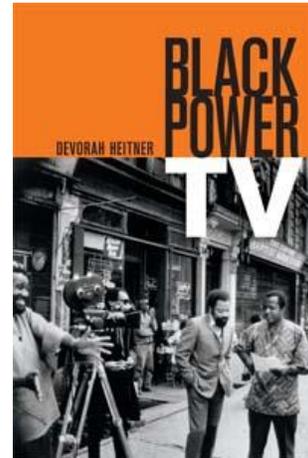


Devorah Heitner, **Black Power TV**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013, 190 pp., \$22.95 (paperback).

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In his book *Blacks in White TV: African Americans in Television Since 1948*, J. Fred MacDonald (1992) suggests that “there can be no doubt that for African Americans in television, the last half of the 1960s was a Golden Age” (p. 117). His proclamation is rooted in the notion that the late 1960s featured an increased number of black actors and actresses in leading and supporting roles, and the roles largely did not rely on prominent stereotypes of African Americans rooted in minstrelsy traditions. While MacDonald only considers fictional series on network television, including *I, Spy*, *Julia*, and *Star Trek*, Devorah Heitner’s **Black Power TV** implicitly suggests that the same period was a Golden Age for black public television. However, Heitner’s discussion of black public television suggests that these series were rooted in a sense of cultural blackness that escaped many of the largely white-produced series on commercial network television. In his seminal work, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, Herman Gray (1995) suggests that network television series in the late 1960s and early 1970s were rooted in assimilationist discourses that created worlds that were “distinguished by the complete elimination, or, at best, marginalization of social and cultural difference in the interest of shared and universal similarity” (p. 85). In this way, Heitner’s *Black Power TV* suggests that public television centered blackness in a way that distinguished it from black representation in commercial television.

Divided into four main chapters (plus an introduction and conclusion), each averaging about 30 pages, Heitner explores black public television in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Using a circuit of culture approach to examine the cultural context, production context (using in-depth interviews with series production staff), and historical audience reception (using viewer letters), this well-researched and highly readable book weaves a rich tale of both local and national black public television series as they attempted to create black public spheres.

Focusing on community programs *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant* and *Say Brother*, as well as the national programs *Black Journal* and *Soull!*, Heitner details the import of these programs to a growing sense of black cultural identity in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination in 1968. Importantly, Heitner suggests that these series’ entrée into the televisual marketplace should not be situated only in a desire to increase black televisual representation in the late 1960s and 1970s. Rather, she suggests that many of these programs, including Chicago’s *For Blacks Only* and Boston’s *Say Brother*, were broadcast to contain and domesticate black bodies and alleviate rioting in the wake of King’s assassination (p. 3).

In particular, Heitner uses as an example a James Brown concert that took place following King's assassination. Although the concert had been planned for months, Boston city officials negotiated with James Brown and WGBH, the city's public broadcast station, to broadcast the concert and encourage black Bostonians to watch the series on television rather than attend the concert since the concert was scheduled on April 5, the day after King was assassinated. Heitner argues that this cultural moment provided the impetus and incentive for WGBH to create *Say Brother*. Former staffers corroborate Heitner's assertion and suggest that

in exchange for giving African Americans their own TV presence and a few jobs in the broadcasting industry, station executives and government officials hoped that African Americans would express their discontent on the airwaves instead of engaging in street protest and uprisings. (p. 54).

Ultimately Heitner suggests that much of the black public programming in the late 1960s and early 1970s stemmed from industrial logics that suggested that if programming appealed to black people, then they would stay in their homes rather than riot in the streets in times of civil unrest. The upside to the increased programming designed to domesticate black bodies is that it gave black people an opportunity to work both behind and in front of the camera and to speak directly to black viewers in untranslated black vernacular.

Theoretically, *Black Power TV* builds on Jürgen Habermas' and Catherine Squires' work on the public sphere. Heitner uses Squires (2004) suggestion that "marginalized groups are commonly denied public voice or entrance into public spaces by dominant groups and thus are forced into enclaves" (p. 458) to argue that public television, from 1968–1972, became a subaltern counterpublic for African American representation. While Heitner suggests that *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant* functioned as a black public sphere by allowing for an open discussion that allowed arguments to be rebutted and debated, it also functioned as a way to make legible new and varied kinds of blackness. Via viewer letters, Heitner suggests that not only did viewers see the series as a new kind of mass mediated blackness, but the black public sphericity of the series welcomed viewer suggestions and feedback, providing an opportunity for viewers to "talk back" to the series with an understanding that the feedback would be considered and incorporated when appropriate and possible. Concomitantly, while *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant* presented its hosts Jim Lowry and Roxie Roker (who would go on to star as Helen Willis for 11 seasons on the hit sitcom *The Jeffersons*) as "the ultimate in respectable familiarity" (p. 35), the series allowed and provided space for more radical voices, but it "let its guests make the more overtly political statements" (p. 52) rather than its hosts. In this way, the series could maintain its moderate political stance via its hosts, as well as represent other black political thought via its guests.

