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**Threads of Rebellion: An Exploration Into  
Slave Dress as a Medium of Resistance in  
Texas, 1830-1865**



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# Threads of Rebellion: An Exploration Into Slave Dress as a Medium of Resistance in Texas, 1830-1865

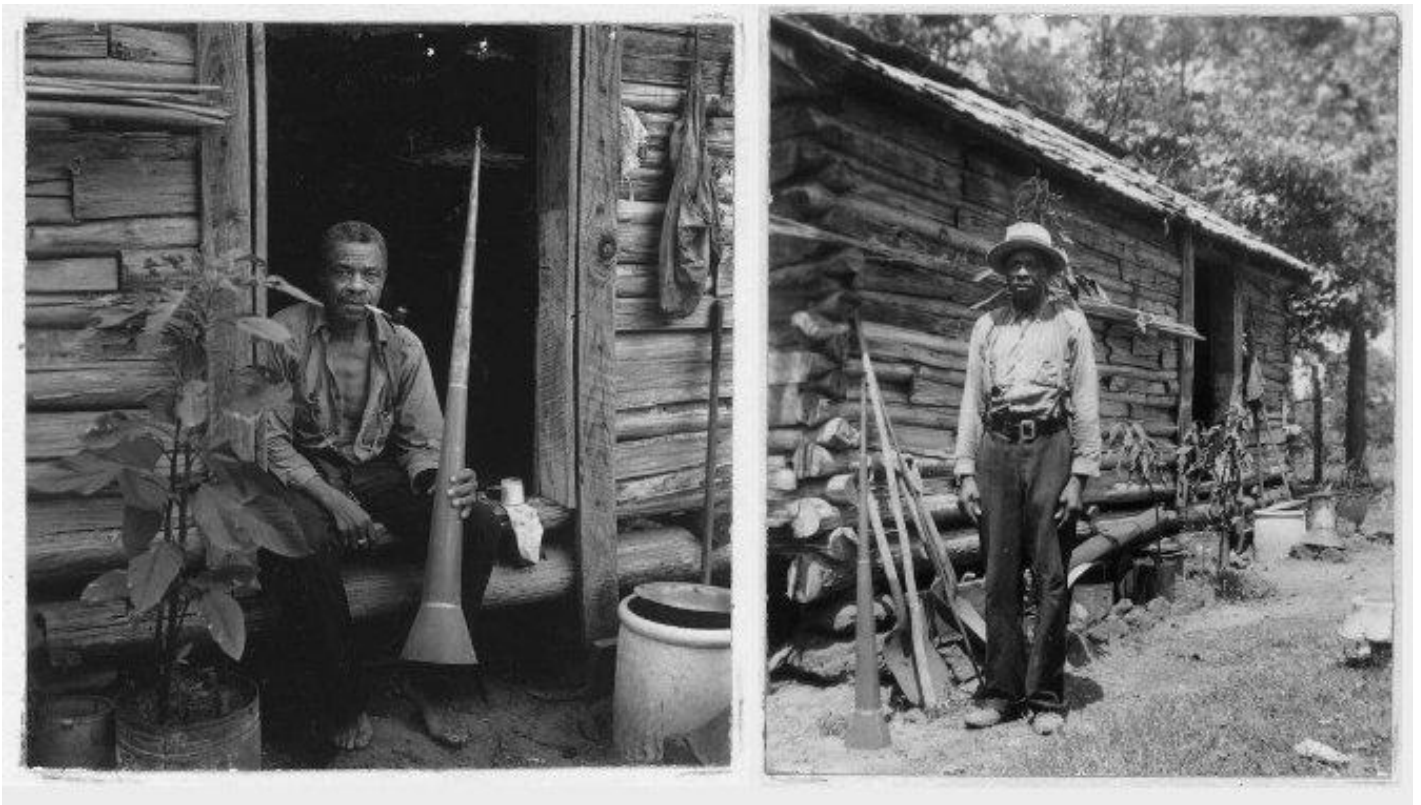


Figure 1. *Willis Win*, Project Gutenberg Ebook Slave Narratives

<<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/35381/35381-h/35381-h.html#willis-winn>> [accessed 10

May 2022]

## CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS	5
A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY	6
INTRODUCTION	7
CHAPTER ONE – MAINTAINING A COLLECTIVE AFRICAN IDENTITY	17
CHAPTER TWO – EXPRESSING INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY	23
CHAPTER THREE – UNDERMINING THE IDENTITIES OF WHITE ENSLAVERS	27
CONCLUSION	31
BIBLIOGRAPHY	33

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

TRSP – Texas Runaway Slave Project

WPA – Works Project Administration

## A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this study, 'dress' will be defined as 'an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body', as outlined by historians Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne Eicher.<sup>1</sup> In this way, dress includes many types of bodily adornment, such as hairstyles and piercings, along with items attached to the body such as clothing, jewellery and accessories. The term 'dress' is suitable for this study, which investigates how slaves used their clothing, hair and accessories to challenge slavery.

The term 'African' will refer to persons or practices of African descent. This composite view of Africa makes sense when looking at slavery as the specific cultural origins of the enslaved were often lost through the process of enslavement which severed familial ties.<sup>2</sup> However, sometimes the enslaved found ways to maintain ties to specific ethnic groups and whenever necessary or possible, specific groups within Africa will be referenced.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne Eicher, 'Dress and Identity', *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 10 (1992), 1-8 (p. 1).

<sup>2</sup> Boatema Boateng, 'African Textiles and the Politics of Diasporic Identity-Making' in *Fashioning Africa*, ed. By Jean Allman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 212-226 (p. 16).

## INTRODUCTION

‘Every revolution begins with a change of clothes.’<sup>3</sup>

– René Bizet, French journalist and critic (1913)

Throughout history, dress has offered its wearer a powerful tool to resist, enabling the expression of rage, sadness, cultural heritage, political affiliation, and sometimes joy.<sup>4</sup> This is especially true when the wearer has been unable to verbalise their feelings, due to oppression or intimidation. In the 1970s, Black Power activists styled their hair in afros or dreadlocks to protest against white supremacy in America, while British punks pierced their earlobes as a symbol of protest in a depressing postwar society that offered little for them.<sup>5</sup> Yet despite dress functioning as a powerful tool of resistance throughout history, few studies have explored how different groups have used their dress to rebel.<sup>6</sup> This study seeks to highlight the important insights exploring dress as a tool of resistance can offer into the political and cultural struggles of marginalised groups in history and the ways they fought oppression. Specifically, this study will explore how the slave community in Texas used their dress to resist between 1830-1865. This will be the first study of its kind to examine slave dress in Texas, and the first study to focus exclusively on slave dress as a medium of resistance in America. This study will not only highlight the creative ways dress was used to resist but will also offer insight into the lives of the enslaved, many of whom have had their stories obscured from view. Ultimately, by uncovering these stories, this study aims to come closer to understanding what slavery was like for those who experienced it.

Between 1619-1808 approximately 400,000 Africans were stolen from their homeland and sold as slaves in North America.<sup>7</sup> Upon arrival in the United States, slaves’ African clothing

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<sup>3</sup> This quote was extracted from Camille Benda, *Dressing the Resistance: The Visual Language of Protest*, ed. By Camille Benda (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2021), p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ane Crabtree, ‘Forward’ in *Dressing the Resistance: The Visual Language of Protest*, ed. by Camille Benda (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2021), pp. 6-8 (p. 6).

<sup>5</sup> Camille Benda, *Dressing the Resistance*, p. 11; Kobena Mercer ‘Black Hair/Style Politics’, *New Formations*, 3 (1987), 33-54 (p. 33).

