

# **Bodies: Fashioning Gender in the Early American Marketplace**

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“I too was cohered and received identity through my body,  
/ Of all that I had, I had nothing except through my body  
/...what identity I am, I owe to my body”

—Walt Whitman, *Selected Poems* (1856)<sup>1</sup>

Foul bodies, dead bodies, scarred bodies, sick bodies, decapitated bodies, auctioned bodies, dissected bodies, enslaved bodies, political bodies, naked bodies, fashioned bodies. In the past fifteen years of PEAS and early American scholarship, flesh has become word(s) and come to dwell among us.<sup>2</sup> Bodies, in this burgeoning scholarship, become maps, billboards, sites, advertisements, symbols, axes, credit, texts, collateral, markers, terrain; physical topography upon which political, economic and cultural contests are visually and corporeally enacted. Edward Baptist’s searing new book, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, organizes the story of slavery and American capitalism through bodily metaphors: “The Heart, “Feet,” “Heads,” “Right Hand,” “Left Hand,” “Tongues,” “Breath,” “Seed,” “Blood,” “Backs,” “Arms,” ending with “The Corpse.”<sup>3</sup> He invites us, in the words of Ralph Ellison, to view the drama of American history through the body of an African-American “who, lying trussed up like Gulliver, forms the state and the scene upon which and within which the action unfolds.”<sup>4</sup> That the

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<sup>1</sup>Walt Whitman, *Selected Poems: 1855-1892*, Gary Schmidgall ed., (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 432.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen M. Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America*, Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein, eds., (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002); Vincent Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Michael Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodied Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014) and Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) and Benjamin H. Irvin, *Clothed in Robes of Sovereignty: The Continental Congress and the People Out of Doors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); *Sex and Sexuality in Early America*, Merril D. Smith, ed., (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, vii-viii.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid*, xxiii.

newest history of the development and expansion of a purportedly “free” marketplace where rational subjects exchanged commodity objects for profit should cohere through body parts deserves some explanation.

This turn away from political and economic abstraction and towards embodiment, “the beating heart of the story,” owes much to the emergence of scholarship on the senses.<sup>5</sup> As scholars in the 21<sup>st</sup> century began inviting readers to hear, smell, taste, touch and imagine how life in early America and the nineteenth century might have been experienced sensorially, the body surfaced as a necessary site of deeper investigation. A further confluence of intellectual forces in the 1990’s contributed as well: the ascendancy of cultural history, the maturation and evolution of the “new political history,” which yielded startlingly original new works on slavery and race, and the creative destruction and rebirth of economic history in the form of histories of capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

What the Program in Early American Economy and Society in general, and Cathy Matson in particular, has engendered—that word is intentional since they have fruitfully mentored both male and female scholars and a rich study of gender—is scholarship that explicitly seeks linkages between the commercial and the economic with the social and the cultural. It was not at all obvious in the late 1990’s that institutions would support research in such a direction, in a politically charged mood of a return to narrative, traditionalism, and elite politics.<sup>7</sup> Connecting commodities and markets with cultural life

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid; Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Charles Peter Hoffer, *Sensory Worlds in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Richard Cullen Wrath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Mark M. Smith, *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Peter N. Stearns, “Social History Present and Future,” *Journal of Social History* Volume: 37, Issue: 1. (2003), 9-20; Paula S. Fass, “Cultural History/Social History: Some Reflections on a Continuing Dialogue,” *Journal of Social History* Volume 37, Issue 1, (2003), 39-46; see chapters by Lawrence B. Glickman, “The ‘Cultural Turn’” and Sven Beckert, “History of American Capitalism,” in *American History Now*, Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr, eds., (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); Jennifer Schuessler, “In History Departments, It’s Up With Capitalism,” *New York Times*, 6 April, 2013; *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic*, Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, eds., (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); *Whither the Early Republic: A Forum on the Future of the Field*, John Lauritz Larson and Michael A. Morrison, eds., (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Laura Tabili, “Race is a Relationship, and not a Thing,” *Journal of Social History* Volume: 37, Issue: 1. (2003), 125-132.

