to local gossip culture, parents and white British society. However, her analysis is not centrally concerned with the appeal of individual artefacts like *The Cosby Show*, which somehow speak to variously situated audiences. Neither is she interested in the economic imperatives that drive most cross-cultural media exchanges. What she offers for the current study is compelling evidence that imported programming can have important intersections with audiences' understandings of social identities like ethnicity.

Jones (1988) provides an important corollary to Gillespie's (1995) work in his ethnography of white British fans of Afro-Caribbean music. Jones accounts for the industrial, textual and audience practices that explain this popularity. He demonstrates how Afro-Caribbean music, especially reggae, was intentionally altered and packaged by the music industry to appeal to white youth. However, he also accounts for audiences' continual reappropriation of these musical forms and the subversive potential that inheres in the most commercialized forms, which can provide important utopic ideals and an entree into Afro-Caribbean culture and counter-economies. These working-class white youths exhibit a sometimes deep affinity with black British politics and culture on the basis of shared economic disadvantage.

Like Gillespie (1995), Jones (1988) is interested in micro-analyses of macro-social processes, which causes him to concentrate on one neighbourhood. This article, on the other hand, aims at comparing audiences across local particulars. While Gillespie shows that extranational television culture can help articulate ethnic identities and Jones demonstrates how economic and textual practices must operate together in international exchanges of popular culture, we still need to understand how 'race' can signify transnationally in order to begin our investigation of the roles that race played in *The Cosby Show*'s international success.

Gilroy (1993) addresses the problem of imagining race transnationally when he attempts to theorize the appeal of black popular music within the African diaspora and beyond. According to Gilroy, black music displays an

antimodern aesthetic and politics which links contemporary struggles with past racial horrors and resonates with people of colour across the globe. In this sense, black music has acted as a transnational discourse of blackness throughout modernity, connecting otherwise disparate audiences by referencing shared historical and contemporary circumstances. Music has a history of political and social importance in black communities that traces from slave-era spirituals to contemporary hip-hop clubs.

Gilroy's (1993) concentration on the performative and textual aspects of black popular music is appropriate given his subject, but popular black television images, especially humorous images, hold a far more ambivalent position in black culture (Gray, 1995; Riggs, 1991). In the USA and Western Europe, white-controlled popular culture has for centuries ridiculed blacks through caricature (Pieterse, 1992). This situation has begun to change lately, as black Americans and Britons have gained some control of television imagery and become a lucrative audience segment (see Gray, 1995). Still, television situation comedies like *The Cosby Show* trace their lineage to *Amos 'N' Andy* and minstrel shows. Their consumption occurs in radically different contexts than black popular music and they offer unique representations of blackness which must be understood as a distinct transnational discourse of blackness.

Nonetheless, Gilroy (1993) provides a useful model for our investigation. He is able to specify the structures of feeling that bind together a diasporic audience and how popular culture expresses and constitutes those binds. His ideas are consonant with Goldberg's (1993) discussion of 'race' as a discursive formation. Goldberg argues that race is 'almost, but not quite, empty in its own connotative capacity, able to signify not so much in itself but by adopting and extending naturalized form to prevailing conceptions of social group formation at different times' (1993: 80). In this formulation, race is not reducible to such things as class differences. Instead, it naturalizes those differences. Race also carries 'the sedimentary traces of past significations' (1993: 81), so that skin colour connotes a host of contemporary and historical ideas like class affiliation, citizenship and colonial violence. The question for this investigation, then, is how *The Cosby Show*'s representations of blackness organize and activate certain transnational 'social group formations'.

Two main groupings emerge in this study as salient for understanding the transnational dimensions of racialized televisual discourse. First, many black and non-white postcolonial viewers express an affinity with *The Cosby Show* because of a shared history of racial-colonial exploitation and contemporary class oppressions that derive from that history (see Spivak, 1990 and Marable, 1983). These affinities extend beyond mere economic conditions to include similar histories of imperial exploitation and terror, including Western efforts at cultural genocide. These diverse audiences express admiration for *The Cosby Show* because it avoids conventional

black stereotypes while retaining distinctly black cultural references like jazz.

Second, regional identity or affinity resonates with race in several ways. Originally articulated as comparable to race, regional identity gave the impression that racial differences were as natural and inevitable as geographical differences: Asians lived in Asia, Latinos in Latin American, blacks in Africa, and so on (Goldberg, 1993: 186). But centuries of forced and voluntary migration have destabilized these orderly categories. Regional identity today also implies formal political, economic, linguistic and historical ties. Most notably for our investigation, nations in the same region often share television industrial structures, technical standards and programming (O'Regan, 1992). Viewers' comments confirm that they experience regional identity as increasingly distinct from racial identity, although the two often overlap, as suggested by Morley and Robins' (1989) discussion of whiteness and European identity cited above.