<sup>6</sup> For insight into how everyday forms of resistance such as dress function as a tool of political opposition see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Shane White, Graham White, *Stylin’: African-American Expressive Culture, from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 6.

was replaced with drab, poor-quality garments imported from Europe.<sup>8</sup> The tradition of dressing slaves in poor-quality clothing continued throughout slavery as slaveholders sought to strip the enslaved of their cultural heritage and identity, believing this would enable them to control the enslaved more easily.<sup>9</sup> Over time, slaveholders transitioned away from a reliance on imported European clothing toward a reliance on slave manufactured textiles, whereby slaves were given coarse materials such as osnaburg and kersey and forced to make clothes for themselves.<sup>10</sup> According to historians Shane White and Graham White, slaves across America took advantage of this shift and, in the 75 years before the Civil War, shaped their dress to their liking, contrary to the wishes of their enslavers.<sup>11</sup>

Between 1830-1865 the enslaved in Texas evidently discovered ways to shape their dress, transforming it into a powerful tool to resist slavery. Although few traces from their lives remain, fugitive slave advertisements published in antebellum newspapers suggest this. These notices were published in newspapers at considerable expense by slaveholders seeking to retrieve slaves who had escaped from their properties in search of freedom. Embedded within these adverts are descriptions of bold slaves who contested their captivity using their clothing, accessories and hair. Slave narratives also reveal how slaves used their dress to resist. This study will take fugitive slave adverts and slave narratives together to investigate how slaves in Texas resisted through their dress. My dissertation will argue that the enslaved used their dress as a tool to challenge slavery in three key ways: to uphold their communal African heritage, express their individual identities and undermine their enslavers. By interpreting hitherto neglected representations of dress in sources such as slave adverts and slave narratives, I will argue, we can augment and deepen existing histories of the resistance of enslaved peoples in the period.

## **Literature**

### Slave Resistance Historiography

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<sup>8</sup> Steeve O. Buckridge, *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1760-1890* (Mona: The University of the West Indies Press, 2004), p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Boateng, p. 16

<sup>10</sup> White and White, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 36.



By exploring how dress was used by the enslaved to resist, this study will address gaps in the historiography on slave resistance. Historians have long discredited Ulrich B. Phillips' work depicting slaves as passive in response to slavery, instead highlighting the numerous techniques the enslaved employed to challenge their captivity.<sup>12</sup> However, within works on slave resistance, the use of dress as a tool to rebel has been overlooked. In his book *American Negro Revolts*, Herbert Aptheker identifies eight methods of resistance, including running away and violent insurrection, yet slave dress is neglected.<sup>13</sup> Anthropologist Melville Herskovits also neglects slave dress in his book *The Myth of the Negro Past*, which covers daily forms of slave resistance such as breaking tools and damaging crops.<sup>14</sup> One exception is provided by Stephanie M. H. Camp. Her work explores how female slaves in the southern states used everyday tools to resist, including their dress.<sup>15</sup> Camp, however, only dedicates nine pages to this topic, and male slaves are omitted from her study altogether. Therefore, while scholarship on slave resistance has emphasised the myriad ways slaves contested their captivity, gaps in the field remain and the use of slave dress as a medium for resistance demands further historical investigation. This study aims to address these gaps.

### Slave Dress Historiography

This study also aims to nuance current historiography on slave dress. Although several studies have analysed slave dress in recent decades, it has been largely misunderstood. Up until recently, slave dress has been viewed as a standard imposed by white slaveholders, with little or no room for the enslaved to shape their dress to their liking, let alone to use it as a medium of resistance. In her work on slave clothing in the Antebellum South, Ann DuPont argues slave dress was fully determined by the slaveholder. Drawing on diary entries from white slaveholders, Dupont states,

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<sup>12</sup> Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1918).

<sup>13</sup> Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Revolts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943).

<sup>14</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).

<sup>15</sup> Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), see pp. 78-87.

‘The allotment system of clothing distribution was, in concept, designed to foster complete dependence and thus, instill loyalty of slave to slaveowner. Rather, it signified absolute control and reinforced a sense of inferiority.’<sup>16</sup>

Other historians echo this view, such as Patricia Hunt-Hurst. Exploring slave clothing in Georgia through fugitive slave adverts, Hunt-Hurst attributes the variety in slave clothing entirely to the generosity and economic capability of the slaveholder.<sup>17</sup> Whilst Dupont and Hunt-Hurst helped to establish slave dress as a subject of historical inquiry, their focus on white-authored sources has led them to overlook the agency of the enslaved. Viewing slave dress as a standard imposed by the slaveholder, these scholars overlook the brave acts of the enslaved who used their dress to challenge slavery. This study will challenge claims made by these historians, using both black and white-authored accounts to show that in Texas, the variety of slave dress can be attributed to acts of the enslaved who empowered themselves through their dress.

In more recent years, several scholars have incorporated sources produced by the enslaved themselves, such as slave narratives, into their work on slave dress. This has led historians to acknowledge the role the enslaved played in shaping their dress and how it was used as a tool of self-expression. In their seminal study on black expressive culture, *Stylin’*, Shane White and Graham White draw on fugitive slave adverts and slave narratives to highlight how slaves across America exercised their agency through their hair and clothing.<sup>18</sup> White and White argue slaves used their dress to forge a distinctive style, rooted in African traditions, and to mock white culture. Helen Bradley Foster similarly explores how slaves used their dress to express themselves and uphold their African heritage in her work on the Antebellum South, which draws largely on slave narratives.<sup>19</sup> Other scholars have echoed similar themes in their works, namely Linda Baumgarten, Jonathan Prude and Rebecca

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<sup>16</sup> Ann DuPont, “Textile Tribute in the Antebellum South”, *Textiles in Daily Life: Proceedings of the Third Symposium of the Textile Society of America* (Earleville: Textile Society of America Inc., 1993), pp. 111-118 (p.117).

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Hunt-Hurst, “‘Round Homespun Coat & Pantaloons of the Same’’: Slave Clothing as Reflected in Fugitive Slave Advertisements in Antebellum Georgia’, *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 83 (1999), 727-740.

<sup>18</sup> White and White.

<sup>19</sup> Helen Bradley Foster, *‘New Raiments of Self’’: African American Clothing in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Berg 3PL, 1997).

Fifield.<sup>20</sup> These studies highlight the creative ways the enslaved used their dress to express themselves, and this study will build on these ideas. However, they fail to emphasise how dress acted as an instrument of resistance for the enslaved. Taking these works further, resistance will be a central theme of this study. Furthermore, whilst these works offer comprehensive accounts of slave dress across large swathes of America, this study will address gaps and inaccuracies within these works that have come to light when exploring the specific case of Texas.

Currently, only a handful of works have linked slave dress to methods of resistance, and often these works offer oversimplified accounts. Drawing on fugitive slave adverts, John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger highlight that slaves across America used their clothing to disguise and escape.<sup>21</sup> David Waldstreicher similarly uses fugitive adverts to highlight how slaves in the mid-Atlantic refashioned their clothing for purposes of disguise.<sup>22</sup> Whilst these emphasise that the enslaved challenged slavery through their clothing, by drawing on white-authored sources alone these studies overlook the complex ways slaves used their dress to resist. This study will nuance such works, highlighting that slaves also used their clothing in other more complex ways to challenge slavery.

