4. The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, Channel Fragmentation, and the Recognition of Difference

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While white American situation comedies came to dominate the U.S. prime-time landscape in the 1990s, African American series, especially situation comedies, tended to feature youth themes addressing multiracial audience segments. This trend followed the growing popularity of rap music and hip-hop culture among teenage and young adult fans of all races. The appeal of rap music quickly reached beyond the boundaries of the United States, becoming a popular form and political force in places as diverse as South Korea, China, Brazil, Nigeria, and Italy. Likewise, youth-oriented situation comedies developed worldwide followings in the 1990s as well. Unlike their predecessors in international television trade, however, these youth series engendered an industry lore among U.S. and European executives that, for the first time, viewed African American themes as an advantage in international program trade, rather than a hindrance.

The industry lore that arose from the international popularity of youth series continued to restrict African Americans to comedic roles on television and to largely safe and inoffensive themes, where the tools of resistance were employed not against the white power structure, but against parental control. Still, these programs imagined a world in which mastery of the codes of African American youth culture and the underclass, rather than the codes of whiteness, adulthood, and middle-class culture, provided personal fulfillment and success in life. Although the popularity of rap music, as well as the discovery of ethnicity as a marketing tool among advertisers at the time, paved the way for African American youth series, significant changes in television delivery technologies and the institutional labors of the series among well-heeled buyers were necessary for these program flows to develop and to register in the dominant industry lore.

While industry insiders recognized the importance of African American themes in the worldwide appeal of these programs, that recognition was by no means universal. Even among executives within the same organization, disagreements existed about why these series were popular and whether their popularity signaled a shift in the fortunes of African

American programs among European audiences and buyers. Indeed, this era represents the beginning of the end of a coherent industry lore among U.S. and European executives about many things, including African American programs. While some industry insiders continue to assert that African American programs have trouble abroad, others insist that consistent rules no longer hold true.

Domesticating Youth Resistance in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*

The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air (1990–1996) was the progenitor of the African American youth sitcom. Starring the aspiring rap artist and actor Will Smith and set in a palatial mansion in the exclusive Los Angeles suburb of Bel-Air, *Fresh Prince* told the story of a teenage African American boy from the inner city of Philadelphia whose mother sends him to live with his rich cousins in California, the Banks family. Although the Banks also have two daughters as well as a mother, the majority of the stories revolved around Will, his cousin Carlton, and his Uncle Phil.

Superficially, *Fresh Prince* appeared to address themes and concerns similar to those of *The Cosby Show*. Both were set in intact and exceptionally well-off nuclear families. Both featured strong father figures who emphasized in their personal history and their interactions the importance of education for young African American men to succeed. However, while *The Cosby Show* consistently included storylines that addressed every member of the family with themes of personal growth, responsibility, and togetherness, *Fresh Prince* centered on male relationships, particularly teenage rivalry and father-son (or uncle-nephew) conflicts. While street life and black youth culture, particularly as figured through rap music, was the persistent if unnamed other that threatened to lure Theo Huxtable away from his studies and material success in *The Cosby Show*, *Fresh Prince* celebrated the hairstyles, clothing, speech, movement, and, above all, the music of black youth culture, which had become a global phenomenon by the mid-1990s.

When the series debuted in the fall of 1990, Will Smith (a.k.a. the Fresh Prince) had already established a reputation as a rapper with comparatively tame and clean lyrics at a time when rap music was under the microscope of parents' groups and Congress for its supposedly corrupting influence on children, particularly white suburban teens. Smith's Grammy Award–winning single "Parents Just Don't Understand," released in 1988, had become indicative of his inoffensive—some would say opportunistic—persona and music. The lyrics tell of the universal difficulties of teenage life. As Will explains it,

"You know parents are the same no matter time nor place. They don't understand that us kids are going to make some mistakes." Musically, the backbeat and spoken lyrics reference rap music, but without the themes of inner-city life and radical politics that had come to define the center of that genre in the 1980s. Visually, the video for the song alludes to the clothing styles, hairstyles, and graffiti of hip-hop culture, but not the inner-city surroundings common in most rap music videos of the time. In this way, the visuals continue the universalizing rhetoric of the lyrics, attempting to create a classless and raceless teenage landscape.

The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air picked up on the themes of universal teenage experience in order to draw in youthful and young adult audiences at a time when many U.S. households had become multichannel, multiset homes. In the period between the premiere of *The Cosby Show* and the series finale of *Fresh Prince*, the percentage of homes with multiple TV sets increased 15 percent to more than 71 percent of U.S. households, while 75 percent of multichannel homes could receive at least fifty-four channels by the mid-nineties (NCTA, 2011; TVB, 2010). As households added these television services, family viewing became less and less common, and more and more family members began watching individually.