The Cosby Show's international star

The Cosby Show's international popularity began in the Fall of 1985 and continued until 1995. During this period, the show ranked in the top ten in such diverse markets as the Philippines, Australia, Lebanon and Norway. The only regions where the show was not a marked success were Central and South America, although many of these television markets did import the show for a period of time. In the Caribbean, *The Cosby Show* experienced its greatest and earliest popularity outside the USA. Many countries in this region depend on the USA to provide large tracts of their programming schedules, and some simply re-transmit US signals via satellite. It is not uncommon for a popular US show to be popular in the Caribbean at the same time, and *The Cosby Show* is a prime example of this tendency. Broadcast throughout the region during its network prime-time run, the show 'was as popular in the Caribbean . . . as it [was] in the United States' (Payne, 1994: 233), and audience surveys show that Caribbean viewers enjoyed the show more than any other viewers outside the USA (Fuller, 1992).

At first glance, the show's popularity in the Caribbean seems to suggest that *The Cosby Show* was most popular in countries with predominantly black audiences. However, non-white audiences in the Middle East and Asia also responded favourably to the show. In Lebanon, for instance, the show was the rated number one in 1988 (Raschka, 1988), while in the Philippines, Indonesia and Hong Kong, the show appeared frequently in the top ten between 1986 and 1989. Prior to 1987, the show was exported predominantly to non-European countries, with the exception of the Scandinavian countries. Significant differences in export policies, programming

needs and market size played an important role in keeping the show out of Europe during the first two years of its export. The reasons for success or failure of the show are nicely exemplified if we compare the fate of *The Cosby Show* in the UK and South Africa.

Both the UK and South Africa have large white, English-speaking populations who made up the main audience for *The Cosby Show*. Language transfer was not a concern in these countries. Both countries also have a large non-white population, but there the similarities end. In South Africa, the show was popular with black audiences, while in the UK it was not. The UK has well-established broadcasting networks that produce original programming, while the South African Broadcasting Company (SABC) had been on the air little more than a decade when *The Cosby Show* aired (Nixon, 1994), and had recently upgraded to three channels (Mufson, 1986). As a result of the upgrade, much of SABC's programming came from the USA and the UK during the mid- and late 1980s.

In the UK, *The Cosby Show* was aired from 1985 through the mid-1990s on Channel Four, which was generally regarded as the nation's upscale television channel. The show attracted only a 'cult following' of between 2 and 3 million viewers (Griffin, 1990). By comparison, the first episode of the UK comedy *One Foot in the Grave* drew 14.75 million viewers on the mainstream BBC1 channel (*The Independent*, 1992). Because of the show's lacklustre ratings, Channel Four paid the paltry sum of £10,000–15,000 per episode (Henry, 1986), while its US counterparts sometimes paid close to half a million dollars (Ziegler, 1988) per episode. The series was targeted at, and mostly watched by upscale white audiences, or 'ABs' as they are designated by the industry, whereas non-white audiences tended to find pro-gramming geared toward them on Independent Television (ITV). Among ABs, the show performed well for Channel Four, securing its continued, if unremarkable run for nearly ten years (Henry, 1986). Despite the show's lack of popularity among non-white audiences, those black Britons who did watch the show rated it exceptionally highly (Fuller, 1992).

Likewise, in South Africa, *The Cosby Show* was 'the most popular show among Whites' (Mufson, 1986: 17) in 1990, but black South Africans also responded very positively to the show (Fuller, 1992; Mufson, 1986). The show was carried on SABC TV4, a newly introduced channel aimed at a general audience, unlike TV1, TV2 and TV3, which were targeted toward specific racial and ethnic groups. Ranked consistently number one, *The Cosby Show* generated very different responses from black audience members than it did among some whites. A black grocer explained that, 'Cosby is a big doctor, he is consulted, he has authority, and he receives full respect due to him. This is the kind of thing we blacks want here in South Africa' (Mufson, 1986: 17). On the other hand, one white fan expressed his belief that African Americans' 'first world' values make them fundamentally different from black South Africans. He argued that

white South Africans could identify with the Huxtable family because they shared the values that black South Africans lacked (Fuller, 1992: 114). For blacks, then, *The Cosby Show* could serve to expose the fallacy of black South African inferiority, while for whites it could encourage that fallacy.

