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# ***What did Slaves Wear? Textile Regimes in the French Caribbean***

Robert S. DuPlessis

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## **Résumé**

### ***Comment s'habillaient les esclaves ? Le « rôle des étoffes » dans les Antilles françaises***

Cette étude de l'habillement des esclaves dans les Antilles françaises se fonde sur l'analyse critique de sources écrites et picturales. Analysant les vêtements de travail dont la fourniture incombait légalement aux maîtres, et les vêtements de fête que les esclaves se procuraient eux-mêmes, l'article se focalise sur les possibilités limitées des groupes subalternes d'innover dans le domaine de la culture matérielle. Par la comparaison des pratiques vestimentaires des esclaves et des autres groupes dans les Antilles et ailleurs, cette étude aborde les problèmes de l'histoire de la consommation et du monde atlantique aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles. Elle affirme que la standardisation et la diversification ont été toutes deux les caractéristiques fondamentales du début de la mondialisation moderne.

**Mots-clés :** Atlantique – Antilles – Esclaves – Habillement – Mondialisation.

## **Abstract**

*This study of the dress of enslaved men and women in the French Antilles is based on a critical examination of written and pictorial sources. Analyzing work clothes, by law masters' responsibility, and festive apparel, which slaves themselves procured, the article focuses on the possibilities and limits of subordinate populations' innovation in material culture. With comparisons to sartorial practices of enslaved people and other groups in the Caribbean and in the larger world, the paper addresses issues in the history of consumption and of the Atlantic basin in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, arguing that both standardization and diversification were fundamental features of early modern globalization.*

**Keywords:** Atlantic – Caribbean – Slaves – Dress – Globalization.

« XXV. Seront tenus les Maîtres de fournir à chacun Esclave par chacun an, deux habits de toile, ou quatre aulnes de toile au gré desdits Maîtres »<sup>1</sup>.

Article XXV of Louis XIV's 1685 edict commonly known as the "Code Noir" purports to organize and regulate slave dress in the French Antilles. Like all such decrees, it cannot be taken at face value. But what should we make of it? The Code, Elsa Goveia has argued, "was based upon earlier local laws and was prepared in consultation with the local authorities."<sup>2</sup> A passage in a mid-seventeenth account does hint at the existence of a rule about

slave dress before 1685.<sup>3</sup> Yet searching the best compilation of early laws turns up no enactment on the subject prior to Article XXV.<sup>4</sup> So to what extent did the mandate reflect existing conditions? Or did it seek to dictate new norms? In either case, was it obeyed?<sup>5</sup> Scholars contend that clothing enables self-fashioning, but the edict gave owners responsibility for slaves' apparel. Did the enslaved wear only garments or fabric imposed by masters, never getting to determine their own dress? And how did the sartorial experience of slaves in the French West Indies compare with those of groups both similar and disparate in the Caribbean, elsewhere in the French Empire, and beyond?

Answering these questions requires an investigation not only of power, agency, and material practices in Caribbean societies but also of consumption, Atlantic history, and globalization more generally. These are the goals of a research project I am conducting

<sup>1</sup> « Édit du Roi, Touchant la Police des Isles de l'Amérique Française », Paris, 1687, in *Recueil d'Edits, Declarations et Arrests de Sa Majesté Concernant l'Administration de la Justice & la Police des Colonies Françaises de l'Amérique, & les Engagés*, Paris, Chez les Libraires Associez, 1744, p. 89. An ell (*aune*) was the equivalent of 1.188 meters, so four ells equaled 4.75 meters. According to the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1694), an *habit* was a « Vestement, ce qui est fait exprès pour couvrir le corps humain, ce qui sert ordinairement à couvrir le corps humain » and this broad definition persisted throughout the eighteenth century. See *Dictionnaires d'autrefois. French dictionaries of the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries* (<http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu> – accessed December 18, 2011). It is possible, however, that in the Antilles Labat's 1696 definition of an *habit* as *casaque* and either *calçon* (for men) or *jupe* (for women), was understood; see Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l'Amérique*, 6 vols., Paris, Chez Guillaume Cavalier, 1722, vol. III, p. 443. Labat averred that four ells of fabric sufficed for two male outfits, five for two female (Labat, *Nouveau voyage*, p. 445); by this measure, Article XXV's fabric mandate was inadequate for women.

<sup>2</sup> Elsa V. Goveia, *The West Indian Slave Laws of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* (Barbados: Caribbean Universities Press, 1970), p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> At the end of a list of garments furnished by masters, Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre, *Histoire générale des Antilles habitées par les François*, 4 vols., Paris, T. lolly, 1667-1671, vol. II, p. 521, states : « Et c'est tout ce que les Maistres sont obligez de leur donner quand ils les entretiennent ».

<sup>4</sup> Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Loix et constitutions des colonies françoises de l'Amérique sous le Vent*, 6 vols., Paris, Chez l'Auteur, 1784-1790, vol. I, years 1550-1703.