Fresh Prince was not aimed exclusively at a teen audience; it sought, in fact, to include a good amount of thematic and narrative material that appealed to parents and adults as well. Although it was the top-rated television comedy among teenagers in 1992, it was also top twenty in overall audience ratings. One contemporary critic wrote that, despite the heavy presence of youth culture allusions, storylines, and characters, *Fresh Prince* was "one of the few on TV that consistently acknowledge[d] a full range of African-American lives" (Tucker, 1992). However, *Fresh Prince* needed to spotlight youth culture much more directly than *The Cosby Show*, given the changed television landscape in the home and the ability of many teenagers to abandon the set in the living room in favor of more niche-oriented programming on MTV, BET, and elsewhere in their bedrooms.

Fresh Prince is essentially a fish-out-of-water story: inner-city Will comes to live with his rich aunt, uncle, and cousins, who live in the predominantly white suburbs. The specific theme that the series stages is class conflict, which is coded in both gendered and racialized ways (Zook, 1999). In addition, the series staged a conflict between the hip-hop generation and the older civil rights generation in the person of Uncle Phil, which Todd Boyd (2001) identifies as the central division in African American popular representations of African American masculinity of the 1990s.

The series, then, drew on conflicting discourses about black masculinity at the time, specifically clashes among African Americans over class and racial authenticity, homosexuality, and generational differences. These central conflicts manifested as a clash between African American youth culture and assimilationist or white adult culture. In a related manner, the displacement of racial inauthenticity onto excessively rich characters worked to paper over anxieties at the time about the appropriation of hip-hop culture among middle-class suburbanites, especially whites, and the role that Will Smith and the series in general might have been playing in that process (Zook, 1999). In this regard, the series took the styles, discourses, and energies of the hip-hop movement and channeled them into the spaces and concerns of a largely deracinated suburban domestic setting.

Will and his cousin Carlton embody the clash between black youth cultures and white adult cultures most clearly. While Will wears bright colors, oversized clothes, and baseball caps, all commonly associated with hip-hop culture, Carlton wears prep-school styles: sweaters, dress shirts, khaki pants, and loafers. While Will speaks in street slang, Carlton uses grammatically proper diction and precise pronunciation. While Will's style of walking, moving his head, and hand gestures allude to African American street culture, Carlton's stuffiness extends even to his bodily movements, which are reserved and uptight. The stylistic differences between these two characters are figured not only through class difference, but through racial differences as well, with Will alluding to black popular culture and Carlton alluding to white adult culture. This difference comes across most readily in the soundtrack. Will frequently raps in his everyday conversation and even performs rap numbers. Carlton, meanwhile, adores the white lounge singer Tom Jones and occasionally lip-synchs his songs. Through the character of Carlton, then, white adult culture gets ridiculed as misguided and boring.

In a similar vein, adult African American culture gets dismissed as overly assimilationist through the character of Uncle Phil. Philip Banks is a judge with exceptional wealth who lives in a mansion in Bel-Air, California. A former civil rights activist, Banks now puts his reformist energies into raising his children well. Ultimately, though, the character represents capitulation to conventional social norms and goals of acquisitiveness. Uncle Phil shows little regard for his manservant, Geoffrey, the only recurring working-class character in the series. Furthermore, he has managed to raise two children who are utterly unaware of their own privilege, much less the history of their father's struggle. While Uncle Phil insists on the importance of education, tradition, and respect for authority, rarely does the narrative privilege these

ideals. More typically, they are gently mocked, much the same way that Will repeatedly makes fun of his uncle's weight. In fact, Philip Banks's fatness serves as a metonym for the political lethargy of affluent members of the civil rights generation.

Fresh Prince participated in debates at the time about whether gayness and class differences posed threats to conventional definitions of black masculinity, and the degree to which coherent definitions of black masculinity could withstand different claimant groups. However, the series tended to privilege Will's performance as the only legitimate one, endorsing the articulation of black masculinity as youthful, working-class (or, at minimum, not upper-class), straight, playful, focused on pleasure and enjoyment, and steeped in hip-hop culture. Carlton's and Uncle Phil's performances of black masculinity are sometimes treated with sympathy and dignity, but the ridicule they endure from Will and his friends prevents them from being characters whom viewers are likely to admire.

Importantly, tensions about the racial legitimacy of upper-class African Americans are limited to male characters in *Fresh Prince*. Though the series does raise concerns about the impact of upper-class life on African American women and girls, those concerns are not *racially* coded. Instead, these concerns surface most frequently as fears about spoiling young women. Will's cousin Hillary, a self-obsessed shopaholic, is the epitome of such concerns. His younger cousin, Ashley, is more conflicted, and it is the tension between becoming spoiled and remaining true to herself that animates her character development throughout the series. Finally, his aunt Vivian is rarely a significant narrative presence. Thus, while upper-class living may present pitfalls for African American women, loss of one's racial identity is not one of them.