The contrast between the UK and South Africa makes clear many points that are relevant to our discussion. First, we can see that numerous factors influenced the decision to import *The Cosby Show* and the popularity of the show. Among the more prominent are the state of the television industry, the channel on which it was broadcast, and the racial-political climate of the period. In the UK, racial and ethnic minorities could find locally produced shows geared toward them, and *The Cosby Show* could not fill the void it did among black South Africans. Still, race was not a non-issue in the popularity of the show in the UK. In fact, the marketing director for Viacom UK, Martha Burke-Hennessy, suggested that white Britons resisted *The Cosby Show* because the family was black (Henry, 1986).

The political economic context for *The Cosby Show*

As suggested by these examples, investigating the ways that race played into the international popularity of *The Cosby Show* is complex work. It involves the multiple articulations and dislocations between the show's racialized representations and the audiences' understandings of race, both in their own countries and beyond national borders. I will turn shortly to consider the ways that we can begin to untangle these webs of social identity, but first we need to understand how more 'formal' political and economic forces affected the show's export. In this way, we will more clearly see how race did and did not influence the international popularity of the show.

The international distribution rights for *The Cosby Show* were held by Viacom International, Inc. (later Viacom, Inc.) from 1984 until December 1994. International syndication never had the kinds of direct effects on Viacom's bottom line that its domestic distribution did, bringing in $100 million at most in total revenues (Flanigan, 1987). Instead, the show's international sales provided the company with a strong presence on the international television programming scene at a time of widespread global deregulation of television systems and increased programming needs due to technological changes.

Viacom had been looking for a lucrative syndication property for its domestic and international operations for years before it landed *The Cosby Show*. While the company still owned the rights to many popular 1970s CBS series that it had acquired when it was initially spun off from CBS in 1971, those series were rapidly ageing by the early 1980s, and audiences were evaporating (Richter, 1985). The company had expected that 'the

benefits to be derived from its [syndication] agreement with CBS would diminish' (Securities and Exchange Commission [SEC], 1987) over the years, as their reruns became less and less marketable. Prior to *The Cosby Show*, however, the company had not yet found properties that could 'offset . . . potential adverse effects from such anticipated diminution over time of the benefits to be derived from the CBS Agreement' (SEC, 1987). Its best earlier efforts had won the rights to such forgettable series as *Dear Detective* and *The Lazarus Syndrome* (Richter, 1985).

Viacom also owned cable companies, television stations, radio stations and cable channels, but it saw programming as the key to its future success and the future of the television business. In 1983, when Carsey-Werner Productions ran into problems financing the initial episodes of the high-budget *Cosby Show*, Viacom provided necessary funding in exchange for exclusive, worldwide syndication rights to the series (Richter, 1985). When the series skyrocketed to number one in the network ratings, consistently attracting more than 50 percent of the US audience (Henry, 1986), Viacom had a hot property on its hands, but it could not begin to syndicate the show until the 1988–9 season because of its agreement with Carsey-Werner (Richter, 1985). Although the company did start receiving profits from syndication sales as early as autumn 1987 (SEC, 1987), there were three years during which it held the rights to the most popular show in US television, had invested significant funds for those rights, and was unable to realize a profit. One of the main impetuses behind Viacom's drive to sell *The Cosby Show* internationally was its desire to generate some income from such a popular and expensive show.

Precise dollar amounts earned from marketing the show internationally are not available in Viacom's public records, but it is obvious that Viacom's international strategy did produce immediate results. Following the company's acquisition of rights to *The Cosby Show* in 1984, total foreign exports jumped markedly: between 1983 and 1984, exports posted a modest 1.7 percent gain; the following year, total exports dropped 5.8 percent; and from 1986 until the end of the decade, exports increased between 12.2 and 29.3 percent each year (SEC, 1987, 1991; Viacom, 1985). While we cannot attribute all of this increase to *The Cosby Show*, it was one of the company's most profitable properties in the late 1980s, and contributed a significant portion of the growth in exports.[2]

Deregulation and technological innovations also played a large role in the global success of *The Cosby Show.* Prior to 1985, global politics had been rocked by numerous charges of gross inequality by the Movement of Non-Aligned Nations. Among these charges were critiques of the imbalance in the ownership of communications systems and unequal flows of global media, especially news, that came to be known as the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debate. Although this debate raged for several years, gaining significant momentum in 1980 when UNESCO's

MacBride Commission report called for a more equitable balance of trade and larger number of communication channels, NWICO was effectively short-circuited in 1985 when the USA and UK withdrew from UNESCO. After these withdrawals, UNESCO abandoned NWICO and concentrated its efforts on building infrastructure, avoiding the more controversial topic of global media flows (see Herman and McChesney, 1997).