What is most significant about both *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant* and *Say Brother*, which comprise the first half of *Black Power TV*, is that they both developed in ways that were counter to the corporatized and (white) civic ways there were initially imagined. *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant* was initially an outgrowth of the 1967 creation of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, the first community-development corporation designed specifically to attract investment in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods, and funded in part by the Ford and Stern Foundations. However, the series developed as something more than a

corporatized space for companies to “broadcast their changing employment practices . . . in response both to new legislation and to the urban uprising of the previous summers” (p. 29). Rather, the series attempted to show a side of both Bedford-Stuyvesant and black urban dwellers that was not often mass mediated in televisual spaces. Similarly, *Say Brother* was initially imagined as a way to domesticate black bodies, but because of its black (and relatively young) production staff, the series’ message and style was shaped by Black Power aesthetics, which sought to mediate the multiple ways blackness existed in America. However, the series attempted to disrupt hegemonically masculinist Black Power discourses by regularly including features on black women and the issues that were unique to their experiences. Ultimately, Heitner suggests that while *Say Brother* was created to pacify black Boston, in the hands of its production staff, the series sought to electrify its audience by serving their unique social, political, and cultural needs.

The second half of *Black Power TV* is concerned with national public television programs including the first two years of *Black Journal* (1968–1970) and *Soul!* Heitner highlights the initial tensions related to the production of these two important national series as they attempted to assert their own black voices within a public television system that considered itself to firmly exist within an egalitarian, assimilationist environment. *Black Journal* had to navigate the tricky terrain of white leadership at National Educational Television (NET), funding from the Ford Foundation, and its on-the-ground staff’s desire to pay “attention to Black exclusions and misrepresentations elsewhere on the dial [while] highlighting discrimination in the media industry on the air” (p. 86), particularly in its first two years of production when its budget and audience were largest. In this way, *Black Journal’s* fight for control of the direction of the series reflected the importance of representational politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Former program editor Lou Potter reveals that the program wanted to be more than a space that featured “black faces bearing a white message,” (p. 85) which seemed to be at odds with the vision espoused by the corporate and foundation leadership who nonetheless advertised *Black Journal* as “for, by, and of” (p. 85) black people. Once NET relented and let *Black Journal’s* largely black staff have editorial control, the series sought to recenter blackness, but it was hindered in its efforts by public television’s by-mail syndication system that meant there was little uniformity in terms of when the series would air across markets. In addition, with the loss of white voices in leadership, which spoke to neoliberal (white) ideals, the series was viewed as “too radical,” and many station heads refused to air the series, ultimately leading to the Ford Foundation’s de-funding of *Black Journal* in 1973. Ultimately Heitner argues that “without the pressure of riots, Ford and other foundations and corporate sponsors became far less invested in funding these programs, initially created as ‘outlets’ for Black discontent” (p. 122).

Soul!’s beginnings are similar to *Black Journal* in that they were both initiated by white media makers. However, unlike *Black Journal*, *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant*, and *Say Brother*, *Soul!* was imagined as an arts and entertainment series. One of the few shortcomings of *Black Power TV* comes in this chapter. Heitner suggests that the series received an advertising budget, which was rare in public television, but she does not address whether this advertising budget was rooted in the notion that black people have historically been mediated as entertainers for white audiences. However, in positioning itself as a black counterpublic, based in entertainment, *Soul!* made explicit connections between black arts and black politics and provided space for intersectional identities within blackness, most notably gay men, lesbians, and women. Additionally, the series functioned as an educational resource that demonstrated

“what a participatory black public sphere could look like” (p. 133).

One of the implicit topics of *Black Power TV* is the inaccessibility/unavailability of black television in the archives. Many of the series that comprise the book are either largely unavailable or have not been wholly archived, resulting in “lost episodes.” However, *Black Power TV* provides an engaging and well-researched examination of a Golden Age of black public television that seems unlikely to emerge again.

References

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