<sup>5</sup> Article XXVI enjoined prosecution of masters who ignored their duty and allowed enslaved people to bring complaints of negligence to the royal attorney general, but the relevant records have not survived.

on the history of textile trading, marketing, and consumption in about a dozen commercial nodes and their hinterlands throughout the Atlantic basin between the mid-seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries. Through analysis of Atlantic-wide trends, regional developments, and local singularities in the acquisition, appropriation, and deployment of cloth and clothing, I intend to shed light on the genesis of capitalist globalization, the emergence of modern practices of consumption, and the effects of changes in material culture on all manner of social groups.

Beyond but related to its utilitarian aspects, consumption turns material goods into socio-cultural objects available for a variety of performative as well as expressive projects.<sup>6</sup> Studying consumption involves interpreting transactions and negotiations among persons, objects, practices, and meanings that are mediated by some combination of functional, symbolic, aesthetic, and other imperatives, as well as by

<sup>6</sup> For perspectives that have influenced this study, see Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Mary Douglas, Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Toward an Anthropology of Consumption*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 1996); Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption. New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Roberta Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture. History, Theory and Politics* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2007).

discourses advanced by many of the parties involved. My analysis delimits what I call “textile regimes.” A textile regime consists of objects (fabrics and garments), practices by which they were appropriated and deployed, and discourses that sought to direct and explain both objects and practices.

Textiles are uniquely well positioned to shed light on the larger as well as the more specific issues under consideration here. In the early modern centuries, cloth was the leading global consumer manufacture: largest in volume and greatest in value, sourced from around the world, boasting both mass-produced standardized varieties and myriad distinctive types. Then as now, individuals and groups employed garments to express principles, ideals, and rules, as well as to create and at times cross many types of boundaries. For all these reasons, cloth and apparel were frequently catalogued, widely discussed and portrayed, and repeatedly regulated by lay and religious authorities alike.

Many scholars have discerned a crucial transition in the history of consumption in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During this period, they argue, consumer manufactures as essential elements of everyday life, consumption as a characteristic

but quotidian activity, and the consumer as a distinctive but ubiquitous subject position took hold. Prevailing—if contradictory—narratives ascribe the genesis of this complex of products and practices to singular processes, groups, and places, typically within Europe.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, I argue that it emerged for a variety of reasons, in myriad geographical and social locations, and across as well as within imperial, cultural, and economic boundaries. Analyses of consumption and culture often postulate binary oppositions: popular and elite, global and local, convergence and divergence, choice and constraint. I maintain, however, that in the appropriation of material goods these populations and processes interacted to formulate new cultural practices.

The Atlantic basin proves a superb laboratory in which to observe these developments and test my hypotheses. It boasted diverse geographical and socio-economic ecologies, disparate historical and contemporary engagements with woven fabrics, and—as vital agent of early modern globalization—vigorous commercial networks that had access to textiles from across the

<sup>7</sup> For example, Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987); Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: the Commercialization of eighteenth-century England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Woodruff D. Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600-1800* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

area and beyond.<sup>8</sup> Historians have greatly expanded our knowledge of this lively, multipolar domain in the past several decades, but with few exceptions studies remain within politically defined confines. Frontiers certainly mattered within the early modern Atlantic, not least for material culture. Within empires, mercantilist incentives, tariffs, regulations, and prohibitions promoted certain goods at the expense of others. Yet imperial perimeters were often porous, not simply in the trading zones and borderlands that served as intersection points between empires and their non-imperial partners, but also in the numerous areas—paradigmatically the Caribbean—where colonial needs and desires often overrode metropolitan strictures. Analysis of the textile regimes of enslaved people in the French Antilles must therefore be sensitive to border crossings as well as to boundaries.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> My thinking about early modern globalization draws on Michael Bordo, Alan Taylor, Jeffrey Williamson, eds., *Globalization in Historical Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Frederick Cooper, "What is the Concept of Globalization Good For? An African Historian's Perspective", *African Affairs* 100 (2001), p. 189-213; Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: SAGE, 1992); Jonathan Perraton, "What are Global Markets: The Significance of Networks of Trade?", in Randall Germain, ed., *Globalization and Its Critics. Perspectives from Political Economy* (New York: St. Martins, 2000), p. 164-182.

<sup>9</sup> For important reflections about boundary drawing and boundary transgression practices, see Rogers Brubaker, Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity'", *Theory and Society* 29 (2000), p. 1-47.

## Finding out what slaves wore

So what sources are available to answer the questions prompted by Article XXV? Probate inventories provide copious information about free settlers; in French colonies, indeed, the level of detail (value, fabric, quality, size, color, condition, and yet more) is unparalleled in any other source. But slaves, themselves considered property, could not legally hold or bequeath property, no matter how acquired, so probate inventories were not drawn up when they died.<sup>10</sup> Nor have we for slaves the letters, journals, reports, and other types of first-person documents that free colonists abundantly generated.

