



Stylin': African American Expressive Culture, from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit

Shane White, Graham White

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For over two centuries, in the North as well as the South, both within their own community and in the public arena, African Americans have presented their bodies in culturally distinctive ways. Shane White and Graham White consider the deeper significance of the ways in which African Americans have dressed, walked, danced, arranged their hair, and communicated in silent gestures. They ask what elaborate hair styles, bright colors, bandanas, long watch chains, and zoot suits, for example, have really meant, and discuss style itself as an expression of deep-seated cultural imperatives. Their wide-ranging exploration of black style from its African origins to the 1940s reveals a culture that differed from that of the dominant racial group in ways that were often subtle and elusive. A wealth of black-and-white illustrations show the range of African American experience in America, emanating from all parts of the country, from cities and farms, from slave plantations, and Chicago beauty contests. White and White argue that the politics of black style is, in fact, the politics of metaphor, always ambiguous because it is always indirect. To tease out these ambiguities, they examine extensive sources, including advertisements for runaway slaves, interviews recorded with surviving ex-slaves in the 1930s, autobiographies, travelers' accounts, photographs, paintings, prints, newspapers, and images drawn from popular culture, such as the stereotypes of Jim Crow and Zip Coon.

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