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The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, And Colonization In The Atlantic World, 1650-1800

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INTRODUCTION: FASHIONING THE ATLANTIC WORLD

On October 6, 1761, the newly widowed Luiza Maria da Conceição witnessed the drafting of an inventory of the estate left by her late husband Manoel João Viana.¹ Born in a northern Portuguese village, Viana had emigrated to Salvador da Bahia. São Salvador da Bahia de Todos os Santos, to give its full and proper name, was capital of colonial Brazil between 1549 and 1763, a refreshment and refitting stop (*escala*) for ships traveling to and from India, port for the sugar plantations of a substantial hinterland, and distribution center for licit and contraband Asian goods throughout the South Atlantic, notably cloth for the massive Angolan slave trade.² In that bustling city, Viana married, fathered at least two children, and set up as a *comerciante*, apparently specializing in fabrics.³

Following accepted practice, the inventory itemized and valued the decedent's movable and immovable possessions, both private and professional. Apparel and textiles made up a substantial part of Viana's assets. His own garments included a suit comprising breeches, jacket, and waistcoat of black *droguete* (a mixed fabric of wool and silk or wool and flax linen), along with a pair of silk stockings, all in good condition; eleven "rather worn" shirts, some of Indian cotton cloth, others of *bertanha* (a fine linen); four pairs of white linen breeches; and an item whose identity time has effaced from the fading archival page.

Viana's shop stocked an impressive array of textiles. Dozens of pieces of handkerchief material each contained a dozen or more individual kerchiefs that could be used as shawls or scarves, as headwraps, or

as nose wipes. Many handkerchiefs were silk, others Indian cotton, some French linen, yet others of unspecified material, but nearly all were colorful: blue, red, light yellow. Of the many lengths of cloth catalogued, nearly a hundred were noted as “pieces” (a few of them 40 meters in length), while dozens more were measured in *côvados* (0.68 m) and *varas* (1.1 m); together, they totaled at least 5,000 meters of fabric woven from diverse natural fibers. Cottons included expensive chintz, cheap French *ruam*, coarse and smooth Indian muslin, and yet other kinds at all price points. Linens, too, ran the gamut from choice dazzling white cambric and Hamburg *bertanha* through medium-priced French *crês* and Indian types to rock-bottom rough *linhagem* and fibery tow (*estopa*). Viana had some expensive silk chintz on offer, but his customers could also select medium-priced silks such as shiny taffeta or colorful blue, green, red, or white shagreen for lining. Similarly, while shoppers for woolens might fancy very high-end blue or green broadcloth or slightly less expensive but still pricey black baize, they could also find much more reasonable varieties: cheaper baize (in various colors), smooth but durable serge, or plain-weave camlet.

Interspersed with handkerchiefs and fabrics were ready-made garments: fifteen frilled cotton shirts and five that were striped, eleven pairs of red linen breeches lined with cotton, four cotton *penteadors* (*peinadors* or dressing gowns), ten muslin cravats, a cotton and lace nightcap, and a blue silk with silver sprigs front piece for a waistcoat. Two bed coverings also put in an appearance: an extravagant flame-colored satin coverlet embroidered, fringed, and otherwise ornamented with silk and lined with pearl-colored taffeta, and a modestly priced white linen counterpane (bedspread).⁴ The report wound up with a tally of several dozen French and other semifine hats; a few dozen pairs of men’s and women’s stockings (some French), white and colored, made from silk, linen, and cotton; and length upon length of tape, fringe, lace, silk twist, cord, and braid, amounting to several thousand meters in all.

The inventory was drawn up only to assure the appropriate succession of one individual’s property. Yet beyond their workaday purpose, the dry and formulaic entries that enumerate Viana’s estate provide tantalizing clues about trade patterns, fabric consumption practices, and sartorial cultures that came into existence once Europeans constructed commercial networks stretching across much of the planet, settled throughout the Atlantic, engaged in massive cultural and

population transfers and disruptions, and established new economies and societies. Those commercial patterns, appropriative usages, and dress mores are the subjects of this book. Focusing on cloth and apparel in delimited locations between the mid-seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries, *The Material Atlantic* investigates the ways in which women and men of diverse ethnicities, statuses, and occupations fashioned their apparel from materials old and new, familiar and strange, in a variety of geoclimatic, political, and sociocultural environments that presented both innovative possibilities and severe constraints. This book describes the fabrics and attire that became available to consumers, traces the modes and occasions of their acquisition, interprets the meanings of their deployment, and explains the effects of these developments on global textile industries. By analyzing the dress that disparate Atlantic residents fashioned, *The Material Atlantic* explores crucial developments that characterized early modernity: the material effects of colonialism, proliferation of new and widely sourced goods, massive enslavement, deep and prolonged intercultural transfers, changes in consumer behavior and attitudes, new expressions of social identification, and innovations in manufacturing before the onset of factory industrialization.

But how can studying cloth and clothing in the Atlantic basin shed light on these subjects? Why examine locations scattered across four continents facing onto a vast body of water? Why privilege the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? What kinds of sources are available to help answer these questions? What bodies of scholarship can help apprehend the phenomena under consideration, and what theories explain them?