In the continental plantation slavery colonies of British North America, the single most valuable source for the clothing of the enslaved is the runaway advertisement, featured in newspapers as soon as these began to be published in the early eighteenth century. In South Carolina, for example, 45% of all runaway advertisements printed in the 1730s rehearsed the garments of those

who had absconded.<sup>11</sup> Newspapers only appeared in the French Caribbean after the Seven Years' War: from the beginning of 1766 the *Affiches américaines* came out twice weekly in Saint-Domingue (one edition in Le Cap, another in Port-au-Prince). Each issue contained numerous runaway advertisements, but barely 5 percent of listings included any information about apparel.<sup>12</sup> Instead, body markings, both owners' brands (or their absence) and "country marks" (West African scarification), typically served as descriptors.<sup>13</sup>

The absence of inventories and paucity of clothing information in advertisements complicates the historian's task. Yet the Caribbean does provide numerous examples of two sources that are relatively scarce for most free colonists: commentary

<sup>10</sup> See *Code Noir*, Article XXVIII. Though for other reasons, Amerindians, too, rarely left probate inventories or first-person documents.

<sup>11</sup> More precisely, of 279 runaways listed between the first issue of the *South Carolina Gazette* (8 January 1732) and the end of 1739, the clothing (207 items) of 125 individuals—100 men and 25 women—was specified. See the transcriptions in Lathan A. Windley, comp., *Runaway Slave Advertisements. A Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790*, 4 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), vol. III, p. 1-39.

<sup>12</sup> In British Jamaica, newspapers were published from the early eighteenth century, but their runaway listings likewise very seldom mentioned clothing.

<sup>13</sup> Whereas "country marks" were sometimes cited in mainland runaway advertisements, brands almost never were.

about and visual images of dress.<sup>14</sup> Neither is without shortcomings, to be sure. Both originated outside slave communities, and both were composed by observers who might be well or ill informed, might have a close and substantial engagement with the subject or one that was fleeting and impressionistic (or even copied from other works), and might have been influenced by issues beyond those upon which they were ostensibly reporting. Written accounts frequently moralized and propagandized about slavery, while pictorial images often drew on genres and participated in conventions that had developed in contexts other than the colonial Caribbean for purposes other than those of representing the enslaved. Still, critically collated literary and pictorial sources suggest the existence of two slave textile regimes, one for work days, another for Sundays and holidays.

In the course of delineating colonial material life, missionaries, planters, and travelers typically reported on the dress of enslaved laborers. Overall, and with remarkably little change over time, they portray a kind

of uniform made of rough linen.<sup>15</sup> Men wore knee-length drawers (*caleçon* or *culotte*), women a usually short skirt or petticoat (*jupe*, *cotte*, or *cotillon*). Both genders also had a loose top garment (*casaque* or *chemise*), though both women and men often shed it in the heat of the day.<sup>16</sup> According to some accounts, one or both genders donned headgear, whether caps or kerchiefs, but all agreed that virtually no slave used shoes or stockings.

Contemporary images confirm the drab homogeneity of slave work apparel. Some, to be sure, illustrated works like Du Tertre's and Labat's, so one might imagine them to be pictorial transcriptions of written texts rather than independent testimony. But in these volumes, as in the many works explaining tropical plantation agriculture, depictions of clothing—indeed, of slaves—are

<sup>14</sup> Both are also our chief sources for Amerindian clothing, and of course elite settlers left many portraits, though often the sitters were pictured in stock costumes rather than their own garb.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre, *Histoire générale des Antilles habitées par les François*, op. cit., vol. II, p. 521 ; Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l'Amerique*, op. cit., vol. III, p. 444 ; Justin Girod de Chantrans, *Voyage d'un Suisse dans les colonies d'Amérique*, présenté par Pierre Pluchon, Paris, J. Tallandier, 1980, Paris [Chez Poinçot, 1786], p. 131 ; Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle de Saint-Domingue*, 2<sup>e</sup> éd., 2 vols., Philadelphia, Chez l'Auteur, 1797, vol. I, p. 58-59 ; P.J. Laborie, *The Coffee Planter of Saint Domingo* (London: T. Cadell, W. Davies, 1798), p. 163, 183-184.

<sup>16</sup> P.J. Laborie, *The Coffee Planter of Saint Domingo*, op. cit., p. 176.



incidental to their main purpose.<sup>17</sup> Significantly, the images of the work outfit are as consistent among themselves as they are congruent with the written descriptions. Figure 1 is representative; it also supports written documents claiming that members of both sexes were wont to labor naked above the waist.



Figure 1. « Ménagerie »

From Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre, *Histoire générale des Antilles habitées par les François*, op. cit., vol. II, p. 419. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University. Image Reference NW0011, on [www.slaveryimages.org/](http://www.slaveryimages.org/), compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite, and sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Charles de Rochefort, *Histoire naturelle et morale des îles Antilles de l'Amerique...*, Rotterdam, Chez Reinier Leers, 1681, p. 105 ; Elie Monneréau, *Le Parfait indigotier ou Description de l'Indigo, contenant un détail circonstancié de cette plante...*, Amsterdam, Chez Jean Mossy, 1765, facing title page ; M. Chambon, *Le commerce de l'Amerique par Marseille*, 3 vols., Avignon, Chez J. Mossy, 1764, vol. I, plate III, facing p. 366 ; Denis Diderot, *Encyclopédie, ou, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers... Recueil de planches, sur les sciences...*, 17 vols., Paris, Briasson, 1751-1765, vol. I, fig. I, IV.

