UC Santa Barbara

Volume 2, Issue 2 (Fall 2022)

Title

The Hierarchy of Dress: Clothing in the Age of Emancipation

Permalink

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Journal

The UC Santa Barbara Undergraduate Journal of History, 2(2)

Author

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Publication Date

2022-10-01

Peer reviewed

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FALL 2022

# UC SANTA BARBARA

# THE UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF HISTORY

Vol. 2 | No. 2

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4329 Humanities and Social Sciences Building
University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, California
93106-9410

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UAW Strike, West Campus Picket, day one, UC Santa Barbara.
Credit: Jarett Henderson

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# The Hierarchy of Dress: Clothing in the Age of Emancipation

***Emilia Salcido***[1]

The Civil War ended slavery and brought about the question of what emancipation meant to newly freed people. For some, this meant being able to marry, own property, and even vote legally. The importance of clothing as a symbolic and material indicator of what "freedom" meant to the newly freed has long been overlooked in the conversation of emancipation. The cotton manufacturing institution enslaved peoples were once forced to participate in would then return to the clothes of their enslavers, the North, and others worldwide. Enslaved people would get the cheapest materials for their clothing, while the better fabrics went to the white Southerners. Even after emancipation, the racial hierarchy and social status linked to clothing would not change dramatically for Black people, especially for Black women. Emancipation meant new access to more clothing, but with the consequence of the still rigid system of racism and classism that would further hold back a truly freed notion of dress. Enslaved people's clothing worked off a system of control and hierarchy. Black women's clothing was continually made to be the lowest form of fabric possible while being compared to both other enslaved people and plantation mistresses. The refugee camps specifically blurred the line between emancipation and slavery by not providing a symbol of emancipation for women's clothing, which they would then have to seek out what clothing and emancipation meant for them. Black women's clothing before, during, and after the Civil War was characterized by how those in manufacturing, enslavers, plantation mistresses and even the Union viewed them. Autonomy over clothing was scarce in a society that forced the hierarchy of dress.

The journey of clothing as a means of control started before the enslaved person reached the plantation and began in the markets where they were sold. Enslaved people who would be sold were dressed well to impress the buyers. Their clothing was an indicator of their value as enslaved people. Eyre Crowe's 1861 image, *Slaves Waiting for Sale, Richmond, Virginia* (Fig. A), depicts the enslaved people dressed significantly better than those clothed on the plantation since they are wearing silk bandanas, a symbol of luxury, and aprons neatly draped upon the women's dresses. Their clothing symbolizes the uniform of the marketplace, and one can see four men discussing the enslaved women in the background. The clothing of the market was not in the control of the enslaved person and was merely a way to objectify the women for the sole purpose of being sold and benefitting whoever was selling them. The painting brings the enslaved people to the forefront, their figures and clothing more vibrant than the enslavers pushed into the background. The viewer is immediately drawn to look at the enslaved people. Contrasting their nicer clothing with their clothing in the field exposes the hierarchy and imbalance of enslaved people's clothing within the South.

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Clothing for enslaved people on the plantations was characterized by its cheapness and coarseness compared to the clothing manufactured for their enslavers. A specific type of fabric was designated and regulated for the enslaved people, commonly referred to as "slave" or "plantation cloth."[2] This fabric was durable yet cheap, making it the optimal choice to cloth enslaved people for two reasons. Because many of these plantation cloths used cotton, it was harvested by the enslaved people but sent either to the Northern states or abroad to Britain for clothing manufacturing. The irony of the enslaved person working to harvest cotton only to receive the "bottom of the barrel" was apparent and justified by the enslavers because of its cheapness and practicality when buying cloth. From Georgian plantation owner James Habersham, one can truly get a grasp of what clothing was manufactured in Britain and for what reason with his letters to William Knox, his London manufacturing agent: "I supposed they may be had in London of Cloth at least stronger and more durable and consequently warmer and more comfortable–You see we don't have any purpose saving or rather that it is not our motive tho' the more saved the better."[3] Habersham, while manufacturing and buying cloth during the colonial period, clearly exercised the point that while the fabric was chosen for its cheapness, this type of cloth was the most convenient and practical for clothing mass amounts of people at one time because of its inherent price point, durability, and ability to keep one warm during the winter months even if it meant there was a stark difference in the enslaver and the enslaved way of dress.