In more recent years, a few exceptional works have highlighted the complex ways dress was used by the enslaved to resist. However, this field remains ripe for investigation. Steeve Buckridge has highlighted how female slaves in Jamaica used their dress to challenge slavery by maintaining their African heritage and resisting acculturation.<sup>23</sup> Stephanie Camp, similarly, has explored how slave dress operated as a tool of empowerment for women in the Plantation South.<sup>24</sup> Whilst these works provide insightful accounts of slave resistance through dress, they limit their analysis to female slaves alone. This study will go further, exploring how male and female slaves used their dress to resist. Antonio Bly provides the best account of

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<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Prude, "'To Look Upon the Lower Sort': Runaway Ads and the Appearance of Unfree Laborers in America, 1750-1800', *The Journal of American History*, 78 (1991), 124-159; Linda Baumgarten, 'Common Dress: Clothing for Daily Life' in *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America*, (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 106-139; Rebecca Fifield, "'Had on When She Went Away...': Expanding the Usefulness of Garment Data in American Runaway Advertisements 1750-90 through Database Analysis', *Textile History*, 42 (2011), 80-102.

<sup>21</sup> John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, 'Profile of a Runaway' in *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 209-233.

<sup>22</sup> David Waldstreicher, 'Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 56 (1999), 243-272.

<sup>23</sup> Buckridge.

<sup>24</sup> Camp, pp. 78-87.

slave dress as a tool of resistance to date.<sup>25</sup> Through careful analysis of fugitive slave adverts, he argues male and female slaves in New England used their dress, along with linguistics and gestures, to subvert slaveholder authority between 1700-1790. Describing the slaves as ‘pretty, sassy and cool’, Bly highlights that slaves in New England rejected their masters’ ideas about how they should dress and in doing so, rebelled against slavery. This study will build on the framework provided by Bly. However, whilst Bly focuses on slaves in New England from 1700-1790, this study will focus on slaves in Texas between 1830-1865. Whilst Buckridge, Camp and Bly provide insightful accounts of how slaves transformed their dress into instruments of resistance, gaps in the field remain and further historical investigation is necessary.

Overall, this study will depart from previous literature by focusing exclusively on how slave dress was used by male and female slaves to resist, and by focusing on slave dress in Texas. Although several studies have explored slave dress in Jamaica, America and within several American states, as outlined above, no published work has yet explored slave dress exclusively in Texas, making this the first of its kind.

## **Methodology**

Few garments worn by slaves have survived into the twenty-first century, having been repurposed into second-hand clothing or household textiles, and eventually left to rot.<sup>26</sup> Although some items managed to stand the test of time, these are often inaccessible, locked up in museums with insufficient cataloguing.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, this study will rely on written sources to explore what slaves in Texas wore between 1830-1865 and what these items meant to their wearers. Specifically, this study will be informed by fugitive slave adverts, which provide rich descriptions of dress items no longer available to examine physically. Despite extensive use of fugitive slave adverts by historians in recent decades, few scholars have explored these adverts to examine slave dress. Yet embedded within these notices are the tales of bold slaves who used their dress to rebel against slavery that demand

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<sup>25</sup> Antonio T. Bly, ‘Pretty, Sassy, Cool: Slave Resistance, Agency, and Culture in Eighteenth-Century New England’, *The New England Quarterly*, 89 (2016), 457-492.

<sup>26</sup> Fifield, p. 83.

<sup>27</sup> Fifield, p. 80.

acknowledgement. Furthermore, fugitive slave adverts provide other details of the enslaved, such as their name and age, allowing their individual stories to come to light. Although fugitive slave adverts only provide insight into a small part of the total slave population, as only a fraction of slaves managed to flee, as Lathan Windley asserts 'they [nonetheless]... represent a cross-section of the different types within these colonies'.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, fugitive slave adverts are valuable for exploring the slave community in Texas as a whole. However, these fugitive slave adverts will be supplemented with narratives given by the formerly enslaved in Texas. These slave narratives were collected by the Works Project Administration (WPA) who conducted interviews with the formerly enslaved in Texas between 1936-1938. These interviews were first published by the Library of Congress in 1941.<sup>29</sup> Secondary literature will also be used.

Specifically, this study will be informed by fugitive slave advertisements compiled in the Texas Runaway Slave Project (TRSP) database, which is publicly available and searchable online.<sup>30</sup> This database holds the records of over 2,500 slaves who escaped from captivity in or near Texas between 1830-1865. Since its publication in 2015, the database has been used to explore numerous topics, such as the geographical routes taken by fugitive slaves in Texas.<sup>31</sup> However, despite the rich descriptions of slave dress contained in the database, it has never been used to conduct a study of slave dress in Texas. By analysing this source in a

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<sup>28</sup> Lathan A. Windley, *A Profile of Runaway Slaves in Virginia and South Carolina from 1730 through 1787* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), xviii.

<sup>29</sup> There are several sources for the Texas WPA narratives. The first collection of 275 interviews was published by the Library of Congress in 1941. See Federal Writers' Project, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, Vol. 16 Texas Narratives, Parts 1-4 (Washington, D.C.: The Library of Congress., 1941). In 2000-2001, the Library of Congress digitised these interviews along with interviews that had never been made publicly available. This dissertation has been informed by this digital collection. See Library of Congress, 'Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938', Vol. 16, Texas <<https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/>> [accessed 11 May 2022]; hereinafter this citation will be abbreviated as follows: person's name (part, page number). Another source for these interviews also exists. In the mid-1970s George Rawick et. al. published a revised version of the original interviews upon realising details had been missed out, along with 316 previously unpublished interviews. There may be variations within these interviews that have not been accounted for here. See George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Supplement Series 2*, Vols. 2-10: Texas Narratives (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1979).

<sup>30</sup> Kyle Ainsworth, *Texas Runaway Slave Project* (East Texas Research Center, Ralph W. Steen Library, Stephen F. Austin State University) <<https://digital.sfasu.edu/digital/collection/RSP>> [accessed 11 May 2022]; hereinafter referred to as the TRSP.

<sup>31</sup> Kyle Ainsworth, 'Advertising Maranda: Runaway Slaves in Texas, 1835-1865' in *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America* ed. by Damian Alan Pargas (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018), pp. 197-231.

new way, this study will offer groundbreaking analysis of the question of the slaves' struggle for resistance in captivity. Unlike works that take a quantitative approach to slave databases, such as Hunt-Hurst's work on slave clothing in Georgia, this study will employ a qualitative, case-study approach.<sup>32</sup> This will ensure the enslaved are not objectified but rather that their voices are heard. When possible, the name of each slave referenced will be given.

While the TRSP database provides rich insights into slave dress, it has two key limitations. Firstly, fugitive slave advertisements were produced by white slaveholders seeking to retrieve slaves who had fled from their properties. As a result, descriptions of slave dress in these advertisements rest on assumptions of the white community. This makes it difficult to access the feelings of the enslaved towards their dress. However, by reading between the lines and observing patterns within these adverts, the attitudes of the enslaved come to light. Secondly, the majority of slaves recorded in the database are men (91 per cent) with fewer records of female slaves.<sup>33</sup> However, by supplementing the fugitive slave adverts with slave narratives, this study ensures the voices of the slave community are represented as accurately as possible and that female slave dress can be analysed sufficiently. However, as oral histories, these narratives are associated with their own limitations such as memory loss, having been recorded over 70 years after slavery was abolished in America.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, everyday details about slave dress are often missed out from these accounts which focus on significant events in the slaves' lives. However, by analysing slave narratives and fugitive slave advertisements together, this study aims to limit the drawbacks of each source, and build a story based on common accounts while also considering insights offered by differences between the sources.<sup>35</sup>

This study will focus solely on Texas between 1830-1865. By focusing on Texas alone, this study will make an important contribution to slave dress historiography which has previously neglected Texas as a site of inquiry. Furthermore, Texas provides an invaluable case study for an investigation into slave resistance through dress given the high levels of

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<sup>32</sup> Hunt-Hurst, pp. 727-740.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Library of Congress, 'The Limitations of the Slave Narrative Collection' <<https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/limitations-of-the-slave-narrative-collection/>> [accessed 11 May 2022].

