CHAPTER SEVEN

One Man Hollywood: The Decline of Black Creative Production in Post-Network Television

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In 2013, Oprah Winfrey partnered with Tyler Perry to release a drama and sitcom of questionable production value. One critic called them "so clumsily produced, it's difficult to imagine them getting through a table read at any other network." Few people might have predicted such an outcome when the mogul ended her daytime talk show and started her own network, OWN (Oprah Winfrey Network), years before. But an understanding of the new television economy, which privileges corporate partnerships and ownership of intellectual property, might have presaged the network's ignominious start. After releasing a slate of inspirational programs, OWN was having a hard time drawing audiences in a crowded cable TV market. Weak ratings endangered the possibilities of obtaining lucrative retransmission fees, so Winfrey turned to Tyler Perry, known for his ability to attract Black audiences. Perry quickly supplied OWN with The Haves and the Have Nots (2013–present) and Love Thy Neighbor (2013–present), writing all of the combined forty-two episodes by himself. 'That was quite a remarkable feat for Perry, all the more notable because he had also released three feature films—Tyler Perry's A Madea Christmas (Tyler Perry, 2013), Temptation: Confessions of a Marriage Counselor (Tyler Perry, 2013), Good Deeds (Tyler Perry, 2012)—along with episodes of House of Payne (TBS, 2007–2012) and three filmed plays (Aunt Bam's Place, I Don't Want to Do Wrong, Madea Gets a Job), in the previous year.

Of course, we mean to suggest Perry either did not write all those works, or if he did, his divided attention accounts for their weak plots, reductive characters, and questionable politics. Why not hire help—writers who can earn credits and residuals? Perry insists on owning everything he produces, and he also directs and often stars in those products. In the decade following his film debut in 2005, Perry went from a virtual unknown to one of the highest-paid entertainment moguls, with a fortune estimated at nearly half a billion dollars. He accomplished this by building a following among Black American theatre-goers, bringing them into cinemas and inking lucrative partnerships with corporations who could secure and finance his intellectual property, first Lionsgate (and subsidiary Debmar-Mercury) and then OWN.

Academic and popular writers discuss Perry's portrayal of the Black family, Black women and men, the latter is often cast aside with simple references to his incredible wealth. We argue Perry's multiple roles in entertainment production and his successful self-positioning as a Hollywood outsider compel scholars to grapple with the significance of the ways media corporations have increasingly embraced the "one man Hollywood" niche producer model for its low-cost efficiency in a fragmented marketplace. Like famed director Oscar Micheaux before him, Perry has consistently pointed to the importance of Black audiences, parlaying his grasp of this niche into an ever more powerful and complex production and distribution apparatus. Having this one-man media empire—in theatre, film, and television—gives Hollywood a consistent and safe outlet to market Black audiences in a creative economy made aggressively competitive by deregulation and conglomeration. But Perry's dominance of the space, and his steady focus on growing his own properties, limits America's range of representations.

Much has been said of the expanding possibilities for storytelling in global creative industries. Yet for marginalized groups this has only been occasionally true. For Black audiences, in particular, a fresh wave of government deregulation at the turn of the twenty-first century paved the way for more media conglomeration, changes which reduced the complexity and diversity of minority stories and producers. As audiences grew harder to organize, studios and networks invested heavily in franchises, established talent, and formulaic storytelling, all of which privileged white male producers. Aware of the size and power of the Black market, but losing sight of diversity off-camera, studios and
networks promoted the television stars they had supported in the nineties—Will Smith, Denzel Washington, Jennifer Lopez, Martin Lawrence, Jamie Foxx, and Queen Latifah—to film. At the same time, television shows featuring Black casts and creators declined steeply as major networks aimed to attract broader (or, whiter) audiences. Cable networks targeted smaller but more affluent audiences.