All this evidence suggests that Article XXV sought to enforce a quantitative minimum while codifying existing practices regarding garment types and fabric. But were its stipulations obeyed? Certainly all writers from the late seventeenth century on wrote in awareness of its provisions, though usually without explicitly citing it. From their accounts, however, it is clear that the rule was at best incompletely observed. According to Labat, some masters did fulfill their duty by furnishing « deux habits par an, c'est-à-dire, deux casaques & deux calçons aux hommes, & deux casaques & deux jupes aux femmes ». But the rest withheld a casaque or an entire outfit, or only distributed enough fabric for a single habit.<sup>18</sup> Though Labat gave no information about the relative size of each group, he left little doubt that the non-compliers were the majority. Nearly a century later, Girod de Chantrons presented a bleaker assessment. « C'est le propriétaire qui les habille », he declared. Yet masters often ignored their duty, so the enslaved were likely to go about « presque nus ».<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Nouveau voyage aux îles de l'Amerique*, op. cit., vol. III, p. 444-445. Labat claimed that slaves given lengths of fabric had neither the skills to make their own clothing nor the means of having it tailored for them, so « ils vendent leur toile & leur fil, & vont presque nus pendant toute l'année ».

<sup>19</sup> Justin Girod de Chantrons, *Voyage d'un Suisse dans les colonies d'Amerique*, op. cit., p. 131-132.

This monotonous, standardized outfit was what most slaves wore most of the time, a visible sign of masters' hegemony—or, too often, it seems, of their negligence.<sup>20</sup> Yet it was not the only textile regime that enslaved men and women inhabited. The same writers who revealed, if at times obliquely, the limits of the required clothing ration, verbally elaborated a better stocked world of slave garments for Sundays, festivals, and other special occasions; it was celebrated as well in widely circulated prints and paintings.

If Du Tertre is correct, initially this textile regime was founded on masters' distributions of distinctive versions of basic garments: men received « une chemise & un calleçon de couleur, avec un chapeau », women « une chemise avec une juppe de toile blanche, ou de quelque serge rouge ou bleuë ». These were embellished by the addition of items that slaves themselves provided: men's « galāds [*galons*] à leur chapeau », women's ornaments like « coliers & bracelets de Rassade blanche »,

as well as « rubans de couleur » woven into their hair and sewn onto their garments.<sup>21</sup>

Any involvement by masters had disappeared by the 1690s, but slaves' special occasion dress had become more dazzling as they took responsibility for it. Finer models of *chemises*, *calçons*, and *jupes* remained, but they were now just minor parts of more elaborate costumes. Women put colored underskirts under fine white cotton or muslin overskirts, wore short jackets (*corsets*) that matched one of the skirts, sported bracelets, rings, necklaces, lace collars and sleeves, brilliant white laced head-dresses. Men boasted wide, pleated skirt-like pants (*candale*) over tight drawers, doublets over puffed-out shirts, decorative silver buttons and colored stones, earrings, and hats.<sup>22</sup>

In the eighteenth century, according to commentators, this fancy clothing regime retained its emphasis on choice fabrics, colorful adornment, jewelry, and layering of additional garments (though new fashions changed the specific supplementary pieces). Across several excited but discomfited pages, the planter and administrator Moreau de Saint-Méry effused about

<sup>20</sup> A 1702 order to the royal lieutenant for Léogane and Saint-Louis quarters, in Saint-Domingue, to ensure that the regulation regarding « aliment et vêtements » of slaves and *engagés* were observed implies non-compliance; Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Loix et constitutions*, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 688.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre, *Histoire générale des Antilles habitées par les François*, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 521.

<sup>22</sup> Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l'Amérique*, *op. cit.*, vol. IV, p. 179-181.

« le luxe des esclaves », the ways that the enslaved used « vêtements fins » to participate—if only temporarily—in the world of « recherche », « mode », and « élégance ».<sup>23</sup> Men mixed and matched fabrics—insisting on linens of « une plus grande finesse »—wore long culottes entirely unsuited to labor; attached singular collars, cuffs, and shoulder straps to shirts; turned down their hat brims; replaced doublets with vests. Women donned « superbes » muslins and *calicos*; *corsets* and *casaquins*; gold or garnet earrings, necklaces, and rings; a « beau » black or white beaver hat with expensive trimmings. Both sexes also broke sharply with the workaday by wearing shoes, and, among women, « parfois même des bas ».

The outstanding feature of this textile regime was the artful deployment of *mouchoirs* by men and women alike in pockets, around the neck, and most dramatically on the head. Most spectacular was the female headdress that shaped up to a dozen kerchiefs, often of costly Indian cottons, into « un énorme bonnet ». As a whole, the costumes produced a « métamorphose » so complete that the field hand decked out in Sunday finery was unrecognizable when

seen at church or in the market, and the alteration was « encore plus grande pour la négresse ». Moreau also highlighted the performative dimensions of this festive dress, as the enslaved exploited the aesthetic and modish possibilities of their various *rechanges* in public display and private transactions, amatory and otherwise.

Aspects of Moreau's account stretch credibility, notably some slaves' impressive accumulations of garments (« jusqu'à cent deshabillés ») and the sums spent on them (40-50 French louis by men, 2000 French *écus* by women).<sup>24</sup> There seems to be no way to verify or falsify the quantitative claims that Moreau advanced.<sup>25</sup> But what about the underlying presumption, that slaves—typically presented as impoverished and unremunerated—were not only able to

<sup>23</sup> Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description... de la partie française de l'isle de Saint-Domingue*, op. cit., vol. I, p. 58-61.

