

Edited by Alfred L. Martin, Jr.

IN FOCUS

Race-ing Media Industry and Production Studies

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Introduction

I am writing this introduction as the world grapples with the growing threat of COVID-19. And as angry and uncertain as the virus has made many of us, I want to use it productively to illuminate the urgency and utility of this In Focus section on race and media industry and production studies. On March 16, President Trump tweeted calling COVID-19 the “Chinese Virus,” igniting a tweetstorm and a news cycle in which the content of the tweet was admonished and rightly called out for its blatant racism.¹ Trump’s tweet also recalled “yellow peril” discourses in which, so the stereotype goes, Asian-descended people were hell-bent on destroying white civilization.² At the same time, in calling out and admonishing the tweet, there was little room for a discussion of why these discourses about the alleged “yellow peril” persist. In other words, the stereotype and discourse were acknowledged, but there was no space for interrogating why the discourse is so readily available and culturally (re)produced. By focusing on the image or, in this case, the language Trump used, it is easy to “correct” the offensive behavior and representation. An apology or a vow to do better in the future works to make the offense go away but never interrogates the systems that have produced such discourses. This In Focus turns its attention to those systems.

Often, when an image is deemed offensive or representation fails to mirror the demographic realities of American culture, it is easy to remove the offending representation (if the right amount of pressure from the “right” people has been applied) or to increase representation. As Kristen Warner suggests, simply moving the

1 Bloomberg News Writers, “Trump’s ‘Chinese Virus’ Tweet Adds Fuel to Fire with Beijing,” Bloomberg, March 17, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-17/trump-s-chinese-virus-tweet-adds-fuel-to-fire-with-beijing>.

2 Doobo Shim, “From Yellow Peril through Model Minority to Renewed Yellow Peril,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 22, no. 4 (October 1998): 387–388.

Alfred L. Martin, Jr., “Introduction: Race-ing Media Industry and Production Studies,” *JCMS* 60, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 134–137.

goalposts of representational expectations ultimately only makes the goalposts more attainable “for those in power who can make those changes.”³ “More representation” is a relatively easy target to hit. Recall that after *Empire* (2015–2020) premiered on Fox and became a ratings boon for the network, other networks rushed to “brown” their lineups with Black-cast series including an adaptation of *Uncle Buck* (ABC, 2016) starring Nia Long and Mike Epps and *Marlon* (NBC, 2017–2018) starring Marlon Wayans. As *Uncle Buck* demonstrated, sometimes these representations result in what Warner calls “plastic representation” because they take a white-cast film and substitute Black bodies without adjusting for the cultural specificities of Blackness. In answering the call for more representations of Black folks, Black-cast series like *Uncle Buck* use “the wonder that comes from seeing characters on screen who serve as visual identifiers for specific demographics in order to flatten the expectation to desire anything more . . . Plastic representation operates as a system that reifies Blackness into an empirical system of ‘box checking.’”⁴ The rush to quantifiably increase representation with series like *Uncle Buck* resulted in what Herman Gray calls a “hypervisibility” of the once-object object.⁵

However, even as networks, channels, and platforms “browened” their content offerings, delivering what activists asked, many of those shows disappeared as quickly as they appeared. For example, although *Uncle Buck*’s season finale “averaged 3.8 million total viewers . . . an 81% lift from ABC’s performance in the same time period over the course of the same four weeks a year ago” and “averaged a 1.2 rating in the 18–49 demo, more than double ABC’s average from a year earlier,” the show was canceled after its inaugural season.⁶ Put simply, more representation of people of color is often fleeting because of the precariousness of television generally and, as some scholars have noted, the precariousness of Black-cast television specifically.⁷ Focusing on the image alone would not interrogate the systems that create and engender a platform’s, channel’s, and network’s momentary engagement with race in their programming.

In this way, this In Focus calls for a sustained engagement with race and “representation plus”—because studying representation alone is no longer enough (if it ever was). In the plus-ness of representation, the call is for an examination of the systems that produce images and not “just” bringing theoretical toolboxes and one’s personal affect to bear on a media text. It suggests a shift from asking *how* an image represents people of color as well as people of color with intersectional identities to *why* an image looks as it does. This movement from *how* to *why* research questions allows the study of the image itself but also forces an examination of the industrial discourses that produce such images. In such a shift, the brief essays within this dossier not only explore their respective case studies and their attendant issues around representation but also illuminate what asking questions outside of image studies yields.

At the same time, the essays here push against the constraints of image studies as well as interrogate the broad propensity of media studies (and media industry and

3 Kristen J. Warner, “In the Time of Plastic Representation,” *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 37.

4 Warner, “Plastic Representation,” 35, 36.

5 Herman Gray, “Subject(ed) to Recognition,” *American Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (December 2013): 772.

6 Daniel Holloway, “‘Uncle Buck’ Cancelled by ABC,” *Variety*, July 6, 2016, <https://variety.com/2016/tv/news/uncle-buck-cancelled-by-abc-1201809381/>.

7 See Kristal Brent Zook, *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Alfred L. Martin, Jr., *The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sitcom* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021).

production studies by extension) to exnominate whiteness, thus allowing whiteness to function as both invisible and universal.⁸ Much of the scholarship considered seminal to media industry and production studies is overwhelmingly *white* media industry and production studies. In the process of exnominating whiteness—which, of course, is also raced—studies of those understood as raced (Black, Asian, Latinx, Southeast Asian, and First Nation folks) are understood as particular. Put another way, when race and production practices are studied, the findings are considered to be extrapolatable only to those studying race in media production and not to those who study unnamed whiteness within media industries.

This In Focus centers the production of racialized images, borrowing from and extending media production and industry studies, and offers a mediation on images that help to explain the machinations of the media industries. Such critique helps to explain why images look the way(s) they do, regardless of whether they are construed as “positive” or “negative.” Instead of guessing at the answers to these questions, or “reading the text” for clues, these short essays turn to industry discourse and interviews with industry executives and professionals to better understand the ways race circulates within industrial and cultural discourse. Certainly, this call for the integration of race and media industry and production studies is not entirely new. Some scholars have begun focusing on the importance of studying race and media industry and production practices, including, but not limited to, Arlene Dávila, Jennifer Fuller, Timothy J. Havens, Isabel Molina-Guzmán, Aswin Punathambekar, Anamik Saha, Kristen Warner, Kristal Brent Zook, and me.⁹ However, the contributions within this dossier continue to center production and industry as they are related to race in media. Through examinations of training programs designed to increase diversity, independent production practices, activism around “negative” representations, selective uses of sales figures, and the post-racialization of algorithms, the authors in this In Focus are concerned with the production of racialized content and the (re)production of race, audiences, and taste cultures.

This dossier begins with Anamik Saha arguing for political economic approaches to media. Calling for a shift in scholars’ collective thinking about studying race-making practices, Saha encourages more work that attempts to decouple capitalism and industrial ideologies. Saha’s essay suggests that the discursive focus on inclusion has resulted in the establishment of training and pipeline programs that have largely left the publishing industry as white as it had been before implementing such initiatives. Next, Aymar Jean Christian and Khadijah Costley White theorize “organic representation” as representation that is “sourced” from local communities. Organic representation is both for and by the people such programming aims to represent and is inextricably connected to production practices that privilege the sociopolitical positionality (including the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality) of those being represented. This form of representation is most typically possible

8 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Noonan Press, 1972), 138.

9 Arlene Dávila, *Latinos Inc: The Marketing and Making of a People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Jennifer Fuller, “Branding Blackness on U.S. Cable Television,” *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 2 (March 2010): 285–305; Timothy Havens, *Black Television Travels: African American Media around the Globe* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Alfred L. Martin Jr., “Scripting Black Gayness: Television Authorship in Black-Cast Sitcoms,” *Television & New Media* 16, no. 7 (November 2015): 648–663; Isabel Molina-Guzmán, “Commodifying Black Latinidad in US Film and Television,” *Popular Communication* 11, no. 3 (August 2013): 211–236; Aswin Punathambekar, *From Bombay to Bollywood: The Making of a Global Media Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Anamik Saha, *Race and the Cultural Industries* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018); Kristen J. Warner, *The Cultural Politics of Color-blind TV Casting* (New York: Routledge, 2015); and Zook, *Color by Fox*.

outside “traditional” legacy media and platforms. In advocating for organic representation and for reparative investments by media companies and by drawing connections between organic food production and media production, Christian and White suggest a new phase of media production in the networked era. In the following essay, Madhavi Mallapragada uses the documentary *The Problem with Apu* (Michael Melamedoff, 2017) to expose the paradoxes inherent within South Asian American representation in white-produced media and white-dominated media industries. Conducting a discursive analysis of interviews, tweets, and press accounts of the documentary, Mallapragada interrogates the systems of power that produce and distribute representations of South Asian Americans.

Kathryn M. Frank’s essay examines the comic book industry’s use of industry lore—the industrial discourses, often about race, that circulate about the viability of certain media properties whose very existence relies on industry professionals’ “gut” instinct versus research. Frank demonstrates how comic book industry decision makers cherry-pick specific data that does not include all points of sales to justify catering to white comic book “fan boys” and then lament that they themselves desire diverse content but must respect the market. Finally, Timothy J. Havens calls for a new research agenda with respect to algorithmic data in order to encourage, and perhaps force, streaming giants like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime to consider and recognize racial and ethnic taste cultures in production, distribution, and acquisition decisions.

Taken together, the short essays focus on race in media industries and eschew issues of representation or address them only to introduce larger concerns. In so doing, these essays examine the linkages between race and several media industries: book publishing, independent media, documentary film, comic books, and streaming platforms. The authors in this In Focus suggest not only production interventions in commercially and independently produced media but also a disruption of monolithic imaginings of racialized audiences within the pre-production, production, and post-production/distribution phases of media texts. At the same time, these essays work together to create an agenda toward a serious examination of racial images from behind the camera rather than just from in front of it.

