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Beyond the Classical Archives: Dress as Embodied Histories, Memory, and Orality in and from the Caribbean

Abstract:

As scholars, rarely do we try to read objects as we read books--to comprehend the people and the times that created these objects or 'belongings.' However, the study of dress objects as material culture seeks to change this by exposing material evidence to historical analysis. Material culture is the study of artifacts and physical objects to understand the beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes and assumptions of a particular community or society at a given time.ⁱ It is not my intent to establish the primary importance of dress as opposed to documents, but to demonstrate how dress is parallel to written archival materials and is a source for historical analysis. As Henry Glassie has appropriately stated, "For too long historians have left out vast realms of experience that do not fit into words at all, that can only be shaped into artifacts."ⁱⁱ

Material culture is especially important for studying those individuals who left no written records. The lapse in documentary evidence in archival institutions and the absence of slave testimony across some areas of the Caribbean requires new and innovative methods of research to access the lives and lived experiences of enslaved and colonized people in the region. I argue more scholars need to venture into materials outside of the environment of the state archive and public library, to look at alternative sources like dress as an important source for historical knowledge and enquiry. Dress is a visual language, a form of archive that embodies histories, memory and orality and provides a window into the past as written archival documents do. The study of dress helps us to comprehend the role and uses of dress in shaping the experiences, escape process and representation of enslaved people of the Caribbean. The clothed body can tell a much larger story about African diasporic identity, sartorial style, and the representation of blackness.

Dress, for instance, can reflect colonial society's concepts of feminine beauty, class distinction, gender relations, and cultural retention. The analysis of slave dress is important because it allows us to ask crucial questions and develop some understanding of the various social roles that dress played in slave society; How did dress as a visual language and expressive form of culture articulate differences in slave society? Or how did dress empower or disempower slave women within the colonial plantocracy? Such analysis allows us to comprehend the meaning of texts and illuminates the complexities of enslaved peoples' lives and helps us to understand culture, artistic invention, cultural retention, and resistance.

Bio:

Steeve Buckridge was born and raised in Jamaica. He received his BA from Barry University, MA from the University of Miami, and his Ph.D. from the Ohio State University. He is currently a Professor of African and Caribbean History at Grand Valley State University. His areas of research are Pre-Colonial and Colonial Africa, Caribbean slavery, Gender and Sexuality, Material Culture, Dress and Fashion History. Buckridge's interest in fashion was influenced by his upbringing and his early years working in fashion and design.

He is a recipient of the Ford Foundation fellowship and was based at the University of the West Indies as a Ford fellow. He has published and lectured on Caribbean dress and African textiles, and he has travelled widely in Africa studying weaving techniques and indigenous textiles. He lived and taught in several countries including South Africa and Ghana. His pioneering book, *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaican, 1760-1890* was published by the University of the West Indies Press in 2004.

In 2014, he was awarded a Visiting Scholar in Residence Fellowship at the Center for British Art at Yale University where he used photography, paintings, and other forms of visual representations to analyze dress in Victorian Jamaica. His latest book, *African Lace-Bark in the Caribbean: The Construction of Race, Class and Gender* was released by Bloomsbury Press in 2016. The book was featured in an exhibition on tree and rainforest conservation at Buckingham Palace hosted by the late Queen Elizabeth II and a copy was requested for the British Royal Archive. The text examines the production of lace-bark (a form of natural lace from *lagetto* tree bark) indigenous to the island nations of Cuba, Jamaica, and Haiti. Professor Buckridge is also a recipient of the US Fulbright Scholar/Teaching award and was based at the University of Namibia where he lectured in history. His research and forthcoming book will examine the impact of the Namibian genocide on African women and the connection between dress and the traumatized body. Future projects include an analysis of Imperial dress in Victorian Jamaica, and Caribbean textiles as medium between the living and the dead.

ⁱ Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, Joanne Eicher, and Kim Johnson eds., *Dress and Identity*. (New York: Fairchild, 1995), pp. 5-6.

ⁱⁱ Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery eds., *History from Things*. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), pp. 1-17.