Fashioning Freedom:

Dress and Slave Resistance in the Antebellum South

'Slaves for Sale: A Scene in New Orleans', *The Illustrated London News*, April 1861, p307, Princeton University: Department of African American Studies, http://aas.princeton.edu/news/dressed-and-laying-bare-fashion-shadow-market (3 March 2022).

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Introduction:

A Question of Agency? Slavery, Dress and Resistance

On June 10th 1856, a curious advertisement appeared in *The Milledgeville Federal Union*: '$100 Reward', wrote C. A. Gardner, would be offered for the return of his 'negro man', Will, who had 'obtained a pass to visit some friends in Sparta' three days ago and had 'not been heard from since.' The crux of this advertisement, however, lies not in Will's disobedience – after all, fugitive slaves were a common phenomenon in the antebellum South – but in Gardner's description of his appearance. Contrary to common depictions of the enslaved, scantily clad in ragged attire, Will had 'plenty of good clothes'; amongst his extensive wardrobe was 'a black cloth dress coat', 'dark striped cassimere pants', 'a black silk hat' and 'fine boots'. So lavishly dressed, Gardner continued, Will was indistinguishable from the Southern 'gentleman'; indeed, he might convincingly 'pass…for a white man'.[1]

Dress, then, understood as an 'assemblage of the body and/or supplements to the body', allowed Will to transcend not only class but race.[2] The quality and quantity of Will's clothing, as Gardner made clear, ensured that 'few persons would take him for a slave.'[3] A profound anxiety thus underpins the advertisement: the slave, Gardner suggests, was neither a permanent nor immutable identity but a slippery category that was routinely undermined by the actions of the enslaved themselves. Across the antebellum South, slaveowners shared in this insecurity; bondsmen and women who dressed above their station, sumptuously adorned in the latest fashions, served to visibly remind the planter class of their failure to ensure the complete subjugation of the enslaved population. Instead, mobilising dress for the purposes

[1] *The Milledgeville Federal Union* (10 June 1856).
[2] M. E. Roach-Higgins and J. Eicher, 'Dress and Identity', *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal,* 10/4 (Thousand Oaks, CA, 1992), p1.
[3] *The Milledgeville Federal Union* (10 June 1856).

of self-expression and enjoyment, bondspeople negated their commodification in the market-driven slave regime and carved out a degree of personal and communal autonomy. As this thesis will argue, dress functioned in this way as a powerful form of resistance.

Since the 1970s, the question of slave agency has stood resolutely at the heart of scholarship on American slavery. Historians, seeking to challenge Stanley Elkins' thesis that the horrors of enslavement reduced bondspeople to docility, approached slavery instead 'from the bottom up'.[4] In so doing, they largely answered variations of the same question: 'African American slaves: agents of their own destiny or not?'[5] John Blassingame's *The Slave Community* (1972) and Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1974) were amongst the first to 'recapture' enslaved agency and set the terms of the debate to follow. Analysing nineteenth-century slave narratives, Blassingame demonstrated that a shared African culture amongst the enslaved was not annihilated upon arrival in America but endured and even thrived amongst the slave population.[6] Genovese, in his seminal work, described the Old South as a 'historically unique kind of paternalist society' centred on the slave regime.[7] In line with Blassingame, he argued that enslaved men and women achieved a significant degree of personal and cultural autonomy *within* the 'peculiar institution'.[8] In the process, slave revolts were distinguished from 'everyday', implicit, acts of resistance – such as running away, feigning illness, or stealing food – which challenged a slaveholder's individual authority rather than the slave regime more broadly.[9]

The 1980s, by contrast, witnessed a backlash against this resistance-based portrayal of slave life. Challenging the tendency in early slave scholarship to take the male experience as

[4] S. Elkins, *Slavery; A Problem in the American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959).
[5] W. Johnson, 'On Agency', *Journal of social history*, 37/1 (2003), p114.
[6] J. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972).
[7] E. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1976), p4.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Johnson, 'On Agency', pp116-7.

universal, historians such as Deborah Gray White drew on women's history to emphasize the gendered nature of resistance. Her ground-breaking study *Ar'n't I a Woman?* (1985), for instance, argued that a bondswoman's agency was dictated by her childbearing responsibilities.[10] Other critics insisted that a focus on resistance had masked the true horrors of enslavement; more recent works have reached a broad consensus on this issue: accommodation and resistance to slavery, they agree, could and did occur simultaneously amongst the enslaved. The emergence of cultural history, furthermore, has proven an important catalyst for new studies on slavery. Analysing culture, not only in relation to politics, but as 'meaningful in and of itself', the 'cultural turn' has led to an increased attention to 'identity, the personal and the subjective' in all aspects of slave life.[11]

In American studies, dress is recognised as a fruitful subject of historical inquiry. Examining nineteenth-century fashion advice books, for example, Karen Halttunen demonstrates that clothing served to delineate a middle-class gentility.[12] In slavery scholarship, however, if mentioned at all, dress is generally imagined as another facet of bondspeople's oppression. One notable exception is Graham and Shane White's *Stylin': African and American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit.* Both during and after slavery, they argue, African American men and women used clothing to challenge white hegemony and to carve out for themselves a distinct subculture within American society.[13] Likewise, Stephanie Camp's *Closer to Freedom* examines how the enslaved resisted the temporal and spatial boundaries imposed by slaveowners through the creation of 'rival geographies' on the plantation. The black body is studied as one such space; inspired by previous works on

[10] D. Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1985).
[11] For an overview of these trends, see: E. A. Baptist and S. Camp, 'Introduction: A History of the History of Slavery in the Americas', in E. A. Baptist and S. Camp (eds), *New Studies in the History of American Slavery* (Athens, GA, 2006), pp1-21; Baptist and Camp, 'Introduction', p4.
[12] K. Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women, A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven, 1982).
[13] S. White and G. White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture, from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca, NY, 2018).

slavery and gender, Camp argues that in 'dressing up' enslaved women, more so than men, reclaimed their bodies as sites of resistance rather than domination.[14] Although detailed analysis of enslaved dress remains a rarity in the historiography of American slavery, the scholarship of the Whites and Camp has, in exciting and innovative ways, introduced clothing into the impassioned 'accommodation vs resistance' debate.

Nonetheless, implicit in existing works on slavery and dress is a belief that, while clothing might alleviate the horrors of enslavement, the slave system itself was never seriously threatened by bondspeople's self-fashioning. Building on the scholarship on racial passing, which explores how racial ambiguity was exploited by African Americans to secure freedom, I challenge this reluctance to think beyond the paradigm of everyday resistance.[15] When, I argue, enslaved men and women used their clothing to pass for white, they undermined the racialized justification for slavery: that there existed a biologically determined and insurmountable gulf between black and white races. Dressing as white, in other words, transmuted an implicit, individual act of day-to-day resistance into an explicit attack on the slave regime.

Such conclusions have been drawn from a broad range of sources. As well as the nineteenth-century narratives of former slaves, I examine planters' journals, the diaries of plantation mistresses and travel accounts of visitors to the South in order to better understand how dress intersected with race, class and gender. My thesis, however, is led primarily by an analysis of fugitive slave advertisements and interviews conducted with ex-slaves in the 1930s as part of the Federal Writers' Project, one of the New Deal's work relief programs. Commonly referred to as the WPA (Works Project Administration) narratives, these interviews are

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[14] S. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, 2004), pp7, 60-92.

[15] See M. J. Cutter, '"As White as Most White Women": Racial Passing in Advertisements for Runaway Slaves and the Origins of a Multivalent Term', *American Studies*, 54/4 (2016), pp73-97; A. Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

invaluable to the historian of American slavery. As detailed, first-person accounts of enslaved life, they allow us to understand clothing as it was experienced by bondspeople themselves, rather than their white 'superiors'. The narratives provide a detailed picture of dress as a site of contestation between the enslaved and their masters, as well as how it fit into day-to-day life on the plantation. The scale of the project, furthermore, allows the historian to compare the use of dress according to place and gender, adding a necessary depth to our understanding of enslaved clothing in the antebellum period.