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Production Studies of Race and the Political Economy of Media

The turn toward production in media and cultural studies, and the focus on what Herman Gray calls “race-making practices,” has reinvigorated race and media research that is seemingly forever stuck at the level of the text and the question of representation.¹ Textual study of a film, television show, music video, or web series can certainly produce valuable insights about the nature of racial ideology, at least in terms of the version of reality produced by the text in question. However, the absence of contextual detail—and particularly the lack of concern for how such cultural goods are the end result of industrial, rationalized, and bureaucratized processes—is a significant blind spot.

Most production studies of race work are within the cultural studies tradition of media research. Cultural studies is generally associated with the study of texts and audiences, but as Timothy Havens underlines—referring to Marxist theorist Raymond Williams’s famous dissection of the base-superstructure relationship—an interest in production was present in the field from the very outset.² Cultural studies of production analyze the social worlds through which cultural commodities are made. This entails midlevel analyses that unpack the dynamic between economic

1 Herman Gray, “Precarious Diversity: Representation and Demography,” in *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor*, ed. Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 249.

2 Timothy Havens, “Media Industry Sociology: Mainstream, Critical, and Cultural Perspectives,” in *Media Sociology: A Reappraisal*, ed. Silvio Waisbord (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014).

and cultural forces shaping cultural production. One must pay particular attention to the agency of creative workers, how they are constrained by and work against commercial pressures, and how this impacts the form and nature of cultural commodities.³ In the context of race and media research, the focus has been on how the industrial nature of cultural production impacts the representation of race, often in reductive ways.⁴

While studies of race and production have provided original and much needed empirical insight into the dynamics that shape race-making practices in media, in this brief essay I argue that production studies of race would benefit from a greater engagement with the political economy approach to media. In the past, cultural studies and political economy traditions have been placed in a false dichotomy, although thankfully most scholars have rejected this.⁵ There are many reasons critical media research would benefit from fusing cultural industries and political economy approaches, but I argue that production studies of race need to incorporate political economy analyses of capitalism in order to formulate more effective political strategies that can disrupt the reproduction of racial stereotypes.

Production studies of race within cultural studies tend to focus on the question of ideology rather than structure. The danger is that racial ideology is conflated with capitalist ideology; that is, they are regarded as one and the same. If we were to ask the question, is capitalism more interested in extracting surplus value or reinforcing racial hierarchies?, the answer for many critical race scholars would be an easy one: capitalism does both. But is it as simple as that? While scholars of race have rightly challenged the economic reductionism of a vulgar Marxism that states that the only way to eliminate racism is to dismantle capitalism through class-based politics alone, there is a danger in assuming that eradicating racial ideology is enough to overcome the exploitative effects of capitalism. Instead we need—in the cultural studies tradition—a conjunctural analysis that understands racial ideology and capitalist ideology as two separate forces that are inextricably intertwined. As sociologist Ben Pitcher states, “racism is not and has never been intrinsic to capitalism. Racism is a phenomenon that has always been contingent on wider social, cultural and institutional practice.”⁶ Pitcher argues that racism is not natural to capitalism, but he does not consider it a mere by-product of capitalism either. Rather, racism is an independent force shaped by capitalism in particular ways in specific historical moments.

Such an insight highlights the need for production studies of race to adopt a historical analysis in order to better understand how at different moments of crisis, economic, social, cultural, and political forces come together in very specific ways to shape race-making practices.⁷ Put another way, a concerted engagement with racial capitalism produces a deeper analysis of how media makes race and why race comes

3 Timothy J. Havens, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic, “Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2, no. 2 (2009): 234–253.

4 Alfred L. Martin Jr., “Scripting Black Gayness: Television Authorship in Black-Cast Sitcoms,” *Television & New Media* 16, no. 7 (2015): 648–663; Timothy Havens, *Black Television Travels: African American Media around the Globe* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Anamik Saha, *Race and the Cultural Industries* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018); and Clive James Nwonka, “The New Babel: The Language and Practice of Institutionalised Diversity in the UK Film Industry,” *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 17, no. 1 (2019): 24–46, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2020.0506>.

5 David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2013), 59.

6 Ben Pitcher, “Race and Capitalism Redux,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 46, no. 1 (2012): 1–15, 8.

7 David Hesmondhalgh and Anamik Saha, “Race, Ethnicity, and Cultural Production,” *Popular Communication* 11, no. 3 (2013): 179–195.

to be represented in the way that it does.⁸ A famous example of the historical analysis that I am calling for is Anne McClintock's study of "commodity racism" in British advertising of the Victoria era.⁹ In her analysis, McClintock defines a new trend that she calls "commodity jingoism" and features advertisements based around "racial hygiene and imperial progress" that "helped reinvent and maintain British national unity in the face of deepening imperial competition, and colonial resistance."¹⁰ McClintock effectively describes how the growth of capitalism and the consumer industry coupled with imperial anxieties abroad facilitated a shift from the dominant paradigm of scientific racism to a new cultural form of racism.

In the post-Obama era, we have encountered a unique moment in which we see, on the one hand, the seeping of explicitly racist rhetoric from right-wing/far-right populist movements into mainstream political discourse but, on the other hand, greater demands for racial and ethnic diversity in media, whether in terms of the workforce or media content. While the demand for diversity has been driven by the activism of antiracist campaigners and audiences as well as media itself, one has to ask, To what extent does it fulfill the agenda of racial neoliberalism? Put another way, what do the ascendancy of diversity in creative industries discourse and racial denigration in political discourse reveal about the nature of contemporary racial capitalism? With its focus on the dynamics between culture and the economics within an institutional setting, the study of race-making practices in media can greatly illuminate what is unfolding at this juncture with regard to capitalism and race. Research by film and media scholars Clive Nwonka and Sarita Malik on Black British urban cinema in the 2000s exemplifies this approach, unravelling the connection between representations of Black criminality, UK film policy, New Labour's Third Way policy, and the ascendancy of neoliberalism more broadly.¹¹

Production studies of race demonstrate acutely how media processes themselves lead to the reproduction of historical constructions of Otherness, whether via established commonsense industry knowledge or "industry lore" around Blackness, rigid genre conventions, or standardized industry practices such as formatting that contain within them racialized logics.¹² That being the case, the issue becomes how to transform these processes for progressive ends. This brings us back to the question of political economy since, as media industries are organized according to capitalistic conditions, transforming the representation of minorities necessitates structurally transforming the media itself.

For instance, in British publishing, we have seen a number of individual publishing houses adopt in-house "diversity" initiatives that attempt to tackle the institutional whiteness of the industry, including trainee schemes and mentor programs, the creation of BAME networks, and mandatory unconscious bias training.¹³ Despite

8 Perhaps the most influential version of "racial capitalism" appears in Cedric J. Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). See also Jodi Melamed's "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 76–85; and Gargi Bhattacharyya's *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

9 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

10 McClintock, 209.

11 Clive James Nwonka and Sarita Malik, "Cultural Discourses and Practices of Institutionalised Diversity in the UK Film Sector: 'Just Get Something Black Made,'" *The Sociological Review* 66, no. 6 (2018): 1111–1127, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026118774183>.

12 Martin, "Scripting Black Gayness"; Havens, *Black Television Travels*; and Anamik Saha, "The Rationalizing/Racializing Logic of Capital in Cultural Production," *Media Industries* 3, no. 1 (2016).

13 BAME stands for Black Asian and Minority Ethnic and is a policy term used in the United Kingdom to describe those from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds.

having run for a number of years, these programs have done little to increase the already low numbers of racial and ethnic minorities who work across the publishing industry.¹⁴ Instead, the strategies that have had an impact in terms of increasing the number of racial and ethnic minority writers have come from attempts to change the political economy of publishing. These include arts funding, including the substantial amount of Arts Council money given to the Good Literary Agency, a literary agency established in 2018 that focuses on developing writers from minority backgrounds, and the creation of new publishing imprints that have placed Black folk in key gatekeeper positions, such as Sharmaine Lovegrove at Hachette and grime MC Stormzy at Penguin Random House.

As political economist Nicholas Garnham states, ensuring cultural plurality requires that we “understand the structure of our culture, its production, consumption and reproduction and of the role of the mass media in that process,” including “the problem of productive and non-productive labor, the relation between the private and public sectors, and the role of the State in capitalist accumulation, the role of advertising within late capitalism.”¹⁵ For Garnham, then, cultural plurality does not come from tackling ideology. However, he may go too far in denouncing the question of ideology altogether, as strategies to make media work “better” for racial and ethnic minorities can also entail political economic forms of address. For instance, if we accept that racial and ethnic minorities are subjected to tighter forms of creative control than their white counterparts, because they are seen as an inherently risky investment, then simply inserting more Black and Brown people into media will have little impact because minorities are subjected to greater forms of (self-)discipline. Instead, we need to focus on ensuring that racial and ethnic minorities are afforded the same creative autonomy as their white peers. This includes the same freedom to fail; after all, cultural production is an inherently risky business.

Cultural plurality in cultural production, I argue, requires state intervention because its principles are not based on furthering capitalist accumulation but on social democratic ideals of equality and social justice. Thus, we need government regulation to break up media concentration and encourage minority-led production. Smaller media companies struggle in the face of competition from media conglomerates, and as such, minority-led companies should receive public funding to support their work and ensure a level playing field. I even argue that such funds are awarded in the name of *reparations*. After all, if colonialism and slavery entailed a form of symbolic violence as well as physical violence, then one way a government can bestow reparative justice is by providing a platform that allows the subaltern—through their ancestors—the opportunity to speak.