Of course, many of the themes and debates that *Fresh Prince* engaged would have been unfamiliar to foreign viewers. Instead, European broadcasters emphasized the conflict between youth and adulthood in their scheduling of the series, even as they recognized the importance of hip-hop culture in representing that conflict. What a series like *Fresh Prince* does is take the resistance and rebelliousness of rap music, place it in conflict with white adult culture, and privilege the former. In other words, while rap music provided a lingua franca for youthful rebellion in many places in the 1990s, African American youth television provided a vehicle for channeling that resistance into one's personal life, as well as a utopian vision of a world where mastery of the codes of youth culture, rather than adult culture, could lead to personal success and a more playful, less success-oriented world. These two themes—the importance of youthful rebelliousness and the popularity of rap

music—were the primary elements of the program that found their way back into dominant industry lore at the time.

The Prince of a Place Called Bel-Air. And Spain. And Brazil. And Lebanon. And Kenya . . .

Just how successful was *Fresh Prince* in international markets? According to Warner Brothers, by 1997 the series had sold in more than seventy territories, rivaling sales of *The Cosby Show* at a time when American series faced significantly more competition in international markets. *Fresh Prince* often topped the ratings charts in importing markets. In Spain, where the series enjoyed perhaps its greatest popularity, it was the top-rated import in 1996, attracting nearly four million viewers weekly (Huff, 1996). It was still the top-ranked import in 1999, with an average 8.2 rating per episode in the first quarter, or more than one million viewers ("Top Series by Country," 1999). The upstart U.K. channel Trouble TV, a small cable channel targeting ten- to eighteen-year-olds, initially built its afternoon schedule—the channel's highest-rated time of day—around *Fresh Prince*, which aired at 4 P.M. and in 1998 attracted 160,000 viewers per episode, making it the channel's highest-rated program ("Top Import Moves Mover," 1998). In markets as far afield as Kenya, Hong Kong, and Lebanon, the series was one of the top imported television series.

While NBC's scheduling of *Fresh Prince* emphasized its familial and parental themes because of its prime-time placement, European broadcasters tended to use the series specifically to attract the youth audience, a scheduling innovation that only later appeared at U.S. syndicators, such as TeenNick, ABC Family, and Disney XD in the early twenty-first century. The United Kingdom's Trouble TV was, in many ways, the quintessential European *Fresh Prince* buyer, and the technological developments, industrial organization, and scheduling practices that led to Trouble's success with *Fresh Prince* are indicative of the series' institutional labors at channels across Europe. Trouble began broadcasting in 1998, sharing a channel with the U.K. version of Bravo, which programmed the evening time slots. Trouble identified an underserved niche of teens and tweens, an example of how the presence of global advertising helped create globally standardized conceptualizations of viewers everywhere. By the time Trouble came on air in 1998, other channels had already captured many of the more lucrative niches. In fact, Trouble's immediate predecessor, the Children's Channel, had failed to carve out a niche for young children in an overcrowded market. As the Children's Channel's fate demonstrates, launching new television channels was a

risky proposition at the time, and Trouble relied almost exclusively on cheap imports to help defray programming costs. Trouble avoided placing its most expensive programs in the highly competitive prime-time hours, constructing instead a schedule focused on after-school hours, when their target audience controlled the remote.

Trouble TV's replacement of *Fresh Prince* with a self-produced magazine series only months after launching also demonstrates the precariousness of a series like *Fresh Prince* on foreign broadcasters' schedules. Working with the adage that locally produced programs outperform imported series, Trouble developed a daily series focused on "celebrity interviews, teenage talent spots, music and competitions." The executive producer for the channel, Emilia Jonson, explained that Trouble had made the scheduling change "because this is produced in-house [and therefore] you get to reflect what's going on for teenagers in this country much more than if you buy up American shows" ("Top Import Moves Mover," 1998).

Fresh Prince, then, was appealing to European buyers from small channels targeting teenagers, but was quickly replaced with cheap local programs as soon as a channel could afford it. Similarly, among larger broadcasters, *Fresh Prince* served first and foremost as an inexpensive way to bring in a consistent, if not especially lucrative, audience demographic. BBC2, which began airing *Fresh Prince* in 1991, scheduled it at 18:25, prior to its prime-time lineup. In these instances, the series was likely to stay on the air for a significant amount of time only under two conditions: first, that it perform exceptionally well; second, that the channel's production efforts were focused on other time slots and demographics.

Among international television executives, *Fresh Prince* inaugurated a new global trend that helped create new markets for African American programs. Lisa Gregorian, then vice president of marketing and research for *Fresh Prince*'s distributor, Warner Brothers, told the trade journal *TV World* that "People say Cosby started this [trend], and he undoubtedly had a major role, but *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* broke the barriers of many territories that previously wouldn't have touched comedy like this" (Curtis, 1997, 36). Of course, Gregorian's observation was biased by the fact that she was selling the series. However, its popularity with buyers and audiences is undeniable, as is the fact that the series helped move other African American youth series and changed the way that sitcoms could be sold abroad (see fig. 4.1).

