

Introduction

Upon arriving in the viceregal capital of Lima as part of a clandestine mission that took him to various parts of South America between 1712 and 1714, French engineer Amedée Frézier described a lavish setting. “Lima,” he wrote, “is the depot for the treasures of Peru,” where stunning architecture, gilded carriages, and luxury goods abounded.¹ The Frenchman was particularly taken during his visit by the costumes of the city’s inhabitants:

Men and women are equally inclined toward magnificence in dress: the women, not content to just wear rich and beautiful fabrics, adorn themselves with a prodigious quantity of laces, and are insatiable in their desire for pearls, precious stones, bracelets, earrings, and other paraphernalia, the costs of which ruin many husbands and gentlemen.²

Frézier was not alone in these impressions. Travelers from around the world wrote similar descriptions upon paying a visit to the city in the early part of the eighteenth century, and their references to *limeños*’ sartorial splendor were so frequent as to cohere into an informal kind of visitors’ script.

When British naval captain William Betagh took his turn to write about Lima upon his arrival in the 1720s, he observed that “of all parts of the world, the people are most expensive in their habit,” before going on to note that “the pride of both sexes appears chiefly in *Maclín* and *Brussels* lace, with which they trim their linen in a most extravagant manner, not omitting their sheets and pillows.”³ For their part, Spanish travelers Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa described a city with wide-open possibilities for luxurious consumption:

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The usual dress of the men differs very little from that worn in Spain, nor is there much variation among the different hierarchies; because there is a variety of fabrics that is widely available, everyone wears what they can purchase. So it is not uncommon to see a *mulato*, or any other working man, dressed in rich fabrics, equal to anything that can be worn by a man of superior *calidad*.⁴

Even locals joined in on these effusive descriptions. The writer Pedro de Peralta y Barnuevo proudly praised his hometown as “not only one of the greatest cities in the world for the number of its inhabitants (who are among the best in terms of temperament and circumstance), and one the most opulent for its abundance and riches, but it presides with grandeur over an entire Empire.”⁵

Taken together, these accounts paint a vivid picture of Lima’s eighteenth-century opulence. But they also flatten the terrain of the city’s social and sartorial landscape. They depict an environment in which Spaniards (defined here as Iberian-born *peninsulares* and American-born *criollos*), Indians, Africans, and their mixed-race offspring (a group collectively known as *castas*) largely enjoyed equal access to finery. Regardless of their ancestry, legal condition, socio-economic status, or even sex, it seemed that for *limeños*, money was the only barrier – as well as the only key – to experiencing all the material riches the city had to offer. Moreover, the authors give the impression that all of Lima’s inhabitants shared and expressed the same aesthetic sensibilities.

Exquisite Slaves takes the world at the margins of these descriptions – the Lima that Frézier, Betagh, Juan, Ulloa, Peralta y Barnuevo, and others could not or would not describe – as its primary focus. In broad terms, the book examines the relationship between clothing and status in an ethnically diverse, urban slaveholding society. It does so by focusing on the varying forms of access *limeños* had to elegant dress and the diversity and meanings of their fashions. As its title suggests, the book gives particular attention to the city’s population of

African slaves, who not only figured prominently in Spaniards' sartorial displays but developed their own methods and modes of elegant self-presentation as well. As a result, they were also the primary subjects of various writings about dress and deportment, from sumptuary laws, travel accounts, as well as contemporary discourses surrounding who should wear what and why.

The book opens in the early eighteenth century, when Lima was capital of the Viceroyalty of Peru, gateway to the silver-mining center at Potosí, nexus of trade between East and West, home to a thriving urban economy, and a city of superlatives. It was one of Spain's most significant imperial footholds, its premier engine of wealth, and a site of unparalleled luxurious consumption. The period also marked the height of slaves' demographic visibility in Lima. By 1700, Lima's population totaled around 37,000 souls, including roughly 18,000 Spaniards, 13,000 slaves, and 6,000 free people of African, Indian, and mixed racial ancestry.⁶ In other words, slaves comprised more than a third of the city's population and were almost equal in number to American- and Iberian-born Spaniards. Moreover, slaves operated at nearly every point on the city's public spectrum – accompanying their owners through city streets, selling wares for daily wages, performing work for hire, participating in royal and religious festivals, as well as taking part in the city's dynamic social life. Setting the book in this period, therefore, allows for the consideration of how Lima's eminence, wealth, ethnic diversity, and status as a slaveholding society shaped the relationship between clothing and status in the region. In taking the analysis into the latter decades of the eighteenth century and through the abolition of slavery in Peru in 1854, the book also shows how the discourse and behavior surrounding dress evolved over the course of profound economic, social, and demographic transformations.

