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The Good Side of the Ghetto: Visualizing Black Brooklyn, 1968–1971

> I happened to come from the pool hall and turned the television set on, to my surprise I got my first look at your program. It is great! Primarily because it helps bring the need for identification which in the past has been missing in Bed Stuy. Furthermore, I'm quite sure it helps in other ways, such as showing the residents and all concerned people a true and positive picture of what this community is all about.
> —Letter written by Edwin Mating to *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant*, 29 April 1968

A tired night shift worker coming home to his or her New York City apartment in 1968 and turning on the television would undoubtedly have been surprised to find a group of black high school students from Boys High School in Bedford Stuyvesant earnestly discussing their community activism and their plans to return to their Brooklyn neighborhood after college. The shaky cinematography and poor sound quality would have been less noticeable to this viewer than the simple fact of seeing actual black people on television. The fact that these young people—the valedictorian, the captain of the football team, and the student body president—were also articulate and politically outspoken made the image that much more notable. By portraying a black world that featured African American hosts and guests, *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant* (*IBS*) contrasted with a television landscape in which black faces were rarely seen on television. The show's images of black citizens making art, contributing to their community, offering political critique, and maintaining their families in spite of difficult conditions offered a contrast to news images of African American protesters being arrested during urban uprisings, which tended to depict inchoate rage without the articulate critique prominently featured on *IBS*. Furthermore, the program also offered a sharp contrast to fictional images of blacks that minimized American racism, such as the prime-time programs *I Spy* and *Julia*.

In fact, *IBS*, broadcast on New York's leading independent commercial station, WNEW, was the first of what would become a national genre of black public affairs television. In addition to being the first program of its kind, it was the only black public affairs television program to focus so intensively on a single neighborhood (albeit a neighborhood with a population of more than 400,000). *IBS*, despite a minuscule budget and marginal broadcast times of 1:00 A.M. and 7:00 A.M., had a significant impact that was visible in both the program footage itself as well as letters the program received. WNEW, as an independent commercial station, offered the most accessible channel for such a low-budget program, a program that could not even meet the production standards of New York City's emerging public station, WNET.[1]

IBS painted a living portrait of Bedford Stuyvesant, one of the largest African American communities in the country, with at least 400,000 residents in 1967. After the demise of the program the community would not see a substantial mass-media representation again until Spike Lee's feature film *Do the Right Thing* created a portrait of the neighborhood in 1989. In the post–civil rights or Black Power era black public affairs programs such as *IBS* played a key role in partially transforming television from a site of oppression and exclusion to a site for liberation. The producers and hosts of the program accomplished this transformation by documenting and encouraging activism, celebrating black artistic and political achievements, and providing a mode of rhetorical self-defense to racist discourses circulating in the culture. In the 1950s and early 1960s, as news cameras brought the southern civil rights struggles to screens across the nation, television became a vital staging ground for struggles over African American citizenship and justice. However, African Americans still had little control over their representation and were almost never featured in the role of interpreter, newscaster,

or writer. On *IBS* the hosts and writers were African American, representing a major change in the status quo.

In *Shot in America: Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema* Chon Noriega demonstrates how media activists in this era engaged the sense of crisis within the nation-state. My oral history and archival research on *IBS* and other black public affairs programs demonstrates that these programs also emerged, in Noriega's formulation, "as a highly contingent practice within the nation state, rather than a purely contestatory one positioned discursively outside and against the nation state" (23). *Shot in America* articulates how reformist and radical media activism operated on a continuum between state control and radical points of view. Television shows such as *IBS* occupied multiple locations on this continuum. The program hosts came from a mainstream civil rights perspective, while many of the guests as well as writer and producer Charles Hobson held more radical, Black Power–oriented viewpoints. Despite the contingent relationship *IBS* had with the state (the program was sponsored by government agencies and large corporations), it nonetheless remained porous enough to contain critiques, even of the agencies that funded the program.

This article examines the implications of both the aesthetics and the content of *IBS*'s first two years of production. Building on my analysis of twenty-three archived episodes of the program, archived letters to the program, and my oral history interviews with three of the program's producers and one former host, this article explores how this low-budget television program articulated a vision of the possibilities for black communities such as Brooklyn's Bedford Stuyvesant. This vision intentionally emphasized the community's divergence from outside impressions of "the ghetto." The program was initially intended to challenge these negative stereotypes while simultaneously demonstrating that the community's problems were sufficiently deserving of state financial support. Ultimately, the program did much more than contest negative imagery or underscore the dire needs of the community. Starting from the first episode, *IBS* offered political and cultural visibility, claimed spaces, and depicted and supported a lively black public sphere. The program's history illustrates how a television show that focused so intimately on a single community could articulate alternative visions for black life and black community that were relevant to many situations beyond the neighborhood's boundaries.

IBS centered the neighborhood it documented in two important ways: by declaring it a center of culture and political innovation and by creating a forum where various groups could interact. First, the program, by its existence and focus on homegrown talent and political organizing, declared Bedford Stuyvesant to be an important discursive and cultural center. This was a significant claim in a city where Harlem dominated claims to iconic status as a black metropolis, with its nationally known cultural output and its outspoken political leadership. Bedford Stuyvesant was seldom considered in cultural terms or as a political powerhouse, but this program showcased the community's contributions in both areas. Second, the program actively centered Bedford Stuyvesant by drawing neighbors together, interconnecting disparate elements while allowing participants to rebut arguments with which they disagreed. On the program the neighborhood becomes not simply a physical space but a vibrant black public sphere.

The very act of producing *IBS* supported the existence of a vibrant public. According to Catherine Squires, a marginalized public such as African Americans could employ any of three strategies—enclave, satellite, or counterpublic—depending on external pressures and available resources. According to this model, a marginalized public may need to employ an enclave strategy of "hiding counter-hegemonic ideas and strategies in order to survive or avoid sanctions, while internally producing lively debate and planning" (Squires 449). The same group may, under more flexible circumstances, employ a counterpublic strategy of debating with wider publics, whether through legal means, media critiques, or protest techniques such as boycotts and civil disobedience. A satellite strategy is a group that chooses to separate its internal considerations from a wider counterpublic, even at times of relative safety. For Squires, the Nation of Islam is a group that employs this strategy (451). Building on Squires's articulation of black public sphere theory, the examples that follow show that *IBS* enabled two of these three strategies.

