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Clothing the Black Body in Slavery

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MURRIAH FLOOD

*Murriah Flood. New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed January 31, 2021.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dd-b186-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>*

Scholarship in the area of African American studies has always been plentiful and is ever growing. The intersection between Black history and fashion studies is ripe for additional exploration. Many scholars have made connections between the slave trade, colonialism and the textile industry that built the wealth of American and foreign investors. There is fresh interest and opportunity for fashion studies to focus on what the enslaved themselves wore and the unique role that clothing played in successful escapes from captivity.

Oftentimes when fashions of the past are discussed or represented in images, Black women and men are conspicuously absent. Regardless of the era, Black people were present and contributed sartorially. It is my desire to understand more about the circumstances of life and dress in relation to that history and how Black people navigated their physical representation in the midst of slavery, migration, oppression and the fight for equality.

After suffering the traumas of capture, enslavement and the ship's journey from their homeland, newly arrived Black people struggled to understand and cope with their altered circumstances. In the midst of these difficulties, they were dealt their next blow, an attack on their sense of self and connection through their appearance. Stripped of garments that represented their native culture, unable to bathe or groom themselves, intentionally separated into groups without common language or customs, many stood naked, their bare bodies evaluated much as one would examine livestock, as plantation owners determined their worth on the ship's deck or auction block. Their lack of clothing was inconsequential as they were viewed as less than.¹ Once purchased, it was in the best interest of the master and mistress to protect their investment by providing them with the essentials. Chief among those necessities were clothing.

Along with slavers, sailors and other crewman had a unique opportunity to observe this peculiar transition. Wealthy international travelers were likewise well placed. Ship manifests and passenger diaries often contain reflections on this initial phase of cultural eraser. In the 1732 travel journal of Englishman William Hugh Grove, he recorded the following observation.

"The men are Stowed before the foremast, then the Boys between that and the main-mast, the Girls next, and the grown Women behind the Misen. The Boyes and Girles [were] all Stark naked; so Were the greatest part of the Men and Women. Some had beads about their necks, arms, and Wasts, and a ragg or Piece of Leather the bigness of a figg-Leafe. And I saw a Woman [who had] Come aboard to buy Examine the Limbs and soundness of some she seemed to Choose. Dr. Dixon...bought 8 men and 2 women...and brought them on Shoar with us, all stark naked. But when [we had] come home [they] had Coarse Shirts and afterwards Drawers given [to] them." ²

Though most enslaved people had no agency to choose their wardrobe; they nonetheless faced many of the same societal expectations and a desire to look well, as their owners. At varying times, they needed to conform to the current standards of decency and respectability while remaining humble and in their place. Slaves of differing rank—whether house, field, companion—and age, be they child, adult, or senior, had to contend with shifting demands on their appearance. Their success in walking this tightrope was largely contingent on what was provided to them and the benevolence or malevolence of their master, mistress and others hired to oversee them.

Slaves received an allotment of clothing by two chief methods. Some were given a quantity of cloth to construct garments themselves with the expectation that the woman of the house would

¹ Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America: the Colonial Williamsburg Collection*. (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2011), 133

² William Hugh Grove, Gregory A. Stiverson, and Patrick H. Butler, III. "Virginia in 1732: The Travel Journal of William Hugh Grove." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 85, no. 1 (1977): 18-44. Accessed January 30, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4248090>.

make clothing for her entire family. Others were given a handful of garments meant to last through the season. Typically, garments or cloth were handed out twice a year to coincide with the arrival of warm or cold weather, though some records indicate that a yearly allotment accounting for the change in seasons was given instead.³ The textile itself could vary; some slave masters chose linen, though cotton for milder climes and wool for cooler were much more common. Little was found to indicate that warmer footwear or head and hand coverings were typically dispersed, though there were a few instances of masters issuing items by gender like socks and wool caps for men while women were given stockings, sunbonnets and kerchiefs.⁴

On one South Carolina plantation, “each man gets in the fall 2 shirts of cotton drilling, a pair of woolen pants and a woolen jacket. In the spring 2 shirts of cotton shirting and 2 pr. of cotton pants.”⁵ While women were given “6 yds. of woolen cloth, 6 of cotton drilling and a needle, skein of thread and a ½ dozen buttons. In the spring 6 yards of cotton shirting and 6 yds. of cotton cloth similar to that for men’s pants, needle, thread and buttons.”⁶ All received “a stout pr. of shoes every fall, and a heavy blanket every third year.”⁷

