Fig. 1. José de Bustos, ‘De Español y India produce Mestisa’ [A Spanish man and an Indian woman produce a mestiza], c. 1725 (Mexican). Early casta painting. The Indian mother wears an elaborate version of the indigenous huipil; the Spanish father a lace cravat and an embroidered waistcoat and jacket; the mestiza daughter fine lace and an embroidered blouse.

‘Two Pairs of Pink Satin Shoes!!’
Race, Clothing and Identity in the Americas (17th–19th centuries)
by Rebecca Earle

‘The apparel oft proclaims the man’, Polonius advised Laertes.¹ Shakespeare’s character presented this adage as universal, along with ‘neither a borrower nor a lender be’, and his assertion that fashion involves self-fashioning will seem familiar to today’s readers. A growing literature on the meaning of dress in the contemporary world tells us that clothing assists in the performance of identity. By changing our clothing, we are told, we change our selves. Works on this topic – such as those by Marjorie Garber – provide a very useful analysis of the current culture. In particular, they tell us something about contemporary views of the ‘self’. Yet studies that present clothing as inherently transformative tend to suffer from an underdeveloped historical context. Marjorie Garber, for example, explicitly
Fig. 2. Arellano, ‘Díceño de Mulata y ca de negra y español en la Ciudad de Mexico. Cabeza de la America a 22 del mes de Agosto de 1711 Años’ [Drawing of a Mulata, daughter of a black woman and a Spanish man in Mexico City . . .], 1711 (Mexican). This early casta painting shows a richly-clad mulata girl.
excluded what she called 'seamless historical narrative' from her argument that cross-dressing inevitably questions the very concept of 'category'. Such exclusion certainly facilitates the formulation of generalized statements about clothing's transvestitve or subversive potential. Yet has clothing always had the same power to create and alter identity? The following essay considers the relationship between clothing and identity in colonial and nineteenth-century Latin America (with the occasional detour into North America and the Caribbean). It focuses more particularly on the sartorial opinions of persons who considered themselves to be of European descent, whether residents of the region or travellers. In this it constitutes an examination of elite attitudes and mentalities; the individuals whose opinions are here explored were, broadly speaking, wealthy and privileged. Given its thematic and chronological scope, this paper scarcely constitutes a definitive analysis of the relationship between clothing, race and identity in the Americas. Nonetheless, its subject matter demonstrates that clothing has enjoyed a highly varied ability to shape identity, particularly racial identity. It suggests, moreover, that the subversive, or disruptive, potential of certain 'clothing acts' has varied greatly over the last three-hundred years. Sartorial customs that caused dismay to nineteenth-century observers attracted praise in earlier centuries. This variety can tell us a great deal about the changing nature of racial identity.

* * *

We begin our analysis with three pairs of quotations. The initial pairing refers to the dress of the inhabitants of Mexico City. Consider the ways in which clothing serves to display identity in these two selections, beginning with an extract from the Mexican chronicler Juan de Viera's 1778 celebration of the Mexican capital:

Every artisan sallies forth on holidays with as much decency and ostentation as if he were a great merchant, with two watches like the most distinguished man. In the same manner the clothing of their wives is indistinguishable from that of the greatest ladies. It is marvellous to see them in church and promenades in such fashion that one cannot tell which is the wife of a count, and which the wife of a tailor.

The companion quotation is from the early 1840s. In it, the American diplomat Brantz Mayer describes the interior of a Mexico City church:

Near me knelt a lady, whose dress must have cost thousands in this expensive country. She wore a purple velvet robe embroidered with white silk, white satin shoes, and silk stockings; a mantilla of the richest white blonde lace fell over her head and shoulders, and her ears, neck and fingers were blazing with diamonds. By her side, and almost touching, crouched an Indian, in rags scarcely sufficient to hide her
nakedness, with wild dishevelled hair, bare legs, and a vacant stare from the gorgeous altar to the gorgeous dame! And so, over the whole church, the floor was a checker-board of ladies and léperos — of misery and pride!6

These two quotations, separated by some sixty years, reveal a tremendous change in the depiction of sartorial differentiation in Mexico City. Juan de Viera emphasizes the ‘marvellous’ fact that it is impossible to distinguish the wife of a count from the wife of a tailor, as both are so finely dressed. Mayer describes the unbreachable sartorial gulf that separates Mexico City’s elite from the poverty-stricken mass, while at the same time noting their physical proximity. This difference does not merely reflect the divergent concerns of locals and foreigners, but rather suggests a transformation of attitudes towards clothing and identity. As we shall see, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries foreigners expressed views very similar to Juan de Viera’s.

