
H-France Review Vol. 17 (March 2017), No. 51

Robert S. DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, xviii + 351 pp. Plates, figures, maps, tables, appendixes, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN-13: 9781107105911; \$24.00 U.S. (ed). ISBN-13: 9781316405369.

Review by Cecile Vidal, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris.

In the introduction to *The Birth of the Modern World*, Christopher Bayly used the example of bodily practices, especially dress, to demonstrate that “the societies of the world became more uniform” as globalization extended its reach between 1780 and 1914. [1] Likewise, Robert DuPlessis’s new book singles out sartorial goods and practices as crucial research objects to assess the effects of globalization. However, he analyzes the impact of European colonization and global commerce on dress regimes in the Atlantic world in the early modern period, between 1650 and 1800, before the development of factory industrialization. DuPlessis justifies his chronological and geographical focus by arguing that the Atlantic world was “a zone of especially dense networks of interconnections and interactions” (p. 17) in the early modern period and that “Atlantic colonialism and commerce reached its apogee in the period from the mid-seventeenth to the later eighteenth centuries” (p. 7). Whereas Bayly insisted on the creation of uniformity, albeit not homogeneity, DuPlessis seeks to demonstrate that simultaneous processes of convergence and divergence marked the transformation of dress regimes in the Atlantic world when the trade of woven-fiber textiles and dress expanded. In fact, those goods counted for much of the intercontinental trade.

The Material Atlantic is admirable. Very few books have succeeded in fulfilling the promises and escaping the potential flaws of Atlantic history to the extent this one does. It is an economic, social, and cultural history of cloth and clothing that does not restrict itself to one Atlantic empire, but adopts a truly oceanic scope. It is also both a global and situated history of the Atlantic world: while highlighting global trends, DuPlessis compares dress regimes in a dozen sites –port-cities and their hinterlands – located on both sides of the Atlantic: in West Africa (Cape Coast Castle and the Gold Coast), West-Central Africa (Angola), the Cape Colony, North America (examining Montreal and New France, New Orleans and Lower Louisiana, Philadelphia and rural Pennsylvania, and Charleston and coastal South Carolina), the Caribbean (Jamaica and the Southern district of Saint-Domingue), and South America (Salvador de Bahia and the Recôncavo, Buenos Aires and the Rio de la Plata). Lastly, *The Material Atlantic* is as socially inclusive as possible: people of African, European, and Native American descent are equally considered. Besides location and time, differentiations in dress regimes are studied according to status, class, gender, ethnicity, race, and place of residence (frontier or colonial settlements, city and countryside).

DuPlessis has collected and analyzed an impressive variety of primary sources written in Dutch, English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese: mostly probate or post-mortem inventories, but also merchant papers, official and personal letters and reports, newspaper advertisements, and accounts by missionaries, officials and visitors. A statistical analysis of probate inventories and merchant papers

allows him to offer a series of quantitative data related to the distribution between cotton, linen, mixed, silk, woolen, and other fabrics. The data, presented in several tables, show differences between places and evolutions over time. Written sources are supplemented by a collection of paintings, engravings, woodcuts and other images. Several fascinating images are beautifully reproduced and commented on in the book.

Chapter 1 describes the variety of sartorial goods and practices existing in the Atlantic world by the mid-seventeenth century. The main divide was between woven and non-woven textile dress regimes in respectively Western Europe and West-Central Africa, on the one hand, and the other regions of the Atlantic world examined in this book, on the other. What distinguished Europe was not the use of woven textile, but that their apparel covered most of the body. In relation with the Bible, what Europeans considered nakedness was associated with uncivilization and savagery, whereas outside Europe, people did not have to be fully clothed in public, and even went nearly or completely unclothed in some societies. Beside or instead of cloth, bodies were sometimes ornamented with tattoos or scarifications. These contrasted dress regimes were transformed over time from the mid-seventeenth century as woven-fiber textiles and dress became increasingly available and constituted the most important instrument of change. Chapter 2 thus analyses the main characteristics of the long-distance trade in those goods, the factors that influenced the differentiated textile stocks available in various locations, and the diversity of agents and modes of local distribution of imported fabrics and garments, which involved both market and non-market methods. Textile supplies tended to become more uniform over time.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with people of Native American and African descent living in the Americas or in the Cape Colony whose dress regimes were most impacted by colonization and global commerce. Chapter 3 examines the process of redressing that many indigenous individuals and communities experienced in the Americas, whether they lived completely unclothed or wore some garments before contact, as they were Christianized, participated in an exchange economy with the newcomers and/or were enrolled in the colonial labor force. In Brazil and Rio de la Plata, European missionaries and settlers succeeded in preventing Indians from going fully naked but they were unable to convince or force them to adopt a European style of dress. Likewise, in North America, first nations selectively adopted, to different degrees, some European clothes for practical and political reasons, transformed the way they were supposed to be worn, and mixed them with the garments they produced themselves. The result was new syncretic and plural Native dress regimes that mixed furs and textiles and continued to evolve over time.