<sup>7</sup> For a summary of these scholarly trends, see Gregory H. Nobles, “Refocusing on the Founders,” in Alfred F. Young and Gregory H. Nobles, *Whose American Revolution Was It?: Historians Interpret the Founding* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 137-144. The founding of The Historical Society and the *Journal of The Historical Society* in 2000 was part and parcel of this trend. Defunct and out of print in

and class, racial, and gender formations and consumers with the processes of production, consumption, and commercialization has humanized and animated political economy. It has forced us to contend with the ways commodities like coffee and clothing, money and cotton, ribbons and wine impacted and influenced social structures as well as shaped the balance of trade, economic development and trans-Atlantic commercial relations.<sup>8</sup> Financial panics, long a staple of economic and political analysis, have been freshly explained through the whispers, rumors, and alarmed letters of panicked people.<sup>9</sup> The economic actions of the most marginal of actors have been brought into view, opening up new avenues of analysis into the role of individuals in the market and the impact of market forces on individuals.<sup>10</sup> Where once invisible hands anonymously shaped isolated commercial activities in a profit-maximizing teleology, recent scholarship has conjured actual human hands—black, white, enslaved and free, calloused by labor or safeguarded with doe-skin gloves—pawning, auctioning, bartering, trading, buying, serving, pleading for credit and confidence, at a time when confidence itself had become the most valuable commodity in the marketplace.<sup>11</sup> “Capitalist transformation” has been given a face—the face of harried clerks, for Brian Luskey, and enslaved African-Americans for Walter

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2014, The Historical Society was praised by journalists and popular historians for “representing history as it should be” and for paying “serious attention to serious subjects.” See *Times Literary Supplement* (London), 8 December 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Michelle Craig McDonald, *Caffeine Dependence: Coffee and Commerce in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming) and “The Chance of the Moment: Coffee and the New West Indies Commodities Trade,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 62:3 (July 2005): 441-472; Michael Zakim, *Ready Made Democracy: A History of Men’s Dress in the Early American Republic, 1760-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2014); Ann Smart Martin, *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); David Hancock, *Oceans of Wine: Madeira and the Emergence of American Trade and Taste* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Jessica Lepler, *The Many Panics of 1837: People, Politics, and the Creation of a Transatlantic Financial Crisis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 95.

<sup>10</sup> Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor, *The Ties That Buy: Women and Commerce in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup>), p. 225; Wendy A. Woloson, *In Hock: Pawning in America from Independence through the Great Depression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

Johnson and Edward Baptist.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, inanimate banks, bills of exchange, and securitized bonds have been materialize and brought to life in the exploited bodies of slaves and the “go ahead” agency of merchants, planters, clerks, and factors who “gained new kinds of modern power” from the dramatic expansion of bodily commerce between 1808 and 1860.<sup>13</sup>

Taking seriously then “the experience of the economy” and “the lived experience of economic change,” the emergent focus on individuals, discrete occupational groups, and networks of people has resulted in a re-defining of political economy in human terms, as product and process of human desires, aspirations, exploitations, and interactions.<sup>14</sup> An anniversary conference such as this is by its nature celebratory but it ought to be reflective as well; of what PEAS and related scholarship has accomplished and what remains to be achieved. Following the conference theme “Economic History’s Many Muses,” what follows then is a reflection and analysis of the significance of embodiment and the relationship of gender to the economy in the early American republic.<sup>15</sup>

### **Body Politics**

Though all humans have bodies, some are historically positioned more ideologically in their bodies than others. Slavery, labor stratification, industrialization and political disfranchisement in the early republic gave rise to a society that identified women, African-Americans, working-class and ethnic laborers with the body, and white-collar professionals, government officials, clergy, and educated elites with the mind.<sup>16</sup> Yet escaping or emancipating oneself from one’s body required capital and hard work; we can better understand the appeal and expansion of gentility, fashion, manners, and refinement in the period when we view them as tools to distance the self—a privileged subject imbued with spirituality, intellect, and self-governance—from the body—which

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<sup>12</sup> Brian Luskey, *On the Make: Clerks and the Quest for Capital in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 2; Johnson, *Soul By Soul*, Chapter 5; Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, Introduction.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, xxiv.

<sup>14</sup> Lepler, *The Many Panics of 1837*, 243.

<sup>15</sup> The summary offered here is by no means exhaustive of the scholarship in the field but represent the works that have been significant “muses” in my own research on fashion and consumer culture.

<sup>16</sup> This was as true in life as well as death, as Michael Sappol has shown in his imaginative and illuminating book, “People who were identified with the body” had their bodies “more frequently stolen after death.” See Michael Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 22.

required discipline, control and in the context of coverture and chattel slavery, could be totally violated or rendered invisible, kidnapped, bought, and sold. As Michael Sappol argues, “A self is excluded from market transactions precisely because in the grammar of exchange it is assigned the position of subject.”<sup>17</sup> The value of slaves and propertyless men was calculated minutely by reference to their bodies. Unmarried women too, faced continual physical scrutiny for signs of sexual propriety. In the midst of slave markets and urban brothels, of northern runaways and kidnapped free men, the distinction between subjects and objects proved elusive and uncertain. Ironically because of this, subjects turned to objects to embody their social claims. Objects worn on the body then assumed special significance in the project of constructing subjectivity.