In a fast-changing landscape, Tyler Perry proved a very safe and welcomed bet. Through his theatrical and early cinematic productions, he was one of very few independent producers who had built name recognition among Black consumers. Perry’s small but dedicated audience allowed him to ink distribution deals that were lucrative for him but with little room for other Black creators around him. Unlike in the 1990s, when networks hired a critical mass of writing and acting talent, a small network of production and distribution entities—Lionsgate, OWN, TBS, and Debmars Mercury—went with Perry, the most reliable, albeit problematic, vehicle for garnering audiences in era of hard-to-find niches across platforms. A combination of anti-union labor trends and industry deference to Perry’s influence, and indifference to his work, buttressed with heteronormativity, misogyny, and homophobia, yielded a series of profitable products of questionable cultural value. House of Payne to Love Thy Neighbor (OWN, 2013–present) and The Haves and the Have Nots (OWN, 2013–present), as well as Why Did I Get Married Too (2010) and Temptation.

This essay explains Perry’s successful rise as inextricably tied to the growing invisibility of Black labor and audiences in Hollywood, even amidst exponential growth in production and networks for distribution. How is it that, despite hundreds of channels, only Perry and a handful of other Black producers—Shonda Rhimes, Mara Brock, and Salim Akil—were able to profit from the burgeoning new television marketplace? We begin with an explanation of the past and present—the rise and fall—of the Black TV market. We’ll then move to discuss how Perry stepped into the void left when growing conglomerates shed Black television shows and creative talent, and how his productions successfully saved or lifted those conglomerates above the fray of a competitive media marketplace. Finally, we will end with an examination of the stories this marketplace supports, focusing on how Perry’s cultural politics—based on his perception of what his audience wants—creates damaging narratives that champion patriarchy, heterosexism, and narrow paths to progress within Black communities.

Whither the Black Market?

At the annual conference of the Television Critics Association (TCA), networks promote upcoming programming slates with light and convivial panels with producers and stars. In the generally festive atmosphere of the 2013 conference, there were notable silences as cast members recounted experiences in production. At HBO’s panel for Mike Tyson: Undisputed Truth (Spike Lee, 2013), Tyson described how the final project differed from his initial vision for the autobiographical piece. He explained that the filming of the one-man Broadway play was originally supposed to include a band and take place in Las Vegas, but was later reshaped by director Spike Lee. What Tyson neglected to mention—but what we can only imagine was on Lee’s mind—as he listened by his side—was that the two men had pitched another project to HBO. Their scripted drama, Da Brick (Spike Lee, 2011), penned by Black creators John Ridley, who wrote the George Lucas-produced Red Tails (Anthony Hemingway, 2012) and Steve McQueen’s 12 Years a Slave (2013), was “a contemporary exploration of what it means to be a young, black man in a supposedly post-racial America.” HBO, however, decided not to pick up that show. Instead, HBO opted for something far cheaper, balancing at the opportunity to break a damning track record: the network, despite numerous chances, had never greenlit a series created by a Black producer.

We narrate the story of Da Brick because it reflects the realities of scripted television production in the post-network era: minority producers, despite more buyers for shows (channels), find it difficult to get shows made by networks that could easily support bright new acting talent—Da Brick was to be Attack the Block’s Joe Cornish, 2011 John Boyega’s breakout US role—and bring in more writers under contract with the Writers Guild. Instead, cable networks, initially launched on the premise they could better reflect America’s diverse communities than the three long-standing broadcast networks, focused on cheaper, non-union reality programming and syndicating pre-existing films and TV
shows. Indeed, a week before Tyson and Lee’s panel, BET announced an unprecedented syndication deal for ABC’s Black-led Scandal (ABC, 2012–present), paying an undoubtedly hefty price to air the first two seasons in advance of season three, after which it would re-air new episodes within eight days of each episode’s broadcast on Disney’s broadcast network. While the vast majority of BET’s programming was unscripted, it chose to repurpose other scripted content rather than produce more of its own.

