

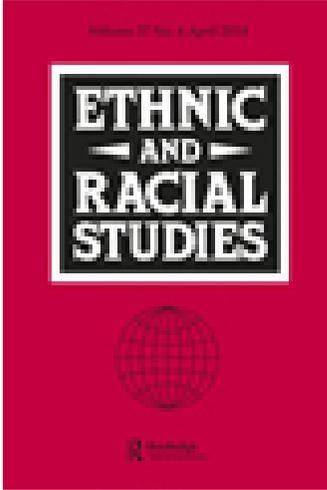
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### Black power TV

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Black power TV**, by Devorah Heitner, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2013, ix + 190 pp., US\$22.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8223-5424-6

In the wake of the urban unrest of 1967 and 1968, virtually every sector of US society was challenged to confront what the Kerner commission on civil disorders famously decried as ‘two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal’. Commercial and public television was no exception, as the Kerner commission, in explaining the myriad factors leading to unrest, pointed to mainstream journalism’s failure to adequately and accurately cover black urban communities.

By 1968, commercial and public stations in major cities responded to the political moment by airing the nation’s first black public affairs television programmes. The story of four such programmes – two local and two national – are the focus of Devorah Heitner’s important study, *Black Power TV*.

By turns a social history and media analysis that draws on a range of sources, including the author’s impressive interviews with those directly involved in creating these shows, *Black Power TV*, not only presents us with a story untold but also reminds us that there was a time when mainstream television had no choice but to talk meaningfully about racism and structural inequality – that is, to do so in ways that were often unsettling, not sanitized. On shows such as *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant*, youth performers recited Amiri Baraka’s lines: ‘America, America. Why did you bring us here? America!’ ‘Rape your mother, lynch your father!’ (43).

By every measure, this was a radical departure from the ‘Jim Crow television’ that defined the post-war era.

But according to Heitner, everyday community members were the true stars of the black public affairs television shows. Here they were represented with the nuance, complexity and dignity they deserved. On the heels of the urban insurrections, these programmes provided a necessary counter-narrative to mainstream representations of undifferentiated black rage.

Black public affairs television was not without its myriad contradictions – some of which Heitner explores at length, and others that she only discusses in passing. She notes that *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant* attempted to balance several messages and representations at once: racial uplift; the ‘good ghetto’ (embodied by hosts who came across as young, black and

respectable, but not militant); and a steady critique of structural inequality. Heitner describes this as a willful ‘counterpublic’ strategy: the show spoke to both outsiders and insiders. Yet the question remains how does this strategy square with the book’s titular ‘Black Power?’ The term black power is never fully defined, and as such the reader is left to wonder why, in keeping with the self-deterministic spirit of the black power movement, these programmes even attempted to be palatable to white audiences.

One infers that the answer has to do with how the television companies – both commercial and public – were entirely managed by whites and funded by major corporations and philanthropic groups. In this sense, Black Power TV was quite distinct from other forms of independent black media, particularly print and radio, which enjoyed varying degrees of black ownership. Heitner touches only lightly on these material and structural matters, and she makes short shrift of the fact that, with the exception of *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant*, all of the shows she analyses were on public, not commercial, stations. She notes only that the difference between commercial and public sponsorship of the black public affairs show was ‘fuzzy’ (29). Yet this is a crucial distinction, one that deserves further elaboration, as it would allow the reader to better understand the political and economic motives of the companies that aired these programmes.

Nevertheless, the struggles between black producers and white management come across effectively in Heitner’s chronicling of shows such as Boston’s *Say Brother*. Liberals hoped that *Say Brother* would keep restive black audience glued to their sets, and thus off the streets. Instead, the show became a voice for street insurrection. Producer Ray Richardson took *Say Brother* into New Bedford during an urban uprising. He defied station management by broadcasting his uncensored interviews with those who had taken to the streets. Richardson was fired (and the show temporarily cancelled) by WGBH. This incident is the book’s most salient lesson on the possibilities and limitations of *black public affairs television*.

The chapters that focus on the two national programmes – *Black Journal* and *Soul!* – present powerful examples of the innovative programming that took shape despite the political constraints imposed upon black producers and staff. Heitner offers an engaging account of the making of a *Black Journal* episode in which reporter Kent Garrett travels to Vietnam and Okinawa to interview black soldiers. The hour-long feature delved into the racism that black GIs experienced at the hands of their white superiors and peers, as well as their ambivalence about fighting for US imperialism abroad while racism persisted at home. Equally fascinating is Heitner’s portrayal of the political and cultural milieu that came together around *Soul!* Here we are introduced to a world in which Nikki Giovanni and James Baldwin debate black sexualities, relationships and families; where Giovanni interviews a young Muhammad Ali about his refusal to fight in Vietnam; where Baraka discusses his genesis as a writer. This is the black power movement in full tilt: artists, activists, entertainers – all of whom are

at the centre of the counterculture – appearing on a television show made by, for and about black people.

But after reading the chapter on *Soull*, one is left to wonder whether or not the show represented the *height* of the movement or rather its denouement. It remains unclear what such programmes yielded for political movements on the ground; how did they help to advance the struggle, to stage the next political moment? Or perhaps the black public affairs show was a belated response – a post-insurrectionary concession – by white liberals in the aftermath of the conflagrations.

Heitner does not delve into these broader historical and political questions, but her work, nevertheless, unveils a moment in television that is unimaginable today. *Black Power TV* brings to light that crucial turning point – that brief window of time that preceded the corporate-driven, multiculturalism that dominates television today.

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