<sup>35</sup> Another limitation of the TRSP database is that it currently lacks 600 fugitive slave advertisements that were published in German and have not yet been translated into English. This is an area for potential variation from the conclusions drawn here.

slave resistance in this state. As the only southern state with an international border, many slaves in Texas attempted to escape. Estimates suggest that by 1851, 3,000 slaves had fled Texas and were living across the border in Mexico.<sup>36</sup> The years 1830-1865 have been chosen for this study due to data in the TRSP database, but also because this was a significant period in Texas slave history. This period saw an influx of slaves in Texas due to Texas achieving independence from Mexico and slavery becoming legal in 1836, along with the annexation of Texas to America in 1845.<sup>37</sup> It is estimated that between 1836-1861 the number of slaves in Texas rose from 5,000 to 170,000 as many Anglo-Americans migrated to Texas from other southern states, bringing those they had enslaved with them.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, these years are significant for an inquiry into slave history in Texas. It is important to note that from 1861 to 1865 the American Civil War was taking place. Several slave narratives from this period refer to a lack of clothes. However, despite economic hardships during the war, the sources highlight slaves in Texas continued to find ways to transform the clothes they did have into powerful weapons of resistance up until 1865 when freedom finally came. Although White and White claim that with the coming of freedom, slaves in America 'were increasingly drawn into an economic system that left them with neither the time nor the facilities to fashion their own cloth and clothing', the sources used here reveal that this was not the case in Texas.<sup>39</sup>

Overall, this methodological approach aims to enrich the literature on slave dress and slave resistance. By exploring slave dress in Texas using data from the TRSP, this study will be the first of its kind. Furthermore, by using a range of sources, both written and oral, black and white, this study aims to depict the voices of the enslaved as accurately as possible.

## Structure

This study uses a three-chapter structure to emphasise the variety of ways slaves in Texas resisted through dress, as highlighted by the source material.

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<sup>36</sup> William Dean Carrigan, 'Slavery on the frontier: The peculiar institution in Central Texas', *A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, 20 (1999), 63-69 (p. 68).

<sup>37</sup> Sean Kelley, "'Mexico in his Head": Slavery and the Texas-Mexico Border, 1810-1860', *Journal of Social History*, 37 (2004), 709-723 (pp. 717).

<sup>38</sup> Kyle Ainsworth, 'Texas Runaway Slave Digital Project – Final Report to the Summerlee Foundation' (2015) <<https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/libfacpub/17/>> [accessed 11 May 2022].

<sup>39</sup> White and White, p. 36.

Chapter One – Maintaining a Collective African Identity: This chapter will examine how the enslaved used their dress to uphold their African heritage and resist acculturation.

Chapter Two – Expressing Individual Identity: This chapter will explore how the enslaved expressed their personalities through their dress, and how this enabled them to reclaim control over their bodies and articulate their self-worth.

Chapter Three – Undermining the Identities of White Enslavers: This chapter will explore how the enslaved in Texas could use their dress to mimic the fashions of their white enslavers, and by doing so were able to undermine them and express their contempt for the institution of slavery.



## CHAPTER ONE – MAINTAINING A COLLECTIVE AFRICAN IDENTITY

This chapter will engage with debates over whether or not the enslaved were able to uphold their African heritage through their dress. In his 1941 book, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Herskovits argued that the enslaved were unable to retain traditional African customs through their clothing. This was, according to Herskovits, a result of slave clothes being controlled by slaveholders, and due to the enslaved being in a new environment with different tools and materials from those in West Africa, where the majority of slaves in America came from. Talking of slave clothes he writes,

‘It is natural that these should have been what was most convenient to procure, least expensive to provide, and, other things being equal, most like the types to which the slave owners were accustomed. Thus, African draped clothes were replaced by tailored clothing.’<sup>40</sup>

Other scholars who perceive slave clothing as entirely determined by the slaveholder, such as Ann Dupont, echo this view.<sup>41</sup> More recently scholars have challenged this view, highlighting that the enslaved found creative ways to uphold their African heritage through their dress. In their book *Stylin’*, Shane White and Graham White highlight that the enslaved in America found ways to imprint African dress customs onto European materials.<sup>42</sup> Helen Bradley Griebel has similarly argued that the enslaved in the Antebellum South found ways to incorporate African traditions into their dress.<sup>43</sup>

This chapter will build on work by the Whites and Helen Bradley Griebel, using TRSP database findings along with the Texas WPA slave narratives to demonstrate that the enslaved in Texas found ways to uphold their collective African heritage through their dress. However, this study will take a different approach to these scholars, emphasising how this functioned as a tool of resistance for the enslaved. By maintaining their African heritage through their dress, the enslaved were able to resist against efforts by their slaveholders to

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<sup>40</sup> Herskovits, pp. 136-137.

<sup>41</sup> DuPont, p. 117.

<sup>42</sup> White and White, *Stylin’*, p. 31.

<sup>43</sup> Helen Bradley Griebel, ‘The West African Origin of the African-American Headwrap’ in *Dress and Ethnicity* ed. by Joanne B. Eicher (Oxford: Berg Publishers Limited, 1995), pp. 207-226.

strip them of their cultural heritage and were able to foster a sense of collective opposition to slavery. Although Helen Bradley Griebel and the Whites touch upon the theme of resistance in their works, it is not explored in depth. Specifically, this chapter will explore how the enslaved in Texas upheld their African heritage through the use of the headwrap and the incorporation of other distinctly African materials into their dress. Although by 1830 the majority of slaves in Texas were American-born, these African dress traditions had evidently been passed down to these slaves from their African ancestors who were brought over from Africa in earlier years.

Evidence that the enslaved used their dress to uphold their African heritage is seen most clearly within the fugitive slave advertisements through references to the headwrap, a distinctly African dress item. The headwrap, also known as a 'handkerchief', a 'head-handkerchief' or a 'head rag', was a piece of fabric wrapped around the head, that often covered the hair.<sup>44</sup> As Helen Bradley Griebel has shown through extensive research, this dress item originated in West Africa around the mid-seventeenth century and was popular amongst the women there. However, the Texas fugitive slave adverts highlight that the enslaved in Texas wore headwraps too.<sup>45</sup> In 1860, an advert was published offering a \$25 reward for the return of a slave named Salley, who ran away from her slaveholder in Houston, Texas. The only item she was reported to be wearing when she left was 'a dark red striped Gingham handkerchief on her head'.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in 1864 an advert was published in *The Houston Daily Telegraph* offering \$200 for the return of a 40-year-old slave named Elizabeth, who escaped from Galveston, Texas wearing a 'spotted calico head-handkerchief'.<sup>47</sup> Whilst Elizabeth and Salley may have been wearing headwraps for practical reasons, such as to prevent headlice or to protect their heads from the sun, they were nonetheless maintaining direct cultural links with Africa by wearing a dress item with strong West African connotations.

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<sup>44</sup> Bradley Griebel, 'The West African Origin of the African-American Headwrap', in *Dress and Ethnicity* ed. by Joanne B. Eicher, p. 207.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p 214.

<sup>46</sup> E. H. Cushing, '\$25 Reward', *Weekly Telegraph*, 25 January 1860, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> E. H. Cushing, '\$200 REWARD', *Houston Daily Telegraph*, 17 March 1864, p. 2.