The roots of this crisis are complicated but begin with the deregulation of the television industry in the late 1970s, which gave rise to networks like HBO and BET. The founders of cable networks lobbied hard for Congress to break the oligarchy of CBS, NBC, and ABC, arguing, in part, that cable would help bring communities forgotten by television together. As Beretta Smith-Shomade has argued, “for people of color and those concerned with their representation, cable was marketed as the cure all for a very white television world.” In reality, cable was a business opportunity for the likes of Ted Turner and Robert Johnson to get a piece of TV’s advertising revenue. Turner himself sold cable to advertisers as a way to get away from people of color; “We’re not wired to the ghettos,” he said in 1978. That sell worked, and throughout the 1980s broadcast networks saw periodic declines in viewership, enough to compel them to market to those people of color, who held on to free over-the-air television at higher rates than whites.

The advent of cable, along with Nielsen’s implementation of the People Meter in 1987, led to a proliferation of Black stories on broadcast TV. The popularity of The Cosby Show (NBC, 1984–92) showed networks white viewers would watch Black stories, and the show’s independent production company, Carrey-Werner, grew rich. Soon Rupert Murdoch’s upstart broadcaster Fox would take a page from this playbook and invest heavily in Black comedy, providing a platform for a group of stars and producers—among them the Wayans brothers and Martin Lawrence—who would enrich Hollywood companies for decades.

Over-the-air network UPN debuted in the 1990s to take advantage of advertiser interest in the Black market and provided dozens of union-contracted jobs for Hollywood’s growing community of Black writers. Most notable among these were Salim and Mara Brock Akil, who created Girlfriends (UPN, 2000–2008) and later The Game (UPN, 2006–2008; BET, 2011–15). The growth of hip hop as a global music behemoth contributed to this bubble, as evidenced by Will Smith and Queen Latifah’s successful transitions to television, culminating in Viacom’s purchase of BET in 2001.

Black audiences thus were integral to the development of cable and the sustainability of broadcast television during the multichannel transition; or, as Robin Means Coleman states, networks during this period perceived Black audiences as “ensuring programmatic successes.” Data from Nielsen suggested Black Americans watched these programs and paid for cable as well, both directly and indirectly. By 2005, a comprehensive report on the African American audience reported a greater share of Black audiences watched ad-supported cable and premium channels like HBO throughout their days. This explains the trend of cable channels spearheading successful original programming initiatives with Black-targeted shows after Black broadcast television production slowed: Lifetime (Any Day Now, 1998–2002, HBO (Oz, 1997–2003), Showtime (Soul Food, 2000–2004), Logo (Noah’s Arc, 2005–2006), VH1 (Single Ladies, 2011–present), DirectTV’s Audience Network (Rogue, 2013–present), and, of course, TBS (House of Payne, Meet the Browns, 2006–2011, For Better or Worse, 2011–present), and HBO’s Superstore (2010–13). At the same time, throughout television’s period of deregulation, Black Americans disproportionately received programming from free over-the-air broadcasts and remained a key viewership of broadcast television programs.

Cable was filling the hole left by the broadcasters, who would become vertically integrated and resistant to pitches from Black producers. Shortly after the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which allowed networks to own more of their programs, broadcasters premiered a nearly all-white slate of programs, as the NAACP called it in 1999. Staging direct action, the organization worked to increase diversity by pressuring networks to adopt formal minority development programs, with NBC starting and other networks following suit (this was in addition to Cosby’s writing fellowship, which started in the early 1990s and ran through 2012). But the merger of UPN and the WB, creating the CW, and the general trend toward reality television, caused a drastic reduction in the number of Black writers, and other networks soon saw declines. By the 2011–12 season, all minority writers
made up just 15 percent of all unionized writers, less than half their representation in the total population. Most of those writers were staffed on majority-white shows, much like the actors forced to play "tokens" on sitcoms and dramas. In this climate, it is no wonder that, when BET revived UPN's *The Game* in 2011, it broke records for the network and cable generally. When Tyler Perry started producing television in the mid-2000s, Black television was teetering on the brink of crisis. On cable, networks were focused on producing cheaper reality television, and broadcast networks had all but stopped producing majority-minority shows. With many writers and actors finding work hard to come by, and viewers finding decent scripted entertainment even harder, Perry was in an ideal position to get the creative teams he needed at a low cost and the robust distribution deals to make him rich.

