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The Politics of Textiles Used in African American Slave Clothing

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Osnaburg, homespun, and linsey-woolsey (Warner and Parker 1990, 82-92), broadcloth and Negro cloth (Hunt and Sibley 1994; Warner and Parker 1990; Williams and Centrallo 1990) and kersey (Hunt, 1996) are textiles that have been identified by scholars used in clothing worn by slaves and are often described in narratives written by African American slaves. The stories of African American slaves are a wealth of information on the lives of all individuals living in chattel environments, but particularly slaves who were usually not photographed. Since textiles are used to create inherently personal items, they are often described in narratives to help the readers understand the complexity of the narrator's life. The guiding question for this research is whether there is an historical and/or political link between the production of these textiles for slave uniforms and the production of natural fiber crops in the United States through the use of slaves as labor? A secondary goal of this research is to test a hybrid method of using narrative inquiry and archival data analysis to gain a better understanding of textile production in the United States and its relation to the textiles slaves wore as a foundation a larger program of research.

Background on Textiles Used for Slave Clothing

Textiles in which slave clothing was produced were legally used as a means to enforce social stratification in chattel environments. For example, according The South Carolina Negro Act of 1735 authorized individuals had the right to seize goods if they were to:

. . . find any such Negro slave, or other slave, having or wearing any sort of garment or apparel whatsoever, finer, other or of greater value than Negro cloth, duffels, coarse kersseys, osnabrigs, blue linen, check linen, or coarse garlix, or calicoes, checked cottons or Scottish plaids, ... (McCord 1740, 397)

Generally, both outer and under garments of slaves were produced from rough fabrics that might have caused skin irritation (Warner and Parker 1990, 82-92), since little concern was given to the aesthetic and comfort characteristics of clothing for slaves. Often fibers were mixed or combined to create durable textiles for slaves rather than comfortable fabrics. When cotton was mixed with wool, it was referred to as mixed homespun (Warner and Parker 1990, 82-92); similarly, cotton and linen were mixed together resulting in a coarse, but strong cloth (Warner and Parker 1990, 82-92). Linsey-woolsey, also a coarse cloth, the result of a linen warp and wool weft (Warner and Parker 1990, 82-92), often was used for slave clothing.

According to the literature, Osnaburg, unfinished German linen, was one of the most prevalent fabrics used for slave clothing (Warner and Parker 1990, 82-92). Osnaburg was produced from cotton in the late nineteenth century (Warner and Parker 1990, 82-92) and was found to be used in both Georgia and North Carolina (Hunt and Sibley 1994, 20-26). "Osnaburg a coarse linen," (Williams and Centrallo 1990, 59) was used to clothe both laborers and the working class (Williams and Centrallo 1990, 51-68).

Hunt and Sibley (1994) found that broadcloth and Negro cloth were common fabrications of garments. Negro cloth was “a rough, coarse, unfinished form, it was an excellent, low cost textile for slave clothing” (Warner and Parker 1990, 87) and was used to make white “negro cloth” jackets and breeches for field slaves (Williams and Centrallo 1990, 60). Hunt (1996) asserted that kersey was a fabric for slave clothing in fugitive slave notices from Georgia. In addition, calico and nankeen were also used for slave clothing (Warner and Parker 1990, 82-92); however, most slave clothing lacked color. In contrast to White and Whites’ (1995) findings, Warner and Parker (1990) maintained that limited colors for fabrics were obtained through “natural native dyes” (87). Hunt (1996) determined that slave clothing was made from fabrics with “striped, checked and figured” patterns (201).

Slave Narratives as Sources of Information on Chattel Life

Scholes (1982) believes that written words not only retain verbatim utterances, but also transfer information available to the senses to another form. Starke (1990) states that “The slave narrative contain a wealth of information from a rare source which will never again be possible” (70), illustrations are subjective. Narratives are useful for study of the time in that they can be used for “historical interpretation, to social, psychological, folkloric, and literary considerations” (Bayliss 1970, 12). These factors make them useful in trans-disciplinary research. These chronicles are not contemporaneous and, they are not diaries but are recollections, therefore reflective in character and viable research sources for literary researchers (Thomas 2000).