The second pair of quotations describe not the dress of different classes or qualities of people, but rather the dress of persons of mixed race. Consider here the language used to describe the wearing of finery by black and mixed-race women. The first quotation is from the seventeenth-century English priest Thomas Gage’s account of his travels in Mexico. Gage commented extensively on the lascivious costume of the Viceroyalty’s black and mixed-race women, as well as on the costliness of the dress of all classes of Mexicans:

A blackamoor or tawny young maid and slave will make hard shift, but she will be in fashion with her neck-chain and bracelets of pearls, and her ear-bobs of some considerable jewels . . . The attire of this baser sort of people of blackamoors and mulattoes . . . is so light, and their carriage so enticing, that many Spaniards even of the better sort (who are too prone to venery) disdain their wives for them.7

The second quotation in this pairing is taken from the diary of John Colthurst, an Anglo-Irish special magistrate in the Caribbean island of St Vincent in the 1830s. In this extract he recounts the trial of a young black woman named Dutchess, who had been arrested for stealing money which she had used to buy elegant clothes. Colthurst recounted that she had bought:

wearing apparel fine enough for a Princess . . . Their colours vied with those of the rainbow, first a flaming bright yellow bonnet, flashy dresses without number, necklaces and earrings without end, rose coloured silk stocking and two pairs of pink satin shoes!!.

She was ordered by the court to try on the shoes:
this was done before a very crowded court who shouted when the pink satins were placed upon the hoofs of Dutchess. In truth I never saw anything as unsuitable as the satins to such feet.8

Again, we note a striking contrast. In the first quotation Thomas Gage, clearly infatuated by the ‘attire and carriage’ of young slaves and freed women, regarded these elegantly-dressed creatures as so beautiful and enticing as to constitute a threat to married men.9 No such threat was perceived by Colthurst. On the contrary, he regarded Dutchess’s finery as incongruous, indeed revolting. His description of her feet as ‘hoofs’ is intended to underscore the distance that separates her, in Colthurst’s eyes, from any recognizable femininity. This well-dressed coloured woman is repellent, rather than erotic.

The final pair of quotations measure the ‘taste’ of the Spanish-American elite. Consider here the relationship between ‘taste’ and ‘excess’ in clothing. The first selection is taken from a Spanish travelogue, and describes Lima in the 1740s. It is an extract from a lengthy description of the sumptuous clothing of limeñas, the women of Lima:

[underneath] the petticoat . . . hangs a border of very fine lace, sewed to the bottom of the under petticoat; through which the ends of their garters are discovered, embroidered with gold and silver, and sometimes set with pearls; but the latter is not common. The upper petticoat, which is of velvet, or some rich stuff, is fringed all round, and not less crowded with ornaments than those described elsewhere in this work. But be the ornaments what they will, whether of fringe, lace, or ribands, they are always exquisitely fine. The shift sleeves . . . are covered with rolls of laces, variegated in such a manner as to render the whole truly elegant.10

The companion quotation is taken from the diary of an English officer working in Mexico in the mid 1820s. In describing the clothing of Mexican ladies of fashion, he noted that while a few wore dresses in the Spanish style, where they have done other Europeans the honour of imitating them, it is a bungling piece of business, and all sorts of finery and tawdry ornaments are to be seen blended in happy confusion on the same person.11

Once again we find a considerable change. The ladies of 1740s Lima wear their expensive clothes with elegance. Perhaps, as the Spanish travellers remark, they carry their taste for Flemish lace to ‘prodigious excess’, but the outcome is pleasing and attractive.12 How different are the Mexican ladies of the 1820s! Like their counterparts in Lima, they wear expensive clothing and jewels, but in so doing they reveal not their excessive good taste, but rather their lack of taste.

Overall, the purpose of these quotations is to suggest that between the
Fig. 3. Miguel Cabrera, ‘De Indio, y Barsina: Zambayga’ [From an Indian man and a Barsina, a Zambaiga], 1763 (Mexican). Cabrera was one of the first casta painters to vary the richness of his subjects’ clothing according to their ‘caste’ or race. This painting shows an Indian father, a barsina mother, and the resultant zambaiga offspring, all in tattered garments befitting their low status; in other Cabrera paintings the clothing of ‘lesser’ castes displays patches and repairs. (Barsina denoted a mixture of indigenous and African parentage. Such terms were virtually never used outside of casta paintings.)