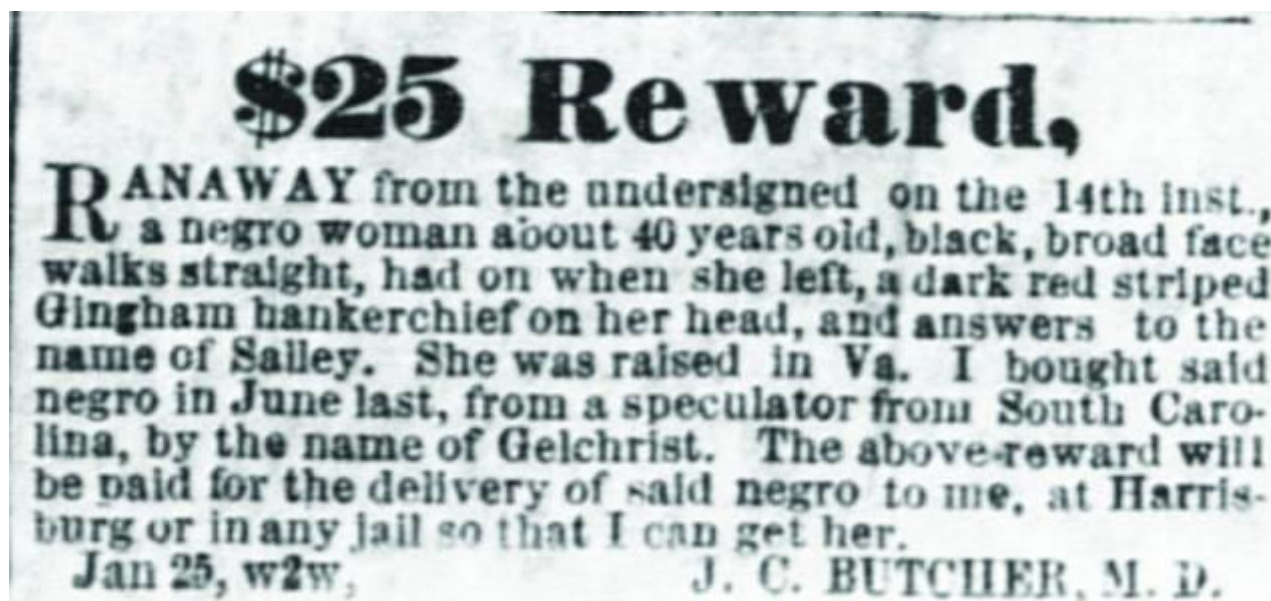


Figure 2. *The Weekly Telegraph*, Texas Runaway Slave Project  
<<https://digital.sfasu.edu/digital/collection/RSP>> [accessed 11 May 2022]

Furthermore, some of the headwraps described in the fugitive slave adverts reflect distinct headwrap customs found within specific African groups. For example, the Yoruba people of West Africa often matched their headwraps, known as *gele* or *oja*, to their dresses.<sup>48</sup> Fugitive slave adverts from Texas reflect this tradition. For example, in 1847, an advert was published in *The Civilian and Galveston Gazette*, offering \$25 for the return of a slave named Jane, aged 10, who escaped from her slaveholder in Galveston, Texas. The article stated that when she left, she 'had on a plaid dress' and a 'plaid handkerchief on her head'.<sup>49</sup> Whilst it could be a coincidence that the fabric used for Jane's headscarf matched the fabric of her dress, it is important not to overlook this minute detail which may be reflective of a direct cultural tie. Nonetheless, whether Jane had purposefully styled her headwrap to reflect Yoruba traditions or not, by wearing a headwrap Jane was upholding her African heritage, just like the other slaves who wore them.

Whilst descriptions of the headwrap within fugitive slave adverts were numerous, in stark contrast, comments on headwraps within the Texas WPA slave narratives were rare and almost non-existent. Whilst there were no comments on headwraps by those enslaved in

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<sup>48</sup> Buckridge, p. 24.

<sup>49</sup> H. Stuart, '\$25 REWARD. – RANAWAY', *Civilian and Galveston Gazette*, 26 June 1847, p. 3.

Texas, there was one comment from Willis Win, enslaved in Louisiana, on the use of headwraps. He recalls how his mother used to steal bread in her headwrap, describing how ‘She rolled it [the bread] up and put it around her head and covered it with her head-rag’.<sup>50</sup> However, in this case, the headwrap is only mentioned in conjunction with another story – about stealing bread – rather than merely to describe how his mother wore a headwrap. From this, it can be inferred that the use of headwraps was so common that the formerly enslaved did not feel as though they were something worth mentioning, unlike the white slaveowners who saw the headwrap as something distinct from white culture. Therefore, when taken together, the Texas slave narratives and fugitive slave adverts recorded in the TRSP suggest the use of the headwrap by slaves in Texas was common. By wearing a dress item with strong West African connotations, the slaves in Texas were forging direct links with their motherland. In this way, the headwrap functioned as a powerful tool of resistance. By upholding their African heritage, the enslaved were able to resist efforts by their slaveholders to strip them of their cultural heritage. Furthermore, the enslaved were able to express their loyalties to Africa while simultaneously disassociating themselves from America and its oppressive system of slavery. In this way, the headwrap functioned as a symbol of courage within the slave community, allowing for a sense of collective resistance.

Along with the headwrap, the enslaved in Texas also used certain materials in their dress as a way of maintaining their African heritage. While the Whites’ study highlights that the enslaved incorporated bold, clashing fabrics into their dress as a reflection of their African heritage, missing from their work are accounts of slaves who incorporated natural materials and metal objects into their dress as a way of invoking their African past.<sup>51</sup> The fugitive slave adverts certainly highlight that slaves in Texas wore ‘fancy colors’ in yellow, green, red and blue, along with fabrics that were ‘striped’ as well as ‘spotted’ and checked’.<sup>52</sup> As Whites’ study suggests, these bold fabrics directly mimicked African dress traditions, enabling the enslaved to uphold their African heritage. However, the slaves in Texas also used materials to uphold their African heritage in another way – by incorporating materials made from natural resources into their outfits.

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<sup>50</sup> Willis Win (Part 4, p. 202).

<sup>51</sup> White and White, p. 23.

<sup>52</sup> E. H. Cushing, ‘Stop the Runaway!!’, *Weekly Telegraph*, 5 January 1859, p. 2; Willard Richardson, *Galveston Tri-Weekly News*, 4 March 1864, p. 2; E. H. Cushing, ‘\$200 REWARD’, *Houston Daily Telegraph*, 17 March 1864, p. 2; Floyd H. Kendall, ‘Notice’, *Nacogdoches Times*, 24 February 1849, p. 2.

The tradition of incorporating natural materials and metal objects into dress was commonplace within many West African groups, as it was believed to establish a harmonious connection with the natural world.<sup>53</sup> The people of Yoruba, Kongo, Ejagham and Mende were particularly fond of reflective materials such as brass, copper, ivory and shells.<sup>54</sup> These reflective materials were believed to symbolise water signs, and therefore embody notions of tranquillity and calmness, along with power.<sup>55</sup> Just like their counterparts in New England, as Bly's work demonstrates, the enslaved in Texas sought to adorn themselves with reflective textiles.<sup>56</sup> By decorating themselves with materials that were traditionally African in their form and their meaning, the enslaved in Texas found ways to uphold their African heritage.