To conclude, I want to stress that I do not subscribe to the arguments of political economists that a focus on ideology is a distraction from the real task of transforming the political economy of media. And I want to underline how political economy, except for a few notable exceptions, has a problematic tendency to sideline issues of race altogether.¹⁶ Instead, as my proposal around the public funding of minority cultural production in the name of reparative justice suggests, we need an approach

14 Equal Approach, “Publishing Industry Workforce Diversity and Inclusion Survey 2018,” Publishers Association, December, 2018, <https://www.publishers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Diversity-Survey-of-Publishing-Workforce-2018.pdf>.

15 Nicholas Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information* (London: Sage, 1990), 44.

16 One such exception is Vicki Mayer, “From Segmented to Fragmented: Latino Media in San Antonio, Texas,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2001): 291–306.

that thinks through how racial ideology intersects with capitalism in all its different forms—that is, capitalism as a mode of production, capitalism as a social force, capitalism as ideology.¹⁷ This is why I argue that production studies of race need to consider how media is a historical phenomenon socially related as part of the general development of industrial capitalism.¹⁸ The (empirical) study of race-making practices in media has already significantly contributed to race and media research by helping us understand the reproduction of historical constructions of Otherness. But only when we contextualize our analyses within the history and dynamics of racial capitalism can we better conceive the strategies needed to intervene in this deeply destructive process.

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17 Pitcher, "Race and Capitalism Redux."

18 Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*.

Aymar Jean Christian and
Khadijah Costley White

Organic Representation as Cultural Reparation

Lena Waithe dons a black shirt and a backwards baseball cap as she sits in the audience of an empty old theater. At the time best known for being the first Black woman to win an Emmy for writing, Waithe introduces short films funded by AT&T in the YouTube behind-the-scenes video for the film *Spilt Milk* (Blake Calhoun, 2010): “I don’t love representation just for the sake of representation. Yeah, we can have a bunch of TV shows with Black people in it but if none of them have substance, if the artists aren’t doing it with care, then it’s actually . . . it’s fast food.”¹ The film Waithe is executive producing includes a crew of mostly Black women, anchored by director Cierra Glauvé. AT&T’s sponsorship of Waithe confers corporate legitimacy on representation “for us by us” as valuable in the networked era.

As Hollywood works to correct decades of marginalizing communities by their race, gender, sexuality, and other intersections, how do we evaluate better representation? Kristen Warner’s theory of “plastic representation” provides a useful framework, connecting the art of storytelling to its production and distribution. Warner argues for a shift in focus away from visible diversity, from “positive” and “negative” representation where “the degree of diversity [becomes] synonymous with the quantity of difference rather than with the dimensionality of those performances.”² Meaningful representation emerges in writing, directing, and producing by filmmakers of color. As Warner writes, “actual progress would involve crafting a more weighted diversity, one generated by adding dimension and specificity to

1 AT&T Hello Lab, “#SETLIFE | The New Creative Class with Lena Waithe—Episode 4,” YouTube, September 13, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BPOQ_UqMrE.

2 Kristen J. Warner, “In the Time of Plastic Representation,” *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 33.

Aymar Jean Christian and Khadijah Costley White, “Organic Representation as Cultural Reparation,” *JCMS* 60, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 143–147.

roles.”³ Warner refocuses cultural politics beyond what is visible to the underlying systems that determine what can be represented and the people who craft its narratives. These systems need deeper repair.

The problem of representation is that the current system does not afford those underrepresented the time, freedom, or ownership to represent themselves meaningfully and sustainably. Most US media is still “fast food,” as Waithe puts it, manufactured by writers with formulaic ingredients and rapidly released without enough care for those represented. Hence, we must ask of representation, Is this *organic*? “Organic representation” comes from an intersectional perspective and provides a useful framework for considering how to correct systems built for bias in media and journalism. Organic representation begins when systems and institutions empower those who have been historically marginalized not only to appear in their stories but also to own and fine-tune narratives, marketing, and distribution.

In this essay, we explain the importance of thinking beyond simple representation and recommend a reparative approach to the historical exclusion of Black and other disempowered creatives and audiences in media. Representation does, indeed, matter, but we offer a more substantive, community-centered way to address racial (mis)representation, acknowledging collective value or harm from the perspective of people marginalized because of a collective identity. The organic representation framework can shift scholars’ assessments of representation from whether a given text is good or bad to whether it substantively addresses realities and histories of intersecting experiences and oppressions from production to distribution.⁴ To illustrate this claim, we first discuss how debates around representation have historically centered on harm and reparation without substantively addressing either. Then we show how organic representation can repair historical problems of representation by addressing inequalities in production and distribution.

Why does representation matter? Artists and media audiences consistently remark on the “spectatorial pleasure” of seeing oneself onscreen.⁵ Positive media images, for example, bolster children’s self-esteem and result in societal shifts such as acceptance of gay rights or a Black president. By contrast, discussions of representation among media scholars and activists tend to center on representational harm. For over a century, the NAACP has waged campaigns, boycotts, and legal action for the portrayals of Black people in news and narrative television, arguing that negative racial depictions detrimentally impact children’s self-esteem and increase marginalization.⁶ Cultivation theory suggests long-term effects of negative representations in news and scripted TV dramas.⁷ Research from scholars across disciplines argues for

3 Warner, 35; see also Mary Beltrán, “Meaningful Diversity: Exploring Questions of Equitable Representation on Diverse Ensemble Cast Shows,” *Flow*, August 27, 2010, <https://www.flowjournal.org/2010/08/meaningful-diversity/>.

4 Aymar Jean Christian, “The Value of Representation: Toward a Critique of Networked Television Performance,” *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 1552–1574.

5 Stephane Dunn, “*Baad Bitches*” and *Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 20.

6 Nicole Martins and Kristen Harrison, “Racial and Gender Differences in the Relationship between Children’s Television Use and Self-Esteem: A Longitudinal Panel Study,” *Communication Research* 39, no. 3 (2012): 338–357.

7 Travis L. Dixon, “Black Criminals and White Officers: The Effects of Racially Misrepresenting Law Breakers and Law Defenders on Television News,” *Media Psychology* 10, no. 2 (2007): 270–291; Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli, “The ‘Mainstreaming’ of America: Violence Profile No. 11,” *Journal of Communication* 30, no. 3 (1980): 10–29; and Constance P. Derouche and John E. Derouche, “Black and White: Racial Construction in Television Police Dramas,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 23, no. 3 (1991): 69–91.

the importance of correcting and repairing these representations. Media representations of marginalized people may function as the primary way that privileged people learn about them. Representations have tended to produce, amplify, and affirm prejudiced views. In news, media over-representations of Black and Latinx people as criminals, athletes, entertainers, and poverty-stricken freeloaders bolster support for harsh criminal justice policy, burdensome and inadequate social welfare policy, and white supremacist views.⁸

Decades of intervening in “negative” representation have netted mixed results. The colorblind approach to remedying Black representations resulted in the casting and writing of stories that tend to over-represent Black people in professional occupations like police officers, judges, or doctors. Over-correcting for representations affirms the righteousness of the racist American system, what Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis call “enlightened racism”; “respectable” representation also diminishes the generative potential of less respectable ones.⁹ As Herman Gray writes, representing Black people as social menace *and its opposite* cannot be understood apart from the aggressive attempts of establishing a “conservative hegemony hostile to progressive notions of racial entitlements.”¹⁰ Creating narratives that do not reflect or explicitly acknowledge systemic barriers can also produce harm. The fallout of representational interventions undermines what oppression is actually like and results in a lack of resources and support for historically marginalized and community-based storytellers, journalists, and creatives.

Moreover, discussions about media representation rarely focus on the history of cultural theft and appropriation. This includes the literal theft of intellectual property, as has been common in the history of Black music.¹¹ Theft can also be of stories and traditions, which is common among indigenous cultural production. The many careers and dollars made from the labor and stories of Black, indigenous, and other people who lack social and economic capital—even as they are visible onscreen—show the limits of visual representation as a remedy for marginalization.

Hence, we need to analyze representation beyond the text and focus on its production and distribution from an intersectional, community-centered perspective. Historically, corporations have not invested in organic representation because of the 1) devaluing of audiences outside historical norms, 2) marketing value of established narratives, 3) lack of intellectual property rights in production, and 4) lack of investment from Hollywood’s entrenched hierarchical, unrepresentative power structure.¹²

We propose thinking of representation as reparational and akin to organic food production: it should be “sourced” from the community it serves and in which it must thrive. Reparational production must prioritize intersecting communities that

8 Entman and Rojecki, *Black Image*; and Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

9 Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992); and Racquel J. Gates, *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

10 Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 16.

11 Kevin Greene, “Copynorms, Black Cultural Production, and the Debate over African-American Reparations,” *Cardozo Arts & Entertainment Law Journal* 25, no. 3 (2008): 1179; and Siva Vaidyanathan, *Copyrights and Copywrongs: The Rise of Intellectual Property and How It Threatens Creativity* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 117–148.

12 See Jennifer Fuller, “Branding Blackness on US Cable Television,” *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 2 (2010): 285–305; and Alfred L. Martin Jr., “Generic Closets: Sitcoms, Audiences, and Black Male Gayness,” in *The Comedy Studies Reader*, ed. Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018).

have been historically disempowered to have ownership over the entire production process, from who is writing the story, producing it, acting or speaking in it, and editing it. The process embraces failure and imperfection and invests the appropriate resources to achieve a nutrient rich product. This form of production is best practiced as either local or community-based, expanding the power of production away from global, corporate centers that are removed from those they represent.

We see these shifts strongly in independent spaces and in some corporate contexts across the production process, including the following:

- in story development* from shows about Black people written by white people and approved by white executives to examples like *Random Acts of Flyness* (HBO, 2018–) with large teams of mostly Black writers and directors;¹³
- in crew labor* from mostly white and male film and television sets to indigenous production like independently produced and distributed TV series where those behind the camera share community with those in front;¹⁴
- in acting* from colorblind casting to casting actors for deep historical and sociocultural connection to the material;¹⁵ and
- in post-production* from reality TV series where those represented have no say in the final cut to participatory documentary.