Fig. 4. Casimir Castro, ‘Trajes mexicanos’ [Mexican dress], 1855–6 (Mexican). This costumbrista painting belongs to a series on Mexican dress. The lithograph contrasts the fine clothing – silk and mantillas – of the ladies in the centre with the ragged dress of the porters on the right and, on the left, an Indian street seller, clad in a huipil.
late seventeenth and mid nineteenth centuries a dramatic change occurred in the relationship between clothing and personal identity in Ibero-America and the Caribbean. While travelogues and chroniclers from the earlier period tended to emphasize the extraordinary richness of colonial attire, accounts from the nineteenth century underscored, not homogeneous wealth, but rather the vast sartorial gulf that separated the rich from the poor, and the failure of most attempts at dressing expensively. This transformation is mirrored in paintings depicting 'typical' Spanish American costumes. During the eighteenth century, painters in Spanish America created a new artistic genre known as 'casta painting'. Casta paintings depicted the outcome of various types of racial mixing. A typical casta painting might carry the legend 'From an Indian woman and a Spanish man, a mestizo is born', and would portray an Indian woman, a Spanish man, and a mestizo baby. Such paintings usually formed part of series aimed at cataloguing all possible forms of racial intermixture; a typical series might include twelve to sixteen such paintings. They were not portraits intended to illustrate particular sitters, but were rather explorations of the racial diversity of the Americas. They constituted a distinct, Spanish-American variant on the more generalized eighteenth-century concern with categorizing racial types. What is interesting for our purposes about casta painting is that the artist usually attempted to dress each 'caste' in typical garb. Such paintings thus offer another angle on the changing meaning of costume in the colonial Spanish-American world. Casta paintings from the first half of the eighteenth century usually depict all classes and races in equally luxurious attire. To be sure, Spanish men and women are shown in European clothes, while Indians wear 'Indian' dress, but both are adorned with ruffles, laces, pearls and jewels.13 Figure 2, for example, painted in 1711, shows a mulatta, 'daughter of a black and a Spaniard', dressed in a fine gown adorned with ribbons and lace, and wearing an elaborate pearl necklace. (Figs 1 and 2) Changes began to occur first in some casta paintings of the later eighteenth century, and then, more dramatically, in the folkloric depictions of 'typical' Hispanic dress common in the nineteenth century, known collectively as 'costumbrista' paintings. These later eighteenth-century casta paintings and nineteenth-century costumbrista paintings emphasize, not the uniform richness of colonial dress, but rather its differentiation. Those castas farthest removed from Europeans are frequently depicted in rags and tatters, as is the case in Figure 3, from a casta series painted by the Mexican artist Miguel Cabrera. Richly-dressed Indians and Blacks no longer populate the canvas. Instead such pictures illustrate the distance that separates the clothing of the poor from that of the gentry, the gente decente. Carlos Nebel's depiction of villagers shows both well-dressed Mexican ladies, and a tattered indigenous porter. (Figures 3 and 4) Here again we see a distinct change in the use of clothing to delineate race, class, and identity. I would like in the remainder of this article to explore the meaning of this change.

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We begin by looking in somewhat more detail at accounts of Ibero-American and Caribbean dress during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
The most striking feature of such accounts is their emphasis on the richness and luxuriousness of colonial dress, particularly in Mexico City and Lima, the two most important viceregal capitals in Spanish America. ‘Of all the parts of the world, the people here are most expensive in their habit’, reported the British marine captain William Betagh of 1720s Lima. The clothing of the elite is festooned with jewels: ‘In every particular people of fortune [in Quito] affect great magnificence in their dress, wearing very commonly the finest gold and silver tissues’, remarked the Spanish travellers Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa, whose mid eighteenth-century travelogue indeed provides numberless examples of elaborate colonial dress. ‘Both men and women are excessive in their apparel, using more silks than stuffs and cloth. . . A hatband and rose made of diamonds in a gentleman’s hat is common, and a hat-band of pearls is ordinary in a tradesman’, observed Thomas Gage a century earlier. As this latter quotation suggests, in these accounts it is not the elite alone who wear such finery. The poor, mixed-race population also dresses with extraordinary elegance and expense. Juan and Ulloa asserted that in 1740s Lima:

The distinction between the several classes [is not] very great, for the use of all sorts of cloth being allowed, everyone wears what he can purchase. So that it is not uncommon to see a mulatto, or any other mechanic, dressed in a tissue equal to anything that can be worn by a more opulent person, they all greatly affect fine clothes, and it may be said without exaggeration, that the finest stuffs made in countries, where industry is always inventing something new, are more generally seen in Lima than in any other place; vanity and ostentation not being restrained by custom or law.

Chronicler Juan de Viera similarly noted that in late eighteenth-century Mexico City,

even poor women of very few means have silver buckles and many reliquaries decorated with that metal and generally the Indian women who trade in the plaza regard it as fashionable to wear a necklace with six or eight strings of pearls and coral, many reliquaries, and rings of gold, silver and red gold.

Freedwomen in the Danish West Indies ‘sail, erect, through the streets, adorned with straw or hats of best English felt, long gold earrings, gold necklaces, several rings on their golden fingers and bracelets; dressed in fine clothes of the costliest English or East Indian chintz, the best muslin or transparent lawn’, according to Hans West.

As these quotations suggest, it is the clothing of women in particular that is described as reaching the greatest heights of cost and elegance. Women
in Santiago de Chile, noted eighteenth-century English sailor John Byron, ‘are remarkably handsome, and very extravagant in their dress’:

They plait [their hair] behind in four plaits, and twist them round a bodkin, at each end of which is a diamond rose. Their shifts are all over lace, as is a little tight waistcoat they wear over them. Their petticoats are open before, and lap over, and have commonly three rows of very rich lace of gold or silver. In winter, they have an upper waistcoat of cloth of gold or silver, and in summer of the finest lawn, covered all over with the finest Flanders lace.20

The slaves of wealthy women, acting as extensions of the bodies of their owners, display similar finery. Ship’s chaplain René Courte de La Blanchardière noted in 1748 that, in Rio de Janeiro, women were carried about in gilded sedan chairs, accompanied by ‘four or five extremely well-dressed black women; they are ornamented with many necklaces and earrings of gold’.21 Luiz dos Santos Vilhena remarked similarly in 1802 that in Salvador, elite women dressed not only themselves, but also their slaves, in rich garments:

The peças (pieces) with which they ornament themselves are exceedingly expensive and when their position allows it, they appear with their mulatto and black women dressed in rich satin skirts, fine lemiste gowns, and blouses of cambric or cassa, embroidered in such a way that the labor itself is three or four times the cost of the garment and so much is the gold that each one wears in clasps, buckles, bracelets, necklaces, or armlets, and bentinhos, that, without hyperbole, it would be enough to buy two or three black or mulatto women like the one who wears it.22

Slave women in Saint-Domingue not only dressed with great expense, but were discerning consumers of imported cloth, according to Médéric-Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, who similarly eulogized the ‘exquisite taste’ of French creole ladies.23 Overall, the image presented in such seventeenth and eighteenth-century accounts is one of luxury, wealth, and successful emulation. All races and classes effect elegant garb, as Mexico City’s inhabitant Agustín de Vetancurt noted in 1698:

The beauty of this city is in its inhabitants, because of their elegance and cleanliness . . . The poorest woman has her pearls and jewels, and considers herself unhappy if she does not have her gold jewellery to wear on holidays . . . Great is the elegance and lustre, the cleanliness, and adornment of the rich, officers, and even those of the least importance, [who] sport ruffs and black capes, travel about in carriages, and on horseback; it is greatness, but whoever was to see everyone together, not making distinctions between the rich noble or gentleman, and the artisan, would
think it impolitic, but it is the glory of this country, which inspires majesty, aggrandises humble hearts, and annihilates wretched conditions.24

These attempts at emulation are described as neither ridiculous nor doomed to failure. During this period a well-dressed mestiza or mulatta was usually viewed as enticing, if not overwhelmingly bewitching.

* * *

The picture derived from nineteenth-century accounts is strikingly different. Emulation was increasingly described as simply impossible, and attempts by the coloured population at dressing elegantly were regarded as pathetic, or indeed grotesque. Accounts by travellers from a variety of backgrounds – North-American abolitionists, British army officers, French plantation owners – displayed a striking unanimity of opinion on the topic of dress. In virtually all cases, scorn was heaped on non-white sartorial ambitions of elegance. Sometimes it was the contrast between the attempt at appearing wealthy and the reality of poverty that drew comment. Joseph Sturge and Thomas Harvey, British abolitionists travelling in the Caribbean, noted that in Antigua many freedmen ‘make themselves ridiculously fine on Sundays. It is not uncommon, on these days, to see ladies, who toil under burning sun six days of the week, attired on the seventh, in silk stockings, and straw bonnet, with parasol and gloves; and the gentlemen in black coats and fancy waistcoats’.25 Bare feet in particular occasioned much negative comment, in sharp contrast with the bare-footed beauties depicted in eighteenth-century casta paintings such as Figure 5. Nineteenth-century travellers regularly remarked that poor women, ‘in endeavouring to imitate their richer neighbours, make a grotesque appearance, being dressed in a gay gown, without the accompaniment of shoes or stockings’.26

Sometimes such accounts simply dismissed non-elite fashion as gaudy or excessive; an English traveller in 1820s Mexico noted that in the clothing of mestizas, ‘the most gaudy colours are preferred; and even richly worked muslin and gaudy French silks have here and there found their way into the most retired parts of the country’.27 English travellers in the Caribbean commented with similar disdain on the ‘big hulking negresses . . . attired in gorgeous silks and satins, and truly wonderful hats with broad brims and feathers and ribbons . . . the woolly locks under all this fashionable head gear were pathetically ludicrous’.28 The dresses of black women in Antigua, the American abolitionists Thome and Kimball observed, were in every colour and style, their hats were of all shapes and sizes, and fillagged with the most tawdry superfluity of ribbons. Beneath their gaudy bonnets were glossy ringlets, false and real, clustering in tropical luxuriance. This fantastic display was evidently a rude attempt to follow the example set them by the white aristocracy.29

New York City, complained another English traveller in the early nineteenth century, was populated with blacks, ‘many of whom are finely
Fig. 5. Vicente Albán, ‘Yapanga de quito con el trage que usa esa clase de Mujeres que tratan de agradar’ [A yapanga from Quito in the dress worn by women of that class who attempt to please], 1783 (Quito school). This painting shows a mixed-race woman who, despite her elaborately-decorated costume and several necklaces, wears no shoes. Yapanga (woman of mixed race) may derive from the Quechua word for barefoot (Michon, *The People of Quito*, 1994, p. 173).

Fig. 6. ‘¡Ave Maria Gallo!’ [Holy Cow!] ‘Para Usted’ Cigarette Lithograph, ?1860s (Cuban). This marquilla (label) advertised ‘Para Usted’ cigarettes. The lithograph ridicules a finely-dressed black couple perhaps on their way to a dance. The shocked reaction of the small dog on the left echoes the print’s caption (see Vera Kutzinski, *Sugar’s Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 1993, p. 58).
dressed, the females very ludicrously so, showing a partiality to white muslin
dresses, artificial flowers, and pink shoes'.