The TRSP database provides numerous descriptions of slaves who incorporated natural materials with metal ornamentation into their dress. One slave, who ran away in September 1858, was reported to have taken with him 'an old cotton vest with brass buttons and ivory sets in them, one Marseille's vest with pearl buttons' along with 'one small black fur hat'.<sup>57</sup> It is unlikely that this slave coincidentally chose to take numerous items of clothing containing natural elements with him, namely ivory, pearls and fur, along with metals such as brass. Rather, it is probable that he placed greater value on these reflective materials, as a result of his African heritage, and therefore sought to adorn himself with them. The admiration the enslaved in Texas had for these materials is made especially clear in the runaway notice for Henry, who fled from his enslaver in Houston during the night in August 1862. His slaveholder described him as having 'a silver watch, brass chain, of which he makes great display'.<sup>58</sup> Evidently Henry was proud of his watch, made of brass and silver, and sought to show it off. Whilst this may have been because the watch was made from materials of value, to be bartered or exchanged, it could have also been because these the watch fit line with traditional African dress customs, which placed great emphasis on the use of natural materials and metal objects, and therefore allowed Henry to uphold his African heritage.

The Texas WPA slave narratives reinforce the idea that slaves in Texas incorporated natural materials with metal ornamentation into their dress in order to uphold their African

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<sup>53</sup> Buckridge, p. 25.

<sup>54</sup> Bly, 'Pretty, Sassy, Cool', p. 486.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> J. W. Latimer, 'Notice', *Dallas Herald*, 22 September 1858, p. 2.

<sup>58</sup> E. H. Cushing, 'FIFTY DOLLARS REWARD', *Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, 8 September 1862, p. 2.

heritage. Abram Sells, born into slavery on the Rimes Plantation in Texas, recalls that 'Some niggers wo' brass rings to keep off the rheumatis' and punch hole in a penny or dime and wear that on the ankle to keep off sickness.'<sup>59</sup> William Adams, also born into slavery, recounts that 'Some [slaves] wears de silver coin tied round dey neck. All sich am for to keep away de effect of de evil power.'<sup>60</sup> For the slaves outlined in these accounts, it is clear reflective materials such as brass and silver symbolised a certain protective power, that can be traced back to West African traditions. Overall, when taken together, the Texas slave narratives and the fugitive slave advertisements provide a convincing account that, by incorporating and combining natural materials and metal objects into their dress, the slaves were maintaining ties with Africa. In this way, the use of natural materials and metal objects functioned as a key tool of resistance. Just like the headwrap, these materials enabled the slaves to show their allegiance to Africa and resist acculturation.

Overall, this chapter has explored how the enslaved in Texas used their dress to maintain their collective African heritage. The fugitive slave adverts, taken alongside the Texas slave narratives, highlight that the enslaved in Texas found creative ways to maintain links with Africa through their dress, namely by incorporating natural materials, metal objects and bold fabrics into their outfits, along with the distinctly African headwrap. This was a key method used by the enslaved in Texas to resist attempts by slaveowners to strip them of their cultural heritage. Furthermore, by upholding their African heritage, the enslaved were able to show their allegiance to Africa and foster a sense of collective resistance against slavery throughout the slave community.

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<sup>59</sup> Abram Sells (Part 4, pp. 13-14).

<sup>60</sup> William Adams (Part 1, p. 7).

## CHAPTER TWO - EXPRESSING INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY

While Chapter One explored how the enslaved in Texas upheld a collective African identity through their dress, this chapter will examine how the enslaved in Texas transformed their drab slave garments into tools of self-expression. In this way, this chapter will challenge work by scholars such as Ann Dupont and Patricia Hunt-Hurst who argue slave clothing was fully determined by the slaveholder with little room for creativity. Instead, this chapter will build on the work of Helen Bradley Griebel whose extensive exploration of slave narratives demonstrates that the enslaved in the Antebellum South found creative ways to fashion their own distinctive styles through their clothing.<sup>61</sup> However, whilst Bradley Griebel focuses solely on slave clothing, this chapter will consider how the enslaved in Texas transformed both their hair and clothing into tools of self-expression. This chapter will also develop Bradley Foster's work by emphasising how the use of dress as a means of self-expression enabled the enslaved to resist slavery. By using their dress to express themselves, the enslaved in Texas were able to reclaim control of their bodies and articulate their self-worth.

Evidence that the enslaved in Texas used their dress to express themselves is made clear through the variety of elaborate hairstyles they wore. As Kobena Mercer's work highlights, 'hair is never a straightforward biological 'fact' because it is almost always... 'worked upon' by human hands'.<sup>62</sup> Rather, hair conveys social messages about the self and society more broadly. Despite slaveholders attempting to strip the enslaved of their identities, the TRSP database reveals that the enslaved in Texas found ways to express themselves through their hair. Although Shane White and Graham White assert that nineteenth-century fugitive slave adverts from America contain 'no sign... of the elaborate and striking hair arrangements that eighteenth-century slaveholders strove to describe', leading them to conclude that slave hair was cut short in this period, this was not the case in Texas.<sup>63</sup>

Data from the TRSP database highlights that the enslaved in Texas wore elaborate hairstyles well into the nineteenth century. The diverse and elaborate hairstyles depicted in the database highlight that slaves in Texas used their hair to differentiate themselves from one another and to retain their own identities. From the database we know that in 1840, a

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<sup>61</sup> Helen Bradley Foster, *'New Raiments of Self'*.

<sup>62</sup> Mercer, p. 34.

<sup>63</sup> White and White, p. 55.

slave named Bob escaped wearing ‘a small bunch of hair on the top of his head as a cue tied with a bit of ribbon or string’, whilst another slave, George, had ‘black whiskers and a moustache’ and was ‘bald on the top of his head’ when he fled in 1863.<sup>64</sup> Another fugitive slave named Harmon, on the other hand, was described by his slaveholder as having a very heavy head of hair, generally platted on the side of his head’, whereas Emily who had escaped from Harris County was described as having hair ‘now cut quite short’.<sup>65</sup> The first thing that can be gathered from these fugitive slave adverts is that the hairstyles of the enslaved in Texas varied greatly during the years 1830-1865. Secondly, these adverts highlight that the slaves wore intricate hairstyles during this period. For example, Bob took time to tie his hair in ‘a small bunch’ using ‘ribbon or string’, whilst the plaits on Harmon’s head had been carefully styled. By wearing their hair in a variety of elaborate ways, the enslaved in Texas were able to differentiate themselves from one another and express their own personalities. Whilst these hairstyles could have been imposed upon the slaves by their slaveholders, this hypothesis is unlikely. Although sometimes hair was cut short as a punishment, as Emily’s hair may well have been, the number of intricate hairstyles reflected within the fugitive slave adverts suggests these hairstyles were the creations of the slaves themselves. It is unlikely that the slaveholders had an interest in creating unique hairstyles for their slaves given that they sought to strip them of their identities. Therefore, the fugitive slave adverts demonstrate that the enslaved in Texas used their hair as a tool of self-expression.

The Texas WPA slave narratives support the idea that slaves in Texas wore a variety of elaborate hairstyles. Larnce Holt, formerly enslaved in Tyler County, Texas recalled that his brother ‘wore all de hair offen de top he head’, whilst Clarissa Scales recounts that her father ‘wore long whiskers and what you calls a goatee’.<sup>66</sup> Clearly, Clarissa’s father had carefully shaped his beard into a goatee, whilst Larnce’s brother had taken time to style his hair differently. Therefore, the Texas slave narratives reinforce the findings from the fugitive slave adverts that the slaves in Texas wore their hair in a variety of elaborate ways. By using their hair as a tool of self-expression in this way, the enslaved were resisting against slavery. By expressing themselves through their hair, the enslaved were able to reclaim a measure of

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<sup>64</sup> Samuel Whiting, ‘FIFTY DOLLARS REWARD’, *Austin City Gazette*, 22 January 1840, p. 3.

