

*Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul.* By Tanisha C. Ford. Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2015

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*Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* spans four continents, eighteen countries and the socio-historical planes of black liberation struggles in the black diaspora, and in Africa to a lesser extent, to explore the ways in which black women's resistance has been visible and concentrated not only in actions within political movements but also in the realm of style and fashion. Focused especially on the 1960s and 70s, Tanisha Ford's concern is with the deliberate and resistant 'African-inspired' fashions that she calls "soul-style": from Angela Davis' iconic afro, to Nina Simone's attitude, described as "straightforward, relaxed and African" (29), to the West African wax prints, caftans and dashikis that became popular with women in organisations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Movement London, as well as among university students on American campuses.

By studying soul-style, Ford illustrates the feminist assertion that the personal is political, as well as how what she calls an "internal revolution" was an important part of black women's resistance to the systemic and violent racism that they faced. She credits activist-professor Angela Davis with popularising the afro among black women, and argues that her arrest served as a catalyst for their re-politicisation and re-energisation. For instance, Ford documents how young black women on college campuses began to subscribe to a 'Black is Beautiful' consciousness by starting to make deliberate decisions about their own style, such as appearing with their "natural hair, head wraps, large hoop earrings, and denim skirts" (96). Looking at the Black Panther Movement in London, she shows how soul-style served women in the movement to not only resist white standards of beauty and decorum; with elements like "little badges saying black power, or little pendants with black

fists on them” (143), the style also made the women *feel* more militant, and so further sustain their resistance.

According to Ford, the sexualisation of police brutality against women in black movements also factored into their style choices. Crucially, she notes, too, that the pro-black movements and spaces within which the women were located were characterised by patriarchal politics and notions of respectable femininity. Her consideration of the activist Olive Morris, in London, as a figure who queered soul-style is therefore very important – but is, unfortunately, one of only few times that, queerness is considered in *Liberated Threads*. Ford argues that with her gender non-conforming looks, Morris took soul-style “outside of the realms of respectable black womanhood” (146) and beyond the “radical feminine chic” (146), instead fashioning it into something “unique, something disturbing” (146).

Turning to Africa, the book explores soul-style as it manifests in Johannesburg through the early career of Miriam Makeba, whose signature looks included “off-the-shoulder sheath dresses” (20) below a full, black Afro, a fashion which linked Makeba to the struggle for black liberation long before she spoke on it. According to Ford, Makeba appealed to her growing international audiences as a kind of voice and image of Africa. For those in the black diaspora, she symbolised a return to an ‘Africanism’ lost to time and racial oppression, and embodied “a soul style ... considered more African in form, origin, and inspiration.” Makeba and her band exported this style on their very backs. For example, Ford discusses how sharply dressed men in Makeba’s band, who would be expected to meet the social norms of jazz clubs in their local South African townships and to maintain an air of respectability, became a sort of spectacle to behold in America, valued aesthetically and politically for more than their sound but also for their visible, stylistic link to Africa.

Overall, ‘Africa’ is handled in an unsatisfactory manner in the book. It is often invoked as a homogenous place, and the essentialised and romanticised imaginations of it that feed into African-American soul-style, such as ideas of Africa as “motherland” (97), are not deconstructed enough. In her exploration of the early days of the Black Consciousness Movement and the South African Students’ Organisation (SASO), Ford assumes but does not convincingly show that what she has termed soul-style translates into, and is shaped by, the same sentiments as ‘the Afro look’ in the South African context. Similarly, Steve

Biko is also arguably misread to fit into the notion of 'soul'. Important parts of the global black struggle intricately linked to imperialism, capitalism and neo colonialism are also not taken into account.

Nonetheless, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and The Global Politics of Soul* does very important work: shining light on the personal and gendered politics often written out of grand, patriarchal narratives of history, and on the gendered complexities of past and, in fact, ongoing struggles for black liberation.