HISTORIOGRAPHIC FOUNDATION

This book is informed by, engages with, and seeks to contribute to several fields of inquiry. To begin, it owes an enormous debt to the

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work of Frederick Bowser, whose foundational study of Peruvian slavery traced how the holding of slaves went from a fifteenth-century rarity to a ubiquity by the sixteenth century, when the institution constituted the very backbone of the region's coastal economy. Bowser explores the variety of experiences of African slaves in the region, observing that in Peru they were primarily employed in urban service and – particularly in Lima – across a spectrum of household and extra-domestic occupations, with female slaves working in the domestic sector and as street vendors and men finding employment as day laborers known as *jornaleros*, who paid a large portion of their wages to their owners and saved any remaining portions for their own purposes. More recently, scholars of Peru's long seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – including Carlos Aguirre, Peter Blanchard, Christine Hünefeldt, Rachel O'Toole, and Jean-Pierre Tardieu – have shown that the urban character of slavery in the region (not only in Lima but in Trujillo and Cuzco as well) helped equip slaves with a remarkable degree of social and economic mobility.⁷ I situate my own project within this discourse, and see in clothing the potential not only to examine challenges to slavery but also to explore how slaves shaped and negotiated ideas about beauty, status, and selfhood.

I am not the first student of slavery to pursue such an interest. In recent years, several historians have offered compelling snapshots of the significance of clothing and self-fashioning in slaveholding and post-abolition societies throughout the Americas. In his study of slavery and absolutism in colonial Mexico, Herman Bennett has noted the extent to which slaveholders in Mexico City outfitted their slaves in finery in order to lay claim to a civilized status. For them, the public and ostentatious display of mastery over African bodies was integral to their identity as Spaniards.⁸ However, the proliferation of sumptuary laws in the region made clear that owners could never fully confine luxury to their own spheres and modes of self-expression. This was a widespread phenomenon: as Ira Berlin has observed, urban slaves in the North American colonies frequently aroused the ire of white planters for making their way about town in

elegant costumes, complete with pocket watches and powdered wigs. The problem, as slave owners saw it, was that these urban slaves were posing a threat to “their exclusive claim to the symbols of civilization.”⁹

Beyond simply appropriating their owners’ tools of self-presentation, slaves also incorporated their own creativity and cultural sensibilities into their dress. This was often a matter of necessity: Stephanie M.H. Camp, for instance, has shown how enslaved men and women in the US South went to great lengths – often risking their personal safety – to attend what were known as “outlaw parties,” which, in addition to serving as dance venues, provided rare but meaningful opportunities to wear stylish clothing. These events held particular appeal to enslaved women, who took time between laboring for their owners and families to fashion hoop skirts out of grapevines or tree limbs, and dye dresses vibrant colors. Not only did these costumes showcase the women’s ingenuity and creativity in procuring and designing festive attire, but they also facilitated escape from the forced androgyny of slavery.¹⁰ Slaves’ creativity was also a matter of taste, for even when they stole or purchased their own clothing, or accepted their owners’ castoffs, slaves would appropriate the dominant culture’s clothing practices and adapt them to their own conventions. Shane White and Graham White refer to this as a kind of “cultural *bricolage*” that gave shape and meaning to a uniquely African-American aesthetic.¹¹ As Sidney Mintz and Richard Price have argued, slaves saw in clothing the opportunity to express or assert their individuality in the context of slavery’s “relentless assault on personal identity.”¹²

Taken together, this scholarship (along with the work of Steeve O. Buckridge, Sylvia Lara, Dylan Penningroth, Sophie White, and others) hints at just how much dress mattered to masters and slaves, to men and women, as well as to both urbanites and rural dwellers throughout the centuries-long history of slavery in the Americas.¹³ But no scholar has produced a comprehensive examination of the layered, gendered, and at times conflicting meanings clothing

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contained for slaves and for those who presumed to control them. Such an examination faces a lack of a single source base or methodology that could adequately address this question in a way that captures the overlapping experiences of diverse social groups, a problem *Exquisite Slaves* addresses with a novel approach that makes use of diverse strands of inquiry, evidentiary fragments, and interpretive methods in order to examine the evolving and often contentious relationship between color, status, and self-presentation.

