

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

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Given mainstream sitcoms' tendencies toward either white homogeneity or "convergent ethnicity" (or the increased use of multiracial, multigendered casts with a resulting diffusion of difference), black-owned and -oriented broadcast and cable networks likely will serve as the last bastions for televised black sitcoms. However, given the varying degrees of success of the sitcoms on these networks, the future of the black sitcom unfortunately is quite bleak.

While the five major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, CW, FOX, NBC) have failed either to develop or to sustain black sitcoms in recent years, black-owned and -oriented networks finally have begun to do so. Latecomers to scripted original programming, BET and TV One have been relatively successful in developing black sitcoms in recent years, with BET's *Let's Stay Together* and *Reed Between the Lines* (which seems to be in a state of turmoil as co-star Tracie Ross Ellis has left the cast) and TV One's (possibly cancelled) *Love That Girl* proving to be popular with their core audiences. This fall, TV One debuted *The Rickey Smiley Show*, a vehicle for actor/comedian/radio host Rickey Smiley. With black networks realizing their potential for original programming, there is some likelihood that a proliferation of black sitcoms may follow.

There is some indication that this is already occurring: Bounce TV, a black-owned broadcast network that began broadcasting in September 2011, already has entered the sitcom fray with *Family Time*, a family-oriented sitcom starring Omar Gooding which began airing this summer. Byron Allen's independent Entertainment Studios also has two black sitcoms in syndication, *The First Family* and *Mr. Box Office*, both of which began airing in September

2012. With other black networks on the horizon (particularly the Magic Johnson-owned Aspire, which debuted in July 2012, and the forthcoming Sean Combs-owned Revolt set to debut in 2013), again, there is some likelihood that more black sitcoms may follow.

The continued growth and emergence of black-owned and –oriented networks likely will prove key in the future of black sitcoms, for black sitcoms seem to be in a state of freefall on even the basic cable networks that have sustained them in recent years. While there are still a few on air, most notably TBS sitcoms like the Ice Cube-produced *Are We There Yet?* and Tyler Perry-produced *For Better Or Worse* and TV-Land’s Cedric the Entertainer and Niecy Nash vehicle *The Soul Man*, there are some indications that their statuses are tenuous at best. For example, the return of *Are We There Yet?* was uncertain for much of the year, especially after the show faced a near year-long hiatus. Recently, TBS announced the series’ return, but it has been placed in an unfavorable noonday Monday slot.

Furthermore, though Perry’s *For Better or Worse* has fared well in the ratings, the show represents an end to Perry’s ubiquity on TBS as his other series—*House of Payne* (2006-2012) and *Meet the Browns* (2009-2011) have ended. The nadir of these shows—coupled with TBS’s new slate of sitcoms, which includes the recent acquisition of former ABC-sitcom *Cougar Town*—has led some to fear that TBS may be following in the stead of networks such as FOX and UPN (now CW), which infamously catered to black audiences until they were able to establish ground with their desired white audiences. These concerns are valid, for *House of Payne* indeed was TBS’s first foray into original scripted programming shortly after it rebranded itself as a comedy-themed network in 2004.

If what has been suggested here is accurate, then on the one hand, black media gains a modicum of control over the commercial likeness of black people. For the first time ever, most

of the black sitcoms in production are on black owned- or –oriented networks or produced by black-owned studios. Given the abandonment by the major networks and the precarious situation of the ones on basic cable networks, we may be on the verge of having all of the black sitcoms airing on these networks. On the other hand, it further isolates black sitcoms from the mainstream, which inherently constrains their sustainability. Furthermore, given black owned- or –oriented networks’ still unproven record of sustaining series (neither BET or TV One, for example, have had a sitcom run longer than three seasons), the possibility that we may be returning to a major lull is unfortunately just as likely.