As a source base, however, the WPA narratives are not without their limitations. The age of former slaves, for one, threatens to undermine the accuracy of their recollections. With the earliest interviews beginning in 1936, the majority of interviewees only experienced enslavement as children; as such, they were often spared from the most intense labour and harshest punishments. As one interviewer wrote of Manuel Johnson, 'although he was too young to remember much about slavery, Uncle Manuel recalls the happy old plantation days.'[16] Distortion also stemmed from the interviewers' methods and the interracial character of the interviews themselves, which prevented black informants from speaking openly and honestly about the realities of enslaved life. This, combined with a tendency for interviewers to offer material incentives in exchange for informants' memories, could produce an unduly favourable image of slavery.[17] When ex-slave Julia Brown was provided with 'rolls, butter, milk' and 'baloney' by her Georgia interviewer, Geneva Tonsill, she obligingly related some old ghost stories from the plantation. Indeed, so enthusiastic were Julia's recollections that Tonsill suspected that she 'was just talking to please [her]'.[18] Nevertheless, despite their

[16] Manuel Johnson, interviewed by Minnie Branham Stonestreet (8 May 1937), Library of Congress, Digital Collections, Manuscript Division, American Memory, "Born in Slavery", Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 2, p338, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.042 (6 March 2022). Hereinafter I will cite WPA narratives as interviewee name, date of interview, page number, permalink and date accessed.
[17] C. A. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill, 2016), pp197-221.
[18] Julia Brown (25 July 1939), pp148-53, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.041 (5 March 2022); C. A. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, p203.

shortcomings, the narratives comprise some of the most extensive testimony of enslaved dress and its functions in plantation life.

Fugitive slave advertisements, an unabating feature of antebellum newspapers, provide an equally fascinating insight into enslaved clothing. Slaveowners, anxious to recapture their slaves as quickly as possible, were concerned to describe runaways' appearances as accurately as they could and often related enslaved dress in almost excruciating detail. Although the majority of runaways were men – enslaved women were more rigidly tied to the plantation by their childrearing duties – female runaways were far from absent in such descriptions. As a result, the advertisements provide a rare and revealing insight into self-fashioning amongst both enslaved men *and* women. When slaveowners prefaced their advertisements with a fugitive slave's skin colour, moreover, they alluded to the mutually constitutive relationship between clothing and race. 'Ingram', wrote his owner, 'is a very bright mulatto, and will probably try to pass for a white man'; he had on when he left a 'black cotton hat, a green calico coat nearly new and dark pantaloons.'[19] Runaway slave advertisements thus shed light on the impressive array of fine clothing an enslaved person might amass, but also how they employed such dress in the making and unmaking of their slave identity.

In the context of slave resistance, then, this thesis is ultimately concerned with the role of dress in identity formation. Recognising dress as a tool of both resistance and oppression, chapter one examines its function in the construction and maintenance of the slave identity. I identify clothing as an important means by which the enslaved were made complicit in their own subjugation and forced to interiorize their status as the property of white planters. Chapter two, in response, analyses the ways in which bondspeople challenged this process of

[19] *The Hillsborough Recorder* (24 October 1855).

commodification. By dressing up and taking pleasure in their own bodies, enslaved men and women asserted their humanity, staking a claim to the class-based and gendered identities that slavery sought to deny them through vivid acts of self-fashioning. Furthermore, by adorning themselves in keeping with African traditions of dress, I posit that the enslaved fostered a distinct, communal, African American identity that powerfully resisted the encroachments of a white planter class.[20] Chapter three seeks to extend this line of argument. Analysing the role of dress in the construction of racial categories more broadly, I examine how clothing was used by bondspeople to enact white identities and, ultimately, attain freedom. Enslaved men and women who so transgressed the boundaries of race, I argue, were not simply committing an isolated act of everyday resistance; in revealing antebellum racial identities to be grounded in performance rather than biological 'fact', they completely and irreversibly undermined the racialized rationale for the entire slave regime.

[20] S. White and G. White, 'Slave Clothing and African-American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', *Past & Present,* 148/1 (Oxford, 1995), pp168-80.

Styled for Servitude:

Dress, Mastery, and the Marketplace

For antebellum men and women, a person's dress testified to one's character and their respective place in the social hierarchies which governed Southern life; black or white, slave or free, all adhered to this method of judgement. Ex-slave Kissey McKimm, for instance, recalled how even his 'master' fell victim to the implications of shabby dress: 'he had a high silk hat, but it was tore so bad, dat he held de top n' bottom to-gether wid a silk neckerchief'; white folks called him a 'miser', a 'hill-billy' and 'ma[de] fun of his clothes.'[1] Recognising the influence of dress in dictating social relations, slaveowners adorned enslaved men and women to mark their inferior status. If the clothing of the upper classes was well tailored, unsoiled by the ardours of physical labour, and made from the finest materials, such as silk, the dress of the enslaved was often the opposite. Bondsmen and women instead wore ill-fitting clothes of coarse fabrics, including osnaburg (a coarse, inexpensive linen), fustian (a cotton and linen mix), linsey-woolsey (a blend of wool and flax), calico (plain woven cotton), kersey (a type of wool) and satinet (a satin woven fabric usually made of cotton and wool mixed together).

Frequently, these materials were encompassed by the umbrella term 'negro cloth'.[2] An advertisement that appeared in *The Georgian* in October 1829 thus listed 'Mixed Plains, Mixed Kerseys, blue and mixed satinetts' and 'plain twilled linseys' under the heading 'Negro Cloths and Blankets, at reduced prices'.[3] Similarly, the South Carolina slave code of 1740, which prevailed until the later nineteenth century, determined that no owner 'shall

[1] Kissey McKimm (9 June 1937), p65, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.120 (14 February 2022).
[2] For more on the materials of slave clothing, see: K. Knowles, *Fashioning Slavery: Slaves and Clothing in the U.S. South, 1830-1865* (D.Phil. thesis, Rice University, 2014), pp46-55.
[3] *The Georgian* (29 October 1829).

permit such Negro or other slave to have or wear any sort of apparel and whatsoever, finer, other or greater value than Negro cloth'.[4] Dress, as Harriet Jacobs recalled, functioned in this way as 'one of the badges of slavery'; yet, it also operated as a crucial means by which African and African American men and women were forced to interiorize and comply with their bondage.[5]

This chapter, then, will examine enslaved dress as it has been more commonly understood in the historiography of slavery: as a tool of white oppression. Analysing the adornment of enslaved bodies in the antebellum slave market as well as on the plantation, I identify dress as central to the foregrounding of a bondsperson's economic value and thus to the construction of the slave identity more broadly. Examining the relationship between dress and gender, I demonstrate that clothing could nonetheless fashion this slave identity in contradictory ways. In the market, for instance, clothing functioned to emphasize a bondsperson's gender; in particular, the so-called 'fancy girls', light-skinned bondswomen sold as concubines, were adorned to stress their femininity and so increase the likelihood of a sale. In comparison, clothing on the plantation worked to reduce the enslaved to a chattel-like status through the deliberate suppression of their gender. Relying primarily on the narratives of ex-slaves, but drawing more widely upon plantation journals, the latter section of this chapter will expand upon clothing as an instrument of plantation management. As a critical facet of planter hegemony, dress, I argue, was essential to the maintenance of the slave regime.

Dress in the Slave Market:

The slave auction, a regular occurrence throughout the South, was characterised by a striking paradox: in dressing up for sale, bondspeople were stripped of their fundamental humanity.

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[4] A. Arabindan-Kesson, 'Dressed up and Laying Bare: Fashion in the Shadow of the Market', http://aas.princeton.edu/news/dressed-and-laying-bare-fashion-shadow-market (3 March 2022).
[5] H. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself* (Charlottesville, VA, 2002), p20.

Manipulating the visual dimensions of antebellum society, enslaved men and women were adorned in clean, respectable clothing which sought to maximise their economic value; 'Required to wash thoroughly', Solomon Northup was then 'furnished with a new suit', a 'hat, coat, shirt, pants and shoes'.[6] In order to mask individual defects, which damaged the prospects of a successful sale, the enslaved were often dressed the same.[7] Horace Cowles Atwater, a northern reverend who visited the South in 1856 and 1857, remembered 'rows of beautiful boys…dressed with the greatest regard to neatness and taste: blue pants, a roundabout jacket to match, with a clean collar turned over, *a la* Byron, fur hat, white stockings, and highly polished shoes'.[8] Clearly, presentation was of the utmost concern. Spending, at times, more than $150 a week on clothing, slave trader Hector Davis certainly spared little expense in such matters.[9]

To the foreign eye, therefore, the appearance of enslaved peoples at auction could come as a surprise. Far removed from the 'kind of state prison garb' he expected, Atwater was confronted with 'ladies, as fair as any that promenade Washington street, with the same fashionable style of dress, flounced skirts, flowing sleeves, embroidered bosoms, hair trimmed with ribbons' – 'nothing lacking to make them look attractive'.[10] Historians studying the dynamics of the slave auction frequently comment on the unclothing of bondspeople by white buyers in order to better examine their physical condition; such bodily adornment as Atwater described, however, was no less an act of oppression.[11] In dressing up for sale, African and African American men and women were 'forced to partake in the marketing of