<sup>24</sup> A French gold louis was worth 31.5 livres tournois and an *écu* equaled 3 livres tournois; Bernard Foubert, « Les habitations Laborde à Saint-Domingue dans la seconde moitié du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Contribution à l'histoire d'Haïti (plaine des Cayes) », 2 vols, thèse de doctorat, Université de Paris IV–Sorbonne, 1990, p. 66-67. At these rates, the male apparel was worth between 1260 and 1575 livres, the female 6000 livres, at a time when a tailor advertised « habits complets » (evidently for free colonists) for 66 livres and an overseer (*économé*) was offered an annual wage of 2500 livres; *Affiches Américaines*, 30 November 1768, p. 392; 16 August 1769, p. 287.

<sup>25</sup> But he concludes his sketch of slave finery by acknowledging that slaves can be seen « couverts de haillons »; Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description... de la partie française de l'isle de Saint-Domingue*, op. cit., vol. I, p. 61. He lays the blame firmly on « la mauvaise administration des maîtres » or « l'administration publique ».

purchase clothing and accessories but did so regularly?<sup>26</sup> Moreau implies that many female slaves were gifted clothes by admirers and lovers. Earlier writers, however, stressed that slaves purchased finery by the sweat of their own brows. Du Tertre declared that slaves wanting to « se parer » were « obligez de se le procurer eux-mesmes ».<sup>27</sup> Similarly, after sketching slaves' « habits de cérémonie », Labat added, « Tout ceci doit s'entendre des Nègres & Nègresses qui travaillent assez en leur particulier pour acheter toutes ces choses à leurs dépens ».<sup>28</sup>

But how did the enslaved “work enough on their own account”? Engravings based on paintings and colored prints shed light both on slaves' supplementary labor and on what they bought with the fruit of that labor. These images were created by or after the Anglo-Italian artist Agostino Brunias, who lived in the West Indies for most of two

decades beginning in 1765.<sup>29</sup> Brunias is not a straightforward source for learning about the French West Indies.<sup>30</sup> For one thing, the titles given his works refer to several Caribbean colonies; too, he often portrayed contented slaves to make them appealing to their intended clientele of colonial planters and affluent metropolitans, and he placed them in settings that drew on European genre conventions. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that Brunias was a careful observer who strove to depict his characters—mainly based upon his experience in Dominica, where the material culture remained heavily French-inflected even after its transfer to British rule in 1763—in realistic ways, especially in terms of dress.

The two engravings presented here (Figures 2 and 3) originally appeared in Moreau's compilation of colonial law, and subsequently in a volume of scenes of Saint-Domingue.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the brief newspaper article by an anonymous inhabitant of Saint-Domingue: “the lowest slave, when he has some money, buys the dearest goods, without any regard to their cost”; B\*\*\*, « Remarques d'un ancien Colon », *Affiches Américaines*, 30 April 1766, p. 157. P.J. Laborie, *The coffee planter of Saint Domingo*, *op. cit.*, p. 178, 180, also remarks on “gaudily dressed” slaves who earned the money for their purchases.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre, *Histoire générale des Antilles habitées par les François*, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 521.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l'Amerique*, *op. cit.*, vol. IV, p. 181.

<sup>29</sup> Brunias's paintings are widely dispersed, but a good selection of colored prints and engravings can be found online at Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite, “The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record”, [www.slavery.org](http://www.slavery.org) (accessed December 18, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> For recent scholarship, see Beth Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), chap. 5; Lennox Honeychurch, “Chatoyer's Artist: Agostino Brunias and the Depiction of St Vincent”, *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society* 50 (2004), p. 104-128; Kay Dian Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement. Picturing the British West Indies, 1700-1840* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), chap. 2.

« Costumes » depicts one of the main ways that slaves earned additional money: marketing produce or manufactures.<sup>31</sup> The clothing of the seller sitting on the left also shows the simple headscarf and *casaque* of the work uniform, while the *marchande* standing on the right illustrates how commonly enslaved workers doffed upper garments.



Figure 2. « Costumes ».

From Nicolas Ponce, *Recueil des vues des lieux principaux de la colonie Francaise de Saint-Domingue* (Paris, M. Moreau de Saint-Méry, M. Ponce, M. Phelipeau, 1791), view 25. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University. Image Reference NW0149-a, on [www.slaveryimages.org/](http://www.slaveryimages.org/), compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite, and sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.

For its part, « Danse » portrays festive as well as working garb, with onlookers wearing all the upgrades and accoutrements that Du Tertre, Labat, and Moreau enumerated.