Organic production is still nascent and will not be without controversy. Consider Tyler Perry, who writes, directs, and produces most of his films but who has been roundly critiqued for misrepresenting Black people in misogynist, homophobic ways.¹⁶ This case, and many others, point to the need for involving a variety of intersectional communities in production and rejecting regimes that isolate singular producers or protagonists as solutions.¹⁷ A collectivist orientation requires engaging more voices and input at each stage of development: welcoming and integrating input from the community represented; giving back to the communities that contribute their stories and knowledge; investing in a pipeline of creative talent, particularly in communities most visibly represented; and supporting independent funding structures that focus on such engagement.

It is not enough to have organic productions. Productions reach audiences through distribution. Reparational distribution prioritizes historically disempowered communities, not as commodifiable markets but as communities inherently worthy of shaping the institutions that profit from telling their stories. Evidence of harm in distribution abounds, including (1) the decimation of Black film distribution networks at the end of the twentieth century, (2) the underfunding and mismanagement of Black, LGBTQ, Latinx, and indigenous peoples' TV channels, (3) the lack of funding or

13 Felicia D. Henderson, "The Culture behind Closed Doors: Issues of Gender and Race in the Writers' Room," *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 2 (2011): 145–152.

14 Aymar Jean Christian, "Expanding Production Value: The Culture and Scale of Television and New Media," *Critical Studies in Television* 14, no. 2 (2019): 255–267.

15 Kristen J. Warner, *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

16 Brittney Cooper, "Tyler Perry Hates Black Women: 5 Thoughts on the Haves and the Have Nots," *Crunk Feminist Collective*, May 29, 2013, <https://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2013/05/29/tyler-perry-hates-black-women-5-thoughts-on-the-haves-and-have-nots>. See also Aymar Jean Christian and Khadijah Costley White, "One Man Hollywood: The Decline of Black Creative Production in Post-Network Television," in *From Madea to Media Mogul: Theorizing Tyler Perry*, ed. TreaAndrea M. Russ-worm, Samantha N. Sheppard, and Karen M. Bowdre (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 138–158.

17 Christian and White.

regulatory acknowledgment of independent television channels working to correct the aforementioned inequalities, (4) the decline of the Black press amid over-coverage of white supremacist movements and the marginalization of Black uprisings by corporate journalism, and (5) the lack of sustained critique of white heteropatriarchal corruption across all media.¹⁸

Organic distribution can repair media systems through platforms, networks, channels, and publications for Black women, queer people, indigenous communities, and Latinx and brown immigrant communities. These solutions are always present in the market but need resources like Ava DuVernay's ARRAY initiative to buy and distribute Black film; Byron Allen's legal quest to get telecommunications companies to carry channels owned by people of color; and the plethora of independent blogs, independent TV channels, and community-based film initiatives across the country.¹⁹ These initiatives require support in government and in the marketplace. Without an organic distribution environment led by individuals with consistent and deep commitment to advancing complex, intersectional stories, we will continue to lack the narratives we need to repair the extensive history of plastic representation.

Organic representation is one way to repair the exclusion of Black and other historically marginalized people from cultural production. This approach requires a reparative praxis to production, funding, and distribution. It is inspired by a long, deep history in which representation is, quite often, white theft, resulting in the commodification and estrangement of whole communities through which corporations generate substantial global profits. And yet it is not enough to use visible representation—for example, centering Black characters in stories or casting Black journalists and actors to be on camera—as a way of remedying marginalization in journalism and media. A reparative praxis requires engagement and restoration, not just taking stories but using them as an opportunity to train, fund, and provide resources to the communities from which these narratives originate. We cannot achieve cultural reparation by papering over historical harms. Organic representation needs to be a consistent praxis.

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18 Eve Ng, “A ‘Post-Gay’ Era? Media Gaystreaming, Homonormativity, and the Politics of LGBT Integration,” *Communication, Culture and Critique* 6, no. 2 (2013): 258–283; Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, *Pimpin’ Ain’t Easy: Selling Black Entertainment Television* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Miya Williams Fayne, “A Digital Black Press? Exploring What Constitutes the Black Press Online,” *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, no. 6 (2016); Khadijah Costley White, “The Case of ‘Misguided’ Thugs: Baltimore Youth, Activism, and News,” in *News of Baltimore: Race, Rage and the City*, ed. Linda Steiner and Silvio Waisbord (New York: Routledge, 2017), 158–175; and Khadijah Costley White, *The Branding of Right-Wing Activism: The News Media and the Tea Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

19 Aymar Jean Christian, “Beyond Branding: The Value of Intersectionality on Streaming TV Channels,” *Television & New Media* 21, no. 5 (2020): 457–474, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419852241>; Sarah J. Jackson, “(Re)Imagining Intersectional Democracy from Black Feminism to Hashtag Activism,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 39, no. 4 (2016): 375–379; and Candace Moore, “Distribution Is Queen: LGBTQ Media on Demand,” *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 1 (2013): 137–144.

Madhavi Mallapragada

The Problem with Apu, Whiteness, and Racial Hierarchies in US Media Industries

Hari Kondabolu's 2017 documentary, *The Problem with Apu* (Michael Melamedoff), revolves around the Indian American writer's mission to resolve what he conceptualizes as the derogatory representation of Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, the Indian immigrant character on the animated Fox television comedy series, *The Simpsons* (1989–). The problem is threefold. Apu is a racist stereotype of South Asian Americans; despite or perhaps because of that, Apu is a beloved and iconic character in mainstream American culture; consequently, Apu's legacy is oppressive as it continues to shape US media industries' expectations of South Asian American representations, people, and culture. As Kondabolu sees it, the only way to make peace with his decades-long struggle with the Apu stereotype is to interrogate the context of its production.¹

This essay focuses on Kondabolu's production-related challenges—notably his (ultimately futile) efforts to get Hank Azaria, the white voice actor playing Apu, to be a part of the documentary—as well as the post-release responses from *The Simpsons'* team. Drawing from them, I argue for the urgency of centering the category of race in media production studies and, relatedly, for examining how racial hierarchies are operationalized and maintained in production cultures. Kondabolu's film takes aim at the politics of a highly influential mainstream, white American television show

1 Apu made his debut in season one, episode eight, "The Telltale Head" (original airdate, February 25, 1990) and has been a recurring character since.

Madhavi Mallapragada, "*The Problem with Apu, Whiteness, and Racial Hierarchies in US Media Industries,*" *JCMS* 60, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 148–152.

and arrives at a time when the lack of racial diversity in mainstream media industries continues to be a problem, despite the recent trend of diverse casting.

Over the last decade, US media industries have attempted to reframe their investments around race. Such efforts include racial diversity initiatives in the media workplace, casting decisions that consciously avoid the perpetuation of stereotypes, and targeting the key demographic groups of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans.² But most of all, the reframing of the industries' relation to matters pertaining to racism, erasure, underrepresentation, and misrepresentation is a strategic ideological move. Here, the rhetoric that the twenty-first-century media industries' ethos is one of inclusivity, offering correctives to existing inequities and giving historically marginalized voices a proverbial seat at the proverbial table, is employed widely and often. In turn, it generates and maintains a narrative that is focused on the industries' intentions (often for the future) and individual practices (looking at casting on one show, for example). Such rhetorical moves function to obfuscate the structural factors that maintain racial hierarchies and recuperate whiteness as an institutional norm.³ My brief study of *The Problem with Apu* exemplifies the challenges racial minorities, including South Asian Americans, face in their efforts to engage the industry on its diversity platform and to offer their critical perspectives on the industries' Anglocentric production culture.

Kondabolu, who wrote and stars in the documentary, draws on the reception of Apu by interviewing his family members and South Asian American celebrities. He focuses mostly on actors, comics, and writers, but problematically foregrounds male perspectives. In characterizing Apu as a stereotype, Kondabolu essentially revisits a long-standing critique about the representation of Apu.⁴ Critics have long pointed to the considerable evidence that Apu is a stereotype. The character owns a convenience store Kwik-E-Mart; is a devout Hindu; has an arranged marriage and eight children; is a "good" immigrant who espouses the values of hard work, tolerance, and not disrupting the status quo; and utters phrases like "Thank you! Come again!" in an exaggerated "Indian" accent. Shilpa Davé's groundbreaking theoretical formulation of "brown voice" posits that the production and repetition of a distinctive "Indian" accent in US popular culture functions as a racializing trait.⁵ She notes that the performance of this accent, or brown voice, is entangled with the racist histories of ethnic vaudeville humor and brownface performances.⁶ She argues that brown voice, as exemplified by Apu's "Indian" accent, ultimately "reinforces a static position for South Asians regardless of their status or occupation in the United States."⁷

In the opening moments of *The Problem with Apu*, Kondabolu reasons that while it is necessary to talk to *The Simpsons*' writers and producers to understand their thinking behind creating Apu, it is imperative to get Azaria to be a part of the documentary. Kondabolu includes a clip from his 2012 appearance on *Totally Biased*

2 "The Multicultural Edge: Rising Super Consumers," Nielsen, March 18, 2015, <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/report/2015/the-multicultural-edge-rising-super-consumers/>.

3 See Kristen J. Warner, *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

4 See, for example, Amit Rai, "The World According to Apu: A Look at Network Television's Only Regular South Asian Character," *India Currents* 7, no. 12 (1994): 7; and Manish Viji, "The Apu Travesty," *The Guardian*, July 16, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/jul/16/theaputragedy>.

5 Shilpa Davé, "Apu's Brown Voice: Cultural Inflection and South Asian Accents," in *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*, ed. Shilpa Davé, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 313–336.