**How One Man Produces Everything**

Tyler Perry achieved success by producing "feel good" comedies and moral melodramas at low cost and rapid pace, organizing large enough audiences to sell them across media platforms. Perry's career grew because he discovered his audience early and secured ownership of intellectual (and physical) property, which gave him power to bypass or accelerate what delayed and complicated production in the post-network era: the hiring of above-the-line creative talent, including writers, producers, directors, and headline actors. For most of these roles, he simply hired himself.

"Is this sort of selfish anarchy a good thing?" asked Nelson Pressley, a television critic writing for the *Washington Post* in 2000, of Perry's *I Can Do Bad All by Myself*, calling it "The Tyler Perry Show." Even after dismissing the play's writing and overall plot, Pressley filed a positive review: "Anything goes, as long as you get the audience's attention and come around to the right message by the end." Inadvertently, Pressley identifies what has always been Perry's modus operandi from the day he self-produced *I Know I've Been Changed* in 1992 by putting up his $12,000 savings to rent and staff a 200-seat theater, to which only thirty people came. Perry learned he needed the audience, not just ownership, and his break came when he staged the play again at Atlanta's House of Blues, a renovated church. "Promotion was done by word of mouth in Black churches; the eight-night engagement sold out," according to reports. After adapting works from megachurch pastor T.D. Jakes, Perry had a theatre-going audience that generated more than $20 million in box-office and merchandise sales from 1998 to 2004, when Lionsgate announced production on *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (Darren Grant, 2005). By the time Lionsgate inked *Madea's Family Reunion* (Tyler Perry, 2006) and started releasing official DVDs of the plays, that number was expected to climb to $100 million. Home videos were a key part of Perry's transition from audience development to master of intellectual property and corporate partnerships. For one, DVDs sales managed by Lionsgate gave him added protection against piracy, which he called a "major issue" when he was self-distributing under the Tyler Perry Company. "Before I could get to my fan base, it had been pirated all over the streets. I knew I needed a bigger machine," he told *Variety*. Lionsgate provided that machine. In 2007, Tyler Perry's success in film, video, and, most significantly, television made him Lionsgate's "favorite son," as vice chairman Michael Burns referred to him in a 2008 quarterly earnings conference call.

Shortly after inking video and film deals with Lionsgate, Perry set his eyes on television and its riches. After the broadcast "whiteout," cable, with its need to fill empty programming schedules, was his savior. In 2003, he was under contract with CBS to write a sitcom pilot, which fell through. The experience of trying to convince a network taught him he needed to produce "on his own terms." Lionsgate had recently purchased syndication firm Debmar-Mercury, and its founders wanted to make a splash. Perry produced ten episodes of *House of Payne* on his own for TBS, and it tested well in ten markets, most notably Atlanta. In mid-2007, it premiered as the highest-rated original sitcom on cable among total viewers and adults 18-49. Debmar-Mercury founders focused exclusively on Perry as self-made brand, his low-cost production model, and built-in audience: "You need someone who has a pre-sold branded element. It can't be an unknown guy with a really good script. You need to be in business with people who have the financial wherewithal to play for the upside," Bernstein said. Tyler Perry's investment in those early episodes paid off. The unprecedented "10/90" deal
meant TBS bulk-ordered scores of episodes after Perry’s initial ten. TBS paid a $45 million six-year license fee for at least seventy-five episodes; additional licensing fees, estimated at around $40 million, resulted from negotiations with individual stations, mainly from networks owned and operated by broadcasters like Fox. This is on top of advertising revenues. Lionsgate estimated the overall value of the deal at upwards of $200 million, of which Perry pocketed 60 percent to Debmear-Mercury’s 30 percent. Perry was explicitly “taking advantage of Georgia as a non-union state,” according to some reports and producing the series for an estimated $500,000 each episode, roughly one-third the broadcast TV average. The series went on to air more than 180 episodes.