<sup>31</sup> Marketing was a long-standing slave activity. It is mentioned in decrees of 1664 and 1677 (Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Loix et constitutions*, op. cit., vol. I, p. 120-21, 306-307), and the *Code Noir*, Art. XIX and XXIX, elaborated on these, seeking to regulate slave retailing, including settlement of debts. Typically, slave retailing was carried out on a master's orders or at least with his permission as embodied in a signed pass (cf. Art. XIX: « permission expresse de leurs maîtres par un billet ou par des marques connues »), but the *Code* foresaw slave selling even « en cas que leurs maîtres n'aient donné aucun ordre et ne les aient point préposés » (Art. XXIX). Many advertisements in *Affiches Américaines* boasted that a slave offered for sale was a « marchand » or « marchande », indicating that marketing skills were considered a valuable attribute among the enslaved. Cf. *Affiches Américaines*, 20 May 1767, p. 160: « Une Nègresse, nommée Louison, très-bonne marchande... Cette Nègresse a vendu des marchandises en pacotille, pendant toute la guerre & depuis la paix, tant dans la Plaine du Cap, que dans celle de l'Artibonite ».



Figure 3. « Danse ».

From *Nicolas Ponce, Recueil des vues des lieux principaux de la colonie Francaise de Saint-Domingue, op. cit., view 26. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University. Image Reference NW0251-a, on www.slaveryimages.org/, compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite, and sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.*<sup>32</sup>

The images do not corroborate every element of the written texts. For example, no

<sup>32</sup> “Costumes” is a reversed version of a Brunias engraving entitled “A West Indian Flower Girl” (c. 1769), itself based on several Brunias paintings, including “French Mulatress Purchasing Fruit from a Negro Wench”, at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. The « Danse » is the reversed version of a colored print by Brunias, “Negroes Dance in the Island of Dominica”, published in London in 1779, itself based on Brunias’s “The Handkerchief Dance”, c. 1770-1780, today in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

one is visibly wearing shoes, much less stockings. So Moreau in particular was likely describing the upper limit of sartorial elegance among slaves. Nevertheless, Brunias’s engravings endorse the texts’ overall picture of enslaved people as having created a distinct textile regime for special occasions.

The (properly) skeptical reader may not be wholly convinced by these literary and pictorial sources. Is there nothing that presents information about material goods actually in the hands or on the persons of enslaved persons rather than ideas or images of them? As it happens, there is; not enough to be decisive on its own, but enough to confirm the accounts of slave textile regimes limned above, and even to offer some additional details. The sources are of three types. The first comprises the rare mentions of runaways’ clothing in newspaper advertisements. These are, of course, narratives, but given their purpose—the accurate description of property on the run, so that it may be apprehended and returned to its owners—there is every reason to believe that they bear as close an approximation to the truth as their writers could attain. According to them, male slaves (the only ones whose garments were recounted) usually wore *chemises* and *culottes* made of inexpensive, often hempen, linen or, less

often, cotton *bazin*. Most of their garments were whitish or brownish-white, but blue and white check linens were also to be found. Occasionally, a slave would abscond while dressed in something memorable—a blue silk vest, a pair of striped red linen *culottes*—indicating ownership of more than the basic uniform.<sup>33</sup>

Merchant accounts, notably those kept by ship captains who peddled goods directly from their vessels to planters, are the second kind of supporting evidence. They reveal regular sales of large quantities of outfits comprising garments like *chemises a Neigres*, *gilletts a Negre*, and *culottes gingas*—in other words, precisely the garments of slave work uniforms—as well as large quantities of cheap linens and, as the eighteenth century went on, cottons and cotton-linen mixtures, sold by the ell, all of them appropriate for slave garments.<sup>34</sup> Finally, planter and merchant probate

inventories likewise disclose the presence of both work apparel destined for the enslaved and lengths of the types of fabrics used in that uniform: linens like hempen *gingas* and *brin*, very cheap flax *halle*, unbleached *toile rousse*, or even *fil d'estoupe*; Indian cottons such as blue or white *salempouris*<sup>35</sup> and striped *bazin*; and, from the 1760s, French cotton and linen mixtures, *siamoise* and check above all.<sup>36</sup> These accounts also list large amounts of better fabrics that could well have been destined for slaves' special-occasion dress. But because free colonists employed the same types of cloth, they cannot be definitively linked with the slaves' festive textile regime. Thus the fancy dress of the enslaved remains less securely documented than their work uniform, a situation that nicely, if unfortunately, reproduces colonial asymmetries of

<sup>33</sup> Runaway advertisements from *Affiches Américaines* (1766-91) are transcribed on the website « Histories d'esclaves dans le monde atlantique français » (<http://pages.usherbrooke.ca/fas>) (accessed December 18, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., « Comptes de vente », Archives départementales de la Charente-Maritime, La Rochelle, E292 (Léogane, Saint-Domingue, goods sold from ships dispatched by the Rochelais merchant Henry Belin, 1724 and 1726); and Archives départementales de la Gironde, Bordeaux, 7 B 1449, 7 B 1479, goods sold by Jean Saugeon, captain of *Le Zephir*, of Bordeaux, along the southern coast of Saint-Domingue (late 1760s and early 1770s).

<sup>35</sup> The spelling of the word « salempouris » (“woven cotton”), has many variations. See Éric Saugera, *Bordeaux port négrier. Chronologie, économie, idéologie, XVII<sup>e</sup>-XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Karthala, 1995, p. 246 ; Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company 1660-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), Appendix 4, p. 501-505.

