Introduction

"IT’S BEEN BEAUTIFUL"

There’s no precise term that can convey the essence of the show; black culture is not inexact for it, but that’s too pompous a term; it’s a program that combines entertainment and talk, and it is a soul show. Once the culture of soul is fully documented, a new word may spring up in its place.

—Ellis Haizlip

_It’s Been Beautiful_ tells the story of Soul!, an understudied landmark in the history of American television. One of the earliest black-produced shows on TV, Soul! was the only nationally televised program dedicated to cultural expressions of the black freedom movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. For five seasons beginning in 1968—first locally on WNDT (later WNET; Channel 13, New York City’s main public broadcasting outlet), and then nationally via PBS distribution—Soul! offered viewers a weekly platform for music, poetry, dance, politics, style, and fashion. It provided an intimate stage for mainstream black culture heroes such as Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte and a rare friendly forum for figures like Louis Farrakhan, Stokely Carmichael, and Kathleen Cleaver (figure I.1), who were regarded by mainstream media outlets as beyond the pale. On Soul!, Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka recited their poems; Toni Morrison read from her debut novel _The Bluest Eye_ (figure I.2); Nick Ashford and Valerie Simpson brought the studio audience to its feet with the performance of their soulful
anthem, “Reach Out and Touch (Somebody’s Hand)”; Vertamae Grosvenor demonstrated “vibration cooking”; Earth, Wind and Fire (in an early incarnation with the singer Jessica Cleaves) played a funky set that included a cover of James Taylor’s “Don’t Let Me Be Lonely Tonight”; Wilson Pickett joined the legendary Marion Williams in the popular gospel number “Oh Happy Day”; and George Faison’s modern dance troupe performed *Poppy*, a ballet about drug addiction set to music by Miles Davis. *Soul!* was where the Last Poets performed their politically explosive works, Nikki Giovanni and James Baldwin talked frankly about sex and Black Power, and the musicians Mongo Santamaría, Letta Mbulu, Miriam Makeba, and Hugh Masekela, and poet Keorapetse Kgotsitsile explored black consciousness and identity transnationally. U.S. audiences watched *Soul!* on their local public television outlets in places like Tulsa and Miami, but viewers included Canadians picking up the signal from Buffalo and Jamaicans who watched tapes of *Soul!* in Kingston.²
1.2. Toni Morrison reads from her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*. 
Behind this eclecticism and cultural edginess was Ellis B. Haizlip (1930–91), a New York–based producer whose immersion in African American performing, literary, and visual arts traditions and “debonairly Afrocentric” persona earned him the affectionate nickname “Mr. Soul.” Under Haizlip’s leadership as the show’s producer and regular host, *Soul!* televised a richly heterogeneous cast of artists and public figures, expanding opportunities for black performing artists and intellectuals on television while critiquing the notion that a TV show—let alone a weekly one-hour broadcast produced on a shoestring budget—could adequately or fully represent the black collective. No prime-time U.S. television show has ever addressed itself so unequivocally to black viewers as a culturally distinct audience or employed a greater percentage of black people, particularly black women, in significant creative positions. None has been so committed to decentering heterosexual masculinity within black politics and culture. Likewise, none has been so intent on exploring the variety and vitality of black culture, and on understanding cultural expressions of the U.S. black freedom movement in the context of the affiliated cultural expressions of African-descended U.S. Latinos and black South Africans.

At the most basic level, *It’s Been Beautiful* seeks to insert *Soul!* into the annals of television, where for the most part it has been overlooked. With the exception of discussions in Laurie Ouellette’s indispensable *Viewers Like You?* and Devorah Heitner’s recent *Black Power TV* and related investigations in works by James Ledbetter, Tommy Lee Lott, and a few others, we have no extended written accounts of *Soul!* as a key TV text of the era or as a cultural project joined by common cause to 1960s and 1970s political struggles. *Soul!* receives scant mention in histories of public broadcasting, which, when they discuss programs aimed at minority audiences, tend to focus on public affairs shows such as *Black Journal*. And it is glaringly absent from the vast majority of histories of African Americans and television, where commercial broadcasting, because of its larger audience and association with popular genres like the situation comedy, has received the lion’s share of attention. As authoritatively titled a text as the *Historical Dictionary of African-American Television*, for example, contains no entries on *Soul!* or Haizlip.
These scholarly omissions are all the more noteworthy given *Soul!’s* documented popularity and favorable critical reception. Journalists praised the show for its fresh take on soul culture and its promotion of artists who could not be seen anywhere else on television. Viewers thrilled at seeing well-known talents who had not “crossed over” getting their proper due. Although observers occasionally registered discontent with the program’s emphasis on performance, fearing it would reinforce notions that black people were only fit subjects of television representation if they were offering musical entertainment, much more common were advocates like Charles Hobson and Sheila Smith, who defended the show after attending the taping of a February 1970 episode with Curtis Mayfield as the guest host. “We don’t know many people who would accuse Mayfield of being a stereotype of anything,” Hobson and Smith wrote in *Tuesday*, a weekly insert aimed at black readers that was included in various Sunday newspapers in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, “if it is stereotyped to dig the Impressions, B. B. King and Eddie Floyd, the brothers and sisters who were on hand were certainly a group of beautiful, together stereotypes.”

*Soul!* never enjoyed the visibility of the era’s commercial black programs, such as *Julia* and *Sanford and Son*. Yet despite competition from the three major networks and technological challenges associated with public television, which tended to broadcast on UHF channels inaccessible to all but state-of-the-art television sets, Haizlip’s show attracted a substantial and loyal audience. A remarkable 1969 Harris poll—which may well be the first detailed study of the television viewing habits of urban African Americans as a distinct demographic group—found that more than 65 percent of black New York City households with access to *Soul!* watched it on a regular basis. A similar 1972 poll found the show competing favorably with commercial network fare among black audiences in Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. Evidence collected in the early 1970s found *Soul!* unique among nationally broadcast programs in being watched by black viewers across age groups.8

Interviews with *Soul!* fans conducted for this book attest to the program’s enduring power. “I literally jumped out of my seat,” recalls the jazz musician Bobby Sanabria, who happened upon the “Shades
of Soul” episode featuring the New York Puerto Rican musicians Tito Puente and Willie Colón when flipping through the channels one night in November 1972. “Because there was nothing about us on TV. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”9 Roland Washington, who had been part of the 1967 mass walkout by high-school students in Newark, was nineteen when his soul-funk cover band Soul Excitement! appeared on the program in March 1969. Soul! episodes featuring Gladys Knight (figure I.3), the Unifics, and the Delfonics brought everyone in Washington’s multigenerational household together. “Soul! was a unifying force,” he recalls, adding: “You didn’t want to be walking in front of the TV or getting something to eat when Soul! was on.”10 Like Washington, Valerie Patterson, who watched Soul! on WPTV in Miami, remembers being deeply impressed by Haizlip. (So was her boyfriend, who with his fraternity brothers envisioned a Miami version of the show that never made it off the drafting table.) It was not just the way Haizlip conducted interviews, with an erudition that impressed her, but also the way he wore his thick glasses, his “huge” Afro, and his “regal,” “erect” bearing.11 Walter Fields, who watched as a child in his parents’ home in Hackensack, New Jersey, says his family had a standing weekly “appointment” with Soul!, only one of two programs (the other was The David Susskind Show) that he was allowed to stay up for.12

