THE DRESS AND THE COLONIAL BODY
IN TRANSATLANTIC TEXTS, 1767-1853

A dissertation presented

by

Amanda Blair Runyan

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation, “The Dress and the Colonial Body in Transatlantic Texts, 1767-1853,” argues that the appearance and presentation of women in colonial spaces is used to make colonizing powers visually explicit. This project analyzes the presentation of colonial bodies through the garment of the dress, a piece of clothing which both constructs and reifies gender. I argue that colonial subjects are visually defined, and racial categories are both constructed and stabilized, through the garment of the dress. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literature is particularly relevant for an analysis of dress because emerging fashions or habits of dress are directly linked to social and economic events in the larger Atlantic world. The colonization of the new world, as well as the implementation of the institution of slavery, are both political realities which sought to stabilize the categories of gender and race by restricting or legislating the clothing practices of colonized people. Tracing sartorial depictions through a number of visual and textual mediums, I begin by reading narratives of Pocahontas and the novel *The Female American* (1767). Other chapters read the novel *A Woman of Color: A Tale* (1808) depicting a biracial Jamaican woman visiting London, and the textile osnaburg and the novel *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter* (1853). Through an analysis of literary texts and archival materials, I reveal the dress and dresses of colonial women as performative constructions and attempted stabilizations of the categories of gender and race that highlight the extension of the colonial project to the body of the colonial subject.
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Introduction

Alexander McQueen’s Spring/Summer 2007 show, *Sarabande*, featured Edwardian gowns and tailored menswear trimmed with feathers, lace, taffeta, and silk and live flowers. Through the color palette of “dusty gray, ivory, and faded pink” as well as the playful use of florals, the tailored period clothing was constructed and styled to convey a “sense of lightness and delicacy” (Mower). This delicacy was a departure for McQueen, who was known for his sharp tailoring. The show was staged at the Cirque d’Hiver, in the round and accompanied by a live chamber orchestra, and a large crystal chandelier dominated the space. Speaking to the theatricality of *Sarabande*, Alexandra Shulman, Editor-in-Chief of Vogue UK, stated “a McQueen show is the closest you can get to theatre while still being a fashion show” (Jones). In the tradition of fashion shows, the final garment on the runway was an elaborate gown, a ‘finale dress,’ made of “nude silk organza” and “embroidered with silk flowers and fresh flowers” (The Met). While walking the circular runway the model left a trail of flowers behind her, the flowers falling off in a picturesque manner.

The unintentional yet artful trail of flowers was the result of working with live flowers. Sarah Burton, creative director of the McQueen label since 2010, recollects “we put [the live flowers] on just before the model went out, and they started to fall off one by one as she walked. I remember people saying Lee [Alexander McQueen] timed it. We had a laugh about that” (Gyben). While the loss of flowers as the gown moved may have been unintended, the ephemeral nature of the garment’s material was central to the design concept. As a material as well as a visual art form, fashion is inherently ephemeral. Textiles break down and garments suffer wear. McQueen acknowledged Sam Taylor-Wood’s 2001 film *Still Life*, which uses time-lapse photography to depict a plate of fruit going through the stages of decomposition, as an influence
on this design (Demos). He asked: “Remember Sam Taylor-Wood’s dying fruit? Things rot…I used flowers because they die” (Bolton 183). The material of the dress is central to an analysis of the design, in this case the representation of a living, and eventually wilting, garment.

The finale dress in Sarabande is constructed with a textile, a silk organza, but the dress is made memorable by its floral covering. The finale dress also illustrates what makes a garment recognizably a dress. It is the form, and not the textile, which is referenced by the descriptor “dress.” Linda Baumgarten, curator of textiles and costumes at Colonial Williamsburg, has identified the consistent silhouette of the dress from the seventeenth century until the early twentieth century (60). This silhouette is a “long, full skirt” with a “bodice,” and it has a “defined waist at the natural position just above the hipbones” (60). These features can be traced through alterations in the width of the skirt, length of the hemline, and style of the neckline or sleeves (60). One significant alteration to this generally consistent form is found in the style of the empire gown, in which the skirt fell from a high waist directly below the bust; although Baumgarten’s overview does not account for the alteration in the placement of the waist, her identification offers the key identifying features of the dress which can be traced throughout alterations in fashion. Costume historian James Laver dates the dress earlier, with alterations to women’s clothing around 1450 (64). This is the date he traces European noblewomen’s gowns diverging from men’s; women’s gowns began to be worn with a garment like a stomacher and the top was cut away to create décolletage (64). These alterations created what modern viewers would recognize in basic silhouette as a dress.

In addition to highlighting form as central to the definition of the dress, and the gendered ideology as the dress is defined as a women’s garment from its inception, a dress likes McQueen’s finale which literally wilts highlights the ephemeral and material nature of fashion.
Elizabeth Wilson writes “clothes are among the most fraught objects in the material world of things,” which she attributes to their relationship with the body, and their significance to the construction of the self as both an object and an image (ix). This descriptor of “fraught” encompasses both the difficulty in studying a physical material which is worn and often worn out, as well as the emotional connections and romantic connotations which have been mapped onto garments (ix). Bill Brown argues for the importance of reading materials represented in American literature, arguing that literary representations highlight “how we use objects to make meaning” (6). Literary representations may represent historical fact, or fantastic, ahistoric objects and garments; both provide insight into the culture which produced them.

My dissertation, “The Dress and the Colonial Body in Transatlantic Texts, 1767-1853,” argues that representations of the female body are central to the project of colonialism. It focuses on the garment of the dress as an important trope of colonial power. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, dresses fashioned and constrained women’s bodies and, in doing so, constructed and reified colonial iterations of gender. The particular garment of the dress, rather than more broadly construed dress practices, narrows this study to a focus on the dress as an item of clothing that is endowed with gender ideology. By examining the colonial power visible in embodied presentations of the dress, I question how the visual presentation of women is used to establish the societal and political position of the colonial class, as well as colonized women’s subversion of dress practices in an effort to challenge constricting gender roles.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic literature is particularly relevant for an analysis of dress because emerging fashions or habits of dress are directly linked to social and economic events in the larger Atlantic world. The colonization of the new world, as well as the implementation of the institution of slavery, are both political realities which sought to stabilize
the categories of gender and race through clothing by restricting or legislating the clothing practices of colonized people. Societal support for dress practices, and the restriction or enforcement of dress, is embedded in “a concern to preserve class distinctions, enabling identifications of persons at a glance” (Entwistle). I argue that the appearance, or visual representation, of women in colonial spaces makes colonizing powers visually explicit, and extends the colonial project to the body of the female colonial subject.

The field of fashion studies considers the place of the body in relation to fashion or dress. Early studies of fashion, including Roland Barthes’s *The Fashion System* (1967) and Alison Lurie’s *The Language of Clothes* (1981), consider clothing in relation to linguistic systems. In a significant intervention for the field, Valerie Steele, historian and editor of *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body, and Culture*, introduced the journal’s inaugural issue in 1997 by stating, “Fashion theory takes as its starting point a definition of fashion as the cultural construction of the embodied identity” (1). The creation of the journal facilitated the connection of the significant work of literary scholars, historians, feminist scholars, and sociologists, among others, on the physical body to the emerging study of fashion. Steele refers to Foucault and his influential work on the body in a definition of fashion theory, speaking to the importance of studying the body as a site for the deployment of discourses. Beginning with theories of embodiment and the disciplined body, Steele is connecting the serious study of clothing to the interdisciplinary study of the body and society. Steele states that fashion theory begins at “the intersection of dress, body, and culture,” as fashion is a cultural construction as well as an embodiment practice (2). Neither the body nor the clothing is taken for granted, because for Steele an understanding of the body wearing the clothes is a significant component for accruing
and deciphering meaning. In addition, the language of theories of the body, embodiment, is presented as foundational to studying dress practices.

Theories of embodiment continue to be central to the study of fashion and dress practices. Dani Cavallaro, Gavin Smith, and Alexandra Warwick’s *Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress, and the Body* (1998) argues that clothing, and bodies themselves, operate as boundaries. These boundaries are between the self and others, as dress demarcates and mediates “between the individual body and the collective body of state and society” (6). Cavallaro, Smith, and Warwick describe a boundary which operates similarly to sumptuary laws, which are laws “designed to mandate certain garments or fabrics, and to forbid others (DuPlessis 19).

*Fashioning the Frame* highlights sumptuary laws function as both as a boundary between classes and a control mechanism for the marked body (Cavallaro 6). Joanne Entwistle focuses on the marked or dressed body itself, and names the embodied nature of fashion the “Dress/ Body” relationship. She further states that she looks at fashion as a “situated bodily practice” (34). By this she means that she looks at how clothing alters the body, how the body alters the clothing, and how the combination of dress and body create a “bodily practice” that is particular to the time, place, clothing, and body under consideration (34). The dress/ body relationship is also a lived experience. Monica Miller’s *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (2009) examines the “inherent bodily and sartorial performativity” of dress, furthering work in fashion and embodiment by considering race as a crucial element of analysis of the body and the bodily practice (13). Miller identifies the figure of the black dandy as one made through self-styling while simultaneously created by “colonialism, imperialism, and the slave trade” (13).
In addition to studies of dress, this project continues Miller’s attention to the connections offered by the study of dress within the structure of colonialism. While numerous scholars engage questions of colonialism through eighteenth century texts, in her seminal text Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (1995), Anne McClintock demonstrates that the relation between gender and imperialism has been concealed by both the historical record and theorists of imperialism (4). Despite this lack of critical inquiry, McClintock’s book is part of a burgeoning field that has established that men and women did not experience imperialism in the same way. Amy Kaplan’s “Manifest Domesticity” (1998) considers women and imperialism; Kaplan reads nineteenth-century American texts, including “Godey’s Lady’s Book,” to highlight the way the domestic or the feminine functioned politically and publically, as well as how the sentimental belief in maternal influence enabled women’s participation despite the ideology of separate spheres (583). This project contributes to that work, examining texts for a gendered perspective on eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century North American colonialism.

McClintock and Kaplan are largely examining what Felicity Nussbaum calls “women of empire,” colonial women are both “complicit in the formation of empire” and simultaneously criticized as “the focus of commercial excess” (2). The relationship women have to colonialism varies greatly based on race. As scholars including Jennifer Devere Brody and Nussbaum argue, the colonial subject, or the white subject, is defined in relation to the colonized subject. In fact, conceptions of race in the eighteenth-century were constructed through English experience in colonial space and the “disavowed and violently denied difference” (Brody 9). The text The Woman of Color illustrates how Englishness is defined through people and products from
colonized spaces, demonstrating how the construction of whiteness is “contingent upon disavowal” (9).

This project considers literary texts from colonial North America, England, and the Caribbean: Atlantic colonies and sites of commerce. Paul Gilroy first conceived of the Atlantic World as a site of identity formation in *The Black Atlantic* (1993), which identifies the Atlantic as a discrete geo-political space and traces the interactions of both people and empires (3). The textiles that I examine are not limited to the Atlantic world; I discuss silks and shawls from India, linen from Germany, and cloth from Indonesia. These textiles all move through the Atlantic world, as materials or “trends within the Atlantic world were inevitably influenced by wider global patterns” (DuPlessis 17).

As a study of colonialism, this project brings together fashion and the body and gendered forms of colonialism. These are interrelated, as this project’s focus on the dress and the deployment of the female body highlights the political and social power of clothing. The politics of fashion were significant for colonial spaces; in English North American colonies “fashion’s gender politics featured prominently” (Haulman 3). Fashion is always on display; and through fashion, gender presentation is visible. The representations of women in the historical and fictional texts demonstrate how the visual presentation of women is used within the political structures of colonialism, to support certain modes of femininity or suppress based on gender and culture. Finally, bringing dress and colonialism together enables a reading of dress, a practice associated with women, for its influence and subversion of colonial power structures.

My first chapter, “The Dress and the Fashioning of an English Colonist: The Encounter and the Native Body in Narratives of Pocahontas and *The Female American; or, The Adventures of Unca Eliza Winkfield*,” reads images and narratives of Pocahontas to argue that the native
female body is constructed and presented through historical fiction to make English colonial powers visually explicit. The narratives read include Edward Kimber’s “A Short Account of the British Plantations in America,” (1755), published serially in *London Magazine* and the anonymously authored novel *The Female American* (1767), a female Robinsonade with a Native American protagonist. Native women’s adoption of the dress and dress practices of English women in the North American colonies enables and supports a visual and material acclimation to English culture and English colonial gender roles. Finally, I argue that the character of Unca Eliza in *The Female American* is a challenge to narrative presentations of colonized women, including Pocahontas, in her challenge to this visual and material colonialism through her own dress.

“The Dress and the Fashioning of Slaves: Osnaburg and Sumptuary Laws in Thomas Jefferson’s ‘Farm Book’ and *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter*” argues that the restriction and legislation of clothing through both custom and law was an attempt to make slavery legible on the level of the body. This was achieved through the textiles like Osnaburg, a coarse and unbleached linen, which came to signify enslavement. I argue that the textile of Osnaburg was altered to suit the visual needs of the institution of slavery, which were to mark people as enslaved. Economic or otherwise material requirements were in service of the visual. This resulted in changes in the textile industry across nations in service of the North American institution of slavery. The novel *Clotel* (1853), and its scenes of gender passing, demonstrate the instability of bodily markers of enslavement as well as their relation to other social systems of power.

Chapter three, “The Dress and the Fashioning of an English Lady: Color and Conduct in *The Woman of Color: A Tale*” contends that race and dress are placed in a dialectic relationship
that challenges racialized representations of women. In opposition to early nineteenth-century ideals which hold white women as models of femininity, *The Woman of Color* (1808) presents the black heroine Olivia Fairchild as the model of “English” womanhood. Olivia’s racial and national connection to the colonial space of Jamaica is not a deterrent from her fulfillment of ideal Englishness. In contrast, the white women of the novel are marked through their adornment in colonial commodities, including Kashmir shawls and ostrich feathers; it is on the bodies of the white women in the novel that the racialized relation to dress is displayed. These commodities – imports from colonial spaces – are incorporated into the visual production of the English lady, revealing the reliance of colonial spaces and products to produce Englishness, as well as colonialism’s dependence on visual elements of fashion.

This project’s conclusion, “Colonialism in Contemporary Art: Staging Bodies and Material Ties,” builds on my focused analysis of the dress in the colonial space, and applies this mode of reading to contemporary art and fashion. Through a focused analysis of the elements of form and material, I read the contemporary artist’s and designer’s work for their commentary on the cultural legacies of colonialism. This analysis includes the sculptural work of British artist Yinka Shonibare, the fashion designs of Indian Manish Arora, and the beadwork of Shoshone-Bannock Jamie Okuma, and I argue that these three artists want us to focus our gaze on the materials of their work, and the manner in which the material as well as the process of manipulation can be a vehicle for critiques of colonialism. The materials themselves, which include textiles, applique thread, and antique beads, are the means through which artists challenge imperialist versions and visions of their culture and traditional cultural productions. These challenges at the level of the material are read through the textiles in the eighteenth- and
nineteenth-century fictional and historical texts. Through a reading of the textiles, Atlantic literature places the female body and the material of fashion at the center of colonial struggle.
Chapter One:

The Dress and the Fashioning of an English Colonist: The Encounter and the Native Body in Narratives of Pocahontas and *The Female American; or, The Adventures of Unca Eliza Winkfield*

The 1616 engraving of Pocahontas by Simon van de Passe is the oldest item in the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery, and the only known life portrait of Pocahontas (Ross 37). As the only known life portrait, this engraving is considered the most accurate depiction of this Native American woman. While the image may accurately depict Pocahontas’ strong and angular features and complexion, the visual depiction is also carefully crafted to present Pocahontas as ‘Rebecca,’ a Euro-Christian wife and mother. Van de Passe’s engraving portrays a figure wearing ornate and stiff English clothing. She holds an ostrich feather fan, and is wearing a tall hat, pearl earring, lace ruff, and what Aileen Ribeiro, historian of dress at the Courtland Institute of Art in London, has identified as a short-sleeve overgown (Ickes 83). The space of the image is dominated by the careful depiction of Pocahontas’ clothing.

“Christianity, civility, and rank were not abstract categories,” but believed to be visible distinctions that were “embodied in dress, manners, and language” (Wheeler 7). In the van de Passe engraving, the overcoat and lace ruff completely cover her body. This depiction deliberately styles Pocahontas against existing cultural ideas about native women’s immodesty. These ideas were well established through the travel writing of European men by the time Pocahontas visited London. John Smith recounts that native women “covered about their middles with a skin,” but he also writes about native women dancing while clad only in leaves and body paint (235). To the Englishmen in North America, the native women’s dress was “scanty and immodest compared to English women’s multiple layers and wraps” (Brown 59). Pocahontas is
represented as connected to the English woman, and therefore to modesty and civility, through her dress.

Yet Pocahontas’ engraving also references her New World origins through accessories which “offer clues not only to Pocahontas’ newly acquired English status but also to her royal, New World blood, advertising the sitter’s hybrid pedigree” (Ickes 83). The use and adornment of ostrich feathers was common in English royal portraits. The feathers may also reference images of indigenous Americans or allegories of America, which were frequently depicted with ostrich feathers in their hair; these figures “deployed costume to represent colonial fantasies” (Ickes 86). The tall hat, believed to be made of beaver, alludes to the Virginian fur trade, a major economic export in the North American colonies (Wilcox 113). These items position Pocahontas in both English and New World spaces.

At the time of Pocahontas’s visit, the English did not yet consider native identities in their geographical or cultural specificity; they would not for many years. In fact, despite the fact that American Indians regularly visited England from the North American colonies, it was their exoticism that was fascinating to Londoners rather than their extensive knowledge of the New World colonial space (Vaughan xii). This is highlighted by a 1710 visit of four Iroquois men from North America. For a number of appearances they were “dressed in capes and turbans” provided for them, and the press promoted their visit using imagery that conflated the Iroquois men with the image of visiting Magi (Bickham 29). For the English, the non-European was more commonly identified as a Muslim, and these Iroquois men were attired to be read as such (Bickham 29). In fact, “despite the regularity with which Indians appeared in Briton, they remained firmly part of the exotic, bizarre, and curious until the mid-eighteenth century”
(Bickham 23). Pocahontas’ New World and English influences in adornment present her as both exotic and civilized, indigenous and English.

This chapter reads the images and narratives of Pocahontas, specifically Edward Kimber’s “A Short Account of the British Plantations in America” (1755) and the novel The Female American; or, The Adventures of Unca Eliza Winkfield (1767), to argue that the native female body is constructed and presented through historical fiction to make English colonial power visually explicit. The English attention to native women’s adoption of ‘proper’ English clothing was itself driven by a distrust of the lack of gender identifying clothing in some North American native tribes. As I demonstrate in the ensuing analysis, this sartorial distrust was directly related to a lack of conformity to English gender roles within courtship in native cultures. Through the adoption of English garments—particularly the dress—the female native body is presented as both already colonized and as a symbol of ongoing colonialism. The adoption of physically restraining English clothing is both visual and material in these texts, and wearing constraining garments is presented in the historical and fictional narratives as a necessary precursor to native woman’s acclimation to English gender roles, including roles surrounding courtship and marriage. Further, adoption of English clothing was an introduction to the colonial economic market, in which native women were both consumers and commodities. I argue that The Female American, through the character of Unca Eliza, offers a narrative example of a native woman who deploys fashion as a disruption of traditional English clothing. Through a rejection of English clothing practices in their entirety, Unca Eliza challenges both the English gender roles ascribed to women and the visual colonialism of the native body.

A reading of the 1616 engraving of Pocahontas highlights the way colonizing of her body through textual elements which contribute to the work of the visual. The text engraved within the
frame, “MATOAKA ALS REBECCA FILIA POTENTISS: PRINC: POWHATANI IMP: VIRGINIÆ,” means “Matoaka, alias Rebecca, daughter of the most powerful prince of the Powhatan Empire of Virginia,” and lists her “Algonquin and English names, conversion, husband, and royal title” (Ickes 89). Pocahontas is known by many names; she was born Amonute and nicknamed Pocahontas (Rountree 38). Matoaka was a personal name which she only revealed upon her conversion to Christianity in 1613 (Rountree). It was at that conversion that she took the anglicized name Rebecca, and upon her marriage added to that her husband’s name, Rolfe. Yet despite the alteration in names, the childhood nickname ‘Pocahontas,’ used within John Smith’s narratives and subsequent historical and fictional texts, continued to be the most commonly used. This engraving uses Matoaka, a private name, and Rebecca, her English and Christian name, demonstrating that Pocahontas was understood to be both simultaneously. Yet the private nature of the personal name Matoaka is obliterated through its inclusion in the public engraving, highlighting the primacy of her English affiliation and Christian conversion as well as rejection of Native practice. Pocahontas is presented as a powerful figure, however ambiguously, as she is given the status of royalty as the “daughter of the most powerful prince” within the “Empire” of Virginia. However, this statement serves to underscore the imperialist power over the North American colonies through the use of the word Empire, as well as Pocahontas’ lack of personal power by calling her the daughter of a prince, rather than a Princess. While the engraving’s inclusion in the 1618 Brazilillogia, A Booke of Kings may support a reading of Pocahontas as an “American royal,” it also highlights her position as a colonized daughter within larger structures of native and English or colonial power (Ickes 83).

Narrative representations of Pocahontas developed beyond the depiction in John Smith’s travel writing, and in the eighteenth century Pocahontas was represented as embodying the traits
of an ideal English woman. By the eighteenth century, the historical record of Jamestown and the particulars of Pocahontas’ life and death had been repeatedly reimagined by artists, historians, and writers of fiction. This repetition served to alter and streamline historical events into an accepted cultural narrative. Pocahontas and her relationship with the English colonists “provided literary and visual artists with a flexible discourse that came to be used to address a number of racial, political, and gender-related issues” including the place of women, specifically colonized women, in both English society and the New World (Tilton 11).