While refinement and gentility might imbue specific goods and practices with cultural power and meaning for those seeking middle-class proprietor status, it did not cement that power in perpetuity. Fashion, in tandem with industrial capitalism, introduced and organized constant change in material life, at ever increasing rates of obsolescence.<sup>18</sup> In a capricious and proliferating marketplace, virtually no one’s place was certain. Disheveled hair and the wrong cravat on even the wealthiest white tradesman in New York or New Orleans could signify immorality and impair credit ratings and commercial relationships.<sup>19</sup> As buyers crowded Louisiana slave pens, bondswomen held their breath hoping bidders might notice their white gloves, which the trader A.J. Walker had recently purchased for them.<sup>20</sup> These objects might spell the difference between being sold with their children or facing the destruction of their families, becoming a lady’s maid or a cotton, field hand. A pair of gloves on a striving young man would not destroy his family but they could prove professionally consequential in their own right. Louisa Jane Trumbull related a story in her 1835 diary of how “Mrs. McCloud a lady

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<sup>17</sup> Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 38.

<sup>18</sup> I define fashion not as fine or elite or metropolitan styles of clothing but per Elizabeth Wilson as a “system of dress in which the key feature is rapid and continual changing of styles.” See Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>19</sup> On the politics of fashion to masculinity and elite status see Irvin, *Clothed in Robes of Sovereignty*, Part I; Linzy A. Brekke, “‘The Scourge of Fashion:’ Political Economy and the Politics of Consumption in Post-Revolutionary America,” *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3 (2005): 111-139, and Brekke, “‘To Make a Figure’: Clothing and Gender Politics in Early National America,” in *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1850*, ed. Amanda Vickery and John Styles (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 225-246.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, *Soul By Soul*, 121.

from Scotland came to Boston a short time ago...Last summer her son of 21 came to Boston and flirted about in great style wore silk stockings & kid gloves white ones too—Mrs. McCloud went to Mr. Appleton a rich gentleman of Boston to ask him to get her son into some business—“No” said he “I shall do no such thing—a young man who dresses as he does—why when I came to this place I came before a load of pigs—and I have made all the money I own.”<sup>21</sup> White kid gloves, a signature of youthful urban white-collar masculinity and domestic feminine modesty in 1835 became symbols of pretense and indolence to industrialists like Nathan Appleton.

This story about Appleton exposes the competing gender dynamics that animated masculine commercial and material culture in the early republic. The success of elite men’s attempts to disavow their bodies and construct a transcendental “self,” unconcerned with objects has masked the historic gender, racial, and economic processes involved. While we know more now, as Serena Zabin has written, about how “Men’s concern with their reputation in the marketplace reveals some of the ways that this culture of credit became weighted toward a particular sort of genteel masculinity” we don’t know who could claim that privilege, when and where and with what objects. Certainly Appleton’s would-be clerk in Trumbull’s story was using white kid gloves to embody that “particular sort of genteel masculinity”—to his misfortune. Appleton attempted to fix and privilege objects with his vision of rustic, propertied masculinity, for surely he did not come before a load of pigs in silk stockings. But he also held on to an older vision of capitalism as well. Propertied manhood rested on tangible things too-pigs and cash-earned through the sweat of his brow and the dirt on his hands, rather than exotic financial instruments or fluctuating bills of exchange. He contested the early republic culture of consumption with an older image for masculine productivity and power.

Writers in the mid-nineteenth century defined the ideal man as “a subject unhampered by fixation upon objects, a subject who, having recognized the true (market) value of object-as-commodity, fixated instead upon the transcendental values that transformed gold into ships, ships into guns, guns into tobacco, tobacco into sugar, sugar

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<sup>21</sup> Louisa Jane Trumbull diary, 14 March 1835, quoted in Lynne Bassett, “The Great Leap: Youths’ Clothing in the Early Nineteenth Century,” Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, *Textiles in Early New England: Design, Production, and Consumption* (Boston: Boston University Press, 1997), 184-202.

into gold, and all into accountable profit.”<sup>22</sup> The myth of the rational, non-consumerist productive male citizen was fashioned in the mid-eighteenth century as trans-Atlantic republican struggled against monarchy and aristocracy and a female dominated culture of sensibility. The transcendental male subject emerged triumphant out of this long contest relegating consumption to the private affective sphere controlled by women excluded from political life, as one writer succinctly put it: fashion was “a weapon conferred on her [woman] by nature to compensate the weakness of her sex.”<sup>23</sup> Women’s potential power as consumers was tamed by the castigation of fashion as a frivolous, leisured pursuit undertaken by a weaker sex excluded because of their sexualized bodies from more serious intellectual pursuits.

