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Caribbean Women, Creole Fashioning, and the Fabric of Black Atlantic Writing

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On October 1, 1768, Jamaican overseer and plantation owner Thomas Thistlewood recorded the following incident between two enslaved seamstresses: he writes, "Phibbah's Coobah marked on Silvia's smock bosom. D T S J H, for Dago, her husband; Mr. Meyler's Tom, her sweetheart; and John Hart[nol]e, who she is supposed to love best; and other ornaments," to which is added the lines: "Here's meat for money / If you are fit, I'm ready / But take care you don't flash in the pan."[1] Coobah and Silvia had been assigned the task of sewing and mending clothes for other enslaved workers, but clearly Thistlewood caught them in the act of doing something very different: Coobah, it seems, could "write" and the materials she wrote with were needle, cloth, and thread. Between 1750 and 1786 Thistlewood wrote nearly 14,000 pages detailing his life and activities, the planting and harvesting of crops, and his brutal treatment of enslaved workers; however, on this day Coobah's "text" disrupts the aesthetic flow and the discursive authority of the record: in order to record and transcribe her unauthorized act, he must also accurately acknowledge her act of authorship and imitate the formalistic qualities of her text. Whether or not Coobah could write in a traditional sense—with ink on paper—her embroidered writing circulated far more broadly than any of Thistlewood's private recordings: worn outside the clothing, Silvia's smock served as a public broadside. In fact, what Thistlewood recorded that day was an early example of black Atlantic women's writing in which the author converts the very tools of her labor as an enslaved seamstress into a medium through which she can tell stories of love and kinship, as well as sexual exploitation and loss.

The account reveals a curious tension between the "literate" white text and the "material epistle" which circulates on Silvia's body and invites us to re-evaluate what we mean by the "practice of letters" in this period. Material texts and the types of tactile literacies that inform their production complicate the print nationalism theories of scholars such as Jürgen Habermas and Benedict

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Anderson, and modify our understanding of which "authors" and what "texts" constitute the corpus of early Atlantic literature. By remaining focused on text-based subject positions, scholarship has been reticent to address how extra-discursive, tactile, and embodied signifying practices challenge the idea that writing alone serves as the primary source of subject formation. Paul Gilroy has argued that scholars should look for the "anti-discursive constituents of black metacommunication" that are grounded in "dramaturgy, enunciation, and gesture" rather than in "textuality and narrative."[2] Cloth and clothing represent such extra-discursive signifying practices and often emerge in contention with the logic of European communities shaped by a rational public sphere in which subjectivity and national belonging are grounded in a shared corpus of texts and reading habits. Unlike the texts that constitute an Anglophone public sphere, textiles establish the importance of aesthetics, memory, and feeling to the continuity of social life and reveal a dialectical struggle between reason and affect, the discursive and the embodied.

The goal of this essay is to shed light on how textiles structured black Atlantic belonging. Like written or printed texts, textiles can serve to circulate and convey messages, as well as to incorporate their makers and users into a social world. However, unlike texts, techniques related to the manufacture, fashioning, and care of textiles are deeply associated with forms of female domestic industry that range across race and class lines, as well as geographies, and point to an Atlantic archive of gendered "literacies" and signifying practices.[3] However, our focus on texts, written documents, and official historiographies makes communities structured by material texts and tactile literacies difficult to track: cloth and clothing wear away and only the written record (kept primarily by Europeans) remains. Even so, textiles are a regular feature of the records kept by slave traders and slaveholders such as Thistlewood, and practices related to cloth production, fashioning, and care are embedded within the natural histories produced by men such as Edward Long and Bryan Edwards.[4] Attention to these sources reveals how enslaved women used cloth and clothing as conduits to memorialize personal and collective histories, signify kinship, advertise status and skill, and provide material links within slave communities, to free Euro-creole communities, and to distant or unknown homelands.

A study of Caribbean publics invites such a turn to the extra-discursive or material text. For instance, there were a limited number of presses, most of which reprinted news from Europe, and West Indians relied almost exclusively on books imported by dry goods merchants. In turn, books written by West Indians were often published in either Europe or North America with European and North American audiences in mind.[5] This assessment characterizes the Caribbean as merely a site of material acquisition, appropriation, and exploitation that fueled intellectual, creative, and economic growth elsewhere; however, an attention to black Atlantic material texts shows that cloth and clothing became avenues through which a vibrant Caribbean creole culture—with its own so-

phisticated embodied signifying practices—emerged despite the conditions of New World slavery.[6]

GUINEA CLOTH AND THE FABRIC OF NEW WORLD SLAVERY

When Manchester businessmen began producing "Guinea Cloth" in the mid-eighteenth century they were, in fact, entering into three markets: a West African market for cloth, a concomitant Caribbean market for enslaved Africans, and lastly a Caribbean market for the cloth that would clothe Caribbean slaves. Textiles directly shaped the contours of an early black Atlantic diaspora: they circulated as Atlantic currency, were exchanged for people in the African slave trade, and characterized the material conditions of Caribbean slavery.[7] "Guinea Cloth"—the name given to cotton and linen "check" British textile manufacturers produced for export—became the primary textile exchanged for enslaved peoples on the West African coast. Joseph E. Inikori argues that the "cotton textile industry in England was dependent almost entirely on the slave economy of the Atlantic system."[8] From 1750 to 1774, 48 to 86 percent of this kind of "check" cloth was exported either to West Africa or to New World slave plantations.[9] William Darity, Jr. notes that some English families cornered all sides of this market: the business activities of the Hibbert family, for instance, "included a 3,000 acre sugar plantation in Jamaica and a sugar commission enterprise in London as well as a cotton cloth manufactory in Manchester—an intrafamily triangle trade."[10] Guinea cloth was the essential "fabric" of New World slavery.