Neglected in this cable TV marketplace were the workers who supply the stories. A year after its premiere, House of Payne’s writers went on strike after Perry fired them for trying to unionize the room. The writers had been negotiating with Perry for months after having written over one hundred episodes. The final sticking point was residual payments. Writer Teri Brown-Jackson said in a release from Writers Guild of America West, which filed unfair labor practices with the embattled National Labor Relations Board:

I feel like I was slapped in the face, like we were used. . . . We were good enough to create over a hundred episodes, but now it comes to reaping the benefits of the show being syndicated and having other spin-offs from it, he decides to let us go unless we accept a horrible offer.

That week five writers picketed the grand opening of Tyler Perry Studios, the nearly thirty-acre campus which that October night drew the likes of Oprah Winfrey, Will Smith, Sidney Poitier, Patti LaBelle, and other Black luminaries (who all crossed the picket line). Then-Democratic Party candidate Barack Obama was invited but declined to attend. A month after dozens of Hollywood’s marquee writers—among them Tina Fey, Shonda Rhimes, Chuck Lorre, and Marc Cherry—publicly chastised Perry for running the only nonunionized scripted production on the air that season, Perry reached an agreement brokered by the NAACP.

The settlement, however, appeared to leave little of Perry’s production practices. Most of the writers who picketed did not return to the show. On his subsequent sitcoms Meet the Browns and For Better or

Worse, Perry is credited as the most frequent writer, a questionable claim given his productivity across platforms. After pioneering the 10-90 deal, of which Ice Cube’s TBS show Are We There Yet and Charlie Sheen’s FX show Anger Management (2012–present) would take advantage, Perry shifted gears when he got into business with Oprah Winfrey and Discovery Communications. He alone is credited on the OWN prime-time soap opera, The Haves and the Have Nots, and sitcom, Love Thy Neighbor, allowing him to circumvent paying a staff of union-contracted writers.

Perry’s insistence on owning and controlling his own intellectual property has been well-documented and appears consistent. This includes a number of accusations and lawsuits alleging he stole material from other writers and artists, particularly Black women and gay men. Notable among these was CBS local V-103 host and noted Atlanta drag queen Miss Sophia (Joe Taylor), who claimed on an infamous October broadcast that Perry stole Madea from her, showing old footage of her own character playing gay clubs:

He would come to the show. He would sit up under the spotlight, behind the camera. He never wanted us to take photos of him. He never wanted us to take videos of him. . . . But after the show Tyler Perry would always come up and tell me, “you know you crazy,” “you know you stupid” and “you know I’m going to put such-and-such in the show.” . . . For all the people asking me, “Miss Sophia, did Tyler Perry steal your stuff?” and I used to say, “No, you know, I don’t think he stole my stuff.” I’m telling you right here on FM digital live: Yes yes yes yes yes yes that nigga stole my character! . . . Sophia has been in existence for 20-some years!22

Authorship in media production is more a matter of industrial power than truth; disputing creative ownership is historically a fool’s errand for those outside media industries. Nevertheless, Perry’s claims of sole authorship on as many properties as possible strains credibility and, at a time when pressure on writers is escalating, betrays his insistence that his work benefits the communities who inspire his works.

Claims to sole authorship have allowed him to profit handsomely from his works and reduce costs for corporate partners desperately searching for cheap, popular content at a time when competition for eyeballs was stiff and consumer options multiplying. Debmear-Mercury
and Lionsgate, TBS, and OWN have all built or sustained their enterprises in great part due to Perry. Lionsgate spent years searching for hits, its stock buttressed by Perry's consistent box-office receipts, DVD sales, and television syndication businesses.65 By the late 2000s, Lionsgate purchased Summit Entertainment, giving it two major franchises (The Hunger Games and Twilight) and transforming it into a major studio. Perry's early success with TBS gave it the heft it needed to eventually pick up a previously canceled broadcast sitcom in Cougar Town (ABC, 2009–2011; TBS, 2013–15). Finally, after OWN's premiere ratings faltered and Perry's planned cable network with Lionsgate, Tyler TV, fizzled, Perry took a small equity stake in OWN and delivered two shows in under a year.66 OWN followed the same playbook as TBS, banking on Black viewers' appetite for scripted entertainment.67 Eschewing the pulpy, exploitative reality television that enriched other cable brands—enough to collect generous retransmissions fees—OWN found in Perry a family-friendly alternative that was easy to market. Premiere ratings for The Haves and the Have Nots and Love Thy Neighbor were strong enough for the network to double the episode order for The Haves and pick up the third season of For Better or Worse from TBS.68