Nor was it only travellers who condemned the clothing and style of
coloured peoples as gaudy and tasteless. Members of the local elite joined
their voices with those of European travellers in ridiculing the excesses of
coloured dress. In his 1882 novel Cecilia Valdés, the Cuban writer Cirilo
Villaverde described the mixed-race participants at a ball as ‘for the most
part overdressed in gaudy clothing of the worst taste’. The caricatures
printed on Cuban cigarette cards likewise emphasized the ridiculousness of
coloured attempts at imitating white dress. One such card from the 1860s
depicts a finely-dressed black couple promenading proudly through the
street, to the astonishment of dogs and men alike. The caption reads simply
‘Holy cow!’.

* * *

Overall, such nineteenth-century accounts by both Anglo-Americans and
members of the colonial elite stressed the impossibility of non-white sar-
torial imitation. Discursively, it had become much more difficult for non-
whites to dress in ‘white’ clothing without being labelled ridiculous or
grotesque. Approval was reserved for those who in their clothing ‘affected
to be nothing except that which they really were’, in the words of English
slave-owner Matthew Lewis. The rejection of the possibility of emulation
reflects the transformation of ideas about race underway in the early nine-
teenth century. The period saw a significant shift in scientific understand-
ings of the origins of racial difference, and indeed of the very meaning of
race. Enlightenment theories such as those of the Comte de Buffon and
Johann Friedrich Blumenbach had emphasized that race was the conse-
quence of the effects of climate, food and culture. Skin colour was thus in
part a function of culture (including dress) and environment. The cen-
trality of clothing, in particular, in designating race is illustrated by Carl Lin-
naeus’s classification of Homo Sapiens into five racial types:

1. **Wild man.** Four-footed, mute, hairy.
2. **American.** Copper-coloured, choleric, erect. Hair black, straight,
   thick; nostrils wide; face harsh; beard, scanty; obstinate, content, free.
   Paints himself with fine red lines. Regulated by customs.
3. **European.** Fair, sanguine, brawny. Hair yellow brown, flowing; eyes
   blue; gentle, acute, inventive. Covered with close vestments. Governed
   by laws.
4. **Asiatic.** Sooty, melancholy, rigid. Hair black; eyes dark; severe,
   haughty, covetous. Covered with loose garments. Governed by
   opinions.
5. **African.** Black, phlegmatic, relaxed. Hair black, frizzled; skin silky;
   nose flat; lips tumid; crafty, indolent, negligent. Anoints himself with
   grease. Governed by caprice.
Eighteenth-century scientific opinion thus regarded clothing as a racial characteristic. Such views fit well with the concepts of race employed in colonial Ibero-America and the Caribbean. There, racial categories reflected not only skin colour, but also the level of wealth, and more importantly, the culture with which the individual identified. The transformative potential of emulation was thus an integral part of Ibero-American racial classifications. In lawsuits individuals might seek to establish their race by demonstrating that they wore the clothing appropriate to their claimed status; when in 1686 Blas de Horta tried to demonstrate that he was not an Indian, he did not summon his parents. Rather, he produced a witness to affirm that he wore ‘Spanish dress’. Thus a mixed-race woman dressed in elegant European clothing truly belonged to a different racial group from the same woman dressed in rags. In fine clothes she might be confirmed in her identity as a mestiza; in rags she might become a parda, or another less-regarded race. This sort of racial self-reclassification through clothing was complemented in the Hispanic world by a complex legal system which allowed individuals to change their race through the acquisition of legal documents confirming the desired racial identity. Processes known as gracias al sacar and autos sobre declaratoria de mestizo, available throughout the eighteenth century, entitled those who resorted to them to alter their racial identity, thereby allowing access to careers and activities reserved to legitimately-born individuals of ‘clean’ blood.

It is for this reason that the colonial Americas retained sumptuary legislation for centuries after such laws had been discarded in Europe. Sumptuary laws – legislation designed to control excessive display, particularly through the regulation of clothing – are employed only in cultures where it is possible to disguise one’s status via clothing. In the Americas sumptuary legislation was considered necessary during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries precisely in order to control the sorts of unsanctioned personal transformation via dress discussed above. Sumptuary legislation had been discarded in most parts of Europe by the seventeenth century. In the American colonies it reached its heyday only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, precisely the period when, as we saw, it was considered possible, even easy, for non-elites to succeed in imitating elite dress. The significance of such laws for our purposes thus lies in the attitudes they suggest towards clothing and identity, rather than in their enforcement, which was limited.