The ascendance of a capitalist uniform of dark woolen broadcloth coats—placed somehow outside of and beyond the realm of fashion—both managed and performed the work of gender difference.<sup>24</sup> They were supposed to equalize politically enfranchised men, as Brian Luskey avers “fine broadcloth—or what observers mistook for it—stood for the bourgeois refinement that supposedly was available to the masses if they sought advancement.”<sup>25</sup> But the rush of men seeking sober frocks to embody their political equality and perform their masculine disdain for fashion actually propelled market change, as men born in the eighteenth century were forced to cast off their wigs, breeches, silk hose and shoe buckles by the new “democratic” fashion regime of the nineteenth. The sober dark business suit has done what many republican elites wanted it to do; mask male engagement with fashion and privilege the male body as a site of

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Stallybrass, “Marx’s Coat,” in *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, Patricia Spyer ed., (New York: Routledge, 1998), 183-207, 186.

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Evergreen, “Commentary on Ballston Springs’ in *The Observer* (Baltimore), 12 December 1807.

<sup>24</sup> There is some debate about the timing of the impulse to create stronger gender boundaries through dress, with some scholars positing the 1750’s and even earlier, while others point to the French Revolution as the clear origin of a professional “bourgeois” ethic in men’s attire, growing stronger and more pronounced in the nineteenth century. All such emphatic positioning at this stage should remain speculative. I think the best way to answer such questions is through object-based analysis. In terms of material culture, there was slow, subtle, and gradual change in men’s clothing throughout the eighteenth century that sharply and quickly shifts around 1810 and endures with remarkably little variation until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For more on this debate, see David Kuchta, *Three-Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity*, chap. 6.; Philip Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society* (London: Longman, 2001), chap. 4 and 5; Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), chap. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Luskey, *On the Make*, 151.



commerce not consumption. More importantly, it has prevented us from understanding the complex processes by which men sought to attain authority and selfhood in early America through their bodies.

Coats crafted in the style of bourgeois refinement might have been the dominant mode in New York city for clerks “on the make” but it was not the only style available. Philo Munn dreamed of goods and opportunities to meet girls as he worked twelve-hour days making shoes and selling sundries in a dry goods shop in Deerfield, Massachusetts in the 1830s.”<sup>26</sup> He lamented the toil and loneliness of his work in his diary: “my mind has been all round the lots sometimes in one place and then in another part of the time building castles and part of the time pulling them down as is usual for young people...some times I imagine that a few more salutary months will cary me from my preasant lonesome hiding place.”<sup>27</sup> But he worked not for bourgeois refinement but for sociability and sex. In order to join his friends at taverns and meet girls at tea parties, he needed clothes. He recorded the number of shoes he made and what they sold for, and the precise moment when he felt confident enough to ask for credit “at J.J. Williams store for the first time to the amount of four dollars and ten cents for wareing apparel and so forth.” At the end of a year’s work, Munn had accumulated enough money to purchase an entire suit—vest, pantaloons, and coat. He walked seven miles to Greenfield and purchased a brand new suit costing \$24.00, “with great green checks, as big as you please” and noted the good-looking girls in the stores in greater detail than the wide selection of cloth.<sup>28</sup> He admired “fine young men handsomely drest” but for him, their clothes indicated independence, freedom from confining work routines and he wished he had their “good horse and wagon.”<sup>29</sup> His suit was anything but sober.

Sub-communities of style embodied the broad range of gender identities and work experiences in the early republic. Most rural farm laborers and the mass of poorly paid urban workers spent their lives in poverty and debt; their experience of consumption included sifting through musty piles in second-hand stores, slop and pawn shops; very few of the B’hoys of New York, like the shoemakers and apprentices of New England,

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<sup>26</sup> 15 November 1834, Diary of Philo Munn. Historic Deerfield.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 27 March 1835.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 19 July 1836.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 4 May 1835.

ever achieved brick townhouses and lucrative clerkships. Munn's suit flouted middle-class standards of taste and respectability and it didn't partake of flashy urban sporting culture either; this was Deerfield after all. Amidst de-skilling and labor stratification, Munn's checked suit brought him out of hiding and into the hetero-social world of taverns and country festivals. It defied monotony and isolation. Sociability and sexuality was counted in the commodities produced for the market and procured in the market. Yet this opportunity for embodied selfhood was clearly outside the norm for Munn's daily life. It wasn't a tool of upward mobility but a "castle" of pleasure to fixate on throughout the long, cold year of labor. Objects situated in time and space, suggest that men could use dress to relate and fit in as much as to stand out and differentiate themselves. Men like Munn detested the stifling confinement of the tight-bodied coats and cravats that urban clerks admired. They crafted a mode of masculinity and material culture in fierce opposition to uncomfortable suits and confined spaces.