SOURCE BASE AND METHODOLOGY

Slavery was so integral to economic, social, and religious life in Peru that scholars have been able to rely on a wealth of civil and ecclesiastical sources to produce histories of the institution from its emergence in the sixteenth century through its abolition in 1854. But while abundant evidence reflects slaves' ethnic origins, numerical representation, geographic distribution, as well as their contributions to Peru's urban, plantation, and highland economies, documentation related to their clothing practices and the responses they provoked is scattered and incomplete. Addressing the question of slaves' material lives and circumstances, therefore, is less a matter of managing a "mound of documentation,"¹⁴ as Frederick Bowser described his experience writing about the beginnings of slavery in Peru, than it is a twin exercise in the close reading of core documents and the careful piecing together of evidentiary fragments.

The core documents for this study include the following materials: nearly 100 criminal and civil cases in which slaves stood accused of stealing clothing or other valuable material goods; hundreds of pages of manumission letters, bills of sale, wills, and inventories recorded by 10 notaries; Spanish-, French-, and English-language travel accounts of visits to Peru; and more than 30 drawings and paintings. Why and how do I use these sources? To begin, court records provide as close to a 360-degree view of slaves and their orbits as an historian is likely to find in Peruvian archives. Although few in number, the cases I have chosen for this study are filled with scores of

people: they appear on the record as claimants, alleged accomplices, witnesses, and even as third parties in witness testimonies. As the enslaved and free relatives, friends, acquaintances, neighbors, owners, and hirers of the accused, they represent a broad spectrum of colors and classes. Their presence thus makes the cases about more than the solitary, sealed-off actions of a handful of alleged thieves. Instead, they give us an understanding of how slaves behaved in ways that were shaped by and caused reverberations throughout the communities and culture in which they lived.

Court cases also contain details that are not available in other records. Although Peru did not have a tradition of slave narration, the rote questions notaries posed to claimants, alleged perpetrators, and witnesses in criminal cases yield answers that, while at times paraphrased, provide a rare first-person accounting of slaves' occupations, living situations, marital status, family composition, and personal relationships. In building my analysis of the rich, lively, and often-entertaining narratives contained within these criminal investigations, I used several guides. Chief among them were the works of scholars who have done skillful analyses of small or singular databases. For example, Sandra Lauderdale Graham's careful explorations of wills, annulment petitions, and divorce proceedings from nineteenth-century Brazil show how important it is to linger on cases in order to extract as many details as possible about the public and private lives of the actors named therein, and to embrace what she calls "the uncertain process of piecing together historically grounded but more ambiguous possibilities" when it is not possible to draw absolute conclusions.¹⁵ Similarly, Joanne Rappaport has highlighted the value of using archival records as "ethnographic scenarios" that can yield insights into the texture of an individual's experience of particular social contexts and dynamics.¹⁶ Heeding these lessons, I have mined the cases at the center of my study for more than just the hard facts they contain; in taking the time to also ask questions about and ponder the actors' motivations, silences, and elisions, I seek to make room for their complicated subjectivities.

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Part of this process also involves acknowledging the power dynamics encountered by witnesses and accused perpetrators when they recorded their testimonies. Natalie Zemon Davis's examination of royal letters of pardon or remission in sixteenth-century France is particularly instructive, given how attuned it is to the impact of social structures on the substance and composition of court documents.¹⁷ With that in mind, I give close attention to the circumstances under which witnesses and alleged perpetrators contributed to theft investigations. To be sure, as João José Reis has shown in his work on slave rebellion in Brazil, criminal cases have a way of rendering testimony as conversational even though it was often extracted under physical or emotional duress, particularly when slaves were called upon to share any information or knowledge they had, whether they wanted to offer it or not.¹⁸ The harshness of the legal system can thus be easily mistaken for witnesses' candor and complicity in proving a suspect's guilt, or for a slave's eager confession of wrongdoing. Even absent threats or the direct administration of violence, the repetition or rewording of questions to witnesses and suspects on part of notaries in criminal theft investigations often served to intimidate or even confuse them. Here, Kathryn Burns's insights into the motivations guiding these scribes are particularly helpful given how much power notaries wielded in shaping what historians consider to be "the record."¹⁹ In this regard, the work of historians of the US South who have grappled with similar challenges posed by WPA slave testimonies also informs my analysis. Considering the racial and status gulfs separating the mostly white WPA employees (many of whom belonged to old slaveholding families) from their formerly enslaved interview subjects, the documents are rife with omissions and other noticeable forms of self-censorship.²⁰ Thus, even though criminal theft investigations are somewhat unwieldy analogues in format and content to WPA narratives, they nonetheless share many similar tensions between interviewer and subject.