As these reminiscences about the program suggest, Soul! is not just an overlooked cultural achievement of the 1960s and 1970s; it is also a television archive that offers new windows into black political and cultural expression in the Black Power era and the powerful feelings these expressions stirred in viewers in an era when black people had very circumscribed access to the televisual public sphere. In other words, it is not merely a noteworthy historical achievement or an archive of great performances (made all the more precious now that Soul! favorites such as Marion Williams, Nick Ashford, and Amiri Baraka are no longer among us), but an archive of what Raymond Williams calls “structures of feeling,” expressive both of a particular time and place and of yet-to-be-realized formations, some of which retain their utopian allure after more than forty years. Mining this archive, It’s Been Beautiful looks and listens for how episodes registered contemporary sociopolitical realities—what Williams calls the “temporal present”—as
well as future-facing “affective elements of consciousness,” exemplified in the resonant slogan, “Black is beautiful.”

_Soul!_ “imagined the dawn of a new world,” observed the cultural critic Lisa Jones in a tribute to Haizlip written on the occasion of his death from lung cancer in 1991. Not only in its gathering of diverse black artists and intellectuals, but also in its visual aesthetic, the show represented the collective dream of black Americans for transport to an imagined place that promised a radically different social order. “Abstract sculpture served as scenery,” Jones writes. “Interviews were shot from unexpected angles and the editing style was up-to-date psychedelic—lots of dissolves and superimpositions.” Performers’ outfits and hair-styles were equally expressive of new modes of looking and being. Opulent red velvet jumpsuits, Afros, African-inspired head wraps and jewelry, plunging necklines, and billowing bell-bottoms pushed the frontiers of fashion and signified a new expressive freedom, claimed by men and women alike, to break with earlier traditions of black bourgeois respectability.

As Haizlip, anticipating Jones, told a Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) reporter in 1970, the very name “Soul!” gestured toward a dreamed-of future. “Soul!,” he noted, was the place-holder for an as-yet-unknown word—and world—that the television program, in its own small way, would attempt to envision.

In foregrounding _Soul!_ as an archive of affect as well as performance, this book reflects a shift in humanities scholarship toward the felt dimensions of cultural production and reception and the emotional saturation of the political imagination. _It’s Been Beautiful_ is part of this shift, but it is also a specific attempt to bring such an orientation to bear on the study of African Americans and television, which has been marked by a preoccupation with questions of authenticity, realism, and positive images. In contrast, I attempt to use _Soul!_ as an opportunity “to go beyond accounts of representation” and focus instead on cultural performance in the televisual construction and negotiation of blackness. _Soul!_ was indeed a pioneering outlet for collective black American self-exploration and self-affirmation in a medium that was only just integrating its representations of the U.S. family and polity.
and allowing racial minorities and women access to the means of production. When Newton N. Minow, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, called television a “vast wasteland” in an oft-cited 1961 speech before the National Association of Broadcasters, he was referring principally to the vapidity and lack of intellectual substance of commercial broadcasting. But Minow’s appropriation of T. S. Eliot’s metaphor for the sterility of modernity aptly captured many African Americans’ sense of television, including noncommercial outlets, as an alternately neglectful and hostile place.

Within this sterile landscape, *Soul!* staffers, many of them the first African Americans to hold certain staff positions at New York’s Channel 13, imagined themselves to be using the tools of television broadcasting to plant “black seeds”—a metaphor that reflects their eagerness for opportunity and ways in to television, rather than fears of selling out. Haizlip felt that *Soul!* had tremendous potential to bring attention to artists whom he believed merited a larger audience. Novella Nelson, one of these artists, remembers that Haizlip had “an internal compass about what was beautiful [and] what was not beautiful that was unwavering and exquisitely sensitive, which is why, as a producer, he proved so prescient, giving many artists their first television exposure.” As Haizlip would proudly note, *Soul!* hosted the national television debuts of Melba Moore; Nelson; Roberta Flack (figure I.4); Bill Withers; Donny Hathaway; Herbie Hancock; Earth, Wind and Fire; The Spinners; Al Green; and Billy Paul. It offered a national platform to black female political leaders—from New York’s Democratic congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, who would go on to mount a historic run for the presidency; to Queen Mother Moore, the pan-Africanist, Garveyite, and long-time advocate for reparations for slavery—who were marginalized by mainstream black leadership. Politically and culturally, it bridged generational and political factions, welcoming icons of the “classical” phase of civil rights, like Belafonte and the musician Odetta (figure I.5), alongside poets, activists, and performers more identified with black arts and Black Power. It planted seeds in viewers as well, offering them a broad-minded exploration of black politics and culture that was a weekly source of delight, instruction, and inspiration on matters ranging from Third World critiques of capitalism to tips on natural skin
care. Frequent images of in-studio audience members—care of the directors Ivan Curry and, later, Stan Lathan—conveyed an ambience of black community that sent forth powerful messages of black political solidarity and cultural pride. But they were also helpful to young viewers in far-flung towns and small cities across the United States, who wanted to know about the latest fashions and hairstyles. As a national program, *Soul!* transmitted a New York–centric sense of emergent black identities to a geographically dispersed audience, exploring the simultaneous diversity, disunity, solidarity, and shared interest of a black audience shaped by multiple diasporas, displacements, and migrations.
Soul! was groundbreaking in form, as well as adventurous politically and aesthetically. Its combination of talk and performance, initially modeled after The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson, enabled it to venture beyond the limitations of the era’s commercial fare (shows like The Mod Squad, The Outsiders, and Room 222) and noncommercial national public-affairs programming (including Black Perspectives on the News and Black Journal), notwithstanding the adventurous turns that both formats might occasionally take. Unencumbered by realist demands for accuracy and verisimilitude, or by the weighty expectations placed on programs purporting to offer black viewpoints, Soul! could instead pursue questions of identity and community through multiple or even competing modes of address. Indeed, Soul! sought out politically and aesthetically challenging material of the sort that Carson pointedly eschewed. In the late 1960s, the popular late-night host took the Tonight franchise to new levels of profitability by offering the program to viewers as a diverting nightcap, an electronic elixir to ward off bad dreams incited by the disturbing images of the evening news. If Carson’s show also supported the careers of such pioneer-

1.5. Odetta on Soul!, April 1971.
ing black comedians as Flip Wilson, Bill Cosby, and Redd Foxx—all of whom would go on to be important black TV stars and producers in the 1970s and 1980s—it was in part because they worked in a performance register that softened critique with laughter.