Another option was to simply reject coats altogether. Intellectuals, radical reformers, religious sectarians and abolitionists waged a struggle for emancipated manhood not through politics and reform but through objects and the physical body. In 1854, Henry David Thoreau wrote lamenting the alienation of commercial society: "We know but few men, a great many coats and breeches. Dress a scarecrow in your last shift, you standing shiftless by, who would not soonest salute the scarecrow?"<sup>30</sup> His transcendental philosophy included a radical critique of capitalist-driven fashion. His friends regretted the way he sought to embody his protest by moving to the woods to live in a ramshackle cabin, letting his hair and beard grow wild, and frightening townspeople in an old-fashioned laborers overcoat, brown baggy trousers, and patched hat. But his critique of men's clothing was not merely a random detail on the way to more weighty intellectual concerns. It actually lay at the heart of his vision of the spiritual and intellectual crisis of manhood brought about by the expansion and acceleration of capitalism. As industrial production and profit motive alienated workers from the products of their labor, the products that they made, when worn on the body, destroyed the spirituality of men. As he put it plaintively, "We don garment after garment, as if we

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<sup>30</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, Joseph Wood Krutch ed., (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), original (1854), 121-122.

grew like exogenous plants by addition from without. Our outside and often thin and fanciful clothes are our epidermis or false skin, which partakes not of our life.”<sup>31</sup> To overcome that alienation and reclaim one’s spirituality, Thoreau asserted, required transcending the body and casting off one’s clothes altogether. It made no spiritual difference to Thoreau whether a man chose wool or cotton, a black or a brown suit, a flashy striped suit or a sober one; all fashion forms chained men in their bodies, thus stripping them of their masculine autonomy and rendering them into commodity forms.



**Figure 1.** Tail Coat, cotton with linen lining, 1790-1800, Anonymous. This striped coat displays the double-breasted style with turn-down collar made fashionable by the French Revolution but its loose shape, plain fabric and extreme wear mark it as a working man’s garment. Numerous and mismatched patches, blood and sweat stains imprinted the wearer’s hard physical labor into the coat. *Courtesy of the Connecticut Historical Society.*

Conflict, insecurity, and dissonance characterized free men’s relationships to their bodies as objects became weapons in warring ideals of masculine identity.<sup>32</sup> Free men,

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<sup>31</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 123.

<sup>32</sup> It may seem troubling to rely on the broad category of “men” to describe the heterogeneous cross-section of individuals, occupations, and social categories implicated in debate’s over menswear. The precise goal of creating and stressing greater distinctions between male and female fashion was to privilege gender difference over class, region, and status, thereby creating the illusion of male republican equality and making its precepts seem “natural” to the fulfillment of manly ideals. I am not endorsing this homogenizing impulse or verifying its truthfulness but rather interrogating the particular contours, meanings, and

white and black, were promised upward mobility if they manifested the economic self-discipline, mastery, and manly sexuality necessary to republican citizenship and a market economy.<sup>33</sup> Men on the make saw in the rhetoric of embodiment a ladder for professional advancement; some began crafting alternative orthodoxies centered around physical culture and homo-social leisure as they challenged the supremacy of the mind over the body; others rejected embodiment altogether and sought transcendence in nature, radical religion and reform. These competing and conflicting masculine ideals shaped other configurations as well, like labor, education, and sexuality as “labor stratification and impediments to land ownership made the value of the robust, laboring male body even more important for those without property.”<sup>34</sup> The resistance on the part of laboring men to the props and postures required of white-collar professional work may have pushed women into those fields and informed new occupational arrangements. Opposition to becoming a “counter jumper” may have played a role in shaping immigrant and laboring men’s preferences for unconfined work, hetero-sociability and personal networks over formal education. Labor shaped the financial and social contours of masculine consumer culture but gender ideologies structured both the practice of commerce and the segmentation of the labor market in ways we are only beginning to understand.