[6] S. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853* (Auburn, NY, 1853), p78.
[7] M. D. McInnis, *Slaves Waiting for Sale: Abolitionist Art and the American Slave Trade* (Chicago, 2011), p136.
[8] H. C. Atwater, *Incidents of a Southern tour: or, The South, as seen with Northern eyes* (Boston, 1857), p23.
[9] McInnis, *Slaves Waiting for Sale*, p137.
[10] Atwater, *Incidents of a Southern tour*, p18, 21.
[11] See Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), pp144-5.

their own bodies.'[12] Dress, for instance, might be used to showcase a particular skillset or denote a certain type of labourer. As Ebenezer Davies recalled, men and women were 'well dressed' in order to 'set them off to the best advantage'; amongst them were several 'coloured girls' – 'evidently the daughters of white men' – who had 'their sewing-work with them, as evidence of their skill in that department.'[13] Likewise, enslaved women destined for the 'fancy trade' were often lavishly adorned so as to eroticise their bodies and attract the buyers' attention. The ornate appearance of one such 'fancy girl' certainly captured the gaze of plantation mistress Mary Boykin Chestnut: 'A bright mulatto with a pleasant face', she was 'magnificently gotten up in silks and satins.'[14] Dress, in this regard, contributed to the hyper-sexualization of the black female body. More broadly, it worked to reduce enslaved men and women to their economic value, identifiable only in relation to the profit they might bring.

Dress on the Plantation:

Outside of the auction room, dress continued to deny bondspeople their personhood. Within the plantation system, however, slaveowners quickly replaced the ornamentation of the slave market with insufficient clothing of the poorest quality that served to reinforce the reduction of enslaved men and women to a chattel status. William Green, for instance, was only ever 'half clothed'. His master, Harry Holliday, 'gave to each man two shirts, two pair of pantaloons made of coarse sacking, such as grocers keep salt in… He said any better was too good for niggers.'[15] As Green suggests, the discomfort and shapelessness of such attire was a frequent source of discontent. The clothes of the enslaved are 'made with every conceivable

[12] Arabindan-Kesson, 'Dressed Up and Laying Bare', http://aas.princeton.edu/news/dressed-and-laying-bare-fashion-shadow-market (3 March 2022).
[13] D. Ebenezer, *American Scenes and Christian slavery; a recent tour of four thousand miles in the United States* (London, 1849), p23.
[14] M. B. Chestnut, *A Diary from Dixie* (New York, 1905), p13.
[15] W. Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green (Formerly a Slave.) Written by Himself* (Springfield, MA, 1853), p7.

ingenuity of misfit', proclaimed journalist Q. K. Philander Doesticks, observing an auction of 436 slaves formerly owned by Pierce Butler; 'tossed on with a general appearance of looseness', the 'Southern negro always looks as if he could shake his clothes off without taking his hands out of his pockets.'[16] For planters, however, cheap and untailored dress, in minimising expenditure, was also necessary for economic efficiency: 'In furnishing negroes with bed clothes', wrote one planter in *DeBow's Review* in 1851, 'it is folly to buy the common blankets such as sell for $1 or $1 25' which have little 'warmth or durability'; 'one that will cost double the money will do more than four times the service.'[17] Dress, as a critical branch of plantation management, thus worked to secure the subjugation of the enslaved *and* the economic viability of the slave regime more broadly.

Supporting Hortense Spillers's thesis that slavery encouraged a process of 'ungendering', ex-slaves also lamented the effects of such dress on their gendered identities.[18] The absence of trousers until well into adulthood was, for many formerly enslaved men, particularly damaging to their masculinity. Jacob Branch, for instance, remembered wearing a 'shirt tail' until he was 'twelve or fourteen'. 'Boys and gals', he continued, were indistinguishable in their dress: 'You couldn't tell us apart!'[19] Caleb Craig was a fellow member of 'de shirt-tail brigade 'til [he] got to be a man;' even intense physical labour, such as ploughing, was undertaken in such attire.[20] Receiving new articles of clothing, then, could often mark the transition from boyhood to manhood.[21] Jasper Battle thus recalled with some pride the day his master allowed him to 'get rid of dem dresses', which were made 'jus' alak for boys and

[16] Q. K. Philander Doesticks, *What became of the slaves on a Georgia plantation? Great auction sale of slaves, at Savannah, Georgia, March 2d & 3d, 1859. A sequel to Mrs Kemble's Journal* (1863), p7.
[17] *DeBow's Review,* 10/3 (March 1851), p326.
[18] H. Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Diacritics,* 17/2 (Ithaca, NY, 1987), pp65-81.
[19] Jacob Branch (2 October 1937), p138, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.161 (14 February 2022).
[20] Caleb Craig (1937), p230, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.141 (14 February 2022).
[21] H. Bradley Griebel, "*New raiments of self": African-American Clothing in the Antebellum South* (D.Phil. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1994), p163.

gals', and 'wear shirts' instead. In a clear demonstration of the relationship between clothing and masculinity, he concludes: 'dat boys' shirt made ma feel powerful mannish.'[22] In all stages of life, however, the shabbiness or insufficiency of dress threatened the claims of enslaved men to masculinity. This was particularly so in their interactions with women. Caroline Farrow, an ex-slave from South Carolina described how 'once a nigger boy stole out to see his gal, all dressed up to kill.' When 'De patrollers found him at his gal's house and started to take off his coat so dey could whip him', he protested; he said, '"please don't let my gal see under my coat, 'cause I got on a bosom and no shirt."' The custom was, Farrow explained, for men to mask the absence of a shirt by wearing 'stiff, white bosoms held up around the neck'.[23] In disrupting gender conventions amongst the enslaved in this way, dress worked more subtly to disturb a bondsperson's sense of self.

For enslaved women, too, dress functioned to position femininity in opposition to blackness and to '[negate] womanhood as an ideological category.'[24] This was particularly so in the mid-nineteenth century by which time, as Bridget Heneghan argues convincingly, the feminine ideal of the 'True Woman' was heavily reliant on one's material belongings. The corseted dress, for instance, was hailed as an external manifestation of the qualities a 'True Woman' should possess: self-restraint, modesty, and an unsuitability for hard labour.[25] As such, it was frequently contrasted to the loose-fitting and thus distinctly unfeminine clothing of bondswomen.[26] Frederick Law Olmsted, visiting a plantation in South Carolina, was appalled to witness the blatant disregard amongst enslaved women for such 'feminine' tastes:

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[22] Jasper Battle (1937), p65, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.041 (14 February 2022).
[23] Caroline Farrow (16 September 1937), p39, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.142 (14 February 2022).
[24] E. Fox Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1988), p261.
[25] M. L. Roberts, 'True Womanhood Revisited', *Journal of Women's History,* 14/1 (2002), p150.
[26] B. T. Heneghan, *Whitewashing America: Material Culture and Race in the Antebellum Imagination* (Jackson, 2003), pp82-3, 97-8.

> 'They were dressed in coarse gray gowns, generally very much burned, and very dirty; which, for greater convenience of working in the mud, were reefed up with a cord drawn tightly around the body, a little above the hips – the spare amount of skirt bagging out between this and the waist-proper…Most of them had handkerchiefs, only, tied around their heads, some wore men's caps, or old slouched hats, and several were bareheaded… sly, sensual, and shameless, in all their expressions and demeanour, I never before had witnessed, I thought anything more revolting than the whole scene.'[27]

In flagrant breach of the fragility expected of the ideal Southern lady, the corporeality suggested by such dress was, for Olmsted at least, instantly repulsive.[28] Under no circumstances would the 'True Woman' be caught reefing up her dress in order to free her legs for labour, nor would she have need to; enslaved women who did so thus betrayed a lasciviousness and physicality which undermined their claims to femininity. Dress, in this light, was instrumental in excluding female slaves from normative gender categories. Defined not as woman or man, but as 'Other', slaveowners manipulated clothing to ensure that bondspeople identified with their slave status before all else.