Textiles and dress

Among the first human manufactures, textiles were both independently developed in many parts of the world and diffused among cultures beginning in early prehistory.⁵ In most societies, production was focused on local needs. But some textile raw materials, semi-processed cloth, and finished fabrics long circulated within sizeable trading regions such as West Africa, the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, or Mesoamerica. In addition, knowledge of raw materials and techniques slowly disseminated over great distances, as did small quantities of luxury cloth, such

as the Chinese silks and Indian cottons occasionally found in medieval Europe.⁶

European colonial and commercial expansion of the early modern era (roughly the late fifteenth through the late eighteenth centuries) eroded the relative isolation of existing commercial regions, and fabrics and garments became the pre-eminent interculturally exchanged consumer manufactures. Cloth and clothing constituted more than two-thirds of English exports to West Africa in the eighteenth century, cotton goods alone the same proportion of French imports from India.⁷ So central were textiles to the deerskin trade between Muscogulges (Creeks) and European settlers, Kathryn Holland Braund proposes, that it “could have been termed the cloth trade . . . for fabrics of various weights, colors, and designs were the staples.”⁸ Beyond commercial exchanges, all manner of gifting – official and private, clerical and lay – assured that woven fabrics were increasingly present and prominent in societies around the globe.

Textiles and items made from them were major consumption items for individuals in all segments of the population. Enhanced levels of domestic comfort raised demand for bed and table linen, window and door curtains, floor and table rugs, while traders and agriculturists depended on sails, sacks, and strainers all made of fabric.⁹ For most people, however, clothing was their most considerable and most regular consumer expenditure apart from food and drink. In late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, for instance, apparel represented by far families’ biggest outlay for manufactures, accounting for up to 15 percent of their annual budgets; across the Atlantic, clothing for enslaved persons was estimated at 11 percent of a model Georgia rice plantation’s yearly costs in the mid-eighteenth century.¹⁰

The economic significance of apparel is evident. Its meanings are less so. Clothing is materially and metaphorically multivalent. Besides fulfilling utilitarian needs for warmth and protection, it affords considerable if diverse aesthetic satisfactions. By virtue of the sundry properties – texture, quality, color, pattern, density, to name a few – of the many substances out of which it can be fashioned, apparel is remarkably protean, available for multiple expressive and symbolic projects.¹¹ It can denote an individual’s personal style or participation in a group’s fashion, declare autonomy or exhibit conformity or subordination, reveal aspiration for economic and cultural capital or attainment of wealth and status. What one wears may announce deliberate

syncretism or simply reflect the selection at hand, manifest an eager social assimilation or a scornful rejection of norms, disclose one's identity or disguise it. In fact, both *clothing* ("the items of apparel" that one puts on) and the more comprehensive *dress* (everything worn on and over the body to cover, add to, or alter it) are likely to convey several messages at once, not all of them intended and some probably mixed.¹²

Though rules formal and informal have long sought to prescribe dress and its meanings, most sartorial items, whether singly or as part of an ensemble, have no fixed signification: what they denote is defined by interaction among wearer, situation, and norms of attire. If, moreover, dress may reflect conscious choice and fashioning, it may equally be a matter of unmindful, virtually automatic routine.¹³ And even when an individual does exercise choice, its outcome is shaped by a congeries of mainly implicit values, dispositions, and practices (the know-how proper to the person's social situation, or what Pierre Bourdieu calls her or his "habitus").¹⁴ So with few exceptions, dress incorporates personal expression and social standard, individual statement and collective convention.

Not only, finally, are the meanings of dress ambiguous but our knowledge of dress in the past is mediated by problematic sources, as we shall see below. Still, the effort is well worth undertaking. What individuals and groups wore imparts much about the social and cultural imperatives and meanings that governed quotidian experience in general, and about the impact of early modern Atlantic commerce and colonialism in particular. Fortunately, textiles and attire left abundant documentary traces, because early modern people regarded dress as a critical guide to understanding both their own societies and those newly encountered. Even though dress is essentially a visual, even fugitive, means of communication, it provoked a great deal of written commentary and a myriad of pictorial representations.

Places and period

Merchant networks that traversed the globe brought a plenitude of fabrics and garments like those listed in Viana's inventory to localities throughout the great Atlantic basin. Nearly a dozen of these sites figure most prominently in *The Material Atlantic*. Two were in regions of

independent indigenous states: Cape Coast Castle on the West African Gold Coast (now littoral Ghana), which from 1672 was the English Royal African Company's operations center for the entire region, and Angola and neighboring kingdoms in west Central Africa, where merchants from several European states trafficked, Catholic orders established missions, and the Portuguese undertook colonization, with mixed results.¹⁵ The others were European settlements and the commercial hinterlands they developed: Spanish Buenos Aires and the areas under its jurisdiction in the Río de la Plata region of today's Argentina; Dutch Cape Town and inland agricultural regions in present-day South Africa; Salvador da Bahia and the Recôncavo, a sugar and tobacco plantation zone that arcs around the Baía de Todos os Santos west of Salvador in Portuguese Brazil; the southern district of French Caribbean Saint-Domingue (today's Haïti), which had multiple small towns and ports rather than a single center; British colonial Port Royal, its successor Kingston, and the island of Jamaica that they dominated commercially as well as socially; the continental North American French colonies of New Orleans and rural lower Louisiana, and Montreal with the nearby settlement zone that grew along the Saint Lawrence River and its tributaries in New France; and the British mainland North American settlements of Charles Town (present-day Charleston, South Carolina), whose trading zone reached into what is today the neighboring state of Georgia, and Philadelphia and its commercial hinterland that eventually stretched west into present-day central Pennsylvania and east into New Jersey.

