

*Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul.* By Tanisha C. Ford. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015). Pp. 272. Cloth, \$29.95.

Tanisha C. Ford's *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* skillfully traces the multiple ways that black women have used their hair and clothing as tools of resistance. Through a transnational history of "soul style," which comprises African and African American-inspired hairstyles and dress, Ford interrogates how black women in the U.S., England, and Africa have challenged gender norms and inequality while developing their own sense of style and identity. In addition, Ford demonstrates the importance of soul style to the black community before it was co-opted by mainstream fashion industries. Using an "eclectic archive," including oral interviews, FBI files, rare photographs, international fashion and beauty magazines, album covers, Ford thoroughly bridges the fields of fashion studies and civil rights movement history, illustratively demonstrating how women deliberately incorporated beauty and fashion into their activism.

Ford dedicates the first three chapters to the unique development of soul style in the U.S. She begins by examining the early years of this fashion movement through African singer and performer Miriam Makeba. Though she was rebranded for a diverse U.S. audience to fit the norms of African American respectability, Makeba kept her short coiffed hair natural, refusing to process it. Ford explains, "As Makeba became a megastar in the United States, her hairstyle began to represent a liberated African beauty aesthetic for African Americans" (16). Indeed, Makeba's African roots represented the origins of soul style itself to black Americans. Ford also asserts that Makeba's friendship with singers Abbey Lincoln, Odetta, and Nina Simone marked the beginnings of soul style. Through their political singing and non-normative clothing and hairstyles, these activists brought women's issues to the forefront of the black liberation movement.

Ford highlights the myriad ways that soul style evolved in different regions of the nation. For example, Ford discusses how soul style flourished in Harlem due to the efforts of the Grandassa modeling troupe. African Jazz-Art Society (AJAS) founders, Ronnie and Cecil Brathwaite, focused on style and adornment politics with the formation of the troupe. In an effort to convince everyday black women that soul style was cool and worth emulating, AJAS sponsored fashion shows where each of the model's hair and fashion represented a different African urban city. Ford argues that Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) female members changed the image of soul style based on practicality and organizing needs. The SNCC soul sisters in the U.S. South refused to conform to standards of respectability that required them to wear modest clothing, heeled pumps, and neatly pressed hair because of the gendered violence they received while protesting. In direct contrast to the Sunday's finest uniforms worn by Southern Christian Leadership Conference members, "the new SNCC skin" allowed women to wear denim, more casual shirtwaist dresses, and short natural hairstyles that made protesting easier and working with the local community less divisive.

In her final chapter on the development of soul culture in the U.S., Ford challenges the dominant narrative that contends that soul style went straight from grassroots to the

mainstream. She claims that black female college students used their version of soul style to fight racism on campus and one-dimensional images of black womanhood before corporate co-optation occurred. For example, as images of Angela Davis were widely circulated, calling for her arrest, her Afro became a symbol of black consciousness and black women on campuses across the nation began sporting the hairdo. Ford asserts that by the end of the 1970s, co-optation of soul style by major fashion industries had taken hold. Though many criticized the mainstream's incorporation of soul style, denim, Afro wigs, and clothing with African prints continued to be mass produced.

The last two chapters of *Liberated Threads* focus on international models of soul style. Looking at London, Ford explores how Afro-Caribbean youth formed the Black Panther Movement (BPM) and used it to foster cultural and political growth in Brixton. Her discussion of one BPM member, Olive Morris, is particularly important. Ford maintains that Morris personalized soul style in a way that "queered" gender lines by dressing against gendered norms, making it possible for her to be misread by the police. On one occasion, Morris was brutally beaten and arrested. Police deliberately housed her alone, "punishing her for her queer gender performance, and setting her up to receive more physical punishment" (149). Morris was not only forced to strip to prove she was a woman, but was also continuously beaten. By situating Morris in the context of soul style and Brixton, in particular, Ford reveals a connection between soul and the creation of a postcolonial black identity.

Ford comes full circle when she examines how soul style has returned to Africa in the final chapter. Termed "Afro look", soul style had a dual meaning in South Africa. Women who wore Afro hairdos, hot pants, mini skirts, and dresses with bold prints could either be activists trying to define black as beautiful or women aiming for modernity with imported styles from America and Britain. Either way, Ford argues, Afro look in Africa represented a way to transgress apartheid restrictions. Consuming Afro look, therefore, became a politicized action, whether or not it was intended as such. When the apartheid system was finally dismantled in 1994, the South African fashion industry blended memory with clothing, exemplifying a history that is being actively lived and remembered.

Tanisha C. Ford's extensively researched *Liberated Threads* sheds light on a scarcely explored aspect of black female resistance, thereby adding to the growing research on race, gender, and body politics. Indeed, Ford details how black women in America, England, and Africa used seemingly quotidian practices, such as hairstyles and fashion choices, as tools for gender and political liberation. Those seeking to expand on this thought-provoking addition to black women's history should look at the growing involvement of the U.S. government in the African fashion market and the implications of western aid on the burgeoning industry.

Alyssa Lopez

*Michigan State University*