

## **Review of Tanisha Ford's *Liberated Threads: The Unifying Thread among Black Female Activists in the Diaspora***

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In *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (2017), author Tanisha Ford examines how black women in the latter half of the twentieth century used fashion as a means of protest. In conversations about politics and activism, topics such as government policies and state structures often arise, but rarely that of fashion. Although fashion and politics are often thought to exist separately from one another, Ford proves that the two are intertwined and highlights how black women used clothing in the soul era as a political statement to further advance their views on equality.

The development of “soul style” became a way for women of various countries and cultures to connect, unify, and reject the policies and ideologies that kept black bodies and minds oppressed across the globe. According to Ford, people of African descent have long believed that the soul—the mind, will, and emotions of a person—can be imparted onto food, music, and clothing and invoke emotional responses in those that engage with them (2017, 6). With a common experience of trauma and oppression, members of the African diaspora developed “soul style”—dress and hairstyles that captured these experiences, embodied resilience and survival, restored pride that had been stripped away by oppression, and protested subjugation. The Afro was one of soul style’s most iconic and visible expressions. The Afro as a popular trend was inspired by the natural hairstyles of Odetta, Nina Simone, and Mariam Makeba. While these styles were short, cropped, and not as full as the Afro, the unprocessed methods of hairstyling were seen as a rejection of Western beauty standards and associated with “Africanness” (32). Representing the power of black women to influence the global market and narratives surrounding fashion and culture (65), the Afro was exported around the world. By the 1970s, women from Harlem to South Africa were sporting the look to challenge notions of subjugation and feminine propriety (159).

Ford shows how, within movements dominated by men, women used what was accessible to them—clothing, traditionally a woman’s territory—to initiate new discussions about the intersections of race and gender. For black people as a whole, these artists sought to instill pride across the diaspora in relation to black history and achievements, which western domination and oppression had stripped away (31). Black women activists were able to arouse this pride, reject heteronormative European standards of beauty, and bring attention to the intersections of gender and race that had been left out of fights for freedom. This connection fostered global solidarity in the fight for racial and gender equality, creating a dynamic where women across continents inspired and drew inspiration from each other in political thought, methods of organizing, and clothing, which served as the armor in their battles for rights.

Providing great detail about the lives and activism of black women around the world, Ford centers their experiences and accomplishments, which are often erased in literature and discussions. The reader is forced to reckon with their arguments, beliefs, contributions, and femaleness. Chapter four, featuring Olive Morris, is particularly compelling, as it highlights her influential and trailblazing work as a Black Power activist in 1970s London (151). Ford places

Morris' activism within a greater cultural and historical context, acknowledging the influences she gained from the Black Panther Party that informed her personal style and method of organization, and drawing similarities between her work and that of black women activists like the women of the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) movement.

The Afro as well as the SNCC skin (e.g., denim overalls, jeans, casual clothes) that women activists donned were a challenge to notions of black middle-class respectability. "The emphasis placed on respectability performed through wearing one's Sunday best and having neatly pressed hair" was used by civil rights leaders to challenge stereotypes of black women as hypersexual and argumentative (72). This formal appearance, which civil rights activists believed was suitable for the camera, was not always practical. To give one example, Ford quotes Anne Moody, a student activist in SNCC, who recalled an incident where she and fellow activists were assaulted with "ketchup, mustard, and sugar pies" during a sit-in (72). Such attacks made it difficult to project middle-class images, especially when activists found themselves in hot, cramped jails, far away from fresh clothing and the attention of beauticians.

As hair straightening was a painful process and adhering to standards of respectability could not protect them from attacks, the women traded their processed locks and church clothes for Afros and denim. Denim, which did not look dirty even when it was, allowed black women to maintain a neat appearance and self-esteem while working as activists (78). It also aided them in making connections to working-class blacks (this "skin" constituted regular attire for laborers), who were often left out of movements for "racial uplift." The women activists' clothing, created out of hardship, became part of soul style, marking a rejection of prior beliefs about respectability and positioning casual clothing as acceptable and fashionable for activism and daily life.