Methods

The researcher collected data through a blended hybrid use of narrative inquiry (Sanders 2011, 267-83) and archival research methods. The method entailed the following stages: (a) review of literature [previous published research and United States cotton production census data for 1830 – 1860] (b) analysis of textile exports in the United States from the Report of the Secretary of the Treasury on the State of the Finances for each fiscal year ending June 30th starting 1830¹ to 1865 [in five year increments], extraction of textile references from slave narratives, (c) identification of content categories by auditors, (d) synthesis of data, and (e) development of conclusions and ideas for future research. United States cotton production census data included the following states: North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas and Tennessee. The information obtained from the Report of the Secretary of the Treasury on the State of the Finances included data for all states in the union at the time of publication. These reports were addressed to the leadership in either the House of Representatives or the Senate. Each report included text outlining the economic impacts of the products produced and future trends based primarily on the opinions of the author, hence the Secretary of Treasury. The challenges with using this source of archival data were the inconsistency in what and how the data were reported each year. In some instances the reports appeared to have typographical errors, in which the year listed in the table was seemed incorrect or not in sequential order. For example, in the 1856 report the years were listed as 1854, 1885, 1856 instead of 1854, 1855, 1856, which brings into question the validity of the other data in the reports.

A total of 54 references to textiles (54 sentences) were extracted from the purposive sample of 10 narratives in the sample written by African American female slaves (reprints of the original documents).

¹ In the United States during the 1830s the fiscal year ended September 30th

The narratives were published between 1850 and 1909 and are identified by asterisks in the reference list. Three auditors (two African Americans and two faculty in the field of textiles and clothing) with an understanding of the topic identified content categories. The researcher synthesized all the data to develop findings and conclusions.

Results and Findings

Textiles and Fibers Found in Slave Clothing

The results of this research provide information on textiles identified as used in slave clothing from variety of data sources (see Table 1). All known fiber contents were natural fibers and additional research should be undertaken to determine the general fibers used to create duffels, garlix, Scottish plaids, and striped clothe.

Textile Name	Fiber Content	Source of Documentation
Blue Linen	Linen	South Carolina Negro Act of 1735
Broadcloth	Cotton	Hunt and Sibley 1994, 20-26 Warner and Parker 1990, 82-92 Williams and Centrallo 1990, 51-68
Calico	Cotton	Slave Narrative - Veney 1889, 28 Slave Narrative - Picquet 1861, 13 South Carolina Negro Act of 1735 Warner and Parker 1990, 82-92
Checked Cotton	Cotton	South Carolina Negro Act of 1735
Check Linen	Linen	South Carolina Negro Act of 1735
Duffels	Unknown	South Carolina Negro Act of 1735
Flannel	Wool	Slave Narrative – Jacobs 1861, 181
Garlix	Unknown	South Carolina Negro Act of 1735
Homespun	Cotton and Wool Blend	Slave Narrative – Picquet 1861, 12 Warner and Parker 1990, 82-92
Kersey	Wool	South Carolina Negro Act of 1735 Fugitive Slave Notices (Hunt 1996, 20-26)
Linsey-Woolsey	Linen and Wool Blend	Warner and Parker 1990, 82-92
Osnaburg or Osnabrigs	Linen or Hemp	Hunt and Sibley 1994, 20-26 South Carolina Negro Act of 1735 Warner and Parker 1990, 82-92 Williams and Centrallo 1990, 51-68
Nankeen	Cotton	Warner and Parker 1990, 82-92
Negro Cloth	Cotton	South Carolina Negro Act of 1735
Scottish Plaids	Unknown	South Carolina Negro Act of 1735
Striped Clothe	Unknown	Slave Narrative – Picquet 1861, 12
White Muslin	Cotton	Slave Narrative - Veney 1889, 30

Table 1. Textiles and the Associated Fibers Found in this Research on African American Slave Clothing.