Planters, keenly aware that dress was powerfully constitutive of personhood and individuality, thus used it to optimise plantation management. Adhering to an ideology of paternalism, which encouraged slaveowners to emulate the role of a benevolent father to their slave 'children', planters frequently made gifts of clothing in exchange for good behaviour or loyalty. 'Gave Dave Bartley & Atean a suit… for their fine conduct', wrote Louisiana planter Bennet Barrow in his plantation journal in 1839.[29] Favouritism, in such instances, was

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[27] F. L. Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States*, 2nd edn (2 vols, New York, 1862), i, p208.
[28] Heneghan, *Whitewashing America*, pp98-9.
[29] B. H. Barrow and E. A. Davis, *Plantation life in the Florida parishes of Louisiana, 1836-1846: as reflected in the diary of Bennet H. Barrow* (New York, 1943), p154.

rendered visible in the quality and quantity of such rewards. 'Slave girl Betty Lilly always had good clothes', explained Elizabeth Sparks: 'she wuz a favorite of [Massa's]'.[30]

Nonetheless, if dress could bestow a planter's favour, it was equally mobilised as a means of punishment. Often, the aim was to humiliate the wrongdoer: 'Charlie couldn' do enough wo'k to suit Marster Adams, so he put in what's knowed as the 'Louisiana shirt', remembered C. B. McRay. 'Dey pull diss on to him every mornin' and then he couldn' sit down or use no arms, coul' jus' walk 'roun' all day, de brunt of other slaves jokes.'[31] Bennet Barrow frequently chose dress as an alternative to the lash. Dennis, in retribution for his poor behaviour, was dressed in a 'red Flannel cap' and 'Exhbit[ed]' 'on a scaffold in the middle of the Quarter.' 'G. Jerry', 'Sam Wash & Bartley Bagging', meanwhile, were forced to wear 'skirts… instead of shirts & pants.'[32] Here, the mutually constructive relationship between dress and gender is manipulated in order to punish unruliness. Clothing thus proved a useful weapon in the planters' arsenal; in maintaining subservience on the plantation, whether through castigation or reward, it hardened the slave regime against insubordination.

Clothing, then, served to instil in enslaved men and women an obedience towards their masters; yet it also structured hierarchies of authority amongst the enslaved themselves.[33] Ex-slaves, for instance, frequently comment on the disparity between the dress of domestic servants and those who laboured in the fields, often with a hint of resentment. House servants, as Frederick Douglass explained, 'constituted a sort of black aristocracy': 'the delicately-formed colored maid rustled in the scarcely worn silk of her young masters, so that in dress…the distance between these favoured few and the sorrow and hunger-smitten

[30] Elizabeth Sparks (13 January 1937), p54 http://hl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.170 (7 December 2021).
[31] C. B. McRay (6 July 1937), p42 http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.163 (4 September 2021).
[32] Barrow and Davis, *Plantation life*, p154.
[33] S. White and G. White, *Stylin',* pp26-7.

multitudes of the quarter and the field was immense.'[34] Annie Young Henson worked as a 'second nurse' and was thus 'one of the inner servants of the family, not one of the field hands.' Her position, she remembered, denoted sartorial benefits: her 'clothes were made better, and better quality than the others', and she received a 'few things of feminine dainty that was discarded by the mistress.'[35] Clearly, the sophistication of house servants' attire was a considerable source of pride; dressed 'better' than her fellow bondspeople, Annie's privileged position on the plantation was made visible. As a discernible marker of unequal status, clothing thus fractured the coherence of the slave community and mitigated against collective resistance.[36]

Conclusion:

Whether dressed up for sale or garbed in shapeless and uncomfortable attire, clothing 'imprinted slave status on black bodies.'[37] As ex-slave Ella Johnson recalled, 'I dressed up and come out once and somebody called the governor and said, "look at your cook." And he said, "that ain't my cook"'… 'I went in and put on my rags and come in the kitchen to cook and he said, "that is my cook."'[38] If dress functioned in antebellum society to construct masculinities and femininities, then, as Johnson suggests, it also constructed the slave identity. Dressed only to meet the demands of their labour, clothing functioned to repress the bondsperson's fundamental humanity and encourage the internalization of their inferior status: 'There is no subject which presents to the mind of the male slave a greater contrast between his own condition and that of his master, than the relative… appearance of his wife and mistress', declared Charles Ball. 'The one, poorly clad, poorly fed, and exposed to all the

[34] F. Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time* (Boston, 1892), p49.
[35] Annie Young Henson (27 September 1937), pp26-7 http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.080 (14 February 2022).
[36] See Blassingame, *The Slave Community.*
[37] S. Camp, 'The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861', *The Journal of Southern History*, 68/2 (2002), p559.
[38] Ella Johnson (1938), p82 http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.024 (14 February 2022).

hardships of the cotton field; the other dressed in clothes of gay and various colors, ornamented with jewelery, and carefully protected from the rays of the sun, and the blasts of the wind.'[39] Dress, therefore, proved such an effective means of resistance for bondspeople *because* it was so central to their subjugation.

[39] C. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains; or, The Life of an American Slave* (New York, 1943), p151.

‘Every possible variety of uncouth and fantastic garb’:[1]

Dress as Resistance in the Antebellum South

Scattered amongst antebellum depictions of the enslaved as they are more popularly imagined – outfitted in dreary, ill-fitting rags – are striking images of black bodies lavishly adorned and vividly embellished in the latest fineries. Visiting the South in 1854, Reverend Nehemiah Adams was shocked to observe enslaved men dressed with ‘all the bearing of respectable, dignified, Christian gentlemen’:

> ‘To see slaves with broadcloth suits, well-fitting and nicely-ironed fine shirts, polished boots, gloves, umbrellas for sunshades, the best of hats, their young men with their blue coats and bright buttons, in the latest style, white Marseilles vests, white pantaloons, brooches in their shirt bosoms, gold chains, elegant sticks, and some old men leaning on their ivory and silver-headed staves…was more than I was prepared to see.’[2]

This propensity for ‘shewy dress’, however, was not restricted to enslaved men; fugitive slave advertisements frequently hint at the impressive wardrobes amassed by bondswomen, too.[3] ‘One light chintz gown… with a large flower and yellow stripes’, ‘a pink-coloured moreen petticoat’, ‘a new black peeling bonnet’, ‘a chip hat trimmed with gauze and feathers’, ‘four good shifts’ and ‘one pair of blue worsted shoes with white heels’ and ‘a large pair of silver buckles’ were amongst the items of clothing Jenny took with her as she made her escape in 1782.[4] Clearly, the enslaved took pride in their appearance and would go to great lengths to preserve it. G. W. Hawkins, for one, remembered how ‘many a young lady’

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[1] Doesticks, *Great auction sale of slaves,* p7.
[2] N. Adams, *A South-side view of slavery: or, Three months at the South, in 1854* (Boston, 1854), pp29-30.
[3] *Baltimore Journal and Advertiser* (25 May 1787).
[4] Ibid (17 December 1782).

would 'walk to church with her shoes flung over her shoulders and wait till she got nearly there before she would put them on. She didn't want to wear them out too soon.'[5]

As Stephanie Camp argues persuasively, adorned in this way, the enslaved mobilised their bodies as a 'site of pleasure and resistance' rather than brutality. Festooned in all manner of colours and materials, bondsmen and women asserted their value, not as chattel, but as human beings.[6] 'Dress', as Adams declared, was a 'powerful means of securing respect'; adorned so genteelly, it was 'impossible' to treat bondspeople 'with indignity'.[7] Building on Camp's scholarship, then, this chapter identifies dress as a critical means by which the enslaved battled against the terms of their bondage. Piecing together the tantalising glimpses of enslaved fashion in the archives, I first examine how dress functioned as a transgressive form of self-expression, allowing bondspeople to destabilise the visually oriented hierarchies of antebellum society and to exercise a degree of bodily autonomy.[8] The second section of this chapter analyses the fabrication of such dress in closer detail. Incorporating African textile traditions and aesthetics into their designs, I argue, allowed enslaved men and women to foster stronger ties of kinship and resist cultural annihilation; in the process, a distinct African American style was formed.[9] Finally, I examine clothing as it operated in an economic context. As producers and consumers of dress, the enslaved carved out for themselves a degree of economic independence that challenged slaveholders' claims to wield an absolute mastery over their bondspeople. Indeed, in trading with poor whites in an 'underground economy', bondsmen and women forged interracial alliances that threatened to undermine planters' hegemony more broadly.[10]

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[5] G. W. Hawkins (n.d.), p219 http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.023 (20 September 2021).
[6] Camp, 'The Pleasures of Resistance', p544.
[7] Adams, *A South-side view of slavery,* p30.
[8] White and White, *Stylin',* pp16-18.
[9] White and White, 'Slave Clothing', pp168-72.
[10] J. Forrett, 'Slaves, Poor Whites, and the Underground Economy of the Rural Carolinas', *Journal of Southern History,* 70/4 (2004), p821.