Enslaved children, male and female, were dressed in a simple pullover frock, a tunic-type long shirt, and were more oft than not, barefoot. In his biography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself*, celebrated orator, activist and scholar, Frederick Douglass, recounts wearing such a garment in his youth. “The children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers, given to them; their clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts per year. When these failed them, they went naked until the next allowance-day. Children from seven to ten years old, of both sexes, almost naked, might be seen at all seasons of the year.”⁸

In *Before Came Freedom*, John Matthews, a slave on a southern plantation, recalled enslaved women’s attempts at style, even within their limited means starching their petticoats in place of hoops. Others used grapevines to achieve the effect. Bringing their hard-won tailoring skills to the fore, small pieces of fabric were carefully harvested from the seams of their mistresses generously cut garments to make one of a kind looks for themselves. Relying on their fabric dyeing skills, some enslaved women identified and used plants and roots to add color to their uniform looks and those who were allowed to earn wages tended to use those funds to purchase clothing.⁹

During times of courting, enslaved women, like anyone looking to fall in love, wished to smell and look nice. They carved out time between work to mend and care for their Sunday best, those

³ Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America: the Colonial Williamsburg Collection*. (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2011), 135

⁴ Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum*. (New York: Knopf, 1967), 291

⁵ Stampp, 291.

⁶ Stampp, 291.

⁷ Stampp, 291.

⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself*, www.docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/douglass.html. Accessed January 30, 2021.

⁹ Drew Gilpin Faust, Edward D. C. Campbell, Kim C. Rice, *Before Freedom Came: African-American Life in the Antebellum South: to Accompany an Exhibition Organized by the Museum of the Confederacy*. (Richmond, VA: Museum of the Confederacy, 1991), 119

castoff items or a handmade frock set aside for exclusive “festive” use, and “used sweet smelling flowers and herbs as perfume and often kept their good dresses packed in them so that the clothing absorbed the fragrance.”¹⁰

In a collection of slave narratives out of Georgia, former slave, Julia Larken, recollected that Black men and women would take extra care to keep their shoes free from the dust of the road while walking to church. They draped them over their necks by their tied together laces until they were indoors. Larken shared that women, “...wore two or three petticoats all ruffled and starched....and evvy ‘oman pinned up her dress and evvy one of her petticoats but one to keep ‘em from gittin muddy.”¹¹

Much of what we know about slavery is from the perspective of those controlling or benefitting from it, it is often difficult to discern much about the slave’s own perspective of everyday life and dress. That said, insights can be found in a few unexpected places. As unlikely a place as the Museum of the Confederacy is to find this kind of vital information about the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the reality is that the industry of slavery was documented like any other.¹² And there is frequent overlap between these two institutions; some might say that the confederacy itself could not be fully separated from its connection to slavery.

Even as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and the other founding fathers attempt to control the history of their lives and legacy, a great deal of information about their roles as slave owners can be found in their own financial records, correspondence and in the diaries of their overseers. Plantation mistresses kept diaries, too, to document the woes and triumphs of their lives and to vent their specific complaints of the indignity of working alongside their slaves to produce the plantation’s textiles.¹³ Along with the names and cost of their slaves, information about their care and keeping were tabulated using both official and unofficial methods.

Archived papers often contain records, which faithfully detailed the money allocated to clothe slaves, how long those garments were expected to last and what planters expected to provide for them according to season. The documentation, of course, varied from plantation to plantation but covered the same details, like the number of yards of fabric provided and the expected number of garments it would yield, while others stated the number and type of garment provided by age, or gender, outlined previously. Slaves in captivity at George Washington’s Mount Vernon received their allotment of clothing annually. Men were given “one wool jacket, one pair of wool breeches, two linen shirts, one or two pair of stockings, one pair of shoes, and linen breeches for

¹⁰ Faust, Campbell, Rice, 118.

¹¹ Martha B. Katz-Hyman, Kym S. Rice, *World of a Slave: Encyclopedia of the Material Life of Slaves in the United States*. (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2011), 124

¹² The Museum of the Confederacy, as it was known then, has closed. Its collections have been relocated to the recently constructed, American Civil War Museum, which is also located in Richmond, Virginia.

