

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Shane White, Graham White.** *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998. xv + 301 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3179-1.



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In *Stylin'*, White and White provide a genealogy of African American public appearance modes (including clothing, body language, hair style, dance, and public festivals and parades) from roughly 1737 to 1943; in other words, from its origins until the point, the authors argue, when African American expressive culture became an undeniable force in American youth culture, and ultimately, in global popular culture. And it is indeed an impressive genealogy. Using ample support from eighteenth and nineteenth century primary sources (including newspaper accounts, excerpts from personal diaries, advertisements from runaway slaves, and a fine selection of visual materials), the authors demonstrate that a distinctive African American approach to personal style made its appearance very early on and developed rapidly with the establishment of Black urban communities in the North.

As the evidence suggests, throughout the course of its development, the meanings and motives of African American style are complex and polyvalent. First, there is the retention of West African Cultural traits; by the late 18th century, black women were heavily involved in textile production to provide clothing for the slave population, and the well-known botanical folk traditions of West Africa lead to new innovations in the use of dyes. More important still was the emergence of a decidedly

non-European regarding color and pattern combination, a practice that reflects the African American aesthetic in music and dance.

As the authors move through this history, however, we see that West African cultural roots cannot alone account for African American style. In the context of American slavery, where forms of resistance to authority were, to say the least, limited, the black body became a locus for forms of symbolic resistance to the efforts of the slave-holders to impose their ideas regarding appropriate (i.e., servile) appearance and behavior. Forms of symbolic resistance and an implied rejection of the dominant can be found throughout the range of African American expression, and the endurance of this dynamic is well-evidenced in the author's final example: the zoot suit, which was, among other things, a rejection of the wartime cloth conservation order of 1942.

Yet another strand of meaning in African American style is in its appropriation of European cultural forms. The basic format of clothing and dance imposed on the Africans in America was of course European, and the distinctiveness of African American style develops not in a vacuum, but in terms of a dynamic interplay with European form. This point gathers greater sociological complexity with the emergence of the Black middle class, and the authors do an excellent job of detailing the man-

ner in which style became a topical center for an African American discourse regarding matters of class, taste, and assimilation.

This is an impressive book. It is written in a compelling, readable style, one that never loses its pace; and yet, it is just as remarkable for both the detail of its primary research and its analytic reach. It also achieves high marks for its sociological grasp, for it presents a history of both black and white attitudes, and always factors race, class, and gender into the equation. Further, while the work has, to some extent, a celebratory tone, objectivity

is never sacrificed: we are continually reminded of the serious rifts within the African American community, and the authors are careful to separate documented fact from interpretation and conjecture. All told, *Stylin* is a work of scholarship of the first order, and it should be regarded as required reading for those interested in African American culture as well as popular culture in general.

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