Visual depictions evolved as well. The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery has a painting of Pocahontas dated to the late eighteenth century which portrays a “fairer and anglicized” Pocahontas, with “European brown” hair and softened features (Ross 37). Alternations made to her appearance place Pocahontas within eighteenth century standards of feminine beauty. This painting emphasizes Pocahontas as adhering to English standards of dress; further, the painting presents a Pocahontas who adheres to eighteenth century racialized standards of beauty through a whitened complexion (Rosenthal 567).

As the portraits illuminate, Pocahontas herself, and narratives of Pocahontas’ life, travels, and death, were well known. These narratives included Pocahontas’ rescue of John Smith, her conversion to Christianity and marriage to John Rolfe, her travel to England and her sudden death. These rough elements of her life inspired imitations and revisions. The Female American uses the contours of the narrative of Pocahontas to tell a new story focusing on the female American of the title, the daughter of William and Unca, named Unca Eliza. Readers of The Female American would instantly recognize that the novel was inspired by Pocahontas. In the first pages of the novel, there is an attack on Jamestown, and colonists are taken captive. An English colonist is saved from certain death by a young Indian maiden, Unca. The Englishman,
William Winkfield, and the native woman, Unca, learn each other’s languages and cultures. William converts Unca to Christianity; they marry, have a child, and Unca succumbs to an early death.

In the novel *The Female American*, Pocahontas (Unca) and John Smith (William) marry. Unlike the historical Pocahontas and John Rolfe who have a son, Unca has a daughter. As *The Female American*’s narrator and protagonist, Unca Eliza speaks directly to the colonizing forces which shaped Unca and herself. The physically restraining garments worn by the women in the text, the gown and shifts of English colonial women, are aligned with the legally and socially restraining gender roles of colonized women, specifically the role of wife. Unca Eliza’s depictions of her mother and herself align the forces of English colonialism with the garments of the Virginian colonial woman.

Colonial women and colonized women occupy disparate spaces in the scripts of colonialism. Colonized women “had to negotiate not only the imbalances of their relations with their own men but also the baroque and violent array of hierarchical rules and restrictions that structured their new relations with imperial men and women” (McClintock 6). These restrictions centered on the colonized woman’s body, determining the appropriate presentation, and regulating economic and sexual labor. Meanwhile, colonial women were “ambiguously placed,” occupying “positions of decided – if borrowed – power” (6). A woman of the colonial class may be in charge of her household, but the power she held in was reliant on the legal and economic power of a husband making her authority borrowed. Significantly, these women are denied the opportunity to make the “direct economic or military decisions of empire,” yet they are crucial in their roles of “upholding the boundaries of empire and bearing its sons and daughters” (6). These gender roles of colonialism, identified as crossing geographic boundaries, are manifest in the
English North American colonies; colonial women were likewise subject to a strict regulation of their economic and sexual labor and societal regulations on the presentation of their bodies. This regulation on bodily presentation is expanded to colonized women through the colonial project.

White English colonial women in North America were not visual representations of the mission of colonialism in the same way as colonized native women. Rather than displays of successful assimilation, they were evidence that English culture was maintained in the North American colonial space. One event which highlights the continuation of the ideals of English culture is the Meschianza. Described as “Philadelphia’s most curiously extravagant party,” the Meschianza was a celebration in May 1778 to honor the departing Commander of the British Army, Sir William Howe (Burt 525). In this event, the dress of the women supported the celebration, which was thrown to honor the departing Howe, making the white English women’s dress a visual signal of support for Howe and the British army.

The attire of the women invited to the Meschianza was prescribed; Major John Andre’s watercolor design offered a model of dress, and he divided the fifty young women invited into “the Ladies of the Blended Rose” and the “Ladies of the Burning Mountain” (Brown 51). The “Ladies of the Blended Rose,” were to wear a rose or pink sash, and the “Ladies of the Burning Mountain,” gray (51). The events of the party continued with the theme of a royal court, with the men jousting as Knights of the Blended Rose and Burning Mountain, and the Ladies carrying favors for them (Haulman 172). By dressing to Andre’s specifications, “It seemed to some that Philadelphia’s ladies were taking fashion directives from a British officer, molding their very bodies to his desires and specifications (172). These specifications were “intended to signify imperial values (172). By making Commander Howe’s departure a celebration, Andre and the officers were communicating that the British military failures were not Howe’s failures. By
dressing as Knights and Ladies and singing “God Save the King,” the guests were celebrating both an imperial present and a romanticized past (Brown 51).

The women who attended the Meschianza came from both sides of the Revolutionary War, so while all the women may have had some investment in the storied history of English culture, only some of the women were invested in the success of the British Army. For all of the women, by wearing the assigned colors and carrying the awarded favors, they became a visual representation of the imperial values Andre wanted celebrated. For some of them, this was counter to their political beliefs; they were more closely aligned with the Colonial Army only a few miles away; they may have been unwilling to miss the party, but they may also have been unwilling to forfeit the myths of Knights and Ladies in the building of a new nation.

Unca and Unca Eliza serve as examples of the colonized and the acculturated colonial woman. For white women in eighteenth-century Virginia, as highlighted with the Meschianza in eighteenth-century Pennsylvania, “fashion was […] the most important idiom in which elite colonial women expressed their relationship to imperial culture” (Brown 293). For native women like Unca and Unca Eliza, fashion similarly defined their relationship to the colonizing culture. Through their adornment in the restricting garments of the English colonial women, Unca and Unca Eliza are visibly accepting the constricting gender roles of the same culture; they are visually colonized.

*The Female American* uses the storyline of a whirlwind romance to illuminate the structural roles of empire. The narrative begins with the narrator Unca Eliza recounting the story of her parent’s dramatic meeting. They meet when William, and five other English colonists, are captives of Unca’s tribe. The men are stripped of their clothes and brought before the tribe; their captors are similarly bare, described as “a great number…of all sexes, all naked, except a small
covering of foliage around their middle” (Female 10). English society understood clothing as a marker of class, as fashion in dress “reified expressions of power and position” (Haulman 6). This cultural belief makes the divestment of clothing from the English captives a stripping of status. Dress was also a marker of gender, and thus the colonists are stripped of this identity marker with the loss of their garments.

This investment in clothing as a marker of gender and culture, and position in that culture, informed colonial encounters. It also heavily influenced the reporting of those encounters; descriptions of Native clothing were frequent in reports of English North America, for “as travelers to America reported their experiences, their criterion for civility was the degree to which the Indians recognized male-female distinctions…and maintained these demarcations by outward signs” (Kupperman 194). Within The Female American, the native women’s covering is described as being “composed of beautiful flowers,” these distinctions in foliage do not suggest distinctive markers of gender (10). Unca is described as being “curiously adorned,” with “solid pieces of gold and silver,” marking her class or status, but not particularly her gender (12). In their writing about native people, colonists devoted their attention to the adornment of hair and the construction of clothing, or lack of clothing, with the expectation that these markers performed social functions similar to the organizing role clothing played in England (Kupperman 194). Unca’s clothing highlights the immodest dress of native people, and the floral nature of the dress refutes gender distinction through garment construction.

The novel seeks to properly gender Unca through her behavior, specifically, her affection for William and her compassion. Unca’s dramatic rescue of William immediately prior to his violent beheading is motivated within the novel by her instantaneously falling in love with him. At the time The Female American was published, eighteenth-century narratives such as Edward
Kimber’s “A Short Account of the British Plantations in America” from 1755, were introducing a fictional romance into the relationship between John Smith and Pocahontas. Although it is recorded historical fact that Pocahontas married a colonist named John Rolfe after Smith’s removal to England, narratives wrote romance into Pocahontas’ rescue of John Smith beginning in the mid-eighteen hundreds. While John Davis’ 1803 writings are popularly recognized as the first narratives to depict a love story, Kimber’s text, published in London Magazine over three months in the summer of 1755, is in fact the first text to reference a romantic relationship between Pocahontas and John Smith. The romance in these narratives serves as a tacit defense of colonization. In fact, in addition to Pocahontas’ rescue of John Smith demonstrating the Native Americans’ acceptance and affection for the English colonists, Kimber credits the success of the colonial project to Pocahontas’ affection for the colonist John Smith:

Pocahontas easily prevailed with her father and her countrymen to allow her to indulge her passion for the captain, by often visiting the fort, and always accompanying her visits with a fresh supply of provisions: therefore it may justly be said, that the success of our first settlement in America, was chiefly owing to the love this girl had conceived for Capt. Smith. (11)

This material support, in the form of provisions and protection from aggression, is articulated as an emotional connection.

Unca is represented as feminine within English standards of gender through her show of emotion. Her devotion is presented as life-saving, similarly to the devotion celebrated in representations of Pocahontas. After her rescue of William, Unca provides him with food, shelter, and protection. The presumed obstacles to William and Unca’s relationship, including their language barriers and differing religions, are largely presented as insignificant. Unca Eliza
reports that her mother, Unca, “continually talked to [William]” and one day he “began to understand her language” (Female 17). She began to understand English as well. William is provided with the clothing that had been taken from him, and Unca’s conversion to Christianity occurs in a singular omitted conversation, for “we readily believe those whom we love” (20).

Despite the easy dismissal of religious differences and dissimilar languages, it is Unca’s race that initially proves a significant barrier for William. Through Unca’s interventions William is spared from death, freed from captivity, and given status in the Native American community, yet despite this he expresses reservations about Unca’s race. He further highlights the perceived distance from whiteness Unca inhabits by referring to her as his “black deliverer” (40). William’s initial reservations and observations are articulated in the text (as narrated by his daughter Unca Eliza); the text states “though a complexion so different, as that of the princess [Unca] from an European, cannot but at first disgust, yet by degrees my father grew insensible to the difference, and in other respects her person was not inferior to that of the greatest European beauty” (41). Despite the text’s assertion that Unca is not inferior to European beauties, before they can marry and leave the native community for his plantation Unca must religiously and culturally assimilate. This includes bringing her bodily presentation within colonial practices.

Unca’s assimilation is an illustration of colonial possibilities for the English audience. The mission of colonialism is supported through eighteenth-century fictional or fictionalized romances between colonizer and colonized; “Unlike actual colonial and imperial relations, these narratives happily resolve religious conflict and the problem of dissimilar complexions through conversion and marriage” (Wheeler 313). These stories serve to mask the violence of colonialism with the conventions of the eighteenth-century domestic novel. This movement to domestic
resolution can be read through the narratives of Pocahontas in the eighteenth century, which focus on the stories’ resolution in Christian marriage.

Eighteenth-century narratives resolving in marriage are revised by nineteenth-century narratives, which remove marriage from the story of Pocahontas (Tilton 4). These later rewritings erase John Rolfe from the narrative entirely; due to the solidifying racial categories in the new United States and the fear of miscegenation, John Smith and Pocahontas are depicted as an impossible love story (Tilton 4). Yet in the eighteenth century, marriage between a native women and an English colonist was presented by historical romance as a viable possibility; significantly, it was a viable possibility for a time period which had passed. In the eighteenth-century narratives, “the particular, highly successful marriage of Pocahontas and Rolfe had provided the early colonists with an opportunity they failed to grasp” (Tilton 17). The myth produced in historical romances of Pocahontas was that if intermarriage between white, male English colonists and native women had become common, presumably religious conversions would have occurred, resulting in widespread cultural assimilation and land acquisition for the English.

In *The Female American*, Unca is the one to suggest that she and William marry. “Other women,” women who are not white or English, “often propose marriage to Englishmen [in novels of interracial marriage]. It is a sign of their improper gendering…and it is symptomatic of their cultural and religious differences” (Wheeler 168). It is only after Unca’s adoption of English religion and further, English dress, that their union can take place. Presumably, her unrestrained physical presentation permits her unrestrained advance when she proposes to William, if she had already assimilated to English culture she would not have proposed.
In opposition to *The Female American*’s Pocahontas figure Unca, other fictionalized versions of Pocahontas are often presented as acting within the bounds of the proscribed role for an eighteenth-century English lady. While Kimber’s “A Short Account of the British Plantations in America” was the first of many narratives to detail a love story between Pocahontas and John Smith, these narratives all told a story of thwarted love. In the move from telling a story based on the historical record of Pocahontas and John Rolfe’s marriage to a fictional account of Pocahontas and John Smith’s flirtations, the centrality of Pocahontas’ ability to assume the role of an English lady remained. Still supportive of the civilizing missions of colonialism, some narratives become critical of John Smith for his refusal to play out this colonial fantasy through marriage (Tilton 55). These narratives depict Pocahontas as a proper lady, waiting for John Smith’s declaration of love but never making her expectation known. The unstated and pro-colonialist message is that she became a proper English woman due to the forces of evangelism and the civilizing presence of English colonists.

The Pocahontas in “A Short Account” abides by specifically English cultural rules of femininity and does not articulate what is, in this fictional narrative, her romantic disappointment. In eighteenth-century domestic novels, questions of matrimony are often determined by men. In Edward Kimber’s 1755 serialized narrative of Pocahontas the proper behavior of a lady is illustrated. In a climactic scene, the narrative depicts the reunion of Pocahontas and John Smith in London after her marriage to John Rolfe. When reunited with Smith, who Kimber has described as the object of her deep affection, Pocahontas does not articulate her continued resentment because “such is the native modesty of the sex in all countries, that she did not even then insinuate any such expectation” (345). The colonized Pocahontas follows the societal script for unrequited affection.
This interaction with Smith highlights Pocahontas’ ability to navigate and embody English gender roles, but her discretion is credited to her femaleness, not her culture or acculturation. Yet this interaction highlights what the author Kimber deems success for the colonial project, a demure and assimilated Pocahontas. This scene is based on Smith’s accounts of being reunited with Pocahontas in London; no record exists of Pocahontas’s own recollections or reflections (Rountree 180). Yet the discretion which prohibits Pocahontas from speaking about (possible) romantic disappointments is cultural; this is highlighted by Unca’s willingness to speak of her desire for marriage.

Unca’s move from colonized native to colonial wife is made visible through bodily adornment. The narratives first line about their marriage recounts William’s concern over Unca’s garments; “as my father had persuaded his wife to conform to the European dress, he provided for her as well as he could, till he had an opportunity of procuring cloaths more suitable to her dignity” (Female 34). This passage recounts William having to persuade Unca to begin wearing a dress, whereas previously she adopted the Christian faith without reservation. For Unca, the physical and embodied marker of the dress is a more fraught moment of acculturation than an acceptance of faith. Yet dress and faith are connected for English colonists; in addition to marking gender and class, dress as an English colonist was a marker of an implied faith. For native people who underwent conversion, and it was believed that “more than simply displaying […] Christian identity, European-style dress would promote and sustain it” (DuPlessis 92). The reference to clothing “more suitable to her dignity” is referring to the standard of dress for a Virginian plantation mistress, which would convey the appropriate gender, class status, and faith of that colonial societal position (Female 34). Unca’s adoption of European dress is a visible and tactile sign of her legal and religious alterations, as well as a reflection on William, her husband.
The necessity of a grand house, “suitably furnished” for Unca, and an appropriate and fine wardrobe, mark the home and the female body as the center of the trade between the North American colonies and England (34). William “took every opportunity that was offered to send part of his riches over to England…and such goods in turn to be sent as he wanted” (34). This importation is what necessitates waiting “till he had an opportunity” to buy textiles. Few textiles were spun or woven in the colonies, and due to navigation acts that remained in place, European goods could not be directly imported into the colonies: they were required to travel through English ports (Andrews 115). These laws, designed to protect England’s economic interests, shaped the burgeoning textile markets in the colonies.

For Unca, the material of dress is a key component of a performance of femininity, and a particular kind of white femininity. Specifically, The Female American addresses Unca’s assimilation into English culture, including the active and deliberate fashioning of her gender and racial presentation. While Unca’s specific dresses are not described within the text, historians tracing colonial fashion have established that in the North American colonies in the late eighteenth century, women wore a gown with a bell-shaped skirt, narrower than the skirts popular in the 1750’s which were very wide and supported by hoops on either side (Baumgarten 76). Gowns were layered over a linen shift worn against the body, a petticoat, and two underpetticoats (Baumgarten 40). The petticoats were often cotton, and the shift lined with linen and crafted to fit under tight sleeves (Baumgarten 40). For Unca, the multilayered components of the English dress contrast sharply with her previous attire of floral coverings described by the novel. The hesitance expressed over this alteration in apparel is potentially at the physical restrictions the new garments would impose.
Women in the English North American colonies sewed dresses in styles adopted from England with little alteration in pattern or design. Periodicals like the *Virginia Gazette* brought “news about metropolitan fashion,” which allowed colonial women to embody their connection to the styles and status of colonial power (Brown 293). The physical garments gave women space to “display costly and beautiful silks;” dresses also “announced wealth, status, and a leisurely lifestyle” (Baumgarten 64). Gowns were not crafted for ease of movement, and everyday clothes for a planter’s wife like Unca would be cut in current English fashions despite the fact that these styles hampered mobility. The only common alterations that distinguished fine clothing from everyday clothes were the material used, and the absence of decorative touches on everyday items. The dress’s materials communicated wealth, while the immobilizing effects of the garments, including the difficulty a woman would experience trying to perform domestic labor wearing them, enhanced that connotation of wealth by communicating a “leisurely lifestyle” (64) of limited bodily movement. Status is determined by the display of fine materials and reinforced by the performance of leisure, making status an ephemeral quality judged through the display of the woman’s body.

Colonists, however, begin to wear English clothing in manners more appropriate to the North American climate, to the shock of English visitors. For men this meant that they might leave off their suit coats. Women found fashion less accommodating; women wishing to make their clothing lighter might leave off their stays, the eighteenth-century version of a corset, but their ability to do so depended on their position in society (Isaac 94). Stays were not as constricting as the nineteenth-century corset. Corsets actively sought to restrict the waist, and stays supported the waistline, with the primary purpose and restrictive aspect of stays being support of the back, keeping the woman wearing stays in a straight and upright posture (Haulman
A woman in stays pressed her body into an “upright submission,” as the garment molded women’s breasts by compressing her torso from the waist up, and pushing the breasts to the neckline of her dress (18). The goal was to teach “genteel posture and movement” (Baumgarten 121). The overall effect of stays altered the woman’s stance as well as the hang or drape of the garments worn over the foundational apparel. Leaving off boned stays was considered inappropriate for a ‘lady’ in the North American colonies, particularly in public (121). It is clear that it was an uncommon occurrence to see a woman in the class of ‘lady’ without her stays; one man’s journal, dated 1774, included his shock on seeing a Virginian plantation owner’s wife in such a state, recording “To day I saw a Phenomenon, Mrs. Carter without Stays!” (122) For Unca, this meant that her move from her native tribe to the Virginia plantation resulted in a drastic change in the norms of clothing.

I argue that Unca’s sartorial display of colonial clothing does not displace her identity as a native and colonized woman, but adds the identity of colonial wife to this visual presentation. Contemporaneous narratives about Pocahontas addressed the same display of the native body. In the historical records, Pocahontas is known to have converted to Christianity, married the English colonist John Rolfe, and traveled with him to England. Her status and assimilation are read on her body; Robert Beverley’s History and Present State of Virginia, an early eighteenth-century narrative, describes the attention paid to Pocahontas on her trip to London, stating:

Pocahontas had so many honors done her by the Queen…she was carried to many plays, balls, and other public entertainments, and very respectfully received by all the ladies about the court. Upon all which occasions she behaved herself with so much decency, and showed so much grandeur in her deportment, that she gained the good opinion of everybody.” (43)
While some of Pocahontas’ trip, including where she was received, is known, much is not. Beverley’s assertion that Pocahontas was “very respectfully received,” and “showed so much grandeur” is based on the scarce records which remain (43).

Beverly continues his story of Pocahontas’ social triumphs with the fabricated notion that John Rolfe was nearly chastised by the monarch for presuming to marry a “princess royal” (34). This myth promotes the notion that Pocahontas was recognized as royal herself. Edward Maria Wingfield provides one of the early sources writers like Beverley would draw on which alludes to her royal status. Wingfield refers to Pocahontas as “the ‘Lady Rebecca,’” “daughter of an emperor,” and in England, an “object of much curiosity and attention” (Wingfield). It is the third statement that reveals the lie behind the others. The Virginia Company exhibited Pocahontas as evidence of their success in their civilizing mission in the New World. Acknowledging her or her family as a legitimate governing power would undermine their own authority in the New World, and destabilize the mission of colonialism.

Within *The Female American*, Unca Eliza takes pains to demonstrate her English ancestry. The text deftly traces the royal lineage, recognizing James I and remembering the “maiden Queen Elizabeth, of blessed memory,” while simultaneously recounting the settlement of the colony of Virginia. Through the juxtapositions of this passage, the English monarchy and the establishment of Virginia are presented as interconnected powers rather than a ruler and a fledgling colony. The history of the colony of Virginia continues, and after mentioning and recognizing Sir Walter Raleigh, Unca Eliza swiftly undercuts his achievements stating that “the first plantation that proved successful, was begun in 1607,” after his time. It is a later group of settlers, among whom is Dr. Edward Maria Winkfield, recognized in the text *The Female American* as the fictional Unca Eliza’s grandfather, who are credited for the colonies success.
Edward Maria Winkfield was a celebrated figure in Virginia’s history; one of his accomplishments was writing early histories of the colony under the alternate spelling Wingfield. Along with crafting the colonies’ written history, Winkfield held significant power in Virginia. He was the first President of the colony’s governing council, and had a stake in the London Virginia Company; he was involved in the legal and economic development of the colony as well as a crafter of its historic narrative. Through this history, by aligning the King and colony Unca Eliza is subtly creating a lineage of power which connects her grandfather to James I. The colony, in her telling, moves from royal control to noble control, and then to a governor. Before the narrative action begins, the text carefully identifies Unca Eliza’s connection to English power in the New World space.