E. H. Cushing, *Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, 17 August 1863, p. 2.

<sup>65</sup> J. W. Hampton, ‘\$150 Reward’, *Texas State Gazette*, 16 July 1853, p. 6; James F. Cruger, *Morning Star*, 20 September 1842, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Larnce Holt (Part 2, p. 151); Clarissa Scales (Part 4, p. 3).



control over their bodies, which had been stolen from them by their slaveholders and subjected to oppressive treatment. Furthermore, by taking time to carefully shape their appearances, the enslaved were able to articulate their self-worth in a system that saw them as nothing more than biddable property.

As well as styling their hair in a variety of intricate ways, the enslaved in Texas also used their clothing to express themselves. Descriptions within the fugitive slave adverts highlight that slaves in Texas added personal flair to the drab garments or materials provided to them by their enslavers. These findings fit in line with those of Helen Bradley Foster, who demonstrates that slaves in the Antebellum South used a variety of ornamentation techniques to individualise their clothing.<sup>67</sup> Common throughout the TRSP database are descriptions of slaves who modified their clothing using dyes. In 1862, a slave named Henry escaped, taking with him 'russet shoes, which he had colored black'.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, in 1864, John escaped on horseback, wearing 'jeans, dyed dark brown or black'.<sup>69</sup> From these descriptions, it is apparent slaves in Texas modified their clothes through dyes. What is less certain, however, is whether these slaves had dyed their clothes to individualise their outfits, or whether they had been dyed for purposes of disguise. However, the Texas WPA slave narratives clarify that slaves in Texas dyed their garments for aesthetic reasons, as highlighted by the slave narrative given by Martha Patton. Speaking of her family, she recalls 'We made cloth, blankets and our own stockin's. We made dye outta live oak bark, mesquite bark, pecan leaves. They made a dark brown and it dyed the cloth and blankets pretty.'<sup>70</sup> From this account it is clear Martha's family spent time making dyes due to the pretty results that they created, not to disguise themselves. By modifying their clothes in this way, slaves such as Martha were able to enhance their drab apparel and show off their individual styles. When taking Martha's slave narrative alongside the fugitive slave adverts, it becomes clear that slaves in Texas modified their clothing using techniques such as dyeing, which enabled the enslaved to express themselves. In this way, the enslaved were using their dress as a tool of resistance. By transforming the drab clothing given to them into vehicles of self-expression, the slaves in Texas were subverting their slaveholders' wishes to strip their slaves of their

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<sup>67</sup> Helen Bradley Foster, 'Constructing Cloth and Clothing in the Antebellum South' in *'New Raiments of Self'*.

<sup>68</sup> E. H. Cushing, *Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, 'FIFTY DOLLARS REWARD', 8 September 1862, p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> D. Richardson, *Weekly State Gazette*, '\$300 Reward', 16 March 1864, p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Martha Patton (Part 3, p. 173).

identity. Furthermore, by shaping their appearances, these slaves were reclaiming a measure of control over their lives. These slaves, whose bodies had been stolen from them and subjected to painstaking agricultural labour, never missed the chance to reclaim them from the hands of their enslavers.

Overall, this chapter has taken fugitive slave adverts from the TRSP database alongside Texas slave narratives to show that slaves in Texas used their dress not just to uphold their collective African identity, as discussed in Chapter One, but also to express their individual identities. By styling their hair in a variety of elaborate ways, and by adding personal flair to their clothing through techniques such as dyeing, the slaves in Texas were able to show off their unique personalities. This was a key method used by the enslaved in Texas to resist efforts by slaveholders to strip them of their identity while also enabling the enslaved to reclaim a measure of control over their bodies and articulate their self-worth in an oppressive system that sought to dehumanise them.

### CHAPTER THREE – UNDERMINING THE IDENTITIES OF WHITE ENSLAVERS

Whilst Chapters One and Two explored how the enslaved in Texas used their dress to maintain their collective and individual identities, this chapter will explore how the enslaved in Texas could use their dress to undermine the identities of their white enslavers. Specifically, this chapter will explore how the enslaved in Texas could mimic the fashions of their white enslavers as way of ridiculing them. Moreover, this chapter will explore how dressing up in fancy attire was a method of resistance, allowing the enslaved to disrupt the social order that clothing was meant to convey and articulate their contempt for the institution of slavery.

This chapter will feed into debates concerning why slaves mimicked the clothing styles of their white enslavers. Edgar J. McManus argues slaves wore expensive clothing as ‘an illusion of the importance that their real condition denied them’.<sup>71</sup> However, his account misinterprets slave dress, overlooking the more rebellious reasons why slaves styled themselves in fancy attire. Shane White and Graham White, on the other hand, offer a more nuanced view. Drawing on extensive descriptions of slave clothing from various written sources, White and White demonstrate that slaves in America dressed in fashionable clothing to gently mock the white community.<sup>72</sup> This study will build on the work of White and White, using evidence from the TRSP database and the Texas slave narratives to highlight that slaves in Texas dressed up in fancy clothes to undermine their white enslavers. However, this chapter will take the Whites’ study further, highlighting how wearing fancy clothing was not merely a gentle tool of mockery but rather functioned as a powerful tool of resistance for slaves in Texas.

The fugitive slave adverts highlight that slaves in Texas dressed in fashionable attire as a way of undermining their white enslavers. Within the TRSP database are multiple descriptions of slaves who fled wearing clothes that were in vogue with the white gentry. Most surprising was the number of slaves in Texas who fled wearing frock coats. These knee-length overcoats were highly fashionable with the white gentry in America during the nineteenth century.<sup>73</sup> Especially stylish were frock coats in dark colours, such as navy or

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<sup>71</sup> Edgar J. McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1966), p. 64.

<sup>72</sup> White and White, p. 17.

<sup>73</sup> Karen Baclawski, *The Guide to Historic Costume* (New York: Drama Pub 1995) p. 113.

black.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, when James escaped from his slaveholder wearing ‘a black cloth frock coat’ in 1840, his outfit was in line with the fashion trends of the time.<sup>75</sup> His slaveholder even commented on this, stating he had ‘in his possession a tolerably respectable wardrobe’. Slaves also dressed up in other items fashionable at the time, such as top hats.<sup>76</sup> Sometimes, the enslaved found ways to incorporate numerous fashionable items into their outfits. For example, John, who fled from his slaveholder in Fort Bend County, was reported to be wearing both ‘a striped frock coat’ as well as a ‘tall black hat’ at the time of his escape in 1853.<sup>77</sup> In their quest for freedom, James and John were overdressed. The safer option would have been to dress in the typical drab clothing their slaveholders supplied them with to blend into the Texas scenery. However, these slaves did not wish to conform to the clothing standards implemented by the white community. By mimicking the clothes worn by their white slaveholders, the enslaved in Texas were engaging in an act of rebelliousness. As Shane White and Graham White assert, ‘Such actions nuanced the social order that clothing was supposed to display, blurring the borderlines between black and white, slave and free’.<sup>78</sup> In a society where slaveholders used clothing to maintain a clear-cut hierarchy between themselves and the slaves, by wearing fancy attire the enslaved were directly undermining the authority of their enslavers and the oppressive hierarchical system that they had created.

Not only did the enslaved in Texas dress in items that were fashionable amongst the white gentry, but they infused them with an African aesthetic in a way that would have looked bizarre to white onlookers. This was a technique used by the slaves in Texas, and their counterparts across America, to assert their own identities and allow them to ridicule the fashions of their white enslavers and undermine them. Isham was one such slave from Texas ridiculed white slaveholders through his dress. His story is recorded in the TRSP database. Having escaped in 1849, a runaway notice was published in the *Nacogdoches Times* by his slaveholder. Seeking Isham’s imminent return, his enslaver provided an elaborate description of the coat Isham was wearing when he fled. The description stated:

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> John Marshall, ‘Runaway Negro’, *State Gazette*, 29 September 1860, p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> The Metropolitan Museum of Art, ‘Top Hat’, *Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/156398>> [accessed 14 May 2022].