Cotton Production Trends in the South

The United States census data reveals that the state of Mississippi was the largest producer of cotton per capita between the years of 1830 to 1860, during the peak of slave labor in the southern region of the United States. Louisiana, Alabama, Arkansas, and Texas were the next top producers of cotton for both the domestic and export markets (See Table 2).

State	1830	1840	1850	1860
Alabama	177.4	198.1	292.5	456.9
Arkansas	21.1	61.2	124.3	374.7
Florida	242.9	224.1	207.0	213.5
Georgia	158.6	236.5	220.3	300.0
Louisiana	212.5	437.2	137.8	439.3
Mississippi	328.4	513.8	319.6	676.5
North Carolina	13.5	69	33.9	65
Tennessee	69.6	33.4	77.5	119.0
Texas	-	-	108.9	319.6
South Carolina	123.9	103.8	179.4	200.3

Table 2. Cotton Production Per Capita by Individual States, Census Years: 1830-1860 (In Pounds)

Textile Fiber Export Trends in the United States

The researcher accessed online scanned copies of the Report of the Secretary of the Treasury on the State of the Finances in the United States and after randomly scanning several reports for various years between 1830 and 1865 the researcher decided to focus on reports publishing data between the years of 1829 to 1865 in five year increments. Originally 1830 was the intended year to research; however, the data for that year was not located and 1830 report only included data for 1829. The data were compiled into Table 3 and Table 4, after searching through each report for the appropriate “statements” or tables prepared by the Secretary of the Treasury. The researcher was not able to locate data for 1835. By 1865 the reports included not only manufactured textiles, but also products made from the textiles, which may explain the decrease in the importation of textiles since products made from the textiles were more readily available for import.

Analysis of the export and import trends for cotton, flax (linen), hemp, silk, and wool textiles resulted in a noticeable trend of the increase of textile exports and imports in cotton, hemp and wool. Although the United States was exporting textiles, in most cases the country was importing a significant amount of goods which indicates a need or shortage of textile products for the main consumer markets. Therefore, these practices brings into question, if there was a large enough surplus of textile goods, including poor quality goods, to clothe slaves. A surprising result of this research is the revelation that hemp was a significant fiber and in the textile market during this time period, since has not been mentioned significantly in previous research on slave clothing.

Year	Cotton	Flax	Hemp	Silk	Wool	Total
1829*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1835	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1840	3,549,607	-	8,242	-	-	3,557,849
1845	4,327,928	-	14,762	-	-	4,342,690
1850	4,734,424	-	11,776	-	-	4,746,200
1855	5,857,181	-	36,508	-	27,802	5,921,491
1860	10,934,796	-	27,816	-	-	
1865**	3,331,582	-	119,738	-	132,544	3,583,864

* Values for the years 1829 and 1835 were not found by the researcher

** Values for 1865 were reported in a different manner than the previous years

Table 3. Values in Dollars of Domestic Manufactured Textiles Fiber Goods Exported from the United States between 1829 and 1865.

Year	Cotton	Flax	Hemp	Silk	Wool	Total
1829	51,813	82,083	655,935	N/A	239,882	1,029,713
1835*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1840	6,504,484	4,614,466	1,588,155	9,601,522	9,071,184	31,381,651
1845	13,863,282	4,923,109	897,345	9,731,796	10,666,176	40,083,553
1850	20,108,719	8,134,674	588,446	17,639,624	17,151,509	63,624,822
1855	17,757,112	8,617,165	266,829	24,366,556	24,404,149	75,413,666
1860	10,139,209	10,736,335	371,317	30,767,744	37,937,190	89,953,655
1865*	2,726,989	8,845,229	310,094	4,222,899	13,123,992	29,231,068

* Values for the years 1835 were not found by the researcher

** Values for 1865 were reported in a different manner than the previous years

Table 4. Values in Dollars of Foreign Manufactured Textiles Fiber Goods Imported into the United States between 1830 and 1865.

Themes from the Slave Narratives in the Sample

From the narrative analysis of the textile references in the African American female narratives sampled, two sets of binary emerged: *Conspicuous/Inconspicuous* and *Comfortable/Uncomfortable*.