*Soul!* did occasionally feature comic performers. Irving Watson, a Carson favorite, and Foxx both appeared on early *Soul!* programs, and an episode from April 1971 featured a young magician by the name of Arsenio (figure I.6), later familiar to millions of late-night TV viewers as the host of the *Arsenio Hall Show*. But in general Haizlip shared the wariness of the poet Carolyn Rodgers and the novelist John Killens, both *Soul!* guests, about a legacy of TV representation—epitomized by *Amos 'n' Andy*—that cast blackness itself as an object of hilarity. In his personal papers, Haizlip kept a copy of Rodgers’s poem *A Long Rap: Commonly Known as a Poetic Essay*, a searing black feminist critique of the *Flip Wilson Show* that was published in 1971, at the height of the comedian’s popularity.25 And he would have known *The Cotillion*, Killens’s satire of the same year, with its simultaneously hilarious and nightmarish depiction of *The Tonight Show* as a stage for the symbolic lynching of the novel’s black radical (anti)hero. If there was any confu-
sion about where Haizlip, as producer, stood on the question, on the eve of *Soul! ’s* first episode he curtly informed a *New York Times* reporter that the program welcomed white viewers, as long as they did not tune in “to watch a lot of darkies strumming and singing.”26

Overlapping for three seasons with both Wilson’s and Carson’s shows, *Soul!* offered itself as a program that would use the variety format to address a diverse black audience, but would reject the format’s racially saturated history of comedic performance and its evasion of politics.27 Instead, *Soul!* would give the spotlight to a variety of organic intellectuals, based on the assumption (shared by members of the black arts movement) that a black television show had a responsibility to communicate with its audience rather than speak (down) to it. Whereas conventional television wisdom of the period held escapist (commercial) programming apart from educational (noncommercial) fare, *Soul!* proposed that pleasure and knowledge were two sides of the same coin, and that most television programming that purported to enlighten black audiences only reinforced existing class and gender hierarchies. In Haizlip’s alternative formulation of “educational television” (a term that preceded today’s more familiar “public television”), a concert by Mayfield and the Impressions might be “more meaningful than a three-hour lecture.” Conversely, and consistent with the outlook of black arts practitioners, *Soul!* did more than any TV program of the era to promote poetry, conceived not as a rarefied art form but as accessible oratory rooted in longstanding African American aesthetic traditions.

In its emphasis on music, *Soul!* bears an obvious resemblance to *Soul Train*, the popular music-and-dance show that debuted in 1970, as Haizlip’s program entered its second season. In fact, during the years that they overlapped as national productions (roughly 1971–73), the two TV shows—one commercial, the other noncommercial—booked many of the same acts. Both celebrated and incubated black musical creativity, and Haizlip respected the work of his friend and counterpart, Don Cornelius, but *Soul!* and *Soul Train* worked toward divergent visions. *Soul Train* began as a local Chicago youth and dance show sponsored by Sears, Roebuck and Company. Tweaking the formula popularized by *American Bandstand*—and explicitly refuting that show’s racist legacy
of resisting the integration of its dance floor—*Soul Train* tapped into the growing commercial market for black pop in the 1970s, epitomized by the success of Motown Records, which touted itself as “The Sound of Young America.” On *Soul Train*, the roving eye of the camera subordinated the relatively static image of musicians to the more dynamic spectacle of dancers as they responded to and creatively interpreted the music; on *Soul!*, the spectacle of musical production garnered more attention, with camera operators working to convey a sense of the emotional immediacy and intensity of live performance even when episodes were taped. Moreover, and unlike *Soul!, Soul Train* was a self-consciously entrepreneurial enterprise, in line with Berry Gordy’s Motown. The program indeed anticipated the geographical trajectory of the Detroit-based record label when, in 1971—after Johnson Products Company, the maker of Afro Sheen, signed on as a major sponsor—it moved its base of operations to Los Angeles. The show’s westward migration confirmed *Soul Train*’s power as a cultural arbiter, but it also conflated black success with the abandonment of local black communities, which were then confronting the forces of deindustrialization that would lead to the concentration of poverty in the inner city.

*Soul!* projected an image of soul culture that ventured beyond the youth and black pop demographic and retained a connection to New York’s black arts and political scenes—and, perhaps, a slight whiff of black New Yorkers’ sense of superiority to the residents of Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Shaped by the idealism of educational television, the urgency of the black freedom movement, and the eclecticism of Haizlip’s tastes—cultivated during his student years at Howard University in the 1950s and his early career in theater—*Soul!* had the air of a TV program in pursuit of lofty goals, certainly something much higher than ratings or sponsorship. Whereas *Soul Train* embraced Black Power in an economic sense, manifesting its politics primarily at the level of style and image, *Soul!*, imbued with greater earnestness, self-consciously pursued black performance as a site for progressive black mobilization. It paid tribute to black popular culture yet devoted equal time to less popular arts (for example, concert dance) and to musicians whose genius was largely ignored by the commercial mainstream: from Nelson, the singer and actor who figures centrally in this book, to “New
“Thing” jazz virtuosos like Max Roach, admired by the black intelligentsia yet lacking mass appeal, and Puente, who enjoyed international popularity but in television appearances was often expected to play music accessible to the Anglo majority.

The chapters of this book chart Soul!’s innovative, even visionary, explorations of black culture and politics, while bearing in mind the material conditions and structural challenges that simultaneously shaped the program’s history and, at times, its expression. Soul! was a vehicle of black radical critique on public broadcasting, a medium embedded within the state and reliant, in this period, on the patronage of the Ford Foundation, the liberal philanthropy that had underwritten U.S. public broadcasting since the 1950s. The program’s emergence coincided with a brief period when government officials and broadcasting executives, in response to the long-standing petitioning of black activists, looked to public television as a vehicle for redressing widespread sociopolitical discontent, and its demise occurred at a moment, soon afterward, when the state and, in its wake, broadcasting institutions abruptly reversed course, withdrawing support both for public television generally and for liberal programming in particular.

Others have narrated the decline of public television in these years. It’s Been Beautiful supplements existing scholarship by attending closely to how the state mobilized in response to civil rights successes, appropriating integrationist discourse to pursue its own interests, and how the Soul! community—an imagined public consisting of both its producers and its viewers—navigated repeated instances of existential threat. The first of these moments came in 1969, near the end of Soul!’s first season, when the Ford Foundation declined to renew a crucial programming grant that covered operating expenses; the last came in 1973, when officials at the quasi-governmental CPB announced that they were directing public monies away from Soul! and toward programming that would emphasize the image of integration—of black and white bodies within a single visual frame—thereby superficially projecting an ideal of racial harmony and of black citizens as the equals of whites within the formal political sphere. The story of Soul! is from this perspective a
story of ongoing effort—in the form of public diplomacy, behind-the-scenes maneuvering, and organized protest—to secure the very conditions of possibility for the program’s existence. The history of Soul! is particularly instructive in displaying how the noncommercial sphere of broadcasting, which had offered itself as a site of cultural possibility and formal experimentation not available in the commercial realm, ultimately proved to be vulnerable to countermobilizations of the “racial state” in the immediate post–civil rights era.30