In 1788, Samuel Taylor, a Manchester textile producer, characterized the profits and reach of the check or Guinea cloth trade as follows:

> The value of goods annually supplied from Manchester and the Neighbourhood for Africa, is about £200,000, from which, if I deduct the small value which is taken for the purchase of wood, Ivory, etc. which cannot amount to £20,000, there remains upwards of £180,000, for the purchase of Negroes only. This value of manufactures employs immediately about 18,000 of His Majesty's subjects, men, women and children. . . . The coarse kinds of goods serve for a School or means of improvement to Workmen to enable them in time to work finer goods. . . . Besides the manufactures which are directly furnished by the manufacturers of Manchester for the African trade, they equally furnish for the West India Trade, which is intimately connected with the former.[11]

In the space of a paragraph, Taylor travels between four distinct regions which he sees as woven together by the production and consumption of Guinea cloth. Taylor's description is striking in the way that it imagines how this fabric "intimately"—in his words—binds English laborers, British merchants, West African consumers, and New World slaves into the wider fabric of eighteenth-century imperial commerce. Global markets for textiles such as Guinea cloth

initiate modes of cross-cultural exchange and embed workers, producers, consumers, and enslaved peoples within these circuits: rather than shared texts and reading habits, material and embodied practices related to the exchange of this fabric formulate the uneven power relations among different actors in the Atlantic world.

When English manufacturers began producing Guinea cloth, they were forced to make a study of and mimic the African patterns, prints, and aesthetics of African-produced cloth as well as the brightly printed Indian cottons that sold well in thriving West African textile markets.[12] This marks a moment at which West African consumer desire effectually changed—or began to creolize—textile production and textile aesthetics in England.[13] This challenges England's own conceptions about the unilateral movement of culture from metropole to colony or from West to East, as well as how we usually characterize the flows of capital, culture, and power between Africa and Europe. That is, a West African market for cheaply produced textiles caused a change in the aesthetics of dress in the wider Anglophone Atlantic world as fabrics mimicking the tastes of West African buyers were also sold in English domestic markets, as well as markets in colonial North America and the West Indies. Indeed, what they were mimicking was the material representation of an already long history of economic and material exchange between Europe, Africa, and India embedded in the cloth itself.

As a producer of check or Guinea cloth, Taylor seems to recognize how this long history of commercial and aesthetic exchange shapes the texture and appearance of the cloth his company produces, and in turn how the practices related to its manufacture may develop "intimacies" between people from different regions. Prior to this moment, English merchants had imported Indian cottons for export to African consumers as their own linen and wool manufactures had only found limited buyers. However, where English woolen manufactures, especially wools dyed red, did find a limited market, such as in Benin and Yoruba, African textile producers unwove these woolen textiles and rewove them into African cotton cloth that was then exported to coastal African textile markets. Similarly, imported silk on the Gold Coast was unwoven by the Asante and rewoven in the form of Kente cloth—cloth that quite literally weaves together the products and labor of vastly different geographies. The striped and checked patterns that characterize these types of mixed-media textiles would be one of the primary "prints" or styles English Guinea cloth producers attempted to mimic.[14] Guinea cloth, in other words, has the capacity to signify and to tell the story of how Europe underdeveloped Africa: embedded in the very fabric is a history of economic relations, aesthetic practices, and uneven distributions of power characterizing the routes of New World slavery.

While Guinea cloth may "weave" together producers, traders, and laborers from different regions of the world, what is only gestured at in Taylor's account is how this cloth radically "unweaves" or severs material and psychic connec-

tions to home and family for the men and women sold into New World slavery. In accounts written or told by peoples sold into slavery, cloth often catalyzes the process through which people are transformed into commodities and points to three significant events that characterize the transition from freedom to enslavement and commodification in the route from coastal West Africa to the Caribbean: 1) men and women were traded for items such as cloth, 2) they were stripped of their own clothes, and 3) they were re-clothed by slaveholders.[15] Of the exchange of people and cloth, Ottobah Cugoano notes in his 1787 *Narrative,* for instance: "I saw him take a gun, a piece of cloth, and some lead for me."[16] Venture Smith records a similar exchange: "I was bought on board by one Robertson Mumford, steward of said vessel, for four gallons of rum, and a piece of calico, and called VENTURE, on account of his having purchased me with his own private venture. Thus I came by my name."[17] As Mumford strips Smith of his name and renames him, he identifies Smith as interchangeable with the rum and the calico that were exchanged for his person—Mumford's "venture" in Rhode Island–produced rum and cloth becomes a "venture" in human commodities.

In Ukawsaw Gronniosaw's 1772 *Narrative,* two yards of English-produced check catalyze his expropriation from Bornu society and his interpolation into the social structure of the ship as a slave. He writes that the Dutch Captain "bought me *for two yards of check,* which is of more value *there,* than in England." He continues:

> When I left my dear mother I had a large quantity of gold about me, as is the custom of our country, it was made into rings, and they were linked into one another, and formed into a kind of chain, and so put round my neck, and arms and legs, and a large piece hanging at one ear almost in the shape of a pear. I found all this troublesome, and was glad when my new Master took it from me—I was now washed, and clothed in the Dutch or English manner.[18]

Gronniosaw's account exhibits how clothes and ornamentation can tell personal and collective stories and histories. From his account we learn that gold ornamentation is a "custom of our country"—most likely Bornu—but also that it was a gift from his mother. Notably, his description of these ornaments as "chains" "put round my neck, and arms and legs" suggests material ties or "links" to home; however, this language is also reminiscent of the experience of many enslaved Africans who would make their way to the coast in African-produced hemp or rope chains which were then exchanged for the iron chains and manacles on board European ships. By appropriating Gronniosaw's clothing and re-clothing him in the "Dutch or English manner," the Dutch Captain severs Gronniosaw's ties to both nation and kin. It is an expropriation of the most brazen sort—the lifetime of a human being's labor is bought with goods of very small comparative value. Therefore, it was important for Gronniosaw

to assert to his English audience that "check" has more buying power in West African markets than it does in England. He seems to be working through a theory of value that must account for practices in which people and cloth are interchangeable and metonymically linked. In doing so, he uses the reference to check or Guinea cloth to assert the value of his person and his labor.