At the same time, there are some key differences between WPA interviews and criminal theft investigations. For one, WPA interviews

took place well after the abolition of slavery, and while the interviewers came from backgrounds and adopted interrogative styles that may have reminded formerly enslaved interviewees of their old masters, interviewees also understood that they were not being asked questions because they were in trouble with the law. Rather, they were being asked questions about their life experiences. In contrast, interviewees in criminal theft investigations (or, more specifically, slaves accused of clothing theft, along with their alleged accomplices and beneficiaries) knew that they were, or could be, in trouble. Thus, their evasions and vague replies must be read in light of their specific and constraining circumstances.

Ultimately, like Arlette Farge, I devote space to the details of these cases “not for the love of drawing (or the picture itself), nor for the sake of description, but because it is through these that one is able to follow men and women as they grapple with the whole of the social scene.”²¹ But criminal records do not tell us everything, and using them as the sole window onto slaves’ material circumstances may implicitly reproduce accusers’ and colonial officials’ notions that slaves mainly gained access to elegant clothing and other valuable resources through theft. For this reason, as well as to deepen my analysis of criminal cases, I have also drawn on notary records produced by Orencio de Ascarrunz, Silvestre Bravo, Andrés Calero, José Cardenas, Juan Casio, Juan de Dios Moreno, Fernando J. de la Hermosa, Jose Simeon Ayllon Salazar, Teodoro Ayllón Salazar, and Gerónimo de Villafuerte. These men were among dozens of active notaries during the period under study; I narrowed down the list to these men in order to have a consistent sampling across my periodization and a core group of notaries (Orencio de Ascarurunz, Fernando J. de la Hermosa, and Teodoro Ayllón Salazar chief among them) who were regularly visited by slaveholders and by clients of African descent.

My approach with these sources – in particular the manumission records, wills, and inventories contained within the notebooks – was to tease out the ways in which slaves gained access to freedom, money, clothing, and other valuables. Examining the records in this

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way means examining the world of social and transactional relationships that yielded slaves meaningful material rewards. Among other things, this approach shows how an enslaved mother's ties to a free African woman could position her to borrow money to purchase her son's freedom, and how an enslaved woman could come into possession of her owner's vast wardrobe.²² This approach necessarily relies on examining wills left by slaveholders who made provisions for slaves' freedom and inheritances. In some cases, they even detailed the affective ties that led them to make such arrangements.

Reading wills alongside criminal cases helps address the question of why some slaves resorted to – or got accused of – stealing, while others did not. Some simply lacked the social ties that could result in gifts of cash to use however they wished, or bequests of elegant clothing and other valuable material goods. The wills also show that enslaved women were the primary beneficiaries of gifts and bequests from free people (whether those free people were male or female, of Spanish, African, Indian, or mixed racial ancestry), which left enslaved men in need and in pursuit of other, often-illicit, means of gaining access to finery. This disparity raises additional questions: Did slaves perceive the difference between inheritance, purchase, and theft to be a meaningful one? Put another way, did the matter of *how* a man got his hands on elegant clothing mean as much as what he did with it when he got it? Further, is it possible that some slaves preferred the act of stealing to the act of purchasing, particularly when it involved owners or hirers against whom they may have held ill will or contempt? Again, I cannot always answer these questions with certainty, but asking them is crucial to making sense of how slaves understood and navigated the system that held them in bondage.

Another question that arose from my reading of the documents for this study was what the clothing – and even the people – in question may have looked like. This was driven by a desire to examine the outcomes of slaves' actions and the reasons for observers' reactions. Travel accounts are particularly useful to this enterprise.