6 Shilpa S. Davé, *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 19–59.

7 Davé, "Apu's Brown Voice," 315.

with *W. Kamau Bell* (FX, 2012–2013), a show on which he worked as a writer, where he describes Azaria (in his Apu role) as “a white guy doing an impression of a white guy making fun of my father.”⁸ Kondabolu (presumably) is referencing that Azaria models his “Indian” accent, in part, on Peter Sellers’s portrayal of the Indian character, Mr. Bakshi, in *The Party* (Blake Edwards, 1968).⁹ Sellers, a white actor, was in brownface for that role, a detail that neither Azaria nor his interviewers ever bring up while discussing Sellers as the former’s inspiration.¹⁰

Although Kondabolu hopes to engage Azaria in an on-camera conversation about his voice acting of Apu, he can only include clips of Azaria from previous media and taped public appearances. In one clip from a 2007 appearance on *LateNet with Ray Ellin* (Ray Ellin Productions, 2007–), Azaria reveals that *The Simpsons*’ producers “were like, can you do an Indian voice and how offensive can you make it, basically?” Another clip features Azaria delivering a portion of his 2016 commencement address at Tufts University in his Apu voice; Kondabolu uses it to establish the fact that even after becoming aware of criticisms over Apu’s stereotypical voice—and admitting as much in a 2013 interview with HuffPost—Azaria continued to peddle the crude vocal representation outside the televised world of *The Simpsons*.¹¹ The clips are interspersed within a narrative that chronicles Kondabolu’s multiple efforts over the course of 2016 to interview Azaria for his project.

When Kondabolu initially reaches out to Azaria’s team with a request for the latter’s participation in the documentary, Azaria’s agent directs Kondabolu to the very same 2013 HuffPost interview as if to say, “The article speaks for itself.” Kondabolu’s next tactic involves using his podcast, *Politically Re-Active* (First Look Media and Panoply, 2016–), to generate public pressure on Azaria. Urging his listeners to use the hashtag #Apu2016 and tweet @HankAzaria, Kondabolu then launches a Twitter campaign in August 2016, asking “Dear @HankAzaria, please let me interview you for my Apu documentary. It would mean something to a lot of us. #Apu2016.”¹² While supporters kept the social media campaign alive until October 2016, it was to no avail. In the concluding moments of the film, we watch Kondabolu read aloud Azaria’s email message wherein he declines to participate in the film. Azaria writes, “I’m not comfortable . . . throwing myself upon the mercy of your edits. It’s nothing against you . . . as I said, I think what you are doing is great.” The scene ends with Kondabolu wryly pointing out Azaria’s privilege in that “he gets to choose how he wants to be portrayed.” In this instance, Azaria reveals and asserts his privilege—owing to his racial and cultural status, as a white celebrity in mainstream American media—to decline to talk race and representation, even though his role as Apu is a racialized performance and, to some critics, a racist one as well.

Dana Gould, a producer on *The Simpsons* from 2001 to 2008, is the only executive associated with Fox or the show who agrees to be part of the film.¹³ Gould,

8 “Mindy Kaling, Apu & Indian Americans by Hari Kondabolu,” YouTube video, 5:31, posted by “Hari Kondabolu,” November 9, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ktQH78FNCfs>.

9 Hank Azaria, “‘Simpsons,’ ‘Spamalot’ Castmember Hank Azaria,” interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, NPR, 10:34, June 3, 2005, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4679119>.

10 In the 2005 *Fresh Air* interview, the follow-up question to Azaria’s mention of Sellers’s brownface act as Mr. Bakshi is, “so, you have had to sing as Apu?”

11 Mallika Rao, “Is It Time to Retire Apu?,” HuffPost, September 20, 2013, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-simpsons-apu-racist_n.

12 Hari Kondabolu (@HariKondabolu), “Dear @HankAzaria, please let me interview you for my Apu documentary. It would mean something to a lot of us. #Apu2016,” Twitter, August 2, 2016, 7:29 p.m., <https://twitter.com/harikondabolu/status/760663853285900288>.

13 Indian American actor Utkarsh Ambudkar, who voiced Apu’s nephew on one occasion on *The Simpsons*, also appears in the documentary.

who is white, participates on camera only to deflect Kondabolu's questions about stereotyping by talking about the show's comedic purpose and questioning the value of updating Apu's character to make him "less anachronistic." Most remarkably, however, he tells Kondabolu, "Yeah, well, there are accents that by their nature, to white Americans, I can only speak from experience, sound funny. Period." This assertion demonstrates how Gould claims white ownership of brown bodies and normalizes Apu's brown voice.

Kondabolu's challenge in getting *The Simpsons*' team to participate in his documentary continued even after the film was completed. For almost two weeks after the documentary's initial airing on November 19, 2017, neither Hank Azaria nor anyone from *The Simpsons* or Fox made any public comment about Kondabolu's film, despite the press actively seeking them out. On December 1, a reporter for TMZ ran into Azaria at the Los Angeles International Airport and got a comment. Without naming Kondabolu, Azaria admits that the "documentary . . . gave us a lot, at *The Simpsons*, to think about," then issues a general apology to "anybody" that was offended by "any character" and closes by observing that "it is a really important conversation, one definitely worth having."¹⁴ TMZ posted the video to its Twitter page on December 3, 2017, and invited Kondabolu to share his views on Azaria's response. Kondabolu took this invitation as an opportunity to remind everyone about the big picture of "who gets to control their story and who gets cast in what . . . the power of Hollywood, who gets to control what in Hollywood?" (reserving an expletive-filled version of his response for his own Twitter page).¹⁵

Almost five months later, in *The Simpsons*' episode "No Good Read Goes Unpunished" (April 8, 2018), those who control the story of Apu on the show—the *Simpsons*' writers, producers, and showrunners—finally deployed their power to speak on the Apu controversy. In the episode, the progressive Lisa Simpson glances at a picture of Apu while noting, "Something that started decades ago and was applauded and inoffensive is now politically incorrect. What can you do?" Within the context of the episode, Lisa is making this observation about her mother Marge's favorite childhood storybook, a book that, by Marge's own admission, now reads as racist. However, Lisa's comment was widely interpreted as a (non)response to and dismissal of another text, *The Problem with Apu*.¹⁶ Lisa's argument also incorrectly assumes that the book, and Apu's character by analogy, was once inoffensive to everyone, thereby revealing yet again the intended audience—white and mainstream—for both Apu as well as the show's response to the Apu controversy. The standard response issued by *The Simpsons*' producers to the press was and is to "let the episode speak for itself."¹⁷ Longtime showrunner Al Jean nevertheless reminded critics on Twitter on April 9, 2018, that "[r]espectfully Hank won an Emmy for voicing the character in 1998. Only 20 years ago."¹⁸

14 TMZ (@TMZ), "Hank Azaria Says 'Simpsons' Discussing Apu Changes After Racism Allegation dlvr.it/Q452GV" Twitter, December 3, 2017, 12:58 a.m., <https://twitter.com/TMZ/status/937244541299474433>.

15 TMZ (@TMZ), "'The Simpsons' Need to Give Apu Some Power Says Comedian Hari Kondabolu," Twitter, December 4, 2017, 8:15 p.m., <https://twitter.com/TMZ/status/937898079243657221>.

16 For example, Sopan Deb, "'The Simpsons' Responds to Criticism about Apu with a Dismissal," *New York Times*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/09/arts/television/the-simpsons-responds-to-criticism-about-apu.html>.

17 Ryan Parker, "'Simpsons' Criticized for Response to Apu Controversy," *Hollywood Reporter*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/simpsons-criticized-response-apu-controversy-1101070>.

18 Al Jean (@AlJean), "Respectfully Hank Azaria won an Emmy for voicing the character in 1998. Only 20 years ago," Twitter, April 9, 2018, 1:37 a.m., <https://twitter.com/aljean/status/983262547150192641>.

The following Sunday (April 15), in an act of counter-programming, truTV reaired *The Problem with Apu* to coincide with *The Simpsons* telecast on Fox. A week later, *The Simpsons*' creator, Matt Groening, built on the problematic political correctness theme expressed by Lisa in the April 8 episode by insinuating that "it's a time in our culture where people love to pretend they're offended."¹⁹ In a subsequent *New York Times* interview, Groening noted that he loves Apu, finds himself hard-pressed to think of "a better animated Indian character in the last thirty years," and "feels bad" that Apu makes some viewers unhappy, yet thinks that the ongoing conversations and debates over Apu lack nuance.²⁰

Azaria, however, has rethought his position. In January 2020, Azaria announced that he would no longer be the voice of Apu.²¹ Albeit delayed, Azaria's response is in part an outcome of the public backlash he has experienced in the wake of the Apu controversy. Azaria has also yet to directly engage with Kondabolu or the critiques extended in his film. Nevertheless, his decision to quit voicing Apu tells us that it is increasingly untenable for some industry players (like white voice actors on television) to avoid accountability for their role in perpetuating offensive racial characterizations that are written from a white perspective and intended for a predominantly mainstream, white audience. That said, neither Fox nor Groening nor the show's producers have yet felt compelled to interrogate their assumptions around Apu's appeal as a character and additionally appear to brush off Kondabolu's film. It is a stark reminder that for now, white industry heavyweights can resist being challenged to engage in a meaningful conversation about the industry's entrenched practices around race.

At this time, when US media industries are deploying concepts of diversity, racial inclusivity, and multiculturalism to reframe their historical legacies of racism as well as their ongoing investments in the same, it is critical to examine how race functions in media contexts beyond image, representation, and storytelling. Although *The Problem with Apu* failed to get the white accountability it had set out to receive, the decision by Azaria, two years later, cannot be overlooked. At the same time, the documentary does demonstrate the ongoing tradition of mainstream media to assert and defend white privilege even when, by all appearances, racial diversity is an industry priority.

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19 Bill Keveney, "The Simpsons' Exclusive: Matt Groening (Mostly) Remembers the Show's Record 636 Episodes," *USA Today*, April 27, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/2018/04/27/the-simpsons-matt-groening-new-record-fox-animated-series/524581002/>.