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, Notariat de Saint-Domingue, vol. 591, Not. Dupuis de Lavaux, Nippes, 23 March 1770: Thomas Cadet, merchant and habitant in Anse à Veau, left, among many other things, 135 « chemises et culottes, recharge a negre, toile de halle ». According to an anonymous Saint-Domingue resident, « Les toiles de chanvre servent d'habillement aux plus pauvres esclaves... » ; B\*\*\*, « Remarques d'un ancien Colon », *Affiches Américaines*, Supplément, 30 April 1766, p. 158.

power. In this context, one is grateful for Moreau and Brunias, their exaggerations, idealizations, and more subtle distortions notwithstanding.

## Textiles of the enslaved and Atlantic history

To what extent were the textile regimes of slaves in the French Antilles peculiar to them? In French Caribbean colonies, to begin locally, all residents, no matter what their race, status, or gender, wore light linens, and, increasingly, cottons and cotton-linens, most of all for workaday purposes. Still, certain types of both cottons and linens were closely associated with enslavement and skin color. Specifically, *salempouris* and *toile rousse* were never found in the inventoried wardrobes of free persons, no matter what their race or how modest their background. For their part, Halle and Laval linen were not just uncommon among free persons but, when found, belonged only to artisans, many of whom were *gens de couleur*. Quite precise textile regimes also distinguished fancy dress. Whereas slaves fashioned dress for special occasions from expensive linens and cottons, among free settlers, whites decidedly favored silks and woolens for this purpose. Silks and woolens were more popular

among all free males, including *gens de couleur* and whites, than among women, and this gendered preference was growing. The significance of gender in sartorial practice was even more striking in terms of fine cottons: unlike the previous examples, it crossed rather than asserted boundaries. Just as enslaved women boasted costly muslins and calicos, so among all free people cottons became increasingly branded female: in the 1760s, half the garments in the inventories of free Saint-Domingue women (both *de couleur* and white) were tailored from cottons, as against about a quarter of men's.<sup>37</sup>

Comparing the textile regimes of slaves in the French Antilles with those created by their counterparts in other slave colonies reveals other ways that material culture traversed and constructed frontiers. Substantially the same kind of work uniform emerged both where it was decreed—as in British colonies like Jamaica—and where more discretion was left to slave owners, as in Louisiana, and even in South Carolina,

<sup>37</sup> Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, Notariat Saint-Domingue, Nots. Beaulieu, Belin du Ressort, Berton, Bugaret, Daudin de Bellair, Dupuis de Lavaux, Duval, Flanet, Guilleau, Ladoué, Laroque, Legendre (Cayes), Legendre (St Louis), Le Jeune Duparnay, Mallet, Rivet.



where no such law was ever enacted.<sup>38</sup> This is not startling, in light of the similarity of the labor performed on plantations no matter what their location. The outfits were not identical, however. In particular, linens were yet more dominant in the British colonies than in the French, reflecting the considerable gap, in the British colonies, in prices between cheap linens and cheap cottons and the apparel made from them.<sup>39</sup> In addition, cheap woolens like bays (baize) were frequently included in the British Caribbean, and “plains” (or “Negro cloth”) was prominent in mainland North America. With respect to special-occasion apparel, enslaved men and women in all slave colonies showed an analogous determination to acquire and dress in better quality fabrics and greater ornamentation. Yet here, too,

an important distinction was found, though in this case it was not imperial but regional—indeed, trans-imperial—in nature: in the Caribbean, headwraps were much more elaborate, even theatrical, than in mainland North America.

In both French and British non-plantation colonies, where slaves comprised smaller minorities, no characteristic slave textile regimes appeared, whether for work or for special occasions. On the contrary, enslaved men and women (many of them, in New France, Amerindians) wore the apparel of the broader farming and working population among whom they labored and lived, especially indentured servants (*engagés*). This meant not simply donning items, notably shoes and stockings, like their free counterparts, but also owning larger numbers of items in a similarly wide variety of fabrics and colors. This is not to say that imperial borders were of no importance; in fact, they did affect the contours of slave dress—as of everyone else’s. But such frontiers were only one among many influences, and indeed were less salient than factors such as slaves’ professions, wealth of their owners, rural or urban location, and geography and climate.

So uncovering sources like those discussed here can shed light on the material

<sup>38</sup> “That all Slaves shall have Cloths [sic], that is, Men Jackets and Drawers, and Woman [sic] Jackets and Petticoats, or Frocks, once every Year, on or before the Twenty Fifth Day of *December*, upon Penalty of Five Shillings for every Slave’s wanting”; “An ACT For the better Order and Government of Slaves”, from *The Laws of Jamaica, Pass’d by the GOVERNOURS, COUNCIL and ASSEMBLY in that Island, and Confirm’d by the Crown* (London: W. Wilkins, 1716), p. 227-228; for the 1724 Louisiana version of the *Code Noir*, which directed the colony’s Superior Council to choose “the quality of clothing that they deem suitable for masters to furnish their slaves” each year, while remaining silent about the composition of “suitable” outfits and textiles, see *Publications of the Louisiana Historical Society* 4 (1908), p. 80-81, Articles XVIII-XXI.