Closely related to the issue of Soul!’s conditions of possibility is a set of concerns in It’s Been Beautiful about the relation of Soul! to a broader political and social history of the period between 1968 and 1973. The black arts and Black Power movements, which came of age in these years, registered the shift from a post–World War II era of protest politics, which had produced a “face of public unity” to combat state-sanctioned racism, to an era of proliferating imaginations of black interests in light of novel expressions of state power.31 In its five seasons on the air, Soul! harnessed energies and strategies associated both with civil rights and Black Power, reflecting the liminality of the period. A proudly black show on a television outlet better known for programs like Great Performances and the British import Civilisation, it combined the civil rights movement’s critique of the uneven distribution of state resources and citizens’ rights with the black arts and Black Power movements’ rejection of the state as an ultimate arbiter of black freedom and embrace of alternative paradigms of value, belonging, and authority, as signified in the very word “soul” itself. If Soul! had a political patron saint, it was Malcolm X (figure I.7), whose 1965 murder the program commemorated in special episodes featuring the late leader’s widow, Betty Shabazz, a friend of Haizlip. Yet the show’s spirit of bold defiance was influenced by a distinct spirit of somber introspection that was inseparable from the lingering grief over the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and questions about the direction of the movement he had spearheaded. (It was in fact the anguished and angry public response to King’s 1968 slaying that forced the U.S. government to make available the public resources that forged a path for Soul!) As this study illustrates, the Soul! archive is saturated by affective intensities that alternately gave voice to black hope and despair, celebration and mourn-
I.7. Anna Horsford in front of an image of Malcolm X, on the Soul! set
It is an archive that refutes the notion—ably critiqued more recently by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and others—that the immediate post–civil rights era was one of declension, decline, and the dispersal of black political energies and efforts. I find the protean energies of this period reflected and refracted in Soul!’s programming choices, its aesthetic of juxtaposition, and its ongoing experimentation with format. For example, in the repeated presence on the show of the poet and activist Felipe Luciano, I find an affirmation of the centrality of Latinos—especially Puerto Ricans, who had protected their property in Newark during the 1967 riots by writing “soul brother” on shop windows and doors—within post-1968 black cultural and political formations. In the two-episode conversation between Giovanni and Baldwin, I discover the simultaneous display and deconstruction of familiar categories of identity and political ideology, as well as powerful enactments of gendered tensions and romantic love within the Black Power movement. The dynamism of the era is evident as well in the memorable 1972 episode devoted entirely to the jazz virtuoso Rahsaan Roland Kirk, who evoked New World rebellions going back to the revolution of Haitian slaves and on to Selma and Newark by dramatically demolishing a chair after a performance of the gospel number “Old Rugged Cross.”

As these examples suggest, Soul! affords us a vision of black culture and politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s that was more fluid, less predictable, and more open to difference than many scholars who work within a more traditional sense of the political have recognized. Whereas the evening news and public-affairs shows represented Black Power through the figure of the angry or militant male revolutionary, on Soul! a viewer was as likely to see radical consciousness and creativity embodied in Labelle, the female trio who appeared on a 1972 episode doing an inspired cover of the Who’s “Won’t Get Fooled Again.” The proud and beautiful faces of women—first Nelson and later the actor and associate producer Anna Horsford, both wearing “natural” hairstyles—flashed on the screen during Soul!’s jazzy opening sequence, anticipating the opening sequence of Saturday Night Live, another edgy, New York–centric variety show that would debut not long after Soul! went off the air. And there was Haizlip, the avatar of soul style and sensi-
bility, a gay man who engaged in warm and mutually admiring conversations on the program with Baraka and Farrakhan, whose sexual politics would seem to have positioned them as his adversaries. The *Soul!* archive casts light on such obscured networks of black arts and Black Power conviviality, in which figures seemingly set apart by difference of creed, sensibility, and ideology were represented as mutually familiar and respectful of one another, and in which invisible alliances and proximities (such as those between African Americans and Puerto Ricans in Harlem and between gay and straight black men within the movements) found an avenue of cultural representation.

The problem of understanding the political formation of *Soul!* in relation to received notions of Black Power is partly, I find, one of presentist historical inclination. Given my own intellectual formation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, engaging with the *Soul!* archive has meant shedding prevalent assumptions about 1960s and 1970s nationalist political culture as a homophobic and patriarchal monolith. If the Black Power movement has gotten a reputation for absolutism and intolerance because of some of its most visible and notorious expressions, then *Soul!* indeed offers us a different perspective, in which a common sense of purpose offered black people of divergent sensibilities, backgrounds, and political commitments pathways for representing and negotiating difference. Especially in chapter 4, *It’s Been Beautiful* works to recuperate the finely woven social textures of the black arts and Black Power movements—not to idealize the period or to deny the pettiness and narrow-mindedness that coexisted with tolerance in this formation, but to subject it to new understanding.34 For example, *Soul!* showed black women as occupying roles that diverge from and complicate those critiqued in Michele Wallace’s 1979 manifesto, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, which took to task Giovanni, *Soul!*’s most recognized female intellectual, and set the tone for a certain feminist analysis of 1960s and 1970s black radicalism.35 At the same time, Haizlip is revealed to be an important and overlooked protagonist of the black arts and Black Power movements: a cultural impresario and anthologist of soul culture, on a par with “New Negro” anthologist Alain Locke and the cultural rainmaker Carl Van Vechten, who left a lasting impression on the scores of artists and intellectuals he men-
tored or otherwise supported, but who is overlooked in academic black queer projects of historical recuperation. On *Soul!*, the idealized family of the black modern nationalist imagination is subjected to respectful critique—not to disparage varieties of nationalist politics and desire in this era, but to force its most visible spokesmen to address the dissenting expressions within this formation.

Two recurring keywords assist me in these investigations, threading their way through my narrative. The first is *affective compact*, a term I use to explore *Soul!*’s pursuit of intimacy and connection with viewers, despite the distancing, cold mediation of television. In practice, the affective compact, explored in detail in chapter 2, encompassed everything from *Soul!*’s mode of address (for example, Haizlip’s use of words like *we* and *our* when speaking to the camera) and the knowledge it assumed viewers had (about racism, for example, or black public figures) to its tacit understanding of audience participation as a necessary element of live performance. The notion of an affective compact particularly assists me in understanding the activism of the heterogeneous and geographically dispersed community of *Soul!* viewers, who passionately supported Haizlip and the program in moments of crisis. It also helps me tease out *Soul!*’s resistance to widely embraced notions of television as a medium that, by its very nature, encouraged political passivity, social conformity, and social isolation.

