

PHILIPP DORESTAL, *Style Politics: Mode, Geschlecht und Schwarzsein in den USA, 1943-1975* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012), 370 pp.

Years after the Black Power era, professor and activist Angela Davis met with a young man who at first did not recognize her. When she explained who she was, the young man exclaimed: “Oh, Angela Davis—the Afro.” For Davis, it was humbling to learn “that a single generation after the events that constructed me as a public personality, I [was] remembered as a hairdo.” Saddened, Davis bemoaned the fact that cultural amnesia had reduced “a politics of liberation to a politics of fashion” (152). In his new German-language study *Style Politics*, Philipp Dorestal offers solace for Davis and an analysis of the intersection between racial identity and style in the African American freedom struggle from the 1940s through the 1970s. With chapters covering the Zoot Suit Riots, nonviolent direct action protests, the Black Panthers, Nation of Islam, and Blaxploitation cinema, Dorestal’s book is a deeply researched and at times provocative addition to the field of civil rights scholarship.

The book opens with the admission that the term “Style Politics” may seem oxymoronic. Is there a less political arena of culture than the self-consciously ephemeral fashion industry? Dorestal’s initial assertion that black style is inherently political will surprise few scholars of African American studies, but his research into the contentious debates about fashion within the freedom struggle offers a much needed corrective to civil rights studies that tend to mention style off-handedly, if at all. Early on, Dorestal follows Robin Kelley in asserting that wearing a zoot suit during the 1940s was a clear signifier of race rebellion. “We had to be rebellious to [wear the zoot],” explained a future activist, “but then it was the style, and I wasn’t going to be a square” (95). That activist was not Malcolm X, as one might expect, but César Chávez.

The civil rights era of the 1950s and 60s witnessed a radical evolution of style. Dorestal observes that activists intentionally performed middle-class respectability by donning suits and ties for sit-ins, freedom rides, marches, and other public protests. Yet some of these same activists would perform working class identities by wearing overalls when running voter registration drives in the rural South. “We were talking to people in work

clothes,” recalled one activist in an oral history interview, “[w]e wanted to be in work clothes, too. [...] Yes, we were from a university but we saw ourselves as workers and we were doing work” (127). When Bob Moses, a Harvard-trained educator, taught college students about the dangers of journeying to the Mississippi Delta for Freedom Summer, his denim gave him authenticity just as Martin Luther King’s impeccable dark suits gave him standing on national news broadcasts. Performance theory and questions of authenticity are, in fact, at the heart of this study. Dorestal should be given credit for letting theory inform his work without overwhelming its more substantive historical analysis.

As the Black Power era emerged, Dorestal finds a much more explicit debate about the role of fashion and style in the movement. This section is notable for two particular insights. First, Dorestal deconstructs the vicious debate between the Black Panther Party and Maulana Karenga’s Us organization on the West Coast of the United States. “If we were ever gonna be politically free,” Karenga told one interviewer, “we have to be culturally free. [...] When we changed our clothes and our names that was an act of self-determination” (225). To the Black Panthers, Karenga and other dashiki-clad activists were merely “cultural nationalists”—not true revolutionaries. Yet Dorestal’s analysis of both the Panthers’ performance and reception shows that the self-defense organization’s style left as much of an impression as its radical rhetoric and community activism. A subtle analysis of stylistic differences between Panther chapters on the East and West Coast in this section mirrors a similarly nuanced analysis of northern and southern activists’ styles during the earlier phase of nonviolent direct action.

Dorestal also challenges popular understanding of the Nation of Islam (NOI) based on an analysis of the religious organization’s style. Though Malcolm X and the NOI are often lumped in with Black Power groups based on their militant rhetoric, Dorestal suggests that the NOI’s conservative strictures for dress, hair, and (for women) make-up should rightfully place that group alongside integrationist civil rights organizations in seeking a middle class respectability. Malcolm and other NOI ministers talked about racial separatism and self-determination, but their style suggested aspirations for success within a far more traditional American framework.

One of the great strengths of Dorestal's work from a historian's perspective—his analysis of primary textual sources—is also one of this work's few weaknesses. This study is based primarily on discourse analysis. Dorestal analyses how people talked and wrote about black style more than he deals with style itself. As a result, this book has a plethora of telling quotes about the contested evolution of African American fashion from the 1940s through the 1970s and the political implications of those debates for the strategies and goals of the black freedom struggle. That, in itself, is a worthy contribution to movement scholarship. However,

the topic offered opportunities to do fine-grained image analysis as an art historian might. Without access to more period images with the text (perhaps a decision of the publisher), this study does not reach its full potential. Still, Dorestal's book is the most comprehensive and thoughtful account of style in the civil rights and Black Power eras to date. Though the language barrier of the German publication may be a difficult hurdle for many American scholars, this is a book that deserves to be read and debated on both sides of the Atlantic.

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