<sup>77</sup> Michael Bourke, *San Antonio Ledger*, 1 September 1853, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> White and White, p. 16.

‘He wore off a blue blanket coat, patched with two or three colored patches, one of which was a large checked twilled cloth, on the left shoulder – the coat was made by a good tailor for myself, and bound with black Merino.’<sup>79</sup>

From this description it is clear that the coat Isham was wearing had once belonged to his slaveholder, and that it was of fine quality, having been tailor-made for the slaveholder himself. Therefore, the coat was typical of the styles worn by white slaveholders at the time. However, Isham had brought an African flair to this garment, having embellished it with ‘two or three colored patches’, one of which was made from ‘checked twilled cloth’. The result was a patchwork display of clashing colours and textiles, typical of African dress customs, that would have appeared jarring to white eyes. By transforming what was once an elegant, tailor-made coat, into a discordant array of colours and textures, Isham may well have been ridiculing his slaveholder and the white fashions he bought into. This was typical of many slaves in Texas who brought an African flair to garments typically worn by the white gentry. In this way, slaves such as Isham could also use their dress to mock their slaveholders and undermine the cultures they bought into. Unable to express their contempt for slavery and their slaveholders through words, fearing punishment, through the use of clothing slaves in Texas were able to make a statement of defiance against their slaveholders and the inhumane treatment they had been subjected to.

Whilst Isham’s coat was a hand-me-down, other slaves in Texas dressed up in fancy attire that had been *stolen* from their slaveholders. This was a method used by the enslaved to further undermine their enslavers. In 1831, a fugitive slave notice was published in the *Mexican Citizen* seeking the return of three slaves, Sampson, Joe and Ben, who ‘stole two pair of good old boots and one pair of new quarter shoes’ when they fled from Austin, Texas.<sup>80</sup> It is unclear from the notice whether these shoes had been crafted by members of the slave community, or if they were imported. Regardless, by stealing fancy items from their slaveholders to wear for themselves, the enslaved in Texas were metaphorically reclaiming clothing items produced by the slave community, who often manufactured clothes for the black and white populations in Texas. Furthermore, these shoes functioned as literal tools of

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<sup>79</sup> Floyd H. Kendall, *Nacogdoches Times*, 24 February 1849, p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> Aitken; Williamson, ‘150 DOLLARS REWARD!’, *Mexican Citizen*, 21 April 1831, p. 3.

resistance for Sampson, Joe and Ben, who escaped on foot. In contrast to the fugitive slave adverts, within the Texas WPA slave narratives, there were virtually no accounts of slaves from Texas who stole fancy clothes from their slaveholders. This is perhaps due to the violent consequences that stealing had, meaning that only slaves who had fled elsewhere could risk stealing items from their slaveholders. From this, we can infer that stealing clothes was an infrequent occurrence on the whole as only a fraction of the slave community absconded. Nonetheless, when slaves did steal fancy clothes, they were undermining the authority of their enslavers. As well as directly undermining their slaveholders by stealing from them, the enslaved undermined their slaveholders by taking back clothes that the slave community could have manufactured themselves. In this way, the enslaved were reclaiming the fruits of their labour. In the context of a system that sought to rob slaves of profits that were rightfully theirs, by reclaiming these goods the enslaved were directly challenging the system itself.

Overall, this chapter has explored how the enslaved in Texas could use their dress to undermine the identities of their white slaveholders. Specifically, this chapter has explored how slaves in Texas could dress up in clothes fashionable with their enslavers as a way of undermining them. This could be achieved in three ways. Firstly, by wearing fancy clothes the enslaved were able to disrupt the structured social order that clothes were meant to convey. Secondly, by imprinting an African aesthetic onto elegant clothes, the enslaved were able to subtly ridicule the fashions that their white enslavers bought into. Finally, by stealing fancy clothes, members of the slave community in Texas were metaphorically reclaiming goods that had been stolen from them.

## CONCLUSION

Taking the TRSP database alongside Texas WPA slave narratives, this dissertation has investigated how the slave community in Texas used their dress as a tool to resist during the years 1830-1865. Weaving the different threads of analysis together, this section presents some closing remarks on the findings presented throughout the three chapters and suggests some avenues for further research.

When the three chapters are considered together, it becomes clear that the slave community in Texas used their dress to resist slavery in a variety of ways. While the enslaved incorporated distinctly African items into their dress to preserve their collective African heritage, items fashionable with the white gentry were also worn by slaves who sought to undermine the identities of their slaveholders. Additionally, the enslaved incorporated personal touches into their dress, enabling them to express their individual identities. These methods enabled the enslaved to resist acculturation, reclaim a measure of control over their bodies and articulate their contempt for the institution of slavery. Furthermore, while certain forms of resistance were overt, such as stealing shoes from one's slaveholder, others were much more subtle, such as wearing a coin around one's neck. These varied responses can make the meaning of slave dress difficult to decipher, especially when analysing it over 200 years since slavery was abolished. However, by carefully observing patterns within fugitive slave adverts and supplementing these with the Texas WPA slave narratives, the hidden meanings of slave dress come to light and the ways the enslaved used their dress to resist are revealed. This poses a challenge to works viewing slave dress as a standard entirely imposed by white slaveholders.

Furthermore, as these three chapters have shown, slave dress offers a unique window into the lives of the enslaved in Texas between 1830-1865 and how they contested their position in society. By illuminating the individual stories of slaves in Texas, this study has sought to acknowledge the humanity of the enslaved who fought against an oppressive system. To overlook these bold acts is to deny the enslaved the historical recognition they deserve. Moreover, by improving our understanding of the everyday ways the enslaved fought against oppression, this study has brought us closer to understanding what slavery was like for those who experienced it. In this way, analysis of dress as a strategy of resistance helps to restore an important dimension of the lost archive and historical

memory of enslaved people which was destroyed by the system of slavery and reconstruction.

While this study has explored how the slave community in Texas used their dress to rebel between 1830-1865, the story of Texas is just one chapter within a wider narrative of slavery. As a result, there is undoubtedly scope to take this study further. Although Antonio Bly offers insight into how slaves in New England contested slavery through their attire, the use of slave dress as a tool of resistance within states beyond New England and Texas remains largely unexplored.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, further research should not be confined to America alone. Whilst Steeve Buckridge has explored how slaves in Jamaica used their dress as a way of challenging slavery, other countries such as England demand research.<sup>82</sup> In 2018, the Runaway Slaves in Britain database was published online, containing over 800 fugitive advertisements.<sup>83</sup> Embedded within this database are rich descriptions of slave dress and the tales of bold slaves waiting to be uncovered. However, slaves are not the only marginalised group in history that have used their dress to protest. This study has sought to illustrate the rich insights that employing dress as an analytical lens can provide for historical inquiries into marginalised communities and hopes to encourage further research into the dress of marginalised groups in the future. Finally, although this essay has explored how dress functioned as a tool of resistance for the enslaved in their everyday lives, further research is required to place these daily acts of resistance into a wider narrative of resistance and to understand how they enabled the enslaved to come closer to freedom.

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<sup>81</sup> Bly.

<sup>82</sup> Buckridge.

<sup>83</sup> The University of Glasgow, *Runaway Slaves in Britain* <<https://www.runaways.gla.ac.uk>> [accessed 12 May 2022].



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