Bert Cohen, president of Worldvision, which sold the African American youth sitcom *Moesha* abroad, for instance, identified the popularity of *Fresh Prince* as crucial for driving sales of *Moesha*.[1] Similarly, Gary Schnedecker, a former acquisitions executive at Disney Channel España, commented, "I was

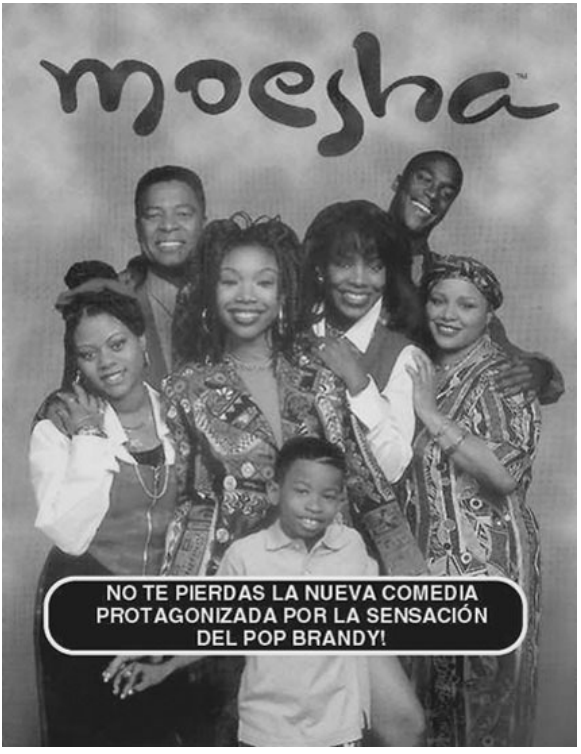

Figure 4.1. This advertisement for *Moesha* from Antena 3 demonstrates how the series was marketed as a tie-in with the pop singer Brandy, rather than a family-oriented series.

working at Disney Channel in Spain. And, in Spain, the [*Fresh*] *Prince of Bel-Air* was working like crazy. That's why at Disney Channel we bought *Moesha*. We bought *Moesha* because we knew that black comedies are [a] great success and so we thought the *Moesha* . . . would work also very well" (1999). This comment shows how competitive programming environments produce national and transnational trends, as programmers constantly scan competitors and the global markets for new developments. In addition, the comment offers a good example of how programming executives work as *interpreters* of tastes, rather than diviners. That is, the recognition that *Fresh Prince* was a hit in his market could have led this programmer to buy pop-star-driven white series, family shows featuring African Americans, or any number of other combinations. The fact that he likened *Fresh Prince* to *Moesha*, which is both more family-oriented and geared toward young women's concerns,

exhibits an active attempt to interpret what the appealing features of the former series were and apply them to available programming options.

Despite its eventual successes, however, *Fresh Prince* encountered the same kind of resistance among buyers when it first turned up on the world markets as many other hit African American series. Paloma Garcia-Cuesta (1999), acquisitions director at the Spanish channel Antena 3, which broadcast *Fresh Prince* in Spain, explained, "Apparently, there was no relation between those characters and Spanish people." Similarly, Torsten Dewi (1999), commissioning director of international coproduction at the German broadcaster Prosieben, expected the series to perform poorly because "Blacks are such a minority in Germany." An unnamed buyer even complained to a *New York Times* reporter after seeing *Fresh Prince* for sale at the L.A. Screenings in 1990, "How are we ever going to subtitle rap?" (Huff, 1996).

Buyers obviously thought that the language and culture of hip-hop spotlighted in *Fresh Prince* would be unfamiliar and off-putting for viewers. Nevertheless, several of them wound up with the series. For some, it was a matter of having few other purchase options. As we have seen, many came from small channels or were buying series for cheaper parts of the broadcast schedule. Others were from new, upstart channels trying to build up their audience numbers on the cheap. Both types of buyers sought to take advantage of the fact that buying imported television programming is almost always significantly cheaper than self-producing. While *Fresh Prince* might have been "idiosyncratically American," it was also comparatively cheap. Finally, a number of larger buyers wound up with *Fresh Prince* as a result of package deals, which had become commonplace in the international marketplace by the 1990s, and require buyers who are interested in broadcast rights to blockbuster films to also take a "package" of less appealing programming, including situation comedies. Several of the buyers I interviewed indicated that they had first acquired *Fresh Prince* through such arrangements.