Broadly, in the Black Power era greater independent media resources and distribution channels facilitated African Americans speaking both within their own communities and to a wider public—a counterpublic strategy. In addition to this counterpublic strategy *IBS* also mobilized an enclave strategy as it spoke to black audiences with insider references, fully aware that black audiences might have understandings different from those of other audience members. Whether or not programs such as *IBS* were aimed

at a "wider public" of non–African Americans, responses from white critics and viewers demonstrated that these encounters were prevalent and significant. The creation of black media by and for African Americans is a tactic of an enclave public, while the struggle to be recognized, represented, and employed in an integrated mass media is a counterpublic tactic. The simultaneous mobilization of these two strategies for black publics created a program where, as letters to the program demonstrate, multiple interpretations were possible, yet the critique of present conditions in black America was registered by most viewers of any ethnicity.

Television in the Post–Civil Rights Era

In 1967 President Johnson appointed a committee led by Illinois governor Otto Kerner to investigate the "civil disorders" that rocked American cities from Los Angeles to Newark in the years from 1964 to 1968. The Kerner Commission's report, officially named *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, offered an analysis of a racially polarized country in which black discontent was growing. In the months before the assassination of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., newspapers informed Americans of the findings of the Kerner Commission's report on these racial uprisings. The report recommended broad changes in federal policy to improve schools, healthcare, housing, and employment opportunities for black Americans. Central to the commission's assessment was a critique of the U.S. media's exclusion of African American perspectives on the "civil disorders."[2] The report took print and broadcast media to task for exacerbating the riots by sensationalizing them, ignoring their root causes, and sending poorly prepared reporters into communities with no real understanding of the issues that had created the civil unrest. The report castigated television stations and newspapers for reporting and writing "from the standpoint of a white man's world," ignoring the "slights and indignities that are part of a Negro's daily life," a perspective that might have helped viewers outside of black communities to contextualize the uprisings (Kerner Commission 147).

Despite the publicity the report garnered, initially few television stations took up the commission's recommendations to hire more African American journalists and make other substantive changes in representing black communities. It was not until the sense of national crisis reached new heights after the assassination of Dr. King on 4 April 1968 that many stations from Chicago to Boston to Los Angeles began a black news or public affairs program. However, in New York City the nation's first community development corporation (CDC), the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, collaborated with local independent commercial television station WNEW to create the first black public affairs television program documenting the Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, community—in response to the Kerner Commission report but before the King assassination. Ironically enough, the program premiered on the day of the King assassination, making it the first of the wave of black public affairs television programs to appear that year.

While there had been specials on both commercial and public television addressing Black Power, the civil rights movement, and black history and culture, *IBS* was the first ongoing program to focus on an African American community. *IBS* documented both the activism of the Black Power movement and the simultaneous black arts movement. By showcasing welfare activists, radical organizations, and black political candidates from the electoral system, *IBS* documented a range of national and local African Americans organizing on many fronts. This was a period of both intellectual and artistic emergence that saw the growth of Pan-Africanism, cultural nationalism, and black feminism, each of which posed serious challenges to the status quo. In keeping with the Black Power era's blend of cultural and political activism, *IBS* presented a blend of performance and news and invited spontaneous appearances by residents of Bedford Stuyvesant. The format of the program was more varied than the designation "black public affairs" might imply; it was an outdoor variety show, a news program, and a purveyor of "high" art. This range of features was tied together by a pair of windblown hosts whose on-air presence linked interviews with Black Panthers to appearances by black congressional candidates. The hosts were the connection that linked performances by musicians such as the Persuasions and Max Roach to politicians and activists. Single episodes frequently featured these seemingly incongruous elements. For example, in one episode a discussion with activists from the Ad Hoc Refugee Committee of Brooklyn, which aimed to help residents who were (ironically) displaced by poverty programs such as the Model Cities Program, follows a performance by the Agroma African dancers.

Through the performances of the hosts *IBS* simultaneously mobilized a politics of respectability with a radical politics of black liberation and Black Power, thus registering a markedly divergent representation of a community that government officials and social scientists had consigned to the "culture of poverty." In his essay "Looking for the Real Nigga: Social Scientists Construct the Ghetto" historian Robin Kelley points out that "ghettoizing discourses," such as the descriptor "culture of poverty," which originated with anthropologist Oscar Lewis, had a significant influence over welfare and other public policy in this era and beyond (21). Kelley argues that these essentialist findings "continue to shape much current social science and mass media representations of the 'inner city'" (22) and that these narrow concepts of ghetto life have "contributed to the construction of the ghetto as a reservoir of pathologies and bad cultural values" (16). The influence of these discourses on policy is most clearly seen in Daniel Patrick Moynihan's controversial report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which has been soundly criticized by feminist and antiracist scholars and activists.[3] While social scientists developed and reinforced images of ghetto pathology, journalists tended to sensationalize even as they attempted to document the abysmal conditions in some communities. Despite potentially liberal intentions to expose ghetto conditions, articles such as a *Life* magazine profile of Bedford Stuyvesant treated the problems of the "inner city" without fully examining government and private sector culpability for the creation of the conditions in the first place. The implications of this social scientific pathologizing and the narratives created by sensational journalism built layers of stereotypes that undergirded categorical thinking in policy making and had serious repercussions for black communities.

By showing women and men in collaboration, *IBS* presented an array of contradictions to the Moynihan report's sexist discourse, which portrayed black women as a negative force in the lives of black men. In contrast to discourses blaming black women for problems with welfare, *IBS* featured women Welfare Union activists offering solutions to poverty and survival strategies for welfare recipients. In another example, by portraying a draft resistor recently released from prison as a quiet hero for risking incarceration to avoid serving in a war in Vietnam that he considered racist and colonialist, *IBS* countered Moynihan's argument that the "utterly masculine world" of military service would provide a "desperately needed change, a world away from women" (42–43). Significantly, these segments positioned community members as experts on these issues.