Unlike Gronniosaw, most African captives did not receive new clothes or livery while on ships traveling the Middle Passage. Rather, most men and women were reduced to near nakedness—a state signifying the severing of ties to home and family, as well as the "bare life" which would characterize their experience as New World slaves.[19] For enslaved men and women who survived the Middle Passage, Caribbean laws required slaveholders to clothe enslaved workers meaning that the transition into West Indian slave economies included new clothing. For instance, in his 1774 *History of Jamaica*, Edward Long cites a 1696 law that states: "Male slaves are to have jackets and drawers; and female slaves, jackets and petticoats; supplied them once a year, under penalty of five shillings, to be paid by the owner or master for every default." He adds the footnote: "On every well-regulated plantation they are allowed, besides a suit of warm woollen cloaths, hats, caps, checks, handkerchiefs, working aprons . . . beads, needles, thread."[20] In the items Long mentions here are the same "checks" that were manufactured for West African markets. Against the conditions within which African captives became New World slaves, cloth and clothing—particularly check—would play an integral part in reconstituting memories of African pasts and negotiating Caribbean presents: the check or Guinea cloth that was manufactured for West African markets and that mimicked tastes and aesthetics dictated by West African consumers may have been familiar to newly enslaved Africans as well as a significant material mnemonic for creole men and women belonging to the African Diaspora.

The clothing provided by slaveholders operates on several levels to make, unmake, and remake its wearers. As Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones have argued, "Clothing is a worn world: a world of social relations put upon the wearers body." "Clothing," they suggest, "reminds. It can do so oppressively, of course. . . . But whether oppressively or not, memory is materialized."[21] By "memory materialized," Jones and Stallybrass suggest that cloth functions on a register similar to text: it can articulate the past and incorporate people into their present social world. As suggested above, the distribution of check could signify homelands from which enslaved Africans were now irrevocably severed: it served as the means through which many were sold into slavery and, once in the Caribbean, continues to serve as a material marker and reminder that their bodies are no longer legally their own. For instance, Mrs. Carmichael, the wife of a West Indian planter, uses the general term "Negro clothing" to describe the types of materials slaveholders distributed to enslaved workers—materials that consisted of "strong blue woollen cloth, called Pennistowns—(the same that is so generally worn by the lower classes of females in Scotland

for petticoats); that sort of coarse, strong, unbleached linen, known by the name of Oznabrags."[22] While "lower class" women in Scotland might wear blue Pennistown wool, in the Caribbean Guinea cloth, Pennistowns, and Oznabrags incorporated enslaved workers into the fabric of New World slavery.

Many women who survived the Middle Passage arrived in the Caribbean with the knowledge and skill to manufacture clothing from imported textiles, as well as plant materials indigenous to both African and Caribbean geographies.[23] Enslaved women sewed garments for themselves and for slaveholders, and often bore the brunt of transforming textiles into wearable clothes for their own immediate "families" (including blood relatives, housemates, and shipmates), as well as for unattached men who may not have known how to sew. They were often apprenticed to Jamaican milliners, asked to copy styles from imported ladies magazines, and on occasion were sent to Europe to learn metropolitan styles.[24] Thistlewood, for instance, records this type of labor in his journal and apprenticed two enslaved women to local seamstresses to learn to sew clothes for him and for others on the plantation. He records that he "Bought of Mr Jeremiah Meyler, a Congo girl, 9 or 10 years old, 4 feet and 1 inch high, give 42 pounds cash. Had a receipt, named her Sally, and intend her for a semptress."[25] He apprenticed her to another enslaved woman named Doll who belonged to a Mrs. Blake, and agreed to pay Doll a doubloon when Sally's training was complete. When Sally failed to learn the trade, he sent another young girl, Bess, to a woman named Mrs. Emetson. In early 1768, Bess returned to Thistlewood's plantation to begin sewing clothes for other slaves.[26] While this work represented the expropriation and theft of women's labor, when it came to sewing clothes for their own use, enslaved women used dress to reclaim their bodies as their own, to produce kinship ties, and to navigate circuits of familial and social obligation. Moreover, Afro-creole women also applied their knowledge of African dyeing and washing techniques to the care of imported European cloth and to the manufacture of cloth from indigenous plant materials such as lacebark, and often passed this knowledge on to Euro-creole populations as well. The Caribbean fashioning of cloth, in other words, links women such as Mrs. Emetson, Doll, and Bess, who passed on their knowledge of the needle, as well as formulations of "taste," in official and unofficial apprenticeships.

On occasion, however, slaveholding women such as Mrs. Carmichael supervised the sewing of clothing for the enslaved women working on her plantation. She would have understood this as part of her own domestic labor. She writes, "for two months before Christmas, and also Easter, I used to be as busy as possible, cutting out dresses, superintending the trimmings, and inventing different fashions for them,—for they imagine that what is too common, cannot be very genteel."[27] Providing ready-made clothes would mean that slaveholders could control the appearance of enslaved women as well as promote their own understandings of "virtuous" domestic labor. However, here at least, the

enslaved women for whom Mrs. Carmichael sews engage in subtle acts of subterfuge. In promoting Mrs. Carmichael's sense of superiority and competence, they avoid the labor of making these clothes themselves. Moreover, while Mrs. Emetson taught Bess to sew in the English fashion, Mrs. Carmichael was, in turn, forced to "invent" or modify English cutting and sewing techniques to appease the aesthetics of the enslaved women for whom she sewed on occasion.