Chapter 4 focuses on bound people, especially enslaved ones from Africa who faced the most drastic transformation of their mode of dress. Cloth was an important element of distinction between indentured servants and slaves. Indeed, undressing and redressing were an integral part of turning captives into slaves. Slave outfits for work on the plantations evolved the least and were the simplest and most uniform in all American slave societies as in the Cape Colony. However, because masters tried to spend as little as possible to clothe their enslaved laborers, the latter were able to acquire cloth through various means and to fashion their own styles for holiday-wear. In this way, slaves asserted their dignity and civility. Masters were perfectly aware that their slaves' sartorial practices questioned the divide between slavery and freedom. It was paradoxically where the slave system was the most exploitative and abusive – in the Caribbean sugar islands – that the enslaved were able to forge their most vibrant dress cultures.

Chapters 5 and 6 concentrate on free settlers in tropical and temperate colonies, respectively. In the slave societies of Jamaica and Saint-Domingue, accounts insisted on the wealth of planters and on the luxurious mode of dress they adopted to display their fortunes, especially after the mid-eighteenth century. However, this picture is considerably qualified by probate inventories. Over time free settlers in the Caribbean islands as well as in Brazil adopted lighter and brighter fabrics that were more

appropriate to the torrid climate. Yet, they continued to cover their bodies nearly completely, and stuck to European styles of dress as they tried to distinguish themselves from their bound laborers. In contrast there were few differences between the way white colonists and people of color dressed. More than race, occupation, gender and location explained some variations among free settlers of tropical colonies. Still, the cultures of dress in Jamaica, Saint-Domingue and Brazil tended to converge over time. In the temperate colonies, the dress regimes that free settlers created “were less syncretic and more oriented to European norms than those found in warmer areas” (p. 197) and “transatlantic dress uniformity came closest to being realized” (p. 224).

In Chapter 7, DuPlessis analyzes the situation after one hundred and fifty years of increasing connections and exchanges within and beyond the Atlantic world. At the outset of the nineteenth century, all the dress regimes of people affected by European colonization and global commerce in the Atlantic World had experienced some change even though the extent of these transformations varied considerably. In the New World, the dress regimes of indigenous and enslaved populations had been more deeply modified than those of colonists of European descent. Hybridity marked the former, but only marginally and superficially the latter. Even more than their colonial counterparts, people living in Europe were the most reluctant to change. They welcomed new raw materials from Asia or the Americas, but they used them to produce existing kinds of apparel. Their dress regimes evolved internally. These changes affected both metropolitans and colonists and contributed to differentiating empires. Finally, the slave trade in West and west central Africa and the colonial presence of the Portuguese in Angola increased the availability of woven textiles, but the structures of garments did not change. The new dress regimes that developed among political elites and the commoners who were involved in the slave trade or who identified as Christians were more syncretic than European. Hence, by 1800 woven-fiber textiles had managed to impose themselves to some extent almost everywhere, but the demand for specific kinds varied regionally. These diverse “fashions of Atlantic consumers both fostered and retarded Europe’s capitalist factory industrialization.” Yet, “Europeans profited disproportionately” from the rise in the production and consumption of woven-fiber textiles (p. 243).

Since the 1990s, Atlantic historians have forged many expressions using the word Atlantic. They talk and write about North and South Atlantics, English, Dutch, French, Spanish and Portuguese Atlantics, Black and white Atlantics, Kongo Atlantic, Native or Amerindian Atlantic, Red Atlantic, Catholic and Protestant Atlantics, etc., in relation with geographical zones, empires, diasporas, and revolutionary, religious or commercial networks. Did we need yet another Atlantic? *The Material Atlantic* convincingly demonstrates that material culture based on the production, commerce and consumption of fabrics and garments, played a crucial role in the integration of the Atlantic world. Still, DuPlessis does not downplay the power relations at stake in the process, but shows at the same time that people of Native American and African descent appropriated goods imported mostly by Europeans to forge new cultures and identities. As Nigel Bolland has demonstrated for Jamaica, in the colonial and slave societies of the Americas, “creolisation, then, [was] not a homogenizing process, but rather a process of *contention* between people who [were] members of social formations and carriers of cultures, a process in which their own ethnicity [was] continually re-examined and redefined in terms of the relevant oppositions between different social formations at various historical moments.” [2] More local studies are needed to deepen and nuance this broad narrative, especially for the Spanish Empire, with its sedentary indigenous populations and its highly multiethnic colonial cities mixing people of Native American, African and European descent, which is rather cursorily dealt with in *The Material Atlantic*. The fact that the book should stimulate more research on material culture in the early Atlantic world is a tribute to its great accomplishment. *Chapeau bas!*

NOTES

[1] Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 12.

[2] O. Nigel Bolland, "Creolisation and Creole Societies: A Cultural Nationalist View of Caribbean Social History," in *Questioning Creole: Creolisation Discourses in Caribbean Culture*, ed. Verene A. Shepherd and Glen L. Richards (Kingston and Oxford: Ian Randle Publishers and James Currey Publishers, 2002), p. 38.

Cécile Vidal
École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales
cecile.vidal@ehess.fr

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172