This articulation of familial connections to English and colonial power is not done as a renouncement of Unca Eliza’s native heritage; this family lineage is also articulated. Yet it is without the same level of specificity: articles have referred to potential historical figures that the text could be indicating, but Unca’s father, the key figure in Williams’ near execution, remains unnamed. Unca’s father, also Unca Eliza’s grandfather, is referred to only as a ‘King,’ and Unca as ‘Princess.’ The novels work to use familial ties to connect Unca Eliza to royal and colonial power underscore her significance as a figure of colonial success. The use of royal titles without offering further identifying details for Unca’s native family is significant; this move points to the novel’s investment in a depiction of colonized native people under a system of benevolent and peaceful colonialism, and the disinterest in tribal affiliations, native systems of power, or a careful and accurate historical record of native leaders. The inclusion of Unca Eliza’s maternal family demonstrates the novel has an investment in her native genealogy, but not in the support or continuation of native social and political power structures. Unca and Unca Eliza are notable
figures for their ability to acculturate, and the political and social power that their native ancestors held is simplified and romanticized within the structure of royal titles recognized in English political power structures.

This royal ancestry is an undercurrent to Pocahontas’ visit to England, as demonstrated through the inclusion of the descriptor “daughter of the most powerful prince” on the Van de Passe engraving. The compliments that Beverly pays Pocahontas through his narrative *The History and Present State of Virginia* are revealing. He states that Pocahontas was received by the Queen, and by the ladies of the court, highlighting her acceptance and inclusion by her superiors and peers in status and sex. She is credited for decency, and deportment, both qualities which would have been read through her clothing. A court appearance required preparation, and during her visit it is reported that Pocahontas was assisted by a social chaperone, Lady De La Warr (178). However, it was Smith, in a letter dated 1624, and then Beverly, in his 1705 narrative, who named Lady De La Warr; while it is certain Pocahontas had a social chaperone and assistance from one or more English women, it is not clear who acted in that capacity (Rountree 178). Nevertheless, Beverly’s narrative depicts a Pocahontas who is properly attired, and carries herself as the English women do; the cumbersome gowns of the early sixteen hundreds are gracefully worn. While writing in the eighteenth century, long after Pocahontas’ death, Beverley is invested in remembering Pocahontas as having transformed from a native woman to an English lady. This investment is articulated through his description of her movement through English society, and the compliments he imagines that this Pocahontas would have received.

From existing sources, primarily John Smith’s writing and letters from an Englishman with the Virginia Company named John Chamberlain, it is known that while in England
Pocahontas appeared at court, as well as at a theatre (Rountree 176). Significantly, the clothing she wore, the dresses and finery, were provided by the Virginia Trading Company. They were the financial sponsor of her transatlantic journey to London. For the Virginia Company, Pocahontas’ visit to London was a “propaganda venture,” presenting Pocahontas as a native princess won to English religion and culture (Rountree 176). Her presentation required this duality; Pocahontas must be simultaneously native and English. This duality also illuminates the Virginia Trading Company’s use of the native name she was known by, Pocahontas, rather than the more recently adopted Christian name Rebecca. She must be known as the Native American Pocahontas in order to highlight her assimilation and new position as the Christian wife (and eventual mother) Rebecca.

The sponsorship by the Virginia Trading Company was made necessary for purely financial reasons, as “[Rolfe] was not wealthy enough to provide his wife with the many changes of fine clothing she needed to go about in society at the level the company wanted for her” (176). In this way, the clothing obtained for Pocahontas was at the crux of this arrangement: the Virginia Trading Company provided funds for the voyage, determined the parameters of Pocahontas’ movement in society (including, arguably, her name), and planned an itinerary which made those funds indispensable for the cost of garments.

Dress was a crucial issue, and not simply because of the social occasions that Pocahontas would be attending. In any part of English society, clothing served to construct and reinforce a person’s gender and class status. That clothing would enforce gender was expected: feminist theorists now understand as foundational that “[gender] identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 4). In 1616, “gender distinctions were crucial; they were determined by nature but required visible and emphatic demarcation”
Class status was similarly enforced through a complex set of sumptuary laws which sought to make certain clothing, colors, and materials limited to those of the upper class. This investment in clothing as a marker of gender and class informed colonial encounters as well as the way that colonists wrote about native people, devoting their attention to the adornment of hair and the construction of clothing with the expectation that these markers performed social functions similar to the organizing role clothing played in England (Bickham 24). In the space of the encounter, dress also signaled a demarcation of race.

In a speculative study of the garments Pocahontas wore to the masque, Karen Robertson reads the body of Pocahontas:

> The significance of the change of dress [from native to English] must not be underestimated. Her transformation into a Christian woman is signaled by her abandonment of what the English saw as the lewd clothing of the savage… The familiar coverings of Englishwomen’s dress not only signal her abandonment of heathen ways but facilitate the marking of her rank.” (568)

English clothing played numerous roles in the construction of Pocahontas for the English ballroom and theatre audience. The full skirts and bodice of the English gown marked her as properly female. The fine material and adornments demonstrated her class position; although this luxury was purchased by the Virginia Company, it was displayed on her body and therefore signified her financial means. Significantly, the other status that is suggested as read on her body is articulated as religion: Pocahontas is demonstrated to have given up her heathen ways. The “familiar coverings” refer simultaneously to the English society’s comfort with Pocahontas’ adopted dress and to the extensive covering of her body in the dress as compared to native garb (568).
The dress that Pocahontas wears to the masque is a signifier for ‘English lady.’ This signifier, the garment, works with the body of the woman Pocahontas as an embodied identity. Subject positions are performed both with and on bodies, and a subject position can be both crafted on and crafted by a body, provided there is an audience. Performance reveals both “how thoroughly bodies inhabit signifying systems and how signifying systems are always organized as bodies” (Hart 15). In this central example, Pocahontas is using English clothing, the class status open to her through the Virginia Company’s sponsorship, and her adopted religion, to form the identity of Rebecca Rolfe.

This reading of the native body as exotic is clear through the novel The Female American’s depiction and described reception of William and Unca’s daughter Unca Eliza:

My tawny complexion, and the oddity of my dress, attracted every one’s attention, for my mother used to dress me in a kind of mixed habit, neither perfectly in the Indian, nor yet in the European taste, either of fine white linen, or a rich silk. I never wore a cap; but my lank black hair was adorned with diamonds and flowers. In the winter I wore a kind of loose mantle or cloak, which I used occasionally to wear on one shoulder, or to cast it behind me in folds, tied in the middle with a ribband, which gave it a pleasing kind of romantic air. My arms were also adorned with strings of diamonds, and one of the same kind surrounded my waist (49).

Unca Eliza describes herself as attracting “every one’s attention,” and uniquely dressing in a “mixed habit,” yet the elements of her clothing as she describes them are overwhelmingly English (49). She wears “fine white linen” or “rich silk,” both textiles introduced by colonial trade and likely the same materials that Unca would have worn a short number of years earlier in
her move from native to English dress (49). The distinction of “fine” as a descriptor for the linen is important, as a marker of the cost of the textile as well as the class of the wearer; a fine linen can be distinguished by sight from a coarse linen, which was used in colonial spaces “for slave clothing or as shipping wrapper for cotton and coffee” (DuPlessis 238). While silk was rarer, it was a popular item for colonists; the East India company was a major source of imported silk as they “consolidated […] power over the Bengali silk industry in the 1760’s” (Shankman 38). At the moment of the novel, the silk trade was being standardized and output increased, leading to its even greater success in the London market. The fine linen or silk is the textile used to construct the gown, and the other major garment mentioned is the cloak. A common garment for English women in both England and the colonies, cloaks were generally made of tightly woven broadcloth, a woolen material, and often trimmed with ruffles or ribbons (Styles 42). This places Unca Eliza’s “loose mantle or cloak,” “tied in the middle with a ribband,” within the styles for English colonial women (Female 49). The textiles and garments mentioned firmly establish Unca Eliza’s connections to English dress and economic means.

While the materials may be English, Unca Eliza states that she dresses “neither perfectly in the Indian, nor yet in the European taste” (49). The leaving off of a cap, the draping of the cloak, and the adornment of her hair in flowers are all ways in which Unca Eliza chooses to take conventional materials endowed with class status and defamiliarize them with the styling of her hair and the draping of her cloak. The combination of textiles and materials as well as a mixture of conventions of dress, “not the wholesale adoption of imported styles, but the formation of hybrid peltry-textile fashions” was common among indigenous people in colonized spaces; the central attribute of late seventeenth and eighteenth-century Amerindian fashion was its composite character – composite in garments but also in materials and inspiration” (DuPlessis
While Unca Eliza has not retained materials in her dress that she recounts, other than the use of flora, she describes native elements as always being present in her clothing. In fact, throughout the novel native clothing is represented as a lack of clothing, with characters adorned only in flowers and precious stones or metals. Given these descriptions, Unca Eliza being draped in flowers and diamonds is the novel’s attempt to represent a composite character of dress which is “neither perfectly […] Indian, nor yet […] European (Female 49).

Through presenting Unca Eliza’s resistance to English standards of presentation, the narrative explores the still evolving definition of a female American as well as the capacity of the space of the Atlantic to generate and support alternate possibilities for women. In The Female American that space is first the North American colonies, and then England, and finally an uncolonized island in the Atlantic Ocean; though this locale is fictional the impetus to determine native and colonized women’s space in the North American colonies is a pertinent and contemporary question. As a historical novel, the character Unca Eliza challenges an expected assimilation through dress, but adopts Christianity, a standard of English womanhood.

Also in adjustment in the North American colonies are practices in courtship and marriage. Although Unca Eliza does not act outside of Anglo culture like her mother Unca, who proposed to her father William, Unca Eliza attempts to control potential suitors with an unpassable test. She rejects her cousin’s proposals (while avoiding overt rejection) with the claim that she “would never marry any man who could not use a bow and arrow as well as [she] could” (51). When that fails to discourage him, she begins to answer his pleas “in the Indian language, of which he was entirely ignorant” until he is subdued into silence (51). Unca Eliza rejects a marriage which would presumably please her family, as well as a marriage proposal given by a ship’s captain as a proxy for his son. She admits that accepting the captain’s proposal (with the
intention of pleading for her release upon reaching Virginia) would have “avoided the distress my refusal occasioned” (54). However, she attempts to deflect the proposal with a promise that “if [the captain’s son] could shoot with [her] bow and arrow…as well as [she could, [she] would have him, were he ugly or handsome” (54). This deflection is insufficient, and the captain fulfills his promise of turning her off the ship on a remote and deserted island. Even under threat of desolation and death in the middle of the Atlantic, as well as the possibility she could agree and later plead coercion, Unca Eliza is determined to select her own marriage partner and openly rejects the demand.

The novel’s curious end seems to undercut that assertion of choice, yet manages to fulfill the requirements of the eighteenth-century novel while subverting its gendered expectations.

Unca Eliza is stranded on an island in the Atlantic; her cousin extracts her location from the captain, and sets off in search of her. Upon finding her, he brings her linen clothing (unspecified in its quality), and immediately begins to besiege her with requests for their marriage; he promises to remain on the island and become a missionary to the island’s indigenous population, as she has; he states “I shall have but one more thing to ask, and that is, Unca’s hand for ever, in return for my heart, which she has long had” (135). He insists that “one motive for my seeking you was, that, if we should meet, we might be for ever united” (139). She remains undeterred.

Unca Eliza is only decided in their marriage through his petition to her modesty. He insists that if they do not marry, they cannot be alone together; he references the possible damage to her reputation, stating “I know your delicacy will be hurt” (139). Unca Eliza weighs the unlikeliness that the indigenous people will “entertain any ill suspicions of my conduct” with her personal admission that the situation would “hurt her modesty” (139). She puts off the decision still further, and it is only in the abrupt and decidedly unromantic and off handed comment “I
was at last obliged to give my hand, about two months after his arrival” that she returns to the subject of their marriage in her narration (141). Yet although the marriage was at his request, Unca Eliza acted alone in her acceptance or rejection. She set the terms of the relationship, determining their profession of missionaries, as well as their residence on the isolated island in the Atlantic. Finally, she determined their language, as shortly after his arrival, and prior to their marriage, her cousin John learns the language of the island’s indigenous population.

Marriage is a “legal anomaly,” as women did not have political standing with men, yet marriage (even when decided by a father) was seen as a matter of consent (McClintock 178). Unca Eliza only consents to marriage in a space outside of the law; she rejects a marriage within the space of England or the colonial space of Virginia for a marriage on the uncolonized Atlantic island. Unca Eliza rejected the stiff and structured clothing described as adorning Pocahontas and being adopted by her mother, and ultimately she rejects space ruled by many of the norms of English society. The most crucial element of redressing or acculturation projects was to “promote proper sartorial gendering” (DuPlessis 94). Unca’s dressing by her husband William, and Pocahontas’s dressing, a project of her husband, John Rolfe, as well as the women acting as her social chaperones under the auspices of the Virginia Trading Company, acted to place them within the gendered and racial bounds of colonial womanhood. Marie de l’Incarnation, a French missionary to North America and the daughter of a silk merchant, saw a crucial moment in the conversion to both religion and culture the “adoption of the gown” (Oury 221). Unca Eliza’s rejection of an entirely English manner of dress indicated and even enabled a rejection of her fashioning as a colonized figure. While the narrative conventions of the eighteenth-century novel required her to be settled in marriage, Unca Eliza’s subtle challenges reveal the novels
exploration of the complexity of gender roles and presentation, and the potential narrative freedom of the Atlantic world.
Chapter Two:

The Dress and the Fashioning of the Enslaved: Osnaburg and Sumptuary Law in Thomas Jefferson’s “Farm Book” and *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter*

In an entry dated December 1794, Thomas Jefferson recorded in his Farm Book the cloth and clothing distributed to his slaves. The records cover three pages; the page just prior to this accounting has a list of materials purchased from “Brydie & Co.” including “512 yds. oznabrigs” (*Farm Book* 40). The list of distributed cloth and clothing is titled “distribution of clothes for Dec. 1794,” and identifies measurements of cloth to be distributed (41). The cloth amounts are specified by age, and the itemized yards of material correspond with the ages of enslaved women, men, and children creating a standard allowance or allotment of clothing. These measurements are precise, and include both yards of linen (the purchased Osnaburg) and “skaines [sic] of thread” (41).

Jefferson’s detailed account of the quality and quantity of cloth provided make it possible to imagine the appearance of Monticello’s enslaved community. The “distribution of clothes for Dec. 1794” names 93 women, men, and children and accounts for allowances of Osnaburg, a coarse linen fabric, in varying measurements. This fabric, and other similar coarse and inexpensive textiles, are specified by slave codes, including South Carolina’s Negro Act of 1735, as “Negro cloth.” This specification, and dress codes made legal through slave codes, functioned to “outwardly distinguish those without power from those who held it” (Foster 134). In addition to specifying the use of Osnaburg or “Negro Cloth,” slave codes attempted to curb the practice of giving finer clothing or ‘cast-offs,’ used clothing, to slaves.

This chapter analyzes Jefferson’s Farm Book and the novel *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter* (1853) to examine the policing of the clothing of enslaved people. I argue that the
restriction and legislation of clothing through both custom and law was an attempt to make slavery legible at the level of the body. The social use of clothing influenced and altered the economic market of textile production, with the manufacture of osnaburg crafted specifically to serve the market of the North American plantation owner. I argue that the textile of osnaburg was altered to suit the visual needs of the institution of slavery, rather than economic or otherwise material requirements. I assert that osnaburg was a marker of enslavement, positioned to sustain and support race as an indicator of enslavement, further eliding sartorial, social, and legal discourses of colonialism on the body.

While economic concerns were complementary, and I argue secondary, to the visual requirements, the document of the Farm Book contains careful calculations. The allowance of clothing specified in the distribution list, with its yardage based on age, also includes exceptions; there is an exception made for infants, stating that “the blanket & linen given a newborn infant serves till next clothing time; bracketed directions for determining a person’s rough age, which explain “to find the age, subtract the year of birth from the present year without regarding the month”; as well as designations of material for a “common sized” man or woman and a measurement including an extra yard for a person designated “very large” (Farm Book 41).

Following the careful articulation of the clothing allowance standard, including the exception for infants and concessions for an individual’s size, Jefferson or the person designated to make this list has recorded each of the individual slave’s clothing allowance. The slaves are listed by name, and the allocated yards of linen, skeins of thread, and in some cases, stockings, blankets, and shoes are listed in carefully drawn columns down the pages. It would take additional work, an unaccounted for labor, on the part of enslaved women to make the cloth into the shirts, smocks, trousers, and dresses needed. This accounts for the skeins of thread which are also listed. In some
places on the list the skeins of thread are listed both “to make each shirt,” and then “to mend” (Farm Book 41).

The list’s existence, particularly its detailed and methodical clothing allowances, highlight the role that the cost of cloth played in determining standardized allowances. Presumably, these calculations are designed to meet minimum needs. It is unclear how the measurements were determined, other than that the amount of cloth allocated is sufficient to make a shift or a shirt and trousers. In addition to questions of quantity, the likely quality of material can be determined based on the types of cloth ordered; the primary material listed is known for its low cost and poor quality which also serves to highlight the importance of cost in the allowances. Finally, the existence of the list and its location in the Farm Book between an accounting of the weight of hogs killed at Monticello and another Jefferson plantation, Shadwell, and detailed calculations about the cost and likely output of both a ploughman and a plough horse, locate the clothing allowances of slaves as financial and business decisions in addition to social concerns. Yet despite the record’s explicit investment in plantation economics, I argue the social concerns, deployed through the use of a material which will clearly mark bodies as enslaved, is the text’s primary investment.

Yet not all of the slaves listed in the Farm Book received osnaburg. There are disparities in clothing allowances, with some slaves given more cloth of a finer material. Page 41 in the Farm Book, the first page in the clothing distribution list, begins with the detailed clothing allowances. It then describes the cloth and clothing allowances for a select number of slaves. In contrast to the numerous allowances of coarse and unconstructed cloth recorded elsewhere in the Farm Book, Jefferson’s personal servant received a ready-made coat, waistcoat, and breeches, with a finer linen for shirts (Farm Book 41). Two other men also received waistcoats and Irish
linen. Sally Hemmings, her sister Critta, and their niece Betsy were each given a fine linen and callimanco for dresses. Callimanco is a wool blend that was a precursor to linen calico, had a fine finish, and often had a floral pattern (Buck 225). While most enslaved women were allotted seven yards of material (for a “common sized” woman) Sally and Critta are recorded as receiving 10 and a half yards, and Betsey, nine and a half (Farm Book 41). All three women, Sally, Critta, and Betsey, were recorded as receiving three pairs of stockings, where most slaves were recorded as receiving only one pair. They also received yards of flannel, for outerwear or linings. Finally, although the allowance recorded is for material and not for ready-made clothing, the women are not allotted a certain number of skeins of thread.

The absence of an allowance for thread means that the three women at the beginning of the clothing distribution list either had constant access to thread, or had no need of thread because the clothing would be constructed by someone else. Either possibility indicates that their position is working in the plantation home rather than in the field. Even without existing research into the lives of Sally, Critta, and Betsey, the clothing distribution list and their allowances of a finer Irish linen and callimanco would indicate a difference in position. Once the callimanco was sewn into dresses, these floral patterned garments would serve to distinguish Sally, Critta, and Betsey, women who labored within the home, from the women who worked outside wearing coarsely woven, solid-colored woolens. The rough quality of Osnaburg as well as the disparities in the quality of the material listed indicate the ways in which clothing functioned, for Jefferson, as well as others in the slave holding American south, as a marker. The disparity is also apparent through the visual of the Farm Book, as the detailed descriptors cede to a list of names, spanning the next two pages, and allowances of Osnaburg, thread, stockings, and blankets are indicated through numbers and quickly jotted tally marks (Farm Book 41-43).
Domestic slaves laboring in households were given different material and even garments, so that “very often dress marked the status of these jobs” (Foster 138). The marking of status referenced was communicated through finer clothing, and this demarcation was visible to slaves themselves. William Wells Brown, in his text *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself*, refers to the quality of clothing he received while enslaved; he writes “I was a house servant – a situation preferable to that of a field hand, as I was better fed, better clothed” (Katz 15). Without further details, the definition of this “better” Brown refers to must be inferred as either a better quality of material, a greater amount of clothing, or both.

While a status or position was marked out through clothing, it was one which directly correlated to the type of work a slave performed; dress “defined [house servants] in relation to the tasks they performed for white people” (Foster 138). Frederick Douglass, in his memoir *My Bondage and My Freedom*, elaborates on the visible differences in clothing for those slaves working inside the slave owner’s home, stating:

Those [house] servants constituted a sort of aristocracy on Col. Lloyd’s plantation. They resembled the field hands in nothing, except in color. The delicate colored maid rustled in the scarcely worn silk of her young mistress, while the servant men were equally well attired from the overflowing wardrobe of their young master’s; so that, in dress, as well as in form and feature, in manner and speech, in tastes and habits, the distance between these favored few, and the sorrow and hunger-smitten multitudes of the quarter and the field, was immense. (109)

Douglass responds to the varying treatment and provisions of slaves with the language of class status, calling the slaves who worked in the house an aristocracy or favored class. He describes
the difference between slaves who labored in the house and slaves who labored in the fields as visually defined through clothing; these distinctions are great enough for Douglass to claim that one group resembled the other “in nothing, except in color,” giving clothing a great deal of power in the definition of people and making skin pigmentation or racial identity a secondary marker (109). Following dress are a list of visual and behavioral characteristics: “form and feature,” “manner and speech,” and “tastes and habits,” all of which come after dress and are related to dress in setting distinctions between the enslaved population (109).

When Douglass refers to the “scarcely worn silk” which clothed a maid and “equally well attired” male slaves, he is referring to the used clothing known as cast offs (109). This practice was limited, as “only favored or close personal servants, a small percentage of the total slave population, benefitted from the practice” as “visible household servants received special treatment” (Baumgarten 134). While this practice may not have been broadly extended on many American and Caribbean plantations, it was a relatively common practice in England (Baumgarten 134). The motivation for giving English servants cast off clothing was economic, and the clothing was often a form of payment for their domestic service. For slaves in the Southern United States, the motivations for providing cast off clothing were not simply economic; the practice of “cast offs” was also used as a reward system. In one 1780 account, a plantation owner named Henry Laurens records telling his overseer that “any Negro that has behaved remarkably well” should be rewarded, by “distinguishing them in their clothing by something better” (White 189). Clothing was used deliberately as a system of rewards made visible on the body.