Almost uniformly, buyers expressed surprise at how well *Fresh Prince* performed in their markets. Dewi from Prosieben, for instance, admitted that he "was surprised that [*Fresh Prince*] worked so well, because I thought . . . that it would have been much harder to establish" among German viewers. Executives at the Spanish broadcaster Antena 3 similarly claimed to be surprised by the series' performance, especially with teenage viewers, as did executives at the Mexican broadcaster TV Azteca (Durán, 1999).

Of course, the popularity of *Fresh Prince* among teenagers around the world did not take place in a vacuum, but rather built on particular historical precursors, most specifically the worldwide popularity of rap music among young people and the success of earlier youth-oriented American imports,

especially *Saved by the Bell* (1989–1993). In addition, widespread efforts by global advertisers to use ethnic difference, especially blackness, as a trope for modernity and cosmopolitanism likely influenced the popularity of the series as well.

Arising from the South Bronx in the 1970s, rap music was quickly adapted to a wide range of different national contexts, in places as diverse as South Korea, China, Brazil, Nigeria, and Italy. Tony Mitchell (2001) argues that rap music became a vehicle for political agitation, minority ethnic pride, and musical self-expression in foreign lands. "In its recombination into local linguistic, musical, and political contexts around the world, rap music and hip-hop culture have in many cases become a vehicle for various forms of youth protest" (10). Mitchell also demonstrates that a good deal of exchange and collaboration occurred among rap musicians from various nations throughout the late 1990s. Among listeners, meanwhile, American rap music had become popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In addition, due to the growth of cable music channels, teenagers in many parts of the world at the time were inundated with the sounds and imagery of African American youth culture. *Fresh Prince* both popularized and capitalized on these broader trends by introducing hip-hop culture to mainstream television genres and audiences. Of course, as discussed above, *Fresh Prince* channeled the rebelliousness of much rap music into domestic settings and interpersonal relationships, but this move by no means precluded viewers from seeking out other, more publicly political forms of rap, whether domestic or foreign.

If the worldwide spread of rap music in the 1980s and 1990s laid the groundwork for the popularity of *Fresh Prince* among audiences, as well as recognition of rap as a global cultural trend among industry insiders, the series' precursor, *Saved by the Bell*, demonstrated the viability of a transnational teenage television audience that would all watch the same programs. *Saved by the Bell*'s success allowed industry insiders to imagine that a television series based on a popular rap artist and targeting teen viewers could potentially be a success.

Saved by the Bell was a network show produced by NBC that initially aired during the Saturday morning children's programming block, which otherwise consisted exclusively of animated programs. Network executives viewed the series as risky because no live-action series had previously performed well in the time slot, but *Saved by the Bell* quickly attracted a devoted following, and is credited with almost single-handedly identifying and capturing the tween audience demographic, or those children who no longer watch cartoons, but also don't flock to adult shows, typically identified as the nine-to-fourteen age group in the United States. Prior to the success of *Saved by*

the Bell, this was not a demographic that was recognized by either advertisers or broadcasters. However, the audience fragmentation associated with increased channel capacity at the time made it possible for the demographic to emerge (Sherwood, 1992).

Despite NBC's willingness to take a risk on the series, however, its production costs required creative funding practices, including heavy reliance on international syndication revenues. The series was syndicated in eighty-five countries and reportedly sold for as much as $200,000 per episode in some markets. Foreign broadcasters such as the BBC and the German commercial broadcaster RTL II seem to have followed NBC's approach when scheduling the series, airing it on weekend mornings and during after-school hours. In addition, NBC relied on merchandising revenues to cover a percentage of production costs, though mostly in the domestic market. In these ways, NBC had largely covered its production costs for the series prior to domestic syndication, where it made the majority of its profits (Sherwood 1992; Kover, 1998).

Saved by the Bell focused on the antics of a group of friends at a California high school. Although its producers claimed the series was about the "universal" experiences of school, it addressed decidedly middle-class teenage concerns, especially personal relationships, as opposed to such working-class teen themes as balancing work and school, the impact of financial hardship on teenagers' personal relationships, or the difficulties of dealing with divorce. Despite its popularity both at home and abroad, however, *Saved by the Bell* produced few copycats beyond its own production house. The reasons behind the series' lack of followers are difficult to divine: perhaps the exceedingly low production costs were difficult for other producers to duplicate. Regardless of the reasons, however, the need for youth program imports continued and grew after the series' cancellation, as demonstrated by the inauguration of a Youth Program Screening event immediately before the global sales fair MIPCOM in 1994, which later came to be known as Mipcom, Junior. *Fresh Prince* capitalized on the same tween audience that *Saved by the Bell* had identified, although it developed a different model for attracting viewers and funding production.