For Viacom, the end of the NWICO debate coincided nicely with its global offering of *The Cosby Show*. Only a few years earlier, government-owned communications systems around the globe might have made an example of the series. After NWICO, however, many countries were trying to regain US favour. Moreover, the USA had begun 'aggressive global pro-market policies' (Herman and McChesney, 1997: 23) in the 1980s under Reagan in an attempt to get non-Western nations to open up their markets to US goods. A worldwide era of deregulation was under way, which opened more and more national television systems to competition and commercialization, again increasing the number of export channels that Viacom could exploit in its marketing efforts. As the company's 1987 SEC 10-K filing boasts, 'A substantial portion of [foreign distribution] revenues is derived from countries that have import quotas and other restrictions which limit the number of foreign programs and films exhibited in such countries.' Among the nations that began importing the series in 1985, the majority fall into this category of less developed, predominantly non-white nations whose media had recently been commercialized, including Lebanon, (Raschka, 1988), South Africa (Mufson, 1986), Malaysia, Malta and Singapore in 1985 (Fuller, 1992).

The introduction of satellite television greatly increased the speed of commercialization and deregulation around the world. In fact, the NWICO debate had its roots in concerns that satellite technology would allow Western media companies to broadcast into nations with strict regulations (Herman and McChesney, 1997). Because of satellite technology, television systems around the world became more commercialized and began to offer more channels. Along with the increase in channels and broadcasting hours came demand for programming. Viacom was poised to fill the gaps with *The Cosby Show*, as it is cheaper to purchase programming from a distributor than it is to produce original programming (Hoskins et al., 1997).

Beyond deregulation and satellite technology, the unpopularity of the sitcom genre on the international television market at the time, and the subsequent bargain price of the show also affected its success. The price made the show attractive to less wealthy broadcasters. The main reason for the price was a conventional belief in international television programming that 'American comedy had little appeal to an international market' (Huff, 1996: 52). Comedy was seen as a culturally specific phenomenon that could not cross national borders, let alone linguistic borders. Based on

previous successes with *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and *Kojak*, most international television trade at the time consisted of drama and action-adventure shows. As one international television executive explained, 'Car goes down the street, car makes the wrong turn, car blows up . . . everybody understands that' (Schapiro, 1991: 29). Although *The Cosby Show* was dirt cheap in comparison with US prices, it was also an unlikely success. Wealthier European channels were more likely to spend their money on more expensive, but proven formats.

Viacom's lack of confidence in *The Cosby Show*'s exportability comes across plainly if we look at the way Viacom marketed itself and the series in *TV World*, an international television trade journal, in 1985 and 1986. The first Viacom ad to feature *The Cosby Show* for international television buyers appeared in the February 1985 issue. It pictures four shows, *Me and Mom*, *Star Games*, *Peter the Great* and *The Cosby Show*, the only sitcom in the line-up. Mention of *The Cosby Show* is buried at the end of the second paragraph of copy, and it is featured for its 'critical acclaim' instead of its humour. Obviously, the company is emphasizing its drama programming in the ad, a fact reinforced by an August 1985 ad for *Peter the Great* which claims that 'The world turns to Viacom for great drama'. Viacom did not see *The Cosby Show* as a significant international property at this time.

One year later, however, in February 1986, Viacom took out a full page ad for the show, suggesting that 'The biggest show in America *is* the biggest show in the world'. The hyperbole of this claim becomes apparent if one reads further; the ad only announces that 'this highly celebrated series is available worldwide', and does not claim that the show is popular around the world. Still, it is apparent that Viacom thought the show would attract enough international buyers to warrant a full-page to itself, unlike a year earlier.

The success of the show in Europe accounts for Viacom's evolving marketing strategy. The company thought little of its sales to less developed industries and did not fully recognize the potential of *The Cosby Show* until it succeeded in Europe. By November 1986, we find an ad announcing boldly in 60-point font that Bill Cosby is 'The World's Newest Superpower'. Minor yet significant copy changes have been made to the February 1986 ad. The February copy reads, 'And now, this highly-celebrated series is available worldwide', while the November copy reads, 'And now, this high-celebrated series *has transcended* language and culture' (emphasis added). While the show had transcended Lebanese language and Malaysian cultural barriers a year earlier, it seems that Viacom was unaware of the show's ability to 'amuse across different cultures' (Patterson, 1995) until the show had succeeded in the more fickle – and lucrative – European markets. Of course, it is not surprising that Viacom was most interested in exporting to Europe, even while it was willing to strike deals with any broadcaster interested in the show. Because of the greater penetration of

television sets, the degree of commercialization, and the massively larger economies of Europe in general, *The Cosby Show* drew much better profits in Europe and established potentially advantageous future relationships for the company.