This positioning of community members and activists as experts turned the television conventions of quoting experts on issues such as welfare upside down. On *IBS* local people were the experts on schools, housing, policing, family life, politics, and a host of other issues. Episodes featured children in their best clothes singing in their school choirs, welfare activists attempting to educate recipients about their rights, and many ordinary people making an impact on their community. The same episodes often featured radical political activists such as Julius Lester and artists such as Amiri Baraka. Altogether, the producers of *IBS*, working with very few resources, created a popular program that challenged many of the dominant media and government messages about black communities while creating an intimate portrait of one of the United States' largest African American communities.

The Origins of *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant*: The Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation

With at least 400,000 residents by the early 1960s, Bedford Stuyvesant was considered by many outsiders to be "one of the largest ghettoes in the United States" (Johnson 116). Because of conditions created by redlining, in which banks refused to grant loans or mortgages to African American homeowners and businesses, many African Americans in Bedford Stuyvesant in the 1960s paid high rents for substandard housing (117). Between 1940 and 1960 the neighborhood became 85 percent African American and Latino. Prior to this it had been 75 percent white. Real estate speculation and the practice of redlining intensified Bedford Stuyvesant's demographic shift. Political scientist Kimberly Johnson also cites suburban home ownership and highway expansion as reasons for the population shift and economic downturn (120–22). Despite these pressures, the neighborhood had a substantial middle class of African American and Caribbean American homeowners and a large number of beautiful brownstones.

IBS grew from a mix of racial conflict and media neglect. Communities such as Bedford Stuyvesant were part of the "inner city" that scholar Robert Allen considered analogous to an internal colony of the United States with little—too little—indigenous control and with no recourse to stem the outward flow of buying power from the community (112).

This type of analysis is frequently echoed on the program, suggesting that whether or not individual guests were familiar with Allen's internal colony thesis, the idea of African American communities as internal colonies had permeated popular consciousness among African Americans.

In the summer of 1964 unrest turned into an uprising in Bedford Stuyvesant. An incident between young people and police sparked a riot by residents who were also angered by poor conditions in the neighborhood. Journalists labeled this and a nearly simultaneous uprising in Harlem the beginnings of "the long hot summer" of civil unrest. Despite the uprisings and the substantial size of the community, media coverage of Bedford Stuyvesant was minimal even in comparison to other maligned and misrepresented black communities such as Harlem. The only media attention Bedford Stuyvesant received focused on the abysmal living conditions that some residents endured. In 1966, in an attempt to address these poor conditions, activists from the Central Brooklyn Coordinating Council (CBCC), a diverse coalition of civic leaders, church leaders, block clubs, and other local leadership, invited U.S. senator Robert F. Kennedy (D-NY) to tour Bedford Stuyvesant. At the end of the tour the activists challenged Kennedy to address conditions in the community. The activists included CBCC leader Elsie Richardson and Thomas Jones, a prominent local judge. While Kennedy proposed to study the area, a community leader responded emphatically, "No more surveys. We've been surveyed to death" (qtd. in Johnson 116).

Eventually, Kennedy's collaboration with activists in Brooklyn became the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (BSRC), the country's first CDC. Franklin Thomas became the first director of the organization. Thomas had grown up in Bedford Stuyvesant and had been New York City's police commissioner. The concept of CDCs developed as a piece of 1967 antipoverty legislation that amended the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, part of President Johnson's "War on Poverty." CDCs were intended to "address critical problems" by attracting private investment into neighborhoods like Bedford Stuyvesant. This appealed to some local activists as well as to some liberals who wanted to contribute to improving life in "the ghetto."

Initially, the BSRC sponsored employment programs and neighborhood improvement programs that trained unemployed local residents to rehabilitate the area's ailing housing stock. An enthusiastic article about the BSRC appeared in the 8 March issue of *Life* magazine. Calling the corporation a "ray of hope," the article's writer, Jack Newfield, took a positive, even promotional view of the promise of CDCs for poor neighborhoods. Newfield, a white journalist, had grown up in Bedford Stuyvesant and witnessed the community's demographic shift firsthand. In his account Newfield acknowledged that the BSRC had had mixed results. Many of the program's graduates, even those with demonstrable skills, were nonetheless shut out of jobs by racist unions and employers. Despite this discouraging result, Newfield still described the BSRC in idealistic terms:

> The project is a holistic, systematic attack on urban poverty starting with the idea of convincing private enterprise to invest massively in the ghetto. "Because of Vietnam there just isn't enough federal money available to do the job," says Senator Kennedy who developed the project with his staff, "so we must convince the private sector that it is their responsibility too. They can create dignifying jobs—not welfare handouts—for the poor." (84–96)

Recognizing the potential role of the media in altering the image of Bedford Stuyvesant, Fred Papert, a white BSRC board member and advertising executive, proposed that the BSRC start a television show of its own. Papert's suggestion also came in response to the Kerner Commission report's criticism of the media for ignoring black issues while sensationalizing riots. He suggested that the BSRC could organize a television show illustrating the achievements of individuals and groups from the neighborhood. Initially, BSRC staff members asked Leslie Lacey, an African American children's author, to produce the program. According to Charles Hobson, Lacey found the "Kennedy people" difficult to work with and passed the job on to Hobson, who worked at WBAI, an independent progressive radio station in New York City affiliated with the Pacifica Network. Hobson, now a well-known documentary filmmaker who grew up in Bedford Stuyvesant, prepared a proposal for the program describing the beauty, character, and vitality of the neighborhood as he hoped to represent it. The BSRC approached WNEW (Channel 5 in NYC) and worked out an agreement to air the show.

The mixture of corporate and foundation sponsorship *IBS* enjoyed reveals that both corporations and foundations were aware of and responsive to a changing racial atmosphere in the years after the uprisings. First National City Bank, Commonwealth Edison, and NY Telephone all funded the initial episodes. Banks and utilities most likely

gave to the program to display their generosity at a time when they were the targets of criticism and protest by community residents for both their poor services to neighborhood residents and their employment practices. Each of *IBS*'s funders had its own interest in African American representations of Bedford Stuyvesant as a community. For example, the Ford Foundation and the Stearns Foundation helped fund *IBS*. These foundations funded many antipoverty organizations and more broad efforts as well. Public affairs programming on commercial television continued to require noncommercial subsidy—contributions from both foundation and corporate sponsors. In the case of *IBS*, foundation support for a program on commercial television that was clearly not "commercial" in the conventional sense shows that the distinction between public and commercial television was somewhat blurred.

