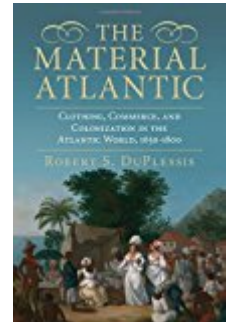


Robert S. DuPlessis. *The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 367 pp. \$29.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-10591-1.



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Between the mid-seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries, ways of dressing and the distribution of fabrics in the Atlantic world underwent significant shifts. Early modern globalization, the transatlantic slave trade, and colonization all contributed to the creation of new dress cultures in response to the increasing uniformity of textile availability throughout the Atlantic basin. Some of these sartorial changes occurred through settler adaptations to new climatic conditions, as colonists in the tropics adopted lighter fabrics while staying close to European dress norms. Others occurred as Europeans sought to “redress” indigenous Amerindians and Africans, whose lack of sartorial bodily coverage was taken as a sign of incivility. Still others took place under duress, as slaves were dressed in bondage and also often managed to acquire clothes of their own choosing, forming syncretic fashions that contrasted with their purely functional work attire. Robert DuPlessis’s *The Material Atlantic* examines these and related sartorial innovations in a synthetic, transatlantic perspective that highlights how ex-

panding commercial networks in the early modern period promoted greater textile uniformity even as wardrobe compositions and dress cultures varied widely throughout the Atlantic world. Drawing on a blend of archival and textual sources (including paintings, travelogues, probate records, and, fascinatingly, newspaper descriptions of runaway slaves), DuPlessis argues that the early modern Atlantic accommodated both greater uniformity in fabric types and remarkable diversification of sartorial modes and inventions, which he calls “dress regimes.”

The book’s chapters examine multiple locations around the Atlantic basin, featuring British and French colonial North America (Montreal, Philadelphia, South Carolina, New Orleans), Caribbean slave societies (Jamaica, Saint-Domingue), South American imperial hubs (Bahia, Buenos Aires), and African coastal regions (Cape Town, the Gold Coast, and West-Central Africa). DuPlessis also returns to metropolitan Europe from time to time, pointing out how shifts in imperial politics and dress cultures at home affected com-

mercial networks throughout the Atlantic world and the ways in which people responded to the changing availability of certain fabrics. The bulk of his analyses, however, remains focused on early modern colonial sites in the New World and Africa. The book's first two chapters deal with extant dress regimes at the beginning of the period under examination and with the distribution of woven-fiber fabrics throughout the Atlantic region. Chapter 1 offers a comprehensive overview of the sartorial cultures at play throughout the early modern Atlantic as colonial projects and commercial networks were beginning to expand. DuPlessis moves here from western Europe and its sartorial cultures of bodily coverage to colonial regions whose indigenous inhabitants were often taken by Europeans to revel in nakedness but who, in reality, actually had access to and wore woven-fiber cloth (as in Atlantic Africa, for instance) or conceived of bodily modifications like tattoos as integral parts of their dress regimes. All of these dress cultures were caught between forces of conservation and transformation as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries progressed, and chapter 2 examines how nascent global commercial networks and evolving merchant stocks promoted and responded to these cultural shifts. DuPlessis's data shows how the increasing availability of textiles through the eighteenth century meant that woven-fiber cloth was much more uniformly accessible, but that this did not necessarily undermine local dress regimes. Thus by the 1770s woolens had lost their preeminent place in merchant stocks throughout the Atlantic basin, but "they retained a much greater presence in Atlantic continental North America than elsewhere" (p. 66). This new availability involved market-based transactions, to be sure, but also extra-market modes of circulation such as contraband and the provisioning of slaves and indentured servants.

The following two chapters turn to the questions of redressing and sartorial inventiveness with respect both to the Amerindian populations

with whom Europeans came into contact and to the African slaves whom free settlers purchased and (at least nominally) clothed. Chapter 3 takes up indigenous dress regimes in the colonial Americas and the ways in which Europeans sought to change local dress practices or to cover up what they perceived as shameful nudity. These attempts were not always successful, and DuPlessis shows convincingly that practices of redressing often resulted in "new form[s] of indigenous undress" or in syncretic styles that never entirely jettisoned traditional garments (p. 89). He makes this latter case particularly clearly when describing Amerindian converts to Christianity who adopted sartorial importations while remaining at the forefront of local cultural practices. DuPlessis highlights the category of "constraint" in chapter 4, which examines how indentured servants and slaves were redressed but managed nonetheless to acquire clothes other than the often meager items provided by masters. The analyses here describe conventional bondage attire throughout the New World and enrich these portraits by studying advertisements for runaways, which often indicate how servants and slaves departed from their work-related dress codes. The "irony" here is that the barebones wardrobes provided to slaves actually "gave many slaves some scope for self-fashioning," even or especially in those colonies where the distance between masters and slaves was at its greatest (pp. 162-163).

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss climatological variants on free settler dress regimes in both the tropics and in colonies where cooler weather prevailed. The first of these chapters opens with contemporary accounts of sumptuous dress cultures in the tropical colonies of Jamaica and Saint-Domingue. According to certain early modern observers, colonial settlers dressed to the nines even as they adopted lighter-weight clothing that was better suited to tropical temperatures. DuPlessis shows, however, that most settlers' everyday wardrobes were humbler than these accounts suggest. Free men and women of color in these

slave societies also accumulated wardrobes that resembled closely those of their white counterparts. As DuPlessis points out more broadly, gender and occupation were much more significant determinants of dress culture than race, even in racially stratified colonial contexts. Whereas tropical settler dress regimes syncretized over time in response to the warm climate, they remained more closely aligned with metropolitan sartorial norms in imperial locales where the weather was more moderate. This alignment and its unique iterations are the subject of chapter 6. In the southern African Cape Colony and Río de la Plata, for instance, sartorial cultures came to bridge town/country divides as unified markets allowed settlers to dress according to their profession and economic station. In Montreal and Philadelphia, by contrast, rural agriculture and the local fur trade intersected with these colonies' participation in far broader Atlantic trade patterns. However, in all of these places "creolized" dress cultures expressed a measure of adaptation to European norms, and DuPlessis suggests that "it was in the temperate colonies that transatlantic dress uniformity came closest to being realized" (p. 224).

The book's concluding chapter offers a recapitulation of some of its major arguments, but it stands out for the multiple "ironies" it elucidates that lurk just below the surface of many of DuPlessis's analyses in his study. He concludes with two ironic points in particular: first, that Europe "profited disproportionately" from sartorial and commercial networks that were Atlantic-wide; and second, that Europe went from a position of relative weakness in textile production to one of industrial strength in the eighteenth century, dismantling the early commercial structures that had come before (pp. 241 and 243). These are fitting final thoughts in a book whose argument reveals a somewhat ironic paradox, namely that the uniformity in textile availability generated by early modern globalization in the Atlantic world also

nourished an increasing and syncretic diversification of dress regimes throughout the region.

The Material Atlantic offers a convincing account of Atlantic textile consumption and circulation in the early modern colonial period. It will thus undoubtedly interest not only early modern scholars but also those interested in globalization, Atlantic colonial histories, and the history of fashion. Perhaps the book's greatest strength, though, lies in its synthetic methodology: DuPlessis does not rely exclusively on pictorial, narrative, or inventorial evidence since any one of these sources, considered in isolation, gives a distorted picture of how woven-fiber fabrics traveled and were used during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Rather, he moves among these sources while pointing helpfully to the inherent limitations of each, and the result is a satisfyingly synthetic argument that doubles as a critical commentary on its own methodological underpinnings.

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