20 David Itzkoff, "'Simpsons' Creator Matt Groening Says Debate around Apu Is Tainted," *New York Times*, July 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/18/arts/television/simpsons-matt-groening-apu.html>.

21 Fred Topel, "The Simpsons' Star Hank Azaria Will No Longer Voice Apu," *Film*, January 17, 2020, <https://www.slashfilm.com/apu-voice-actor/>.

Kathryn M. Frank

Diversify, Rinse, Repeat: The Direct Market, Sales Data, and Marvel Comics' Diversity Cycle

In 2016, Marvel Comics had either a successful or disappointing sales period, depending on which sources and headlines one consults. One analysis noted that North American comics and graphic novel sales in 2016 were up 5 percent over the previous year, a small but seemingly positive (or at least neutral) sales trend for the industry.¹ However, comics journalism outlets reported perceived troubles for Marvel's sales throughout the year, with hyperbolic headlines suggesting that DC Comics' sales were so good that Marvel should feel "humiliated."² In March 2017, Marvel's senior vice president of sales and marketing, David Gabriel, turned these ambivalent trends into a full-blown controversy when he argued, following a summit with comic shop retailers, "What [Marvel editors and executives] heard was that people didn't want any more diversity. They didn't want female characters out there. That's what we heard, whether we believe that or not. I don't know that that's really true, but that's what we saw in sales."³

- 1 Milton Griep and John Jackson Miller, "Comics and Graphic Novels Sales Up 5% in 2016," accessed December 29, 2019, <https://www.comichron.com/yearlycomicssales/industrywide/2016-industrywide.html>.
- 2 Rich Johnston, "DC Comics Humiliates Marvel with August 2016 Marketshare, as Diamond Sets a Record Month of Sales," *Bleeding Cool News and Rumors*, September 16, 2016, <https://www.bleedingcool.com/2016/09/16/dc-comics-humiliates-marvel-with-august-2016-marketshare-as-diamond-sets-a-record-month-of-sales/>; and John Mayo, "Marvel Sells More Comics, but DC Takes 7 of October's Top 10," *CBR*, November 13, 2017, <https://www.cbr.com/october-2017-comic-sales-charts/>.
- 3 Milton Griep, "Marvel's David Gabriel on the 2016 Market Shift," *ICv2*, March 31, 2017, <https://icv2.com/articles/news/view/37152/marvels-david-gabriel-2016-market-shift>.

Kathryn M. Frank, "Diversify, Rinse, Repeat: The Direct Market, Sales Data, and Marvel Comics's Diversity Cycle," *JCMS* 60, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 153–157.

Responses from journalists and fans were too numerous and varied to detail here, but one notable trend was to connect Gabriel's comment to North American comics' distribution and retail structure: the direct market. Some critics defended Marvel's intentions by locating blame with this distribution and retail structure; others denounced Marvel for failing to educate fans and claimed that Marvel was essentially blaming readers for its own failure to promote and distribute titles appropriately.⁴ These critics also identified Gabriel's comment as the beginning of a familiar cycle of canceling diverse titles after a period of seeming abundance, reminiscent of the television practice of moving from "racial narrowcasting" to less diverse programming.⁵ These critics predicted a coming period of scarcity for female characters and characters of color in Marvel's comics offerings.⁶

In this essay, I offer a brief case study of how Marvel Comics constructs an assumed audience through ambiguous and incomplete sales data, which they then mobilize in contradictory ways. Ambiguous data about audiences allows Marvel to justify promoting diverse titles as a sales strategy but also allows them to justify a lack of racial diversity in characters or creators when these titles are canceled. Recent scholarship has identified comics' "direct market"—particularly a distribution monopoly on monthly comics and the resultant privileging of specialty comics retailers as points of access for consumers—as locations of racializing and gendering production practices that constitute larger economies of comics culture. Distribution and sales reporting serve a gatekeeping function and are racialized in specific ways that allow publishers to claim to value diversity—and indeed, to cyclically produce diverse stories and characters—while simultaneously disavowing responsibility for centering and re-centering whiteness. The ways distribution and the measurement of sales are racialized illustrates how Marvel Comics, as a mainstream US comics publisher, arrives at seemingly "self-defeating" decisions that allow for experimentation but ultimately tend to reproduce Otherness.⁷

Before proceeding, a brief explanation of the North American comics industry's direct market is necessary. The North American comics industry's distribution and retail structure largely evolved from newsstand magazine sales, wherein unsold comics purchased by retailers are refunded by publishers. However, this model became economically untenable as the comic book industry's readership narrowed in the mid-1950s; this contraction led to the rise of comics' direct market, a system wherein specialty retailers (such as comic book stores) order comics from the North American industry's only retail distributor, Diamond Comics. In most cases, they cannot return unsold titles.⁸ Retailers therefore order comics they believe their customers are likely to purchase and assume the financial risk for unsold comics.

4 For example, Alex Abad-Santos argues that "people are incensed that Marvel blamed poor sales on diversity. But it's complicated" in his connection of Gabriel's comment to the direct market. See Alex Abad-Santos, "The Outrage over Marvel's Alleged Diversity Blaming, Explained," Vox, April 8, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/4/4/15169572/marvel-diversity-outrage-gabriel>. In contrast, Colin Spacetwinks excoriates Marvel for their seeming lack of transparency about how direct market sales are measured in a lengthy essay entitled "Shut the Fuck Up, Marvel," <https://spacetwinks.itch.io/shut-the-fuck-up-marvel>.

5 Kristal Brent Zook, *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 105.

6 Iron Spike (@Iron_Spike), "The problem isn't 'diversity.' But it'll take the blame. And for the next 10 years, Marvel can sniff 'We TRIED that, it doesn't SELL,'" Twitter, March 31, 2017, https://twitter.com/Iron_Spike/status/847947181046861825.

7 Anamik Saha, *Race and the Cultural Industries* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 139.

8 For more detail on the rise of the direct market, see chapter four of Shawna Kidman's *Comic Books Incorporated: How the Business of Comics Became the Business of Hollywood* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

In this system, stories and assumptions about audiences—what Timothy Havens refers to as “industry lore”—proliferate at multiple levels, as publishers’ assumptions about their audience are filtered through retailers’ assumptions about their customers.⁹ In Gabriel’s controversial “diverse titles” comment, he asserts that Marvel “heard” from “people” and “saw in sales” that diverse titles weren’t financially viable. However, the precise contours of who was heard from and what was seen are obscured through the direct market infrastructure. Marvel largely does not see what consumers purchase. Retailers’ perceptions of what is or is not selling also are imprecise, as they depend on the quantities of specific comics series that retailers order monthly (which again, are based on assumptions of what their customers *might* purchase). In 2019, a small number of retailers began participating in a pilot program to track their “sell-through” of monthly comics to consumers, but this point-of-sale tracking is not the norm.¹⁰ To complicate the matter, Diamond Comics’ effective monopoly on distribution and privileging of specialty retail stores’ monthly orders also means that reported sales figures do not generally take into account comics purchased outside specialty retail shops (e.g., in bookstores, on Amazon, or from digital suppliers) and depend heavily on monthly sales of single comics issues rather than collected editions (i.e., trade paperbacks).¹¹ The reporting and interpretation of these simultaneously amorphous and narrow sales metrics supports the proliferation of gender- and race-making lore about retailers, readers, and comics culture more broadly.

As the responses to Gabriel’s quote suggest, industry lore plays a major role in how comics publishers interpret sales data and other feedback with regard to comics readers. Suzanne Scott incisively unpacks Gabriel’s remarks to illustrate how Marvel imagines white male fans as their core audience, leading to a “vicious cycle” wherein marginalized fans’ concerns or preferences are half-heartedly addressed by producers and then dismissed to appease a “core” fan backlash if not “immediately successful.”¹² The dynamics of this “vicious cycle” that Scott identifies parallel and complement the diversity boom-and-bust cycle identified by fans; Scott’s analysis, both of Gabriel’s quote and in a larger examination of female fans’ marginalization, clearly articulates how Marvel’s approach to diversity is formed through racializing and gendering logics and practices. Shawna Kidman, Benjamin Woo, and Nasreen Rajani explicitly connect the direct market to gendered practices, emphasizing comics publishers’ focus on “privileged adult males” and identifying the comics shop as a common site of gendered marginalization.¹³

Whereas Scott and other scholars focus primarily on gender, examining sales data as a form of racialized industry lore related to the direct market demonstrates that these logics influence the production of race in comics as well. Comics writer Christopher Priest, best known for his influential 1998 to 2003 *Black Panther* series, has specifically identified the comics shop and the direct market distribution system

9 Timothy Havens, *Black Television Travels: African American Media around the Globe* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 4.

10 Brigid Alverson, “ICv2 Insider Sessions: ComicHub Opens the Black Box,” ICv2, December 26, 2019, <https://icv2.com/articles/news/view/44814/icv2-insider-sessions-comichub-opens-black-box>.