The name "plantation cloth" imposes a hierarchy onto the already hierarchical enslaved system. By calling these coarse fabrics plantation or slave cloth, it signifies their purpose and status when being manufactured. If someone else were to wear these fabrics, such as a Southern white woman, it would degrade their social status solely on the factor of dress and fabric. Plantation cloth was the lowest status of clothing, and it was kept out of white Southerners' hands by demonizing it as a means of controlling how people dressed.

On other occasions, clothing would be manufactured by enslaved people themselves. Some were given the fabric with the expectation of sewing their clothing.[4] The material would be produced elsewhere, but it made sewing an essential skill for enslaved people who would have to make and mend their clothing and those of their enslavers. Louis Hughes, a formerly enslaved person in Mississippi, describes the women's ingenuity while creating new garments out of other articles of clothing: "[they] made for themselves what were called pantalets. They had no stockings or undergarments to protect their limbs - these were never given them."[5] Their clothing was significantly limited, yet Black women found small opportunities to turn controlled clothing into new garments. This often hinged on the resourcefulness and ingenuity that enslaved women had to

[2] Madelyn Shaw, "Slave Cloth and Clothing Slaves: Craftsmanship, Commerce, and Industry," in *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Art,* https://www.mesdajournal.org/2012/slave-cloth-clothing-slaves-craftsmanship-commerce-industry/. 2012.
[3] James Habersham, *The Letters of Hon. James Habersham,1756-1775* (Georgia Historical Society, 1904), p. 16.
[4] Shaw.
[5] Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave* (South Side Printing Company, 1897), p. 42.

maintain their clothing and keep themselves and others satisfied with the options of clothing allotted to them. It is the smallest form of clothing autonomy that women and enslaved people generally had during this time.

The amount of clothing given depended on the enslaver and what they were willing to buy. Hughes recounts the clothing women were given during different seasons as he states, "the women had two dresses and two chemises each for summer…The women's dresses for winter were made of the heavier wool cloth used for the men. They also had one pair of shoes each and a turban." In total, this is quite a meager amount of clothing manufactured for durability rather than comfort and priced cheaply, harkening back to ideals from the colonial period, as seen in James Habersham's letter. It was a system that had stayed in place for decades.

However, clothing given to enslaved people differed on a case-by-case basis all over the South. Henry Box Brown, who had run away from his enslavement in Virginia, added onto what enslaved people were allowed to wear when he explained from an exchange with an enslaver from another plantation: "He [the enslaver] expressed a good deal of surprise that we were allowed to wear hats and shoes,--supposing that a slave had no business to wear such clothing as his master wore."[6] Brown expressed the limiting nature of being enslaved and prohibited from wearing a particular article of clothing as another means of controlling a group of people, in this case, hats and shoes. The restrictive nature of clothing also created what enslaved people on certain plantations would have dictated as "master's" clothing or what would be considered free people's clothing.

Another formerly enslaved person from Maryland, Charles Ball, stated, "In summer they do not require clothes and can perform such work as they are able to do, as well without garments as with them. At the time we received our shoes, and blankets, there was not a good shirt in our quarter--but all the men, and women, had provided themselves with some sort of woolen clothes, out of their own savings."[7] Ball experienced not getting clothing during the summer for both men and women. At the same time, Hughes recounts the small amount of clothing they were allotted, and Brown identifies the power and control enslavers had on the plantation through the use of clothing. It was up to the enslaved people to either fashion their clothes or buy whatever they could to keep themselves warm during the winter. By not providing a substantial amount of clothing, plantation owners maintained control. There was some autonomy to choose how one would dress freely, but clothing was now relegated to survival rather than a means of pleasure seen in the white Southerners of the time. However, the dress hierarchy delved beyond being exclusive to enslaved people and their enslavers, as there was also a built-in hierarchy to domestic enslavement and fieldwork.

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[6] Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped From Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide. Written From a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery. By Charles Stearns* (Brown & Stearns, 1849), p. 25.

[7] Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States, A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball*, (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999), p. 271.