But the numbers only tell the story of tycoons who have profited from an unequal marketplace. What narratives are Black audiences being sold? There have been numerous critiques of Perry's representations in film, which tend to denigrate Black female professional success and valorize traditional, working-class family structures. An analysis of his TBS and OWN shows (Perry's only solo-authored television texts) reveals the pitfalls of when one man guards creative ownership over swathes of programming.

When One Man Produces Everything

Tyler Perry's contribution to television and film extends far beyond the scope of behind-the-scenes battles, plagiarism, and backroom deals. While Perry's approach to the entertainment industry is plagued with accusations of appropriation and lack of originality, the extremely predictable and preachy nature of Perry's texts has also propelled their widespread circulation and consumption among Black audiences, attracted by their Christian overtones and cultural references. A close look at Perry's dominant one-man-band approach to production shows how his creative works cohere around his personal ideas about African American identity and behavior. By producing derivative family dramas and situation comedies focusing on the Black experience, Perry does more than promote his brand—he also advances a clear agenda, painting a vexing portrait of Black pathology, values, and norms.

The politics of Black representation on both silver and small screens has been at the center of scholarly and critical analyses (and conflicts) for decades. Most of this work focuses on whether media images provide people with information about racial others that fuel their actions, behaviors, and beliefs; as such, debates over popular on-screen narratives about people of color typically examine whether these narratives vilify (or flatter) Black people, depict their complex identities and roles in society, or present accurate portrayals of Black experiences. Arguably, the tropes represented in Tyler Perry's brand does the work of each, creating accessible and diverse representations of Black characters that venerate working-class people, vilify the wealthy, and adhere to strict pseudo-Christian gender and sexual codes. In his own words,69 Black women are both the primary subject and audience of his work, and he receives most of his criticism pertaining to their representation. For some detractors, his moralistic texts and humor about their appearances and choices extend the "painful and punishing control over women's bodies" that theorists argue is endemic to modern society.70 According to his critics, Perry's pieces are "marked by old stereotypes of buffoonish, emasculated black men and crass, sassy black women"71 and their "image is troubling and harkens back to Amos 'n' Andy."72 Perry, however, argues that his work is based on real-life personal experiences and, through it, he aims to counsel Black viewers on the challenges they face, especially young women. As he explains in an interview about his film Temptation:

What was more important to me in this film was that I knew there were a lot of people going through things in relationships and I wanted to just raise a flag and say "What happens when you're tempted?" One choice, one bad decision can change your entire future and destiny. That's why I wanted to tell this story and that's why I took the play version to this version and
really extended it and really went into all of those different areas ... I also wanted this cast, I wanted a younger cast because not only is this message for everyone but its in particular for younger people as well. One decision can change your whole life ... It's not about trying to make the men more powerful, they're great and moving on and happy and the women aren't. No — it's about the choices that we make and to tell you the truth, I've known some of these women, I know some of these men. I've known a lot of people in my lifetime, in my career and I've seen a lot of these situations and it is pretty sad.  

By drawing on what he sees as authentic Black experiences, especially for Black women, Perry's characters and representations function as cautionary tales about success, failure, faith, and power (see, for example, Perry's advice book, Don't Make a Black Woman Take Off Her Earrings: Madea's Uninhibited Commentaries on Love and Life).  