¹³ Patricia Hunt-Hurst, “Round Homespun Coat & Pantaloons of the Same’: Slave Clothing as Reflected in Fugitive Slave Advertisements in Antebellum Georgia.” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, vol. 83, no. 4, 1999, pp. 727–40.

summer.”¹⁴ While women received “one wool jacket, one wool skirt, two linen shifts, one pair of stockings, one pair of shoes, and a linen skirt for summer.”¹⁵

Though Washington wrote that “it has always been my aim to feed & cloath them well...- in return, I expect such labour as they ought to render,” his actual practice did not bear that sentiment.¹⁶ In letters to his man of business, he was not above airing his own concerns about the cost of clothing so many. He sought ways to purchase the cloth for less and wondered at the necessity of providing slaves with trousers that reached the ankle.

Scholar and textile expert, Linda Baumgarten, has researched early American textiles, including those created and worn during slavery, for much of her career. One planter discussed in Baumgarten’s work, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America*, purchased from an English supplier, “a thousand ells of German osnaburg, three hundred yards of Kendal cotton, one hundred yards of “plaidding for Negroe children,” and 60 ready-made “fear nothing waistcoats of the cheapest color.”¹⁷ Ells were a unit of measuring length. It was the distance between the tip of ones forefinger to their elbow.¹⁸ “Fear nothing” and other descriptive turns of phrase were names given to fabrics meant for the servant class and slaves, aiming to convey strength and durability to the buyer.

Washington had facilities to manufacture textiles from the beginning of the process to the end on his vast plantation and, of course, the slaves there performed the work. Certain slaves at Mount Vernon were tasked with transforming bolts of fabric into clothing. The Mansion House Farm, one of five on the grounds of the larger Mount Vernon estate, primarily housed skilled laborers such as coopers, blacksmiths, carpenters and textile artisans. The Mansion House Farm was also home to the spinning house. There, enslaved women spun fiber and sewed textiles from the resulting fabric, woven by White artisans hired for the task, for domestic use in the manor house and into clothing for their fellow slaves. A quota system was enacted, a number of garments or quantity of spun yarn had been set, and slaves who did not meet them would be punished.¹⁹

Though the Black Codes, also interchangeably called the Code Noir and Slave Codes in literature, were initially concerned with the movement, behavior, wardrobe, and treatment of slaves, they also had a great impact on free persons as well. With regard to appearance, these so-called Black Codes helped to support a shorthand, visual method of identifying slaves who were out of place. The first was the Code Noir, passed by Louis XIV in 1689, controlled and restricted the movements of slaves and free Blacks in the French colonies.²⁰ Throughout the years, additional laws were passed and over time were adapted to cover all manner of things outside of the legality of slavery. These were typically formal written edicts, there also existed a set of

¹⁴ “Clothing.” *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, mountvernon.org/george-www.washington/slavery/clothing. Accessed January 30, 2021.

¹⁵ Clothing.

¹⁶ Clothing.

¹⁷ Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America: the Colonial Williamsburg Collection*. (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2011), 135

¹⁸ “Ell.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ell. Accessed January 30, 2021.

¹⁹ Clothing.

²⁰ *Le Code Noir ou recueil des reglements rendus jusqu'a present* (Paris: Prault, 1767) [1980 reproduced by the Societ, d'Histoire de la Guadeloupe]. Translated by John Garrigus.

www.s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/1205/2016/02/code-noir.pdf Accessed January 30, 2021.

informal regulations and traditions that flexed and expanded to include nearly anything that Whites felt they had a right to tell Black people to do or not do, down to wardrobe. In order to visually reinforce White dominance slaves and free Blacks were required to look the part.

In professor and attorney Ruthann Robson's *Dressing Constitutionally: Hierarchy, Sexuality, And Democracy From Our Hairstyles To Our Shoes* she masterfully illustrates how the law created loopholes via Constitutional Articles and Amendments to deepen the connection between slavery and the production of textiles that built and sustained the economy of the United States and beyond until the Civil War.