### **Black Modes of Masculinity**

Slavery represented a literal theft of the body and thus embodiment held different and complex meanings for African-Americans. For black men, especially, Kathleen Brown has alerted us “the body was the most important resource for expressing manhood.”<sup>35</sup> Encased in bodies that could be stripped naked publicly, inspected, whipped, tortured, and killed, embodied assertions of personhood assume special

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consequences of its articulation for relationships between a range of men and their bodies. I see commodities in the early republic as a rich field for elite, middle class, laboring, and enslaved men to contend for political and social authority.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas L. Haskell and Richard F. Teichgraber III, eds., *The Culture of the Market: Historical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); David Leverenz, *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Toby L. Ditz, “Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia,” *Journal of American History* 81 (June 1994): 51-81.

<sup>34</sup> Kathleen Brown, “Strength of the Lion,” 173.

<sup>35</sup> Kathleen Brown, “Strength of the Lion,” 173.

significance. Clothing under the slave system reproduced bodily disenfranchisement through coarse homogenized objects. Alternatives to ill-fitting and undifferentiated dress offered African Americans a powerful way to claim gender and familial identities and contest the chattel principle. Men sought to fashion political claims to manhood, which included access and control over women and children, and to manifest differing visions of freedom to each other and to whites through dress objects.<sup>36</sup>

In 1817, John Dipper, an enslaved bootmaker in Williamsburg, Virginia secured his freedom. He continued plying his craft as a free man and prospered, investing in land, slaves, livestock and timber. He received and extended credit, and slowly accumulated the wardrobe of success, as illustrated by an 1821 tailoring bill: “Black silk dress, striped silk waistcoat, round jacket and pantaloons, superfine cloth coat and waistcoat.”<sup>37</sup> The silk dress was for his wife, whose freedom he purchased shortly after his own, but the rest of the items were for himself. These were smooth and well-made fabrics, characteristics a craftsman would have appreciated, and they bore no visual or material relationship to coarse “Negro cloth.” Dipper took great care of his property, routinely sending items in to be repaired, and buying additional suits, and gingham and bombazet dresses for his children as they came into vogue in the 1820s. Dipper’s wardrobe, like his other investments, constituted as well as signified his freedom. It also reflected a husband and father’s desire to improve the appearance of himself and his family. In 1831, however, to protect his hard-won lifestyle, Dipper fled eastern Virginia and moved to New Jersey when white anger over Nat Turner’s rebellion threatened the safety and security of free blacks there.

Dipper’s conservative material advancement epitomized recently freed African-Americans’ efforts to achieve economic competency, decency, and authority as heads of households in white society. That he appeared in account books in his own name and was able to draw on credit independently was no small achievement. It spoke to white recognition of his hard work and trustworthiness. A few yards of flannel or even a

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<sup>36</sup> John Stauffer has examined the way that black abolitionists like Gerrit Smith and Frederick Douglass constructed identity and self through visual culture, especially pictures. I argue that a similar process took place through fashion. See John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), chap. 2.

<sup>37</sup> John Dipper Papers, Folder III, Papers 1826-1830. New Jersey Historical Society. Xeroxed copy in Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia.

silk waistcoat did not invoke the flashy and heedless materialism of undisciplined former bondsmen that whites feared. The tenuous situation of free blacks in places like Virginia where slavery was still legal made them consume carefully and ultimately contributed to Dipper's decision to leave the state. But it also reflected a conscious strategy of economic and racial advancement through specifically styled goods. Men like Dipper couldn't and didn't try to transcend their bodies like Thoreau; he needed his body to work and to maintain his freedom with his fists when necessary. Yet to depend on one's body, Kathleen Brown has suggested, "to assert manhood was to reinforce white depictions of black men as potentially murderous and rebellious primitives."<sup>38</sup> He used embodiment to claim the prerogatives of a male head of household and to contest negative racial stereotypes.

Frederick Douglass too balanced the embodiment of self-governed masculinity with the physical posture of strength and assertiveness. The attainment of gendered respectability was an *idée fixe* for free black men as the basis of their political enfranchisement, upon which the abolition of slavery, enjoyment of legal rights, educational opportunities, and social advancement rested. Douglass explained his definition of respectability in specific detail to readers in *The North Star* "when we say respectable, we mean intelligent, well-behaved persons, without reference to fantastic dress or pecuniary circumstances."<sup>39</sup> Emphasizing the cultivation of the mind and spirit over the acquisition of commodities and embodied performances, Douglass exhorted black men to discipline their bodies. Securing white recognition of black self-mastery he felt, was the crucial cultural capital that would enable them to contest slavery and secure rights *as men*. Yet his *Autobiography* was an object-lesson in attaining self-hood through the muscled, combative body as much as the learned, literary autobiography.<sup>40</sup>

Material life exposed disparate yet interconnected modes of black masculinity. Black evangelical ministers focused on economic, material, and social behavior as central to spiritual awakening and moral elevation to transcend racist objectification of the black body. Their efforts clashed with the expressions of urban and sporting African-American

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<sup>38</sup> Brown, *Strength of a Lion*, 187.