Indeed, black public affairs television programs blurred the distinction between commercial and public television in this era, as both kinds of broadcast outlets responded to the pressures to create black programming. A few months after its premiere *IBS*'s production quality would be dwarfed by the (relatively) larger budget of PBS's New York–produced national black public affairs program, *Black Journal*, which came out later that year. Unlike some of the experimental television created by WNET, New York's PBS station, *IBS* was accidentally avant-garde. The program's odd camera angles and editing were not experiments but were hallmarks of an austere production budget. While the funding was also low at the local PBS-produced black programs that premiered in the months following the King assassination, some of the PBS programs such as *Black Journal* and WGBH Boston's *Say Brother* were shot in color, while *IBS*'s black-and-white production marked it as a lower budget production.

Showing the "Good Side" of the Ghetto

At the premiere of *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant* Papert spoke of the paucity of media resources available in the community: "The series is a perfect example of television being as good for the audience as it is for the sponsors. It's responsive to the basic communications needs of the nearly half million people who live in this community who up to now have boasted no radio, television or daily newspaper of their own" (Gent 93). The *New York Times* described *IBS* after its debut in April 1968 as "a mixture of neighborhood news, interviews, and entertainment television" (Gent 93). The thirteen episodes of *IBS*'s first season were created with a low (even for 1968) budget of $45,000. This resulted in hastily filmed and edited footage that appears sloppy by television conventions of the time. It was clearly the content that attracted the audience, not the style.

The decision to film outdoors, likely because of budget limitations, nonetheless created a distinctive aesthetic. This style emphasized the accessibility of the program and created a feel significantly different from that of a studio-based program. This accessibility made the program porous; individuals could and did walk on camera during the filming and as a result were featured in the broadcast. This accessibility was very unusual for television practices in this era. Most of the local news coverage of African American communities eschewed the sustained engagement of *IBS*. Filming the program throughout the neighborhood invited viewers from many parts of the Bedford Stuyvesant community. Furthermore, the program showcased the diversity of Bedford Stuyvesant's architecture, public spaces, and institutions. By naming these locations "inside," as the title suggested, the program claimed them as being part of Bedford Stuyvesant. Claiming specific neighborhood sites was a way to establish the parameters of Bedford Stuyvesant and proudly mark it as a beloved and thriving community. This was a strategic way to improve the community's image in the minds of both residents and nonresidents.

This defining of Bedford Stuyvesant's boundaries in a positive way, claiming inclusion rather than exclusion, also addressed the notion that the community was an ill-defined, disgusting, growing slum, as the *Life* article on the BSRC describes it: a "growing slum with amoeba-like boundaries that render its exact geographical limits uncertain" (Newfield 84). Pointing out this amorphousness, BSRC's own Thomas R. Jones said, "Bedford Stuyvesant is wherever Negroes live" (Newfield 86).

IBS's strategy of claiming spaces within the neighborhood recontextualizes this designation of amorphousness, which, in the context of the *Life* article, is layered with thinly veiled fears about New York's growing African American population. The program asserts that being located in the Bedford Stuyvesant area is a positive attribute and that the neighborhood is not a festering amorphous space but a vibrant community. The choices of location emphasized attractive public spaces such as Brower Park and Fulton Park and educational establishments such as the Pratt Institute. The program was able to document Bedford Stuyvesant's buildings and infrastructure in keeping with

BSRC's mission of architectural renovation and preservation. Another advantage of filming outdoors was that the hosts and crew became a familiar sight in the neighborhood, increasing the comfort level that Bedford Stuyvesant residents felt with the program.

The producers' desire to convey both the decay of the community's infrastructure and Bedford Stuyvesant's beauty is evident in the program's first press release. "The scenes of Bedford Stuyvesant . . . will show beauty and squalor side by side—brilliant people in the midst of decaying homes. Restoration Corporation intends to make Bedford Stuyvesant once again the garden spot of Brooklyn through the wonderful people who live here" (Hobson). Airing images of decay had the potential to catalyze reform, justifying the private and government funds channeled into the community. Nonetheless, the show chose to emphasize beauty more than decay. This choice shows that the makers of *IBS* felt that the need to win the image war over depictions of ghetto pathology was as great as the need to demonstrate the necessity to obtain funds from War on Poverty programs. Furthermore, the effort to foster community pride shows that community members were the program's first priority and that the potential audience of government officials, foundations, and corporate funders was secondary.

While the program was certainly innovative, an examination of the episodes displays evidence of time and budget constraints. For example, while the opening theme of the program conveys that the neighborhood itself is a vibrant place, the theme clearly suffered in the production process. Many of the shots include text that appears on-screen too briefly to be legible. In a series of very brief consecutive shots, the viewer sees the neighborhood. The first image is the Brooklyn Bridge; the next shows the street sign at Fulton and Nostrand at the heart of Bedford Stuyvesant and very close to the BSRC office. Several shots pan down from tall, ornate buildings to street level. A final series of images shows neighborhood residents coming out of the subway and getting on a bus.

The casual nature of some of the cinematography and editing added to the program's spontaneous style. This improvisatory style was explored by some of the musicians who appeared on the program. The music in the opening, an instrumental version of Aretha Franklin's "Respect," aptly summarized the attitude the program hosts displayed for neighborhood residents and their audience. Yet the broadcast time contrasted with the ideal of "respect," markedly demonstrating the minimal resources devoted to *IBS*. The 1:00 A.M. and 7:00 A.M. time slots created cognitive dissonance with the broadcasts' feeling of immediacy, as the show was always shot in bright sunshine with many people milling about. Thus, the 1:00 A.M. viewer would be absolutely certain he or she was not watching a simultaneous live broadcast.