Dress, the Black Body and Resistance:

Enslaved men and women did not simply dress up, they dressed well. Often, their attire compared favourably to that of white men and women, much to the latter's disdain. Olmsted, travelling in Virginia, described 'many more well-dressed and highly-dressed coloured people than white'.[11] Arraying themselves in the finest and most fashionable materials, the visual signifiers of gentility, enslaved men and women laid claims to a superior position in the social hierarchy.[12] '[A]mong this dark gentry', marvelled Olmsted, were 'the finest French cloths, embroidered waistcoats, patent-leather shoes, resplendent brooches, silk hats, kid gloves and *eau de mille fleurs*, were quite common'; the 'coloured ladies', meanwhile, 'were dressed not only expensively, but with good taste and effect, after the latest Parisian mode.'[13] For white men and women, such transgressions were a profound source of anxiety. Indeed, many turned to the law in order to prevent alleged 'extravagances' in black dress. In 1822, for instance, the State Legislature of South Carolina received a request from the Charleston City Council concerning the 'apparel of persons of color'; 'The expensive dress worn by many' of the enslaved, it claimed, is 'highly destructive to their honesty & industry and subversive of that subordination which policy requires to be enforced.'[14] Dress, as the City Council duly recognised, could contest a bondsperson's servile status.

This transgression was at its most striking when enslaved men and women donned the clothing of their masters and mistresses, usually without their permission.[15] Pinkey Howard, for instance, 'used ter git [her] young mistresses dresses and put em on and git out in the yard and flounce and flip.'[16] In committing this 'symbolic transgression of place', however,

[11] Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom,* i, p46.
[12] White and White, 'Slave Clothing', pp154-9.
[13] Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom,* i, p46.
[14] White and White, 'Slave Clothing', p168.
[15] Camp, 'The Pleasures of Resistance', p566.
[16] Pinkey Howard (30 November 1936), p334, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.023 (19 September 2021).

bondswomen simultaneously negated the 'ungendering' of black bodies within the slave regime.[17] Francis Fedric recalled an illicit party held in his master's house during his absence; dressed in the 'gowns' of their 'young mistress', the female slaves, he declares, possessed 'all the airs of duchesses'.[18] Adorned in their owners' clothing, then, the enslaved claimed both the class and gender privileges of the Southern gentry as their own. As a result, dressing up was often accompanied by an additional act of insubordination: a breach of the plantation's 'geographies of containment'.[19] In an 'emphatic repudiation of their allotted social role', Fedric describes how 'the women…walked with all the consequence, and imitating all the manners of their mistresses, into the dining room, and seated themselves at the tables.'[20] Clothing, in this way, worked to deconstruct racial and gender hierarchies, allowing the enslaved to literally encroach on the world of their supposed superiors.[21]

African Dress Traditions and an African American Aesthetic:

If the enslaved took considerable pride in their dress, white observers frequently dismissed such adornment as a disastrous parody of white fashion. Fanny Kemble, the wife of Georgia planter Pierce Butler, described the 'Sabbath toilet' of the enslaved as 'the most ludicrous combination of incongruities that you can conceive':

> 'Frills, flounces, ribbands, combs stuck in their woolly head, as if they held any portion of the stiff and ungovernable hair, filthy finery, every colour in the rainbow, and the deepest possible shades blended in fierce companionship round one dusky visage, head handkerchiefs that put one's very eyes out from a mile off, chintzes with sprawling patterns, that might be seen if the clouds were printed with them – beads,

[17] Camp, 'The Pleasures of Resistance', pp560-1.
[18] F. Fedric, *Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky; or, Fifty Years of Slavery in the Southern States of America* (London, 1863), pp63-4.
[19] Camp, 'The Pleasures of Resistance', p535.
[20] White and White, *Stylin',* p35; Fredric, *Slave Life*, p64.
[21] White and White, 'Slave Clothing', p184.

> bugles, flaring sashes, and above all, little fanciful aprons, which finish these incongruous toilets with a sort of airy grace, which I assure you is perfectly indescribable.'[22]

Behind such 'incongruity', however, lay a profound logic. As Graham and Shane White argue convincingly, such dress was not merely a failed appropriation of white style; rather, enslaved men and women fashioned themselves according to a unique 'aesthetic code' which was grounded in African traditions of dress. In the far-reaching Mande culture of West Africa, for instance, opposing colours and patterns are set next to one another in order to achieve an almost rhythmic design. Indeed, closer examination of ex-slave narratives reveals how bondspeople incorporated this principle of 'rhythmic textiles' – namely 'unpredictability' and 'movement' – into their everyday dress;[23] 'Everything was stripedy', recalled Morris Sheppard, because 'Mammy like to make it fancy.'[24] The influence of this West African aesthetic is also strikingly evoked by William Hayden:

> 'The pantaloons, which I wore, would have puzzled the wisest magician of the east…here stood out in bold relief, a large spot of virginia linsey – there a half section of red flannel – here, a patch of home-made cloth, which appeared to have belonged to the nether garments of Mathusalem…and the coat! - Ye Gods! Joseph's was but a faint idea of the patch work, and variety of colors which decorated my back. From black to green – from white to red – from olive to brown – from scarlet to claret – from yellow to crimson – from lake to blue, and in fact all these, with their

[22] Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* (New York, 1863), pp68-9.
[23] White and White, 'Slave Clothing', pp169-72, 184-5.
[24] Morris Sheppard (n.d), p287, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.130 (12 February 2022).

> innumerable shades added 'dignity' to my looks…and acted as a mark of attraction to every passer by.'[25]

A remarkable fusion of West African design principles and American-sourced materials, Hayden's unique appearance was an 'object of universal remark.' Crucially, though, it was received differently amongst the white population as it was amongst the black: 'The whites', he recalled, seemed surprised, and at a loss to know what [he] was'; members of his own race, by contrast, 'paid due deference to their superior, whenever [he] passed them.'[26] Building on the Whites' thesis, it seems likely that the reverence shown by black men and women stemmed from their recognition of Hayden's extraordinary attire as a form of cultural expression. In this light, Kemble's initial offense upon witnessing bondspeople's 'incongruous toilets' is a product of her ignorance: as a white woman, she was blind to the cultural significance of such vibrant visual display.[27]

Empowered by African dress traditions, then, the enslaved were able to carve out their own distinct style. If such 'Africanisms' were subsequently shaped and moulded by the unique circumstances of American life, they nonetheless united bondspeople in a commemoration of their shared heritage.[28] Steeve Buckridge, for instance, has argued that the process of dying clothes with plant substances was one such 'feature of cultural retention and expression', particularly amongst enslaved women.[29] 'Ah'll tell yuh how tuh dye', declared ex-slave Emma Tidwell:

> 'Er little beech bark dyes slate color set wid coppor. Hickory bark an bay leaves dyes yellow set wid chamber lye; bamboo dyes turkey red, set color wid copper. Pine straw

[25] W. Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South. Written by Himself* (Cincinnati, 1846), pp132-3.
[26] Ibid, p59.
[27] Kemble, *Journal*, p69.
[28] S. Buckridge, 'The Role of Plant Substances in Jamaican Slave Dress', *Caribbean quarterly*, 49/3 (Kingston, 2003), p61.
[29] Ibid.

> an sweetgum dyes purple, set color wid chamber lye. Ifn yuh don' bleave hit try em all.'[30]

Adapting their knowledge of Africa's plants and raw materials to the American environment, the enslaved thus preserved distinct elements of African culture. The production of dye, however, was no less significant than the colour itself. Andrea Feeser, for example, has related the popularity of indigo-dyed cloth in South Carolina to the association of the colour blue with protection in West African cultures.[31] South Carolinian slaves who so used indigo in the production of their dress thus resisted their enslavement on two levels: they reclaimed a crop they cultivated as a means of self-expression and, drawing on African symbolism, they mobilised colour as a defence against the horrors of slavery.

By the 1840s and 1850s, enslaved women, now almost entirely responsible for the manufacture of clothing on the plantation, were confirmed as the 'principal exponents and protectors of African culture.'[32] It is significant, for example, that one of the most recognisable components of West African dress, the headwrap, was associated predominantly with bondswomen. Philander Doesticks described how female slaves, 'by a sudden and graceful twist of their fingers', manufactured 'gorgeous turbans' from 'gay-colored handkerchief[s]'. Occasionally, he adds, there was a more 'elaborate turban, a turban complex and mysterious…ornamented with a few beads or bright bits of ribbon.'[33] Defying white assertions that the headwrap was a marker of servitude, enslaved women mobilised it instead as a 'uniform of rebellion' that evoked a common cultural ancestry. Helen Bradley Griebel, for instance, suggests that bondswomen deliberately tied the headwrap on the crown of the head rather than under the chin (as was common for Euro-Americans) so it resembled a

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[30] Emma Tidwell (n.d), p331, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.026 (17 September 2021).
[31] A. Feeser, *Red, White & Black, Make Blue: Indigo in the Fabric of Colonial South Carolina Life* (Athens, GA, 2013), p38.
[32] Buckridge, 'Plant Substances', p70.
[33] Doesticks, *Great auction of slaves,* p7.