Saved by the Bell targeted a tween audience at home and abroad; in contrast, *Fresh Prince* targeted a much wider domestic audience in prime-time and domestic syndication, while at upstart European satellite and cable channels it was used to draw in tweens. Of course, this was an evolving strategy, as opposed to the quite conscious demographic strategy of *Saved by the Bell*'s producers. First offered for domestic syndication in 1994, *Fresh Prince* was the top-rated new series along with *The Simpsons*. *Fresh Prince* proved

particularly strong among women eighteen to thirty-four and teens, and performed respectably among men eighteen to thirty-four (Tyrer, 1994). In international syndication, meanwhile, European buyers typically deployed *Fresh Prince* to attract teen and tween audiences exclusively.

Increasingly, domestic television networks abandoned the general audience for African American situation comedies in favor of more demographically focused audiences and programs. As Herman Gray (2005) has observed, African American programs have moved to the margins of the television schedule since the mid-1990s, appearing on cable networks or on the upstart broadcast networks WB and UPN. While a few general entertainment series, such as *My Wife and Kids* and *The Hughleys*, which tried to recapture the broader appeal of *The Cosby Show* and *Fresh Prince*, remained on network prime-time schedules, they slowly disappeared. Since the turn of the century, the primary outlets for African American youth series have been children's cable channels such as the Disney Channel and Nickelodeon, where they are used to attract both white and black tweens.

Industry Lore Recognizes African American Elements

Unlike the industry lore that came to surround *Roots* and *The Cosby Show*, the industry lore among European buyers and U.S. distributors about *Fresh Prince* and its descendants occasionally activated African American cultural themes when explaining the series' popularity. Specifically, industry insiders recognized that blackness signaled youthful rebellion, pleasure, and an incipient utopian vision of transnational youth culture and solidarity. Among non-European buyers, however, the industry lore surrounding the popularity of African American youth series in their territories was more continuous with prior perceptions, emphasizing the similarity of these series with prior African American imports and the cultural sensibilities of their viewers. Moreover, we begin to see disagreement in the dominant industry lore about African American programs among European and U.S. industry executives at this time that reflect the rapidly changing industrial and cultural environments of television distributors and networks.

Despite the initial hesitancy of some buyers toward a television series rooted in African American youth culture, several of them began to view such themes as central to their institutional priorities of attracting teen and tween viewers. Because of the groundwork done by rap music and, perhaps, the history of associations between black culture and such notions as pleasure, resistance, and toughness in the West, many European show buyers believed that African American youth series were better at drawing those

viewers than their white counterparts. "I think because [black sitcoms] are a little more hip and the culture of music is obviously a very important part of those comedies, and therefore it does touch with the youth far more than . . . white sitcoms," says Jeff Ford, controller of acquisitions for British Channel 5. Paloma Garcia-Cuesta of Spanish Antena 3, Schnedecker of Disney Channel España, and Dewi of German Prosieben expressed similar sentiments in favor of acquiring African American youth series.

What distinguished these series from white series, in addition to the use of established pop stars as central characters, were allusions to hip-hop culture through dress, rap music, graffiti, dance, and language. Among U.S. television executives, such programs came to be called "urban" or "ethnic" television series, and nearly every executive I interviewed chose to define such series based on their use of language, rather than any of the other features just mentioned. An executive at one of the major Hollywood studios who has distributed many ethnic African American sitcoms explained, "most African American sitcoms produced today . . . definitely have a very urban skew to them, meaning there's no Russian word for 'whassup homeboy.' There's no translation for it, and most of our sitcoms really skew toward our urban African American viewers" (personal communication with the author, 1999). Bob Clark (1999), a white American and president of the commercial Russian network Story First Communications, agreed: "A lot of ethnic comedies in America don't travel particularly well to foreign audiences, because there's almost a different language in them." Given the need to translate U.S. programming in most markets, this focus on language, as opposed to other textual features, works to exclude the possibility that television programs that allude to African American youth subcultures are capable of international sales, whereas defining them by reference to other textual features would not be as damning. In the 1990s the perception that sitcoms could not travel well abroad still persisted, specifically because most humor in situation comedies of the day was based in word-play, pun, innuendo, and other linguistic forms. Most industry insiders agree that translating linguistic humor to another language is challenging, and often fails because so much of it is culturally and linguistically specific. Consequently, the suggestion that African American shows are steeped in slang makes them appear doubly difficult to translate successfully.

It is important to recognize that these impressions of the textual features that facilitate or block successful international syndication are not properties of the texts themselves, but are instead produced by television executives. In other words, they could have chosen to focus on textual features of ethnic series that help facilitate international sales when discussing these shows.

Furthermore, we cannot look to successes and failures in international sales to solve the riddle of what kinds of black cultural elements might travel well abroad, because program merchants will tend to interpret successes in a way that is consistent with their perceptions of the markets. Look, for example, at the tortured logic of one Warner Brothers executive, who is convinced that ethnic series don't sell abroad, trying to explain the success of *Fresh Prince*. "[Fresh Prince] does have a lot of vernacular in the way he talks, but not in the way the rest of the family talks," he explains. "The rest of the family talks very white. . . . So with everyone talking normally and him with the occasional whassup, I think it has more of an international appeal."