While hardly an exhaustive registry of places engaged in Atlantic commerce and colonialism, these ports and colonies encompass all the populated continents facing on that basin, as well as its major non-polar geographic and climatic zones, economic structures, socio-cultural ecologies, and European colonial empires. They were, moreover, economically and geographically dynamic. Not only did trade and colonial settlement continually expand – or at least attempt to – but the economic and cultural reach of Atlantic ports and settlements always extended into contact zones beyond current commercial and colonial borders. Most important, the locations studied in this book exemplify the diversity of dress cultures affected by the materials, manners, and modes introduced by early modern Atlantic commerce and colonization.

In the mid-seventeenth century, clothing in many Atlantic societies was tailored from woven-fiber textiles, but in others it was fashioned from furs, skins, and beaten tree bark. Even when woven fabrics were the dominant dress materials, moreover, societies had different preferred fiber types and favorite cloth sources, which might be local, regional, or far distant. Apparel styles ranged from what Europeans considered nakedness or shockingly minimal coverage of the body to degrees of envelopment that at their most pronounced left little save extremities visible. Similarly varied were the forms of alternate or additional types of corporeal adornment and their place within overall clothing ensembles. Together, this diversity and dynamism enable *The Material Atlantic* to analyze the impact of colonialism and globalizing commerce not only on sartorial goods and styles but on cultural practices of both long-established and nascent societies.

Early modern Atlantic colonialism and commerce reached their apogee in the period from the mid-seventeenth to the later eighteenth centuries. European exploration of the basin dates back to the fifteenth century, colonization and exploitation of natural resources to the sixteenth. But only from the 1640s did “a shared Atlantic world,” which Pierre Gervais has defined as a “thick web of relationships, linking a number of people on each side of the Atlantic Ocean,” come into existence.¹⁶ Beginning in those years, proliferating settlement and rapid expansion of the plantation economy greatly increased commerce and migration while both supplying and demanding a much broader array of trade goods.¹⁷ That Atlantic world reached its height across the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century. Whereas some 1,144,000 Africans and Europeans left for the Americas in 1640–1700, about 3,666,000 departed between 1700 and 1760.¹⁸ Between the early eighteenth century and the early 1770s the Atlantic trade of England about sextupled and France’s rose at least eightfold; in both cases, growth in Atlantic commerce was at least double the gains registered in other commercial zones.¹⁹

The Atlantic cloth and clothing trades were particularly dynamic. Overall, England’s textile exports and re-exports (of which more than three-quarters of the cottons and some of the silks were Asian) grew less than twofold between 1699–1701 and 1772–74 – but they rose more than sixfold to the Americas and West Africa. Across that period, textiles always comprised more than half of total English

exports and re-exports, and about three-fifths of manufacturing exports and re-exports. In every major fiber category, Atlantic markets were more buoyant than any other. Exports and re-exports of cottons and calicoes more than quadrupled, of woolens and linens more than sextupled, of silks jumped nearly sevenfold. By 1772–74, Atlantic locations took more than 90 percent of British linen exports and re-exports, as well as nearly half of all silks and more than a quarter of all woolens, cottons, and calicoes.²⁰ Across the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in short, merchant networks delivered all manner of woven-fiber textiles from Europe and beyond to the diverse populations of the rapidly developing Atlantic world. How, why, and what sorts of dress were made from these goods are the subject of this book.

Sources and complications

Studies of dress during the early modern era can draw on a wide variety of sources. The multitude of fabrics, apparel, places, and populations in the early modern Atlantic invites – indeed, mandates – consideration of and comparison among sources as diverse as possible, with the proviso that many are more pertinent for some groups than for others. Before modern marketing surveys (which have their own shortcomings), direct evidence about consumer preferences – the motives behind appropriation acts – is at best scanty, necessitating reliance on inference from traces and clues left in an assortment of documents, written and pictorial. Yet all pose problems for analysis and interpretation, thanks to the different purposes for which they were created, the discrete conventions on which they draw, and the manifold dispositions that inform them. Moreover, none includes every group in all locations across the entire period, and even the most widely available have many local idiosyncrasies.

Probate or post-mortem inventories like Viana's are the most numerous and typically the most detailed documentary sources. Usually drawn up shortly after death by notaries paid a small proportion of the total value of the estate, by court-appointed executors when the decedent left a will, or by administrators when the decedent died intestate, numerous similarities in form and content obtained among them. No matter where prepared, they customarily contained information about the decedent and heirs; lists of movable property, including cash

and financial instruments; declarations of credits, debts, and items that were missing or on loan; sworn signatures of those responsible for drafting the document, appraisers (if any), and witnesses; and (less often) values for some or all of the goods enumerated. Some also listed real property, though unimproved land – and sometimes all real estate – might not be appraised.