The clothing worn by the young woman Douglass describes who worked in the Lloyd’s house – the “scarcely worn silk of her young mistress,” – serve to mark her visibly (109). This
clothing also alters how Douglass reads her person, describing her as “delicate” (109). While she is still enslaved, her elevated clothing reads, to Douglass, as an elevated status. Douglass is not alone in reading status through clothing; class is literally encoded into garments both through design and material. According to guidelines set and written in England but followed by those in the North American colonies and later America, the clothing of the genteel was close rather than loose fitting, and smooth rather than coarse (Bushman 71). While Douglass reads cast offs for the distinctions that the garments make between slaves who labored in the home and slaves who labored in the fields, others grew concerned about this practice for the lack of distinctions which existed between the young enslaved girl in the cast off, “scarcely worn silk” of the “young mistress” and the young mistress herself (Douglass 109).

It was precisely anxiety about the ability of dress to mask status, and conversely its inability to effectively serve as a boundary, that prompted the first sumptuary laws (Jones 232). Much has been written about these laws, appearing in England and English colonies, in which fine textiles and specific colors were restricted to the adornment of the elite. The United States had its own versions of sumptuary laws; in fact, “southern codes, used to demarcate status by regulating appropriate types of clothing according to the skin color of the wearer, were in place in the colonial era” (Foster 135). These laws were primarily attempting to curb the practice of giving ‘cast-offs’ to slaves, and in the case of the American antebellum south the boundary being policed is not between economic class statuses, but between free and unfree, free and enslaved, white and black.

South Carolina’s Negro Act of 1735 was the “first major dress code restricting the attire of enslaved…African Americans, and paved the way for future legislation regarding dress”
(White 134). In fact, this code “actually went so far as to prescribe the materials suitable for slave clothing, allowing only the cheapest fabrics” (154). The act states:

> Every constable and other persons are hereby authorized, empowered, and required, when as often as they shall find any such Negro slave,…having or wearing any sort of garment or apparel whatsoever, finer, other, or of greater value than Negro cloth,…coarse kersies, osnaburgs, blue linen, check linen, or calicos…as aforesaid, to seize and take away the same, to his or her own use, benefit and behoof; any law, usage or custom to the contrary notwithstanding.

(O’Neall 25)

The act ends with the clarification that this law is to be enforced, “any law, usage or custom to the contrary notwithstanding” (25). The custom referenced is the practice of giving slaves cast off clothing, and this law takes a decision which is often made at the local level within a household or plantation and moves it to the level of the state. This mass enforcement points to this act’s awareness of the display inherent in the wearing of clothing. It also indicates that the quality of fabric is apparent visually, and that anyone, or rather, any free white person, is empowered to both read the value of a fabric at sight and take action in claiming the material or garment.

While texts on the history of slavery in North America and the culture of enslaved African Americans frequently mention South Carolina’s Negro Act of 1735, its actual impact, aside from its status as an early and precedent creating piece of legislation, is often unaddressed. Significantly, the enforcement of the act is unrecorded. Plantation owner Laurens’ directions to his overseer regarding a system of rewards through clothing in 1780 point to a disregard for this legislation (White 159). In fact, at the time of the law’s passing “some legislators wanted an
exemption for clothing given to slaves by their owners” (Edgar 189). This request indicates that the legislatures were aware of the common practice of awarding or rewarding enslaved people with clothing; they may have participated in this custom personally. The lack of recorded enforcement of the South Carolina Negro Act of 1735 can be found in Judge John Belton O’Neall’s 1848 text *The Negro Law of South Carolina*, which was written and presented to the legislators to recommend amendments. O’Neall addresses the 1735 Act, describing it as an act which “regulates the apparel of slaves” and clarifies that “this section has not, to my knowledge, ever been enforced” (O’Neall 25). He continues, “Indeed, if enforced now, it would make an immense booty to some hungry, unprincipled seeker of spoils. It ought to be repealed” (25). The official record of the confiscation of clothing from a slave deemed to be dressing above their status is silent.

Along with the names of specific textiles, the Negro Act of 1735 specifies that “none of the cloth could exceed ten shillings per yard at the time of purchase” (White 133). This price point attempted to set a standard, and “by prescribing the type of dress and designating fabrics known colloquially as Negro Cloths, this code [and later statutes] provided a ‘maintenance of social distance symbolically through apparel’” (134). Yet while attention is paid to the marking of status through clothing for slaves who labored in a house, clothing would also mark the status of slaves who worked outdoors; clothing for house slaves is made visible or thrown into relief when besides the rougher clothing of the rest of the plantation slaves.

The crude textiles provided for most plantation slaves clothing were specifically chosen to communicate a status of enslavement, and consequently restrict mobility and further mark the body as enslaved. These materials were blends; “fabrics [that] were mixed or combined to create durable textiles for slaves rather than comfortable fabrics” (Sanders 1). And prior to the rapid
expansion of the cotton industry in the nineteenth century, the textiles were linen. In 1893, a three volume history of the textile industry of the United States was published which stated that although “cotton was regularly imported in small quantities, chiefly from Barbadoes,” linen was imported in large quantities and fulfilled “nearly all the purposes for which cotton is now employed” (Bagnall 13). Among the linen imported into the United States was a coarse blend called osnaburg.

Osnaburg, recorded by Jefferson as oznabrig, is a coarse linen whose name derives from the German town where it was originally produced. The expansion of production of osnaburg in Europe was directly responsive to the North American colonial market for the linen. The British Linen Company, aware of the amount of osnaburg imported and then exported to North America and the West Indies, sponsored production of osnaburgs in Scotland (Durie 71). The attempt to manufacture the linen blend, previously only produced in Germany, was not an isolated venture, but “only one of a number of Scottish attempts to copy continental linens, both coarse and fine” (Durie 71). The production of osnburg in Scotland was very successful; manufacturing began in the 1740’s, and before 1760 osnaburg became a major Scottish export to the colonies and accounted for 25% of the entirety of the linen produced in Scotland (Durie 71).

One thing that Scottish manufacturers were unable to accomplish is the rebranding of osnaburg. Despite their attempt to rename the linen “edinburgs,” the original name remained. However, although the fabric was still called osnaburg, it was not the exact same fabric which had been produced in Germany. As the primary purpose for the material became export to the North American colonies and clothing for laboring slaves, the quality of the material changed (Bagnall 13). Always a poor quality and coarse textile, the quality further decreased (Bagnall 13). The appearance also changed, and by 1750 Scottish manufacturers offered “a range of
osnaburg linen in a variety of colors: the brighter for the Jamaica market, the duller, buff or brownish being adapted to the demands of the North American colonies (Durie 74). In this way, a fabric purchased by plantations became a British textile industry, which shaped itself according to the needs of slavery in the colonies.

The Scottish manufacture of osnaburg was profitable solely for its use in the clothing of slaves, and mentions of osnaburg in the historical record are predominantly advertisements for runaway slaves; the British linen company described the coarse material as produced for “sailors, slaves, and small sails” (74). And while osnaburg is a linen, the name “osnaburg” became synonymous with cheap laborer’s clothing to the point that when cotton replaced linen as the most economical fabric for use on plantations, the name was applied to any cheap cotton fabric of a similar weight and weave (Sanders 4). The linen blend osnaburg of early North American colonial slavery, the linen blend osnaburg mentioned in Jefferson’s Farm Book, and the cotton blend osnaburg of the nineteenth-century slave narrative are three vastly different textiles. This study of the law, through the South Carolina slave codes, and the related textile industries, demonstrate the recursive relationship between desires to make slavery legible on the body through clothing, and textile production. The textile industry responded to market requirements for inexpensive and durable clothing, but just as significantly, the textile industry transformed in response to consumers desires for a textile which would visual signify enslavement.

author, this poem is one of many which Brown had included in *The Anti-Slavery Harp; A Collection of Songs for Anti-Slavery Meetings*, a collection he compiled in 1848. The lines which precede the opening of *Clotel* read “Why stands she near the auction stand, That girl so young and fair? What brings her to this dismal place, Why stands she weeping there?” (81). From the first lines of text offered, the novel is questioning the institution of slavery through the image of the young, black and fair complexioned girl, as well as using this specific image as an example of its evils.

The speaker in the poem “The Slave Auction – A Fact” is questioning the unnamed girl of the poem through a series of rhetorical questions, including why she is in proximity to an auction stand, and why she is openly weeping. These questions may be asked for the readers of the poem, or those who hear its recitation, as the answer of why this girl is in this physical space is evident. However, another reading argues that the answer to the question “why stands she near the auction block” is not evident (81). In the case of the “young and fair” girl, the proximity and emotional response to the auction block points to a racial identity and status of enslavement unsupported by her physical person. In addition to this observation, the poem is questioning the institution of slavery. The repeated “why” can be understood as a much larger question, in which the poem asks why the systems are in place to move this girl to the auction stand and into a purchaser’s possession.

The second line of the poem, the only line in the stanza that is not a question, describes the girl; it reads “that girl so young and fair” (81). This descriptor of “fair” is repeatedly employed within the novel *Clotel* to describe the three generations of enslaved women. While this is the only stanza of the poem “The Slave Auction – A Fact” to appear within the pages of this novel, the rest of the piece is resonant with the thematic questions of the novel *Clotel*. The
third stanza describes the girl reaching out for a man who is with her, “she grasps a manly hand,” and quietly questioning him “‘My brother, must I go?’” She is answered at the end of the fourth stanza with the simple “‘Yes, sister, you must go!’” The man continues to state: “‘No longer can my arm defend, No longer can I save, My sister from the horrid fate, That waits her as a slave!’” With these stanzas, the poem has introduced questions for the reader or listener that it will not answer. The man’s race or color is not clarified. It is uncertain if he is her brother, or a figure like a brother. Yet what is suggested from the end of the fifth stanza, with the statement “no longer can my arm defend, No longer can I save,” is that this is not a slave auction in which the unnamed girl is being sold in a changing of hands, moving from the ownership of one master to another, but a slave auction in which the girl is being sold into slavery for the first time. The brother has shielded her from this fate before now, but is for some reason powerless to do so now; this is a trope or storyline repeated through the novel.

While the girl is described only as “young and fair,” the reader is to presume that despite her skin tone or complexion, she is black. The brother, however, may be black or white. In fact, the poem’s narrative of a brother who had previously been able to shield a sister from enslavement would suggest a brother who had the power to do so; it suggests a white brother. When Clotel and her sister Althesa, women described by the novel as Jefferson’s daughters, are auctioned as slaves and enter the institution of slavery from their mother’s protection, this specific scenario plays out in the novel Clotel within Althesa’s family. Althesa marries and has children, and she and her white husband, Henry Morton, die unexpectedly. Mr. Morton’s brother, James, arrives to take guardianship of his nieces Ellen and Jane; it is only then that he finds out that Althesa was born a slave, and therefore Ellen and Jane are also slaves. When James Morton tries to take Ellen and Jane home to Vermont he is accused of “attempting to conceal the
property of his deceased brother” (196). Morton’s offer to mortgage his farm to pay for the young Ellen and Jane is rejected, and they are removed from his protection, auctioned, and swiftly meet tragic fates; one dies at her own hand and one dies of a broken heart. In this case even the young Ellen and Jane were unaware that their mother, and therefore they themselves, were slaves. This story, and the poem “The Slave Auction – A Fact” identify the inability of family to shield girls born to women in the system of slavery from the generational inheritance of slavery. Significantly, this poem, and the novel itself, consistently question how the bodies of women, particularly women who are young and fair, are made legible as slaves.

As stated, the central characters of the novel are a family of women, and all of them are described as fair; Currer, who is described as a “bright mulatto” who had “kept house [for] Thomas Jefferson, by whom she had two daughters,” the titular Clotel and her sister Althesa (Brown 85). The novel continues with the stories of Althesa’s daughters Ellen and Jane, described previously, and Clotel’s daughter Mary. After fathering Clotel and Althesa, the novel states that Jefferson was called to Washington D.C., and Currer stayed in Virginia. She worked as a laundress, turning a partial amount of her earnings over to her master, a Mr. Graves, and “supported herself and her two daughters” (85). It is after Mr. Graves’ death that Currer and her daughters are sold, and the first chapter of the novel concludes with a scene of the young Clotel on the auction block.

While the novel begins with only the stanza describing the young women on the auction block, the text of the novel itself immediately following this stanza begins with the opening line “With the growing population of slaves in the Southern States of America, there is a fearful increase of half whites, most of whose fathers are slaveholders, and their mothers slaves,” signaling the novel’s investment in the children born into slavery with white fathers and enslaved
mothers (81). This investment is certainly due in part to the sexual exploitation that such children
signified; an exploitation which is added to the physical and economic deprivations and
exploitations of slavery. The men and women Brown describes as “half whites” in this opening
line, as well as the women in the central family of the novel, highlight the novel’s central
concern: what about their appearance makes women and men visibly enslaved?

After opening his novel with a poem which recounts the trauma of the auction block,
Brown’s first chapter moves into the auction of Clotel herself, which reads:

The appearance of Clotel on the auction block created a deep sensation amongst
the crowd. There she stood, with a complexion as white as most of those who
were waiting with a wish to become her purchasers; her features as finely defined
as any of her sex of pure Anglo-Saxon; her long black wavy hair done up in the
neatest manner; her form tall and graceful, and her whole appearance indicating
one superior to her position. (87)

In this passage, the mere appearance of Clotel is described as “creating a deep sensation,” and
the line following, which details her complexion, suggest that this is the reason for the crowd’s
reaction. By describing her as “finely featured” and “graceful,” with neat “long black wavy
hair,” the reader is asked to imagine a young woman who adheres to the appearance they would
expect of a young white woman rather than a young black woman and slave (87). The younger
sister Althesa is described as “scarcely less beautiful then her sister,” yet her time on the auction
block is absent from the narration. This emphasis on one sister is due in part to the centrality of
the character of Clotel to the narrative, but is also in service of advancing the romance of the
early chapters of the novel.
Just as the unnamed girl in “The Slave Auction – A Fact” is described as young and fair, Clotel is described as having “finely defined” features and “a complexion as white” as the spectators she faces. This entire scene echoes the repeated “why” of the poems; why is Clotel, who is as white as the spectators and prospective purchasers, on the auction block as a slave? Scholars have considered the figure of the mulatta slave, or the “tragic mulatta”; Jean Fagan Yellin argues that the narrative trope of the tragic mulatta was aimed at “the concerns of free white women” (73). The typical narrative of the tragic mulatta centers on a beautiful fair-skinned young woman, typically the daughter of a master (father) and a slave (mother). This woman often experiences thwarted love with a white man, and through a narrative development enters slavery (Yellin 73). While the narrative strain of Clotel’s story through the novel does not adhere to each of these details precisely, this is a good approximation of Clotel’s narrative. The narrative of the tragic mulatta spoke to the concerns of a female readership and audience, detailing love, a marriage or plans for a marriage, and the potential to create a family and care for a home (Yellin 73). These concerns are shared by the white female readership.

The concern with fair complexioned enslaved women in the literary texts of the mid- to late-nineteenth-century can further be read as evidence that “the horror of slavery…was increasingly emblematized by the degradation suffered by ‘white’ women” (Brody 48). The danger of these portrayals is their communication that slavery which is experienced by ‘white’ women, including Clotel, is worse; that a complexion makes slavery unsuitable for a specific type of woman, and not that slavery is unsuitable for any woman or man. The focus in scenes of fair complexioned women at slave auctions is on the woman’s “approximation to white standards of beauty and bearing” (Raimon 74). The novel Clotel certainly highlights the character Clotel’s adherence to white standards of beauty. She is described as having “features as finely defined as
any of her sex of pure Anglo-Saxon,” and because of her adherence to these white standards of beauty Clotel is further described as appearing to be “superior to her position” (87). Yet the figure of Clotel on the auction block can also be read as a disruptive figure; her “form tall and graceful” and “complexion as white” as those recognized legally as white highlights the instability of racial categories (87; Raimon 74). Rather than reading scenes like Clotel’s auction for their valorization of her ‘white’ features, Clotel’s auction troubles racial categorization.

The auctioneer refers to Clotel as not only fair, but as albino, stating “‘Miss Clotel has been reserved for the last, because she was the most valuable. How much, gentleman? Real Albino, fit for a fancy girl for any one” (87). The auctioneer’s use of the word “albino” in his description of Clotel also suggests racial difference (Frye 531). The word albino originates from the colonization of the African continent, when Balthasar Tellez “coined the term albino to describe white-skinned tribe members encountered on the first European incursions along the coast of West Africa” (Martin 5). The bodies of the albino Africans, with their unpigmented, pale skin, challenged the colonial systems construction of racial difference. For white society, this challenge was the basis of the fascination with the figure of the white African, or the albino. Interest in the figure “relied on the polarities of racial difference: the spectacle of pure whiteness depended on the audience’s expectation of pure blackness” (Martin 91). This spectacle, and the subversion of the expectations of the spectator, is applicable to the figure of Clotel on the auction block. Within the novel Clotel “both the mulatta and the albino may appear white, but they are not white according to any of the ideologies or standards at the time” (Frye 531). This appearance of whiteness is a visual disruption to the binary of black and white constructed in the colonial narrative and maintained in the antebellum south.
This binary of black and white, and division between enslaved populations, is supported through clothing. Throughout the novel, the clothing and general appearance of house slaves is carefully described. The Reverend John Peck, the man who owns Currer, “kept his house servants well dressed” (Brown 135). The neighbor of John Peck, Mr. Jones, claims that “my negroes are well clothed, well fed, and not over worked” (140). The narrative supports this, stating that “the servants in [Mr. Jones] ‘Great House’ were well dressed, and appeared as if they did not want for food” (140). Yet these descriptors are followed within the text by information which reveals the impression offered by fine clothing to be misleading. The clothing is supplied by the plantation owners to project a particular image, and the text carefully states that Mr. Jones’ slaves were “well dressed” and “appeared” to have their physical needs met (140). This use of the word appeared indicates that there is a clear distinction, or at the very least a potential differentiation, between enslaved men and women whose physical needs are met and enslaved men and women who have the appearance of individuals whose physical needs are met.

The description of Mr. Peck’s “well dressed” slaves, however, is undercut (135). Further description of Peck’s plantation reveals:

Although Mr. Peck fed and clothed his house servants well, and treated them with a degree of kindness, he was, nevertheless, a most cruel master. He encouraged his driver to work the field-hands from early dawn ‘til late at night; and the good appearance of the house-servants, and the preaching of Snyder to the field negroes, was to cause himself to be regarded as a Christian master. (143)

While for Mr. Peck the “appearance” purposefully projected is that of a benevolent or permissive master, the “reality” is much different. The clothing that Mr. Peck provides enables him to
project this image of the good Christian slave owner. Mr. Peck is shown to be concerned with appearances above all other concerns, as upon his arrival in the South after a college education in the North, Mr. Peck was “captivated” by the attention and admiration he received; his belief in his right to own slaves is based on his idea that it is “better that Christian men should hold slaves than unbelievers” (108). If true, then the “degree of kindness,” and certainly the physical sustenance and the clothing, can serve to project an image of benevolence. Later on in the novel this association appears again in the section when Mrs. French, the woman Clotel is sold to after her relationship with Horatio ends, similarly uses clothing to project an image rather than reality: “Well dressed, but scantily fed, and overworked were all who found a home with her” (149). For Mrs. French, the appearance projected through orderly and perhaps even costly clothing is of greater import than fulfilling basic but ultimately invisible needs of food and rest.

Slaves also took advantage of the performative nature of clothing. While clothing is used by slave owners to project an image of wealth or benevolence, it is also used by slaves as a tool to enable escape from slavery. The chapter “Escape of Clotel” begins with Brown recounting an example of two fugitive slaves who displayed “great shrewdness in their endeavors to escape from this land of bondage” (165). These two men were traveling north, one on horseback and one in bondage, so that to anyone who passed they looked like a trusted slave and a runaway. They maintained this ruse until they passed into the free state of Ohio; there they were set upon by slave-catchers and one of them was taken hostage. Waiting until the men were asleep after a night of drinking, this hostage slave made his way to a window to escape before stopping. The text moves into the first person, and recounts the slave stating “these men are villains, they are enemies to all who like me are trying to be free. Then why not I teach them a lesson?” (166). Following this, and moving back into third person, the text reports “he then undressed himself,
took the clothes of one of the men, dressed himself in them, and escaped through the window, and, a moment more, he was on the high road to Canada” (166).

This brief story serves a number of purposes. It begins as an opportunity for Brown to celebrate the ingenuity of the men and women who had donned various disguises in their efforts to escape bondage. The geography of the story is also significant. By having the men reach the northern states, and then meet with slave-catchers who again took them into bondage, this story reminded readers of the precarity of freedom in the Northern States under the Fugitive Slave Act. By ending in Canada, with the slave “safe in her Britannic Majesty’s dominions,” Brown locates freedom outside of the United States (166). Finally, the act of donning the clothing of the men who had taken him captive is presented as a lesson to the slave-catchers themselves. This is literally stated, in the move to first person narration from the unnamed slave. More than just a robbery, the clothing is a tool used to obtain freedom. While the story does not narrate the road to Canada, it does report that the previously captured runaway slave successfully arrives. The implicit claim is that the flight was facilitated by the stolen clothing. In Brown’s brief story, the boundary between enslaved and free can be successfully masked through the stolen clothing of the slave-catchers. Many slaves understood the ability of clothing to mask their status, and runaway slaves “used fine clothing to distinguish themselves from the enslaved population whose coarse, tattered garments were recognized by both blacks and whites as badges of slavery” (Marshall 168).

The central escape narrative in the novel, the escape of Clotel, relies on a change of clothing and the adoption of a new identity. Clotel and fellow slave William run from their plantation and travel north as a master and slave. The fair skinned Clotel and the darker William
travel in the same mode as Ellen and William Crafts, whose narrative *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* depicts Ellen’s adoption of the clothing and deportment of a white man, and William enacting the role of her slave and traveling companion. While the Craft’s narrative would not be published until 1860, they were contemporaries of Brown. William Wells Brown and William and Ellen Craft gave abolitionist lectures together in 1849, the same year that they met (Levine 35).