While labor related to the production of clothing may represent uneven distributions of power, the knowledge and aesthetic practices that inform this labor constitute a type of embodied public discourse that shapes communities structured by material practices. Conferred clothing certainly marked the body, but it often offered people greater mobility and status, as well as represented items that could be repurposed or bartered within slave economies and at Sunday markets.[28] A thriving internal island trade serving both free and enslaved peoples made a number of additional textiles available to enslaved men and women.[29] These included silk, Indian muslin, English-produced cottons, island-produced plant fiber textiles such as lacebark, as well as different types of locally produced dyes that women used to change the color of conferred clothing. Informal markets structured by the manufacture or exchange of different textiles offered many enslaved men and women avenues through which they could resignify the material and embodied representation of their bondage—namely, the often coarse, conferred clothing given to them by slaveholders. The production of clothes suited to their taste played a significant role in producing new ties within, as well as beyond, an Afro-Caribbean Diaspora. And in the case of women such as Coobah, with whom I began this essay, "marking" English-produced textiles with their own expressions and transforming English textiles into clothes suiting their own taste may have challenged the aesthetic and social authority of slaveholders. Informed by embodied, performative, non-literary signifying practices, clothing structures black Atlantic publics that contest an Anglophone legal and discursive record that contends that enslaved peoples' bodies are not their own: clothing can serve as material testimony or petition, operating within and constituting an embodied public sphere structured by tactile literacies and material memories.

TRANSATLANTIC PRINTS AND BLACK ATLANTIC MATERIAL TEXTS

As Katheryn Kruger has argued, "literary history and textile history were, at one time, interdependent."[30] Text and textile share the Latin root *tex re,* meaning "to construct or to weave," and the Latin, *textus,* means "that which is woven," a "web," or "texture." In this sense, makers of textiles can, "with the same verb," as Kruger argues, "contrive texts."[31] Building on a similar premise, Juliet Fleming has pointed out how what we now understand as a distinct divide between cloth work and the work of "text" and "writing" is largely anachronistic

and central to agendas that seek to keep the "author function" in place.[32] That is, the divide between woven work and written work is historically constructed and serves agendas seeking to understand the pen as a superior implement wielded by men and work with cloth as an inferior trade or "craft" belonging to women. While Fleming is more concerned with the surfaces and implements through which women create alphabetic and pictorial representations, Stallybrass and Jones argue that even unadorned textiles were one of the most basic, elementary "fibers" of social life and essential to the making of culture.[33] Kate Haulman similarly argues that clothes—and fashion in particular—figured as a site through which to contest, codify, and articulate gender roles and gendered forms of power: clothes establish links between gender relations, social order, commerce, and political authority.[34] Understanding textiles as social texts provides new avenues for learning about how women may have woven their way into the social fabric, and also asks us to embrace, in the words of Susan Frye, "a broader sense of text than the literary"—that is, to look at the many forms of "women's textualities" that inform cultural production in the long eighteenth century.[35]

Turning to examples of black Atlantic material texts, we can begin to imagine the kinds of publics they inform as well as how they may participate in Enlightenment-era knowledge production traditionally understood as driven by print. Caribbean women's tactile literacies and knowledge of local environments could be said to inform and frame the practice of cosmopolitan letters as seen in Thistlewood's journal or Long's *History of Jamaica*. In the case of the natural histories and ethnographies that reached European and North American readers, the knowledge they disseminate is arguably that of local guides and enslaved women working with natural resources, as well as exchanging materials within informal markets for imported and locally produced materials. Black Atlantic material texts—as constituted by cloth and clothing—may be seen to inhabit European books thereby undermining the myopic narratives of their European writers. Non-textual forms of communication and expression are clearly difficult to tease out of written or printed texts—what we are reading are material texts in translation filtered through the lens of Anglophone authors. Moreover, when textiles show up in account books, ship's logs, personal records, or natural histories they often tend to stand in for or obscure histories and relationships that may be unthinkable or unspeakable in "polite" European letters: for instance, the exchange of human lives for textiles of comparatively little value or coercive sexual relationships negotiated through gifts of cloth and clothing. Embedded in these "literate" white texts, cloth and clothing tell stories regardless of whether their writers or wearers want them to and gesture toward communities structured by a set of embodied signifying practices that Anglophone writing seeks to eschew.

For some women, clothes served as material texts that helped them lay claim to the rights of romantic affiliation and kinship—despite the asymmetrical na-

ture of these relationships—in the absence of a legally and discursively recognized marriage. Thistlewood, for instance, regularly records his distribution of textiles among different enslaved women with whom he had sexual relationships. He gave a woman named Jenny "some beads," "2 yards of Brown Oznabrig . . . 4 yards of striped Holland . . . an handkerchief," a "blue bordered coat," a "plain blue" coat, and a "bordered zacca."[36] Several days later he records taking back the coat and the beads. He and Jenny, it appears, must have quarreled; however, the only way to track their volatile relationship is through the clothes he gives and then reclaims. After Jenny, Thistlewood entered into a relationship with Phibbah which lasted until the end of his life and resulted in her manumission. In the early days of their relationship, he records giving her "10 yards of brown oznabrig . . . 2 pistoles in money, mosquito net, 3 cakes of soap, about 3 ½ yards of cloth." In turn, Phibbah gave Thistlewood "a gold ring, to keep for her sake."[37] While Thistlewood only records the flows of commodities in his journal, the items he gave to Phibbah and which were worn on the body would serve as public record of their relationship: the gifts Phibbah received from Thistlewood mark her as his mistress, and the ring she gives to him acts as a reminder of that fact to both Thistlewood and other women. Textiles could also serve as legal testimony, as was the case with John Thistlewood, Phibbah's and Thistlewood's manumitted son, who pursued a relationship with an enslaved woman named Mimber. When John died under suspicious circumstances, the only evidence is "a piece of fine printed linen & a woman's hat" that cost seven pounds—money that is still owed to "Messrs Wilson and Benison." Mimber "stiffly denies" any relationship with John, but it seems that he may have been poisoned by a man named Port Royal for his involvement with her.[38] The clothes tell a story that is otherwise absent from the official record or only recorded as "debt" in the account books of Wilson and Benison. However, as they continue to circulate on Mimber's body they serve as a material mnemonic: the clothes are the record or the material text that tells the story of their relationship.