At the center of the affective compact is a heuristic concept of black experience that binds viewers of *Soul!* to its representations and, through the synchronous experience of watching television, to each other. Haizlip alluded to this concept in a 1968 interview with *R ’n’ B World*, telling a reporter: “Our main point is to attract the black TV audience. . . . We’d like to give the audience a common experience through its blackness. The thing is to pull all those brothers together on Thursday nights and let them have the common experience of enjoying *Soul!*” As producer, Haizlip was tasked with giving material expression to the idea of black experience from segment to segment, week to week, and season to season. Not unlike the black arts movement’s celebrated poets and dramatists, he incubated a vision of black cultural self-definition that refused to accept white aesthetic standards and, in so doing, contributed to the emotional and spiritual well-being
of the collective. “We’re trying to create programs of black love, of black encouragement,” Haizlip explained, looking into the camera, at the conclusion of the occasionally fractious 1972 episode featuring Farrakhan. “We hope that you agree with what’s going down.”

Where the affective compact is concerned, I am less interested in critiquing the idealism of particular moments or constructs of Soul! than in understanding the basis of their appeal, in both senses of that word: that is, in their solicitation and mobilization of a sense of solidaristic affiliation and their power to stimulate viewers’ emotions and interest. Like the literary critic Stephen Henderson—who, in the influential introduction to his 1973 anthology, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, proposed “saturation” as a keyword for understanding “the philosophical meaning of phrases like ‘Black is beautiful’”—Haizlip posited a notion of soul that resisted the integrationist logic of American cultural pluralism. For him, as for other black intellectuals engaging with concepts of cultural nationalism, black experience and black culture were empowering constructions that countered the historical erasures of white supremacy. Houston Baker Jr., looking back on Henderson’s essay about saturation, declared them to be an expression of the era’s “metaphysical rebelliousness,” in which radical intellectuals sought to liberate themselves from critical traditions that marginalized black expressive culture. Such metaphysical rebelliousness is likewise at the heart of the Soul! enterprise and a hallmark of its own spirit of restless and repeated self-creation.

My second keyword is *vibrations*, a term I derive from Haizlip himself, who used it to describe the affective atmosphere conjured by notable Soul! conversations or presentations. Haizlip elaborated on the concept of vibrations in a brief producer’s note that he wrote for programs for Soul at the Center, a black performing arts festival largely inspired by the television show, which he co-organized at Lincoln Center in the summer of 1972. In the note, Haizlip—a native of Washington, D.C.—recalled the “warmth” he had felt seeing concerts, plays, and poetry recitals in the black performance spaces (including makeshift venues like churches) of the segregated capital city, and he wrote affectingly of the transformative power of black performance, both on the individual and the collective. As an example of how performance could change
people’s sense of space itself, he cited his memory of Marian Anderson’s
historic 1939 recital at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial on the National
Mall, after the opera singer had been peremptorily denied the use of
Constitution Hall, the venerable Washington venue controlled by the
Daughters of the American Revolution. Recalling the ways the ampli-
fied pulsations of Anderson’s powerful voice filled and warmed that
cold space (although it was Easter, the weather was distinctly wintry),
he ascribed the efficacy of her performance to its “vibrations” and, in
a bold historical leap, imagined a version of these vibrations pulsating
through Alice Tully and Philharmonic Halls, venues designed with Eu-
ropean high-arts traditions in mind.

In his original proposal for Soul at the Center, Haizlip elaborated
on the significance of black people’s “occupation” of “white” spaces.
“The Black Experience Revival,” he wrote, using his initial title for the
Lincoln Center festival, “would take place at Alice Tully Hall,” a space
specifically designed for chamber music performance. “I am aware
that it would be best to hold the fete in a relatively culture-free, non-
establishment location so that the ego-presence of the American Black
people would be the unifying force, rather than the architecture of the
buildings or the solemnity of the locale, yet one purpose of this event
(which I hold firmly in my mind) is the urgency of making Lincoln Cen-
ter a more relevant and responsive institution within the total commu-
nity.” In the producer’s vision, the “vibrations” of the collective were
linked to the material transformation of white spaces and resources.
“The Black Experience Revival” might have been staged at symbolically
black spaces such as the (white-owned) Apollo Theater in Harlem, for
which black New Yorkers felt a sense of cultural ownership and col-
lective belonging, but then it would not have changed the dynamics
of culture in New York, or the sense of the newly constructed Lincoln
Center campus—a premier venue for New York performing arts—as a
venue for symbolically white performance.

Through his concept of vibrations, Haizlip centered the production
and negotiation of affect in performance settings that explicitly blurred
the boundary between producers and consumers. Indeed, his idea
about vibrations anticipates, even while it complicates, contemporary
affect theory through its grounding in the African American perfor-
mance aesthetic of call and response. As illustrated in the example of remembered concerts or recitals at Howard’s Rankin Memorial Chapel, for Haizlip black performance was always a site of dynamic exchange between performers and audiences. The vibrations he associated with black performance were inherently social, resonating within the body of the collective and constituting the collective as a resonant social body. These vibrations also had a transtemporal dimension, insofar as they called on embodied memories of past performances while anticipating new feelings and states of being.

Haizlip was not alone in thinking about vibrations, a term from acoustics, as a metaphor for the efficacy of black performance, the condition of possibility for which is its own disappearance. A range of creative intellectuals including Kirk, John Cage, Sun Ra, Dorothy Ashby, Albert Ayler, and even Beach Boys band member Brian Wilson pursued similar ideas in their work—especially Ra, whose musings on music as sonic transport heavily influenced Baraka’s writing and laid the foundation for later Afrofuturist and queer utopian theorizing. Like Ra, Haizlip conceptualized the concert space as a quasi-sacred arena, where performers and audiences engaged in the mutual exchange of energy, and he recognized the bodily sensation of musical vibrations as a source of knowledge and power, not only (erotic) pleasure. Yet where Ra’s thinking pushed up against the limits of rationality and science, advancing unconventional beliefs in reincarnation and interplanetary travel, Haizlip grounded his utopian concept of vibrations in more terrestrial black cultural traditions, most notably those of the black church.

In an era when it was fashionable on the Left to denounce religion as a haven for passivity and false consciousness or to embrace systems of belief (such as the Islam of Elijah Muhammad) as alternatives to Christianity (conceived as a European or “white man’s” religion), Haizlip’s explicit embrace of black Christian cultural and social practices distinguished him from many of his contemporaries. Haizlip grew up in a Holiness congregation, and he regarded the African American church as a living archive of historical black consciousness. Under segregation, churches had afforded black communities a weekly opportunity to experience shared vibrations in spaces largely outside of white surveillance. Moreover—and notwithstanding the inevitable fac-
tionalism, hierarchy, and petty infighting—the church offered a flawed but useful prototype of the sort of warm black counterpublic space that Haizlip wished to create on television (figure I.8). Perhaps equally important to Haizlip—who, as a TV host and producer, did not conceal his homosexuality—the church had long accepted the presence of “sissies,” “bulldaggers,” and other queer bodies in the collective, as long as they were not too visible or disruptive. Alice Hille, Soul!’s associate producer between 1968 and 1971, gave voice to this congruence when she touted Soul! as “one-hour of relief once a week.” Her phrase referred to concrete TV time bands, but it hints at an equivalence between television and daily life, in which a weekly hour at the church or mosque (or their secular equivalent, the nightclub) offered an analogous reprieve from the stresses of daily life. A May 1969 New York Times display advertisement appealing for corporate underwriters for the program at a time of crisis touted Soul! as a show that “turned the black community on,” a phrase that usefully draws together affect, or the production of “intensities” associated with the erotic and manifested in spirit posses-