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Henry Bibb, a former enslaved person who worked in the fields of Kentucky, described the disconnect and discontent he had for the work of the domestic enslaved people, saying that "I would remark that the domestic slaves are often found to be traitors to their own people, for the purpose of gaining favor with their masters; and they are encouraged and trained up by them to report every plot they know of being formed about stealing any thing, or running away, or any thing of the kind; and for which they are paid. This is one of the principal causes of the slaves being."[8] So while there was a brewing hierarchy without the means of clothing, the way of dress would further divide the domestic enslaved people from those who did fieldwork on the plantations.

There became a social pressure for enslavers to dress them better than their plantation enslaved people because these enslaved people were not only closer in proximity to the enslavers daily but also because they were seen as more intelligent and faithful. *Enslaved House Servants and White Children* (Fig. B) depicts two domestic enslaved people with the plantation owner and their children. Unlike the descriptions from Hughes, Brown, and Ball, the domestic enslaved people got access to better clothing, presumably because of their attachment to the labor of the house. The pressure to dress one group of enslaved people well and to virtually not care about the other created a divide. Plantation mistresses sometimes offered their older clothing to the domestic enslaved women.[9] This would be an additional factor in the division of domestic and field enslaved people. Yet, the passing off of the mistress' clothing to the domestic enslaved women categorized the enslaved person as "their property" simply by controlling whose clothing they wore as well. By creating a false sense of hierarchy under oppression, it further divides the enslaved people by their clothing.

Another aspect that did not help the perception of enslaved women in dress was the "mammy" stereotype. This stereotype is built on the assumption that the enslaved woman enjoyed her work at the plantation. One illustration (Fig. C) from that time depicts a Black woman folding her apron with a smile. The caption below reads, "Joy Unspeakable." One can also view the "mammy" stereotype in the illustration *Mammy and Her Pet* (Fig. D). Like Figure C, the woman is dressed in a head wrapping and an apron and is seen amid her work raising a white child. The enslaved woman is drawn looking down at the children lovingly and maternally. This illustration also plays into how white people of the time viewed enslaved women with the mindset that enslaved women did not mind, found joy in doing the work of white enslavers, and that raising their children was a privilege bestowed onto them. The harmful depiction illustrates the wrongdoings of the enslavers as they hold onto the notion that enslavement is enjoyable for enslaved people. Even if the perspective of the illustration is warped, there is some truth to the aprons and head wrappings that give a small glimpse into what women of the time would have worn.

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[8] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself with an Introduction by Lucius C. Matlack*. (Self Published,1849), p. 136.

[9] Joan Cashin,. "Torn Bonnets and Stolen Silks: Fashion, Gender, Race, and Danger in the Wartime South," *Civil War History* 61, no. 4, p. 339.

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To fully understand the hierarchy of dress, it is essential to include white plantation mistresses as their narrative was heavily related and would help to construct the hierarchy and control that enslaved women were forced into. Fashion for this group of women was not limited to race as they had access to plentiful fabrics, sewing, money, and in some cases, people to sew their clothing for them. However, clothing was also a measure of their femininity l.[10] The more ostentatious clothing they could afford was symbolic of their place in the house, and their femininity through dress sealed their status in the household among the enslaved women and their husbands. With these factors in place, there is already an advantage to being a white Southern woman who had the luxury to obtain clothes at their leisure and clothing that could also reflect their style.

One such garment that demonstrated both the changing styles of the mid-1800s and the excessive wealth of the plantation was the hoop skirt. While these items could be obtained abroad, many women found more accessible options in domestic stores. Yet, if a woman truly wanted to show off her wealth and status among the plantation elite, her dress would be decorated, vibrantly colored, and have a full skirt in part to the hoop skirt.[11] The look of excess demonstrated that they could afford all the latest fashions. It helped them stand out from poorer white women while putting them visually in a position of authority above their enslaved people, essentially dressing like royalty. The hoop skirt took up more space than the slimmer silhouettes of the regency era prior. In doing so, it again was an indicator of the larger figure in the plantation.