The livelihood of many slaveholders, and indeed the United States economy as a whole, rested on the uninterrupted production of cotton. Robson states, "[t]he 1787 Constitution enshrined slavery, albeit without using the term 'slavery,' in a number of provisions."²¹ The first of the Articles passed assigned the terms by which people who were non-White men would be counted. Those who were free or indentured for a specified number of years were counted whole; Indians were completely excluded, while Blacks would be considered three-fifths a person.²²

Therefore, if slave-holding states discounted their slave populations, it would directly affect their overall numbers and thus diminish their political might. Free states, however, were loath to allow those enslaved men and women to be counted at all, knowing that the increased number of those in the South could be a danger to their own agendas. Even the eventual compromise, reflecting their status as part person, part property by counting the enslaved as three-fifths of a person, was not enough to satisfy lawmakers in free states.²³ They argued that no other property could be counted to boast state numbers in non-slave states consequently slaves in slave holding states should not count either. If they are men, free them and give them the right to vote like all others.²⁴

This stance did not stem from benevolence or kindness. This was a numbers game. The number of persons in a given state determined representation. The three-fifths clause and others in the Constitution, created loopholes to ensure that the inferiority of Blacks would be upheld and laid the groundwork to continue slavery under another name ensuring that slaves remained in this suspended state strung between dehumanization and personhood.

In *Thirty Years a Slave*, Louis Hughes provides great insight into that dehumanization and the difficulties of life on a working textile plantation. He attempted to escape these circumstances numerous times. Once, after making a snap decision to flee, Hughes made it as far as Memphis where he was eventually discovered on a sugar boat he had been hiding in. To his surprise, one of the ship's crew read his fugitive advertisement to him: "Ran away from Edmund McGee, my mulatto boy Louis, 5 feet 6 inches in height, black hair, is very bright and intelligent. Will give

²¹ Ruthann Robson, *Dressing Constitutionally: Hierarchy, Sexuality, and Democracy from Our Hairstyles to Our Shoes*. (New York, N.Y: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 154

²² Robson, 154.

²³ Robson, 154.

²⁴ Robson, 154.

\$500 for him alive, and half of this amount for knowledge that he has been killed." ²⁵ Note the hefty prize for capture, Louis and his skill with textile machinery was valuable indeed.

When his master eventually came to retrieve Hughes, he did not cuff him, to the consternation of the guards. Indeed his owner was more concerned that Louis clean up and dress well for their return trip home. They had recently moved to a new plantation where the master had a reputation for his style and wealth and seemed reluctant to be labeled as someone who beat his slaves. Louis was slotted back into his role in the home, the cruelty that sent him running abated for a time. Hughes, whose plantation's chief industry was textile production, shared a slave's eye view of their everyday work lives.

"Through the winter and on rainy days in summer, the women of the field had to card the wool and spin it into yarn. They generally worked in pairs, a spinning wheel and cards being assigned to each pair, and while one carded the wool into rolls, the other spun it into yarn suitable for weaving into cloth, or a coarse, heavy thread used in making bridles and lines for the mules that were used in the fields. This work was done in the cabins, and the women working together alternated in the carding and spinning. Four cuts were considered a task or day's work, and if any one failed to complete her task she received a whipping from the madam." ²⁶

By examining the slave narratives and reviewing fugitive slave advertisements that include particular detail about well-dressed slaves, we can see a hidden thread of clothes as a path to freedom and how clothes presented a unique opportunity to invert the paradigm of oppression and dehumanization.

Fugitive slave advertisements, even those without likenesses attached, are also a rich resource for intimate sartorial detail that reveals the importance of clothing in a successful escape. Information provided to identify the owner's property could also be analyzed for clues about the escapees' lives. These advertisements likely contained more information about the slaves than they even realized their masters noticed about them. In an effort to recapture their runaway property, slave owners breathed life into these formerly one-dimensional people with descriptions of physical traits and typical garments worn.

²⁵ Louis Hughes. *From Bondage to Freedom. The Institution of Slavery as Seen on the Plantation and in the Home of the Planter*, 81-82. www.docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/hughes/hughes.html. Accessed January 30, 2021.

²⁶ Hughes, 39.

