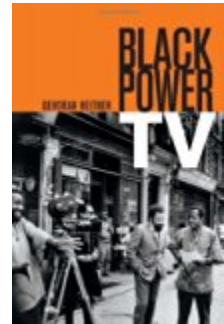


Devorah Heitner. *Black Power TV*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013. pgs. (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8223-5424-6.

Reviewed by Lars Lierow

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (April, 2014)



D. Heitner: Black Power TV

“Black Power TV” recovers an important chapter in the history of both U.S. television and the intertwined Black Arts and Black Power movements. Devorah Heitner examines a set of television programs created by African-American artists, activists, and media professionals in the 1960s that disrupted white-oriented television, created a forum for Black viewpoints, and offered African-American audiences opportunities to see their own lives reflected and validated.

Drawing on extensive archival research and interviews with producers, hosts, and staff, Devorah Heitner reconstructs the histories and aesthetics of four very different Black public-affairs programs: “Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant”, “Say Brother”, “Black Journal”, and “Soul!”. These case studies reflect the range of television programs created by African-Americans for African-American audiences at the height of the Black Power Movement. At this historical moment, assertive revolutionary rhetoric, Black nationalist ideology, and systematic grassroots campaigns for equality and political control marked a new phase of the Black freedom struggle. At the same time, heated debates, violent clashes, and a solid backlash against the incremental but decisive changes brought about by the civil-rights movement were symptoms of a deep social and political instability.

The riots in Los Angeles, in Detroit, Newark, Washington, DC, and other cities between 1965 and 1968 and the assassination of Martin Luther King punctuated the palpable sense that the country was caught in a racial crisis. Hoping to help mitigate racial tension, television

executives responded to demands by Black activists and opened their schedules to unique programs that dealt with concerns of Black communities on the local and national level and gave a broad on-air platform to the rhetoric and aesthetics of the Black Arts and Black Power Movements. Through her close analysis of their visual aesthetics and rhetorical strategies, Heitner conveys a vivid sense of what it might have been like to watch these programs.

Importantly, these programs staked out a territory for Black Arts and Black Power within television where the many faces and disparate voices of the movement would be seen and heard with an unprecedented immediacy. Heitner argues that the creators of these programs succeeded in constructing a viable Black public sphere amid a television landscape that overwhelmingly catered to white audiences. At a moment when network television responded to the racial crisis with African-Americans in a few dramatic and comedic roles or with civil rights-focused news documentaries these programs made a difference. Heitner makes a compelling case that Black public-affairs programs, even though they occupied a fraction of the entire television schedule and began as reform-minded concessions from station owners and executives, were a crucial site for movement representatives to articulate the range of their views and to engage the Black community. By seizing control of these programs on local stations and educational television, the activists and artists brought the ideas and politics of the Black Power era directly into television. They changed the relationship between television and the movement in

ways that had seemed unimaginable earlier and that media historians have barely begun to account for.

The scholarship on postwar Black activism and its relationship with television has by and large been organized around two related questions: How did activists gain attention and access to the airwaves for their causes and concerns? How did television represent Black activists and construct the movement? This approach typically casts activists in the role of grassroots public relations workers who struggled to get their message picked up by reporters and editors who controlled the news frame, i.e. the narration of events and depiction of movement figures. These investigations have shown that television news followed its own ideology, yielding only indirect and limited influence to the activists, and have focused on the developments prior to the mid-1960s, when this unequal constellation became irrevocably strained. For example: Vanessa Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Use of Public Relations*, New York 2006. Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers. The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*, New York 2005. Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and in Color. Television and Black Civil Rights*, Princeton 2003. Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised. Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power*, Minneapolis 2004.