Other accessories and fabrics contributed to the hierarchy of dress. Silk was imported from China and was seen as highly luxurious because of how much it cost to ship the material to the United States. And as dyes became more widely available, dresses could be more vibrant. Rich plantations could afford to dress the mistress and other family members, like their daughters, with silk that showed off their wealth. Some would even go to extreme lengths to have this clothing. For instance, "Adaline Rodgers of Tennessee estimated that her clothes and those of her daughter were worth approximately a thousand dollars."[12] The overindulgence of plantation mistresses stemmed from wanting to separate herself from the enslaved women as much as possible. Being able to afford the highest quality and most expensive clothing is one way to do so visually.

Plantation mistresses' femininity and hierarchy through clothing were also a mocking point for the Union army as they tore up and destroyed Confederate homes that plantation owners and mistresses once lived in. It was typical to grab souvenirs of homes one had destroyed, including taking the dresses of the plantation mistresses to mock them, symbolizing another layer of control this woman once had. Her dresses are no longer the extravagant symbol of control over the enslaved people but a means of mimicry to the Confederacy. It is reported that Union soldiers would parade around in their dresses before throwing the silk gowns in the mud or setting them on fire.[13] The

[10] Cashin, "Torn Bonnets," p. 344.

[11] Joan Cashin, "Trophies of War: Material Culture in the Civil War Era." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 1, no. 3 (September 2011), p. 344.

[12] Cashin, "Torn Bonnets," p. 343.

[13] Cashin, "Torn Bonnets," p. 354.

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malicious intent behind the Union's actions does not change the fact that these women did, in fact, own and embrace the hierarchy allotted to them at the time.

Plantation mistresses did everything in their power through their excessive money to separate themselves from enslaved women. The stark contrast of their clothing is symbolized plainly in Charles Ball's writing as he states, "The one, poorly clad, poorly fed, and exposed to all the hardships of the cotton field; the other dressed in clothes of gay and various colours, ornamented with jewelry, and carefully protected from the rays of the sun, and the blasts of the wind."[14] This description easily depicts the reality of one life versus the other. The plantation mistress had the luxury, money, and ability to acquire pieces that reflected both changing fashions and clothing and accessories emblematic of her status in society. This is juxtaposed against the enslaved person, who does not have the money to buy their clothing and is at the mercy of what is given to them. They are bound to the slavery system by clothing. By not being able to choose how one presents themselves to the world freely, there is a loss of one's autonomy. Therefore, clothing would continually be a factor of not only the enslaved experience and how they were perceived, but as emancipation and the Civil War drew near, it would also symbolize the struggle to find what freedom meant to Black women.

As the question of what to do with enslaved people seeking freedom caught up with Union soldiers in the war, it was decided that the place for them was refugee camps. Similar to when enslaved, clothing was scarce. Union soldiers describe the formerly enslaved people coming to the camps with "filthy rags."[15] As mentioned previously with the term "plantation cloth," the language around enslaved people's clothing exposed white people's bias against the formerly enslaved people. Even without mentioning the color and type of fabric on their body, one can observe how white people looked down upon the clothing worn by enslaved individuals.

Women in refugee camps were at a disadvantage. For Black men, clothing was more plentiful as they could join the Union army and be provided with a uniform. The uniform was not only a visual representation of a soldier, but for these formerly enslaved people, it was a visual indicator of freedom. Wearing a uniform and being on the front lines of the war as a soldier meant finding emancipation through war, and the clothing given to men was a symbol of this. While there were some complications of the men paying for the uniform, essentially paying for a marker of their freedom, there was still a clear visual indicator that Black men were fighting for their freedom. However, for women, there was no apparent visible symbol of freedom in clothing. Yet because of the uniformity of men's dress at this time,[16] women could have more significant variance in their clothing. Emancipation in dress could mean whatever they chose it to. While women's clothing in refugee camps was harder to come by because of the better availability of Union uniforms, it does not change the fact that they could explore and play in a new area of dress that could create a

[14] Ball, p. 222.

[15] Amy Murrell Taylor, "Clothing Bodies." *Embattled Freedom: Journeys through the Civil War's Slave Refugee Camps.* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), p. 159.

[16] Taylor, p. 169.

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personal story of emancipation, not needing to meet the standard of what it meant for the whole group of individuals.