While slavery is a power relationship that could not confer clear or lasting agency on enslaved peoples, enslaved women were also not simply passive victims: access to imported and locally produced textiles and informal markets allowed many enslaved women to establish social and familial ties despite the uneven power relations characterizing West Indian society. The material texts embedded within Thistlewood's journal reveal how some women may have negotiated their status as slaves, as well as how slavery continually disrupted the formation of stable kinship ties. In the case of Coobah and Silvia with whom I began this essay, both women carried on asymmetrical relationships with white men.[39] The smock, as well as the articles of cloth listed above, represent relationships negotiated through the body. The song or phrase Coobah embroiders on Silvia's smock attests to the bodily relationships it signifies. The lines "Here's meat for money / If you are fit, I'm ready / But take care you don't

flash in the pan" serve as innuendo, and show how sexual relationships with white men may have yielded material assets but, as was most often the case, offered little stability. What is often left, at the end of a relationship, is the record of it in the form of the clothes and gifts that were exchanged. However, the case of Coobah and Silvia suggests that women often took charge of how this extra-discursive record was materialized and memorialized as well as how these records may have framed publics structured by embodied, material practices. In this sense, the smock publicizes one form of intimacy—if asymmetrical sexual relationships can ever really be seen as intimate—while privatizing another: that is, her relationship with Coobah and the bonds between women that are gestured to in the smock but that are not made legible or translated into print in Thistlewood's journal.

Historian Steve O. Buckridge suggests that the material memories retained and embodied in cloth and clothing styles assured the "survival of Africans and their descendants against European attempts at cultural annihilation." He writes that "Africans brought aspects of their culture such as folklore, music, religion, dress, and the knowledge of plants with them to the Americas . . . [and that these] cultural characteristics were also transmitted to the descendants of African slaves." The result, he notes, is "a vibrant Creole culture."[40] I would add that one of the features of this "creole culture" is the centrality of enslaved women as seamstresses, "head dressers," and domestic workers, and that we see evidence of this survival embedded within Anglophone texts and images that translate the tactile literacies of New World Africans for English audiences.

While deceptively peripheral to texts such as Long's *History of Jamaica*, Afro-Caribbean women's relationship to cloth production, fashioning, and care is fundamental to the knowledge that his text produces and disseminates about New World ecologies. Volume III, for instance, includes extensive lists of West Indian plant materials that could be used as "Vegetable Soaps," "Perfumes" (to scent clothing), "Dyes and Pigments," and "Substances for Cloathing." He records how New World Africans fashioned clothes and accessories from a number of plant materials: from the leaves of the Palmeto-Royal they made hats, seeds from the Great Macaw Tree were transformed into necklaces, the cotton from Silk-Cotton trees was woven into garments which could then be dyed "a fine fixed blue colour" with the Indigo-Berry or a "rusty, iron colour" with oil dyes produced from the Cashew Nut. In turn, the gum from the Lignum-Vitae tree could be used as soap to "wash painted linens, and other stained garments."[41] Of these items, the "Laghetto, or Lace-Bark Tree" is perhaps the most interesting. According to Long, "The ladies of the island are extremely dexterous in making caps, ruffles, and compleat suits of lace with it . . . equal to the best artificial lace."[42] Moreover, lacebark may have been familiar to his readers as a token of transatlantic diplomacy: in the late seventeenth century, Sir Thomas Lynch, then Governor of Jamaica, presented Charles II with a lacebark cravat made on the island. The lacebark cravat combines Caribbean raw mate-

rials and elite English fashion, and would serve to testify on Lynch's behalf that his island can produce marketable commodities as well as maintain English aesthetics, cultural forms, and practices.

Long neither credits Afro-Caribbean women for this knowledge, nor elaborates upon how these materials were manufactured into clothing or items used in the fashioning and washing of clothes. So who were the women that acted as guides and purveyors of the knowledge he includes in his books? This is a moment in which the knowledge and labor of these women enters the official Anglo-American record and raises the question: to what extent did the tactile literacies and material memories of enslaved Caribbean women impact the production of texts for metropolitan readers? The clothes that women manufactured in excess of conferred clothing may have served as the material texts that inform authors' characterizations of West Indian ecologies—ecologies that these authors seek to list and render legible while simultaneously silencing or disavowing the source of this knowledge.

The lacebark cravat was a material epistle that served as a promise as well as a reminder; however, unlike most examples of Atlantic correspondence, it also embeds within it material practices belonging to women whom Long only identifies as "ladies of the island."[43] The knowledge of lacebark production would most likely fall within the realm of Afro-Caribbean women who brought this knowledge with them from Africa and passed it on to descendants.[44] Long's book, in turn, translates these material texts into written language: the knowledge they represent and the plants they come from are absorbed into the Anglophone record, and as Long taxonomizes their various parts and relates how they are made, the material text becomes a new specimen-commodity ready for harvesting. When collected within natural histories, the knowledge and labor of these women, as well as their bodies, is coopted to exhibit the potential of Caribbean ecologies: these women are a part of the ecologies they work within and are therefore equally exploitable.