Olive Morris, influenced by the dress of the SNCC women and the Black Panther Party, defied gender norms by dressing androgynously. Ford describes black women as "hyper-visible," visibly different because of their gender and blackness, and marked as threats to the social order (129). By living as "queer" and refusing to conform to societal gender expectations (145), Morris used her hyper-visible body as a black woman to elevate women's silenced voices and draw attention away from male-centered ideas about black power (151). Her activism, and that of her British counterparts, was influential in focusing attention on the oppression of black females and their experience of sexualized violence, both in society and within the Black Panther movement.

Throughout *Liberated Threads*, Ford does an excellent job of placing the fashion and activism of black women, separated by national boundaries and bodies of water, into dialogue with each other. Like Olive Morris, whose influences are included in her story, Ford does not write about movements on different continents separately, but intertwines the development of a region's unique soul style with the historical and cultural influences that went into producing the style. This is important because it demonstrates that fashion was not only a Western phenomenon, but something that women engaged in globally as a means of expression and protest. In a world dominated by Western (predominately American) ideals and perspectives, Ford's presentation of black women in Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa contradicts the popular narrative of them as imitators of American fashion, and traces their role as equal participants and contributors to the global development of soul style. Her method of naming African and Caribbean designers, hairdressers, and activists, as well as characterizing African cities as centers of innovative design, brings them out of relative obscurity. Ford's extensive use of sources—from interviews to speeches, photographs, magazines, and newspapers—further

solidify this point, providing visual evidence of artistry, innovation, and the political statements women made with their clothes. Excerpts from South Africa's *Drum* magazine, for instance, highlight both the integration of African culture and customs and a Western influence that worked to create a style that rejected conceptions of African backwardness and the effects of colonization.

While women drew inspiration from each other, there was also much complexity in the development of soul style. Soul style was a unifying force against racial and gendered oppression, but, as Ford illustrates, women also had differing views on what liberation through dress should look like. What did it mean to be black? Authentically black? What was whiteness, and what did it look like to reject whiteness to achieve the decolonization of one's body and mind? These questions were not easy to answer, and although soul style was a large factor in creating global solidarity, views of black identity sometimes created tension as people sought to use their style as a way to embody their blackness. Black American women, who were pressured to conform to white beauty standards of having long, straight hair, found short hairstyles and Afros to be freeing, a chance to connect to their African roots. However, for many South African women, these styles were not liberating, as they were reminders of an oppressive past, when black girls were forced to cut their elaborate braids under the apartheid system. The Afro, instead of reflecting modernity, was sometimes associated with "imperialism and cultural encroachment" (16). Along with attempts to be authentic, or to connect with one's people or past, came the worry of performative blackness. Ford does not lead the reader toward a particular answer to any of these questions, but instead showcases the diversity of black thought. This is significant because oppressed groups are often unrealistically expected to be uniform in thought and ideology. The creation of a memorable, adaptable, and dynamic means of solidarity such as soul style is proof that diversity of thought is not an impediment to progress. Soul style has once again become popular in the present day, with US and European celebrities and companies collaborating with and recognizing the work of African designers.

By presenting "usable history" (186) and revealing the importance of everyday events like choosing one's dress and individual style, Ford's work becomes relevant to young people, students, and activists looking to make a difference, since even the "little things" can be influential (187). Her book is written for the younger generation of scholars and activists (189), as a way to understand their foremothers' journeys in using fashion as politics and to chart their own paths. For US activists especially—and given America's position in the world as a shaper of narratives surrounding justice—the book offers a broader sense of activism and reminds the reader that civic engagement in different communities and spaces may not look as one might imagine it to look. In our achievement of black liberation, varying human experiences of marginalization and identity will come into play. We are all looking to be seen and heard, to have an equal opportunity to experience and enjoy life. Our differences should not get in the way.

## Reference

Ford, Tanisha. 2017. *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press.