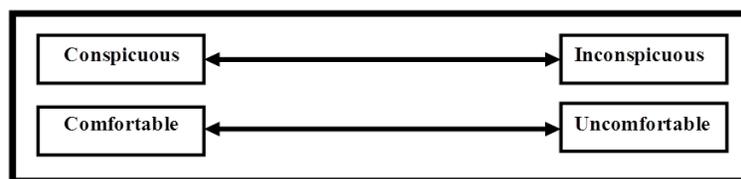


Fig 1. Binary Themes Representative of the Impact of Textiles in African American in Female Slave Narratives Sampled.

Conspicuous/Inconspicuous

The slaves in this sample described and experienced the textiles used to make their garments in manners that resulted in them being highly recognizable as a slave or invisible. These narrators mainly highlighted examples of a conspicuous appearance such as this instance related by Bethany Veney: “She put a white muslin apron on me, and a large cape, with great pink bows on each shoulder, and a similar rig also on Eliza” (Veney 1889, 30).

Louisa Picquet’s narrative used “striped” a descriptor of the homespun fabric worn by African American slaves to signify conspicuous, in the following passage: “In the summertime we never wore but two pieces -- only the one under, and blue homespun over. It is a striped clothe [sic] they make in Georgia just for the colored people” (Picquet 1861, 12). The “stripes” made the garment noticeable and Picquet referred to the fact that these garments were specifically made for African Americans. This suggested a uniform type of appearance expected of slaves in the chattel community and textiles that were created primarily for this target market.

Comfortable/Uncomfortable

In rare instances these slaves experienced clothing made from textiles that were comfortable, but in most cases the fabrications of their garments made them feel both physically and sometimes emotionally uncomfortable. Harriet Jacobs made this reference to a garment that was considered comfortable to wear: “I took off my own flannel skirt” (Jacobs 1861, 181). In contrast, often the narrators made references that indicated that the garments were physically uncomfortable. For example, Harriet Wilson described a “coarse cloth gown” (Wilson 1859, 69), in which the variant, “coarse,” signified a fabric that was not comfortable next to the skin.

Louisa Picquet’s description of her clothing as, “Oh, very thin, with low-neck’d dress” (Picquet 1861, 12) indicated an uncomfortable provocative appearance due to the use of “thin” and “low-neck’d” as variants to describe the dress.

Conclusions and Significance

The findings confirm and provide additional insight into the names of textiles often used for slave clothing and types of fibers used. This research also highlights the fact that the natural fiber textile industry in the United States is a reflection of the types of fibers found in the limited documentation of textiles used in slave clothing, except in the case of fibers made from hemp. What is perplexing about the findings is whether, the quantities of textiles either imported or grown for the domestic market were sufficient to meet the needs of both the main consumer and the slave target markets for the creation of clothing. If a country is importing twice as much of a product as it is exporting in some years, it begs the question how and where less important consumers, such as slaves obtained textiles for clothing. It is evident that slaves did have clothing and in many cases these clothes were made from textiles that politically made her or him a *conspicuous* or *inconspicuous* being through the use of color or lack of color and patterns such as stripes or checks. In a few rare cases a slave felt physically *comfortable*, while in most cases both physically and emotionally *uncomfortable*, from the roughness of textiles such as homespun, kersey, linsey-woolsey, and osnaburg.

The significance of this research is that it initiates an innovative platform for analyzing textiles and their impact on slave clothing for scholars through the use of narrative inquiry and archival data. Future research compiling and comparing information from other slave narratives such as the WPA narrative with records from: (a) famous plantations such as Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, (b) census data of crop production by each state found in the 1855 Report of the Secretary of the Treasury on the State of the Finances, and (c) a larger sample of the import, export and production of hemp fibers in the United States provides the possibility to further understand the political ramifications of slavery and the Emancipation Proclamation on the import and export of textile goods in the United States and those affected by the institution of slavery.

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References marked with an asterisk identify the 10 narratives used in the narrative analysis.

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