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SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE

**TWO RESPONSES TO
AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM:
W.E.B. DU BOIS AND
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.
DAVID LEVERING LEWIS**

**SPECIAL SECTION:
REVISITING THE BLACK ARTS**
MANTHIA DIAWARA—Photographs
by MALICK SIDIBÉ
ST. CLAIR BOURNE
KALAMU YA SALAAM
TED JOANS



**NEGOTIATING
MULTIPLE
WORLDS:
A PUBLIC
INTERVIEW WITH
ELIZABETH NUNEZ**

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BREAKING AT BLACK

THROUGH JOURNAL

ST. CLAIR BOURNE

In the late 1960s, there was active unrest in the African-American population, due to discrimination and second-class treatment. The Civil Rights Movement, based on the principles of nonviolence and petitions to the larger society for justice, was beginning to run its course as the marches and activists were thwarted by violent resistance and government inaction. In addition, the energy and frustration with the slow rate of fundamental change moved from the rural towns of the South to the inner cities of major urban centers in the North. Thus, planned and spontaneous rebellions, usually sparked by a symbolic incident but also caused by a long list of unjust conditions, erupted in the cities where there were large Black populations like Detroit, Newark, and the Watts section of Los Angeles.

In addition to being subjected to discrimination, African-American people especially resented the lack of acknowledged participation in and contributions to U.S. society. A specific complaint was the lack of presence in the electronic media and the negative distortion that took place when we were represented. Therefore, programs, funds, and positions were made available to provide media access for Black images so that Black issues could be

addressed. It should be noted that these welcome changes were not made out of charity, benevolence, or good will. They resulted from the application of pressure by the revolutionary potential of the Black protest movement.

These were the conditions that led to the creation of *Black Journal* within the tax-supported public television sector. Alvin Perlmutter, a white staff producer at National Educational Television (the pre-PBS TV sys-

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tem), conceived of the series idea in April 1968 following the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The idea was enthusiastically approved as an overdue response to both the Kerner Commission report on U.S. race relations, which called for the media to "expand and intensify coverage of the Negro community," and to the growing mood for self-determination in Black communities around the country. Perlmutter and Black producer/writer Lou Potter were assigned to develop a format and to secure a staff.

After extensive meetings with both leaders

and ordinary folks in Black communities around the country, a public affairs-oriented, magazine-format program was decided upon. Then a staff was assembled. It was composed of both NET personnel and others hired specifically for *Black Journal*. I was a graduate film student at Columbia University at the time, but had been recently suspended due to my involvement in the 1968 Columbia University student takeover. Fresh from the

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barricades and a night in jail, I was brought on as an associate producer. At this point, there emerged a basic contradiction that later came back to traumatize this effort. The NET public relations department heralded the series in their press releases as programs "by, for and about Black people." Although two Black on-camera hosts—independent filmmaker William Greaves and former Chicago radio news reporter Lou House (who later changed his "slave" name to Wali Sadiq)—were hired, the staff ended up with 12 blacks out of a staff of 20. More important, Perlmutter,

who was white, became the executive producer with editorial control for the series.

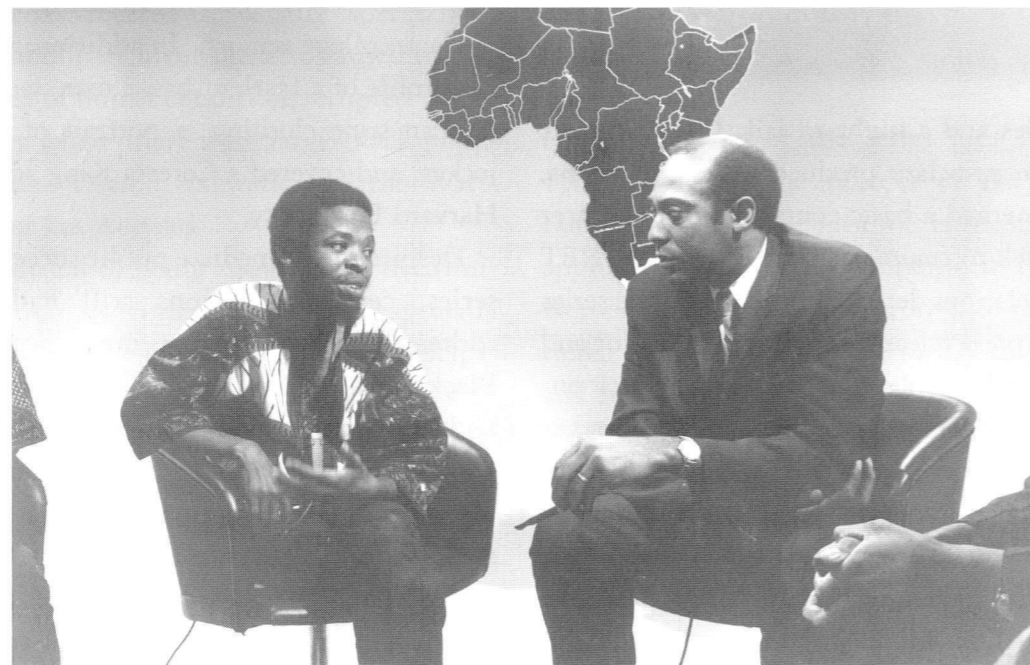
The series went into production in May, had its premiere broadcast in June 1968, and was greeted by both critical acclaim and an unprecedented viewer response, for public television. In the show's first segments, we broadcast an interview, conducted in an Oakland prison, with Huey Newton on the future of the Black Panthers. We also did a report on the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, D.C., a satirical skit about the use of Blacks in advertisements, and an essay on the view of the future by graduating Black college seniors. In addition, we aired a profile of a Harlem-based manufacturer of African style clothing, a portrait of a Black jockey, and covered a Coretta King address at Harvard University.