The patently marginal time slot in the "broadcast ghetto" was criticized by guests on the program and by audience members. That the staff members in their interviews used the spatial metaphor—the word "ghetto"—to describe a marginalized time on the broadcast schedule shows how deeply ingrained and defining the concept of "the ghetto" had come to be. Not surprisingly, audience members regularly wrote to the program to ask that it be moved to a more convenient viewing time, demonstrating that black audiences refused second-class viewership status. The most notable on-air critique of the time slot came from Harry Belafonte, who asked on air, "Is this the best they [the station] can do for us?" BSRC officials were more circumspect in their criticism of the program's marginal time slot. BSRC director Franklin Thomas, who was interviewed by the *New York Times* the day before the program's premiere, acknowledged that the time was far from ideal but said it was "a start" (Gent 93). WNEW did offer the BSRC a discount on airtime, but apparently it was not enough to buy a more visible time slot.

Hosts as Ambassadors: Mediating a Counterpublic

> Jim Lowry: Welcome to *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant*, your community program: . . . I love to say that, I feel good . . . You gonna billboard us, Roxie?
> Roxie Roker: Oh, yes, I'd like to say the program was brought to us by Con Ed, NY Tel, and Coca Cola.
> Lowry: Right, and I understand you are going to have a very interesting guest.
> Roker: Yes, her name is Ms. Jordan and she has her own dress manufacturing company in New York City, but she's right from this community, here in Bedford Stuyvesant, in fact just a stone's throw away.
> Lowry: You gonna model?
> Roker: Oh, no, no . . . I don't think I'll model. Maybe someday our producer will work it out so I can wear Ms. Jordan's clothes on our show.
> Lowry: Very smooth, Roxie! Very smooth . . . Another thing, I think we're going to have a forum, a new thing on the show, we have invited civic-minded people from the community.

This exchange underscores the warmth and casualness of the banter between the two hosts that permeates the program. *IBS*'s hosts were integral to the program's popularity, which led to a longer-than-expected run. In the first two seasons the hosts were Roxie Roker and Jim Lowry. Roxie Roker, a Broadway actress with some television experience, worked at NBC, where her husband, Sy Kravitz, was an executive. Her recognizability and respectability attracted viewers, although her presence and style were reportedly criticized as being more theater than television. Numerous journalists applied for the job as Roker's cohost, but ultimately James Lowry, who had been on staff at the BSRC for two years, auditioned and was selected. Lowry was a prominent worker at the BSRC who had been featured in press coverage about the work of the organization.

The choice of Roker and Lowry, with their middle-class linguistic styles and appearance, to host the program was a subtle nod at "uplift," a strategy invoked by elite African Americans of countering racism by "calling attention to class distinctions among African Americans as a sign of evolutionary race progress" (Gaines 22). Lowry's looks probably did not hurt his selection. According to viewer mail, both of the hosts were very popular, with twenty-nine-year-old Lowry garnering special attention from viewers for being "tall and handsome" or "charming, personable, and handsome." Roker was a celebrity in her own right and undoubtedly attracted viewers to the program because of this.

Despite the excitement of making this pioneering program, the working conditions at *IBS* were far from glamorous. Lowry recollected that he and Roker would bring three changes of their own clothes so that three episodes of the half-hour program could be shot in an afternoon (Lowry). In the first two seasons Lowry and Roker were the glue that held the disparate and sometimes incongruous elements of the program together. The show's inclusion of dissident voices was crucial to building a black public sphere, and Roker and Lowry demonstrated this inclusion in every episode. According to grant applications, one of the program's early generic models was the *Today Show*, and the hosts' sunny and warm demeanors bore out that resemblance.

The hosts mediated a diverse black public sphere that was porous, responsive, and vibrant. When Lowry or Roker interviewed activists such as Herman Ferguson or politicians such as Charles Kemp, their questions were open-ended, allowing guests a chance to speak for themselves. They did not try to represent consensus about what was best for the community—there was no consensus. When introducing particularly radical artists or activists, Roker and Lowry were ambassadors while representing the ultimate in respectability and familiarity; they helped to introduce new ideas to the community by modeling an attitude of friendly inquisitiveness.

In the second season Lowry literally modeled new ideas by wearing a dashiki in some episodes, demonstrating an openness to new culturally nationalist trends. On the days Lowry wore the dashiki he typically commented on it. In one of the first dashiki episodes Lowry commented to Roker that the women activists he had interviewed had been "all over him," and he attributed it to the new look. "It must be the dashiki. I'm coming home, Roxie." Roker smiles in response and says, "You never left, Jim, you never left." Many in the audience might have taken pleasure from seeing Lowry's fashion experiments. His self-consciousness about it likely reflected at least some viewers' own experience with the evolving "black look" (Craig 75). Roker's appearance also changed over the course of the program. In the first episodes her hair is in a curled perm, but in later episodes her hair is in a coiffed Afro, reflecting her engagement with the changes in African American self-presentation.

While Roker and Lowry welcomed everyone warmly, Roker's attitude was especially gracious with personal friends. "Let me introduce you to my dear friend," she said when introducing guests such as actress Vinie Burroughs, with whom she had performed in *The Blacks*, and Hal Johnson, a friend from Howard University. Roker graduated from Howard University and emerged from a civil rights milieu; she clearly enjoyed having some of her personal heroes such as Harry Belafonte on the program. In addition to Roker's and Lowry's general warmth and enthusiasm, their flirtatiousness with both guests and each other created another mode of interaction with the audience.

The importance of the hosts' roles as ambassadors is especially clear when they practiced explicit "framing" while introducing guests. Roker and Lowry attempted to represent openness and objectivity alternating with advocacy journalism. Thus, their approach to each guest anticipated a range of viewers' responses. In cases of the most outspoken Black Power–oriented guests, they took what one staff member later called an "almost apologetic

tone" (Hobson). This can also be read as a plea for audience members to keep watching and keep an open mind—even if the points of view on the air were quite radical. Two prominent examples of this type of framing are illustrated here. Immediately prior to the performance of the Spirit House Young Players, Roxie Roker stated, "What you are about to see you may not agree with, but I think you will agree with me that it needs to be said." Lowry makes a similar framing statement when introducing Black Nationalist activist Sonny Carson:

> Today we have a very special guest on *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant*, someone I've known for some time and have a great deal of respect for, a person who always speaks his mind out. Sometimes you might not agree with what he says, but you cannot deny the fact that Bob Sonny Carson speaks his mind out. He tells you what he thinks . . . and that's why I'm glad to have Sonny Carson with us today on *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant*. I'm glad you can make it *this* time.