Within the novel, Clotel does not come up with the plan to adopt Ellen Craft’s method of disguising herself as a man immediately. The initial suggestion offered to Clotel by William is that she take money he has set aside and escape to England. William tells Clotel that she is “much fairer then many of the white women of the South, and can easily pass for a free white lady” (Brown 167). Clotel presents the suggestion that she adopt the disguise of a white man, and that William travel with her as her slave. While the Crafts narrative presents the decision for Ellen to adopt the disguise of a man as pragmatic, because “they knew it was not customary in the South for ladies to travel with male servants” the novel depicts this decision as an idea of Clotel’s which will obtain freedom for both Clotel and William (Crafts 24). Further, although Clotel does offer a plan that will take them to Canada, her primary goal is to locate her daughter Mary.

Michael Berthold reads Clotel’s motivations as an impediment to reading the adoption of male clothing as an examination or challenge of culture, stating that “the escape from bondage is articulated as a specific, inexorable maternal quest, and Clotel’s freedom becomes the assumption of the full anguish of active motherhood” (22). By making Clotel into a “heroic mother,” the cultural interrogation her transgressive disguise can perform is limited (23). It is
true the entire episode of Clotel and William’s escape is brief; within the novel the entire episode is only three pages. In addition, Clotel does not continue onto freedom, but travels to the slave state of Virginia to look for Mary. However, despite Clotel’s primary motivation being reunification with her daughter as opposed to individual freedom, the decision to don male apparel as a means of escape is of her own design. In the Crafts narration of events, Ellen’s reluctance to adopt a male costume is underlined. The text explicitly states she had “no ambition whatever to assume this disguise” beyond its practicality and the knowledge that a woman and slave traveling together would attract notice (Craft 24). This assertion, of course, also serves to reassure the largely female abolitionist readership that while Ellen may have acted out the role of a man, it was a role taken under the direction of her husband and one she was eager to relinquish. Within the novel, Clotel is not burdened with the same concerns of maintaining her femininity. While Clotel crafts her disguise, William must be convinced she should adopt a male disguise, as “Clotel satisfied him that the plan could be carried out if he would only play his part” (Brown 168). While her motivations might place her within a feminine role of motherhood, the impetus and the planning of an act of gender and racial passing are Clotel’s own. This episode shows Clotel eager to step outside of the constraints of gender, offers a challenge to the stability of the racialized and gendered identities read on her body.

Clotel is aware of the mutability of her gender, as she asserts her ability to pass as a man. One of the most consistent functions of cross-dressing is “to indicate […] ‘category crisis,’ disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances” (Garber 16). The crossdresser’s displayed body is an overt commentary on the cultural category of gender, and becomes a sign of transgression in all categories. As a figure of category crisis, the crossdresser reveals the instability of the cultural definitions of category written on the body. In addition to
crossdressing, Clotel passes as white, which “reflects an ambiguity that already exists on the level of the body” (Bost 148). The ambiguity that exists on the level of the body is what clothing serves to make legible, both the racial identity and freedom or enslavement, and the reason for the high stakes surrounding the access and legality of clothing for bodies which are enslaved.

While Clotel’s escape in the guise of a man is considered and theorized, the escape of George, which occurs later in the novel, has not received the same critical attention. Considering the way in which these two episodes function as an inverse of each other, examining their relationship to each other can highlight the way that dress functions to mark enslavement; however, this marking is altered by the differing legal rights and protections afforded to women. Clotel’s disguise as a man, and George’s disguise as a woman, bring into relief the differing level of surveillance women face, in particular enslaved women.

Throughout the novel, when Clotel is in public she is visibly displayed. The novel begins with an account of Currer, Clotel’s mother, taking Clotel and Althesa, her sister, to a “negro ball” with the goal “to attract attention” (Brown 86). In commenting on this practice, Brown editorializes “indeed, most of the slave women have no higher aspiration than that of becoming the finely-dressed mistress of some white man” (85). Through the figure of Clotel, the novel expresses anxiety over the morality of women in the system of slavery and uses clothing as a lens to comment on that morality. Immediately following the description of Clotel at the ball is the second place where Clotel is displayed in public, the depiction of Clotel on the auction block. Aside from these examples she lives a private childhood, a cloistered existence in the cottage provided by Horatio, and enclosure in the homes of the people she works for as a slave.
While traveling as a white man, Clotel experiences being in public without being under surveillance. The clothing that Clotel obtains is briefly referred to as “the clothes for her disguise procured,” and Clotel in disguise is described as “being attired in a neat suit of black” with “a white silk handkerchief tied round her chin” (167). This “neat suit of black” is dichotomous to coarse and loose clothing of the enslaved. In this disguise, Clotel begins her journey with William on a steamboat to Louisville, stays in a hotel, and travels on another steamboat. After separating from William, she adopts a slightly different disguise of “an Italian or Spanish gentlemen” with “a splendid pair of dark false whiskers [which] covered the side of her face” to travel from Cincinnati to Richmond by stage-coach and to check in to a hotel (186). This second disguise does attract attention from a gentlemen and his two daughters, the oldest of whom is described as “unmarried but marriageable” (194). The text describes this meeting as a flirtation, in which “that shy glance of the eye, which is ever given when the young of both sexes meet” was “freely at work” (194). The attention Clotel receives in the form of a shy flirtation emphasizes the difference of moving through society as a white man; Clotel’s attention is sought, and as a foreign gentlemen, she has the luxury of experiencing moving through public in anonymity.

It is Clotel’s clothing which betrays her identity and leads to her arrest. Richmond is in a state of increased vigilance after Nat Turner’s rebellion, the 1831 Southampton County, Virginia slave revolt Brown places within the timeline of the novel. While the text states that even without this overall increased vigilance, “the fugitive [Clotel] could not have escaped the vigilance of the police” due to advertisements released and a reward offered, it is not the runaway slave ads placed which led to her arrest, but the identification and search of anyone unknown in the area (202). City officers come to the hotel where Clotel is staying and they
“informed her that they were authorized to examine all strangers, and to assure the authorities that they were not in league with the revolted negros” (202). It is not Clotel’s presence which draws special attention, but the general attention paid to all strangers who may be sympathetic or supportive of a violent revolt; significantly, this indicates that the city officials read Clotel as a white man, as she was in her hotel room “still in the disguise of a gentlemen” (202). In their exploration they take the key to her trunk, and upon opening it “to their surprise, they found nothing but a woman’s apparel in the box, which raised their curiosity, and caused a further investigation that resulted in the arrest of Clotel as a fugitive slave” (203).

When Clotel is examined at the level of the body and found to be a woman, there is an instant shift from understanding her to be a young, white, possibly foreign man to reading her as a black woman. This points to Garber’s theory of “category crisis”; once the disguised Clotel is found not to be a man, other categories of her identity are similarly up for interpretation. Where the white man can be read as a sympathizer to the slave revolt, it is a lesser jump to consider a woman in disguise as being something other than she appears in other categories of identity.

Women’s clothing leads to George experiencing a greater level of attention and surveillance. George is introduced in the chapter entitled “The Escape” as a slave of Horatio Green, Clotel’s former lover and Mary’s father. He is the son of an enslaved mother and his father was “an American statesman” (Brown 210). George and Clotel’s daughter Mary are in love and plan to marry, but when George is introduced into the text he is in jail awaiting execution for his participation in Nat Turner’s rebellion. While visiting George in prison and awaiting execution, Mary suggests he “exchange clothes with her, and thus attempt his escape in
disguise” (213). Initially he refuses, but the next day he is convinced, the switch is made, and he
exits the jail as Mary.

The novel explains George’s ability to leave the jail disguised as Mary by explaining that
“as George was of small stature, and both were white, there was no difficulty in his passing out
without detection; and as she usually left the cell weeping, with handkerchief in hand, and
sometimes at her face, he had only to adopt this mode and his escape was safe” (213). Mary has
previously been described as white; when as a child she was brought into her father Horatio
Green and his wife Gertrude’s house as a slave she is described bluntly: “the child was white”
(156). George is described as being “as white as most white persons,” “his hair was straight, soft,
fine, and light; his eyes blue, nose prominent, lips thin, his head well formed, forehead high and
prominent” (210). Finally, it is asserted that he “was often taken for a free white person” (210).

Despite the fact that George has previously been read as a free white man, while in the
disguise of a woman George does not experience freedom of movement. He seems to
immediately sense the potential difficulties of traveling in the guise of a woman; after escaping
from the jail and gathering provisions that have been left for him by Mary, George realizes
“neither of them had once thought of a change of dress for George when he should have escaped,
and he had not walked but a short distance before he felt that a change of apparel would facilitate
his progress” (214). Since this is not possible, he continues, but immediately after entering the
free state of Ohio he is pursued by slave-catchers. His dress is the reason these men pursue him,
as “George was not the slave of either of these men, nor were they in pursuit of him, but they had
lost a woman who had been seen in that vicinity, and when they saw poor George in the disguise
of a female, and attempting to elude pursuit, they felt sure they were close to their victim” (215).
The dress, the garments of a woman, lead to a greater level of surveillance for the runaway George.

It is through the intervention of a Quaker that George eludes the slave-catchers, and the first thing he does is change his apparel. George is taken to a friend of the Quaker’s, and “after laying aside his female attire, and being snugly dressed up in a straight collared coat, and pantaloons to match, was again put on the right road towards Canada” (216). Along with a change in clothing, George makes a change in his travel pattern. Previously, while in the disguise of a woman, he had rested by day and traveled by night. Once his clothing is changed, so is his schedule; he continues to Canada traveling by day.

This moment in the text is pivotal in a number of ways. George moves from wearing women’s clothing and traveling by night through slave states, to wearing men’s clothing, traveling in the daylight, and moving through Free states. With his flight from the slave-catchers George is almost thwarted in his escape to freedom, and immediately following this a change in clothing facilitates movement that results in his freedom in Canada. Crossing from a slave state into a free state is a significant part of this change in George’s ability to move freely. Yet while the change in traveling and an ability to move freely correlates to the movement from slave states to free states, the change in clothing is a significant part of this transition. The physical constriction of the clothing itself, and the lack of constriction in the change to men’s clothing, allow George exactly what he had anticipated, that “a change of apparel would facilitate his progress” (214).

Mary’s escape from slavery is enabled by her clothing as well as the protection of a white man. In the case of Clotel’s escape, Clotel herself is the white man whose movement can escape
a high level of scrutiny. Mary escapes under the protection of a white man, who then becomes her first husband. After helping George escape from prison, her master (and father) Horatio is compelled by the court to sell her out of state; while George is working and attending school as a free man in Canada, Mary is sold to a trader and transported to New Orleans. She is purchased from the slave-market in New Orleans by a man in the city looking for a waiting-maid for his wife. It is another man, a Mr. Devenant, who first sees Mary in the slave-market in New Orleans, and later on the steamboat from New Orleans to Mobile, who helps her escape slavery under his protection.

While Mary’s anticlimactic escape from slavery is not discussed in scholarship of escapes from slavery within the novel, in fact it is Mary’s escape that most effectively illustrates the instability inherent in physical markers and the potential collapse between the status of free and unfree. Prior to the description of her clothing, Mary’s complexion is identified as a deterrent to potential purchasers while in the slave-market in New Orleans. She describes her experience in the market, stating “I was examined by many person, but none seemed willing to purchase me, as all thought me too white, and said I would run away and pass as a free white woman” (222). Rather than finding her complexion a selling point, as was the case for Clotel and Althesa, her fairness is a deterrent and seen as an insufficient marker of enslavement.

Mary’s clothing is the other significant marker which fails to mark her as enslaved. Once purchased as a waiting-maid, Mary is given new clothing. She describes this, stating “I was then dressed to suit the situation of a maid-servant; and upon the whole, I thought that, in my new dress, I looked as much the lady as my mistress” (223). It is the fear that Mary, outside of the space of the New Orleans slave-market, would look “as much the lady as my mistress” which deterred other buyers:
Ironically, runaways generally received the accoutrements necessary to pass as free people from their owners. Given better clothing to reflect their masters’ status, domestics often wore fashionable apparel formerly belonging to their owners. (Marshall 168)

Mary’s new master and mistress outfitted her as a traveling companion and waiting-maid, and this dress, certainly chosen to reflect the status and taste of her mistress, provided the physical material which could mark Mary as free. While it is unspecified whether the dress is new to Mary, and a cast-off garment of her mistress, or entirely new, the effect is the same. Significantly, with the line “I thought that…I looked as much the lady as my mistress,” Mary is acknowledging the way her situated bodily practice, or how her body and garment together project an image or identity, depict someone who is white, and free (Brown 223; Entwistle 34).

While Mary’s complexion and garment work together to project the image of a free white woman, it is the protection of a white man, Mr. Devenant, which makes this escape possible. While Mary says “I dressed myself in my best clothes, and put a veil over my face” it is her place on Mr. Devenant’s arm which allows her to exit the steamboat, and then board another steamboat and abscond to France, without question (Brown 224). Mr. Devenant is confident of his ability to leave the steamboat with Mary; when convincing her to run away with him, with the eventual goal of freedom for her and their marriage, he says “fly with me to-night; we shall be in Mobile in two hours from this, and when the passengers are going on shore, you can take my arm, and you can escape unobserved” (224). It is the freedom of mobility as well as the normativity and the power of that normativity embodied by Mr. Devenant, both his whiteness and masculinity, which make this anticlimactic escape possible. Mary and Mr. Devenant meet on board, and “surrounded by a number of passengers” they leave the steamboat and “were soon
lost in the crowd” (224). Mr. Devenant claims Mary as his sister for their journey to France, and they marry as soon as they arrive. Simply by taking Mr. Devenant’s arm, Mary is under his protection and escapes scrutiny.

While each escape is facilitated through an adoption of clothing, with George wearing Mary’s clothing, Clotel wearing the clothing of a free man, and Mary wearing the clothing of a well-dressed free woman, George’s near capture while disguised as a woman contrasts with Clotel’s freedom of mobility disguised as a man and Mary’s invisibility traveling under Mr. Devenant’s protection. These three different escapes and escape attempts confirm the role of gendered clothing in making slavery legible on the level of the body.

Osnaburg as a material is without gender, and even when fashioned into a dress the linen or cotton made loose garments. Yet the osnaburg garments of enslaved people approximated the gendered clothing of the dress or pantaloons and shirts (Foster 146). The gendered presentation of a woman, through wearing the garment of the dress, brought social and legal discourses which determined women as subjects under control and surveillance onto the body. With a change into a fine suit, Clotel takes on the role of an elderly disabled man, or a foreign and eccentric young man. With the clothing from her mistress, a veil, and the protection of a free white man of means, Mary appears a free white woman and wife. Clotel and Mary highlight the difficulty in making young fair complexioned women recognizably enslaved; Clotel’s successful gender passing and Mary’s social invisibility under a white man’s personal protection demonstrate that gender passing circumvents the marker or clothing, making it a greater challenge to the institution of slavery and the ability to read enslavement on the body.
Chapter Three:
The Dress and the Fashioning of an English Lady:
Color and Conduct in *The Woman of Color: A Tale*

In the epistolary novel *The Woman of Color: A Tale* (1808), the protagonist Olivia Fairchild describes her appearance while on a visit in her new neighborhood of Devonshire:

I need not describe my dress, you know I have one plain unornamented style. Augustus approves it, and of course I do not depart from it; but Dido bids me “be sure tell Mrs. Milbanke that I wore my new diamonds in my hair, which looked very pretty and charming.” (112)

Olivia, a Jamaican woman of mixed race, is reticent in describing her dress in detail within the letter she sends to her former governess; however this description still offers a great deal of information about Olivia’s dress, and further, her navigation of English society. “Custom, cost, taste, and propriety” are guiding values for dress which “prescribe or proscribe certain practices and tolerate or encourage certain behaviors,” making dress a social endeavor (Perrot 6). The assertion that the dress was approved and therefore appropriate for Olivia to wear means that it would follow the rather narrow guidelines for a gown in early nineteenth century English society.

This chapter contends that race and dress are placed in a dialectic relationship in the novel *The Woman of Color*, offering a parallel construction of the novel’s investment in challenging gendered representations of women, in which white women are assumed to be models, while black and enslaved women are always negative examples. The black heroine of the title, Olivia Fairchild, is clearly represented as the most ideal woman in the novel, primarily described throughout the text in terms of her personal qualities and characteristics, namely,
gentility and piety. Contrastingly, the white women in the novel are presented through detailed
depictions of their physical attributes and attire. These descriptions are often mocking or
sexualizing, which I argue suggests that Olivia, who arrives in England from colonized Jamaica,
is positioned as more “English” than the white, ostensibly “English” characters. Further, I
demonstrate that the racialized relation to dress is played out on the bodies of the women in the
novel: the white women in the novel wear attire marked by colonial imports including ostrich
feathers and Kashmir scarves. These commodities are imports from colonial spaces that have
been incorporated into the visual production of the English lady, revealing and upending
colonialism’s dependence on visual fashion cues.

Brigitte Fielder considers the visual elements of *The Woman of Color*, arguing that the
figure of Olivia is often read in relation to whiteness, and not in relation to blackness; Fielder
studies both how “the woman of color figures within white empire and how she figures her own
black Atlantic identification” (173). Fielder’s study of the novel considers the visual
triangulation of the mixed race Olivia, her white sister-in-law Mrs. Merton, and her black slave
Dido. Her examination is focused on the familial and maternal relationships Olivia has with her
former governess Mrs. Milbanke and traveling companion Mrs. Honeywood rather than her more
contentious relationships with Mrs. Merton, Lady Ingot, and Miss Singleton. Jennifer DeVere
Brody’s reading of the novel, which is focused on the racialization of Olivia, addresses the
colonial materials implied through the text. In her consideration of the colonial products which
would be imported and circulated in early nineteenth century England, Brody reads Olivia’s
person as a colonial product. Olivia begins the novel en route to England from Jamaica, and
Brody argues that:
such a journey replicates the exchange of material goods during the triangular trade in which ‘raw’ agrarian materials such as sugarcane, cotton, and slaves were cultivated and then, in industrialized England, refined into white sugar, shirts, and women of color. (15)

This analysis addresses the colonial economics which permeate the text as well as the acculturation of Olivia. It does not, however, consider the colonial commodities which are present within the text beyond their entry into England as commercial commodities. Through my reading of colonial imports, including the Kashmir scarves and ostrich feathers which adorn the white women of the novel, as well as my readings of Mrs. Merton, Lady Ingot, and Miss Singleton, I demonstrate that the white women in the novel hostile to Olivia’s perceived racial and cultural difference are themselves marked by colonial space and argue that colonial commodities are central to the visual signifiers of white English femininity.

In 1808, when the novel was written, women in England were wearing a neo-classical style of gown which had a “high waistline, diaphanous fabric, and flowing skirt” that came to be known as the ‘Empire’ gown (Johnston 40). For evening, necklines were lower and “usually square” and women routinely bared their arms, sometimes employing “detachable sleeves to go from day to evening wear” (Condra 32). The front of the gown was designed to have a flat, smooth appearance, and the addition of a train in the back, a colorful shawl, and ornamentation such as embroidery or a band of color at the waistline and hems differentiated the gowns and added a level of formality (Condra 32).

The social role of dress is particularly evident in the occasion of a formal social call or visit, which is the event under discussion in the passage beginning “I need not describe my dress” (Woman 112). Although a visit could be informal, it had as many rules as a more
prescribed occasion, such as a ball. “Visits called for luxury,” but what dress was worn depended on many factors, including the formality or informality of the occasion (Perrot 93). The etiquette of a visit was largely determined by the level of intimacy, and the length of acquaintance, of the two parties. Olivia is describing a new acquaintance, in a new neighborhood. In addition to this, the visit involves many neighbors who are new acquaintances and is described by Olivia as an occasion she believes was “prepared on our account” (Woman 112). This all points to the occasion being a visit which required a formal gown.

Olivia demonstrates her understanding of and adherence to these dress practices through her reference to her husband Augustus’ approval, stated explicitly in the letter. With the abandonment of ornamental objects or trimmings like lace from men’s clothing in the nineteenth century, women served as “signs of wealth and ornamental objects,” and “signified the social status and monetary power of their fathers [and] husbands” (Perrot 35). Early fashion histories asserted that men’s clothing in the nineteenth century did not communicate wealth and social power, but in fact the markers for men’s clothing shifted to value “cut and fit before ornament, colour and display” (Wilson 29). This design simplicity still resulted in women’s clothing functioning as an indication of social status. Therefore, Augustus’ approval is not an uninterested or tacit stance, but a significant statement. Dido’s interjection to “be sure tell Mrs. Milbanke that I wore my new diamonds in my hair” is also significant here (Woman 112). First, Dido is communicating and underlining Augustus’ family wealth through Olivia’s accessories. Significantly, the mention of this wealth is carefully attributed to Dido, leaving Olivia free from the appearance of pride. The diamonds are new to Olivia, and a gift of financial worth is particularly of note because their marriage provided Augustus with a significant personal fortune through her dowry. Although Olivia brought wealth into the Merton family, the diamonds are
certainly a gift from the family. This is articulated later in the novel: when Olivia and Augustus’ marriage is broken up by the reappearance of Augustus’ first wife, Olivia collects the jewels she received when she was married stating “the jewels which had been presented to me on my marriage by Mr. Merton, it was my firm resolve to give to Mrs. Augustus Merton” (149). The Mr. Merton in question was Augustus Merton’s father. Finally, the specific mention of diamonds communicates Olivia’s status as a married woman as “only married women were supposed to wear diamonds,” and only in the evening (Perrot 99). Augustus’ approval of Olivia’s appearance is validated by the evidence that Olivia’s dress communicates her new status as a married woman and his status as a man of wealth.