On one level, natural history writers depict the kind of Caribbean world that Europeans would want to see: a virtual paradise in which cultural blending is relatively benign. Following in this tradition, Agostino Brunias—an Italian draughtsman—worked in St. Vincent, Dominica, and Antigua producing works for planters, bureaucrats, and military officials. Many of his paintings were intended as souvenirs circulating in ways similar to modern-day postcards and his works were also used to illustrate Bryan Edwards's 1794 *History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*. We cannot take Brunias's work at face value: he was, after all, producing work for European elites who often wanted to remember the Caribbean in a certain light. For these reasons, Beth Fowkes Tobin has called Brunias's work "ethnographic art." She writes that "The clothing that Brunias records in his paintings identifies his subjects as types of Caribbean people" and suggests that these "are taxonomic images of specimens, not representations of individuals."[45] While Brunias's works pay a certain taxonomic

Fig. 1: Agostino Brunias, *Dominica Linen Market*, ca. 1770s. Courtesy Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

attention to dress that may be understood as "ethnographic" in nature or—as in Long's plant studies—as a way of "collecting" women for study, he also inevitably captures examples of Caribbean publics structured by embodied and material practices: markets and festivals channeling the exchange of produce and textiles rely on a variety of bodily attitudes and practices—hawking, dancing, eating, flirting—that structure certain types of social and economic relations.

I conclude this essay with a reading of Brunias's *Dominica Linen Market* produced sometime in the 1770s (see Fig. 1). Many of the material ties and relationships outlined above come together explicitly at Sunday markets. Sunday markets seemed to be a particularly curious attraction for European writers, as well as a significant site of social, economic, and cultural exchange for enslaved Caribbean peoples. These markets provide some evidence for how cloth and clothing may have structured interdependencies between Euro-creole and Afro-creole populations, as well as the importance of creole women to European textile markets, and how women's dress played an important role in knowledge produced about the Caribbean and Caribbean peoples.

In the painting, the ships and shorelines in the background serve as a reminder that Caribbean markets were dominated by British imports. From these ships we see offered for sale linens, striped Hollands, check or Guinea cloth, cotton muslins, oznabrags, pennistowns, as well as perhaps locally produced

lacebark and thread spun from local plant fibers. While Brunias depicts mixed-race women along with white creole and black creole women; his painting attempts to maintain a clear racial hierarchy despite the inevitable mixing the market produces: while free women of color are situated as superior to and standing over enslaved women, most of whom are seated and offering wares for sale, they still remain inferior to white women in the painting, such as the woman with the umbrella held over her by a slave. As Barbara Bush has argued "as a woman, the female slave shared a common subordination with all women but, where gender united black and white women, race and class divided them."[46] In other words, Brunias's works seem to uphold European assumptions that, in the words of Lucille Mair, "the black woman produced, the brown woman served, and the white woman consumed."[47]

However, I would also suggest that the very conditions of the mixed-crowd marketplaces structured by the exchange of textiles, in particular, begin to dismantle this reading: while this is not an egalitarian space, the rules of assemblage and exchange seem to be controlled by market women of African descent. For instance, one could argue that, in fact, two women share center stage in *Dominica Linen Market* and their relationship is structured by the exchange of cloth. The "language" of cloth functions as a potentially equalizing force and informs the exchange between the white creole woman and the market woman—a language characterized by touch, sight, knowledge of market prices, the cloth's origins, and its capacity to signify. In this sense, Brunias's marketplaces illuminate the aesthetic authority and primacy of women buyers and sellers who seem to be of African descent. He depicts, for instance, a number of different styles of dress—ranging from European cuts to African-influenced headdresses to creolized stylistic combinations. Women of different racialized backgrounds wear headdresses and shawls made from the check or Guinea cloth that was also traded in West African markets. The market woman has adopted a few of the aesthetic qualities of European dress: a full skirt and ruffs, for instance. Rather than open and wide flowing sleeves that would facilitate physical labor, her sleeves are cinched at the elbow and fashioned into three-quarter length ruffs that keep her forearms free to sew or spin. And, in turn, the Euro-creole buyer has adapted to the climate of the region and adopted some of the characteristic styles of Afro-Caribbean women. She wears an elaborate turban and, tellingly, she is wearing the Indian muslin that was popular in West African textile markets and which is better suited to warm weather, providing greater mobility than silks or linens. Brunias may have attempted to depict Euro-creole women as superior, but he also seems to recognize Afro-creole women as major purveyors of British exports within Caribbean circuits of exchange.

If the West African littoral is a site where African captives' ties to home are severed or unwoven, the textile market is a site where new ties are established. The market, in this reading, is a site of assembly that challenges Anglophone

