Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Dress

The Journal of the Costume Society of America

ISSN: 0361-2112 (Print) 2042-1729 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ydre20

Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul / The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora

Paula D. Davis

To cite this article: Paula D. Davis (2017) Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul / The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora, Dress, 43:1, 71-74, DOI: 10.1080/03612112.2017.1288036

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03612112.2017.1288036

Published online: 03 Apr 2017.

Submit your article to this journal

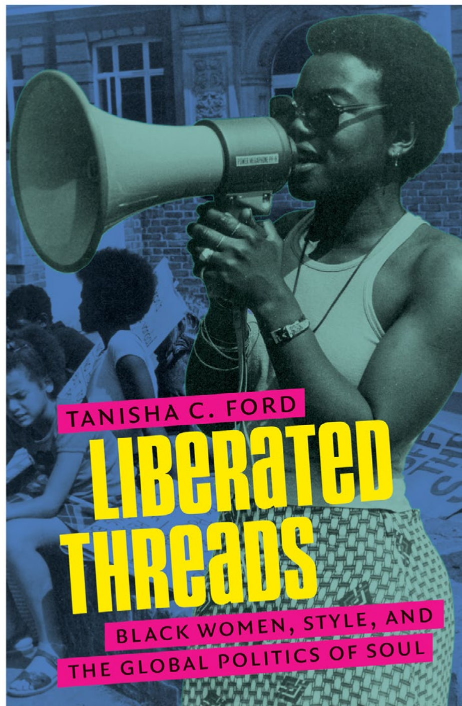
Article views: 3

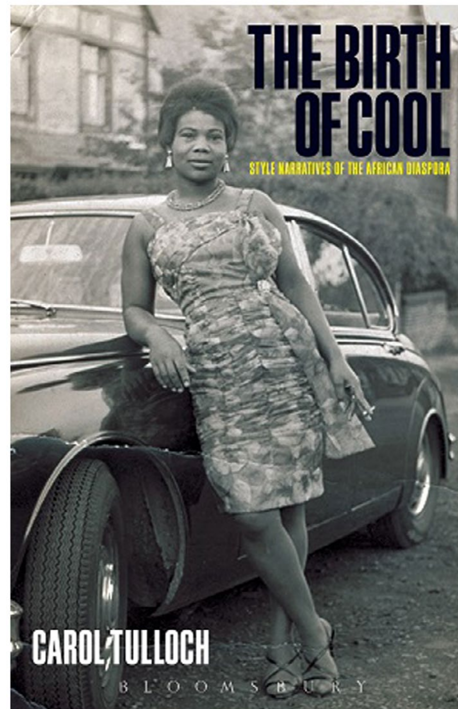
View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=ydre20

Download by: [Bucknell University] **Date:** 06 April 2017, At: 15:06





Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul

Tanisha C. Ford
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015

The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora

Carol Tulloch
London: Bloomsbury, 2016

Two scholars, Tanisha C. Ford from the United States and Carol Tulloch from Britain, have given us thoughtful, important works that explore fashion and style of the African diaspora from the late nineteenth to early twenty-first century. Ford frames her study around the idea of "soul," while Tulloch uses the lens of "cool." Both succeed in shedding light on and challenging "the aesthetics of invisibility that people of the African diaspora have had to overcome since slavery" (Tulloch 3).

Both authors have employed extensive research using a wide variety and depth of materials including written and photographic archives, personal letters, magazines, popular culture, relevant literature, and interviews. Significantly, both authors at times situate their works personally, connecting the reader with their own experiences of growing up black in the diaspora and the experiences of their family members on both sides of the Atlantic. Additionally, both of these works focus on a key element in the study of

© Costume Society of America 2017
DOI 10.1080/03612112.2017.1288036

dress and material culture characterized by folklorist Pravina Shukla as "real people, with real names and biographies, creators who are allowed to speak, interpreting their art and history in their own words."[1]

Specializing in social movement history, feminist issues, material culture, fashion, beauty, and body politics, Ford is Associate Professor of Black American Studies and History at the University of Delaware. Her book, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul,* combines two rarely studied areas, soul style and women's roles in the Black Civil Rights, Freedom, and Power movements of the mid-twentieth century. That these two areas should come together in a study is a revelation that highlights the interconnectedness of politics and what Tulloch calls style narratives. Indeed, "the politics of style has a long history" (Ford 7) as demonstrated through such poignant examples of individual stories such as that of the late Afro-British activist Olive Morris, whose photo is featured on the book jacket, and who was a member of the local Black Panther Movement in the Brixton neighborhood of South London.