Though inventories are compendious and widely found, only a minority of deaths generated one. The goods of children, indentured servants, the enslaved, and indigenous people were almost never inventoried, nor were many estates of adult free settlers, particularly married women. Inventories were most likely to be prepared when a dispute over a decedent's property had emerged or was anticipated: when heirs disagreed about division of goods; when creditors required satisfaction; when a community of goods dissolved upon the decease of one of the partners; when minor children needed non-parental guardians; or when there were children from more than one marriage. Keeping in mind as well the many documents lost over time, it is clear that surviving inventories do not constitute random samples of the populations in the places from which they originate.

Nor are the inventories that were created trouble-free. The local authorities or notaries who composed them used current terminology that sometimes proves impenetrable to twenty-first-century scholars. Textiles are especially fraught. Fiber composition often changed over time: thus the fabric called a “rouen” or “ruam” after its initial French place of production was made of linen in the seventeenth century but usually, though not always, of cotton from some point in the eighteenth. Equally, cloth could be made of diverse materials in the same period (an eighteenth-century “check” could be a linen, a cotton, or a combination of both, and was often simply but unhelpfully denominated “check” in an inventory), or be referred to by an attribute such as its pattern (e.g., “damask”) with the fiber – which in this case could be linen, silk, wool – left unspecified. Apparel terminology could also be ambiguous: in New France, an *habit* could be a coat or a suit, while in the Cape Colony *rok* might signify a skirt or a coat.

In addition, listings could be incomplete or lack historically significant information because heirs accepted items en bloc, compilers were ignorant or negligent, decedents granted items in wills. Appraisers, often neighbors of the decedent, might be ill-informed, and though merchants or artisans were often called in for specific expertise, they

might be unable to provide price or other needed data. Worse for the purposes of this book, many inventories either omit clothing altogether or lump it into one catchall category such as “purse and apparell.” A growing problem everywhere as the eighteenth century progressed, this defect was most pronounced in Britain and the Netherlands and their respective colonies. Finally, even the most accurate and thorough inventory cannot provide an account of the process of consumption: it is a snapshot not a film, a record of accumulation rather than a narrative of acts of appropriation.

For all that, inventories are invaluable.²¹ They incorporate a broad selection of social groups, occupations, and locations from both genders among free adult European and European-descent populations around the entire Atlantic, and in some places include free people of color as well. Moreover, the most common reasons for which inventories were compiled cut across lines of age and wealth: the need to provide for minor children, for instance, resulted in many inventories of decedents who were neither affluent nor old. Comparisons of estimates and actual sale prices show that valuation errors were minor, very rarely more than a few percent, while detailed merchant inventories permit interpolation of fabric price data where needed. And if it is impossible to track individuals’ sartorial behavior over time, sufficient inventories have survived from determinate periods in both the later seventeenth and later eighteenth centuries to permit identification of significant group trends and patterns in many places.

One inventory makes a cameo appearance when Native American dress is investigated in Chapter 3. The most substantial Atlantic populations appear very rarely in inventories, however, and then almost always fortuitously and inferentially. It is likely that the coarse *linhagem* and *estopa* linen in Viana’s holdings, for instance, were destined to dress enslaved men and women – that was, after all, a leading use for such fabrics in Brazil – but such information is not found in the document itself. To learn it, we must turn to other sources, including merchant papers, official and personal letters and reports, and newspapers, in which Africans both free and enslaved, as well as indigenous inhabitants of the Americas, feature more consistently, overtly, and intentionally. Unlike inventories, however, which were created by, for, and within European and free settler societies, all of these other documents, no matter how anodyne, were created by outsiders to the communities on which they reported.

On the whole, commercial records are most straightforward, not least because they consist mainly of information about trade to or aggregate supply in particular locations. For this reason, they figure centrally in analyses of textile commerce in Chapter 2. Along with inventories, they allow a kind of paper-based (occasionally parchment-based) archeology that supplements material remains or even substitutes for those that have been lost.²² Still, like inventories, merchant archives reveal little about the uses to which the items on offer were put. They disclose the availability of cloth and clothing, as well as the conditions and situations of exchange. But commercial records do not tell why people acquired textiles and apparel or what customers did with their new possessions.

Some of these deficiencies in information about consumer demand can be remedied with the aid of contemporary narrative works. Missionaries, officials, and visitors usually took an interest in the dress worn by those whom they evangelized, administered, or observed because apparel was widely considered a reliable marker of civility and thus of suitability for allegiance, conversion, or respect. To be sure, these sources must be used with care. Very seldom are African or Amerindian voices heard (no matter whether free or enslaved), and then usually in translation and virtually always in transcription, with all the inevitable difficulties entailed by such processes no matter how forceful or well informed the speaker, no matter how attentive or sympathetic the scribe. Further, many works are palimpsests of primary, secondary, apocryphal, and even invented materials, and they may concentrate on the exotic, picturesque, and bizarre. Authors who never saw the lands or peoples they ostensibly described retailed misunderstandings, exaggerations, and outright fabrications, as did writers who sought to enhance the reputation of themselves or their group or to denigrate others.

