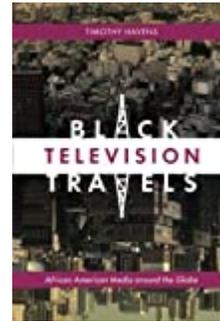




**Timothy Havens.** *Black Television Travels: African American Media around the Globe.* New York: New York University Press, 2013. xii + 215 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-3720-0; \$23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-3721-7.



**Reviewed by** Kim Gallon

**Published on** Jhistory (May, 2014)

**Commissioned by** Heidi Tworek (Harvard)

## The International Lure (Lore) of Black Television

How does African American television labor internationally for the benefit of mainstream American television programming? What discourses about blackness are circulated through global television circuits? How are African American television shows received internationally? These questions and others drive Timothy Havens's research into the global dispersal of African American television in *Black Television Travels: African American Media around the Globe*. Despite relatively few sources at his disposal (television broadcaster archives were largely closed to him), Havens argues that the globalization of African American television (series that make consistent reference to African American political, thematic or cultural concerns) highlights the limits of network television for producing progressive politics of race even as it opens a range of transnational meanings around blackness (p. 7).

Arranged chronologically to document the evolution of not only African American television sold abroad but also the international distribution of the broader domestic television industry, *Black Television Travels* explains

the relationship between industry issues such as domestic syndication and marketing and selling television in international markets. Havens informs us that U.S. television executives often depend on various global television sectors' acquisition of U.S. programming to pay for the cost of producing domestic television shows for the first three seasons. Unlike syndication in domestic markets in which there is a delay of at least three seasons before a show can be sold to other networks, industry executives internationally market shows as early as possible to generate revenue. Over the long term, however, international syndication is not as important; domestic syndication is far more profitable. Further, Havens reveals that a confluence of factors, which include lower costs than original programming and countries' deregulation and privatization of their television industries, creates greater opportunities for the distribution of U.S. television programming internationally.

Havens examines these vast changes and charts and maps the flow of black television. In order to do this he defines industry executives' discussion of African Amer-

ican television and its ability to successfully migrate to international markets as "industry lore." This is, perhaps, one of the most compelling parts of the book and allows Havens to thread together a group of African American television shows from different time periods. Industry lore, however, should not be considered homogeneous. Indeed, reveals Havens, it is diffuse and diverse, acting as a "transnational conduit" for U.S. television programming across the world (p. 5). Additionally, industry lore is far from a simple channel or a means of exchange. It is socially constituted in the unique fabric of U.S. race relationships from which industry executives operate. According to Havens, industry lore in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century came to rest on two predominate views: television programming as having universal qualities and serving as a cultural journey for viewers. Although Havens fails to provide racial demographics of industry executives, one might assume from his discussion that they are disproportionately white. In this regard, Havens informs us that U.S. industry lore is deeply privileged with a white dominant view of how to promote African American television programming in international markets.

One area of concern in Havens's introduction to the text occurs in his statement that commercial cultural industries which determine what images of African Americans we see nationally and internationally do not have a stake in the production, maintenance, and continuation of elite white rule. In so saying, he sets up a false dichotomy between the state's biopower, to use, as Havens does, Foucault's term, and culture industries's economic power or drive toward the bottom line. While Havens is certainly correct to focus on industry executives's preoccupation with profits, this should not suggest that conscious or unconscious concerns with the political power of whiteness is not also at play in industry discourse. Havens sheds light on the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) 1993 repeal of the Financial Interest and Syndication rules, which had prohibited national networks from profiting from shows they broadcast. The removal of this rule greatly constricted television producers's ability to generate revenue and limited their creative control over programming, suggesting that a relationship between the state and culture industries does indeed exist. In *Black Sexual Politics*, Patricia Hill Collins also identifies a connection between corporate media images and the political status of white and black Americans, arguing that social hierarchy in the post-civil rights movement era, "relies more heavily on mass media to reproduce and disseminate the ideologies needed to justify racism." [1]