The book's introduction opens with discussion of the powerful and contested images of scholar-activist Angela Davis released by the FBI in 1969 on its "Ten Most Wanted Fugitives" list in which Davis wears a "halo" Afro and later a "dashiki" based on an African man's shirt. Ford writes that these images of

. . . radical activism reveal the deep significance of the visual markers of a mode of dress that was known in the 1970s as "soul style" and point to a vital yet virtually unknown story of the body politics of the civil rights-Black Power era. During these years, black women struggled to redefine themselves over and against layers upon layers of stereotypes about the black female body that circulated in both mainstream and activist culture. In the everyday choices that black women made as they dressed themselves and styled their hair lay a revolutionary politics of style (1).

Ford's work encompasses global fashion in the diaspora beginning with both real and imagined African aesthetic influences on African American fashion through singers such as Miriam Makeba, Nina Simone, and Odetta in the 1960s. Northern and southern interpretations of 1960s soul style are astutely compared through the Grandassa modeling troupe in Harlem, with their "Black is Beautiful" slogan, and female members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who donned non-gendered denim clothing in response to the physical and psychological needs of political actions. Ford further demonstrates that in the 1970s, soul style gained recognition as a major fashion trend both commercially and individually through the example of African-inspired clothing in brightly colored fabric made by her own mother, activist and feminist Amye Glover, while in college. By taking "up these issues of black women's radical activities, the politics of style, and the global circulation of soul culture," Ford "reveals that throughout the global Black Freedom struggle, black women have incorporated beauty and fashion into their activism" (3–4). Although *Liberated Threads* does not contain any color photos or full-page plates, the photographs that Ford selected provide rare and pertinent evidence that supports and contributes greatly to her monograph. These images have been culled from a wide variety of sources such as university yearbooks, LP album covers, and several archives. Each image is contextualized within the book and helps to further the story of black style and fashion of the twentieth century.

Carol Tulloch, Professor of Dress, Diaspora, and Transnationalism at Chelsea College of Arts and Research Fellow with the Victoria and Albert Museum, originally

1 Pravina Shukla, *The Grace of the Four Moons: Dress, Adornment, and the Art of the Body in Modern India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 388.

trained as a fashion and textiles designer and later received a master's degree in the History of Design. Tulloch describes that "these elements of my personal and professional life have shaped my interest to study dress and black identities as dialogues on the 'self'".[2]

In *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora*, Tulloch uses case studies "to *read* the identities and style narratives of visual and textual images of black people" (3). Like Ford, Tulloch comes to her scholarship personally, explaining that

> **In my case, it is the inevitable experience of mourning the loss of family members and friends who were part of the pioneering generation of black travelers from the "British West Indies" to England, whose presence from the late 1940s onwards, though tangible, was rendered invisible because of intolerance and racism. It is my personal and critical need to remember them and their style narratives to contribute to the historical resonance of that period (182).**

These case studies cross the Atlantic from Jamaica at the end of the nineteenth century and Harlem of the 1930s to the Afro-Caribbean immigrant communities of post-war London and contemporary fashion in post-apartheid South Africa. Because many of Tulloch's case studies are based on images, the inclusion of high quality images was crucial to the success of her book. The wide selection of unique images embedded in chapters and color plates found in the center of the book add richness and depth to this text. In addition to deeply examining anonymous subjects of photographs to "challenge historical truths" (5), Tulloch also applies her techniques of thick descriptions to more well-known figures such as Malcolm X and Billie Holiday, shedding new light on how each of them used "the power of self-presentation" to create irreducible images that could not be fixed (90).