authority and the "rules" of white, bourgeois sociality, or in turn, a white bourgeois public sphere: it is dominated and controlled by Caribbean women of color and centered on the exchange of fabrics rather than texts or "polite" conversation. However, these fabrics function in ways that are not entirely different from—even if they are at odds with—an Anglophone print public sphere: they are communicative devices, they can challenge the exercise of power, and they structure communities around the use of a common language—the language of cloth. However, unlike an Anglophone public sphere, markets are sites that establish the importance of aesthetics, memory, and feeling in the continuity of social life. In this sense, the market is also a site, however, where Anglophone aesthetics are deconstructed and reconstituted as "creole." As imported English textiles reach Afro-creole buyers, they are made to signify in new ways; moreover, when Euro-creole buyers purchased cloth from the Afro-Caribbean women at the market, they purchased cloth that has travelled through Afro-creole circuits of exchange. In turn, these buyers are also influenced by the different ways these textiles can be fashioned. Sellers use their own bodies as templates to advertize the quality and potential of as yet unfashioned textiles. For instance, Mrs. Carmichael acknowledged the power of Afro-Caribbean aesthetics when she noted, in 1833, that she was "very much amused by observing what connoisseurs the negro women are of dress,—standing near me, at one time, I heard them criticize every thing I wore, both in the material and the make."[48] While Mrs. Carmichael seems to disparage this expertise, she also inevitably recognizes Afro-creole women's role within Caribbean society as judges, agents, and tastemakers—tastes and aesthetics that, furthermore, influence her own style of dress. Her comment exhibits a reversal of the colonial gaze with its concomitant relationship to knowledge production and power: rather than the observer of the habits of her domestic slaves, Mrs. Carmichael—specifically, her dress—is the object of their observation and derision. By titling these women connoisseurs—experts, judges, critics—she inadvertently acknowledges their central role as judges and agents in a West Indian society—a role that could lead to degrees of empowerment, mobility, and agency for enslaved Caribbean women just as access to the world of letters may have served a similar purpose for literate English subjects.

When Brunias painted *Dominica Linen Market*, he recorded much more than the exchange of cloth. What he recorded was a shared tactile language centered on conversations between Afro-creole and Euro-creole women about the "material and the make," in Mrs. Carmichael's words—that is, what type of cloth is offered and how it can be fashioned. By the end of the eighteenth century, turbans and muslins would enter the lexicon of British women's dress as well. This suggests that England did not simply export cloth to the Caribbean but, in the form of creole women returning to the metropole, imported new tastes, styles, and languages, as well—that is, forms of expression featuring the aesthetics and tastes of Afro-creole women: painted cottons, shorter sleeves, and head-

dresses. For instance, as Mrs. Carmichael writes "the heat of the climate, which renders it quite impossible for any one to wear in that country the same clothing as in England; and it is no exaggeration to say, that the modesty of that lady who would appear in England with no thicker clothing than she can endure in the West Indies, would be thought rather questionable."[49] However, women did begin to appear in Europe who wore these fashions. For instance, Lady Nugent describes a ball gown made after the creole fashion as having "Scarcely any sleeves . . . [and] the body made very much like a child's frock, tying behind, and the skirt round, with not much train."[50] Notably, the dress was sent to her by Madame Pauline Le Clerc, Napoleon's sister and the wife of General Le Clerc who Napoleon sent to reestablish French control over Saint Domingue. Madame Le Clerc was in Haiti between 1801 and 1802. The dress she had made for Lady Nugent in late November 1802 was most likely made *in* France but with a creole aesthetic in mind. In other words, when Madame Le Clerc returned to France in the fall of 1802, she may have brought methods of creole fashioning with her—possibly in the form of Caribbean seamstresses—and the dress she sent back to Lady Nugent combined creole and French aesthetics.

Unlike the unilateral route of the slave ship from coastal Africa to the Americas, textile markets and trends in dress have a circumatlantic movement. Combining European and African styles and manufacturing techniques, clothes produced by Caribbean women impacted the creolization of dress in the Caribbean for free and bound women alike—trends that free white women would, in turn, import to Europe and North America. In this sense, while clothes and domestic goods inevitably signal class and belonging, they also foster possible avenues for self-making through "literacies" that are not predicated upon the printed word, common reading habits, or access to literature. In particular, local and international markets in cloth and clothing provided avenues through which enslaved women could establish material ties and memories to distant homelands, as well as challenge the power and primacy of slaveholding European men and women. Moreover, as Afro-Caribbean women's labor, knowledge, and taste influences the kinds of information collected within the natural histories, ethnographies, and journals written from the position of European men and women, their "tactile" literacies could be seen to shape two seemingly distinct markets: firstly, a Caribbean market for imported and locally produced textiles, and secondly, a market in texts about Caribbean peoples, plants, products, and manners. In this sense, Afro-Caribbean women played a central role in shaping West Indian society—for West Indians and for metropolitan readers alike. The material texts that constitute creole fashioning ask us to rethink the flows of culture and power between England, Africa, and the Caribbean and to understand how cloth and clothing functioned as sites of cultural retention, resistance, and influence.

NOTES

1. Thomas Thistlewood, *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica 1750–86*, ed. Doulas Hall (Kingston, 1999), 159.

2. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, 1993), 75.

3. Jennifer Morgan argues that women were fundamental to Afro-creole slave cultures: without "the benefit of the cultural knowledge and skills possessed by African women" it would have been difficult "to negotiate the shoals of New World slavery . . . there could be no return to some semblance of normal life" (*Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* [Philadelphia, 2004], 196–97). See also Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650–1838* (Bloomington, 1990); Hilary Beckles, *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados* (New Brunswick, 1989); and Marietta Morrissey, *Slave Women in the New World: Gender Stratification in the Caribbean* (Lawrence, 1989).

4. Recent studies of natural histories, such as Susan Scott Parrish's *American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, 2006) and Christopher Iannini's *Fatal Revolutions: Natural History, West Indian Slavery, and the Routes of American Literature* (Chapel Hill, 2012), have been increasingly in tune to who, in addition to the acknowledged authors, may have served as informal experts in the collection of the knowledge that natural histories disseminate.

5. Work on Caribbean publics and print cultures includes Roderick Cave, "Early Printing and the Book Trade in the West Indies," *The Library Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (1978): 163–92; Belinda Edmondson, "Public Spectacles: Caribbean Women and the Politics of Public Performance," *Small Axe* 7, no. 1 (2003): 1–16; and Bradford F. Swan, *The Caribbean Area*, The Spread of Printing, Western Hemisphere (Amsterdam, 1970).