In the episode Carson castigates Pratt for ignoring minority applicants while holding up a painting by a young black painter who he maintains was unfairly rejected for financial aid. Lowry gives Carson a fair amount of space to make his point, and his appearance is very much in the "soap box" or street corner tradition.

Yet another example of the hosts' dialogue shows that they anticipated strong audience response (possibly both positive and negative) to their guests. In an episode featuring the Brooklyn Black Panthers, Lowry and Roker's dialogue anticipated this reaction.

> Roker: We have an interesting program, don't we?
> Lowry: Gonna shake a lot of people up, I think.
> Roker: *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant* is always an interesting and versatile program presenting many sides.

In this episode Lowry discussed with a radical guest the possibilities for a black revolution. Lowry's questions to Lieutenant Aponte of the Brooklyn Black Panthers reflected his own distance from Aponte's methods and aims. Yet the interview does provide an entry point to the discussion with black radicals for nonradical viewers. Lowry asks, in essence, "What about someone like me . . . a middle-class, successful black man?" He spoke for some African Americans who, having achieved material success under capitalism despite the pressures of racism, were doubtless concerned about the impact of a black Marxist revolution on their own lives. Lt. Aponte responded by saying that "after the revolution" the backlash against all African Americans would be so strong that even middle-class people would be affected and therefore unable to maintain neutrality. The earnestness of Lowry's attempt to connect with Aponte across their different positions creates a range of identification possibilities for viewers without offering an easy resolution to these significant questions and differences of opinion.

Visualizing Community in Public Spaces

While the hosts were central figures and mediators of diverse opinions, in many ways the community itself was the star of the show. Many episodes of *IBS* showcased a live audience of community members watching the hosts and other performers; these onlookers became a central part of the program text. In an episode featuring Max Roach performing outdoors on the Pratt campus, young people surrounded Roach, rapt with attention when he played. As music journalist Jake Austen reflects, "Roach seemed to appreciate and be especially comfortable with performing for a black audience, and the 'vibe' that the audience's enthusiasm created may have enhanced his performance." In this particular episode the credits rolled over images of people performing and smiling for the camera, some still dancing apparently to music still playing on the campus. In the final shot a woman leaned over her young child in a carriage and turned his or her head toward the camera. This gesture of offering the child to the camera, when so many negative ideas were circulating about African Americans and residents of neighborhoods such as Bedford Stuyvesant, shows that residents felt comfortable with the presence of the program and had a desire to be represented. This pervasive excitement made *IBS* compelling viewing, despite the low-end production values. While liberal journalists such as Jack Newfield in *Life* magazine sensationalized conditions in Bedford Stuyvesant with phrases such as "Rorschach tests of vomit" and descriptions of violent youth, stench, and filth, one sees a different side of the community in the hopeful gesture of the on-screen mother in the park.

IBS featured a space for debate, with several segments in which community members could speak directly to issues. These were called the "speak out" and "community forum" segments. In these portions of the program individuals from the community could offer a critique directly to the audience. The simple knowledge that one could be on the show to state one's point of view and be heard within and beyond the immediate community transmitted some-

thing unprecedented to Bedford Stuyvesant residents. *IBS* showed young people as enthusiastic participants in society as they actively worked on community issues. Sensitive to the importance of young people in the changing mood of the late 1960s, the staff of *IBS* generated a myriad of opportunities for young people to appear on the show. In the episode featuring Belafonte, several students from Boys High School conducted the interview. Another episode featured the class president, the valedictorian, the yearbook editor, and the football captain of Boys High describing the problems facing the neighborhood and discussing their college plans. The seniors, including valedictorian Henry Marietta and class president Dewey Hickson, spoke eloquently and forcefully about their desire to return to the community after they graduate from Harvard and of their struggle to get a black principal for Boys High. In this episode and others the show replaced an image of dangerous youth with an image of heroism, intelligence, and mature leadership. The recasting of youth in this context is a notable departure from the pervasive negative stereotyping of black youth in most other media at this time.

By citing indigenous experts on the community while critiquing or pointedly ignoring dominant discourses from governmental and academic "experts," the program introduced progressive notions of experts and expertise. In one 1968 episode a community forum featured a group of adults from the community standing by a sculpture on the Pratt campus. Jim Lowry introduced the guests, citing their names, professions, and community involvements. When Lowry introduced Mr. Charles Thomas as an art teacher, he mentioned Thomas's degree, emphasizing that local people were highly qualified experts in their fields. Lowry introduced Mr. Von King as a contractor, past member of the school board, and former PTA president. Mrs. Lee Brown was introduced as "active with an adoptive parents agency." Finally, Lowry introduced Mrs. Hortense Beveret as an expert on Bedford Stuyvesant history, validating her expertise whether or not she held a formal degree. His introduction also valued volunteer work and community leadership in addition to paid positions.

In this forum Lowry asked participants to articulate their perspectives on youth in the community and Richard M. Nixon's bid for the presidency. One respondent, addressing the question of youth, spoke of her admiration for what she termed the "new African identification," a shift in hairstyles, fashions, and attitudes. She praised this change, calling it "wonderful" and saying that she hoped this new generation would be blessed with "wholeness as a person." This positive intergenerational attitude coupled with fervent praise for African American young people markedly contrasted with prevailing portrayals of African American youth. This segment validates both formal education, such as a master's degree, and community-based knowledge, situating Bedford Stuyvesant residents as experts on their own community at a time when "experts" were studying "ghetto communities" and drawing their own conclusions. *IBS* offered a forum for this type of communication; the program both foregrounded nonelites and documented "ordinary circumstances of black life" (Harris-Lacewell).