In her chapter about Jamaican market women, "Angel in the Market Place: The African-Jamaican Higgler, 1880–1907," Tulloch carefully lays out her methodology of inquiry in the study of images, specifically the 1903 postcard, "A Jamaican Lady," that forms the basis for this chapter. Her critical framework consists of seven elements:

(1) Complexities of time
(2) Choice of caption used
(3) Use of colonial postcards
(4) Flipping cultural meaning to reveal a "maze of meaning"
(5) Reading photographs for stories
(6) Viewpoint of photographer
(7) Photograph as a graphic symbol

This methodology exemplifies Tulloch's intention "to convey that objects-people-geographies-histories are intertwined and often interdependent in the contributions that style-fashion-dress practices have made to the articulation of these diasporic relationships and their place in dress studies" (6). Her approach is inspiring in a field in which scholars often work with artifacts without access to the biographies that connect with these artifacts; in fashion studies ultimately the human connection brings the artifact alive.

Both books bring their readers back to Africa, specifically South Africa, in a full circle journey of black style. In fact, the soul style that began with South African Miriam Makeba's presentations of self in the United States returned to Africa as "a fresh fashion trend imported from black America and black Britain" (Ford 160). Ford highlights the importance of the "Afro" look, as it was called, to black South Africans living under apartheid. Utilizing examples from *Drum*, a prominent black South African magazine, she demonstrates in this complex story that "far from being a frivolous pursuit, fashion was part of a monumental shift in the ways Africans perceived and projected themselves" (166).

2 Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed December 20, 2016, http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/c/carol-tulloch-biography/.

Stoned Cherrie, the South African fashion house founded in 2000 by actress and designer Nkhensani Manganyi, also figures prominently in both books. Stoned Cherrie is known for appealing fashion designs that reflect an African sensibility in cut and textiles. In 2002, her firm began to use images on T-shirts from vintage *Drum* covers such as the 1977 portrait of Steve Biko, the anti-apartheid activist who was killed by police later that same year. Individuals and nations protested this event globally. Steve Biko remains an important symbol of the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa, and "these T-shirts enable wearers, whether consciously or not, to participate in a collective remembering of the era of black freedom and black feminism across the diaspora" (Ford 184). Tulloch further unpacks meaning from the Steve Biko T-shirt "as an act of 'postmemory' or a second memory" that acts as a "symbol of modernity and post-modernity" (157–58).

Ford and Tulloch recognize the difficulties their subjects have faced, observing that "this is not always a happy story, given the ways in which soul style emerged, in large part, out of violence" (Ford 11), and more pointedly, Tulloch states that "violence and aggression have been contributory factors in the lives of most of the case studies" she examines in her book (200). Although "there was a heavy emphasis on the importance of style both as a response to social and physical violence," it also was regarded a great "source of pleasure" (Ford 6). Both monographs, however, exude a certain joy and sense of beauty as they celebrate individual expression and creativity ranging from the vast array of hairstyling to the assemblage of homemade, commercial, and thrift store fashions and accessories to create Afro-fashion in the modes of cool and soul style. In her touching tribute to her aunt, Gloria Bennett, and her mentor, Beryl Gilroy, Tulloch celebrates their fashionable selves and proposes "the idea of the styled black body being a form of levitation" (193). She goes on to eloquently describe that "the concept of style as levitation places the styled black body as 'invisibly' rising above racism to get on with becoming *and* being" (193–94).

Liberated Threads and *The Birth of Cool* are ultimately timely and political books that use the lens of cool and soul, beauty and adornment, and style-fashion-dress to present powerful arguments for the recognition and study of style in the African diaspora, which "are key to understanding so many other economic, political, and social issues in the diaspora" (Ford 189). Ford creates what she calls "'useable history,' a story that looks beyond the 'big event' history of the movement to reveal the importance of quotidian practices, such as getting dressed and styling one's hair, for the countless black women who put their bodies on the line in their pursuit of justice and equality" (187). The inclusion of these books in the slowly increasing literature on black fashion and style should help to fulfill Tulloch's desire to "lead to a more balanced understanding of the style-fashion-dress practices of black people as a comment on a sense of self in contested situations and contested spaces" and Tulloch's view that "the consideration of this form of self-presentation across the African diaspora leads to a dynamic profile of black people that undercuts misrepresentations and ethnic absolutism" (5).

Paula D. Davis
Associate Professor of Theatre and Dance, Bucknell University