As the first of Perry's television ventures, House of Payne provides a glimpse into the themes, patterns, and ideas pervading his TV work. Typical of the sitcom genre, House of Payne focuses on a patriarchal family raising children in unconventional circumstances and challenges. In the show, Curtis and Ella Payne (LaVan and Cassi Davis), a middle-class couple in their fifties with a son in college, are forced to take in their nephew and his family after a tragic accident. The spouses of both Payne men are housewives who spend their time volunteering, cooking, cleaning, and otherwise attending to the needs of their husband and children. Besides common sitcom storylines about aging, financial difficulties, childhood bullies, and school, the show is filled with Black cultural references, like jokes about skin tone, masculinity, layaway, DNA paternity tests, playing the dozens, and referring to various characters with the Black church honorary of "Sister" or "Brother." Like all of Perry's programs, House of Payne focuses on issues perceived as facing Black families, most often pointing blame at mothers as responsible for their deterioration. For example, the drug addiction of "stay-at-home mom" Janine (played by Demetria McKinney) nearly rips the Payne family apart.  

Irresponsible and neglectful mothers are plot devices in each of Perry's other shows, from another addict mother who loses her children to foster care in Meet the Browns to a woman who attacks and regularly threatens her adult children in Love Thy Neighbor. This theme echoes popular and historical arguments that blame the poor outcomes of Black people on the pathological behavior of Black women—perhaps most famously in the findings of sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1965. The trope almost always neglects systemic injustice and justifies racism by locating Black dysfunction on individuals who should presumably know better and are empowered to change their circumstances.  

Perry's work buttresses his intellectual property, along with his preferred themes of religion and individual respectability, by shifting his characters across his theatre, television, and film brands. Abiding by his on-stage vow to only produce Christian, faith-based entertainment, Perry opens the House of Payne series with the family returning from a Sunday afternoon at church, padding the show with Scripture, church scenes, and family prayer. Additionally, the first few episodes of the series include two of Perry's trademark characters, Madea (performed by Perry) and Mr. Brown, played by David Mann. Continuing a premise from a 2006's Madea's Family Reunion, in which Madea becomes a court-appointed mother, she and her foster daughter appear in House of Payne as bullies to the Payne males. The film's star, Keke Palmer, returns to play Madea's daughter on the show. Similarly, Mr. Brown appears as the irritating neighbor in House of Payne and also becomes the star of Perry's second sitcom, Meet the Browns. Thus, intertextuality in House of Payne reflects the ways in which Perry creates and maintains impressive connections between his different projects across multiple platforms, frequently using the same characters, actors, and storylines to extend and solidify his brand and extend religious themes and neoliberal politics.  

Seven years later, Perry's first show to premiere on the OWN network continued to draw on his trademark themes and plots. Love Thy Neighbor focuses on a family headed by an elderly woman named "Hattie" (Patrice Lovely), who lives with her unemployed college-educated grandson, and her daughter, a former housewife contending with divorce and dating after her husband's infidelity. The Hattie character is explicitly modeled after Perry's Madea—"If you love Madea," he says in one advertisement, "you are going to love Mama Hattie." Perry's other show for OWN, The Haves and the Have Nots is a distinctly southern tale depicting the intersecting lives of two wealthy families, one Black and one white, and their
domestic servants. Intra-racial and class tensions undergird the show. In one scene, Hanna Young (Crystal R. Fox), an older Black woman character who is a maid and moral compass, remarks, "I can’t stand Black people like that . . . who think they’re better than us." While Perry continues to display his familiarity with Black vernacular, cultural jokes, and signifiers in the prime-time soap, his work remains plagued with slow pacing, heavy-handed music, awkward camera shots, and stereotypical plots intended to provide moral clarity to an audience he feels desires it. Lacking depth and complexity, *The Have and the Have Nots* received particularly scathing reviews. Britney Cooper, noting Perry’s predictable reliance on negative Black female archetypes, wrote:

