

Reviving the Black Sitcom

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the groundbreaking television series, *A Different World* (NBC), the much-beloved spin off of *The Cosby Show* (NBC), which explores student life at the fictional Hillman College, a historically black institution. In August, Producer/Director Debbie Allen tweeted that “we need to revisit this wonder arena” of such a program that is “missed in TV today.” Allen’s statement seems to be indicative of a general consensus concerning the representation of African-American experience on television, that highlights a waning of critical edge and nuance in favor of sensation and spectacle in the current crop of shows that are considered black sitcoms. Reactions to Allen’s virtual comments were mixed; while some (including myself) were excited to hear that such a project could be in the works, others were hesitant to support a reboot for fear that a show so steeped in identity politics of the late 80s and early 90s would not translate in the current moment. Nonetheless, the continuing buzz over a possible *A Different World* reunion attests to the black audience’s desire to re-create the magic of the black sitcom’s generic past.

Indeed, today’s black sitcoms that exist on cable networks appear to reflect nostalgia for their heyday on broadcast television. For example, BET’s *Reed Between the Lines* pays homage to the wholesome family fare of *The Cosby Show*. The program’s focus on a professional couple (Malcolm-Jamal Warner as a professor and Tracee Ellis Ross as a psychologist) with precocious children hearkens back to Bill Cosby and Phylicia Rashad’s aura of respectability in a depiction of an upper middle class black domestic lifestyle. The increasing lack of original comedic programming on BET and rival network TV One is compensated for by the amount of sitcoms in syndication on these channels such as broadcast favorites of the mid-90s, *Martin* and *Living Single* (both originally aired on FOX), *Girlfriends* (UPN, The CW) as well as The CW’s *Everybody Hates Chris* and *The Game*. The ease with which these shows circulate in the syndicated market contributes to their staple status in the viewing habits of black audiences.

Thus the emphasis on remembering and screening the past of the network black sitcom in the present on cable is partly an industrial imperative, yet it also speaks to a recognition of a moment in which these narratives were tenuously integrated into a dominant televisual climate that frequently renders race invisible. Here, I am referring to the perhaps problematic broadcast network practice of branding blackness by constructing a discrete night of programming geared towards African-Americans. However, one can “read between the lines” to conclude that such marketing ploys actually cultivated a cohesive sense of identity as well as a shared televisual experience and vernacular for the black community through intertextuality and star power. The success of future cable offerings will be predicated on the continued development of black fan culture with a viewership that is willing to search for media within the post-network era’s dispersal of content through narrowcasting.

The Game’s success on cable can largely be attributed to its loyal network audience that pushed for the show’s resurgence after its cancellation. The “Change *The Game* Campaign” urged fans to petition to bring it back on air and BET capitalized on this passion for the show by producing new episodes. Garnering new viewers as well as satisfying its previous audience ultimately resulted in the show clearly outperforming the

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Reed-ing Between the Lines: The Future of the Black Sitcom

ratings from its previous incarnation on The CW. The unprecedented popularity of Tyler Perry's sitcoms, *House of Payne* and *Meet the Browns* (TBS) may not necessarily be due to their position on cable but rather to the core base of Perry fans that are loyal in consuming his media products wherever they are located.

The fate of the black sitcom today is fundamentally dependent on the continued development of the black audience that seeks out the communal experience of laughter to explore the multifaceted lives of African-Americans. The privileged site for the sitcom genre still remains in the broadcast realm however cable networks are re-defining the comedic narrative, especially through reality television programming. Indeed, shows such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (Bravo), *Basketball Wives* (Vh1), and *Love and Hip Hop: Atlanta* (Vh1) are not sitcoms in the traditional sense, but cater to a cult black audience that finds amusement in the lives of the black subjects presented. Similarly, the increasing prominence of the black web series (notably Issa Rae's *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*) and its viral distribution is forging new modes of address to the black viewer. The common denominator is the fan and to achieve such investment in black programming, cable networks need to mobilize nostalgia for the black sitcom's past *and* the affective environment it created in order for their future sustainment.