Finally, the differential success of the show also derived from the way that buyers viewed the show's performance in other countries in their region. For instance, Middle Eastern buyers could look to the success of the show in Israel and Lebanon and think that the show might do well in their home markets. In Europe, the show's marginal performance in England and its failure in Belgium (*Broadcast*, 1988) made other buyers wary of spending too much money for it. In short, a snowball effect took over in each region, and helped speed or slow the spread of the show.

The political economy of the world television market in the mid- and late 1980s helps to explain a large part of *The Cosby Show*'s popularity. Many developing nations had recently opened their television networks to competition due to increased satellite broadcasting and pressure from the USA and other Western nations, resulting in a huge increase in broadcasting hours around the world. US distributors were well-suited to fill those hours because their programming was so much cheaper than original programming. Because Viacom had the rights to *The Cosby Show*, but no hopes of recouping its original investment in the show for several years, the company began to sell the show worldwide. Much to the company's astonishment, the show became as popular overseas as it was in the USA, contradicting conventional industry wisdom that the sitcom format was too culturally specific for international television trade.

The Cosby Show, blackness and international audiences

While our analysis so far has shown why a sitcom might have been aired in several countries around this time, it cannot explain why this specific show became such a hit, and not one of the other 135 sitcoms that Viacom licensed. The answer to this question lies in textual and audience practices. In many areas of the world, audiences are accustomed to and even prefer Western popular culture, and we might suspect that *The Cosby Show* appealed to international audiences simply because it was the most popular US show at the time. While this assumption is surely accurate, it neglects the importance of race in US popular culture. Western popular culture has long enlisted black culture, performers and bodies in order to build a mass white audience (Hilmes, 1993; Lott, 1993; Pieterse, 1992; Roediger, 1991; Rogin, 1996). The recent explosion of African American images in US television and advertising (Boyd, 1997; Gray, 1995) at a time when these products are expected to appeal to disparate international audiences should cause us to ask whether we are witnessing a similar strategy.

If we compare the export patterns of *Family Ties*, *The Cosby Show*'s 'white obverse' (Taylor, 1989: 163) and perennial challenger in the US ratings, we can see that race is an important element in *The Cosby Show*'s success. *Family Ties* consistently ranked close to *The Cosby Show* in many European markets, Australia and New Zealand, although *The Cosby Show* attracted far greater non-European audiences than *Family Ties*. Each of these shows offers a comparable ideology of the American Dream, where material comfort allows family members to avoid the drudgery of daily work and concentrate on their individual and collective growth surrounded by love and humour. Why, then, did *The Cosby Show* outpace *Family Ties* so dramatically on the world scene? Aesthetic considerations like better writing or better acting may explain some of the difference, but compared with the general ruck of US sitcoms, *Family Ties* and *The Cosby Show* seem more similar than different. *Family Ties*' syndicator, Paramount Television, was as interested in developing its international distribution wing as *The Cosby Show*'s syndicator, Viacom. Race is perhaps the only salient difference between these two shows that might account for their differential export patterns and international success. Anecdotal comments from audience members, which will be explored more fully later, show how important the Huxtables' blackness was for their enjoyment of the show.

As mentioned above, two main aspects of race as a discourse affected *The Cosby Show*'s unprecedented success: the audiences' experiences of race, and the racialized representations of the show. Many scholars have written about *The Cosby Show*'s representation of blackness. I do not want to rehearse all of those arguments here, but I will offer an overview of a few prominent insights on the subject that bear directly on the international exportability of the show.

Jhally and Lewis (1992), in their study of white and black audiences for *The Cosby Show*, argue that the show portrays blackness in a limited, post-Civil Rights light, shorn of the economic hardship and exclusion that so often comprises part of what it means to be black in the USA. The authors criticize the show on this account, claiming that class is a necessary component of race, and that *The Cosby Show* leaves white audiences with the impression that all economic barriers for African Americans have been removed through affirmative action, while it placates black audiences by portraying a respectable, non-stereotyped African American family. Regardless of the political implications, it is surely true that *The Cosby Show* tends to avoid addressing specifically American problems by side-stepping issues of economic hardship. In this way, the show is more suited to international audiences, who might find American problems distancing and difficult to identify with.