Despite the immediate public success of the series, certain questions still had to be addressed: Who was the primary audience—Blacks, whites, or an integrated audience? Did this decision affect the content of the program and how? Was the use of largely white film crews a contradiction to the stated goals of *Black Journal*? Little by little, questions of assignments and editorial points of view became points of dispute among the staff. For



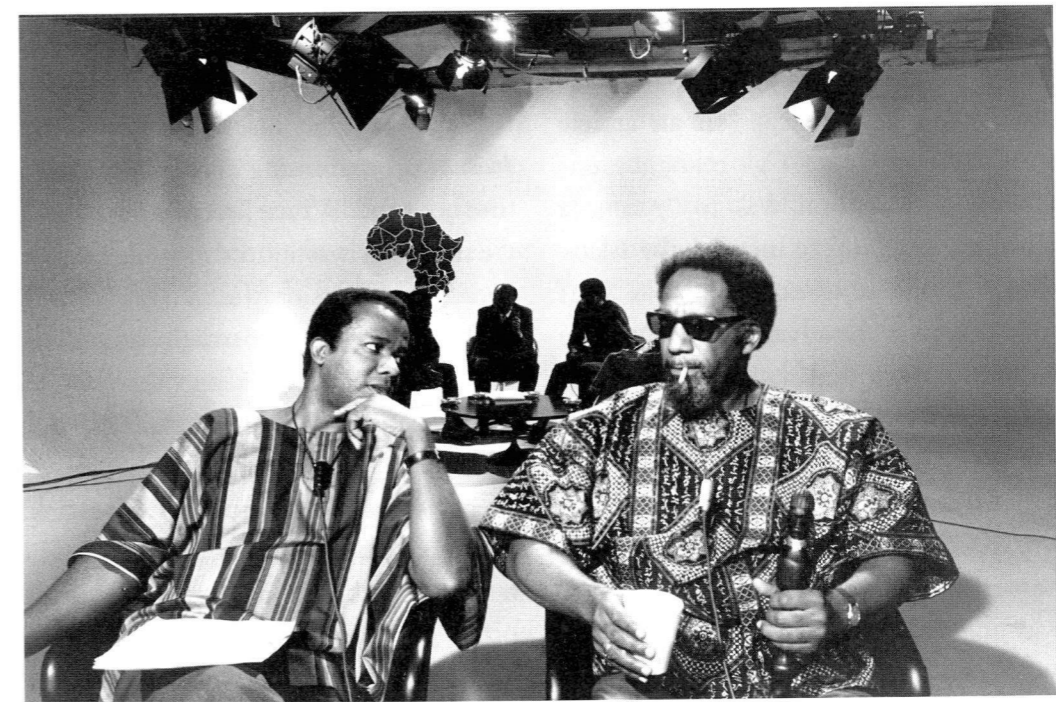
Roy Lewis (left) and St. Clair Bourne on location in a grocery operated by the Nation of Islam, Chicago. (Author's Personal Collection)

Poet, Keorapetse Kgositsile and Political Scientist, Charles V. Hamilton on the set of *Black Journal*. (Author's Personal Collection)



Black Journal crew on location in Chicago. From Left to Right, Roland Mitchell, Sound; James Howard, Assistant Cameraman; Roy Lewis, Cameraman; St. Clair Bourne, Director. (Author's Personal Collection)

On-Camera hosts, William Greaves and Wali Sadiq (a.k.a. Lou House) on the set of *Black Journal*. (Author's Personal Collection)



example, when a breakdown of the percentage of white-produced shows to Black-produced shows was done, it was discovered that the former far outnumbered the latter. Disagreements over editorial politics emerged as well. When a white producer wrote an introduction to a news piece stating that the Black community supported Israel and disavowed Arab protests over the seizure of land, an argument broke out in the studio during the taping and was quelled only after the narration was rewritten.