Yet despite the visit’s formality, acknowledged by Olivia in her description when she states that the acquaintances are new, part of the “daily-increasing acquaintance” she passingly mentions while omitting names, as well as the further acknowledgment that the occasion was likely on her behalf, Olivia underlines the simplicity of her own attire (Woman 112). She reminds Mrs. Milbanke “you know I have one plain unornamented attire” (Woman 112). This “unornamented attire” is stated as a known fact and habit of dress for Olivia. Further, it is stated as a deliberate choice. Olivia is purposefully adopting simplicity in her dress, choosing garments which “opposed pretensions, fads, and affectations,” and which establish the value of the garment, and therefore the woman, through an elegance established in opposition to excess (Perrot 129). A simple attire can still be within the bounds of propriety and luxury; in the words of one woman of early nineteenth-century society:

a woman of high birth […] distinguishes herself by the simplicity of her dress, by the modest shawl or coat that covers her; in fact, this woman dressed that way has
a certain aura of gracefulness, a bearing whose significance escape only those of
very ordinary judgement. (Perrot 237)

Olivia’s “unornamented attire” follows this guideline for distinguishing herself (Woman 112).
She distinguishes herself through opposition to others, as her dress “could be contrasted not only
to aristocratic splendor but also to nouveau-riche bluffing” (Perrot 125). This model of simplicity
as distinction is taken up by the novel in its distinction of Olivia from some of the other women
described within the novel.

Lyndon J. Dominique begins the introduction to The Woman of Color: A Tale by stating
“Two of the most unexplored lines of critical inquiry in contemporary studies of British literature
have to be the roles that black heroines play, and the influence they collectively wield, in long
prose fiction written during the long eighteenth century” (11). The Woman of Color was
originally published in 1808, and recently republished; Dominique’s critical study illuminates the
significance of this text within the context of narratives of black women as well as the long
eighteenth-century novel. Credited to an anonymous writer, the text’s awareness of race as well
as the interiority of the novel’s heroine Olivia provide possible evidence that the author was a
woman of color, a specification understood in eighteenth-century Britain as referring to “specific
groups of free people in the Americas…in Haiti, free mixed race and negro North Americans,
and mixed race freedmen and women in Caribbean outposts such as Jamaica” (Woman 21). This
narrow definition for a term as ambiguous as woman or person ‘of color’ demonstrates English
societies strict racial definitions and demarcations.

From the first page of the novel, the heroine and narrator of the text Olivia addresses her
own racial identity as well as the racism of the English planters on the island of Jamaica; an
epistolary novel, the narrative is presented in the form of letters from Olivia on her journey
across the Atlantic and upon arrival in England addressed to Mrs. Milbanke, her former governess and friend. After the death of her father, a planter, Olivia is under the constrictions of his will which stipulate that she marry her unknown cousin, Augustus Merton, in England. While within the context of the plot Olivia’s discussion of race at the opening of the novel is in regards to this will, the subject matter would presumably be very familiar to any friend and instructor of Olivia’s. At one point Olivia’s narration pauses to acknowledge this: “you will ask me why I recapitulate these events? events which are so well known to you” (55). This recital of Olivia’s history is clearly a contrivance of the narrative form, yet it is through the narrative’s repetition of information which would be known to the recipient of the letters Mrs. Milbanke that the narrator Olivia is able to offer her observations and opinions on race in the form of social commentary:

…such is their prejudice, such is the wretched state of degradation to which my unhappy fellow-creatures are sunk in the western hemisphere. We are considered…as an inferior race, but little removed from the brutes, because the Almighty Maker of all created beings has tinged our skins with jet instead of ivory! – I say our for though the jet has been faded to the olive in my own complexion, yet I am not ashamed to acknowledge my affinity with the swarthiest negro that was ever brought from Guineà’s coast! – All, all are brethren, children of one common Parent! (53)

Through this statement at the very opening of the text, Olivia is asserting her racial affinity with slaves in Jamaica; she is not limiting her shared racial heritage to other “women of color,” or to those people who are free or specifically of mixed race. The “wretched state of degradation” that Olivia refers to is an indirect way to refer to slavery, and rather than defining herself separately or in opposition to enslaved persons of African descent, through this passage the potential
division is collapsed. Olivia refers to slaves as “unhappy fellow-creatures,” (53) foregrounding this kinship. Furthermore, through her words Olivia asserting racial equality through her claim that the only difference manifest between people of color and the white English planter is a tinge in skin tone, which came from “the Almighty Maker of all human beings” (53). Through this statement Olivia is claiming equality for blacks under God and consequently under the law. The one distinction the text makes between slaves in the Caribbean and the heroine Olivia is the identification of Olivia’s skin tone, described as olive rather than a “jet” black (53).

This distinction of skin tone is positioned as an afterthought, for although Olivia does clarify her own light skin tone she does so after asserting that the Almighty Being, or God, had “tinged our skins with jet instead of ivory” (53). The clarification that in fact she is not jet in color comes as an afterthought. Throughout the entire passage not only does the character of Olivia present a strong racial affinity, ending with the claim that all blacks are “children of one common Parent,” but she avoids descriptors of slaves which undercut their own humanity (53). Although she describes a “wretched state of degradation,” she specifically describes a state, which could be changed, rather than a descriptor of a permanent characteristic of a people (53). Following the description of “the wretched state of degradation,” the text uses the pronouns “we” and “our,” conjoining Olivia and the enslaved Africans in the Caribbean: “we are considered…as an inferior race” and as referenced above, “though the jet has been faded to the olive in my own complexion, yet I am not ashamed to acknowledge my affinity” (53). Through these passages Olivia and the blacks enslaved in the Caribbean are made a unit, and together the object of the sentences. Furthermore, the words “we” and “our” are placed in italics drawing attention to their significance while undercutting assumptions of racial inferiority (53).
Yet while the text opens with claims for racial equality based on affinity, aside from this mention of skin tone no physical description of Olivia is immediately following. In fact, Olivia’s color is not mentioned again until she arrives in London. What does follow this passage in the text is a description of Olivia’s enslaved mother Marcia, which begins: “the soul of my mother, though shrouded in a sable covering, broke through the gloom of night, and shone celestial in her sparkling eyes!” (54). In describing her own mother, Olivia does what she had avoided when discussing slaves in the abstract or as a group: she equates blackness with inferiority. While previously the narration had asserted that English planters’ attention to skin tone was a result of their prejudice, in discussing her mother, Olivia treats color as an obstacle. Significantly, she also uses the language of a garment in this description: Marcia’s color is a shroud which covers her. Although her description of her mother is ultimately redemptive, it is problematic in its depiction of race as an obstacle to an innate goodness: Marcia’s sparkling eyes are able to overcome the “shroud” of sable which threatens to prevent “the soul” from shining through (53). If Marcia’s color is a shroud, and therefore a garment, the shroud or color could potentially be thrown off. However, it is only through death that Marcia will have an ultimate freedom from her shroud or pigmented skin. Through death Olivia’s mother’s soul was freed from her body.

While the description of Marcia does identify the color of her skin as an obstacle, it is significant that Marcia is not described in terms of her other physical characteristics. The focus of this passage is on her soul, which is described as tangible. Aside from her soul, and her “sparkling eyes,” Marcia is described as being abducted from Africa with “folded hands, and tearful eyes,” and being purchased by Mr. Fairfield. The novel states that “the symmetry and majesty of her form” and “the inflexible haughtiness of her manner” both “attracted the attention of Mr. Fairfield” (54). Jennifer DeVere Brody reads the encounter between Mr. Fairfield and
Marcia for the depiction of Marcia’s body as attracting Mr. Fairfield’s attention, arguing that the language choice places him in the role of the man seduced rather than the male consumer (Brody 23). While Marcia is certainly depicted as catching and holding Mr. Fairfield’s attention, through her “folded hands” Marcia is cast in terms of western concepts of femininity as passive and pious even previous to her conversion to Christianity (Woman 54). She is also described as a woman wearing a corset would be described, well formed with “symmetry and majesty” (54). In an effort to gloss over the slave market or auction where her mother and father met, Olivia diverts the description of Marcia away from the body and onto characteristics. These characteristics include her “untutored ignorance” and “native simplicity”; the description of Marcia does compartmentalize her body but only to highlight a nonsexual body part, her “attentive and docile ear” (54). The descriptions of Marcia, with their focus on her mannerisms and characteristics and the absence of physical descriptions which could be construed as sexual, are very similar to the way the novel describes the protagonist Olivia; the treatment of both Marcia and Olivia marks the novel’s unwillingness to objectify the black female body.

A great part of the novel is absent of any references to Olivia’s color; the next reference is after her arrival in England when she meets her uncle Mr. Merton, her intended husband and cousin Augustus Merton, and his sister-in-law Mrs. George Merton. If Augustus and Olivia do not marry, then she will be under the guardianship of Mr. and Mrs. George Merton, Augustus’ older brother and his wife. Olivia recounts the meeting stating “I believe I held out my hand, and that lady was very near taking it in her; but I fancy its colour disgusted her, for she recoiled a few paces with a blended curtsey and shrug” (71). After an extended silence on the subject of her skin color, the reader is reminded of Olivia’s race through the reaction of Mrs. Merton. This recoiling and visible distaste is particularly noteworthy in comparison to Olivia’s treatment by
Mr. Charles Honeywood and his mother, fellow passengers in her journey across the Atlantic. They become friends while traveling, and Mr. Honeywood greatly admires Olivia. While on the ship Mr. Honeywood’s mother describes the ideal wife for Charles, stating that she should be “a companion of [his] own age, whose pursuits are similar to [his] own, whose mind has been cultivated, and whose principles are good” (63). Significantly, nowhere in this description is there a mention of a racial background. In fact, issues of class hold a greater significance; the ideal wife is described as one whose “mind has been cultivated” meaning she has had access to education, and whose “principles are good” referring to the appropriate wife’s adherence to English and upper class standards of femininity (63). Through this speech Mrs. Honeywood is indirectly indicating that she would accept a woman of color in general, and Olivia specifically, as a daughter in law. The Honeywood’s treatment of Olivia – defined by their acceptance of her as a cherished friend as well as admiration of her virtues – provides a stark contrast to Olivia’s reception in London.

With the introduction of Mrs. Merton, the reader is reminded of Olivia’s racial difference and the potential for discrimination she faces in England; while traveling with the Honeywoods Olivia explained her father’s motivation for the unusual stipulations in his will as manifesting his belief that “in England…a more liberal, a more distinguishing spirit…[and] a connection with his own family” would be the best hope for “the security of Olivia’s happiness” (58). This belief that a more liberal attitude exists in England is met with “a skeptical expression” which “overspread[s] the marked countenance of Mrs. Honeywood” (58). Mrs. Merton’s overt prejudice provides evidence of Mrs. Honeywood’s unexpressed concerns for Olivia. In addition Mrs. Merton fulfills Charles Honeywood’s fear that Olivia will “soon be sickened” with English women’s “superficial characters,” “their frivolous pursuits, their worse than childish
The “superficial character” of English women is detailed through the description of Mrs. Merton (65).

First, Mrs. Merton is thoroughly described based on her appearance; this is something that the novel carefully and consciously omits in descriptions of Marcia and Olivia. Mrs. Milbanke, the governess in Jamaica receiving the letters, is given a thorough description of Mrs. Merton by Olivia, who states:

[She] would be thought pretty by any person who looks for features only. She is very fair, and very fat; her eyes are the lightest blue, her cheeks exhibit a most beautiful (but I am apt to believe not a natural) carmine; her hair is flaxen; her teeth are dazzlingly white; her hand and arm would rival alabaster. Yet with all these concomitants to beauty, she fails to interest or to please your Olivia. (73)

The description begins with skin color, calling Mrs. Merton “very fair” and later in the passage “alabaster,” demonstrating the primary significance of skin tone to a description of a person (73). Yet unlike the previous description of Marcia, comments about appearance are meticulous. The most striking parallel is in the description of the two women’s eyes; Marcia’s eyes are noteworthy because they “[shine] celestial” (53). Olivia describes her mother as someone whose soul was visible through her “sparkling eyes” (54). Mrs. Merton’s eyes are described as “the lightest blue” indicating simultaneously that the narrator Olivia has no problem dissecting Mrs. Merton in terms of appearance as well as the fact that there is nothing visible in her eyes: through the light blue they contain no testament to her faith or goodness (73). By describing her eyes by their color alone Olivia is alluding to this emptiness as well as offering appearance as the sole definition of Mrs. Merton.
Olivia states from the outset that Mrs. Merton “fails to interest or please” her (73). This observation is made prior to the subsequent remarks about her character. One of the reasons for the instant dislike (aside from the abrupt slight made to Olivia personally) is the artifice which is attributed to Mrs. Merton. Following the same trajectory of Marcia’s description, appearance signifies character. Olivia’s mother Marcia’s physical appearance is described in ways that represent the descriptions of character which follow; through her “sparkling eyes” evidence is given of her pure and religious character (54). Mrs. Merton is described as artificial, from her “simpering” and “affected smile” to her “carmine” cheeks the color of which Olivia comments “I am apt to believe not natural” (73). This passage serves as an indication of the artifice of Mrs. Merton’s character, which extends from her physical appearance to her personal characteristics. Yet this passage contains another significant observation, which is the manipulation of appearance performed by Mrs. Merton. Through use of rouge she has given her pale skin the appearance of a deep red color in her cheeks, altering her skin color while presenting a natural appearance. This indicates that appearance and skin color are not static categories as they are discussed within the novel, but changing; descriptors later in the novel continue this implicit discussion of altering appearances.

Mrs. Merton’s clothing supports a reading of her as frivolous. On Olivia’s first morning with the Mertons, Olivia waits for a summons to breakfast which is very late in coming. She finds out that “this inactive lady cannot leave her bed very soon of a morning” (76). When Olivia goes down to breakfast, she finds Mrs. Merton partially dressed “in an elegant morning dishabille,” carelessly dressed and “reclined on an ottoman” (76). While beginning the day in a dressing gown was appropriate, it was important not to be caught in “unbecoming disarray” (Perrot 92). Just as her dress is inappropriate, Mrs. Merton’s actions are seemingly directionless
or purposeless; she is described as walking with a “languid careless step” and “[throwing] herself on a sofa” (*Woman* 73). Although Mrs. Merton is an English woman, and further, she has never left the country of England, the description of her “languid careless step” and sedentary habits recall the contemporary descriptions of creole women in the British West Indies. Edward Long’s *The History of Jamaica* (1774) states that creole women in Jamaica “possess some share of vanity and pride” and are “fond of dress, balls, and company,” however, they “yield too much to the influence of a warm climate in their listless indolence of life” (280). The inactive and reclining Mrs. Merton is represented in the novel with the same vices and mannerisms as the creole women are accused of possessing.

Olivia is positioned as the proper British woman in this scene; Mrs. Merton’s inattentiveness as a host draws Olivia’s attention. The lounging “fashionable fair” Mrs. Merton does not notice the makings for tea right in front of her, until prompted by Mr. George Merton asking if he should assist her (*Woman* 77). Olivia insists on taking over making the morning tea, to which Mrs. Merton responds with a snide remark “the lady is of an active turn I find” (77). Mrs. Merton’s clothing and manner indicate she places herself and her comfort above that of the duty of being a gracious host. Through the deployment of stereotypes believed of creole women in the West Indies, I argue that the novel is revealing the negative characteristics of vanity and “listless indolence” as unconnected to race or place (Long 280). Further, by assuming Mrs. Merton’s role as hostess and mistress, Olivia demonstrates the role of English lady as disconnected from racial identity.

The distraction and inattention of Mrs. Merton is credited within the text to her intent study of “Bell’s Belle Assembly, or Gallery of Fashion” a “monthly periodical publication, where the ladies have coloured specimens of the costume and habits in which they are to array
themselves every month” (76). Also known as “La Belle Assemblée,” John Bell’s publication “strove to retain a suggestion of Gallic sophistication” as “Londoners continued to associate France with fashionability” (Breward 119). Launched in 1806, Bell’s publication was a “mix of fashion, social reportage, domestic advice, and the advertising of luxuries” (119). Mrs. Merton’s attention to her own comfort, and the study of a magazine which advises her clothing design and luxury purchases, offer the appearance of both selfishness and vanity.

While Mrs. Merton acts thoughtlessly in her neglect of her morning appearance and household hosting responsibilities, her attention to fashion is also a responsibility of a wife. The balance between attention to others and attention to oneself and one’s appearance is precise; nineteenth-century British culture mandated that “women had to uphold moral values, but were simultaneously required to illustrate patriarchal wealth through an attention to dress” (Aindow 55). Just as Augustus must approve of Olivia’s gown when they are married, Mrs. Merton relies on George’s approval of her apparel. She is described as “a very fashionable and showy looking young woman” but Mr. George Merton’s sole comment on her appearance is to note her reading of the fashion magazine as “an interesting study” (Woman 77). He continues, “You ladies employ every opportunity in rendering yourselves, if possible, more irresistible then you were formed by nature!” (77) The attention to fashion seems appropriate to Mr. George Merton, as it is Mrs. Merton’s task to be the fashionable counterpart to his “plain” and “remarkably neat” dress (74).

Fashion and vanity were the impetus for Mrs. Merton’s role in the estrangement of Augustus Merton and his first wife, Angelina Forrester. From her childhood, Mrs. George Merton, then Letitia Manby, was well dressed. Her father was a tradesman who made his fortune, and her mother displayed their new riches through clothing; Mrs. Manby is described as
“attired in all the colours of a rainbow” (171). This ostentatious show is exactly what Olivia guards against in her “unornamented style” (112). While items of Mrs. Manby’s dress may have been within the bounds of fashion, its overall excess, which is described as a reaction to her unfashionable address, was the subject of conversation. That her dress was noteworthy to other women highlights the intricate and implicit fashion rules; if both Olivia’s simple dress and Mrs. Manby’s excessive finery deviate from the standard, that standard is demonstrably difficult to meet. Mrs. Manby also extravagantly dressed young Letitia; she “dazzled her infantine eyes with finery, and labored earnestly to decorate her little person in the costliest garb, and in the most becoming manner” (171). When Angelina Forrester, Mrs. Manby’s niece, is orphaned, the Manbys take her in to act as Letitia’s friend and companion. Letitia took “delight in showing her finery” and enjoyed pointing out the discrepancies of their situations made visible in their clothing, saying to Angelina “that gown is well enough for you, I could not be seen in such a one” (173). Letitia associates her finer clothing with her better station, as a wealthy man’s daughter and not an orphaned ward.

Angelina herself is a cipher. She is described as being an “amiable girl” with “all the beauty and softness of her mother; all the intelligence and magnanimity of her father” (172). Other descriptors point to her piety and beauty: she holds onto her faith through the trial of her parents’ deaths and Augustus admires “the chastened smiles, of the unconscious Angelina!” (176) She is “rendered dumb” at his declaration of love, “grateful” at their marriage, and Augustus mourns her “mild and gentle attractions [and] the modest excellencies of her mind” when she is believed dead (179). In none of these scenes of her becoming an orphan, moving in with the Manbys at seventeen, and meeting and marrying Augustus does Angelina have a line of dialogue or a remembered speech. She is as mute throughout the storyline of her young womanhood as she is
on her proposal when she is “rendered dumb” (179). In addition, Angelina is repeatedly described as fair; when Augustus, believing her dead, remembers her to an acquaintance, he refers to her “transparent skin of ivory” (102). When Angelina is moved into Augustus and Olivia’s neighborhood, by Mrs. George Merton who intends Angelina’s reappearance to break up their marriage, the neighbors refer to her as “the fair incognita” (130). When Olivia arranges a meeting of Augustus and Angelina, she notes the “bashful timidity” and “delicacy of her fragile form” (155). Again speechless, the “transparent complexion” of Angelina makes her very corporeal person seem to be in question (155).

Letitia’s actions cannot be defended: jealous of Augustus Merton’s attention to Angelina, he tells her father she wants to marry him. When Augustus and Angelina marry in secret, Letitia finds out and her mother has Augustus’ father send him away. Letitia and her mother do not reveal to Augustus’ father Mr. Merton that Augustus and Angelina have already married, only that they intend to marry. With Augustus away, Mrs. Manby finds Angelina and tells her that her marriage was not legal and Augustus has seduced and abandoned her. Angelina, alone and pregnant, believes she was betrayed. Mrs. Manby convinces Angelina to live in isolation under an assumed name, and promises an allowance. Only Mrs. Manby and Letitia knew of Angelina’s location; Augustus returns to find that the young woman who rented the room after Angelina died of smallpox and believes the smallpox victim was his Angelina. In an act intended as a final insult to Augustus, Letitia agrees to the original wishes of both her father Mr. Manby and Mr. Merton, and marries Augustus’ older brother George Merton. The novel places this series of events as a result of the over-privileged upbringing and unchecked vanity encouraged in the young Letitia and manifest through her clothing. She is used to having the best of everything in her apparel, and Augustus’ interest in Angelina instead of her, despite her superior wardrobe and
(in Mrs. Manby and Letitia’s opinion) her superior beauty, lead to her sabotage of their secret marriage.

The critique of Mrs. Merton’s vanity and poor character is also made through her son. Negligence in dress and activity are believed to be made evident in all areas of a woman’s life and home. Wearing her dressing gown and lazing on the ottoman are examples of ways in which “a lazy young woman…betrays herself in a thousand ways” (Perrot 137). Carelessness in dress is a sign of other deficiencies, including “her deplorable ignorance,” and both are made evident in a child’s education (137). The question of the young George Merton’s social education is explicitly explored when Mrs. Merton’s young son calls Olivia’s Jamaican servant Dido a “nasty black woman” (Woman 78). He rushes to his mother upset that through kissing him Dido has “dirt[ied] his face” with her black skin. Olivia takes his confusion and frustration as an opportunity to educate him about race (78). She tells him that:

The same God that made you made me…the poor black woman – the whole world – and every creature in it! A great part of this world is peopled by creatures with skins as black as Dido and as yellow as mine. God chose it should be so, and we cannot make our skins white anymore then you can make yours black (79).