The Cosby Show, in fact, avoided most overtly political issues, focusing instead on stories of personal and familial growth and adjustment, all the

while enacting an 'insistent recuperation of African American social equality (and competence) through the trope of the stable and unified black family' (Gray, 1995: 80). The blackness represented on the show was subdued and dignified, and came across in such things as Blues and R&B music, African American portraiture art that hung on the living room walls, references to Civil Rights and Anti-Apartheid leaders, and the 'Abolish Apartheid' sticker on son Theo's bedroom door (Downing, 1988: 61–2). The show cautiously avoided conventional black stereotypes and inner-city settings, instead marking its characters' blackness through these references to African American high culture. However, by avoiding much of the 'loud' humour that most African American sitcoms employ, where blackness becomes 'an object of derision and fascination' (Gray, 1995: 81), *The Cosby Show* also denied an integral part of black humour, especially working-class black humour.[3] The political work affected by the series lies in its controlled celebration of certain aspects of African American culture; it is a predominantly cultural politics.

The political issues that did surface on the show were not flash-in-the-pan popular topics that interest a sitcom like *Murphy Brown*, but long-standing political concerns like education and Civil Rights. We might, therefore, expect some international audiences to be familiar with these issues. Even if we understand *The Cosby Show*'s familial harmony as a 'retreat into fundamentalist principles of family, whose rigidity suggests not so much the relaxed confidence born of stability as the fear of total disintegration from within or invasion from without' (Taylor, 1989: 165), the show avoids American cultural specificity by limiting its references to the outside world and concentrating on the nuclear family.

Despite its focus on domestic life, the show does make reference to diversity within African American communities and black communities worldwide. As Downing (1988) notes, gender differences and struggles provide one of the main themes in *The Cosby Show*. The show portrays sibling rivalries that appeal to children, parenting problems for parents and the romantic relationship between Cliff and Claire for couples. Many audience members around the world can identify with one or several of these themes. The presence on the show of the internationally recognized Civil Rights and Anti-Apartheid movements also gestures at a transnational black community, bound by similar political goals. Finally, we see 'aspects of international culture [which] are part of the Huxtables' taken-for-granted world' (Downing, 1988: 62) in the travels of various family members and in incidental characters, such as Theo's math teacher who is Portuguese. Over the course of its run, *The Cosby Show* makes clear that these characters' lives stretch beyond the borders of the USA.

The Cosby Show's representation of blackness was uncommon for US television, but the show did retain an abundance of physical humour which is typical of traditional black humour. In one episode, for instance, all of

the family members perform a lip-synch pantomime of Ray Charles and the Raelette's 'Night Time Is the Right Time' for the Huxtables' grandparents (Downing, 1988). Bill Cosby, like most black comedians, delivers his lines 'with recognizable expressions and gestures, which, in themselves, are a source of humour' (Watkins, 1994: 41). For international television, the use of physical humour facilitates the show's export: it transfers to different cultures and languages much more readily than verbal humour. Audiences for *The Cosby Show* obviously responded to the show's representations of blackness, and their comments about the show give us important insights into how they see their own racial identities intersecting with the Huxtables'. I draw these comments from published audience interviews and newspaper feature accounts that include interviews with non-US audiences for the show, and reanalyse them with an eye toward their articulations of race, class and regional identity.

Non-white audiences appreciated *The Cosby Show*'s portrayal of dignified blackness. Black audiences worldwide reported similar feelings of pride from watching the show and knowing others in the world were watching it. Compare the following statements made by an American, a Caribbean and a South African respondent:

> I like this show because it depicts black people in a positive way. I think he's [Cosby] good. It's good to see that blacks can be professionals. (Jhally and Lewis, 1992: 81) (USA)

> Black people in this show are not isolated, no fun is made of Blackness, and the characters are shown as leading wholesome moral lives. (Payne, 1994: 235) (Barbados)

> The show makes me proud of being black. (Fuller, 1992: 111) (South Africa)

The pride these respondents feel issues in part from the fact that white audiences are watching, and that the show breaks with traditional portrayals of blacks. Each of the statements indicates an understanding that images of blacks in white popular culture have long been derisive, and expresses pride that, finally, blacks are being positively portrayed. These viewers believe that blacks throughout the West share a history and a common political goal of challenging the representations of blackness in Western popular culture. Their racial identity stretches beyond the borders of the nation-state, and must be understood as a transnational phenomenon (see Gilroy, 1993).