1.8. The TV set as church: the New York Community Choir performs on Soul!, February 1971.
sion and related practices of the Sanctified Church, with the operation of consumer electronics such as television sets.47

Haizlip’s interest in the vibrations of black counterpublic spaces links his concept, finally, to my notion of the affective compact. The 1960s and 1970s saw the increased use of the word soul as a signifier for blackness, the term resisting white appropriation insofar as it refused to be pinned to a specific quality or possession of black people. In this sense, the familiar phrase “if you don’t know what it [soul] is, you don’t have it,” while humorous, succinctly locates the source of soul’s signifying power in its very elusiveness as a concept. Haizlip referred to this power when asked about the title of his TV program or about whether it was also for white people. “Soul” is “a shared experience that only a suppressed, oppressed minority can express and understand,” he told one white journalist, insisting that while whites might watch Soul!, it ultimately cared little whether they watched.48 Haizlip’s assertion of black cultural power through indifference to white viewers and white opinion was expressed as well in the exclamation point in the program’s title, a mark of emphasis that resembled an upside-down Black Power salute.

I discuss Haizlip’s concept of vibrations in more detail in chapter 5, which focuses on Soul!’s final season and on the producer’s refusal to concede finality in the face of the withdrawal of CPB support, advancing a notion of the program’s disappearance as distinct from its demise. Yet Haizlip’s 1972 producer’s note, the eloquence and originality of which moved me to write a book about Soul! in the first place, permeates this project in more comprehensive and also less explicit ways.49 It influences my method, which draws idiosyncratically—but, I hope, coherently—on cultural history, cultural analysis, and literary studies, and which is informed throughout by oral history, even when I am not directly quoting from interviews.50 Haizlip’s concept of vibrations also informs the specific examples I home in on from among the dozens of hours of tapes of Soul! that are available. Although I cannot possibly hope to represent Soul! in its entirety in these pages—indeed, one of the challenges of writing this book is making five seasons of an ever-changing TV show both
engaging and coherent—I have endeavored to narrate moments that strike me as exemplary in their materialization of the program’s affective atmosphere or “vibe,” as well as moments primarily interesting for their unusual, provocative, or extraordinary content.

With few exceptions, I draw these examples from Soul!’s second through fifth seasons, or from January 1970 through March 1973. My omission of most of the show’s episodes from the 1968–69 debut season is driven by necessity. Of the thirty-five episodes of Soul! that aired live on Thursday nights at 9 o’clock on Newark-based WNDT during this period, only one exists in its entirety; as far as I and others have been able to tell, the tapes from this period were either lost, discarded, or repurposed for other recordings. Exacerbating this gap in the early Soul! archive is the fact that Soul! does not circulate widely, either commercially or via social media. As of this writing, the program has no significant presence on YouTube and is not available for purchase in analog or digital format; the only publicly accessible collection of Soul! episodes is at the Library of Congress.51

I read the incompleteness of the Soul! archive as a performance of the erasures that characterize the relation of black performance to the archive of American performance.52 Similar absences or erasures characterize the archives of many programs of the period, including the first decade of The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. Yet in the case of Soul!, such archival absences—in this case, perhaps literally erasures, since technicians reused the expensive two-inch tapes on which it was recorded when possible—contribute to the absence of subordinated groups from the historical record, exacerbating social experiences of invisibility. Archives, moreover, are not just collections of stuff; they exist by virtue of intensive investments of labor and money, as a New York Times journalist writing recently about the digitization of the Tonight Show archive could not fail to observe. Although little “from the first 10 years of Carson’s ‘Tonight Show’ . . . has survived,” the journalist noted that copies of shows from 1973 on “were kept in storage . . . in salt mines in Kansas.” We learn, too, from the Times article that the effort of preserving, digitizing, and transcribing the Tonight Show tapes demanded the combined labor of “more than 2,000 people.”53 Hence the absence of Soul!’s first season may be arbitrary, but it is not entirely accidental.
Scant resources must also figure into the narratives we construct about how certain stories—including the story of *Soul!*—are overlooked in our cultural histories.

In *It’s Been Beautiful*, the lacunae in the *Soul!* library compel me to seek out alternative sources of documentation and methods of storytelling more suitable to a text that was a palette for ongoing creative discovery by its production staff, directors, camera operators, lighting technicians, sound designers, and stagehands. Each of the five seasons of *Soul!* saw different attempts—sometimes several within a single season—to showcase an ever-changing roster of guests in ever-changing representational formats. In later seasons, this included the novel arrangement of the studio environment to resemble a nightclub, Club Soul, complete with atmospheric candlelight and the clustering of members of the studio audience around small tables. *Soul!*’s aesthetic of multiplicity, juxtaposition, and improvisatory experimentation further demands that individual performances be read in the context of the narrative arc of particular episodes or even seasons. To understand the gospel singer Marion Williams’s authoritative and restrained interpretation of Billie Holiday’s signature ballad “God Bless the Child,” from a Peabody Award–nominated October 1968 episode, for example, requires thinking of it as the performance that directly followed “Die Nigga!!!,” the Last Poets’ confrontational spoken-word piece. Indeed, it is the fact that such disparate expressions could coexist in a single episode that merits exploration.

Furthermore, although Haizlip was the show’s most unifying and visible presence and is in many ways the protagonist of the *Soul!* story, it is noteworthy that he regularly ceded the host role to others, in a deliberate effort to give performers—including Mayfield, Joe Tex, Luciano, and Giovanni—opportunities to display untapped aspects of their talent and to refute, yet again, the pernicious stereotype of the one-dimensional black entertainer. (The list of *Soul!* hosts includes the psychologist Alvin Poussaint; Haizlip’s cousin, the educator Harold Haizlip; the announcer and producer Gerry Bledsoe; and the radio personality Hal Jackson.) Unlike *Soul Train*, helmed by the honey-voiced Cornelius, or—closer to home—public broadcasting’s *Black Journal*, later renamed *Tony Brown’s Black Journal*, *Soul!* did not produce its af-
fective energy only through a singular charismatic male personality.\textsuperscript{54} Haizlip’s commitments, tastes, and connections drove the show, but the show itself did not rise or fall on his celebrity.