In this case television provides a venue for these individuals to assert their critiques of government, fostering Bedford Stuyvesant's transition from an enclave public, in which dissent is discussed internally, to a counterpublic, in which dissent is publicly voiced (Squires 449–56). For example, in response to Lowry's questions about the recent nomination of Nixon and Agnew at the 1968 Republican National Convention in Miami, one participant said, "I am not surprised that Nixon wants to cut funding to Bed-Stuy and Watts, etc. No matter what the platform is we are not benefited." Another guest described Nixon's attitude toward African Americans in the city as abusive, "like a mother spanking a hungry baby to keep it from crying." Airing these political critiques by individuals who would not ordinarily be interviewed on television repositioned the kind of private political talk that circulates in communities and made it available to engage the public. This validated African American points of view while also presenting mystified outsiders with a deeper understanding of the black counterpublic, which political scientist Melissa Harris-Lacewell calls "life behind the veil" (13).

Producing an Audience across Spatial and Racial Divides

Despite the inconvenient hour of the show's broadcast and the program's placement on a non–"big three" network, *IBS* was immediately found and watched by viewers. An examination of the letters received by the program demonstrates that viewing the program was profoundly gratifying to residents of Bedford Stuyvesant. The letters to *IBS* reveal some of the pride and ownership that African American viewers, both within and beyond Bedford Stuyvesant, felt for the program. Far from rendering the program irrelevant to outsiders, the local nature of *IBS* modeled a community

that individuals in other locales could relate to in profound ways. In addition to the letters the program received, segments such as the interview with Hal Jackson demonstrate that viewers in neighboring Newark, New Jersey, avidly watched *IBS*. Other evidence of the show's impact both within and beyond Bedford Stuyvesant came from references that guests made on the air in regard to the program's devoted audience. Many of the guests praised the program, but few spent as much time lauding the program as radio personality Hal Jackson. Despite Roker's encouragement for him to speak about his own work, he complimented *IBS* at length on the air.

> Now in [New Jersey] and also in New York . . . I have found that this is the byword for all of the students, and, well, all of the areas in the community centers, everybody talks and everybody educates the children to look at *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant*. It's really not only a swinging hope and a swinging show for young people . . . it's become the kind of thing that all of the young people are looking forward to it—I wanted you to know that everybody's talking about it—not only talk about, everybody's making everybody else look at it.

Jackson's perspective demonstrates the dissemination of *IBS* beyond the borders of New York City and emphasizes the fact that audiences made an effort to view the program despite the inconvenient airtime. In addition to reaching black audiences beyond Brooklyn's borders, the archived letters also show that the program was educational for white viewers who happened upon the show or chose to tune in. For example, one suburban viewer named Thomas George wrote that seeing the show made him want to walk around Bedford Stuyvesant and see black people face-to-face despite his fears: "Many of us are tempted to take a weeknight or a day on the weekend to come to Bedford Stuyvesant to see for ourselves the world you are putting on TV. However, the 'fear' which keeps Negroes and white people apart makes many people look upon such a trip as not quite possible."

The fact that a television program could even begin to bridge this considerable divide offers evidence of television's civic potential. One white writer displayed both liberal support of the program and its ideals and some of the vestiges of white condescension toward African Americans in building "race relations." Addressing his letter to "Dear Insiders," Astoria, Queens, resident Russel Locasia praised the program but saw it more as positive civil rights propaganda than as entertainment or art: "Yours is one of the most constructive, down to earth, most alive and refreshing *social programs* I was so truly happy to watch." He identified himself as a working- or middle-class person who could not contribute money to the program, but he reiterated a theme common to both Bedford Stuyvesant residents and outsiders—that the show expanded narrow conceptions of ghetto life. However, his outsider status is evident in his comments. Locasia was grateful to the show: as he put it, the show "demonstrate[s] to an unknowing public just what goes on in a ghetto besides degeneration." By saying "besides degeneration" the writer revealed that he was familiar with the predominating "ghettoizing discourses" and appreciated the alternative presented by the program's upbeat and comprehensive look at the neighborhood.

Despite this celebratory tone, the writer expressed strong distaste for some kinds of black liberation discourse. While Locasia praised the show for eschewing the use of what he termed an "irritating phraseology . . . black power," if he had continued to watch the program, he would have seen the phrase "Black Power" invoked in later episodes. Indeed, many guests on the program elaborated the contours of Black Power from a variety of perspectives. Locasia also praised the program for not exhibiting "helplessness" and for eschewing communism. Further revealing his sensibilities about race and class, Locasia praised the hosts' middle-class, accent-neutral speech patterns. "The fact that you have no southern drawl," the writer states, is praiseworthy; he argues that although there is nothing "wrong" with a drawl, it represents "the unfortunate situation of the south," which for Locasia sets up a "psychological block immediately." Locasia's interpretation of Lowry and speech patterns mixes admiration for their "fluid" speech and for what they say. Locasia praised the hosts and, seemingly, other African Americans, whom he refers to as "you people," for their abilities to speak the "American Language . . . without strain, without ghetto traces, without fanatical reproaches, without tyrannical demands, without persecution complexions [*sic*] without sympathy gimmicks, in brief, without vinegar."

In this description Locasia referred both to the accessibility of the hosts' middle-class speech and to his comfort with the message of their speech. Calling the hosts "heroes," Locasia ended his letter with praise: "The dignified humility you so beautifully reflect is evidence that you are not looking for laurels, but rather harmony in people and love." This writer did not reference Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose assassination a week before had prompted a "national spasm of remorse" (Staub 19), yet the letter

displays a clear nostalgia for the nonviolent civil rights discourse that King represented to many Americans. The writer, by calling the phrase Black Power "irritating," made it clear that his sympathies lay with a particular brand of civil rights ideology. The fact that *IBS* could appeal to an anxious white New Yorker like Locasia yet also appeal to audiences interested in hearing from Sonny Carson, Julius Lester, the Black Panthers, and the Leroi Jones Spirit House performers demonstrates the complexity and diversity of the program.