Of course, the question remains why television executives would work so hard to explain why their programming is unsalable. The answers to this are difficult to fully divine, and probably numerous: they include unexamined assumptions about race that color their perceptions, institutional priorities that favor other genres and discourage much thought about situation comedies, and an active effort to distance their companies from heavy involvement in African American programming, as a hedge against being seen as only a niche-oriented company.

It is significant to note that none of the European buyers I interviewed shared the perception that the heavy use of slang in African American youth series limited the series' potential appeal abroad. In fact, as with most of the other elements of youth culture, they tended to see the language of the program as an advantage. Dewi from Germany's Prosieben, for instance, explained that, when translating African American youth series, "They keep most of the terms like 'homeboy' and 'yo' and 'whassup' and they just translate the rest . . . —the stuff that kids also know from rap records. They listen to rap records, they know some of the stuff rappers are saying, so you can basically keep that." Garcia-Cuesta from Spanish Antena 3 sounded a similar note when asked whether the language of *Fresh Prince* and other African American youth sitcoms was difficult for viewers or translators, saying, "the black people [are] related to the teenage and American culture that they know through the cinema, music, etc." In fact, another executive for Warner Brothers, a European primarily familiar with European markets and buyers, insisted that she had "never heard" that the use of slang in *Fresh Prince* and other African American programs posed difficulties for buyers. The disagreement within Warner Brothers about the transferability of African American slang demonstrates the beginning of the dissolution of a coherent dominant industry lore regarding African American youth programs.

Despite negative perceptions of African American programs that utilize a substantial amount of nonstandard English, the tendency of such series

to liberally employ visual comedy helps offset their linguistic limitations in the eyes of some television executives. Trade journal articles generally report agreement among industry insiders about the transferability of visual comedy, or slapstick, because such comedy does not require the kinds of cultural knowledge that linguistic humor does. According to a 1996 *Television Business International* article on the improved fortunes of American situation comedies on world markets in the 1990s, "what does work, say executives, are those shows with strong visual comedy or those with a strong family theme such as *Family Matters* or *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*" (Huff, 1996). One executive I interviewed, a president of international television at one of the Hollywood studios, concurred: "If there's physical humor or slapstick, that would translate a little better than if it's in-the-hood type vernacular." Dewi from the German station Prosieben agreed as well. "The first season of *Family Matters* did not work well for us," he explained, "but [in] the second season, when [Steve] Urkel showed up, which is a very broad, slapstick character, the show really took off."

Of course, black slapstick is controversial due to the long history in the West of stereotyping blacks through such comedy to achieve racist political ends. Since their inception in nineteenth-century minstrel shows, mainstream depictions of African Americans in white popular culture have exhibited "an overriding investment in the [black] body" (Lott, 1993, 10). While minstrelsy cannibalized and mocked slave culture with specific political consequences, the stereotypes formulated during the era of minstrelsy continue to inform representations of African American characters in popular culture, especially in comedy genres like the black sitcom. Much of the humor in these shows comes from visual comedy, such as Steve Urkel's high-water jeans, suspenders, and nerd-like gait in *Family Matters* or Will Smith's overly broad parodies of male sexuality in *Fresh Prince*, which retains its comic integrity across cultures and takes less time, and hence less money, to translate. As U.S. television programs face more and better-polished competition in the world market, especially in Europe, the practice of hiring local writers and comedians to translate sitcoms is becoming more and more common, a process that is estimated to increase the costs of translation by as much as 50 percent (Huff, 1996).

While slapstick travels well, then, it is also potentially offensive to one of the main target audiences in the domestic markets, African Americans. In fact, it would be possible to write the history of African American television comedy as a persistent effort to find ways to include slapstick without risking offense. As we will see in the next chapter, contemporary television comedies try to resolve this dilemma by ridiculing both black and nonblack

cultures and by channeling criticism at media portrayals of African Americans, rather than particular communities of African Americans.

Both *Fresh Prince* and *Family Matters* solved the riddle of how to retain slapstick comedy while trying not to alienate crucial African American viewers by endowing their primary satirical characters with white cultural allusions. Both Carlton in *Fresh Prince* and Steve Urkel in *Family Matters* are made ridiculous through their association with white culture. In the case of Carlton, as we have already seen, his uptight physical movements, his frenetic dance style, his diction, and his dreams are all coded as white. Steve Urkel is made ridiculous by his love of polka music, perhaps the whitest music in America. This inclusion of African American characters endowed with white cultural values, often paired with other characters steeped in African American youth culture, became one of the primary representational strategies of African American youth series during this time. These portrayals appealed to many youthful white viewers as well, for whom white adult culture signaled stagnation, boredom, and cultural vacuousness (hooks, 1992). While European youth might not have been the primary audience, the perception that they responded to the celebration of African American youth culture and satire of white adult culture in similar ways certainly helped fuel this particular representational strategy.