The issue came to a head when 11 Black members of the production staff demanded that the white executive producer be replaced by a

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Black executive producer, citing the NET press statement that *Black Journal* was produced “by, for and about Black people.” When the NET management refused to appoint Lou Potter, the series’ managing editor, as the executive producer, the 11 went out on strike in protest and made the incident public in a press conference. In an article printed in *Variety*, NET’s management claimed that its intention was to “promote from within the unit and to increase the Black composition of the unit as quickly as staff members were ready for advancement.” Wire services, trade papers, and mainstream media columnists wrote extensively about the strike and within a week NET agreed to the demands. Greaves, the show’s host, became the new executive producer, and Perlmutter became a consultant with no editorial power. Potter was given the new position of executive editor with the option of working on other

NET projects. Most of the other white producers were phased out to return to other NET commitments.

After this traumatic experience, several changes took place. The group spirit of the *Black Journal* staff took on an added commitment to “the people,” but also, because of the well-publicized struggle around the control of the show we gained support from leaders of the national Black community. Furthermore we gained a sizeable white audience who

wanted to see what all the noise had been about. Interestingly, the overall white reaction was not as antagonistic as we expected, primarily because we didn’t use our airtime denouncing white racism but rather documenting, exploring, and articulating African-American political, economic, and cultural issues. With only one hour per month of *Black Journal* programming competing with the infinite hours of “White Journals,” we thought that we shouldn’t waste time ranting against whites, because our mission was to supply Black people with valuable information and analysis. Another important change that occurred after the strike was staff editor Madeline Anderson’s promotion to producer. Although there had been a white female producer and Black women had served as production assistants, editors and researchers, there had never been a Black female producer at NET.

Because of the unique national position of

Black Journal within the media landscape from 1968 to 1971, we undertook several projects to improve “minority” participation. Even our own producers on the series relied on largely white crews because there were very few freelance technicians of color, due to the difficulty of finding work regularly and thus gaining experience and skill. *Black Journal* sponsored a workshop to fill this void. Word soon got around that a 10-week crash course in basic film production was being offered and that

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accomplished graduates could possibly get camera crew assignments. The instructors were both Black and white technicians who volunteered their time to teach new recruits. This created a new pool of technicians. Armed with sample reels, they began to get work on *Black Journal* documentaries and on other productions as well. Ultimately, Peggy Pinn, staff production coordinator, quit her post, raised money for staff and equipment and managed the workshop for five years. The workshop trained hundreds of Third World technicians, many of whom still work in the film and television industries.

At that time—again, because of the political climate—a constituency was created for this new Black programming or as it began to be called, “minority programming.” As we saw it, the purpose of “minority programming” in the public affairs sector of television news was clear—to provide “minorities” with

an opportunity to address each other on issues that they considered important. In addition to *Black Journal*, there was a series called *Soul*, an entertainment program that provided a forum for performers who had virtually been ignored by mainstream television. It’s hard to imagine now, but there was a time when one could look long and hard without seeing a Black face on any TV program. After *Black Journal*, there was an explosion of local public affairs shows aimed at the “minority” audience.

Both of these pioneering programs performed a necessary function quite effectively but were created as a response to an admitted deficiency: to serve an audience that had never been adequately

addressed directly before. The programs and their imitators could be called “the first generation of minority programming.” If there was a flaw in this first effort, it was a narrowness of vision practically inescapable at that time. By addressing Blacks about Blacks only, for example, a large part of the viewing audience was excluded, but more importantly, the role of “minorities” within the total framework of U.S. society and culture was ignored.