The Cosby Show also offered black viewers solace to help them through their daily struggles. As one black South African fan explained:

> [T]he Cosby Show . . . is saying, 'Come on, you white guys [in South Africa], the blacks are not so bad as you make them out to be. Look at us, we are having a good life and normal problems here in America. Give those guys down

there a chance. Let's change for the better and live together, not apart'. (Fuller, 1992: 114)

As Downing (1988: 70) explains, the upper-middle-class setting of the show, 'is not simply a matter of blanking out the ugly realities of continuing oppression, but also of offering some sense of resolution to the grinding realities of racial tension and mistrust in the United States'. This audience member's comment reinforces this view, but extends its insights beyond the USA.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many black viewers identified with the Huxtables, but non-black audiences also derived pride and solace from *The Cosby Show*'s representations of blackness. One Lebanese viewer, a Shiite Muslim and father, explained that 'American blacks are a little like us. They have big families' (Raschka, 1988: 16). Other viewers commented that the Huxtables '[come] across as successful and smart, without having sold out to white culture' (1988: 16). Here, we can see viewers identifying across racial lines. They recognize similar cultural traits, as well as the problems that many people of colour face in achieving material success while maintaining their cultural integrity (see Fanon, 1967). These remarks also point to an understanding of shared economic oppression. The respect that the Lebanese viewers give the Huxtables because of their material achievement suggests that such achievement is difficult and anomalous. Finally, we can see the racial dimensions of this shared class oppression in the identification of 'white culture' as threatening. The comment references contemporary and historical economic exclusions based upon skin colour.

Even as these discourses of class bind together people of different races and ethnicities, the discourse of regional identity can frustrate a shared racial discourse. Some male Barbadian viewers objected to Cliff's lack of authority in the family and claimed that the show taught Caribbean boys to be 'desperate to appease women' (Payne, 1994: 285). Other viewers complained about the show's detrimental influence on Caribbean values, behaviours and youth styles (Payne, 1994). Given the proximity of the Caribbean to the USA and the general dominance of US programming on Caribbean channels, a desire to maintain a distinction between black Caribbeans and Americans is not surprising. This situation offers further evidence that viewers understand international television through the twin discourses of racial and regional identity. Political and historical relations between nations and communities worldwide determine which of these identities is operative for which viewers.

Non-black viewers who reject a racial identification with the Huxtables may still identify with them through a discourse of regional identity. One white South African viewer, for instance, explained why he identifies with the African American Huxtables:

> The greatest divide between black and white in this country is not the colour of one's skin but the first- and third-world values and attitudes displayed by the different race groups. . . . Therefore, we do not see the Cosby show as being about black people but we see it as a very entertaining sit-com displaying beliefs and values we can associate with. (Fuller, 1992: 114)

This viewer asserts a regional Western identity, or First-World values as he puts it, which links him with the Huxtables across racial lines. Curiously, this bond does not extend to blacks who share the same national identity as the writer. We see, then, that this viewer's understanding of race in his own country depends upon experiences of extra-national identities, complicating any strictly national definitions of race. In this instance, regional identity is predominantly imagined as a class identity which includes all Westerners regardless of race.

Finally, white viewers in South Africa and elsewhere who did not identify with the Huxtables often displayed a voyeuristic fascination with the family's blackness. A Swedish journalist explains that 'the fact that they are black also plays in [to her enjoyment of the show]. It makes it a little special. They are so much more attractive than white people' (Fuller, 1992: 107). This seemingly complimentary statement about black people belies a cliched vision of blacks as exotic Others. Likewise, a white South African viewer commented, 'You'd be surprised what that man [Cosby] has meant to the Afrikaner. The Afrikaner doesn't mix with black men. The television brings the black man's quality right into his living room' (Mufson, 1986: 17). We can imagine a less enlightened viewer, perhaps one who is not speaking to an American journalist, saying that the show 'brings black men into his living room'. Both statements illustrate that *The Cosby Show* allows these viewers to experience blackness voyeuristically through the non-threatening confines of the sitcom genre. While audiences cannot 'simply laugh at these characters' (Gray, 1995: 81) they can still consume their blackness as an entertaining commodity and little else.

Conclusion: reframing blackness

The purpose of this article has been to demonstrate through an analysis of *The Cosby Show*'s international circulation some of the ways in which televisual representations of race operate as a transnational discourse of social identity.[4] While much of *The Cosby Show*'s success owes to the timing of its international syndication, which coincided with global deregulation and increased satellite presence, these factors cannot explain why the show became so popular with audiences, nor why it was more successful than its white counterpart, *Family Ties*. To answer these questions, we need to look instead at the twin discourses of race and region.