> The fact that Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire, along with their remixes (Bad) Baby Mama, Golddigger, Freak and Hood Bitch showed up in under 15 mins is surely a new world record . . . . Tyler Perry is dangerous. He has made Black women mistake hate for love. When his heavy-handedness is still not enough to chastise and discipline us for being independent, driven, and sex-positive, he will resort to straight up distortions of history, and assume that his working class audience will miss the sleight-of-hand.13

*Ebony’s* Gerren Keith Gaynor further lambasted the various shortcuts Perry made in storytelling and production value, particularly with regard to sexuality:

> Sticking to his usual formula of mass stereotyping, Perry covers all of his bases. Bourgie Black folks? Check. Hardworking, southern church woman? Check. Privileged White? You got it . . . . But this time, there’s one group Perry threw into the mix that I never thought he’d give the time of day to: gay men. Aside from longstanding rumors about Perry’s own sexual preference, it’s surprising that he would address homosexuality at all, considering his fan base is predominantly Black Christian women . . . . I suspected Perry would more than likely take the opportunity to do what he does best: drench his character in so many stereotypes that it would turn into a television hate-fest. And that it did.14

Despite the largely negative critical reception, however, the two shows gave OWN its largest audience ever. With an average of 1.1 and 1.7 million viewers, respectively, *Love Thy Neighbor* and *The Have and the Have Nots* pushed OWN into the top five cable networks for African American women aged 25–34 among their competition, allowing the network to make its first profits in its four-year history for a show.15

Film scholars like Jacqueline Stewart theorize that Black viewers consume Black images in mass media in order to "reconstitute themselves in(to) new public formations." As Black-created representations have been largely marginalized within mainstream media, consuming these types of texts can be seen as a form of resistance. Perry imagines himself as part of this subversive project to generate these images for Black audiences, explaining that "Hollywood thinks that these people do not exist and [this explains] why there is no material speaking to them." While Perry’s work depends on easy, familiar plot devices and stereotypical notions of gender roles and Black pathology (i.e., hypersexual or irresponsible Black women and effeminate Black men), it also subverts the veneration of wealth and stigmatization of working-class poor people rife in mainstream media representations. In this way, Perry’s work can also be seen as an indictment of the disquiet and exclusionary tendencies of the Black elite, particularly those who actively shun or demean poor Blacks. And while Perry frequently relies on the simplistic vilification of his characters, especially nonconformist women who are ambitious or successful, his texts do introduce some nuance to the portrayals of Black women. In *House of Payne*, for example, while Janine abandons her children due to her drug addiction, her overweight and middle-aged Black aunt Elia is repeatedly constructed as sexually active and attractive. In *The Have and the Have Nots*, the scheming daughter is both a prostitute and a woman who secretly provides vital financial support to her family. While Perry indeed "hates black women," as Cooper argues, he also does not.

Still, the successful reception and scope of Perry’s portraits of Black life displays a major weakness in today’s media and cultural environment. Not only has Perry’s work perpetuated simplistic and restrictive ideas about gender roles, sexuality, and racial performance, it has been granted a much larger scope and reach than any other producer of color in recent history. With the massive support of loyal Black audiences, Perry has created a media franchise for Black storytelling that serves as a model for successful Black cultural production. As a reliable
brand, Perry's work across multiple platforms delivers a cultural product less demanding of production expertise and thus financial investment. That is, its very production implicitly justifies lower expectations and resources given to television programs that center upon protagonists of color, while legitimizing the value of its texts through its consumption among Black audiences. Moreover, by positioning himself as a Hollywood outsider and authentic Black voice, Tyler Perry not only pushes other voices in his portrayal of Black life, he renders them unviable and unnecessary. At a moment when networks are taking risks in funding and staffing shows led, written, and performed by white peers, Perry's franchising draws attention to the lack of space for innovation and diversity in works by people of color. As Gray argued, "commercial culture operates as both a site of and a resource for black cultural politics." Perry's legacy will consist of more than his steady circulation of controversial Black images. His representations both reflect and devalue the value of Black cultural production in the post-network era.

Notes

5. Lee was then prepping the infamous $2.2 million Kickstarter campaign for his next feature.


60. Gray, 5.