According to the standard narrative, the uneven symbiosis between the civil rights movement and mainstream television came undone when the tone and politics of the movement shifted and the call for Black Power, along with assertive nationalism and revolutionary rhetoric, marked a turning point for the Black freedom struggle. Initially the civil rights movement had been able to gain cautious support from news and entertainment television, as long as coverage of the movement could capture the attention of a national mass audience without sacrificing advertisers and sponsors. Media-savvy activists were able to use network news to their advantage in exchange for the drama and news value that the story of the Black freedom struggle provided. As grassroots communication workers, however, their control over the televised civil rights narrative remained very slim and their access to airtime was limited. The images audiences saw of the movement and of Black America in general remained distorted by racial stereotypes and ideological biases. In addition to an overarching preference for a narrative of moderate progress and consensus, which obscured conflict and the radical ferment of the mass movement, media historian Aniko Bodroghkozy has identified the prevailing “image of

the worthy Negro, [...] that middle-class whites could feel comfortable welcoming into their living rooms.” Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time. Television and the Civil Rights Movement*, 1st Edition., Urbana 2012. p. 48. See the review by Andre Dechert in: *H-Soz-u-Kult*, 26.11.2012, <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2012-4-174>> (04.04.2014).

The rise of Black Power and the uprisings in Black urban centers revealed the inadequacy of this news filter, yet without a suitable alternative at hand. Julian Bond, the co-founder and communications director of SNCC, one of the pivotal organizations in the postwar Black freedom struggle, has observed that in the wake of the riot in the Watts section of Los Angeles (1965) and the Meredith March in Mississippi (1966) the “generally supportive phase of media coverage ended” and gave rise to negative and false representations of the movement, which Bodroghkozy confirmed in her analysis of network television in the civil-rights era. Julian Bond, *The Media and the Movement: Looking Back from the Southern Front*, in: Brian Ward (Ed.), *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, Gainesville, Florida 2001, pp. 16–39. p. 17.; Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time*, pp. 150–151. Few studies have looked more closely at the relationship between the movement and television in the second half of the 1960s and the early 1970s.

“Black Power TV” broadens this conventional time-frame and explores a transformative moment when Black Power artists, intellectuals, and activists were able to make inroads into television. Heitner is less interested in representation. Instead she analyzes how Black public-affairs programs functioned as sites of artistic expression, activist debate, and community engagement. Because “Black Power TV” expands our understanding of how postwar Black activists challenged the institution of television directly, it aligns with the work by historian Steven Classen who investigates how civil-rights activists sought to remake the legal, political, and employment conditions of the media. Like Classen, she is also interested in the lasting impact Black media activism had on the U.S. television landscape. Steven D. Classen, *Watching Jim Crow. The Struggles Over Mississippi TV, 1955–1969*, Durham, North Carolina 2004.

“Black Power TV” is organized around Heitner’s argument about these programs’ capacity to engender a distinct Black public sphere. Thankfully, she bypasses a lengthy discussion of the ins and outs of public sphere theory. Instead she demonstrates how this new genre

provided not only a forum for Black politics ranging from moderate to radical, but also modeled practices of respectful and open debate, while each program achieved this goal differently. The hosts of “ultralocal” “Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant”, for example, which featured activists and artists from the Black community of Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant section, acted as “community members and ambassadors” fostering a distinctly local public sphere (p. 50, p. 35). In contrast, shows like “Black Journal” or “Soul!” had a specifically national orientation. “Soul!” was remarkable for its capacity to combine an arts and entertainment program with political debate. For “Soul!” the studio audience was crucial, because it bridged the “distance between the at-home audience and the performers at the same time it modeled a hip, engaged, and dignified Black public sphere for those at home” (p. 130).

The argument in “Black Power TV” relies on this type of analysis of genre and style. The underlying rationale is that performances on-screen engaged viewers directly

and offered scripts for their participation. Heitner does examine letters from enthusiastic viewers in order to support her larger point about the open and engaging format of Black public-affairs programs. Yet, because there are only a few such letters available, we learn little about the responses and behavior of the actual audience. The detailed visual and rhetorical analysis of episodes she retrieved from disparate archives and the oral history interviews she conducted with hosts, guests, and creators allow her to paint a vivid picture of Black public-affairs programs and to tell the story of their emergence and decline. The programs were a successful intervention of the Black Power/Black Arts movement in television, trained a generation of African-American media professionals, and shaped the conditions for their long-term role in television and other media. “Black Power TV” captures this episode in U.S. television history that elucidates the role of African-Americans in television after 1970 and tells a more complex story of the Black Power/Black Arts movement’s engagement with popular media.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Lars Lierow. Review of Heitner, Devorah, *Black Power TV*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. April, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41634>

Copyright © 2014 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.