A variety of industrial practices, economic demands, industry discourses, and representational strategies led to the impression among some European and U.S. distributors that situation comedies featuring young people, especially established pop stars, with allusions to African American youth culture in characters' clothing and speech, as well as through setting, music, comedy, and dance, could travel well internationally. As we have seen, this emerging industry lore was unique in its recognition of the potential transnational appeal of African American televisual portrayals. Outside the West, however, industry executives tended to understand the popularity of *Fresh Prince* and other youth sitcoms in a way that was more continuous with their perceptions of prior series, rather than as a significant break.

Buyers in Mexico, the Middle East, and South Africa who target family audiences that are less affluent than Europeans identified a connection between blackness and economic struggle that their audiences prefer, and which they identify with most African American television series. Ignacio Durán, vice president of international affairs at the Mexican broadcaster TV Azteca, claimed that "In Mexico, we don't have any Black population at all, but what we have found is that the racial conflicts have to be translated into class conflicts. . . . Black comedies will do better [than white comedies] in Mexico or in Latin America because the element of the underdog

is there . . . and this will probably cause an identification with the audience" (interview with the author, 1999).[2] Perhaps somewhat incongruously, Durán included both *Fresh Prince* and the 1970s series *The Jeffersons*, a spin-off of *All in the Family* featuring a nouveau riche African American family living on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, as examples of class underdogs. The reason, according to Durán, is that both of these series focus on characters who come from poor backgrounds and are struggling to adjust to rich, white American culture.

In a similar vein Bassam Hajjawi (1999), president and CEO of International Distribution Agency, which brokers programming for major U.S. distributors to general entertainment channels throughout the Middle East, explained, "Most of the black situation comedies are about middle-class or lower-middle-class people. For many people in the Middle East, they associate and sympathize with that kind of life . . . and if they see these [white] situation comedies always with the high-brow politicians or the millionaires, they don't sympathize as much." These examples point to a clear understanding on the part of non-Western programmers targeting predominantly nonwhite viewers that important historical, cultural, and economic connections exist among nonwhites around the world.

For Khalid Abdilaziz Al-Mugaiseeb (1998), CEO of Kuwait Television Channel 2, the similarities between African American and Arab cultures also include personal style and gender relations and help target his primary family audiences much better than white sitcoms. "In white comedy," he says, "it's like the aliens talking from another planet. They're talking about rednecks and hot dogs. Black people, they talk about things in the house." In fact, Al-Mugaiseeb notes a good deal of cultural resonance between African American and Kuwaiti communication styles and comedy. "Most of what we accept from all the comedy is black," he explains. "Culturally, it's more similar. . . . Black comedy, especially the women, the way they act it's like Arabic women—the shaking of heads and such, some of it's Arab. . . . And the way [men] hit [on women] is like Arabs."

As one of the first African American series distributed abroad in the wake of worldwide privatization, deregulation, and channel fragmentation, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* was capable of performing a wide range of institutional labors, from drawing in prime-time family viewers in the Middle East to helping fill newly launched niche and sub-niche channels in Europe and Latin America. Unlike the institutional labors of integrated sitcoms in South Africa in the 1980s, which we examined in chapter 2, the uses of *Fresh Prince* were widespread enough to capture the attention of some distributors, particularly those working the closest with buyers and those from independent

distribution firms. Put slightly differently, the institutional labors of *Fresh Prince* among certain niche broadcasters led to revised industry lore about the suitability of certain elements of African American culture for global exchange. These elements included the satire of middle-class culture, especially white culture; the rebelliousness, sexuality, and vulgarity of hip-hop culture and rap music; and debates about authentic forms of ethnic and gender identity. This nascent industry lore was widespread but certainly not all-pervasive, leading even to disagreement among executives working for the same media conglomerate.

Arriving as it did on the cusp of the transition from the network to the "post-network" or "matrix" era of television (Curtin and Shattuc, 2009; Lotz, 2007), *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* was the first globally traded African American series to benefit from this new corporate logic. While its immediate successors were cut from similar cloth in terms of genre, demographic slant, and cultural allusions, the continuing fragmentation and uncertainty of the present era has led to a handful of distinctive international institutional labors and industry discourses related to contemporary African American series. In addition, one of the main consequences of the current industrial changes has been the dissolution of a single, dominant form of industry lore, which became ascendant during the era of *The Cosby Show*, and has since splintered into different pockets of industry lore centered on buyers and sellers that specialize in similar program types and demographics.