Few commentators were disinterested. The *Jesuit Relations*, annual reports on the Society's missionary activities throughout the world, have rightly been regarded as invaluable proto-ethnographic reports. But on occasion they tried to advance one of their principal objectives – increasing lay support and funding for evangelization – by detailing the difficulties the Fathers faced and the strangeness of the customs they encountered. Descriptions of plantation societies often overtly or covertly defended chattel bondage, or bitterly assailed it, by one-sided characterizations of the material life of the enslaved. Other

accounts – whether for colonial proprietors, for mother country governments, or just for wider anonymous reading publics – could be yet more overtly moralistic, propagandistic, or sensational.

Invaluable information on clothing and its uses can nevertheless be extracted from such documents. They can be collated within and across time and space, though because authors routinely – but usually without acknowledgement – copied from one another, agreement may only reveal a common source; fortunately, scholars have begun to produce critical commentaries on or editions of some of the most widely cited of these sources.²³ Moreover, many writers were conscientious, making use of information gathered first-hand, talking to or compiling information from others with direct experience, using sources that are now lost. Then, too, partisan and prejudiced works can be read against the grain by exploiting contradictions or by extrapolating from information subsidiary to their authors' intent. And because such reports are particularly interesting for what they reveal about the outlook of their writers, they figure prominently in Chapter 1 (dress at the beginning of our period) as well as in Chapters 3 and 4, which focus on dress practices among groups that Europeans regarded and treated as savage or subordinate.

Newspaper advertisements are a rich source for sartorial knowledge, notably listings seeking the return of fugitive slaves, servants, and apprentices, who for ease of recognition were frequently described in terms of their clothing as well as (and in many cases more than) by their physiognomy. Of course, runaway listings are not necessarily inventories of all the clothing owned by the individuals described: they may simply note what was worn at the time of escape or the apparel that masters or mistresses considered distinctive and thus easily recognizable. Yet when and where they are sufficiently abundant they give an excellent sense of the array of garments held by those in permanent or temporary bondage, and they permit developments to be followed over time. The rub is that whereas newspapers were becoming common in western Europe as the seventeenth century progressed, they only appeared in British colonies in the early eighteenth century and in French colonies in the 1760s; what is more, in the Caribbean only a small minority of the runaway advertisements mentions dress.

Myriad paintings, engravings, woodcuts, and other images portray the early modern Atlantic and its inhabitants. Frequently

more vivid and captivating than written documents, the realistic style of many of these depictions can give the impression of transparent reproduction of their subject matter free from representational distortions. Yet if exempt from the linguistic issues bedeviling written sources, these pictures raise problems of their own. Not only were many images of Africa and the Americas and their inhabitants not based on direct observation. Artists also frequently deviated from or entirely ignored the passages that they were purportedly illustrating, and publishers were wont to recycle depictions among different texts, typically without acknowledgement.

Even apparently straightforward renderings “from life” or “on the spot” were shaped by a host of artistic conventions derived from European models. Take, for instance, the verisimilitude of the paintings of the Italo-English Agostino Brunias (*c.* 1730–96), whose oeuvre provides the best extant portfolio of the quotidian activities of eighteenth-century indigenous, enslaved, and colonizing inhabitants of the West Indies. Despite its Caribbean subject matter and setting, Brunias’s work was firmly rooted in such metropolitan genres as the so-called urban “cries” and fashion illustrations that delineated types rather than individuals, as well as in the romantic idealization of both figures and landscapes.²⁴ Patron participation also modified art works. For their portraits, Timothy Breen has argued, colonial sitters typically selected the garments and fabrics in which they were to be depicted, and they had aspirational rather than representational objectives in mind. This imagistic self-fashioning intended to show them not as they physically and materially existed but as they wanted to be visually perceived, with dress denoting the status and wealth they sought to project.²⁵

But if visual images cannot be taken as objective representations of the subjects depicted, artists were not mere tools of conventions or clients. Neither were the images they created simple flights of fancy unworthy of serious study. Art works often violated or complicated established norms, and in ways productive for historical analysis. In addition, many times artists, like writers, had access to sources that have since disappeared, and, like texts, visual depictions can be compared and contextualized. Many images, too, were created by observers with minimal or no formal artistic training but with excellent knowledge of the localities in which they found themselves, and their depictions frequently turn out to have been remarkably accurate.²⁶

Equally important, even stylized and distorted representations helped both to produce and to reveal contemporary understandings and practices. The circulation of images of clothing shaped and was shaped by sartorial cultures, while also making evident attitudes about the dress worn by specific groups, if not individuals. As John Styles has noted, stereotyped portrayals are compelling because they evoke characteristic attire: Artists might caricature particular items of apparel, but their images got their force by being rooted in “the typicality of the clothes they depicted.”²⁷ It would be hazardous to take any image – even or especially a portrait – as the literal likeness of a particular person, much less of her or his wardrobe. But together with the wealth of information that can be retrieved from written documents, the copious clues about fabrics, garments, dress habits, and cultural values encoded within visual materials enable textured insight into early modern clothing cultures.