As we have seen, audiences make a distinction between racial identity and regional identity, although the one often impinges on the other. Among some Caribbeans whom we might expect to identify racially with the Huxtables, we observe instead distancing based upon regional distinctions. On the other hand, a white South African claims to identify with the Huxtables across racial lines based on a shared regional identity. These examples suggest that regional identity, like racial identity, is multi-dimensional. For the Caribbeans, it relates to historical differences, contemporary economic and cultural relations and an urban–rural dichotomy. For the South African, it refers to class distinctions. While regional identity is distinct from racial identity, the two concepts also overlap. Hence, the white South African's view on regional identity determines his view of black South Africans. Likewise, as noted above, Morley and Robbins' (1989) study shows that a European regional identity is being constructed from a racially specific culture and history. Given the growth in regional cultural exchanges, especially in audiovisual culture (O'Regan, 1992), and the importance of regional economies in the global market, regional identities are becoming increasingly prevalent. Although Gilroy (1993) shows how these identities can be liberating for people in the black Atlantic diaspora, comments from viewers of *The Cosby Show* show how regional identities can also be as insular and xenophobic as national or racial identities.

The interdependence of racial and regional identities should cause us to question any simple explanations about the global appeal of 'Western' shows. Part of *The Cosby Show*'s appeal to non-white audiences was its representation of cultural integrity in the midst of material plenty. These Western middle-class values are all the more powerful when shown as available to, and non-threatening for, audiences of different races and nationalities. *The Cosby Show* offered viewers the comfort of seeing characters with whom they identified enjoy the spoils of Western capitalism for a change. Integral to their enjoyment was the show's representation of a dignified blackness, which broke with centuries of popular Western images of blacks. Apparently, skin colour signifies a certain class identity to international audiences, and *The Cosby Show*'s unconventional image of dark skin in upper-middle-class surroundings seems to have had broad global appeal.

While the consequences of *The Cosby Show*'s export seem to have been positive for many audiences, not all of the influences were laudable. Because the show 'celebrates the virtues of upper-middle-class existence as the most desirable way of life' (Downing, 1988: 67), it promotes the nuclear family as the primary social unit on a worldwide scale. As Miller (1992) has noted in his studies of Caribbean culture, this 'global discourse of the domestic' is often a throwback to colonial ideals of respectability. Here, the nuclear family operates as a safe harbour in an otherwise stormy world, where efforts to shore up the family structure are more important

than efforts to change society, and an undue amount of responsibility for maintaining this domestic sphere falls on women. Again, the Huxtables' blackness plays an integral role in disseminating the 'universality' of this particular family unit.

Television programmers at home and abroad learned a similar lesson from *The Cosby Show*: that a rich African American family could draw audiences across racial lines. While the cultural-economic climate surrounding *The Cosby Show*'s distribution was unique, middle- and upper-middle-class African American sitcoms like *A Different World*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Family Matters* and *Moesha*, which followed in the wake of *The Cosby Show*, have achieved significant international success. These more recent shows, however, have primarily capitalized on the position of African American youth styles in global youth culture (see Boyd, 1997 and Gray, 1995), and their distribution has focused heavily on European markets (Schapiro, 1991).

This myopic concentration on Europe in spite of lucrative markets elsewhere, has caused 'black street styles and black bodies [to become] the universal signifiers of modernity and "difference" ' (Hall, 1995: 15). Different routes of cultural exchange that would allow for different representations were activated and opened by *The Cosby Show*. However, these routes have since remained largely untravelled by US sitcoms. Nonetheless, the show provides evidence of a willingness among formerly colonized people to engage with representations of racial and regional differences that hold the potential to reshape international television distribution.

Notes

1. Only two scholarly investigations of *The Cosby Show*'s international distribution have been published: Linda Fuller (1992) surveyed audiences in several countries to determine their level of enjoyment of the show, and Monica Payne (1994) interviewed Barbadian men and women regarding their opinions of *The Cosby Show*'s representation of an ideal black family.

2. While some of these profits owe to Viacom's part-ownership of MTV-Europe, that channel did not begin operations until the summer of 1988.

3. Dating back to the days of slavery in the USA, African Americans have 'fostered a dual mode of behavior and expression [including humour] – one for whites and another for themselves' (Watkins, 1994: 32). In the realm of humour, this duality surfaces when 'African-Americans [become] the arbiters of a reversed joke in which others' assumptions of their ignorance [become] the source of humor' (Watkins, 1994: 33). The social and political implications of this self-mocking humour are debatable, and have led to sometimes vehement disagreements within and among African American communities.

4. A more exhaustive audience study would likely have found that gender and age differences are also common global divisions through which race and region signify.

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