After the Civil War, equality of dress was not a sudden occurrence. Black women's clothing did remain somewhat stagnant. Winslow Homer's 1876 painting, *A Visit From the Old Mistress* (Fig. E), identifies the different balance of power from emancipation. The plantation mistress is dressed all in black, mourning the loss of her husband in the war, but also symbolizes she is stuck in mourning and the previous social structure. Contrasting her clothing with the vibrancy of the Black women makes them stand out more in the painting; the eye is naturally drawn more to them. Additionally, their clothing has not changed in style. They still are adorned with a head wrapping and an apron. They are in a position where four of them are against the mistress, the strength of their clothing being front and center, along with their unity of numbers, reclaims a small piece of what the women had lost under the mistress.

Although they were technically considered free people as they were not bound to an enslaver, clothing would continue to be a market in which white women could control them. Refugee camp stores that sold fabric and clothing became the primary way for women to distance themselves from slavery further.[17] Clothing was now slightly more autonomous in that a buying privilege was unparalleled while enslaved. Still, some articles of clothing, like the headwrap, were reclaimed as part of the transition to emancipation. Additionally, not all newly freed people moved into refugee camps or the North. Many were stricken by poverty and the sharecropping system that replaced slavery and maintained hierarchal power systems.

The stigma around Black women and their clothing did not fade away overnight. White women could pick and choose what they donated to the refugee camps, a milder form of control over what Black women could and could not cloth themselves with, and even some stores would forbid Black women from buying certain items because of their race. Emancipation, while a celebratory milestone, did not change the racist, controlling, and social status of clothing. Black women were still seen as a second class, and the tactics to keep them looking as such would manifest because of the strategies of the past.

The Civil War and the subsequent Reconstruction serve as a reminder of the limitations and barriers that come from clothing. The term "plantation cloth" reminded the enslaved people of their status in society while serving as a status marker and a warning to those who were free not to wear it. Hierarchies in dress occurred between the labor of enslaved people and the plantation mistress who had the luxury and money to obtain her clothing rather than be forced to make do with a small amount of clothing. As emancipation became more of a reality and enslaved people fled to Union refugee camps, clothing again was marked by the symbol of a uniform. This left Black men free but left Black women to struggle with their role of freedom in dress. Black women's dress during this time would constantly be a battle between their freedom of dress and society's limitations.

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[17] Taylor, 171.

**Appendix**

*Figure A*: "Slaves Waiting for Sale: Richmond, Virginia, 1861," Eyre Crow, Accessed January 19, 2022, https://eyrecrowe.com/pictures/1860s/slaves-waiting-for-sale/

*Figure B:* "Enslaved House Servants and White Children, South Carolina*,* 1863," Enslaved Children George Mason, Accessed January 19, 2022, https://ecgm.omeka.net/exhibits/show/the-enslaved-children-of-gunst/item/14.

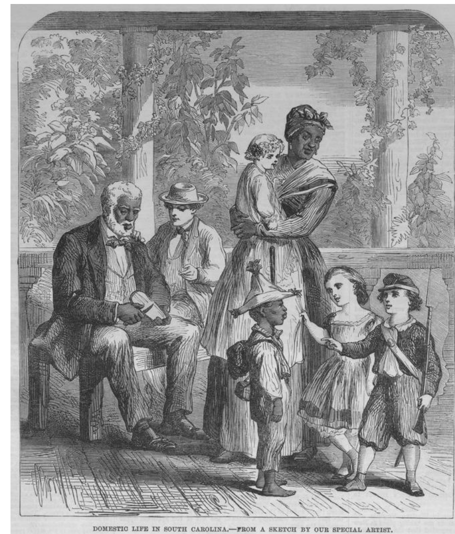


*Figure C:* "A Woman Rice Planter, 1914," Documenting the American South, Accessed January 19, 2022, https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/pringle/ill74.html

*Figure D:* "'Mammy' and Her Pet, 1895, Documenting the American South, Accessed January 19, 2022, https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/haley/ill182.html

*Figure E:* "A Visit From the Old Mistress, 1876"
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Accessed January 19, 2022, https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/visit-old-mistress-10737

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