Approaches and debates

The Material Atlantic enlists, modifies, and extends recent scholarship on early modern globalization, the Atlantic world, and consumption. Though each has a distinct intellectual genealogy, focuses on disparate issues, and relies on different sources, they can provide insights that help interpret trends, patterns, and consequences of textile and apparel practices in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Early modern historians have long studied European overseas expansion and foreign commerce and the sundry effects that they occasioned. Increasingly, these developments are subsumed under the capacious rubric of “globalization” to spotlight not only the “intensification of commercial, economic, social and cultural connections between different areas of the world” but also the integration of innovative or newly available goods into the daily lives of substantial groups of people even before the advent of factory industrialization.²⁸ Intended to displace hierarchic, diffusionist, and Eurocentric explanations, the global turn has not been unanimously embraced. Among early modernists, its proponents have with some justice been faulted for slighting European primacy in constructing, coordinating, and sustaining global connections; ignoring unequal power relations among participants; and anachronistically exaggerating the extent and significance of intercontinental commercial and related

exchanges.²⁹ Yet if early modern globalization often differed from what is sometimes claimed for it, its emphasis on interaction, poly-centric agency, and hybridity is productive for understanding some modes and meanings of innovative dress practices.

Though a form of textile-based globalization arguably linked together much of the medieval Indian Ocean, it was Europeans who established networks that greatly heightened worldwide movements of people, products, images, and styles in the early modern era.³⁰ Moreover, Europeans retained a principal role in the operation of these networks, even when neither producers, sellers, nor purchasers were European, as with East Indian companies' intra-Asian trade or the cotton cloth woven and dyed under Portuguese supervision in the Cape Verde Islands for consumers on the West African mainland. Many globally traded commodities came as well from producers in Europe or European colonies: manufactures from the former, so-called "colonial groceries" (sugar, coffee, tobacco) and raw materials like indigo and cotton from the latter. Within and between networks, power was asymmetrically distributed and exercised: Europeans and free settlers typically commanded more resources, notably capital (usually in the form of credit flows), the physical assets required for long-distance oceanic transport, and relevant technologies.

Yet if Europeans and colonists of European descent dominantly structured early modern globalization, its personnel, contents, and customers were remarkably heterogeneous. Much of the commercial activity associated with global trade was not in European hands, and much of whom and what was traded – slaves, most cotton and many silk fabrics, spices, and tea – came from societies that Europeans did not control. Goods, fashions, and usages did not circulate unilaterally or unidirectionally, for societies with customs and concerns not dictated by Europeans accounted for a great deal of supply and demand. *The Material Atlantic* demonstrates that early modern worldwide trade fostered the wide availability of some similar items – certain textiles in particular were global goods par excellence – but they were consumed within specific imperial, regional, and local contexts. Convergence and divergence were equally intrinsic to early modern globalization.

Early modern globalization should not be confused with today's. Not only did it entail very different forms of production, commercial organization and conduct, and transport and communications. It took place without formal liberalization of markets or creation

of transnational political and economic organizations; in fact, imperial, mercantilist, and other barriers shaped and limited its extent. It also proceeded slowly and unevenly, sharply contrasting in both scale and scope with more recent manifestations, and it encompassed a more circumscribed array of places and phenomena.³¹ But then as now, this book argues, globalization provoked diverse strategies among both sellers and buyers. Some involved provision and acquisition of goods that replaced indigenous products and cultures; others entailed customization that targeted or domesticated imported commodities to diverse environments, a process now often termed (g)localization.³² At times, European goods and standards proved authoritative; in other situations, consequential products and influences emerged from different locations; in yet others, producers and consumers far distant from one another mutually refashioned the goods that global trade circulated.³³ Any given outcome depended on a host of circumstances; as the chapters of this book document, only empirical investigation of concrete dress practices can establish which held true in a given situation.

All these processes can be observed again and again throughout the Atlantic basin. As with the topics now encompassed by the study of globalization, historical attention to the societies located around the Atlantic is hardly a novelty. But “Atlantic world” or “Atlantic system” histories propose that the basin constituted not simply an aggregate of places but an increasingly integrated community; a new world created by encounters, fusions, and transformations of old worlds; an entity particularly characterized and joined by intercontinental and transnational flows of people, objects, and concepts. Sundry approaches have been essayed. All, however, insist on the primordial significance of interactive rather than unilateral relationships that transcended geographic, cultural, and imperial borders.³⁴

As critics have not been shy to point out, Atlantic histories have often fallen short of their programmatic claims, or even the promise of their titles. All too often remaining within national and colonial frameworks (the Spanish Atlantic, the French, the Dutch), with preponderant attention devoted to the British North Atlantic, many are little more than the traditional topics of European expansion or imperial studies renamed – and even then are likely to ignore the European metropolises. At the same time, the “Atlantic” epithet has been misapplied to processes that were broader or narrower. Early modern European political and commercial expansion was worldwide, not solely located in the Atlantic, while early

modern merchants built networks – commercial relationships – that were not primarily demarcated by physical or political borders.³⁵