Sumptuary legislation in the Americas, as in Europe, attempted to control the clothing worn by different classes of person; but the American codes also tried to preserve distinctions between different races, a feature that was largely absent in the European legislation. In sixteenth-century Mexico, black women were banned from wearing gold, pearls, silk, or other luxurious goods, unless they were married to a Spaniard, and were similarly prohibited from wearing Indian garb unless they were married to an Indian. Most Indian women were at the same time banned from adopting Spanish

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dress. In seventeenth-century Lima city ordinances banned ‘negroes, mulattos and zambos’ from carrying swords or other weapons, and black and mulatto women from wearing ‘woollen cloth ... cloth of silk, [or] lace of gold, silver, black or white’. Comparable laws in eighteenth-century Peru aimed at ‘moderating the scandalous excesses of the clothing worn by blacks, mulatos, Indians and mestizos’. In eighteenth-century Brazil, white colonials repeatedly asked the Portuguese crown to legislate against the perceived excesses of coloured dress, while in the French colony of Saint Domingue sumptuary legislation specifically banned free people of colour from the ‘reprehensible imitation’ of the clothing, jewellery and hairstyles worn by whites. Free people of colour were instead required to dress in accordance with ‘the simplicity of their condition’. The eighteenth-century Spanish slave code for Santo Domingo similarly prohibited both slaves and free people of colour from wearing ‘pearls, emeralds, and other precious stones’, and, equally significantly, prohibited them from wearing the Spanish mantilla in place of the African head-cloth. Comparable legislation was issued for the Dutch Caribbean islands in 1786.

Such laws aimed at preserving the distinctions between white and coloured dress were accompanied by laws intending to preserve class distinctions that survived well into the eighteenth century. Indeed, such legislation first appeared in Britain’s American colonies in the 1620s, nearly two decades after all sumptuary laws had been comprehensively revoked in England itself. Legislation in seventeenth-century Virginia permitted only ‘the council and heads of hundreds to wear gold in their clothes, or to wear silk’. In her study of power and gender relations in colonial Virginia, Kathleen Brown has noted the distinctive colonial nature of such laws, which she links to the particular social and cultural environment of British settlement in the Americas:

Even more than in England, where stately homes, carriages, trappings of office and traditions of local rule expressed aristocratic and gentry rights to rule over yeomen and labourers, clothing became a crucial signpost of status in early Virginia, where most people lived in little more than a two-room cottage until late in the seventeenth century.

Throughout the seventeenth century Massachusetts issued sumptuary laws aimed particularly at preventing ‘the people of mean condition’ from dressing in ‘the garb of gentlemen’. In Spanish America, legislation aimed at the ‘common people who without having sufficient wealth wish to dress like the wealthy’ was issued regularly until the end of the eighteenth century. In 1773, for example, the president of Chile’s Audiencia ordered that at Carnival ‘no person may use a costume that does not correspond to his estate, sex and quality’, so as to avoid ‘serious inconveniences’.

It was only in the nineteenth century, after the overthrow of Spanish colonialism, that such laws were discarded in Spanish America. They were
discarded because they ceased to be necessary: it was no longer considered possible to alter one’s race via luxurious dress. On the contrary, as we have seen, attempts by non-whites to dress well were regarded as ludicrous failures. Legislation was no longer necessary to control such transparent deceits. The nineteenth-century abandonment of sumptuary laws thus shed additional light on the nature of biologized racial theories emphasizing the inherited, inflexible, nature of perceived racial characteristics. In Spanish America changing scientific thinking combined with the official abolition of racial categories, which occurred in many countries after independence from Spain, to make inconceivable the legal alterations of race permitted in the eighteenth century. Racial categories were thus simultaneously abandoned legally and strengthened socially and scientifically. Mid nineteenth-century French anthropologist Alcides d’Orbigny’s racialized description of ‘American Man’ contrasts sharply with Linnaeus’s eighteenth-century account:

AMERICAN MAN
First Race: ANDO-PERUVIAN: Olive-brown colour, more or less dark. Short stature. Forehead only slightly elevated or receding; horizontal eyes, never narrow at the outer corner.
Third Race: BRAZILIAN-GUARANI: Yellowish colour. Medium stature. Forehead slightly convex; eyes slanting upwards at the outer corner.

Dress, along with forms of government, has disappeared from this typical nineteenth-century racial classification. Clothing was no longer considered a racial characteristic. As a consequence, a mixed-race woman in fine clothes became simply a jumped-up half-caste. The disdain for well-dressed people of colour in the Americas is thus symptomatic of the hardening of racial categories in the nineteenth century. ‘Clothes make the man’ is not a nineteenth-century sentiment, at least as far as racial identity was concerned.

* * *

We may thus end by returning to our original question: in what ways did clothing show identity in the colonial American world? I have suggested that until the late eighteenth century, clothing helped create identity, particularly racial identity, while by the mid nineteenth century it had lost much of this ability to do so. Instead, clothing was thought to reflect, more or less accurately, existing class and racial identities. It is for this reason that nineteenth-century Anglo-American travellers became increasingly suspicious even of members of the Hispanic elite. Their attempts at dressing well did
not compensate, in the eyes of such travellers, for their doubtful racial extraction. Thus accounts by nineteenth-century English and American travellers tend to cast doubt on the gentility of even the most aristocratic Ibero-Americans. Creole men from the British colonies, claimed J. B. Moreton, ‘are amazing fond of costly, tinsel frippery; abroad they appear ridiculously gay’.55 ‘Gaudy’ became the term most typically used to describe Ibero-American dress, including that of the elite.56 Such criticism of elite dress was usually couched in terms of ‘taste’: Ibero-American elites simply didn’t have enough. In Mexico, one English traveller remarked in the 1820s, ‘It is customary to wear white silk stockings with these black dresses, and often coloured shoes, which we Europeans should consider bad taste’.57