Although at first glance it is problematic that Olivia chose the language of “creatures” in order to discuss people of non-white racial lineage, including herself and Dido, she is clearly carefully including young George, as well as all people, in the category of creature. Olivia is also relying on the religious argument of equality under God to explain racial difference to the young boy. George Merton is undereducated in religion for his age and class position; Mrs. Merton is initially confused by Olivia’s line of moral questioning and interjects that George “is very backward in his catechism…I am sure I could not pretend to teach it to him” (79). However,
Olivia’s lesson uses the language of Christianity to communicate the simple and moral reasoning that she is another color because “God chose it should be so” (79). By the end of the episode the young boy seems to understand, offering Olivia a kiss and correcting his speech from stating that Dido is “very dirty” to “very black” (80).

George Merton’s recognition of Dido as dirty is related to his belief that appearances can be altered. This idea is manifest in his mother’s ability to alter her appearance with makeup, and craft an identity through clothing. Olivia rejects George’s initial reasoning that Dido is dirty in order to explain the concept of race. Due to the simplicity of her explanation, in which she found it more significant to explain the inherent equality of all people regardless of skin color as well as to assert her affinity and affection for Dido, Olivia does not explain the instability of racial categories. Yet young George Merton appears to innately understand this instability; when he tells his mother that a “nasty black woman” has kissed him Mrs. Merton’s reaction is “pretending to silence the child…while the pleased expression of her countenance could not be misconstrued” (78). Even the young George Merton understands his mother’s reaction, and explains that it was not Olivia, but Dido, someone “much, much dirtier” (78). In his childishness, George Merton understands that there are wide variables in what is classified as black.

Furthermore, George Merton asserts that skin color is changeable. His evidence for this is his knowledge that he *could* make his skin black, “by rubbing himself with coals” (79). Although Mrs. Merton’s use of makeup is not equivalent to a racial identity and George Merton’s painting himself with coal would also not be a presentable and believable presentation of race, both ideas contribute to the novel’s discourse on the impermanence or social construction of race. Through the contrasting figures of Mrs. Merton and other white women in the novel and Olivia, the novel challenges the racialized definition of a proper English lady. This discussion of race as legible on
the skin, and the instability of that legibility, extend the novels commentary on the construction of stable social and cultural categories to the construction of stable racial categories. After Olivia’s explanations, young George Merton certainly does not have all of his confused ideas about race clarified, demonstrated through his hesitance to call Dido black in favor of his previous descriptor dirty, as well as his confusion when Olivia asserts her love for Dido. Yet through his affection for Olivia, George demonstrates that whatever hesitations he has about Dido he does not have the same reservations about her; George expresses affection for the “good natured” Olivia (79).

Through this episode further descriptions of Olivia are offered; the young George Merton clarifies that he is talking about Dido and not Olivia by stating that Olivia’s “lips are red, and [her] face is not so very, very dirty” (78). This is the first time Olivia has been discussed in terms of physical characteristics, and given her aversion to make up in her commentary on Mrs. Merton, the reader can infer that the coloration in Olivia’s lips is natural; the identification of red lips both speaks to the light pigmentation of her skin color overall as well as her fulfillment of standards of beauty. Providing an alteration to her previous self-description, in identifying her skin color to George Merton, Olivia describes herself as “yellow” (79). This descriptor “yellow” is different than descriptions both previous and forthcoming in the novel which assert that Olivia’s skin tone is “olive.”

The skin tone yellow is commonly used in discussions of the figure of the mulatta, a term used in the British West Indies “to designate light-skinned individuals with a part-European and part-African background” (Kriz 198). Although the novel is explicit about Olivia’s background as the daughter of an English planter and an African slave, the terminology used throughout the text is that of a person or ‘woman of color’ rather than the more specific and gendered term
mulatta which is recalled by the use of the descriptor yellow. Perhaps this descriptor is only evidence of the character Olivia’s attention to her audience; in this example she is speaking in terms and examples comprehensible to the young George Merton. Yet having introduced the discourse of the mulatta through the descriptor ‘yellow,’ the prior absence of the term in the text is highlighted. Perhaps the reasoning behind using the term “woman of color” as opposed to “mulatta” is specifically due to the limited cultural and racial significance of the term. Mulatta is only used to refer to biracial women of a specific racial and national background, while the more expansive term ‘woman of color’ allows for the text to connect Olivia to the free blacks in Jamaica and the Caribbean at large.

Olivia’s affinity with other blacks, which is directly stated through the character Olivia’s letters as well as represented in conversations such as the one analyzed above, is the foil to an attempt made by Mrs. Merton to humiliate her; Mrs. Merton directs her servants to bring a plate of boiled rice, a staple of a slave’s diet in the Caribbean, to the breakfast table. Having the plate placed near Olivia, Mrs. Merton explains the unexpected addition to the table by stating “Oh, I thought that Miss Fairfield – I understood that people of your – I thought that you almost lived upon rice…and so I ordered some to be got, – for my own part, I never tasted it in my life, I believe!” (Woman 77). While Mrs. Merton shies away from identifying who she is referring to in her unfinished statement “people of your…,” it is clear to Olivia as well as everyone else at the table that Mrs. Merton is drawing attention to Olivia’s racial background, and attempting to embarrass her by implying Olivia shares a culture as well as a racial lineage with slaves. Olivia understands this attack, writing to Mrs. Milbanke “this was evidently meant to mortify your Olivia; it was blending her with the poor negro slaves of the West Indies! It was meant to show her, that, in Mrs. Merton’s idea, there was no distinction between us – you will believe that I
could not be wounded at being classed with my brethren! (77). Olivia’s response is characteristic in its restatement of her shared racial heritage:

I thank you for studying my palate, but I assure you there is no occasion; I eat just as you do, I believe: and though, in Jamaica, our poor slaves (my brothers and sisters, smiling) are kept upon rice as their chief food, yet they would be glad to exchange it for a little of your nice wheaten bread here. (78)

Dominique, in his analysis of this scene, identifies two different types of acting occurring. Just as Mrs. Merton is masking her slight by pretending to be a considerate host, Olivia is acting as well, “playing the part of the gracious ‘guest’” and “pretend[ing] to take Letitia’s “impertinence…in a literal sense” (28). Even more significantly Dominique reads Olivia’s response as “a threatening revelation” in which Olivia, similarly to Fanny Price in Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park, is recognized as “spiritually and fraternally blended with West Indian slaves” (29). Through this reading, Olivia’s assertion that slaves are her “brethren” and “brothers and sisters” serves to “confl ate her own ‘palate’ with those of the slaves” (29). First Olivia accepts her relationship to slaves despite the fact that it is rudely implied, and then she moves one step further by declaring this a nearly familial relationship. By calling slaves her brethren Olivia is making her connection to the West Indian slaves impossible to ignore; Dominique believes that this makes her next action, the rejection of the rice in favor of the bread on the table, a “loaded gesture” in which she is “challenging not merely Mrs. Merton’s prejudiced inhospitality but also question[ing] the inhospitable practices by which her slave-holding father managed his plantation” (29). By raising the piece of bread Dominique believes Olivia is signaling “both her own and slave’s combined desire for better treatment” (29). Although Olivia previously refused to discuss her father’s practices as a slave owner, throughout the novel she does express a desire to educate the slaves
of Jamaica, particularly in religion; in the opening of the novel she regrets that although her father “treated [slaves] with humanity,” “their minds were suffered to remain in the dormant state in which he found them!” (55) This desire to educate the enslaved people in Jamaica supports a reading of Olivia’s reaction as challenging the treatment of slaves in the Caribbean.

While Dominique’s reading is compelling, there is another component to this scene which is equally as crucial: Olivia is certainly affirming her relationship to the enslaved blacks in the Caribbean, but just as significantly she is asserting her position in English society. By stating that the slaves in Jamaica are her brethren, Olivia is stating her racial and cultural relationship to the Caribbean, however in her retort Olivia tells Mrs. Merton “I eat just as you do, I believe” (77). While claiming a cultural association to the Caribbean, Olivia is simultaneously asserting a similar connection to England. While Dominique seems to read Olivia as stating aloud both “brethren” and “brothers and sisters,” the latter comments position in parentheses marks it as an aside or editorial comment made to Mrs. Milbanke. Her ability to act, which Lyndon directs the reader to, includes feigning confusion as well as her ability to respond to the insults of Mrs. Merton with a polite smile. These performances demonstrate her ability to move in English society; Olivia is acting within the rules for proper feminine behavior in which both outrage and overt insult would be inappropriate. Responding with a smile, Olivia is using the only defenses provided to a woman in this society. In addition, at the opening of this scene Olivia pointedly takes over the serving of tea which Letitia has neglected, demonstrating that she both understands the rules for English femininity, which include service to the home and seeing to the comfort of the family.

It is shortly after this that further physical description is given of Olivia; in a letter to Mrs. Milbanke she writes “You have frequently remarked, that I walk in a manner peculiar to myself.
You have termed it majestic and graceful; I have been fearful that it carried something of a proud expression: but I believe it is very difficult to alter the natural gait, and I am too much above the common size, with regard to height, to walk like the generality of my sex” (83). Olivia frames the discussion of her own appearance within Mrs. Milbanke’s own assertions or descriptions. What Mrs. Milbanke calls “majestic and graceful” Olivia fears looks “proud” (83). Through the juxtaposition of these two opposing descriptions of her gait, the narrator Olivia is able to both describe herself as “majestic and graceful” while demonstrating an appropriate level of modesty (83). She also refers to her walk as natural, stating “it is very difficult to alter the natural gait” (83). It is far more likely that instruction as a child is at least partially responsible for a natural stride which is graceful, but along with being humble, through this passage the narrator Olivia is presenting her mannerisms as unstudied. In terms of physical descriptors, through this passage Olivia relays that she is above average height; in a following comment Olivia describes Mrs. Merton as conversely “any thing but elegant or graceful” (83). Physical descriptions of Olivia are sparse; this passage is characteristic as any information about her physicality, such as her height, is gained only as contextualization of a characteristic such as grace.

Attempting to draw attention to the way in which Olivia walks, Mrs. Merton takes the opportunity while the family is out strolling to ask “did you ever learn to tread the stage?” to which Olivia answers “I am now learning…to tread on the great stage of the world, and, I fear, I shall find it very difficult to play my part as I could wish” (84). The narrator Olivia takes Mrs. Merton’s question, which is intended to make her self-conscious about her posture or bearing and gait, and changes it into a metaphor; she has left Jamaica for England, left the family circle for a circle of family who are still new acquaintances, and is treading the “great stage of the world” (83). Along with enacting the same performance of feigned ignorance which she played
when Mrs. Merton attempted to give her rice in place of bread, Olivia is demonstrating awareness that she is playing a role. The reference to the stage is an opportunity for Olivia to comment on her own performativity; she is acknowledging that she is performing in this situation in which she must engage in a bantering conversation, responding to the malicious comments of Mrs. Merton without accepting her insults or responding in kind. Yet her performance is not limited to her interactions with Mrs. Merton; Olivia is aware that she is performing through the entirety of her experiences in London. In order to join English society Olivia is consciously playing the role of an English woman, while aware of her status as a woman of color and without abandoning her identity as a Jamaican.

Olivia considers herself a Jamaican and a woman of color, while also coming to consider the ways in which she is English or able to navigate Englishness. This consideration is highlighted through conversation with the Ingots, a family in the neighborhood she becomes acquainted with. Lady Ingot complements Olivia by telling her that she “speaks like a perfect English woman” (111). Olivia responds by saying that she considers herself “more than half an English woman,” which indicates that she identifies with the English culture and national identity as communicated through her father (111). Further, the reference to “more than half” indicates her belief that the values of an English woman, such as piety and purity, were taught to her by both her mother and father (111). This makes her Jamaican mother someone who cultivated the ideal values of English womanhood in Olivia’s girlhood. Finally, reference to her parentage and upbringing making her “more than half an English woman” may point to Olivia’s inclusion of her white governess and mother figure Mrs. Milbanke as contributing to her development as an English lady (111). Olivia continues with the statement “it has always been my ardent wish to prove myself worthy of the title! (111) Here Olivia is referring to the title of
an English woman, but also playing with the word title in reference to the Ingot epithet. Olivia states that she strives for the title of an English lady, while suggesting that Lady Ingot was titled an English Lady, deserving or not.

In fact, Lady Ingot and Sir Marmaduke long for the colonial space of India, where they previously resided. Sir Marmaduke misses the power he had in governance there, lamenting “in India we manage matters more concisely; for there, we men in power have the law vested in our hands” (109). Sir Marmaduke resents the due process of the English Parliament. His power as a colonial official and an Englishman in India was greater than his power as an Englishman in England. Lady Ingot, while enjoying the title and privileges of a ‘Lady,’ identifies as an East Indian when it suits her. In a conversation between Olivia and Lady Ingot about posture, Lady Ingot asserts that “there are some who have imitated us East Indians…these degenerate imitators of that luxurious ease, which they have never felt, are the greatest treat to us, who see the distorted barbarism of the likeness!” (111) Lady Ingot is asserting her cultural authority of a territory that she inhabited as a colonizer, and additionally mocking what she sees as a poor English imitation of East Indian airs.

Lady Ingot’s clothing connects her to India. She is described as being “wrapped in a most superb oriental shawl, while a fine lace veil descended almost to the ground” (108). Shawls are unique as an item of clothing, as they are “both cloth and clothing” (Daly 12). An “oriental shawl” is another way to refer to a Kashmir shawl, which were shawls of Indian origin and worn by women in England and France (Laver 155). Wearing Kashmir shawls was not limited to women like Lady Ingot who had spent time in colonial India. Rather, Kashmir shawls were a widespread fashion trend, and acquired through the importation of the shawls or as gifts: “it was
considered a mark of a fashionable woman to be able to wear a shawl with grace, and it formed an essential part of every woman’s wardrobe” (Laver 155).

To “wear a shawl with grace” in England and France meant following very specific style guidelines: “shawls were folded down the middle or along the diagonal and draped on the neck or worn off the shoulders around the arms” (Perrot 111). The goal in the specificity of the draping of the shawl was so that the material would display a symmetrical design (Perrot 111). Images were published which illustrated the draping of the shawl when worn around the arms. The shawl was prominently and symmetrically displayed; worn off the shoulder, the shawl is not an item of clothing with utility, but rather functions as an accessory and a luxury.

While Lady Ingot asserts authority over the languid posture or reclining figure imagined in East India as a way to impress on Olivia her affiliation with India, the shawls are a more complex marker of identification. Kashmir shawls were expensive, in part due to the lengthy weaving process required for their production. A patterned shawl, what Lady Ingot is described as wearing, was still rare outside of India in 1808 despite European interest. This was largely because the shawls “could take up to eighteen months to make” (Daly 27). The twill tapestry weaving methods used by Indian artisans required individually pieced sections, and artisans wove in colored yarn separately when the design required contrasting colors (Gordon 178). This gives the underside of the Kashmir scarf a slight ridge on the underside where the colors interlock, but the purpose of twill tapestry weaving is that the shawl displays the same pattern on both sides (Gordon 178). Lady Ingot’s Kashmir shawl is an import made of an Indian textile through an artisan weaving process. As a marker of identification, it is also an increasingly common part of an Englishwoman's wardrobe popular enough to have style rules. Through inclusion in Englishwomen’s wardrobes, this Indian luxury item has transformed into a marker
of an English lady. Rather than asserting Lady Ingot's connection to India, the shawl marks Lady Ingot as a woman of fashion and wealth.

Lady Ingot’s shawl is a genuine Kashmir shawl, as at the time of the novel there were no imitation shawls in production. Around 1820, both England and France “began to produce imitation Cashmere shawls” (Laver 155). Kashmir shawls, both patterned and solid colored, were very expensive, and their value made them a piece of apparel only available to the upper-class (Daly 17). They were a recognizable luxury item. The imitation shawl produced in Europe were very popular among a wider population, and as the shawls began to be produced in Europe, their significance for European women was altered.

The European manufactured cashmere shawls were made of “a combination of wool and silk” and produced on looms in a process far less labor-intensive then the Indian artisan weaving (Gordon 178). The difference in name between Kashmir shawls and cashmere shawls is significant; the imported Kashmir denotes a geographical location. Kashmir is “a place of manufacture and not a fabric” (Daly 23). The location of production is more important than the method or textile, as the place stood in for and indicated both the method, a “twill-tapestry method known as kanikar” and not the machine manufacturing of the cashmere imitations, and the textile (24). Cashmere shawls were made “first using drawlooms,” and then on powerlooms (Gordon 178). “Imitation cashmere shawls were produced in Norwich, Paisley, and Edinburgh” primarily, and the name shifted for these shawls as well as “the design element most closely associated with Kashmir shawls came to be known as ‘Paisley’” (Ribeiro 125). By the mid nineteenth century, the ability to distinguish between an imported shawl and an imitation became a skill for the discerning eye (Daly 28). Kashmir shawls were an expensive import, and cashmere or Paisley shawls were affordable; this made the Kashmir shawls themselves less desirable.
The interest in Kashmir shawls was part of a greater “fascination with Indian culture in Britain,” which “was expressed partly by an enthusiasm to consume new ‘exotic’ luxuries such as the shawl” (Morgan 460). Within novels, Kashmir shawls “function at once as a marker of respectable English womanhood and as magical and mysterious ‘Oriental’ garments” (Daly 13). Lady Ingot’s title and wealth give her access to English womanhood, but she attempts to assert her connection to Indian culture through the shawl. However, since the Kashmir shawl became a fashionable item for English women, Lady Ingot uses her son to signify her cultural connection to India. Olivia describes the 15 year old Mr. Ingot as being “wrapped in a shawl, and his delicate fingers were warmed in a muff of the finest ermine, almost as large as himself (for he is very effeminate and diminutive in his person)” (Woman 108).

The young Mr. Ingot is dressing against the English dress code, which limited Kashmir shawls to women. In India, Kashmir shawls were “a prestige garment for male royalty” (Gordon 177). Lady Ingot’s own adornment in a Kashmir shawl serves as a marker of English womanhood and wealth, and so it is through her son, Mr. Ingot, that she attempts to display Indian culture. Lady Ingot’s intention is to use the Indian commodity of the Kasmir shawl to “create the illusion of absolute possession,” both of Indian culture and of the colonial territory (Daly 3). Olivia sees Mr. Ingot as diminished through his attire. She believes that Mr. Ingot would be handsome, “if he were not made so mere a monkey of, and dressed in such a non-descript manner” (Woman 109). Rather than recognizing Mr. Ingot as culturally East Indian, Olivia pities him as being non-descript or indeterminate in gender and culture. In fact, she refers to the Ingots themselves as a “new species of animal” (122).

This is not the sole place in the novel that Olivia uses the discourse of an animal to discuss the people around her; this narrative strategy displaces the more common
dehumanization of a black woman like Olivia. Narrating the ball, Olivia acknowledges that she was an object of attention; Olivia first credits this to the wealth of the Merton’s, which, “in such as place as this,” serves to “make them generally known” (84). She quickly concedes that “My colour, you know, renders me remarkable,” and that the attention paid to the Merton’s is potentially attention that can be directly attributed to her appearance (84). This appearance is both her first venture into a London ball, as well as her striking physical appearance as tall, graceful, and of mixed race. Yet the attention quickly turns to the gawking of an exhibition.

Olivia reports that “the men – also believe me – they walked up in pairs, hanging one on another’s arm, and, with a stare of effrontery, eyed your Olivia, as if they had been admitted purposely to see the untamed savage at a shilling a piece!” and “I heard one of these animals say to another – “Come, let’s have a look at Gusty’s black princess!”” (85). This reference to the “untamed savage” or “black princess” can be read as a reference to Sara Bartman, a Khosian woman who was displayed in London, or a similar exhibition. Within this discourse, which would normalize the treatment of Olivia as a show piece, black women are treated as exotic commodities. Similarly to Bartman, and other women on display, the treatment of Olivia is not within what Abrahams refers to as “conventional norms of decency” which have become “inapplicable to women of color” as a result of the ‘savage’ freak shows (Abrahams 227). Yet Olivia is not without retort, as in her narration she refers to the men in the ballroom as “animals” (Woman 85).

While Olivia is unable to prevent the men at the ball from inappropriate comments or inappropriate gazes, she is able to turn their discourse of objectification onto them. While the men at the ball are overtly (and the women like Mrs. Merton covertly) endeavoring to objectify her, Olivia through her writing objectifies them: she is using the discourse of the ‘savage’ on the
colonizer. Most noteworthy is Olivia’s description of Miss Singleton, an acquaintance made at the ball, in which Olivia states:

Feathers of the ostrich were mounted in several directions from her head, while her bared ears, and elbows, and back, and bosom, gave to her whole contour, so freezing and so forlorn an appearance, while her volatility, and frisky and girlish airs, made her a person so conspicuous, that I could not help surveying her with the utmost curiosity, as a species of animal which had never before fallen under my notice. (87)

Olivia is describing the English woman Miss Singleton in the same manner in which an exhibition would be described; she is drawing attention to the exotic or unusual in order to transform the British subject into the position of the colonized or ‘other.’ In this case she begins by describing Miss Singleton’s apparel, which consists of feathers mounted in her hair. Ostrich feathers themselves are a colonial commodity. They were an expensive and elite luxury item used to adorn clothing, and the nineteenth century saw women wearing ostrich feathers in their hair, and then on hats. However, procuring ostrich feathers was difficult, and it is this scarcity that increased their value; “during the first half of the nineteenth century, ostrich feathers could only be obtained through hunting the wild North African bird” (Boum 13). This ostrich hunting in colonial North Africa connects white English women’s finery to violence in the colonial space.

Olivia also sexualizes the white body of Miss Singleton by describing an absence of clothing. She remarks that Miss Singleton’s dress exposed her “back, and bosom” as well as non-sexual parts of the body including her “bared ears, and elbows” (87). Olivia is drawing attention to the immodesty which was more commonly inscribed onto the black female body. Finally,
Olivia classifies Miss Singleton as a foreign “species of an animal,” stating that this species “had never before fallen under [her] notice” and similarly describes Miss Singleton’s young date as animalistic, as “a boy, who aped the man” (87).