The early modern Atlantic was, moreover, neither self-enclosed nor boundaryless; nested within a globalizing world, it was continually, intimately, and necessarily articulated with other zones. A substantial number of the commodities that circulated within the Atlantic came from outside that basin; indeed, the existence of most colonies therein depended on massive imports of Indian cotton fabrics that were traded in West and west Central Africa for the enslaved men and women who toiled on plantations in the Americas. As a result, trends within the Atlantic were inevitably influenced by wider global patterns. At the same time, political units significantly oriented trade and thus material cultures. Hence no matter how global their aspirations or how personal their networks, merchants found it “easiest and most cost-effective” to do business “within imperial boundaries and alliances.”³⁶ The contours of the Atlantic were, finally, fluid over time and space. Some areas extending far inland eventually became strongly integrated with coastal ports and posts, whereas others much closer to littorals remained largely untouched by Atlantic influences.

But if the Atlantic was both part of a wider history and contained numerous diverse ecologies each with its own development, it was also a zone of especially dense networks of interconnections and interactions. While no merchant (or anyone else) thought in specifically “Atlantic” terms, Atlantic routes and operations were the core of their networks, and their headquarters were situated in the Atlantic basin.³⁷ No European colonial empire was restricted to the Atlantic arena, yet all (with the exception of the Dutch) had their demographic centers and their most important settlements there. Because of the thick intermingling of colonies and commercial networks, and the humming reciprocal connections forged among disparate economic, social, and cultural systems, the Atlantic focus of this book advances understanding of processes that unfolded globally, throughout the basin, and in more delimited locations.

A meaningful activity by which individuals and groups acquire and make objects their own (that is, “appropriate” them), consumption is a central cultural practice and process of symbolic communication in all societies.³⁸ Many scholars have proposed, however, that a “consumer revolution” involving qualitative as well as quantitative changes occurred in the early modern era.³⁹ Though numerous aspects of the thesis remain in debate, it is now widely accepted that at least across the seventeenth

and eighteenth centuries, growing numbers of people in Europe and its colonies evinced the ability and the propensity to purchase consumer goods in an expanding array of commercial venues. Shoppers selected from an ever-wider variety of items, many of them previously unknown foodstuffs and manufactures from Atlantic and global producers, in a profusion of materials, qualities, and finishes from suppliers using innovative techniques of promotion and presentation.

An Atlantic perspective, however, raises questions about the geographic and social reach of the changes, and the modernizing teleology that underlies it. How many buyers exhibited novel attitudes, values, and habits, a behavioral complex frequently termed “consumerism”? Did enhanced social mobility and shifting gender roles increasingly encourage all consumers to act according to individualistic motives, ignore or reject time-honored strictures about purportedly morally dubious and economically harmful “luxury” expenditure, and display a marked taste for the new (an aggregate of dispositions usually designated “fashion”)? Analyses of the package of changes summed up by the term “consumer revolution,” this book proposes, must take account of selective adoptions and adaptations that occurred around the Atlantic.

The evidence deployed to demonstrate that fundamental changes in practices and meanings of consumption occurred during the early modern era has been mainly drawn from northwestern Europe and colonial British North America and has featured populations enjoying personal autonomy. Examining a broader range of societies, *The Material Atlantic* revises existing interpretations to account more accurately for appropriations of dress undertaken not only by metropolitans and free settlers but also by the substantial populations around the basin that were held in bondage and by indigenous people living beyond the boundaries of European settlements and stations yet engaged in exchange with them.

In any society, admittedly, the significance of consumption acts is never unambiguous. For one thing, all goods are polysemic; their meaning depends on how, when, and where they are employed and which consumers use them. For another, consumers’ motives are always formed and expressed in complicated ways, in a jostle of conscious reasons and unconscious forces. In short, consumption acts involve more than simply acquisition: they also entail appropriation, that is, taking possession of an item’s panoply of utilitarian, symbolic, and aesthetic properties. Appropriation, however, is rarely autonomous.

Rather, it is shaped not only by climate and geographic environment but by multiple overt and unseen sociocultural factors including wealth, profession, status, gender, and ethnicity; supply and demand conditions; imperatives toward imitation and toward originality; the operation of forcible or discreet power relations.

The Material Atlantic decodes practices of dress acquisition and appropriation. It documents sartorial choices that intended to affirm norms, and others that set out to disrupt them, practices that signaled inclusion and those that marked exclusion. The book traces the results of sumptuary laws designed to mandate certain garments or fabrics, and to forbid others. Most of all, in the Atlantic world, where identities were particularly fluid thanks to the continual intercultural movements and mixtures of peoples, goods, styles, and ideas, this book shows how dress practices emerged out of and promoted identifications – both chosen collective self-representations and imposed categorizations – increasingly defined by some combination of gender, ethnicity, status, occupation, and class.⁴⁰

Beyond the inherent intricacy of all appropriation, moreover, Atlantic trade involved repeated encounters between disparate material goods, cultural conventions, and sociopolitical projects. As a result, the sartorial practices analyzed in *The Material Atlantic* involved a good deal of the material and behavioral intermingling that scholars have denominated hybridization, syncretism, or bricolage.⁴¹ To capture the complexity of both the processes at work and the material results, this book delimits what it calls “dress regimes.” Such regimes consist of objects (garments and related items of dress), practices by which they were appropriated and deployed, and verbal and pictorial discourses that sought to direct, explain, and justify (or delegitimize) both objects and practices. Dress regimes could be widely eclectic or narrowly selective, highly innovative or strikingly traditional, broadly diffused or of more circumscribed ascendancy. But like the identifications they expressed, all were dynamic, incorporating contributions from old and new materials, imperatives, and styles.