Just as important, Havens's larger arguments throughout *Black Television Travels* suggest a substantial correlation between television programming and state interests in an international context. Contrary to the assumptions of U.S. industry executives, international syndication of African American television is often successful in a variety of countries for different reasons. Havens's first chapter chronicles the global success of the 1977 miniseries *Roots* and its corresponding reception in various European television markets. According to Havens a country's specific political-economic situation often influenced broadcasters's importation of the series. For instance, Havens tells us that while West Germans used *Roots* to foster discussions about the Holocaust, Hungarians, in contrast, avoided discussing their role in the genocide of Jews. The economic-political backdrop of each country, argues Havens, shaped its framing of the series. Interestingly, in both cases, Germany and Hungary were less interested in examining the history of African Americans. However, *Roots*'s commercial success in these and other countries indicated to U.S. industry executives that domestic and particularly African American television shows could sell well internationally. Yet, as Havens puts it, instead of producing and promoting more African American television programming, U.S. industry executives were constrained by the "abounds of whiteness" and opted not to pursue more African American and mini series programming in the short term, though mini series programming would come back into vogue in the early 1980s (p. 54).

Havens moves through the rest of the book tracing the travels of African American television programming from the 1980s through the first decades of the twenty-first century. In one of the most interesting chapters in the book, Havens reveals how the South African broadcaster Bophuthatswana Broadcasting Corporation, or BOP-TV, deployed the 1980s show *Benson* (1979-86), known for its integrated casting, to speak to anti-apartheid sentiment and act as a counter to the more politically conservative South African Broadcasting Corporation. Havens also relates that *The Cosby Show*'s (1984-92) international success saw industry executives revise their thinking about domestic television exports, particularly ones that had African Americans at their center. In this sense, industry lore around *The Cosby Show* suggest that its emphasis on middle-class family values resulted in the show having universal (i.e., not black) values that would sell well across national boundaries and cultural differences. Thus race and African American culture was largely ignored as the reason for its

success. Calling *The Cosby Show* revolutionary in its importance, Havens states that the show established a new standard for industry executives, who began to factor potential international syndication profits into the development of new programming.

Havens uses the rest of the book to analyze the industry lore of shows such as *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (1990-96), *Everyone Loves Chris* (2005-09), *The Chappell Show* (2003-06), *The Wire* (2002-08), and *Boondocks* (2005-present). These shows reflected a far from unanimous industry lore that constructed and marketed African American youth culture through *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* as a transnational discourse that appealed to youth around the globe. Havens also labels these shows as contemporary African American television, suggesting that they demonstrate the presence of an increased and more diverse image of African Americans on television. Still, Havens notes that the progressiveness of *The Wire*, for example, is limited by stereotypical images of African Americans involved in crime in urban settings.

The book's last chapter complicates what we might label as black television in Havens's analysis of television produced outside of the United States. Havens's discussion of *broâTown* (2004-09), an animated New Zealand series about Polynesian teenagers, in this section is most interesting. Despite its regular references to Polynesian culture and language, Haven argues that the show uses and deploys African American rhetorical strategies in order to make claims about the marginalization of indigenous and nonwhite people in New Zealand. However, rather than downplaying the show's allusions to local culture in their efforts to market the show internationally, industry executives incorporated these features into a new industry lore which cast the show as a cultural journey for viewers outside of New Zealand.

Havens suggests that the idea of cultural journeys is an emerging industry lore that television executives suggest helps viewers understand international programs as introducing and translating cultures that appear foreign to U.S. audiences. Instead of championing television programs that contain universal qualities which will appeal to transnational audiences, industry executives seek to find ways to market international shows geared toward specific audiences to new and different viewers in the United States.

The final chapter also features Havens's examination of the global distribution of Nigerian or "Nollywood" video films and *Noh Matta Wat* (2005-08), a Belizean television show. In both cases, Havens argues that illicit global flows (bootleg copies) undercut the show's efforts to profit from syndication. Ironically, points out Havens, the underground circulation of international black television programming demonstrates its popularity and its potential for global success once industry executives can develop distribution strategies that cannot be co-opted.

In the continued search for global cultural connections between people, Havens introduces us to the way that the television medium constructs institutional discourse, which transmits ideas and perceptions about race across transnational boundaries through African American television. *Black Television Travels*, then, provides students of Africana and African American studies, media and communication, and critical race theory among other disciplines another path to understanding transnational flows of communication about race and blackness.

#### Note

[1]. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 34.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

**Citation:** Kim Gallon. Review of Havens, Timothy, *Black Television Travels: African American Media around the Globe*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. May, 2014.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40329>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.