<sup>39</sup> Frederick Douglass, *North Star*, 26 January 1849.

<sup>40</sup> Serena R. Zabin, *Dangerous Economies: Status and Commerce in Imperial New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 26.

men who embraced freer self-expression and “signifying” performances of individuality and style.<sup>41</sup> Amidst the expansion of slavery and escalating racial violence, free African-American men begged fellow blacks to critically examine “external appearance, and the effects it produces on society” (emphasis in original) and to make the connection between attention-getting fashionable clothing and the anger of marauding white mobs. Douglass, drawing on the language and logic of commerce and consumption to make his point, warned: “Let us remember that every impropriety committed by one of us is charged to the account of our whole people.”<sup>42</sup> The collective “body” of free people of color could be essentialized and defined by the clothed body of any individual. So construed, African-Americans could not escape racial objectification, they could merely try to influence the reading of their bodies.



**Figure 2.** This 1835 portrait of Columbia, Pennsylvania businessman and abolitionist William Whipper features him sporting several layers of well-crafted custom clothing: a starched white shirt and high white stock, an embroidered waistcoat, black woolen frockcoat and overcoat, a jeweled breast pin, and a gold watch chain and key draped

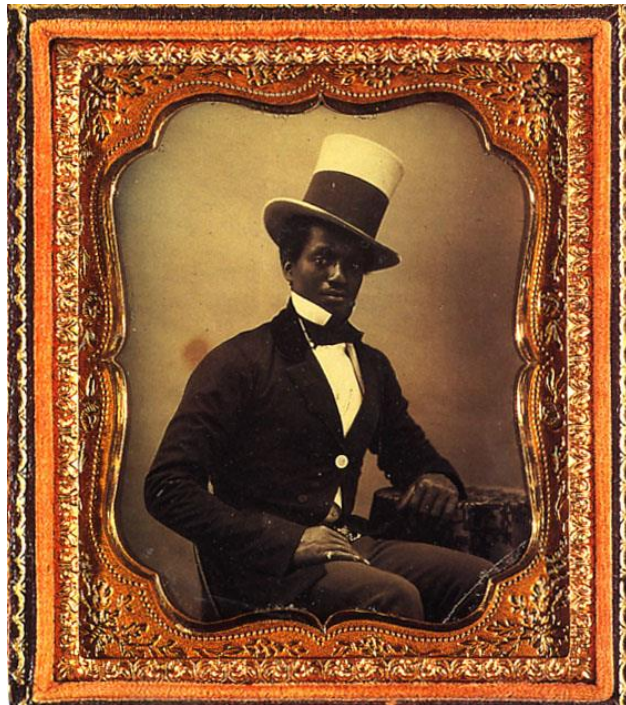
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<sup>41</sup> Though originally applied to literary texts, the concept of signifying is particularly apt if we view clothing as an embodied text, see Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>42</sup> Frederick Douglass, *North Star*, 28 July, 1848.

conspicuously across the center of his chest. The monogrammed leather account book featuring his initials testifies to his need to keep track of his extensive land and business ventures. Whipper's body and his book materialized his commitment to embodied respectability and capitalist masculine mastery. Oil on canvas.

*Courtesy of the New York State Historical Society.*



**Figure 3.** This anonymous sitter strikes a pose of artful defiance and cool style, wearing a tight but poorly-fitting frock coat and beaver top hat cocked to one side. A pinky ring is the most obvious item of jewelry but a watch chain and watch are just visible around his waist, ca.1852. Jewelry, popular on young urban men and African-Americans was censured as effeminate and dangerous on black men, inciting white physical assault.

*Courtesy of the George and Sue Whiteley Collection*

As slavery chained the bodies of millions of enslaved African-Americans, so too did fashion threaten the minds of free black men. The *Colored American* pitted emancipated, black manhood and fashion as mortal enemies: “the worst indication in the character of any man is a love of dress...Think you WASHINGTON would ever have had the sparkling and dazzling halo of glory put upon his brow, if he had thus confined within the compass of his own body, his giant intellect? Were Newton, Bacon, Locke who reveled in the hitherto unexplored depths of the sciences—vain of their personal



dress?”<sup>43</sup> Seeking to escape “the compass of the body,” black leaders promoted political and intellectual engagement over embodied performances. In the context of an on-going struggle to end slavery and create new opportunities for free blacks, appearance emerged as a crucial vehicle for the self-definition and freedom struggles of African-Americans. Their material strategies had the effect, however, of reinforcing the convergence of race and the body. They continued to think and describe their community *as a body*, rather than as a population of free and independent subjects.