Some scholars have argued that the move away from ‘luxe’ (luxury) to ‘goût’ (taste) in the late eighteenth century marked a democratization of fashion. Jennifer Jones, for example, has made this claim for late eighteenth-century France. She notes that French fashion journals for women described ‘taste’ rather than ‘luxury’ as the goal of fashion. Costliness was demoted as a measure of value; dress should aim at good taste, rather than luxurious ostentation. This view was put forward in a number of journals aimed at women, which stressed that the value of an item of clothing lay in its taste, not its cost in terms of materials: women of taste could ‘with the most simple cloth, with the lightest muslin, make clothing whose value had no connection with the materials from which it was made’.58 Jones argues that these journals show a more ‘democratic’ view of fashion, in that they allowed those of good taste but short means to dress well. She notes that in France:

In the seventeenth century the Mercure participated in a fashion culture based on the notion that fashions should express one’s social position; thus, for the Mercure the most troubling aspect of fashion was its potential for blurring class distinctions. But the [eighteenth-century] Cabinet des modes, which held that taste rather than luxury provided the basis of fashion, seldom mentioned class; instead its principal worry concerned the appearance in the streets of Paris of clothing of bizarre or bad taste and the paucity of new fashions.59

I am not convinced, however, that the concept of taste is more democratic than that of ‘luxe’, at least in the sense of democracy that Jones seems to imply. Bourdieu has argued eloquently that in twentieth-century France the concept of ‘taste’ was intimately linked to ideas of class and status, and the nineteenth-century Anglo-American descriptions of clothing in the Americas cited here illustrate that a sartorial system privileging ‘taste’ need be no more sympathetic to popular fashions than one privileging ostentatious displays of wealth.60 While in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries travellers and chroniclers imagined Ibero-America to be populated by slave girls in diamonds and rhapsodized that countesses and cooks dressed with
equal elegance and expense, by the nineteenth century such flights of fancy were no longer possible. A deep sartorial gulf now separated the rich from the poor, and the white from the non-white. Those unwise enough to attempt to cross it risked ridicule.61

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1 William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark [1601?], Act I, Sc.III.
3 For emblematic examples, see Garber, Vested Interests; and also Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Routledge, New York, 1990. For a recent analysis that, although historically-based, focuses largely on clothing's subversive potential, see Jessica Munns and Penny Richards (eds), The Clothes that Wear Us: Essays on Dressing and Transgressing in Eighteenth-Century Culture, University of Delaware Press, Newark, 1999.
4 For an excellent introduction to the traveller's gaze, see Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation, Routledge, London, 1992.
5 Juan de Viera, 'Breve Compendiosa, Narración de la ciudad de México, corte y cabeza de toda la América Meridional' (1778), in Agustín de Vetancurt, Juan Manuel de San Vicente and Juan de Viera, La ciudad de México en el siglo XVIII (1690–1780): Tres crónicas, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Mexico, 1990, p. 256. For two watches worn simultaneously, see the eighteenth-century Mexican portraits reproduced in Artes de Mexico: El retrato novohispano 25, 1994, pp. 10–1, 22, 42, 48.
6 Brantz Mayer, Mexico, As It Was and As It Is, G. B. Zieber, Philadelphia, 1847, p. 152. A lépero is a beggar. I am grateful to Guy Thomson for this source. Or see the remarks by the German traveller Carl Sartorius, Mexico about 1850 (1858), F. A. Brockhaus, Stuttgart, 1961: in Veracruz he notes 'on the one side Paris fashion, on the other the lightest possible clothing . . . The fair sex exhibits the same contrast: on the one hand the greatest luxury, on the other half naked' (p. 2, or see p. 81).
7 Thomas Gage, Travels in the New World (1648), University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1958, p. 68, or see p. 73.
9 Gage notes that 'many of these are or had been slaves, though love has set them loose, at liberty to enslave souls to sin and Satan': Travels in the New World, p. 69.
12 Juan and Ulloa, Voyage to South America, p. 196
13 Ilona Katzew, who has written a suggestive study of colonial casta paintings, regards 'the uniform assignment of luxurious garb to the different castas' in these early series as their most outstanding feature. See Ilona Katzew, 'Casta Painting: Identity and Social Stratification in Colonial Mexico', New World Orders: Casta Painting and Colonial Latin America, Ilona Katzew (ed.), Americas Society, New York, 1996, p. 19. For further discussion of casta painting, see the issue of Artes de México devoted to the genre: Artes de México: La pintura de castas 8,

15 Juan and Ulloa, Voyage to South America, p. 137. Juan and Ulloa here refer to Quito.

The French traveller Amédée Frézier similarly lamented that the ladies of Lima had ‘an insatiable appetite for pearls and jewels, for bracelets, earrings and other paraphernalia, which saps the wealth of husbands and lovers. We have seen ladies who wear sixty thousand pesos worth of jewels on their person’. Amadeo Frézier, Relación del viaje por el mar del sur (1716), Biblioteca Ayacucho, Caracas, 1982, p. 191; see also pp. 219–22. See also the comments of the Abbé Courte de la Blanchardière, Nouveau voyage fait au Pérou (1751), cited in Jean-Paul Duvoins, L’Amérique espagnole vue et rêvée. Les livres de voyages de Christophe Colomb à Bougainville, Editions Promodis, Paris, 1985, p. 305.