11 For more on comics formats and distribution models, see Benjamin Woo and Nasreen Rajani, “Practices and Participation in Media Retail Communities: Comic Book Stores as Sites of Struggle,” in *Point of Sale: Analyzing Media Retail*, ed. Daniel Herbert and Derek Johnson (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

12 Suzanne Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 2–3.

13 Kidman, *Comic Books Incorporated*, 138.

as problems in publishers' attempts to attract fans outside the assumed middle-class white male demographic. Priest, discussing his decision to stop working for Marvel after disagreements about the distribution and promotion of his series *The Crew* (2003), argues that "normal comics distribution chains" are detrimental to promoting comics series to Latino and African American markets.¹⁴

Discourse regarding Marvel's diversity controversy continued in 2017. Although Gabriel eventually downplayed his pronouncement about what Marvel "heard" and "saw in sales," headlines about Marvel's sales woes and Marvel's cancellation of diverse titles continued apace. Two particular issues caught critics' attention. In the build-up to the February 2018 release of *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler), an ongoing Black Panther series written by Ta-Nehisi Coates and one written by Roxane Gay and Yona Harvey were canceled. Also, by the time GLAAD had announced their 2018 Outstanding Comic Book Award nominees, all of Marvel's nominated titles had been canceled; these included the two aforementioned Black Panther series, one of which, *Black Panther: World of Wakanda*, was Marvel's first series ever by a Black woman writer. Critical assessments again identified poor sales and the direct market structure as key reasons for these series' cancellations. Alex Abad-Santos cites a large decline in sales of *World of Wakanda* from its first to sixth issues and ultimately concludes that "there's also a responsibility for fans to support the art they say they want to see" by pre-ordering comics from comic book retail shops.¹⁵ Although Abad-Santos explains the direct market to readers who might not be aware how their readership is and is not counted, he does not mention that Marvel canceled *World of Wakanda* before releasing a trade paperback (or TPB, a collected edition of monthly comics), and thus only pre-orders through comics shops are counted.

Whereas monthly comics are mainly purchased through specialty comics shops, TPBs are often purchased at bookstores, online retailers such as Amazon, and school book fairs; sales of these collected editions to consumers can also generally be tracked through NPD BookScan reporting, in contrast to monthly comics' reliance on reports of pre-orders from retailers. The issue of readers "trade-waiting"—not purchasing a series until it is collected in a TPB—is a common topic of discussion in comics journalism precisely because these sales are not taken into account when publishers make cancellation decisions.¹⁶ Coates's other canceled Black Panther series, *Black Panther & the Crew*, was announced as canceled after only two issues, also allegedly due to poor sales.¹⁷ Sales figures do show that neither *World of Wakanda* nor *Black Panther & the Crew* were among top-selling monthly comics. However, given that both titles were eventually released as trade paperbacks—and the canceled *Black Panther & the Crew* ran six issues, the typical number of issues included in a TPB—Marvel appears to have believed that it would sell enough copies to merit collection and publication in this format.¹⁸ Thus, it seems that one set of data on sales—

14 Zack Smith, "PRIEST ON BLACK PANTHER, Pt. 3: 'Hubris & Arrogance' Would Kill BLACK PANTHER Movie," Newsarama, February 21, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190623004519/https://www.newsarama.com/25518-priest-on-black-panther-pt-3-enemy-of-the-state-and-the-panther-film.html>.

15 Alex Abad-Santos, "Marvel Canceled Roxane Gay and Ta-Nehisi Coates's Black Panther Comics. The Problem Goes beyond Marvel," Vox, June 16, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/6/16/15804600/marvel-cancel-roxane-gay-ta-nehisi-coates-comic>.

16 Jessica Plummer, "Does Trade-Waiting 'Hurt' a Comic?" Book Riot, September 14, 2016, <https://bookriot.com/2016/09/14/does-trade-waiting-hurt-a-comic/>.

17 Kwame Opam, "Ta-Nehisi Coates' Black Panther & the Crew Comic Has Been Canceled," The Verge, May 13, 2017, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/5/13/15636276/marvel-black-panther-and-the-crew-cancelled-ta-nehisi-coates>.

18 *Black Panther & the Crew* appears on the 2017 comics and graphic novel lists: "Top 1000 Comics—2017,

Diamond's monthly reports—were cited to cancel these diverse series while book sales metrics that are typically not included in comics sales data were used to support publishing the series' TPBs.¹⁹

This example illustrates the malleability and imprecision of sales reporting and data as well as the ambivalence introduced by contending with both the direct market of “core” readers and the broader, and likely more diverse, readership outside the direct market.²⁰ When sales for Marvel's main titles lag, pushing diverse creators and characters to the forefront is promoted as a financially sound strategy to attract new readers and to promote series outside of specialty retailers. When Marvel's sales slump or stagnate for a variety of reasons, the company hails and re-centers its explicitly valued audience of direct market retailers and their customers with claims about focusing on “core Marvel characters” and star (i.e., white) creators.²¹

This reliance on retailer pre-order sales data is not unique to Marvel; despite the availability of NPD BookScan data and various attempts to collect consumer purchase (“sell-through”) data from specialty retailers, there does not appear to be significant momentum to improve the granularity of comics sales data or change what data influences decisions about series cancellations. As this brief case study of Marvel's rhetoric around sales data and diverse comics illustrates, the direct market structure and resultant ambiguous sales figures provide comics publishers with malleable data that can easily fit seemingly contradictory narratives about how racial diversity is good or bad for business. Comics publishers can experiment with representation of race and diverse voices in their attempts to attract new audiences but can also disavow any implications of racism in their decisions about which characters and creators to promote.

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- Part 2,” ICv2, January 15, 2018, <https://icv2.com/articles/markets/view/39360/top-1000-comics-2017-part-2>; “Top 1000 Graphic Novels—2017, Part 2,” ICv2, January 15, 2018, <https://icv2.com/articles/markets/view/39358/top-1000-graphic-novels-2017-part-2>; and “Top 1000 Graphic Novels—2018,” ICv2, January 16, 2019, <https://icv2.com/articles/markets/view/42260/top-1000-graphic-novels-2018>.
- 19 NPD BookScan data for March 2018 shows *World of Wakanda* as the ninth bestselling superhero graphic novel of the month, with six other Black Panther volumes, five written or co-written by Coates, in the top twenty. See Brigid Alverson, “March 2018 NPD BookScan—Top 20 Superhero, Manga, Author Graphic Novels,” ICv2, April 12, 2018, <https://icv2.com/articles/markets/view/40151/march-2018-npd-bookscan-top-20-superhero-manga-author-graphic-novels>.
- 20 Todd Allen, “Analyzing Marvel's May Sales: There Are Two Different Marvels and One's Selling a Whole Lot Better,” *The Beat*, June 29, 2017, <https://www.comicsbeat.com/analyzing-marvels-may-sales-there-are-two-different-marvels-and-ones-selling-a-whole-lot-better/>.
- 21 Marvel's former editor-in-chief facetiously answered a question about Black writers writing Black characters by saying he offers these characters to white star writer Brian Michael Bendis first; however, given the number of titles Bendis writes for Marvel and his acclaim as the creator of Black/Puerto Rican Spider-Man Miles Morales, this joke may land a bit flat. See Rich Johnston, “Marvel's Axel Alonso Is the Last Thing from a SJW—But Is Korean?,” *Bleeding Cool News and Rumors*, October 8, 2016, <https://www.bleedingcool.com/2016/10/08/marvels-axel-alonso-last-thing-sjw-korean/>.

Algorithmic Audience Modeling and the Fate of African American Audiences

Algorithmic data processing has transformed commercial media audience research from behavioral measurement based on limited data to behavioral prediction based on information glut. Today's streaming media giants like Netflix and Amazon employ teams of engineers who design AI-enabled algorithms that scour this glut of user information, discerning behavioral patterns that they use to group subscribers into countless "taste clusters." Based on this clustering, the algorithms recommend content to subscribers while also guiding program production and acquisition practices.¹ Ultimately, the engineers who design algorithms really aren't sure how they work, and, as scholars have shown, the algorithms aren't necessarily effective at predicting audience taste preferences.² Regardless, algorithmically derived taste clusters shape a range of practices in the contemporary media industries. In this essay, I examine some of the implications of algorithmic audience modeling on the fundamental questions of race and media scholarship.

The best guess is that algorithmic processing and prediction do not take into account demographic features like race and ethnicity.³ It is not that they misrecognize

1 Timothy Havens, "Media Programming in an Era of Big Data," *Media Industries Journal* 1, no. 2 (2014), <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mij.15031809.0001.202>.

2 Will Knight, "The Dark Secret at the Heart of AI," *MIT Technology Review*, April 11, 2017, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/604087/the-dark-secret-at-the-heart-of-ai/>; and Neta Alexander, "Catered to Your Future Self: Netflix's 'Predictive Personalization' and the Mathematization of Taste," in *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century*, ed. Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 81–97.

3 Jason Lynch, "Netflix Thrives by Programming to 'Taste Communities,' Not Demographics," *Adweek*, July 29, 2018, <https://www.adweek.com/tv-video/netflix-thrives-by-programming-to-taste-communities-not-demographics/>.

Timothy J. Havens, "Algorithmic Audience Modeling and the Fate of African American Audiences," *JCMS* 60 no. 1 (Fall 2020): 158–162.

or under sample nonwhite viewers, nor that they poorly predict these viewers' taste preference. Rather, demographic characteristics seemingly are *not even represented* in algorithmic processing. As such, recommendation algorithms are the perfect tool for an industry seeking to become post-racial.