The most significant observation Olivia makes about Miss Singleton is her skin tone; Olivia describes Miss Singleton to Mrs. Milbanke as having a “natural complexion [which] is not far removed from your Olivia’s, and [consequently] I thought a white satin was a bad choice for a robe” (87). Describing her as “weather-beaten,” Olivia, who is deemed black by the English society in the ballroom, and Miss Singleton who is considered white, are described as having very nearly the same skin tone. At the ball they are each wearing dresses in the color which indicate their racial identities: Miss Singleton is in white satin and Olivia, still in mourning for her father, wears “a black sarsnet, made in the mode” (84). A sarsnet is a “plain weave, strong, piece-dyed, British cotton fabric finished with a high luster” (Johnson 530). It’s a textile that would be used as a lining; an edition of La Belle Assemblée describes a mourning dress of a satin over a “round dress of black twilled sarsnet” (La Belle 247). The importance of this episode moves beyond Olivia’s reversal of the objectification of society; she is also enacting the same careful attention to the body in its elements (ears, elbow, back, bosom) on Miss Singleton which the text resists in regards to Olivia. Finally, the recognition of the shared olive skin tone of Miss Singleton and Olivia, a color which is deemed a tan or signs of a “weather beaten” complexion in Miss Singleton yet determined to be a sign of race which permanently demarcates Olivia demonstrates the instability of the categories of race.

Through the narratives attention to skin color and dress, the novel argues for both the instability of race as well as the social construction of racial categories. The narrative’s attention to race through skin colors is not intended to highlight these categories; rather, the narrative
demonstrates the vanity and exoticism present in the dress of the white women in the novel. Attention to skin color through the novel serves to highlight the variability in pigmentation, as well as the incongruity between color and race. Finally, the heroine Olivia resists dominant cultural discussions of race, and educates those around her such as young George Merton; this emphasis on education foreshadows the novel’s end in which Olivia returns to Jamaica to serve as an educator.

Olivia is depicted as a proper English woman, and the attributes of an “English” lady are disconnected from racial identity within the novel. Her dress and demeanor style her as English, regardless of pigmentation or parentage. The British West Indies and British controlled India are colonial spaces, and “the eroticization of women […] was an integral part of colonialism (Porter 5). Yet the novel rejects this understanding, and turns the objectification or eroticism read on black bodies onto Mrs. Merton, Miss Singleton, and Lady Ingot. By turning the exoticism, or “projection of Western fantasies,” onto the white body, the novel demonstrates the impact of colonialism on the white body (Porter 6). The commodities of colonialism incorporated into dress have altered the visual signifiers of English femininity, making the fashioning of an English lady altered by colonial conflict and desire.
Chapter Four:
The Dress and Colonialism in Contemporary Art:
Staging Bodies and Material Ties

Yinka Shonibare’s 2006 work “How to Blow Up Two Heads at Once (Gentlemen)” depicts two male figures posed in a duel. The sculpture consists of two life-sized, headless mannequins. The left hand of each figure is placed on the left hip, and the mannequin’s right arm is outstretched with a gun clasped in hand and pointed directly at the opposing figure’s absent head. In an overview of Shonibare’s work and its common elements, performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider describes his sculptural work of this style as figures “posed midaction to reference Victorian leisure activities such as bike riding, ice skating, game playing, duel fighting, or game hunting” (159). “How to Blow Up Two Heads at Once (Gentlemen)” is described by Schneider as “two headless ‘Victorians,’ confidently poised in an eternal duel, aiming forever at the heads they don’t seem to realize they have already lost” (159).

The leisure activity of the duel is recontextualized in the companion sculpture “How to Blow Up Two Heads at Once (Ladies),” in which the figures hold the same pose, but rather than men it is women holding a dueling stance and aiming a weapon at an opponent’s absent head. Through its use of female gendered dueling figures, the sculpture is offering an argument for the centrality of women to normalized violence within Victorian culture. Shonibare’s tableau of dueling partners is jarring when seen enacted by female bodies, because it subverts the cultural script of the duel. In this script, women are objects of the duel and not participating subjects. By placing the guns in the hands of women, Shonibare makes them actors in the duel. “Ladies” also challenges the viewer’s familiarity or comfortability with the dueling figures of “Gentlemen.” If
The visual of female figures standing in a dueling stance causes the viewer to pause, then the viewer’s complicity with the cultural practice of duels is also brought into question.

This conclusion builds on my focused analysis of the colonial dress and looks out from the dissertation by offering a mode of reading that highlights the benefits of similarly focused analyses on the constituent elements of contemporary art and fashion. The elements of form and material offer trenchant commentary on the cultural legacies of colonialism. The mediums of artistic production examined include the sculptural work of Yinka Shonibare, the fashion designs of Manish Arora, and the beadwork of Jamie Okuma. I argue that these three artists are each using the materials of their work as an analytic for a critique of colonialism. The significance of the materiality of the artistic product means the pieces signify at the layer of the material as well as the visual. The materials themselves are the means through which artists challenge imperialist versions (and visions) of their cultures, and traditional cultural productions.

Yinka Shonibare’s sculptures, the figures of “Gentlemen” and “Ladies,” are gendered through their clothing; they are also displaced in time through their garments. The “Gentlemen” wear breeches, waistcoats, and cravats, and the “Ladies” wear gowns seemingly constructed of Victorian era bodices and skirts with bustles. One dress has flounces, or large ruffles, gathered down the back, while the other is draped in the polonaise style. Yet the material seems at odds with the style of garments; the most distinguishing element of the sculptures clothing, and a common element in Shonibare’s sculptural work, is the use of the distinctive Dutch Wax fabric to construct the Victorian era garments. The textile of Dutch Wax and its complicated colonial history are used by the artist as an analytic which comments on the structures of colonialism.
Yinka Shonibare began exploring themes of colonialism and national identity, and began using Dutch Wax in his work, after a conversation with a tutor at art school. Shonibare’s personal history and artistic training, specifically this conversation with his tutor, are frequently reported in reviews and profiles of this work. These reviews report Shonibare’s search for subjects and artistic materials which signaled identity (Mills 35).

Profiles of Shonibare typically begin by stating that he was born in London to Nigerian parents, and raised in Nigeria from the ages of three to 16 before returning to England for school (35). In one interview Shonibare recounts how while studying art in university his tutor asked him why he didn’t focus on an ‘African’ theme (35). Shonibare continues by stating that this inquiry “made me question why, as a person of African origin, I should be expected to create ‘African’ art” (35). In his words: “I began to think about stereotypes, and broader questions of authenticity and identity” (35). In another interview, Shonibare reports that his tutor responded to a piece critiquing the Soviet Union by telling him that “his work ‘didn’t reflect himself very much’” which Shonibare questioned (Hynes 60). He reports thinking “I am a citizen of the world, I watch television, so I make work about these things” (60). In a third version of this pivotal conversation, recounted by Shonibare during a talk given at the University of London, the tutor responded to his work by stating “It’s not really you, is it?” to which Shonibare recalls thinking “OK, you want ethnic, I’ll give you ethnic” (Shonibare). Since his 1994 exhibit Double Dutch, Shonibare’s art production responds to all three of these impulses: the desire to perform something recognizably ethnic (and complicate the qualification of ‘ethnic’), the impulse to demonstrate a world citizenship, and the consideration of questions of authenticity and identity.

In a discovery that he sometimes describes as happenstance, Shonibare was exploring London’s Brixton Market while considering what a “signifier of ‘authentic’ African-ness would
look like” (Mills 35). There he was attracted to the brightly colored wax-print fabrics known as Dutch Wax, a material with a complex design and production history intricately connected to the systems of colonial trade and circulation. This material became the basis for the work *Double Dutch*, and a key material for Shonibare’s future artistic production. Dutch Wax was developed through the Dutch adoption of Indonesian production techniques for batik textiles (Cheddie 351). The intention was to produce a textile which would sell in competition with similar locally produced fabrics in Indonesia. The production in Holland was mechanized: while the original production of the batiks used wax-resist dying methods, in which wax on cloth allowed an artisan to dye and therefore color a cloth selectively, the Dutch manufacturing method involved resin printed on the cloth at high temperatures. The result was a faster and lower cost production process, but the resulting Dutch Wax materials produced in Holland were “not popular in Indonesia, owing to their inferior quality (351). The mark of inferior quality was the veining or imperfections in the print design, due to the imprecision of the mechanized process and its use of resin as opposed to the traditional artisan process using wax.

However, these materials did find a market in another location: colonial West Africa, where the fabrics were appealing as a textile which was “both exotic and modern without being European” (Picton 68). Even though the production was European, the patterned textile had an aesthetic distinct from those prevalent in Europe. In addition, the consumption of the material in the West Africa impacted the design of the materials themselves: “local sensibilities began to creep in, most obviously in the visualization of proverbs” (68). There is another theory of the materials distribution in colonial West Africa, which theorizes that “West African indentured soldiers who fought for the Dutch in Indonesia returned home with the fabrics as gifts (Lowe 249). This possibility places indentured West Africans as drivers of culture, and the Dutch
mechanization and distribution of the material as a response to the interest in the fabrics. In either scenario, the West African market welcomed the materials, and influenced their design.

Shonibare describes meeting the merchants in Brixton Market while considering symbols and signifiers of Africanness and being attracted to Dutch Wax fabric because of its complex colonial history. The appropriation of design and alteration in production methods crosses continents, making textiles that, as Shonibare describes, “have a mixed identity” (Mills 35). He continues:

[Dutch Wax textiles] create a misleading perception, and form an essential part of my work’s meaning. The fabrics are not really authentically African, and it’s the fallacy of that signification that I like. In a way that is the way I view culture – it’s an artificial construct, a ‘fabrication.’ (35)

The specificity of the textile Dutch Wax is increasingly central to Shonibare’s artistic production: In his early work Shonibare employed wax-print materials as well as a cheaper version “without distinguishing between cloths produced in European, African, and Asian factories” (Picton 68). That cheaper version, the fancy-print, was a version of Dutch Wax fabric printed only on one side and developed as a less expensive alternative for the established West African market in the late nineteenth century (Picton).

The mass produced Dutch Wax remained prevalent despite the introduction of the fancy print, and is still present in contemporary African aesthetics. Dutch Wax was particularly popular in the mid-1960’s, when numerous African nations were fighting for independence from European colonizing nations. Since the patterns of Dutch Wax were identified as an African aesthetic distinct from European designs, Dutch Wax textiles were worn as “signifiers of independent African identity” (Holmes 118). This fashion statement spread to the colonizing
nations as well, where Dutch Wax was “often worn to indicate black pride in Brixton or Brooklyn” (Hynes 60). The complicated history of Dutch Wax fabric, and its presence and significance in colonial and postcolonial African nations as well as global black culture, enables Shonibare to signify Africaness while questioning the ability of any material to stand for a national or cultural identity. Shonibare’s belief that he is a citizen of the world is present in his work, which draws the viewer into the complexity of colonial relationships. Dutch Wax has an identity intricately connected to colonial logics. The textile highlights “the entangled relationship between Africa and Europe, and specifically how the two continents have invented each other, in ways currently overlooked or deeply buried” (Hynes 60).

Shonibare’s work also highlights the embodied nature of clothing, through his use of full sized mannequins in works like “How to Blow Up Two Heads at Once (Gentlemen)” and “How to Blow Up Two Heads at Once (Ladies).” By presenting the clothing on a body, Shonibare is highlighting the ways that “the social meaning of the body is constructed within a system of visual signification,” in this case, through both the textile and the dress construction (Cheddie 350). The female figure’s shape is not the primary method of identifying them as female; the clothing serves to gender the figures. Yet the significations of the garments are incongruous; for the sculpture “(Ladies)” the cut of the garment communicates the identity of a “Victorian bourgeois woman” while the Dutch Wax printed materials signal an ethnic identity (350). Further complicating reading the meaning of the body, Shonibare’s sculptures are of headless bodies. This has been read as “depersonalizing,” as the figures “become similar to dressmakers’ dummies” (Hynes 60).

The Dutch Wax material, and its colonial history, suggest colonialism to the viewer of the sculpture. The tactile textile itself is a colonial commodity, and Dutch Wax also points to a
history of colonial commodity production. Through the use of the female figures of the sculpture “(Ladies),” the ways in which colonial forces entered Victorian homes is illustrated. The body of the white female figure, raced by her class and location, is not untouched by violence. By making a pair of duel ing female figures, woman are implicated as actors in the violence of the duel; through the Dutch Wax fabric, that violence is figured as colonial. This combination of gendered and colonizing signifiers makes the figure of “Ladies” an analytic which rejects the silence of female voices in the colonial archive, and their reading as peripheral figures in colonial violence.

Yinka Shonibare has gained acclaim for his use of the distinctive Dutch Wax fabric. Other contemporary artists and designers are similarly combining elements of local production or design with modern processes to make art and fashion that comments on the tension between the local or traditional and the colonial or global and modern. An issue of the journal Design Issues considers how contemporary global trade can ‘deterritorialize’ cultures, distancing cultural practices from their origins, but also potentially creating “more entrepreneurial opportunities for producers of art and culture” unlimited by geography (Fiss 3). I will continue with an examination of two artists who carry their cultural practices into work which reaches a global audience, and who take different approaches to both preserving and commenting on the colonial histories which shaped artistic production.

The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts held a fashion exhibit, entitled “#techstyle,” which displayed a piece from the Spring/Summer 2013 collection of Manish Arora’s label, “Indian by Manish Arora.” He is known for “combining traditional Indian crafts like embroidery, applique and beading with Western silhouettes” (MFA). An Indian designer, Arora’s designs have been worn by celebrities including Lady Gaga, M.I.A., and Rhianna. The
entire Spring/Summer 2013 Ready-to-wear collection was designed in pastel tones, a staple in Arora’s work as well as in traditional Indian clothing, and much of the material in the designs were made using modern technological processes. The foundation textile of this bodice, “look #33” from the collection, is leather, and it was crafted through laser-cutting which created the scale-like layers. The bodice is not a garment usually found in traditional Indian clothing, nor is leather a common textile for women’s apparel in Indian design (as Hindu’s revere the cow as a sacred animal). But through the distinctive use of color, applique, and accessories, an Indian influence is made visible.

Describing the Spring/Summer 2013 collection, British Vogue recognized Arora as a designer who has “always celebrated his country’s sartorial traditions” (Macalister-Smith). Interestingly, Vogue, which is published in the United States, was less enthusiastic about the collection as a whole, and believed that it needed further editing – fashion word for extraneous excess (Furniss). This difference communicates differing aesthetics between the original publication and its British counterpart. What British Vogue read as celebratory, Vogue read as over accessorized, demonstrating the US publications lack of investment in preserving the color and embellishment techniques of Indian culture.

In their praise, British Vogue specifically references Arora’s use of updated Zardozi embellishments on many garments, including look #33, the bodice. Zardozi, a Persian word for gold sewing, is an embroidery method similar to applique done with pure gold and silver wire and precious stones. Arora comments on his commitment to traditional artisan practices in an interview, stating:

I don’t think the craft aspect should have ever been forgotten. It’s time to go back to that, because fashion is always connected to manual work, previously at least.
That’s what couture is all about. Today, that is giving an opportunity to people with those skills who don’t really have those jobs anymore – it’s something I always make sure to do. (Pfeiffer)

While Arora integrates traditional techniques, he uses enameled jewels in pastel colors rather than precious stones, updating an art form that might otherwise be lost or relegated to ‘costume.’ The enamel jewels also make traditional embellishments affordable for modern audiences.

Arora’s use of traditional methods, associated with artisans, in the field of Ready-to-wear fashion, associated with design and production, attempts to collapse the binary between costumes and fashion. The use of the term fashion itself is significant, as “the term ‘fashion’ is rarely used in reference to non-Western cultures” (Craik 18). In fact, the two are defined in opposition to each other: “Western dress is fashion because it changes regularly, is superficial and mundane, and projects individual identity; non-Western dress is costume because it is unchanging, encodes deep meanings, and projects group identity and membership” (Rovine 17). Arora’s work attempts to encode meaning through the use of recognizably Indian techniques while participating in the rapidly changing field of fashion. Through this effort he refuses to lose the traditional artisan techniques necessary in the creation of traditional national costumes, but instead he designs with traditional styles and modern materials, which bring those styles into circulation.

Similar to Arora, Native artist Jamie Okuma uses modern apparel and traditional methods as materials for her art. Okuma designs Ready-to-wear fashion as well as art pieces which can be seen in museums including the Smithsonian’s Museum of the American Indian. Okuma, a member of the Shoshone-Bannock tribes, learned how to design garments and bead as a way to participate in tribal traditions; she states that “what started as a necessity for being able to dance
at pow-wows as a child turned into a career in art (Moulaison). Her piece “Adaptations II” is listed on her website under the headline “Mocc’s for the 21st Century” (jokuma.com).

“Adaptations II” is a pair of Christian Louboutin heels beaded in the tradition of the Plateau region, a region which encompasses several tribes in the northwest United States and southwest Canada. The shoes are not intended for wear, but to challenge the perceptions of native crafts as primitive. Native art forms such as moccasins are typically appreciated for their use rather than acknowledged for their value as art. While the shoes could be worn, Okuma is elevating a designer good into art through the use of a native art form, and therefore highlighting the intrinsic artistic worth of native beading.

While for Arora, the method is preserved and the materials are modernized, Okuma creates each element of a piece with traditional materials. Buckskin comes from her grandmother’s reservation Fort Hall in Idaho, and the beads she uses are antique and found at the Shoshone reservation (Moulaison). She conducts research through examinations of historical photographs, but beading motifs and designs are updated to reflect modern native concerns (Moulaison). The use of historically accurate materials and methods to craft modern designs allows Okuma to tell stories of being a Native woman in the twenty-first century while preserving the traditional artisanship of her tribe.

In her most direct commentary on colonialism, Okuma created this ring in collaboration with metalsmith Keri Atumba. Okuma beaded the 1616 engraving of Pocahontas by Simon van de Passe onto buckskin, which was then crafted into a ring embedded with pearls by Atumba. My dissertation project began with Pocahontas, and the ways in which her body was presented as both native and non-native: She was a Princess and a Christian, Christened and renamed Rebecca to highlight her English acculturation, yet throughout England publicized and presented as
Pocahontas to underline her position as an exotic Other. The van de Passe engraving was followed by a long history of imagery that significantly diverged, and depicted Pocahontas as a native, in buckskin clothing, rather than wearing a dress with a high collar and a hat as portrayed in the only contemporary image of her which exists. Clothing was used to craft Pocahontas into an English woman, and later images of her clothing depicted and underlined her nativeness.

The ring, crafted in 2014 and titled Adornment: Iconic Perceptions, is in the permanent collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Jill Ahlberg Yhe, the museum’s Assistant Curator of Native American Art, describes Pocahontas by saying that “she has captured the imagination for all people, for native people, for non-native people. She is probably the most recognizable native person in history” (MIA). The artist’s own motivation for this project was to communicate “their own relationship to being native” (MIA). The ring plays with being a public imagined figure, as well as having a personal relationship to culture, through the hidden second portrait of Pocahontas on the inside of the ring. While the portrait on the face of the ring is based on the van de Passe engraving, the inside of the ring is a recreation of the Sedgeford Hall Portrait from the 1750’s. This second portrait imagined a less stately Pocahontas, and depicted her with her young son. The artists placed this more intimate depiction of motherhood on the back of the ring because “it is connected to the wearer, and not available for all audiences to see” (MIA).

Okuma’s colonial portraiture, crafted into the front of the large and gaudy ring, plays on the colonial framing of Pocahontas. Okuma uses buckskin and beads, sourced at Northwest Native American reservations, to recreate the portrait. This use of Native materials and a Native artisan practice to recreate the van de Passe engraving displaces the centrality of the European perspective. Okuma and Ataumbi also play on the colonial positioning of Pocahontas, placing her as the ‘jewel’ of the ring. Made of buckskin and beads, the portrait of a native woman made
over as a European is surrounded by the incongruous and excessive gold and pearls; she is a resource, ‘mined’ from the North American continent to be polished and displayed. The second and hidden portrait is made of the same materials, but due to its hidden location it does not have the decorative framing. This Pocahontas is not on display, despite the fact that the painting the beaded portrait copies is itself on display. This tension between the display of the portrait and the hidden nature of the beaded portrait mimic the tension of imagining a private moment and a private life for a very public and highly mythologized figure. In addition, through this ring Okuma’s use of traditional Native art materials and practices highlights the place of native material and artisan practices in colonial exchange.

These artists and designers highlight how contemporary art production can be used to refute imperial readings of native and colonized artistic cultures. By deploying the materials and methods of traditional artisans, these artists challenge histories of colonialism which continue to hold power. International development scholar James Ferguson argues that contemporary culture is in a “colonial present,” in which developing nations, specifically on the continent of Africa, remain in the “old colonial role of provider of raw materials” (8). This vantage obscures a vibrant material and artistic production. The curation of museums also suffers from a colonizing lens. In the United States, most collections of Native American art are dominated by historical pieces despite the vibrant community of contemporary Native American artists (Regan). By using materials and methods with cultural significance to create contemporary art, these artists all demonstrate the vibrancy and potential for modernity in artisan practices.

Each artist uses their materials as an analytic for their critique: Shonibare uses Dutch Wax fabric to communicate the complex interplay of relationships between the bourgeois Victorian, the Indonesian craftsman, and the African consumer. Manish Arora uses updated
materials and silhouettes, evident in the leather bodice, and updated methods, such as laser-cutting, to preserve practices of embroidery and applique. As the first Indian designer to show in Paris, Arora’s use of modern materials, like the enameled jewels, bring the traditional Indian use of color onto the stage of the fashion world globally. Finally, Okuma uses traditional techniques and materials, painstakingly sourcing materials on reservations, to make work which celebrates Native life both past and present. By applying the techniques of moccasin design onto designer heels, Okumba is challenging the view of Native apparel as primitive, as well as the designer shoe’s status as beauty. A common thread through these divergent artistic practices is the use of material and form to communicate a different vision of native or traditional practice. These artistic designs are not careful historical recreations, but material and visual evidence of the evolution of artistic and cultural production in colonialized spaces.
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