16 Gage, Travels in the New World, p. 68.

17 Juan and Ulloa, Voyage to South America, pp. 195–6.

18 Juan de Viera, ‘Breve Compendiosa’, p. 256.


22 Lara, ‘Signs of Color’, p. 214. Lara notes that the term peças implicitly refers to both the ornaments, and to the slaves themselves.


24 Agustín de Vetancurt, ‘Tratado de la Ciudad de México y las Grandezas que la ilustran despues que la fundaron españoles’ (1698), in Agustín de Vetancurt, Juan Manuel de San Vicente and Juan de Viera, La ciudad de México en el siglo XVIII (1690–1780): Tres crónicas, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Mexico, 1990, pp. 46–7. I have modified the translation given in Katzew, ‘Casta Paintings’, p. 18.


28 E. A. Hastings, A Glimpse of the Tropics (1900), cited in Steeve Buckridge, ‘Dress as

29 Jas. A. Thome and J. Horace Kimball, Emancipation in the West Indies. A Six Months Tour in Antigua, Barbados and Jamaica in the Year 1837, The American Anti-Slavery Society, New York, 1838, p. 8. Or see Mrs A. C. Carmichael, Domestic Manners and Social Conditions of the White, Coloured and Negro Population of the West Indies (1833), Negro Universities Press, New York, 1969, vol. 1, p. 10. I am grateful to Sheena Boa for these references. In his study of the Eurasian community in India, C. J. Hawes notes similar anxiety over attempts by colonials to ‘follow the example set them by the white aristocracy’: ‘Since Western dress was the mark of the ruling race, the Eurasian variation upon it seemed to be an unwelcome, if unconscious, parody which might invite ridicule and so diminish British standing in Indian eyes’. See C. J. Hawes, Poor Relations: the Making of a Eurasian Community in British India, 1773–1833, Curzon Press, 1996, p. 79. I am grateful to Lizzie Collingham for this source.


32 Kutzinski, Sugar’s Secrets, pp. 57–8.


36 Peter Wade (Race and Ethnicity in Latin America, Pluto Press, London, 1997) discusses the meaning of race in Latin America.


38 For very clear examples, see Jaime Jaramillo Uribe, Ensayos sobre historia social colombiana, Biblioteca Universitaria de Cultura Colombiana, Bogotá, 1969, pp. 195, 211.


Hispanoamericanos 408, 1984) provides an excellent overview of the Spanish luxury debates; while José Cadalso's 1789 imitation of the Lettres Persanes, his Cartas Marruecas, Espasa, Madrid, 1950, and Juan Sempere y Guarinos, Historia del luxo y de las leyes suntuarias de España, 2 vols, Madrid, 1788, give a flavour of the Spanish debate about sumptuary legislation.


46 Hall, Slave Society in the Danish West Indies, pp. 116, 148–9.

47 For comment on this, see Hunt, Governance of the Consuming Passions, p. 38.


49 Brown, Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs, p. 89.


51 The quotation is from a 1648 appeal by the Audiencia of Chile. See Salinas, Las Chilenas de la Colonia, p. 114.

52 Salinas, Las Chilenas de la Colonia, p. 115. See also pp. 125–6.


54 Douglas Lorimer, Colour, Class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century, Leicester University Press, Bristol, 1978, provides an interesting discussion of this process in England itself. Although he argues that in England this hardening of attitudes occurred in the 1860s, my view is that in the Americas this process began earlier, by the 1820s.


57 Cochrane, Journal, vol. 2, p. 89. For immoderate displays of wealth, see Fanny Calderón de la Barca, Life in Mexico During a Residence of Two Years in that Country (1842), E. P.

One distinctive Ibero-American form of dress did attract consistently favourable comment. This was the *saya* and *manto* worn by Limenlas. See for example, Hall, *Extracts from a Journal*, vol. 1, pp. 109, 111. For a celebratory Peruvian description, see Flora Tristán, *Les Pérégrinations d'une Paria, 1833–1834* (1838), Maspero, Paris, 1979, pp. 329–35. The distinctive dress of the women of Bogotá, although often remarked upon, was rarely viewed as attractive. See for example, Cochrane, *Journal of a Residence*, vol. 2, p. 35. (Or see the very similar account in *Cartas escritas desde Colombia*, pp. 95–6, probably plagiarized from Cochrane.) For nineteenth-century illustrations of the *saya* and *manto*, see Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race and Modernity: a Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997.


61 This was true for those who attempted to dress ‘down’ as well as those who dressed ‘up’. Calderón de la Barca provides an intriguing account of her intention of wearing to a ball the costume of a working-class Poblana, which, she later learned, was considered the garb of prostitutes by the Mexican elite. See Calderón de la Barca, *Life in Mexico*, pp. 45–6. Or see p. 137.