<sup>39</sup> For just one example, a cotton check shirt cost three times as much as a linen check shirt in 1770 Kingston, Jamaica; Jamaica Archives, Spanish Town, Inventory Books, 1B/11/3/51, Esther Mella, 20 December 1770.

practices of substantial groups—including, as in the case of the enslaved in the colonial Caribbean, groups that comprised the overwhelming majority of the population—about whom we still know very little despite decades of dedicated scholarly work. Beyond this type of recovery project, necessary as it is, studies like this one help to redirect the imperial-centeredness of present-day Atlantic history toward the polycentric yet connected perspective so often urged yet seldom realized. The *gingas* that was widely employed in Antillean slave work garments, for instance, exemplifies the way in which the multipolar Atlantic network promoted interactive developments around and across the basin.<sup>40</sup> Apparently invented by linen weavers in Bruges (Habsburg Flanders) around 1700, it was soon adopted by artisans in nearby Lille (French Flanders) as a replacement for a declining woollens industry. By the late eighteenth century, most of the city's *gingas* output was exported to the colonies; in addition, a booming yarn-twisting industry had sprung up. Over time, *gingas* became a mixed fabric, using cotton and, for its characteristic striped and checked patterns,

<sup>40</sup> My thinking about networks is indebted to John Scott, *Social Network Analysis: a Handbook*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2000); Wilbur R. Maki, Richard W. Lichty, *Urban Regional Economics. Concepts, Tools, Applications* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 2000), particularly p. 84-94.

indigo from Saint-Domingue, thereby stimulating Caribbean plantation expansion and helping to lay the basis for Lille's rise as a cottons center in the nineteenth century.<sup>41</sup>

The *mouchoirs* that featured so prominently in the writings and images of contemporaries illustrate remarkably well how clothing styles were created in multiple sites, how sartorial practices evolved as they circulated around the Atlantic basin, and how metropolitan products and industries were transformed in response to trans-Atlantic consumption. Used mainly by men taking snuff in the seventeenth century, handkerchiefs were taken up by women in the early eighteenth century both in Europe, where they worn about the neck, and, under West African influence, in the colonies for shawls and headdresses.

The emerging fashion was to have momentous results for Cholet, in western France. From the mid-1730s, its producers saw an opportunity to revive their languishing traditional plain linen manufacture by

<sup>41</sup> See Christoph Dieudonné, *Statistique du département du Nord*, 3 vols., Douai, Chez Marlier, 1804, vol. II, p. 263-268; James E. McClellan, *Colonialism and Science. Saint-Domingue in the Old Regime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press) 1992, p. 67; Robert DuPlessis, "One Theory, Two Draperies, Three Provinces and A Multitude of Fabrics: The New Drapery of French Flanders, Hainaut and the Tournaisis (Late Fifteenth-Late Eighteenth Centuries)", in Negley Harte, ed., *The New Draperies in the Low Countries and England, 1300-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 155-156.

specializing in handkerchiefs, initially of linen, later of mixed cotton-linen.<sup>42</sup> Their check and solid varieties featuring bold blues and reds quickly caught on in the French Antilles as well as in West Africa; subsequently, both planter families returning to the metropole and a growing European taste for brightly dyed textiles made Cholet handkerchiefs all the rage in France. As *mouchoirs*, like *gingas*, added cotton threads to linen, Cholet's industrial structure was also transformed. Cholet weavers had long been independent petty artisans who worked flax and hemp purchased on local markets, where they also sold their woven cloth. Because cotton had to be imported, however, merchant entrepreneurs were able to intervene, putting out raw materials that they controlled to subordinated and increasingly regimented wage laborers.

Multipolar cultural innovation did not denote equality among locations or among those who inhabited them. The histories of Lille *gingas* and Cholet handkerchiefs

show the ongoing if never exclusive dominance of the more resource-rich European metropolises in this process, just as in the construction of Atlantic spaces and of early modern globalization more generally, not to mention the growing dominance of capital over labor. Still, investigating the dress worn by enslaved men and women in the French Antilles unleashes a series of broader discoveries both substantive and conceptual. Despite asymmetric economic, social, and political resources, people throughout the Atlantic developed new textile regimes between the mid-seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries. Some were Atlantic-wide or even worldwide, like the growing taste for cottons.<sup>43</sup> Others were empire-specific, yet others were regional or colony-specific, and still others were peculiar to social groups both across and within other boundaries. Slave dress proves paradigmatic of the relationship between standardization and diversification that was as intimate in early modern globalization as in today's.

<sup>42</sup> See Pascal Dolle, « Les débuts du mouchoir dans la production de la manufacture de Cholet au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle », Jean Maillard, « Des mouchoirs bien carrés », Valérie Berinstain, « Les mouchoirs à carreaux des Indes, ou madras, et la France aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles », Françoise Cousin, « À la croisée des continents: le madras aux Antilles », in Jean-Joseph Chevalier, Élisabeth Loir-Mongazon, Nicole Pellegrin (dir.), *Le Mouchoir dans tous ses états*, Cholet, Association des amis du Musée du textile choletais, 2000, p. 39-47, 71-81, 151-153, 155-163.

<sup>43</sup> Giorgio Riello and Prasannan Parthasarathi, eds., *The Spinning World. A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Part II.