'regal coronet'.[34] Emily Burke, a New England teacher who taught in Georgia in the 1840s, thus recalled how enslaved women fashioned their 'turbans' by 'folding a cotton handkerchief in that peculiar kind of way known only to themselves.'[35] Invested with meanings unintelligible to whites, the headwrap exemplifies the development of an 'anti-style' amongst the enslaved.[36] As Burke explained, the 'high colors' of these 'gaudy' turbans were barely 'endurable' to her, but 'most congenial' to African-American 'tastes.'[37]

Dress in the Informal and Underground Economies:

Not all dress, however, was made on the plantation. In order to embellish their wardrobes, many enslaved men and women actively engaged, as both producers and consumers, in the so-called 'informal economy' of the South.[38] Betty Wood is one of a growing number of historians who have devoted considerable attention to this aspect of enslaved lives. It was not uncommon, she argues, for planters to allow their slaves a marked degree of economic independence; through the cultivation of small plots of land and the sale of its produce, the enslaved were able to purchase material goods that could alleviate the trials of bondage.[39] As Joseph Ingraham described, 'it is customary for planters in the neighbourhood to give their slaves a small piece of land to cultivate for their own use, by which, those who are industrious, generally make enough to keep themselves and their wives in extra finery and spending money throughout the year.'[40]

Clothing, as Ingraham suggests, was a frequent item of expenditure: Nan Stewart, for instance, remembered how she 'us' tu gether e turkey eggs an' guinea eggs an' sell 'em' in

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[34] Griebel, *New Raiments of Self,* pp302, 312-13.
[35] E. Burke, *Reminiscences of Georgia* (Ohio, 1850), pp19-20.
[36] Griebel, *New Raiments of Self,* pp300-1.
[37] Burke, *Reminiscences,* pp19-20.
[38] Forret, 'Underground Economy', p783.
[39] B. Wood, *Women's Work, Men's Work: The Informal Slave Economies of Lowcountry Georgia* (Athens, GA, 1995).
[40] J. H. Ingraham, *The South-West. By a Yankee* (2 vols, New York, 1835), ii, p54.

order to buy herself a 'nankeen dress';[41] Pauline Johnson's 'daddy', meanwhile, 'work[ed] de ground he own on Sunday and sold things' to buy her 'shoes' and 'clothes'.[42] Clearly, the enslaved were avid consumers of dress; yet their acquisition of new clothing was driven as much by indulgence as it was necessity. Mary Boykin Chestnut, for instance, recalled bondspeople purchasing 'splendid Parisian silks and satins' from a 'mulatto woman' who kept 'shop under a roof in an out-of-the-way old house'; 'The ci-devant rich whitewomen sell to, and the negroes buy of, this woman', she explained.[43] In dissociating bondspeople, as commodities themselves, from the items they sold, such trade constituted a crucial, if subconscious, act of resistance.[44] For Ellen Call Long, a prosperous member of the planter class, the 'negro women in bright bandanas' who traded in the New Orleans marketplace were 'as free as the customer' they served; 'slavery', or so it seemed, 'had little signification' for them.[45]

This experience, however, was largely restricted to South Carolina and Georgia. Outside of the low-country, the gang system of labour – which left bondspeople with little time for themselves – combined with a scarcity of land to restrict this element of independent economic activity amongst the enslaved. If, therefore, participation in the public marketplace mitigated against the dehumanisation of enslaved men and women, as a form of resistance it disturbed rather than destroyed the foundations of the slave regime. Indeed, because participation in the 'informal economy' was sanctioned by the slaveowner, it was, as Dylan Penningroth claims, 'perfectly compatible with the institution of slavery.'[46] Some planters

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[41] Nan Stewart (9 June 1937), p87, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.120 (12 February 2022).
[42] Pauline Johnson and Felice Boudreaux (1937), p225, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.162 (2 September 2021).
[43] Chestnut, *A Diary from Dixie*, p300.
[44] A. T. Marshall, '"They are supposed to be lurking around the city": Enslaved Women Runaways in Antebellum Charleston', *The South Carolina Historical Magazine,* 115/3 (Charleston, 2014), p202.
[45] E. C. Long, *Florida Breezes; or, Florida, new and old. A facsimile reproduction of the 1883 ed., with introd. By Margaret Louise Chapman* (Florida, 1962), p26.
[46] D. E. Paterson, 'Slavery, Slaves, and Cash in a Georgia Village, 1825-1865', *The Journal of Southern History,* 75/4 (2009), p889.

even sought to contain such commerce within the plantation itself; 'Mr. X', a South Carolina planter, 'has a rule to purchase everything [the enslaved] desire to sell, and to give them a high price for it' so as to prevent them trading elsewhere, recalled Olmsted.[47] As a form of resistance, then, participation in the 'informal economy' was not without its limitations.

In comparison, the illicit trade between bondspeople and poor whites posed an altogether more significant threat to the 'peculiar institution'; rooted in theft and criminal activity, this 'underground economy' routinely undermined slaveowners' authority.[48] Clothing, recognised as a useful form of currency, was a prominent item of exchange.[49] Prior to his escape from bondage, Jack Bray attempted to sell the 'variety of cloaths' he possessed for 'hard money.'[50] Olmsted similarly recalled how, 'in nearly every Southern town', 'men of no character… open[ed] cheap clothing and trinket shops' and engaged in 'an unlawful trade with simple negroes'; this clandestine commerce, he adds, was a 'great annoyance to planters' everywhere.[51] By its very definition, then, the 'underground economy' depended on enslaved resistance; defiance of the geographical and temporal boundaries of the plantation was paramount if the trade was to remain undiscovered. Bennet Barrow certainly recognised as much: 'If a negro is suffered to sell anything he chooses…a spirit of trafficing at once is created'; 'to carry this on both means and time are necessary, neither of which is he of right possessed.'[52] Enslaved men and women who engaged in such activities thus exposed the limits of planters' control.

By the mid-nineteenth century, involvement in this 'underground economy' had peaked. Heightened fears of insubordination amongst the enslaved population, a product of

[47] Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom,* i, pp254-5.
[48] Forret, 'Underground Economy', pp821-2.
[49] White and White, *Stylin',* p15.
[50] *Baltimore Journal and Advertiser* (3 September 1782).
[51] Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom,* i, pp252-3, 331.
[52] Barrow and Davies, *Plantation Life,* p52.

abolitionism, encouraged planters to limit slaves' economic activities. This, combined with increasing poverty amongst the poor white population, drove increasing numbers of bondspeople to engage in illicit trade. It was not, however, the quantity of such interactions so much as their interracial character that antagonised slaveowners; 'The worst sort of abolitionists', wrote one aggrieved North Carolinian to the State Legislature, are the poor whites who 'clandestinely trade with slaves' in 'stolen goods'.[53] As Jeff Forrett argues persuasively, these economic relationships threatened to establish amongst bondspeople and poor whites 'a common identity as an impoverished, inferior and biracial class.'[54] It is no wonder, then, that Southern whites lamented the effects of this trade on the slave regime more broadly. 'This abominable practice of trading with slaves is not only taking our produce from us, but injuring our slave property', remarked an article that appeared in the *Charleston Standard* in 1854.[55] Dress, in forming a crucial component of this trade, thus threatened to dissolve the racial solidarities upon which planter authority depended.

Conclusion:

Amongst the acts of everyday resistance which historians have hitherto identified, self-fashioning stands alone as a deliberately blatant and highly visible form of insubordination. In dressing above their station, bondspeople forced planters to confront the limitations of their power; the black body, vivaciously adorned, was disassociated from the subjugation it experienced and reinscribed as a vehicle for self-expression, pleasure, animation, and desire. Furthermore, as it functioned in both illicit and sanctioned commerce, dress worked to establish bondsmen and women as consumers rather than commodities. Enslaved dress, however, conveyed more than individual defiance; through the incorporation of West African

[53] Forret, 'Underground Economy', pp806, 821.
[54] Ibid, p822.
[55] Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom,* i, p253.

traditions of textile design and production, bondsmen and women strengthened the ties of kinship which made up the slave community and established a cultural affinity that would long outlast the abolition of slavery. Indeed, adapting African customs of dress to the peculiarities of the American South in a process of 'sartorial creolization', the enslaved used their clothing to demarcate distinct African American 'subcultures'.[56] As arbiters of their own garb, then, bondspeople fashioned identities, both personal and communal, which challenged their status as property.

