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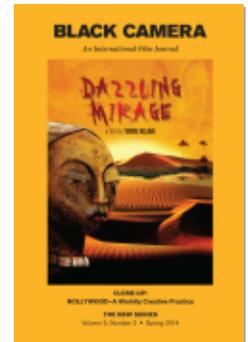
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## Black Power TV by Devorah Heitner (review)

Delphine Letort

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We won't be fooled again! (We hope.) In an age when Samantha Power, even after a spectacularly *undiplomatic* campaign gaffe, can become U.S. ambassador to the United Nations on the basis of an *Atlantic Monthly* article that assumed U.S. benevolence and advocated for humanitarian intervention, the self-critique advocated by Harrow is doubly necessary.

The volume will undoubtedly be useful for teachers presenting any of the many films analyzed in it, but this raises another question, that of pedagogical strategy for those teaching American undergrads. Is it better to choose the most interesting recent Hollywood atrocity and critique it rigorously with the class or to show an African film directed by a superb artist—Ousmane Sembène's *La noire de . . . / Black Girl* (1966), Djibril Diop Mambéty's *La Petite vendeuse de soleil / The Little Girl who Sold the Sun* (1999), Abderrahmane Sissako's *La vie sur terre / Life on Earth* (1998), etc.—and let the film seduce the students into seeing African agency and historical complexity? I've always preferred the latter method, screening the films with delight, and finding the discussions more productive, but I know that the two procedures are complementary, and it's evident I've got to do them both. And that raises the question of how to choose between Hollywood films that will happily disappear if we don't assign them, and ones that are worth addressing. This book will help teachers with such choices.

## Note

1. Held at the 2007 African Studies Association (ASA) annual meeting in New York City, and the 2008 African Literature Association (ALA) annual meeting at Western Illinois University, Macomb, IL.



DEVORAH HEITNER, *Black Power TV*  
 Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013  
 Reviewed by **Delphine Letort**

Drawing on the rare archival footage from four television programs made during the Black Power years (1964–1974), *Black Power TV* attempts to recover the cultural and economic dynamics behind innovative televisual endeavors that were produced in the wake of the Kerner Commission Report

(1968). Responding to the report's call for more diversity on the small screen, several stations opened up public space for African American voices to reach out to television audiences. Whether they adopted a local lens like *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant* (1968–1971) and *Say Brother* (1968–present) or were broadcast nationally like *Black Journal* (1968–1970) and *Soul!* (1968–1973), these programs delved into the Black experience: from documenting the everyday life in Black neighbourhoods to debating local and national issues affecting African American communities, they “injected critical Black perspectives into an overwhelmingly White televisual context, creating a Black public sphere in an unlikely space” (2). The author endows her study with a lively touch by commenting on specific episodes, analysing how the anchors' clothes and chosen settings influenced the construction of racial representations. African attire (including garments and hairstyles) reinforced ethnic identification, reflecting the merging of the political and the personal as a means “to assert Black identity and pride” (5). Heitner's investigation into the paratextual documents of the period conveys a sociological perspective, reflecting an attempt to retrospectively assess the impact of these programs on Black and White communities. She strives to understand the audiences' reception by reading and quoting from the letters, which producers preserved among their personal archives. While some of the given examples may seem anecdotal, they allow the author to capture the zeitgeist of the period. Her interviews with former participants (producers, reporters, editors) enrich the narrative, highlighting practical details that emphasize behind-the-scenes power struggles between Black staff members and White executive producers.

The book points to the diversity of Black aesthetics through underlining the characteristics of each program, introducing a few stills that illustrate the author's argument. The study of the programs further sheds light on the ideological context behind television screens: although producers agreed to introduce more African American voices, regional and structural barriers constrained and restrained their creativity. Dependence on money donated by White-dominated institutions (such as the Ford Foundation) influenced the first episodes of *Black Journal*, which producer William Greaves strove to counter by promoting Black visuals as executive producer of the program from 1968 to 1970. While *Black Journal* suffered budget cuts when pressure from the civil rights uprisings eased, leading the foundations and corporations that funded the program to curtail their donations (122), *Say Brother* was canceled for tackling controversial subjects—including charges of personal corruption that stained the reputation of influential public figures (75). Local censorship constituted another barrier in the southern states: some stations voluntarily scheduled *Black Journal* at late hours to restrict its audi-

ence, whereas others chose to defy the Fairness Doctrine rather than broadcast Black programs on their channels—including Alabama ETV (10).

The book nonetheless underscores the positive input of these programs, which gave African American technicians access to television making, thus paving the way for their future media careers. The heart and soul of the book resides in its analyses of striking moments in the shows, which the author presents with great attention to visual and aural details that have an immersive power. The author dedicates numerous pages to recovering the cultural dynamics that made the newest developments in music, poetry, theater, and film (152). *Black Journal* was “designed to foster a shared vision of a national Black community by transcending regional, generational, and class differences in its coverage” (85) whereas *Soull!* included live performances that helped promote the creativity of the Black Arts Movement. Through the program-specific focus of each chapter, the author identifies the political underpinning of cultural productions that aimed to counter the negative stereotypes that the 1965 Moynihan Report had generated about the Black family. The focus on a specific Brooklyn neighbourhood in *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant* allowed anchors Roxie Roker and James Lowry to provide an inside view that challenged dominant discourses on the ghetto. By referring to specific episodes that incorporated filmed encounters with prominent African American public figures—Harry Belafonte, Amiri Baraka, Black nationalist Sonny Carson, Brooklyn Panthers lieutenant Aponte, artists with roots in the neighbourhood—or prompted local experts to address specific issues (including education, housing, etc.), Heitner emphasizes the potential civic role of television in educating the public. The filmed participants took advantage of the offered screen time to voice personal and political views, thus advancing alternative understandings of the Black experience.

Through her detailed analysis of the programs, Heitner prompts us to rediscover “the role of Black culture, in the forms of music and fashion, in keeping the men’s spirits up and fostering a sense of individual and collective resistance to the military’s racist and dehumanizing practices is a pervasive theme of the documentary” (105). Although *Black Power TV* celebrates the creative process behind these innovative programs, the short time span covered—between 1964 and 1974—points to their limited impact on the television industry. Heitner notes that the development of new media may offer additional venues for African American voices to assert themselves, but she also contends that the “filter bubble” provided by search engines restricts the audience to interested viewers (158). Her study fails to examine the legacy of Black Power television in terms of cultural and aesthetic politics. She evokes the career opportunities offered by working on these shows, yet more needs to be said on how Black Power television influenced the filmmak-

ing of St. Clair Bourne, Stan Lathan, Madeline Anderson, William Greaves, and others. By addressing a neglected aspect of television history, Heitner brings to light programs that have long passed unnoticed, which suggests that there might be more images to retrieve from the television archives. She uncovers a gap that calls for further research to evaluate the visual legacy of Black Power television. To conclude, *Black Power TV* provides a challenging experience to contemporary viewers, who are invited to imagine a different television image, which can also be recovered through the Internet, offering a glimpse into the activist past of Black television.<sup>1</sup>

## Note

1. Selected short clips from *Say Brother* are available at <http://www.wgbh.org/basicblack/episodeDetail.cfm?featureid=33851&rssid=1&subonstate=sayBrother>.