### **Toward an Embodied Economy**

Feminizing fashion, advertisers and retailers in the early republic cast male consumption as commercial investments in business attire and personal connections rather than a pleasure in its own right.<sup>44</sup> The politics of embodied masculinity remains hidden and obscured behind the myth of the anti-fashion, male producer-citizen. Capitalism welcomed all comers, encouraging women as well as men, enslaved and free, urban and rural to buy and spend, but gender structured the terms of their engagement. Gender ideologies shaped market transactions and material values for men in new ways. Marketplace activity might strengthen male social bonds and provide avenues for male sexuality and hetero-sociability. Men used their bodies not just to labor and love, they drew on embodied practices to craft masculine self-hood. In doing so, they argued for different modes of production, market relations, and political distributions of power even as they insisted that fashion and consumption was women’s work. This turned the labor women performed to feed and clothe families into a leisure activity of socialization rather than the hidden, unwaged toil it was and is. It has hidden the way white commercial elites privileged and deployed a vision of disembodied masculine authority to manage the bodies of free white and black laborers and slaves, whose undisciplined bodies rendered fit subjects for exploitation.

We must continue in the next fifteen years to look to embodied practices to expose gender sub-cultures; to pluralize gender identities and dynamics and see them as fluid and changing. In specific times and places, certain gender formations appeared more

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<sup>43</sup> “On Dress,” *The Colored American*, 3 June 1837.

<sup>44</sup> See Joanna Cohen, “Promoting Pleasure as Political Economy: The Transformation of American Advertising, 1800 to 1850” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 48, No.2/3 (Summer/Autumn 2014), 163-189.

dominant and powerful than others. We must continue to locate and identify the sources and consequences of these particular configurations. We need to interrogate further how peripheries shaped centers of commercial culture; how clients and consumers on the margins exercised economic agency and drove innovative material practices towards their own social ends.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, we must move our cultural and material culture analysis beyond considerations of “markers of status.”<sup>46</sup> The cultivation of personal style, sensibility, and gendered selfhood was a matter of great import for the individual and their closest intimates. Scholars (including this one) reading bodies are too inclined to see performances for an external audience rather than an interior self. Surely, how a body felt in clean underwear or tight fitting trousers was as significant *to that body* as to the body politic.<sup>47</sup> As Harvard student Stephen Peabody described the feeling of clean breeches and gloves in his diary in 1767, “I felt in another World.”<sup>48</sup> In fact, since so many of these behaviors were actually concealed, private commercial acts held meaning that went deeper than public bids toward gentility.<sup>49</sup> Owning beautiful objects, fitting in and feeling good must all factor in our analyses as much as the desire to stand out or claim some kind of external status. Young men and women in urban settings sought not just distinction but affiliation, as anti-fashion itself became a fashion among radical intellectuals, rural populists, Mormons, Mennonites, Shakers and other religious sects.

The social relations capitalism produced, like commodification, were processes, not givens, in which people contested their objectification with everything they had. The genius of commerce lay in offering product-solutions for market-generated problems. Slaves worked garden plots to acquire buttons to make tow cloth fit better; clerks bought broadcloth coats from second-hand shops to secure a job; factory-laboring women used collective action to force stores to stay open later so they could shop.<sup>50</sup> These individuals

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<sup>45</sup> Serena R. Zabin, *Dangerous Economies: Status and Commerce in Imperial New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); O’Connor, *The Ties That Buy*;

<sup>46</sup> Zabin, *Dangerous Economies*, p.25.

<sup>47</sup> Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 357; John E. Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort: Sensibilities and Design in Early Modern Britain and Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 105, 197-198.

<sup>48</sup> Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 96.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Hartigan-O’Connor, *The Ties That Buy*, p. 156.

<sup>50</sup> Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 118-122.

sought to transcend and contest the market through the market, acts that expanded the production of the goods and services that impoverished them and devalued their labor, “a political subjection, in which agency and subordination” were poignantly intertwined.<sup>51</sup> In the next fifteen years, we must turn our attention to materially specific studies that move beyond concepts like gentility and refinement to uncover the gendered registers of self that shaped relationships of power in the early republic.

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<sup>51</sup> Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 3; Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 13.