100 DOLLARS REWARD!

Ranaway from the subscriber on the 27th of July, my Black Woman, named

EMILY,

Seventeen years of age, well grown, black color, has a whining voice. She took with her one dark calico and one blue and white dress, a red corded gingham bonnet; a white striped shawl and slippers. I will pay the above reward if taken near the Ohio river on the Kentucky side, or **THREE HUNDRED DOLLARS**, if taken in the State of Ohio, and delivered to me near Lewisburg, Mason County, Ky. **THO'S. H. WILLIAMS.**
August 4, 1853.

EMILY RUNS AWAY

*"Emily runs away." New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed January 31, 2021.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47db-bc26-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>*

One should recall the scarcity of clothing in this era. Even Whites owned relatively few garments. Because clothing could be expensive, it was generally meant to last a long time. For slaves, who typically received clothing only twice a year the likelihood of them changing clothes post escape was unimaginable. By giving minute detail of what they were last seen wearing the chances of reacquiring the slave were greater. However, this could be easily foiled by a slave who had the means to provide themselves not only with a potential change of clothes but possessed the kind of garments that would allow them to slip into the role of a free man or woman.

The tale of one escaped slave, John, lays this fact bare. John had an arrangement whereby he paid a fee to his mistress for the privilege of working as a hired hand. After that sum was paid, he could spend his earnings how he pleased. He, according to his master "...was fond of nice clothing, he was careful to earn a balance sufficient to gratify this love."²⁷ From his ad we learn that "John was a mulatto, of genteel address, well clothed, and looked as if he had been "well fed."²⁸ This combination of factors—John's access to fine clothing, his light skin, and his well-

²⁷ Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library. "William Still; The underground railroad." *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1872. digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47db-bd22-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99 Accessed January 30, 2021.

²⁸ Still, 307.

fed appearance—aided in his successful escape to Canada.

Though there are many tales that illustrate the importance of clothing in escape, the point is sharpest in the story of Georgia's, William and Ellen Craft. Published in 1860, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: Or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* tells the story of their successful escape. In its pages, William Craft explains how their flight to freedom would not have been possible without sartorial aid. Having a good, trusted status with their masters, and with additional permission from William's employer, the Crafts requested and were granted a few days leave to take a kind of honeymoon shortly after their wedding. This step, permission to be away, would be crucial in order to cover such a great distance, the thousand miles in the title of their narrative. They needed time in advance of their absence being noted to cross the slave states between Georgia and freedom.

In disguise, as there were prohibitions on how, when and where Negroes could spend money, William shares that, "with little difficulty I went to different parts of the town, at odd times, and purchased things piece by piece, (except the trowsers (sic) which she found necessary to make)." ²⁹ In this way, they compiled the articles of men's garb to disguise Ellen, with her very fair skin, as a White gentleman planter with plans for William to pose as his slave.

William exercised extreme caution while gathering these garments because any White person taking undue interest in a slave buying a fine jacket could act on his suspicion and lead to dire consequences. Once acquired, and with permission to be absent in hand, they worked out the final details: how to mask Ellen's smooth cheeks, her feminine voice, and her inability to write. Adding such bandages and poultices to the disguise to affect a sickly visage and cover her less than masculine face, they decided they'd also use the feigned infirmity as the excuse for her inability to write or speak clearly, too. Thus outfitted, the Crafts said a final prayer and set off.

²⁹ William and Ellen Craft. *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: Or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/craft/craft.html>. Accessed January 30, 2021.

*"William and Ellen Craft." New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed January 31, 2021.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47db-bcd1-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>*

The story of the escape caused a sensation. Likenesses of Ellen in drag, and the Crafts in their normal attire, were posted everywhere. This led to the couple being so doggedly pursued by their former masters and slave catchers that they eventually fled further to the UK where, despite the risk, they continued to speak at abolitionist rallies to win people to the cause.

"Ellen Craft, the fugitive slave" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed January 31, 2021.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-75ae-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Second only to looks, clothing is the primary thing that draws the eye. Observers make assessments based on those first glimpses. Even while toiling under the lash of slavery, Blacks in America felt the call to express that, which had been taken from their ancestors. They wished for self-expression, some did not stop until they achieved that. The pleasure derived and the confidence imbued was worth the additional hours of labor that went into creating a special garment. The additional physical exertions from plying their skills off the plantation were a small price to pay for a taste of dignity. A brave portion of those few saw the opportunities that lay just beyond these arrangements and stolen moments. We've only scratched the surface of these hidden lives.

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