\textit{Soul!’s} complexities, both as a historical project and a performance text, do not prevent me from writing about the program chronologically—especially in chapters 1, 2, and 5—from its prehistory in discourses of educational television, civil rights, and the integration of mass media to the early 1970s disputes about racial representation that led eventually to its cancellation. Diverse institutions play an important role in this story: from major funders like the Ford Foundation, the CPB, and WNET in New York to more obscure organizations such as the Station Broadcasting Cooperative, the group of PBS affiliates tasked with voting on programs for national distribution. So does the liberal state—by which, as I have already begun to suggest, I mean the discourses, institutions, and political arrangements that constituted governmental power and authority in the United States during this period. It was the liberal state under President Lyndon Johnson that embraced the integration of television as part of an ongoing project of managing—not merely suppressing—black grievances after King’s assassination, just as it was the liberal state, under President Richard Nixon, that hastily fought to reassert federal authority over television in the face of the resistant and transformative energies that the counterculture—and integration—had unleashed.

Overall, I conceive of the state as a controlling and often repressive force in the lives of the people it deems threatening, which—as vast government initiatives like the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Counter Intelligence Program (Cointelpro) show us—black Americans in this period were per se understood to be.\textsuperscript{55} Even as black access to public broadcasting was materially enabled in this period, black expression was unceasingly policed, contained, and suppressed. Yet I also believe the state to be neither omnipotent nor monolithic, and not particularly consistent or deft in its exercise of power. And although I find much compelling in scholarly work that rejects the liberal state, in particular, as a site of liberation or freedom or that sees public television as “politically subservient to the holders of state power,” the case of \textit{Soul!} suggests to me the need for a less hermetic conceptualization of the state’s relationship to liberal or progressive interests.\textsuperscript{56}
Implicit in my conceptualization of the state here is a claim about the agency of black cultural workers who depend on its largesse, even as they compel it through their activism, vigilance, and leadership to be more responsive to their needs (or even while rejecting its authority altogether). The many interviews I conducted with key contributors to Soul!—including most of its production staff—as part of my preparation for this book suggest that for most of these committed and talented people, especially for those who identify themselves as black, public broadcasting was a viable and valuable, if imperfect, alternative to network television. As Killens noted in TV Guide, the emergence of commercial sitcoms or dramas featuring prominent black characters did not translate, in the early 1970s, into heightened employment opportunities for black people in television. Indeed, the superficial integration of television beginning in the late 1960s arguably helped to consolidate a premature national narrative of political accomplishment, when in fact black grievances, with the mass media and more generally, went much deeper than the vast majority of TV programming would allow. As disenchanted as Haizlip ultimately was with the politics of public broadcasting, and as aggravated as he and his staff were by the need to constantly justify Soul!’s existence, they saw little to cheer about in the representations or opportunities produced in the commercial realm. For Soul!’s guests, the show created openings—for greater TV exposure, different modes of creative self-representation, or more overt political expression—that network TV, with its bigger audiences, greater prestige, and higher pay scale, did not. The title of Gil Scott-Heron’s iconic song “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” is a convenient starting point for discussions of television’s limitations when it comes to radical expression—one reason why the phrase has been the source of many a punning title for studies of television—but it has never been the last word on the matter, not even for Scott-Heron himself.

What concerns me, then, is not the impurity of the Soul! enterprise—indeed, I take for granted the impossibility and undesirability of purity in any political or cultural formation—but the discursive shifts that are illuminated by its struggles to stay on the air beyond the early 1970s. By the time the CPB pulled the plug on Soul!, the liberal consensus
created by earlier civil disorders and the rise of Black Power had been displaced by the new neoliberal political compact formed around resistance to race consciousness and an investment in an emerging discourse of color blindness. As chapter 5 argues, the declining fortunes of *Soul!* correspond to the rising fortunes of post-race discourse. In the end, *Soul!* fell prey to the manipulation of the notion—familiar in our own era—that any form of race consciousness is an impediment to race-blind justice.

My title, *It's Been Beautiful*, gives voice to the dialectical tensions—between optimism and pessimism, utopia and dystopia, permanence and evanescence, and transcendence and boundedness—that frame this study and gives shape to my own affective investments in the subject matter. Like *soul*, *beautiful* is a keyword of modern black cultural and political expression, its meaning bound up with the challenges and pleasures of refusing the definitions of the dominant culture, whose notions of beauty, inherited from the European Enlightenment, have deemed black people and their cultural productions ugly, deformed, and deviant. Indeed, because beauty has never been a neutral concept, it is difficult to think of a significant black American deployment of the word *beautiful* that is not implicitly an engagement with the history of race and racism. But the counterdiscourse of the beautiful acquired particular significance in the era of Black Power, when to utter the phrase “black is beautiful” was not merely to associate oneself with an idea, but also to affiliate oneself, quite pointedly, with a larger struggle.

The spirit of solidarity, especially in the face of the fracturing of old political alliances, is the overarching theme of the episode from which I derive the phrase “it’s been beautiful.” The episode, from April 1973, features Haizlip in conversation with Stokely Carmichael, and it is uncharacteristic of other last-season episodes in that it lacks the enlivening presence of a studio audience. Titled “Wherever We May Be”—a richly ambiguous phrase that connotes both imminent loss (dispersal) and enduring connection (diaspora)—it was recorded at a time when Haizlip and his staff knew that *Soul!*’s days were numbered because of the withdrawal of crucial CPB funding. Established by the Public
Broadcasting Act of 1967, the CPB was designed to be a neutral administrator of government funding for public broadcasting. Although its budget was controlled by lawmakers, and thus ultimately embedded in the political process, in theory the CPB was supposed to be insulated from political pressures and free to disburse funds to entities or projects it deemed deserving. But from the outset, the CPB was vulnerable to political weather, particularly in an era of increasing rancor over the allegedly liberal bias of public broadcasting and powerful executive-branch pressures to curtail the scope and reach of public television. Accordingly, the organization had denied WNET (formerly WNDB) crucial funding to produce a sixth season of Soul!, investing its money instead in a new series, Interface, which was to include white guests and focus on crossracial dialogue. A letter-writing campaign in defense of Soul! had yielded thousands of affirmations of its importance to viewers but had done little to change the minds of the people who controlled budgets.

The spring of 1973 was also a sober time for Carmichael. In early 1972, the man credited with popularizing the phrase Black Power while a young activist with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had been referenced on Soul! by his wife, Miriam Makeba, in a manner that could not help but romanticize the pairing of two such attractive and important figures of global black freedom struggles. But by the time of “Wherever We May Be,” Makeba and Carmichael had separated, and Carmichael, living in Guinea, was increasingly estranged from groups with whom he had been allied, especially the Black Panthers.