6. I use the term "creole" to define peoples of European and African descent living within the Caribbean-Atlantic basin and signifying a subject's coloniality and the nature of (un)belonging; however, I am also interested in the creative components of what it means to be "creole." Both the French *créole* and the Spanish *criollo* bear the Latin root, *cre re*: to create. This suggests a relationship between geographic distance from homelands (whether understood as West African or European), as well as the sense of cultural creativity and flexibility necessitated by that distance.

7. Stephanie Smallwood notes that merchant ships were "floating marketplaces," and as captains unloaded stores of "guns, iron bars, knives, and, most importantly, *a half-dozen varieties of textiles*" (emphasis mine), they replaced these commodities with a human cargo. See *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, 2007), 65.

8. Joseph Inikori, "Slavery and the Revolution in Cotton Textile Production in England," *Social Science History* 13, no. 4 (1989): 343–79, 355.

9. Inikori, 355–56.

10. See William Darity, Jr., "British Industry and the West Indies Plantations," *Social Science History* 14, no. 1 (1990): 117–49, 127.

11. Samuel Taylor, quoted in Inikori, 370.

12. Colleen Kriger notes that West African "markets for textiles predated the direct trade with Europeans, and conditioned its operation" and suggests that "regional preferences . . . structured this trade: striped cloths were exchanged for gold on the Gold Coast, while indigo-blue cloths were most desired in Gabon and Angola in exchange for ivory and slaves" ("Mapping the History of Cotton Textile Production in Precolonial West Africa," *African Economic History* 33 [2005]: 87–116, 88, 102).

13. For instance, Inikori argues: "The rapid expansion of exports which followed, together with the multiplier effects on the domestic market for cottons and other manufactures, provided the favorable environment for the rapid transformation of the industry's

technology and organization between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries" (345).

14. See Kriger.

15. On the treatment of African captives during the Middle Passage, see Smallwood; Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York, 2008); and Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, 2006).

16. Ottobah Cugoano, *Narrative of the Enslavement of Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa* [1787] (London, 1825), 124; available through University of North Carolina's *Documenting the American South* digital archive project: http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/cugoano/menu.html.

17. See Venture Smith, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America. Related by Himself* (New London, 1798), 13; available through University of North Carolina's Documenting the American South digital archive project: http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/venture/venture.html.

18. James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (Bath, 1772), 9; available through University of North Carolina's *Documenting the American South* digital archive project: http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/gronniosaw/gronnios.html.

19. See Rediker.

20. See Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica. Or, A General Survey of the Antient and Modern State of That Island with Reflections on its Situation, Settlement, Inhabitants, Climate, Products, Commerce, Laws, and Government*, 3 vols. (London, 1774), 2:490.

21. In a discussion of how livery operates as a mode of obligation and assignation, see Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge, 2000), 3, 5–7.

22. Mrs. Carmichael, *Domestic Manners and Social Condition of the White, Coloured and Negro Population of the West Indies*, vol. 1 (London, 1833), 142–43.

23. According to Steeve O. Buckridge, women adapted these skills to the material conditions of their new environment, and passed on this knowledge to new generations (*The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica 1750–1890* [Kingston, 2004]). This is the most extensive study of women and dress and Caribbean society to date, especially when it comes to women's use of local plant materials in the manufacture of textiles.

24. For more on Caribbean slaveholders sending enslaved women to Europe as apprentices see Karol K. Weaver, "Fashioning Freedom: Slave Seamstresses in the Atlantic World," *Journal of Women's History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 44–59.

25. Thistlewood, 126.

26. Thistlewood, 152.

27. Carmichael, 148.

28. For instance, in Charles Leslie's *A New and Exact Account of Jamaica* (Edinburgh, 1739), the author cites one of many laws regulating the movement of Caribbean slaves: "None shall give Leave to any Negro-slave except such as wait upon their Person, or wear Liveries, to go out of their Plantations, without a Ticket or White-servant, in which Ticket is to be exprest their Name, from whence, and whither going, on Penalty of 40 s." (228).

29. See Buckridge.

30. Katheryn Sullivan Kruger, *Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Weaving and Female Textual Production* (Selinsgrove, Pa., 2002), 28.

31. Kruger, 28.

32. Juliet Fleming, *Graffiti and the Writing Arts of Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2001), 10.

33. Jones and Stallybrass, 89.

34. Kate Haulman, *Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 2011).

35. Susan Frye, *Pens and Needles: Women's Textualities in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2010), 9.

36. Thistlewood, 32–33.

37. Thistlewood, 79.

38. Thistlewood, 276.

39. When Coobah marked the smock, she was pregnant and gave birth to a "mulatto girl," according to Thistlewood, two months later.

40. Buckridge, 61.

41. Long, 3:725–36.

42. Long, 3:745.

43. Long's use of the term "ladies" suggests that he attributed the knowledge and labor of Afro-Caribbean women to the white women who "own" their labor. He would, most likely, refrain from calling enslaved women "ladies."

44. Buckridge comments, for instance, that "European settlers did utilize the products of tree bark and bark clothing, and many perhaps, benefited from the profits of their slaves' activities in this type of industry" (65).

45. Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Paintings* (Durham, 1999), 139.

46. Bush, xii.

47. Lucille Mair, quoted in Hilary Beckles, "White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean," *History Workshop* 36 (1993): 66–82, 67. Mair is credited with the formulation, "The black woman produced, the brown woman served, and the white woman consumed," as early as her 1974 Ph.D. dissertation, "A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica: 1655–1844." When this dissertation was published in 2006 by the University of the West Indies Press, Beckles contributed an introduction to the volume, in which he attributes the formulation to Mair.

48. Carmichael, 46.

49. Carmichael, 155.

50. *Lady Nugent's Journal of Her Residence in Jamaica from 1801 to 1805*, ed. Philip Wright (Kingston, 2002), 133.