[56] S. White, 'A Question of Style: Blacks in and around New York City in the Late 18th Century', *The Journal of American folklore* (Arlington, VA, 1989), p24.

Wearing Whiteness:

Dress and the Construction of Race

If dress functioned to loosen the shackles of bondage, it could also break them completely. Runaway advertisements make frequent reference to enslaved men and women disguising themselves, via their clothes, as part of the free black population in order to physically as well as psychologically liberate themselves from slavery. 'Eleanor', proclaimed one such advertisement published in 1789, 'will probably pass for a free Negro', aided unquestionably by the 'great variety of Clothes' she took with her, including 'a black Silk Cardinal, lined with white Flannel, a mock Marseilles Petticoat', 'a Pair of new high-heeled Leather shoes' and 'Two Pair of Yarn Stockings'.[1] Fugitive slaves, exploiting the possibilities of sweeping demographic change, which allowed for an unprecedented degree of social anonymity, often styled themselves more specifically as tradesmen or artisans affiliated with an increasingly mobile free black population. One particularly skilled 'Mulatto waiting-man' was predicted to pass for free by professing himself as both a 'Shoemaker' and a barber, taking with him some 'Shoemaker Tools' and being able to 'shave and dress a Wig' to an excellent standard.[2]

Passing for free, however, was by no means the only choice available for a fugitive slave; by varying their attire, the enslaved could also fashion (quite literally) new gender and racial identities. Judith More, warned her disgruntled owner, will dress in 'mens cloaths' – a 'brown waistcoat, black breeches, and an old lacked hat' – in order to 'disguise' herself as 'an Indian boy.'[3] With this in mind, chapter three examines the implications of dress for antebellum identity formation more generally. Connecting the narratives of ex-slaves and runaway slave advertisements to a burgeoning literature on racial passing, I identify dress as central to the

[1] *Baltimore Journal and Advertiser* (1 December 1789).
[2] *Maryland Gazette* (20 October 1763).
[3] *Baltimore Journal and Advertiser* (10 November 1778).

construction of race in this period. Enslaved men and women who styled themselves as white, I argue, thus undermined an emerging pro-slavery discourse of 'black blood' which insisted on the fixity of racial categories.[4] In the final section of this chapter, I employ the narrative of ex-slaves William and Ellen Craft as a case study through which to further explore clothing as a catalyst for identity transgressions. More particularly, I assess the complex interactions between gender and race that occurred when enslaved women passed as white men. In so doing, I suggest that dress functioned as more than everyday resistance; it helped to secure freedom.

Passing for White: Dress in the Making of Race

Passing for free, over the course of the antebellum period, increasingly denoted a particular racial transgression: passing for white. Dress, in such instances, abetted the construction and deconstruction of racial categories. 'Jack', announced one runaway advertisement, commonly wears 'a short light-colour'd coat, of country cloth, fitted, trim'd with pewter buttons, a jacket of the same, and brown cotton or bucskin breeches', and carries with him a 'pair of boots, silver-plated spurs' and a 'tolerable good felt hat, with a silver button'; he 'will pass very well for a white man'.[5] Such change, to borrow Ira Berlin's helpful categories of comparison, was inextricably linked to a transformation in the nature of the slave system from a more fluid 'society with slaves' to a rigidly enforced 'slave society'.[6] In other words, by the 1820s, a regime in which 'to be white was not necessarily to be free; to be black was not necessarily to be a slave; and to be a mulatto or racially mixed was not necessarily to be either of these', had been replaced by a system which equated enslavement with blackness.[7] As South Carolina Judge William Harper so strikingly declared in 1831, 'a slave cannot be a white

[4] Cutter, '"As White as Most White Women"', pp77-9.
[5] *Baltimore Journal and Advertiser* (3 September 1782).
[6] Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, p32.
[7] Ibid, p36.

man'.[8] Combined with the rising threat of abolitionism as well as Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion, taken by whites as affirmation of the dangers posed by a free black population, between 1830 and 1860 such uncompromising attitudes towards racial difference only solidified, coalescing in the self-enslavement laws passed by many states in the 1850s. Building on a racialized understanding of slavery as the social condition most beneficial to black men and women, the laws offered free blacks the opportunity to select their master and voluntarily enslave themselves. Unsurprisingly, few were keen.

In binding race and slavery in this way, white Southerners relied on an emerging 'scientific' discourse of race, which mobilised physiological explanations to 'prove' the incommensurability of black and white. Increasingly, the 'one-drop rule' was the standard by which race was measured. As Emily Burke explained: in the South 'all who have a drop of the African blood in their veins, however white their skins may be, are called negroes.'[9] Walter Johnson, for instance, adroitly demonstrates how slave traders at auction marketed their slaves in line with an 'imagined blood quantum', distinguishing 'Negro' from 'Mulatto', and 'Quadroon' from 'Octoroon'.[10] Disgruntled slaveowners who described their fugitive slaves as 'nearly white' (or variations thereof) in their runaway advertisements likewise embody this determination to isolate something of a racial 'essence'.[11] Isaac B. Kelly thus described 'Jim' in the following manner: 'a bright mulatto, almost white'.[12]

Calculating a racial 'essence' was one thing; locating it was quite another. With the effects of interracial sex rendered visible by an ever-lightening slave population, in reality, the ideology of inherent racial difference was riddled with ambiguities. 'It was not uncommon', declared

[8] Ibid, p32.
[9] Burke, *Reminiscences,* p88.
[10] W. Johnson, 'The Slave Trader, the White Slave, and the Politics of Racial Determination in the 1850s', *The Journal of American history,* 87/1 (Bloomington, Ind, 2000), p16.
[11] M. J. Cutter, '"As White as Most White Women"', p79.
[12] *The Daily North Carolinian* (11 January 1858).

Olmsted, 'to see slaves so white that they could not be easily distinguished from pure-blooded whites.'[13] Scottish geologist Charles Lyell, meanwhile, was surprised to discover that his 'American companions' could not tell him 'without inquiry, to which race certain colored individuals belong'.[14] Indeed, studying trials of racial determination, Ariela Gross argues convincingly that 'scientific' definitions of racial incommensurability coexisted and competed with an understanding of race as performative. This was made possible by the peculiarities of Southern conceptions of the self. As cultural historians have demonstrated, where nineteenth-century New Englanders cited reputation as merely a reflection of one's inner character, for Southerners the opposite was true: a man's purest self was constructed through external manifestations. Whiteness, as Gross explains, was thus achieved through demonstrations of virtue and honour. In staking a legal claim to white identities, then, racially ambiguous men emphasized their adherence to a gentleman's 'Code of Conduct' and their participation in civic affairs, such as jury service. Racially ambiguous women, meanwhile, cited sexual purity and moral correctness as proof of their whiteness. Simply put, 'to be white was to act white.'[15]

Racial identities, however, were also constructed through one's clothing. '[W]ell dressed in a 'good decent suit', Wiliam Grimes, the enslaved son of a wealthy planter from Virginia, 'frequently walked the streets of Savannah in an evening' as a white man. To the onlooking 'guards', Grimes' gentlemanly attire testified to the whiteness suggested by his 'light complexion'.[16] Henry Bibb recalled a similar liminality. With his light skin proving an obstacle to sale, Bibb was dressed in a suit of 'old slave trading clothes' and sent out into New Orleans to search for a suitable master himself. As Bibb relates, 'much better dressed

[13] Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, ii, p210.
[14] C. Lyell, *A second visit to the United States of North America by Sir Charles Lyell* (London, 1849), p293.
[15] A. Gross, 'Litigating Whiteness: Trials of Racial Determination in the Nineteenth-Century South', *The Yale law journal*, 108/1 (New Haven, 1998), pp112-14, 156-7, 162.
[16] W. Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave. Written by himself* (New York, 1825), p41.

than usual', he was mistaken by a Tennessee gentleman for a slave trader: the gentleman 'smiled and appeared to be much pleased at my visit on such laudable business', asking '"what kind of slaves have you got, sir?"'[17] The irony of this moment, as Bibb is addressed with the same niceties afforded to white men of standing, is not lost on the reader. Clearly, dress could undermine a racialized belief in the discernibility of 'black blood'.