I say that race is “seemingly” not represented because, given the proprietary nature of these algorithms, very little is known about how they work. Numerous scholars have begun algorithm “audits,” where they bombard a platform like Netflix with a range of requests and see how the recommendation algorithm responds.⁴ Others have examined the public statements of engineers and executives who work for streaming platforms for clues about how the algorithms work.⁵ However, to my knowledge, no one has audited streaming algorithms to examine whether they take into account demographic characteristics like race. The likelihood that demographic information is not used in algorithmic processing is reinforced by public statements made by Netflix executives that, as Evan Elkins shows, consistently claim that their taste cluster analysis does not include demographic information about subscribers.⁶

Audience measurement has been a long-standing issue among activists and scholars interested in the connections between media and racial justice, particularly African Americans, because of measurement's direct impact on what kinds of shows get produced and who gets hired to work on those shows as writers, producers, and actors. As early as 1977, the US Commission on Civil Rights' report *Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television* observed that the broadcasting industry's reliance on gross ratings points, or the percentage of Nielsen homes watching a particular channel or show, made it tough for non-mainstream (including nonwhite) content to get through the production development process.⁷ In the fallout from this report, Nielsen began over-representing Black households as a percentage of their panels in an effort to more fully represent their cultural tastes.⁸

As the 1980s and 1990s progressed and the networks began to lose viewers to cable, they started to focus more on 18- to 49-year-old white audiences. Since then, as Herman Gray argues, the networks have tended to think of African American viewers as political subjects capable of causing turmoil rather than as economic subjects worth targeting with relevant programming. This shift created a predictable programming cycle that recurred multiple times in the 1980s and 1990s as scholars and activists decried the absence of Blacks and Latinos in prime-time series. The networks responded by temporarily adding more diverse series and characters but inevitably dropped them due to poor performance among the 18- to 49-year-old white viewers. One such cycle occurred at the end of the last millennium, when Fox canceled a number of shows popular among African Americans, such as *Living Single* (1993–1998), *Martin* (1992–1997), and *New York Undercover* (1994–1999), as it shifted

4 Maria Eriksson, Rasmus Fleischer, Anna Johansson, Pelle Snickars, and Patrick Vonderau, *Spotify Tear-down: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

5 See, for instance, Mark Andrejevic, *Automated Media* (New York: Routledge, 2020); Ed Finn, *What Algorithms Want: Imagination in the Age of Computing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017); John Cheney-Lippold, *We are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves* (New York: New York University Press, 2017); and Blake Hallinan and Ted Striphas, “Recommended for You: The Netflix Prize and the Production of Algorithmic Culture,” *New Media & Society* 18, no. 1 (2016): 117–137.

6 Evan Elkins, “Algorithmic Cosmopolitanism: On the Global Claims of Digital Entertainment Platforms,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 36, no. 4 (2019): 376–389.

7 Commission on Civil Rights, *Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television* (Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse, 1977).

8 Hugh Malcolm Beville, *Audience Ratings: Radio, Television, and Cable* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1988).

its programming focus to young white men.⁹ for poor overall ratings, followed by political agitation on the part of African American and other minority-based political groups, which led to a brief surge in minority programming. [3

The history of African American media activism regarding audience measurement has thus been somewhat piecemeal but occasionally effective. Today's algorithmically created taste clusters pose a much greater existential threat to African American television audiences than Nielsen's rating practices ever did. Although the Niensens may have homogenized African American audiences under the rubric of "Black households" and struggled to measure their preferences effectively, they did at least recognize African Americans as a valid taste community, unlike algorithmic audience research.

The industrial shift toward algorithmic taste communities challenges a fundamental tenet of scholarship in race and media, including Black media studies—that, at some level, African Americans share cultural tastes that are not reflected in network television. I want to be careful here to clarify that I am not arguing for a monolithic view of Black cultural tastes, nor am I suggesting that those tastes do not often intersect with those of other racial groups, including whites. Indeed, most audience members dip in and out of multiple taste cultures each day. Still, the idea that African Americans have some degree of shared cultural sensibility has a long tradition in African American studies.¹⁰

In order to combat the dangers that algorithmic audience data analysis poses, I propose a new research agenda for the study of race and media, one that can (1) demonstrate the empirical validity of racialized taste cultures, (2) audit whether and how those communities are recognized by streaming media algorithms, and (3) propose alternative algorithmic practices that can better recognize a fuller range of racial and ethnic taste communities. The purpose of this agenda is not to argue for fine-tuning algorithmic research so that it better predicts nonwhite viewers' preferences. As Neta Alexander has argued, the idea that any algorithm could ever predict future tastes is an illusion.¹¹ Instead, I hope to force streaming platforms, through as many avenues as possible, to at least *consider* nonwhite viewers' tastes when production, distribution, and acquisition decisions are made. This is essentially the same research agenda that race and media scholars have always had, but the strategies for forcing such acknowledgments have changed.

Efforts to demonstrate that racial groups share cultural sensibilities and tastes are common across literary studies, music, and even cinema, but television studies has no such tradition. Moreover, the handful of studies that do address such issues have focused on situation comedy because, for decades, African American characters, themes, and creative talent were largely relegated to that genre. The past ten or fifteen years have seen a vast expansion of African American talent and themes

9 Herman S. Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

10 To give just two of the best-known examples: W. E. B. DuBois identified "double-consciousness" as a central approach to the world that was evident across a wide range of black popular culture. See W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1903). Also, Henry Louis Gates Jr. drew on the West African parable of the "signifying monkey" to argue that the rhetorical practice of "signifyin'" is a central cultural attribute of African American literature and culture. See Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

11 Alexander, "Catered to Your Future Self."

into historical dramas, police dramas, and melodrama.¹² African American television criticism needs a set of theoretical concepts similar to other fields that can identify the persistence of particular aesthetic strategies across decades and genres. This type of scholarship decidedly moves away from analysis of representation, as Alfred L. Martin Jr. calls for in the introduction to this In Focus section, as well as forms of criticism that focus exclusively on social discourses. What I am arguing for here is a deeper understanding of “Black televisuality”—an examination of the *practices* of programming Black-cast television.

Similarly, more scholarship in African American fan and audience studies is needed to further demonstrate the viability of African American taste communities. Fortunately, this work is already underway among scholars such as Racquel Gates, Alfred L. Martin Jr., Beretta Smith-Shomade, and Kristen Warner.¹³ Still, more research is needed surrounding those elements of popular television series that appeal to differently racialized taste communities, like Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis’s classic study of Black and white fans of *The Cosby Show*.¹⁴ Streaming services are awash with series featuring a wide array of racial and ethnic groups, and careful examination of why different groups respond to certain programs would provide a good basis for further examining racialized taste communities in television and the appeal of diverse programming for nonwhite viewers. In addition to television series, some streaming services may have racially distinct profiles themselves, and it is worth exploring how the functional and aesthetic aspects of the streaming interface might speak to differently situated taste communities.

The second and third aspects of the research agenda require an interdisciplinary research team, including partnerships with market researchers and computer scientists. A large and growing number of studies have shown that algorithmic data processing reproduces the same forms of racial bias inherent in the broader society, whether that means hypersexualizing girls of color on Google image searches or creating racist health and human services outcomes.¹⁵ Racial bias and exclusion in recommendation algorithms can happen at different moments in the process. First, it’s possible that African Americans are absent (or nearly absent) from the universe of subscribers in the first place. In 2015, Horowitz Research found that African Americans living in urban areas oversubscribe to premium television services in general but comparatively *undersubscribe* to Netflix.¹⁶ If this remains the case today, then Netflix’s algorithm would necessarily have fewer Black viewer profiles to work with and understandably might not recognize Black tastes. The extent to which different streaming

12 Timothy J. Havens, “Showtime’s *The Chi* and the Surge in Black-Cast TV Dramas,” *Flow: A Critical Forum on Media and Culture*, February 26, 2018, <http://www.flowjournal.org/2018/02/showtimes-the-chi/>.

13 Racquel Gates, “Activating the Negative Image,” *Television & New Media* 16, no. 7 (2015): 616–630; Alfred L. Martin Jr., “Fandom while Black: Misty Copeland, *Black Panther*, Tyler Perry and the Contours of US Black Fandoms,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 6 (November 2019): 737–753; Alfred L. Martin Jr., “Why All the Hate? Four Black Women’s Anti-fandom and Tyler Perry,” in *Anti-fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age*, ed. Melissa A. Click (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 166–183; Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, ed., *Watching while Black: Centering the Television of Black Audiences* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012); and Kristen J. Warner, “If Loving Olitz Is Wrong, I Don’t Wanna Be Right: ABC’s *Scandal* and the Affect of Black Female Desire,” *The Black Scholar* 45, no. 1 (2015): 16–20.

14 Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992).

15 Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); and Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018).

16 Horowitz Research, *State of Cable & Digital Media: Multicultural Edition*, (New Rochelle, NY: Horowitz Research, 2015).

services exhibit different subscriber bases is precisely the kind of question that market researchers are poised to help answer.

In addition, television scholars might partner with computer scientists to examine which streaming media recommendations are tailored to different racial taste communities. This is a challenging research design, involving numerous dummy accounts on various streaming services, which are increasingly savvy at weeding out such accounts. Researchers need to develop computerized bots, or “sock puppets,” that mimic the behavior of different racial taste communities; collect the different recommendations that each group of bots receives; and then analyze them for differences that can be attributed to taste community differences. This would tell us whether the algorithm recognizes race as a valid category in constructing its taste communities and what the consequences of that recognition are. One of the main difficulties of this method, though, is creating bots that mimic the viewing behaviors of racial taste communities. Another option might be to develop large, automated surveys on something like the crowdsourcing site Mechanical Turk and ask that respondents to fill out their race, the streaming services to which they subscribe, and the recommendations they receive.

The final step of this research agenda is one that I’ve learned from collaborating with computer programmers: developing algorithms that mitigate or correct problems of racial bias and exclusion. While these are frequently the result of deliberate, if unacknowledged, commercial media policies, they can also result from unintentional ignorance. Developing algorithms that can take into account differences in racial taste communities when developing viewer profiles, acquiring or developing programming, and making recommendations can help solve instances of unintentional bias. Of course, they do nothing about intentional bias in the industry. Still, the creation and dissemination of such algorithms might shame streaming platforms that specifically bracket out certain racial taste communities by calling on them to account for their algorithmic practices.

I realize the idea that critical scholars should work to create algorithmic practices that can better surveil the tastes of nonwhite viewers might seem naive. As Herman Gray has suggested, in an era of hypervisibility and surveillance, the better tactic for racial groups that are closely surveilled and policed might be invisibility.¹⁷ However, when it comes to streaming television, subscribers’ behaviors and tastes are already surveilled; I am advocating for a research agenda that will include African American taste preferences in the programming agendas of streaming services to which these viewers are already subscribing.

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17 Herman Gray, “Subject(ed) to Recognition,” *American Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (2013): 771–798.