Claims and chapters

On the basis of these objects, places, period, sources, and approaches, *The Material Atlantic* investigates the ways in which novel as well as

well-known cloth and clothing were disseminated and taken up around the Atlantic basin during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and explains how and why they supplanted, modified, or sustained existing dress regimes. Each chapter opens – as this one has – with a visual or written document that highlights dress both in a specific place and time and within a larger Atlantic context. Most generally, *The Material Atlantic* argues that by supplying an increasing variety of similar fabrics to diverse locations and populations, early modern globalization enabled both standardization and diversification of dress styles. Concomitant trends toward material cultural homogenization and heterogeneity were inherent in early modern globalization. Though typically considered a recent phenomenon, concurrent convergence and divergence of material cultures was a defining characteristic of the pre-industrial Atlantic.

As people living throughout the Atlantic basin incorporated imported woven-fiber fabrics into their sartorial imaginary and practice, they all, this book demonstrates, created fashions from specific amalgams of habitus, needs, desires, conventions, rules, and available supplies.⁴² Sometimes these fashions entailed little more than existing items rearranged into new styles,⁴³ but frequently they were inventive combinations of novel apparel, fabrics, and styles. Many fashions were intended to express group identifications or at least aspirations, yet others were designed to manifest difference, mark subordination, or civilize savages. Atlantic fashions included striking innovation as well as affirmation of convention, boundary crossing and border drawing, affiliation and proscription: Involving conformity and distinction, imitation and differentiation, they prescribed, governed, and expressed behavior and attitudes of a wide array of groups rather than providing a uniform template.⁴⁴ Free settlers were particularly anxious, and able, to follow metropolitan fashion signals. Enslaved and indigenous people were more creative. Using imported cloth and clothing as well as other materials and practices of adornment they developed syncretic dress regimes rather than, as contemporaries usually insisted, misinterpreted versions of European styles. In fact, these hybrids displayed a level of sartorial creolization – the creation of a new cultural form appropriate to a new environment – that eluded most free settlers.⁴⁵ But as a whole, *The Material Atlantic* posits, the dress regimes of Atlantic indigenous peoples, enslaved men and women, and free settlers left an ironic legacy for textile

manufacturers. While promoting innovation in some sectors, it sustained long-established products and forms of production in others. Neither globalization in general nor its Atlantic iteration embodied an intrinsic modernizing impetus.

These propositions are elaborated in chapters that describe and interpret the causes, components, and meanings of transformation and persistence in the dress regimes in Atlantic colonies, trading posts, and metropolises. Chapter 1 outlines the variety of appareling practices, contemporary understandings of proper garb, and social, economic, and cultural forces that would both foster and retard sartorial change on the eve of the vast increase in commerce and colonialism that characterized the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Imported woven-fiber textiles were the most important element enabling changes in dress, so Chapter 2 investigates the multiple means, agents, and occasions that distributed these fabrics around the Atlantic basin, the factors that complicated textile supply, and the merchant stocks that resulted.

The next two chapters examine clothing practices among groups subjected to broad and prolonged attempts at redressing not only under European and settler initiative but also on their own. Amerindians were engaged in voluntary and involuntary appareling almost from first contact. Chapter 3 examines the fashions that emerged across the Americas from the goods and processes involved in the material cultural encounter between missionaries, officials, merchants, and Indians. Enslaved and indentured men and women likewise experienced compulsory attiring, yet they too dressed themselves both by necessity and by choice. Chapter 4 explores the content, extent, and ambiguities of sartorial agency in the diverse experiences of life and labor that slaves confronted throughout the Atlantic.

Free settler dress in the tropical Americas and in more temperate colonies including southern Africa are the subjects of Chapters 5 and 6 respectively. Considering the influence of climate, occupation, wealth, gender, and race on appareling habits, they evaluate changes in the dress regimes that free settlers imported from Europe, the disparate ways in which “luxury” and place of residence influenced colonial attire, and the extent to which metropolitan fashions were emulated. After reviewing the scope and import of changes registered in dress regimes of diverse indigenous, colonial, and European societies that constituted

the Atlantic world, Chapter 7 concludes by identifying some paradoxical results for textile manufacture: these developments retarded as well as stimulated industrial innovation.

* * *

Most societies located on the Atlantic had long experience with textiles, all with dress. But their sartorial regimes differed greatly, from almost total bodily covering to what Europeans considered nakedness but denizens deemed satisfactory dress. This variety of practices, perceptions, and attitudes formed the backdrop of the nascent material Atlantic.