Racial and Gender Passing in William Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*:

The narrative of William and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom,* provides a unique case study through which to view the role of dress in the construction and deconstruction of antebellum racial identities. Published in 1860, the text describes how the Crafts, with Ellen assuming the disguise of a white gentleman and William her slave, made their hazardous journey from enslavement in Macon, Georgia, to freedom in Philadelphia. From the outset, William is concerned with exposing the lie in pro-slavery racial ideology: slavery, he argues, owes little to 'race' or 'color', and everything to 'power'.[18] Indeed, William explains, Ellen herself was so nearly white that she was 'frequently mistaken for a child of the family' whom she served.[19] Dress, moreover, serves to reiterate race as a cultural construct. Donning the insignia of the prosperous slaveholding class, Ellen fashions for herself a convincing white identity; adorned in 'a pair of green spectacles', a top hat, a 'fashionable cloth cloak', a cravat, and sporting a shortened haircut, she 'made a most respectable looking gentleman.'[20] The implications of this transformation are profound: if dress could be mobilised to transgress racial boundaries, then race itself is not a viable

[17] H. Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave* (New York, 1849), pp105-8.
[18] W. Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (London, 1860), p3.
[19] Ibid, p2.
[20] Ibid, pp35, 60.

signifier of difference. The ideological basis for the entire slave system, an insurmountable distinction between black and white, is thus dramatically undermined.

Allyson Hobbs argues for an understanding of racial passing as 'playful', theatrical, or even humorous.[21] The Crafts' text, in parts, certainly betrays this tendency. It is William, for instance, who is accused of dressing above his station: 'I reckon, stranger, you are *"spiling"* that ere nigger of yourn, by letting him wear such a devilish fine hat', remarked one 'uncouth planter' to Ellen upon seeing William's 'very good second-hand white beaver'. Oblivious to the irony of the situation, that the 'Mr. Johnson' to whom he expressed his disdain was in fact a runaway female slave, the planter continues, 'it always makes me itch all over, from head to toe, to get hold of every d---d nigger I see dressed like a white man.'[22] It is whilst travelling through Virginia, however, that the narrative's most humorous moment occurs. One unfortunate white lady, laying eyes on 'Mr Johnson' for the first time, is overcome with desire: 'Oh! Dear me, I never felt so much for a gentleman in my life!', she gushes.[23] Here, the threat of illicit interracial sex is recast in a satirical light; yet the comedy of this scene also arises from a second and simultaneous act of transgression.[24] Unbeknownst to the smitten Southern lady, Ellen is not only passing as white, but as male. Dress thus functions in the narrative to challenge the 'natural' categories of both race and gender. Indeed, it allows Ellen to liberate herself from the 'double oppression' experienced by enslaved women as victims of both racial and patriarchal hierarchies and to claim the privileges afforded to white men.[25]

In comparison to race, however, the boundaries of gender are more rigidly policed. As Ellen Weinauer discusses in her careful analysis of the narrative, William frequently insists upon his wife's inherent femininity; beneath her disguise, Ellen is every bit the tender-hearted,

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[21] Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, p10.
[22] Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles,* p67.
[23] Ibid, p60.
[24] M. Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York, 1997), p284.
[25] Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, p23.

'fainting female'.[26] On the eve of their escape, for instance, William describes how his wife 'shrank back' in a 'state of trepidation' and 'burst into violent sobs'.[27] Arriving in Philadelphia, she 'wept like a child', so 'weak and faint that she could scarcely stand alone.'[28] Significantly, this foregrounding of Ellen's true womanly nature is reflected in a discursive change: Ellen, referred to throughout the journey as William's 'master', was in freedom his 'wife' once more.[29] In line with anti-slavery arguments, which condemned slavery for its perversion of domesticity, William thus celebrates Ellen's freedom as the restoration of respectable, Christian matrimony.[30]

In a similar vein, Ellen chooses to reject her white identity at the end of the narrative. In so doing, she betrays the tendency for fugitive slaves, identified by literary critics P. Gabrielle Foreman and Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, to pass *through* whiteness. Enslaved men and women, they assert, passed for white in order to be free; newly liberated from their bondage, few runaways subsisted in their racial transgressions.[31] Ellen, for example, celebrates her freedom by 'thr[owing] off the disguise and assum[ing] her own apparel.'[32] Her white identity, in this instance, is made and unmade by her sartorial choices. Clothed once more in an outfit consistent with her enslaved status, Ellen's 'African extraction' is rendered visible: where moments before stood a 'young cotton planter and his nigger', now there was only a 'fugitive slave and his wife'.[33] Dress, in this way, functions throughout the narrative to challenge the fixity of racial categories.

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[26] E. Weinaeur, '"A Most Respectable Looking Gentleman": Passing, Possession, and Transgression in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom',* in E. K. Ginsberg (ed), *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham, NC, 1996), pp47-50.
[27] Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles,* pp40-1.
[28] Ibid, p79.
[29] Ibid, pp42, 79.
[30] For more on anti-slavery arguments, see: J. C. Van Horne and J. F. Yellin (eds), *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, NY, 2018).
[31] Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile,* p29.
[32] Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles,* p81.
[33] Ibid, pp2, 81.

Conclusion:

Accepting this relationship between dress and race holds wider implications for the historiography of slave resistance. As the Crafts' tale suggests, if race served as a 'weapon of the weak' it also posed a more direct threat to the 'peculiar institution'.[34] In allowing enslaved men and women to pass for white, dress exposed the performative nature of race, fundamentally undermining the supposed immutability of black and white in antebellum society. Dress, therefore, did not merely unsettle the foundations of slavery but undercut them completely; how could blackness exist as the criterion for enslavement if black could so easily transform into white?

[34] S. Buckridge, *"Dem caa dress yah!": Dress as Resistance and Accommodation among Jamaican Women from Slavery to Freedom, 1760-1890'* (D.Phil. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1998), p16.

Conclusion:

If the black body was 'contested terrain', dress was an invaluable weapon in the struggle for control.[1] Clothing, understood by both blacks and whites as central to identity formation, determined the balance of power between master and slave; planters who sought to guarantee subjugation amongst their bondspeople by dressing them only in accordance with their value as property were frequently and visibly opposed by enslaved men and women who arrayed themselves in luxurious materials and dazzling colours. Refusing to succumb to the slave identity that planters had fashioned for them, the enslaved safeguarded their humanity through these extraordinary acts of adornment.

To speak of clothing only as an act of self-preservation, however, is to underestimate the power vested in such sartorial display. Through their dress, bondspeople did not simply challenge their commodification, they deconstructed the slave identity entirely. Freedom, for instance, was often synonymous with the discarding of ill-fitting and uncomfortable plantation attire; 'You'd ought to see 'em pullin' off them croaker-sack clothes when master says we's free', remembered Rube Witt, an ex-slave from Texas.[2] In place of the slave, bondspeople carved out for themselves new identities: they asserted their right to individualism, to gender, to membership of a shared African American culture and, ultimately, to freedom. When this self-fashioning involved a racial transgression, the repercussions were of even greater significance; racially ambiguous bondspeople who used their clothing to pass as white revealed racial difference to be grounded in sartorial performance rather than physiology. The belief in blackness as a prerequisite for enslavement was thus powerfully undermined as enslaved men and women transformed themselves, via

[1] M. L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham, 2009), p16.
[2] Rube Witt (1937) Texas, p209, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.164 (7 March 2022).

their dress, from one race to another. As Emily Burke recalled, 'I have seen ladies in the streets…dressed so elegantly that when told they were negroes I could not willingly credit the assertion.'[3] Self-adornment, in this way, was more than a 'hidden transcript', an 'implicit' form of insubordination or an 'everyday' act of resistance; it constituted a formidable attack on the racialized thinking which underpinned the slave regime.[4]

As historians, then, we must take care not to construe everyday forms of resistance as antithetical to more 'explicit' acts of revolt.[5] That is not to deny dress as a 'weapon of the weak' – it certainly functioned on a smaller scale to dictate the relationship between an individual bondsperson and their master – but to recognise that dressing up could and did transmute into a more subversive challenge to the 'peculiar institution' than previous scholarship has allowed for. As one contributor to *DeBow's Review* wrote in an article entitled 'domestic manufactures in the South and West': clothe a man in 'tasteful raiment, and you impart to him a new spirit; he holds up his head, looks his oppressor in the face and boldly demands his rights.'[6]

[3] Burke, *Reminiscences,* pp87-8.
[4] Miller, *Slaves to Fashion,* p16.
[5] Johnson, 'On Agency', pp116-18.
[6] *DeBow's Review,* 3/3 (March 1847), p194.

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