In the course of the hour-long episode, Haizlip and Carmichael review the highlights of Carmichael’s career and discuss his current take on a variety of issues, from King’s enduring importance to Sékou Touré, the president of Guinea, and politically motivated witch hunts of Black Power activists. Although the two men were not friends outside of the studio, the relationship of their bodies throughout the conversation conveys intimacy and conviviality. Indeed, the air of comfort and mutuality on the Soul! set is a noteworthy departure from the antagonism characteristic of Carmichael’s network TV appearances between 1966 and 1970, when white journalists prodded him to defend his rejection
of nonviolence and the provocative and empowering slogan “by any means necessary.” Through confrontational tactics of questioning Carmichael, journalists in those years were able to cast an unflattering light on Black Power advocates as the explosively emotional counterparts to such stoically rational heroes of the civil rights movement as King.60

This is not to say, however, that Soul! links Carmichael and Haizlip under the romanticized sign of racial brotherhood. The men’s sympathy is evident from the outset, but their differences are also on display, as when Haizlip welcomes Carmichael “home” and is politely corrected by his guest, who notes: “Home is in Africa. You may welcome me back to America.”61 But the dominant “thermodynamic modality” of their staged encounter—to use Jason King’s useful vocabulary of performance effects and affects—is not fire but warmth.62

The phrase “it’s been beautiful” enters the conversation near the end of the hour, when Haizlip, perhaps on a signal from the director, abruptly brings the show to a close:

Ellis Haizlip: Stokely, um, time’s up [laugh], and uh . . .
Stokely Carmichael: So soon?
EH: Time’s probably up for Soul! anyway. We probably won’t be here much longer, but it’s been beautiful, the people out there responded well. I am privileged and honored . . .
SC: [in reference to Haizlip’s allusion to the show’s cancellation] Why is that?
EH: You know why it is, but uh . . . let’s not deal with that. There isn’t time [smiles].
SC: Well, see, if our community was organized that would not be.
EH: I don’t know. Maybe it is our evolutionary process that’s necessary. But I’m very proud to have had this conversation with you. It’s done a lot. And tonight I hope that whoever’s listening has learned something. And it’s been beautiful. We will find a way to communicate and get our message through. [They punctuate the exchange with a “soul” handshake.]63

Haizlip utters the phrase “it’s been beautiful” twice here, and both times the phrase serves as a heartfelt affirmation of Soul!’s achievements in the face of its imminent demise. At the same time, it in “it’s
been beautiful” has a productive quality of indefiniteness. The pronoun simultaneously refers to this particular episode, to the show’s five-year history, and to the movement itself, insofar as the fact of Carmichael’s self-exile and his display of both disillusionment and hope express a foreboding sense of future political wandering. The present perfect tense of “it’s been beautiful” contributes to this expansive reading of the phrase’s meaning. Grammatically speaking, the present perfect in English expresses a past that has continuing effects in the present. We say “it’s been lovely to meet you” to signify that a social contact has been a pleasure and to indicate an implicit anticipation of further encounters; we say “it’s been raining” to indicate that yesterday’s rain is continuing today. The temporality of the present perfect is that threshold where past meets present and where present gestures toward an indeterminate future (since our pleasure and the rain have no predetermined end in sight). Like the future perfect theorized by José Muñoz, the present perfect holds past and future in productive tension.⁶⁴

In the context of the “Wherever We May Be” episode of Soul!, with its swan-song atmosphere and theme, “it’s been beautiful” might therefore be read as a counterpoint to Haizlip’s repeated observations about the end of time. When Carmichael asks why Soul! is ending, Haizlip’s response—punctuated by the phrase “there isn’t time”—conveys a need to move on: there literally isn’t time left in their allotted hour to talk about it, and besides, he seems to suggest, this particular fight for the TV show’s survival is over. In this sense, “time’s up” is an acknowledgment of finality—the finality imposed by the conventions of the medium or, more existentially speaking, by the refusal of funding. Following Laurent Berlant, we might also read phrases like “time’s up” and “there isn’t time” as indicating a sense of crisis or intensified temporality, as in the expression, “It’s nation time” (also the title of a poem and 1970 poetry collection by Baraka).⁶⁵ “Time’s up,” as observation and directive, renders this crisis tangible for both Carmichael and the show’s audience.⁶⁶

In contrast to the phrase “time’s up,” “it’s been beautiful” resists closure and emphasizes pleasure and hope in the face of crisis. It does not ring of triumphalism—in fact, it communicates a profound humility in the face of history—but neither does it express resignation. It is, in fact, how Haizlip manages to end a show about crisis on a future-facing
and affirmative but not Pollyanna-ish note, with a direct address to the audience (“whoever’s listening”—a phrase uttered for the camera, in anticipation of future viewers) and an assurance of resilience in the face of constraint (“we will find a way to communicate and get our message through”). The men’s handshake seals the deal, offering visual confirmation of their solidarity in the pursuit of a “beautiful” future, however different their strategies are. “Wherever We May Be” assures viewers that this has been the first act; there will be others.

The phrase “it’s been beautiful” invites us to circle back to Haizlip’s concept of vibrations as a means of negotiating the dynamic of affective imprint and material evanescence that defines our relation to performance. Vibrations are physical matter, but the human body does not always register their presence in the form of hearing or other embodied sensation. Vibrations are in this sense an apt metaphor for the expression of utopian possibilities in performance, which affords both performers and audiences a means of momentarily tapping into the undetected, extrasensorial universe of energy. It was the producer’s hope that the vibrations of black performance would awaken their creators to new possibilities, and that, like the vibrations studied by physicists, they would have an enduring and theoretically infinite afterlife in popular consciousness and memory.67

I do not wish to overstate the impact of Soul! or idealize its interventions. The program was seen by far fewer people than The Mod Squad, cannot boast the legacy of Soul Train or the longevity of black public-affairs shows (either national programs such as Black Journal or local ones such as Like It Is, which aired in New York on WABC), and did not give rise to obvious imitations or successor programs—although Soul! indirectly blazed a path for later cable programs such as Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry, the well-regarded HBO series that brought “spoken word” into the twenty-first-century cultural mainstream, and for Arsenio Hall’s emergence as a significant TV personality. It did not radically alter the racial power dynamics of television, although it was part of a shifting TV landscape in which, increasingly, black people would be visibly present and in which, after efforts that began in the early 1970s, they would own cable networks such as Black Entertainment Television. Haizlip looked back on his experience with Soul! with
enormous pride but also with some frustration, declaring public broadcasting to be “limited and limiting” in a letter to a lover. Yet Soul! did and does have an afterlife, particularly in the communities of shared interest and affect that coalesced around its representations of black politics and performance, and in the scores of artistic and other careers that were facilitated through Haizlip’s mentorship and support. On these counts alone, the show merits a prominent place in our canons of late twentieth-century American culture.

That said, I do not want to discount my own experience of the power of this affective archive in producing nostalgic effects and affects. Nostalgia is typically understood as the longing for a never-experienced past; by definition, it constitutes the object of its desire. Nostalgia can be retrogressive, papering over national trauma and rationalizing brutal projects of repression. Moreover, one has only to think of Gone with the Wind to appreciate the key role of visual media—from photographs to film and television—in producing and perpetuating such dangerously nostalgic narratives. But to the degree that nostalgia is about fantasy, it may well have a role in celebratory projects such as this one. If nostalgia is for a utopia that never existed, perhaps nostalgia, when it is created by cultural productions of the past, can also reveal the ongoing appeal of their utopian imaginings. If Soul! taps into a nostalgic vein of African American scholarship on performance, in other words, maybe that is because many of its fundamental hopes and desires have yet to be realized, even in our post-soul age.