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INTRODUCTION: FASHIONING THE ATLANTIC WORLD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Textiles and dress

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Places and period

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

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

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

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

Early modern Atlantic colonialism and commerce reached their apogee in the period from the mid-seventeenth to the later eighteenth centuries. European exploration of the basin dates back to the fifteenth century, colonization and exploitation of natural resources to the sixteenth. But only from the 1640s did "a shared Atlantic world," which Pierre Gervais has defined as a "thick web of relationships, linking a number of people on each side of the Atlantic Ocean," come into existence.[16] Beginning in those years, proliferating settlement and rapid expansion of the plantation economy greatly increased commerce and migration while both supplying and demanding a much broader array of trade goods.[17] That Atlantic world reached its height across the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century. Whereas some 1,144,000 Africans and Europeans left for the Americas in 1640–1700, about 3,666,000 departed between 1700 and 1760.[18] Between the early eighteenth century and the early 1770s the Atlantic trade of England about sextupled and France's rose at least eightfold; in both cases, growth in Atlantic commerce was at least double the gains registered in other commercial zones.[19]

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

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

Sources and complications

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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