Real Life in "Model Cities"

> The very night I was elected to the Better Housing Committee the mayor's committee said, "Let the churches incorporate and take over the people's property." While they told us to pray they were politicking with the politicians, going on with the program. One lady said, "I'll speak to my preacher"; he said, "You can't fight city hall." He should have said, "*I* can't fight city hall 'cause I have already sold you out!" . . . Nonprofit is a joke! I am not in favor of nonprofits. Black people have no right to be nonprofit. . . . Black people are born with no profits.
>
> —Ruth Shannon, Ad Hoc Refugee Committee

IBS's sponsors at the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation had a mission to rehabilitate housing and stimulate economic development in Bedford Stuyvesant. The BSRC's mission did not prevent the show from hosting guests who were critical of some of the effects and methods of redevelopment there. In one episode host Jim Lowry interviewed three women from the Ad Hoc Refugee Committee in Brooklyn, a group of housing activists led by Ruth Shannon. Horace Marantzi of the Model Cities Program had appeared on *IBS* previously, and the activists from the Ad Hoc Refugee Committee were invited to offer their critical response. The use of the word "refugee" in the organization's name signaled their criticism of housing initiatives such as the Model Cities, which they felt were turning some Bedford Stuyvesant residents into refugees. In her stoop-side interview with Jim Lowry Ruth Shannon criticized the terms by which some officials deemed certain buildings unsafe. She described the duplicity of planners who told residents that their housing was viable but then seemed to tell a different story to government funders. Shannon narrated her reasons for rejecting a paid position with the Better Housing Committee (which was aligned with the housing "rehabilitators") in order to maintain her integrity and not be co-opted. She said angrily, "Better Housing Committee don't live here—I was elected to the BHC—it wasn't intended for me to be on it. . . . I was offered a job, but I refused."

In the interview Shannon is especially critical of churches and business owners in Bedford Stuyvesant that she considers to have been co-opted and to be colluding with developers to evict residents, thus "selling out" the neighborhood. This opportunity for local activists and other "ordinary people" to get time on television and enter into a dialogue is part of what made *IBS* unusual, even for radical television of the 1960s and 1970s. Points of view such as Shannon's were almost never visible in any media. The fact that Shannon's group could appear on a program to refute statements made on a previous episode was a strong contrast to the prevailing logic of television, despite the so-called Fairness Doctrine. This possibility for dialogue and the positioning of citizens as experts made *IBS* a model for black public-sphere formation.

The ultralocal focus of much of *IBS*'s content differentiated this program from the other black programs that followed it onto the air after the King assassination. The program offered black residents of New York's Bedford Stuyvesant a sense of belonging—visibility and membership in a community that demonstrated to both residents and outsiders that, in the words of one viewer, more "goes in a ghetto besides degeneration" and gave voice to critiques of federal and local policies rarely seen in the media. *IBS* countered the notion that Bedford Stuyvesant was trapped in a "culture of poverty" by addressing articulate critiques of the structural (as opposed to cultural) causes of poverty and by offering examples of community members' cultural creativity and productivity.

The middle-class presentation style of the hosts mediated stereotypes, enabling the program to examine the problems of the community without reifying negative impressions and expectations. *IBS* presented a contrast to media and social-science representations of "ghetto life" and "ghetto dwellers" by showcasing the achievements of individuals and organizations from the community. The program offered a platform to a range of politicians, activists, and artists, most with direct ties to Bedford Stuyvesant. Given its neighborhood focus and budget, the show had a surprisingly wide audience, and letters from audience members document the sense of ownership and pride that Bedford Stuyvesant residents felt toward the program. While some cultural critics in this period and afterward considered television to be privatizing and a destructive force to the civic space and community, this program provides a

counterexample in its conscious attempt to foster a black public sphere.[4] The intimately local nature of the program allowed the program to be responsive; individuals could appear on the air to refute the claims of those who had appeared previously.

IBS represented community residents as citizens for whom political ideas for transforming the space and community are omnipresent and debated as opposed to apathetic, nonparticipatory "ghetto dwellers." Episodes featured local, community-based activists, artists, school choral groups, and teen bands as well as well-known activists such as Sonny Carson and Julius Lester. In this era of multiple and contested ideas about black liberation, the show portrayed Bedford Stuyvesant as a place where Black Nationalist ideas had taken hold and were debated as well as a place where housewives, welfare mothers, and high school students all held and articulated strong political beliefs. Finally, because the program hosts were known figures in the neighborhood who embodied respectability and the show regularly featured Black Nationalist ideas, a subtext of the program was that Black Nationalist ideas were not mutually exclusive from respectability.

IBS aimed to document and showcase aspects of the community that were neglected by the mainstream media. The program is unique among the wave of black public affairs programs in the Black Power era as an intimately local document of a specific community. One of the program's central strategies involved claiming specific locales within the community and keeping the mission of the BSRC. Ultimately, the show exceeded initial expectations that it would simply counter negative stereotypes and run for a single season. Instead, *IBS* remained in production until 1971, launching the careers of its hosts, producers, and several of its guests while offering Bedford Stuyvesant unprecedented visibility. Furthermore, despite the marginal time slot, the program's producers took advantage of the opportunity to feature critiques of housing and welfare policy that, had they run in prime time, might have been censored. The program offered validation and a sense of belonging to Bedford Stuyvesant residents while offering outsiders a bridge to a seemingly alien world. For the contemporary viewer the program gives a rare perspective into a moment in the history of broadcasting and the history of the Black Power era. Perhaps most important, it offers a portrait of a community of families, activists, and citizens asking hard questions that, for the most part, remain unanswered. Ultimately, the archived episodes of the program provide a window into an emerging black public sphere in one of the largest African American neighborhoods in the United States, a community that had previously only been visible to itself and outsiders through the marginalizing lens of media racism and the pathologizing lens of social scientific discourse on "the ghetto."

Notes

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1. WNEW, Channel 5 was not an affiliate of one of the "big three" networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS. In the 1960s WNEW-TV was one of three independent stations in metropolitan New York. By the 1970s WNEW was New York's leading independent station. The station was purchased by Fox Broadcasting in 1986.

2. The uprisings included Watts (1965), Newark and Detroit (1967), and Philadelphia and Chicago (1964). See also Loftus.

3. According to sociologist Jill Quadagno, this type of research, along with the Moynihan report, which blamed the problems faced by African Americans on the "broken" and "matriarchal" black family, was used by the U.S. government to argue that the state should be an agent of socialization and that poor people were unfit for significant self-determination (35–36). See also Bensonsmith 251.

4. For examples of the idea of television as destructive to civic space see especially Meyrowitz; Minow.

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