The second generation of “minority” programming—based on the premise that in the beginning it had been necessary to affirm our culture—attempted to correct some of these unavoidable limitations. An example of this corrective programming was a PBS program called *Interface*, which showed the interaction of various cultures in the U.S. by tackling topics based in everyday life. Developed by Black producer/writer Ardie Ivie and hosted by

Black Journal graduate Tony Batten, *Interface* concentrated on ethnic group interactions but also limited itself to a certain aspect of life in the United States, namely, cultural interaction. At the same time another program, *Black Perspective on the News*, took a "hard news" approach and opened its lists of guests to all the races with the understanding that all people in this country can be affected by a variety of newsmakers of all skin colors. However, the news format prevented the viewer from receiving a multi-dimensional understanding of the issues covered. In short, we still spoke to Blacks about non-Black issues as well as Black issues.

The next step which should have been taken would have featured Blacks as participants in U.S. society talking about any issue, that is, a view and interpretation of issues based in the "minority" experience but treating issues, trends and phenomena not necessarily connected to "minority" life. This would bring an unjaded eye to not only institutions of special interest to minorities" but also to those institutions that affect everyone as well, for it must be understood that all things in the U.S. affect all people in the U.S. in some way. However, this phase never developed fully. Some factors were the political resurgence of right-wing conservatives, calculated attacks by the Nixon and Reagan administrations to stop and, in fact roll back the social advances that people struggled to achieve and most important, the lack of Black participation in decision-making within the political and economic process.

The life of *Black Journal* was closely allied to the Black movement that gave birth to it. And so, as money for social programs began to be cut back in the early seventies, NET man-

agement reduced *Black Journal's* production budget. On-location documentaries were cut back, more in-studio production was done, and summer reruns were instituted. Appeals were made to foundations, corporations, and community organizations for production funds, but the change in the political agenda affected the ability and/or willingness to contribute to a television series that advocated social change.

As the production funds decreased, it became more difficult to maintain the high standard with which we started. Gradually, the staff began seeking other avenues for their ideas and talent. Greaves, who set the tone for the series and had gone to Canada to get film experience otherwise unavailable to him, resigned to return to his own productions. Other producers applied for and got jobs at network news departments. I left in April 1971 to form Chamba Productions and pursue more personal and more stylized film projects. As one of six staff producers, I had spent almost three years traveling around the U.S. making documentaries about various aspects and issues of Black America. The social movement that nurtured *Black Journal* did achieve some of its aims in terms of racial identity and a greater recognition of the need for economic and political self-determination. Overall, we are no longer obliged to prove our worth or validity on either the small or large screen. Self-determination is an act of liberation and, in the end, a healthy process. Everyone should have the right and opportunity to see themselves reflected in the cultural expressions and the reporting of current events of the land in which they live. Mainstream television has proven that up to now at least, it is incapable or unwilling to do that. It is up to us, the independents, to fill that vacuum.

Jadis, si je me souviens bien... Once if I remember well

TED JOANS

A poetic cruise through the lives and passions of a beat poet, painter, and musician

All praises to my February-born spiritual fathers, mentors Messieurs Andre Bretón and Langston Hughes.

I have been fortunate to have the close acquaintance of some sum of the best creative minds in Arts and Literature. Not as a perfidious parasite, but as an epiphyte, even inspiring certain V.I.P.s. Having met those individuals: Caucasoid, Afroid, and Mongoloid plus one Aboriginal artist, I feel blessed and *teducated*. That is to say, I utilize the positive stimulus, which I received from meeting Yves Tanguy and Salvador Dalí, and more obviously Charlie Parker and Thelonius Monk. The latter two are exceptional musicians who had an instantaneous "sound" pressure upon my aural intellect, whereas the former two men's art was visual, nevertheless excellent in *teducating* my profundity of seeing.

To share remembered "strange" stories of what was for me an amazing bouquet of facts in this ongoing poemlife. Shall we start at being born the year Louis Armstrong recorded

West End Blues, Wall Street later crashed, and Theodore and Zella Jones (my parents) abandoned their riverboat sturdy employment at Cairo, Illinois to have a baby. Having grown halfway upward in the blues and railroad colorful society of the rivers Ohio and mighty Mississippi, later I attended conventional schools even obtaining a BA of Fine Arts in Painting. During that development of some sum of positive points of views of *teducation*, I was fortunate to hear and meet the jazz masters, due to my part-time job at various theatres in the states of Indiana and Kentucky. Those orchestral sounds and the aura of those musicians had a contagious effect on my ways and means creatively. That jazz influence is an almost religious 'thang that swings' me upward into *le merveilleux*. Big bands were in popular demand throughout this vast unhip and square dealing land. I spiritually heard what the orchestras of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Earl Hines, Billy Eckstine, Woody Herman, Jay MacShaun, Gene Krupa, and even Stan Kenton were saying to America. The latter aggregation was often too Hollywoodian in its pursuit for hard edge