

Stripes of Defiance:
Enslavement, Fashionability, and Refiguring Vectors of Control in the
Eighteenth Century British Caribbean

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Agostino Brunias, "Dancing Scene in the Caribbean," 1764–1796, Tate, London,
www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/brunias-dancing-scene-in-the-caribbean-t13869.

Introduction: A striped bodice.

Afront rolling tropical hills, at least twenty African-descended or mixed-race people of color dance in communion. They play the tambourine, hold hands, and converse: their arms raised, feet bare, and faces painted with bemusement. The gathered—of which the majority are painted in traditional feminine form—are dressed in a diverse array of colors, printed fabrics, headwraps, and skirts of varying lengths and styles. On the right side of the scene, a woman

stands with her hand on her hip and a child at her feet. She wears a bodice with yellow and white stripes, vertical on the bodice and horizontal on the sleeves, which are rolled to her elbows. The bodice is split at the center front seam and loosely fashioned together with matching yellow lacing, exposing the woman's chest beneath.¹

Within this essay I will attempt to tell this artifact's 'life story'. By doing so, I hope to convey the bodice's significance to the European fashion regime and highlight a subversion of imperial notions of mono-directional transatlantic cultural movement. Via the bastardization of European sartorial norms in the late 18th century British Caribbean, this bodice illuminates enslaved peoples' insistence on personhood, agency, and power, especially when captured by imperial means. By this subversion, the bodice asserts a dialogical relationship between the "refined" European mother country and the "rude" colonies, likewise a subversive place within the archive.²

As I attempt to piece together a narrative that recovers this bodice's life, I must also admit to the impossibility of doing so completely. The archive is notoriously silent on slavery as a result of the dominant culture's collection priorities and intentional measures to silence marginalized voices, and what does exist is overwhelmingly populated by violence. To this, I employ a variety of strategies which attempt to glean valuable information from a violent and silent archive. I primarily attempt to read against the grain of historical sources by remaining cognizant of authorial bias, misrepresentation, and goal, with hope to recenter the people on the margins. In order to reckon with the archive's silence, I employ Hartman's "critical fabulation" – emphasizing the negative space and refraining from excessive speculation in hopes not to

¹ Agostino Brunias, "Dancing Scene in the Caribbean," 1764–1796, Tate, London, www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/brunias-dancing-scene-in-the-caribbean-t13869.

² Kay Dian Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700–1840* (London: Paul Mellon Centre, 2008), 1-7.

“trespass” upon “the boundaries of the archive.”³ Wherever possible, I will emphasize the impossibility of connecting the dots in hopes to produce a more ethical historical account.

Found: On depiction and corroboration.

The yellow and white striped bodice’s life did not begin when it was painted into Agostino Brunias’ *Dancing Scene in the Caribbean* c.1764-96. However, this is the only way in which we are able to access it. So our story begins here, by corroborating the existence of this artifact despite the many degrees of removal (painting, archive, digitization, etc) which separate us from it.

Agostino Brunias (1730-96) was an Italian-born painter, significant for his depictions of the British Caribbean colonies in the second half of the eighteenth century. Brunias’ work depicts prosperous, refined, and racially-diverse scenes of Caribbean life in which both mixed-race free people and European planters enjoy similar levels of sartorial adornment.⁴ Through these scenes, Brunias attempted to define the British Caribbean as prosperous and intriguing: subverting the idea of social refinement as a “metropolitan adornment... derived from empire,” and asserting Caribbean cultural value.⁵ *Dancing Scene in the Caribbean* does precisely this by depicting both enslaved and free people of color, adorned in an array of fine clothing, participating in an act of leisure. By depicting a thriving material and social scene for people of color, Brunias asserts the colonies’ prosperity and pacifies the brutality of plantation slavery.

Before we’re able to investigate the striped bodice, we must also attempt to corroborate its existence in distinction from artistic merit, imagination, or intentional aesthetic alteration.

³ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small axe : a journal of criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 9.

⁴ “Agostino Brunias,” Mutual Art, accessed December 7, 2023, <https://www.mutualart.com/Artist/Agostino-Brunias/908F669F84DA350A/Artworks>

⁵ Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700–1840*, 1-7.

Brunias' work does not lend itself easily to these ends. Firstly, *Dancing Scene in the Caribbean* is undated and lacks a denotation of location. We may assume that Brunias paints a scene within Dominica, or better yet, St. Vincent, given these islands make up the majority of scenes within his portfolio and are the islands on which he lived until his death in 1796.⁶ As for date, an extremely similar work entitled *Villagers Merry Making in the island of St. Vincent, with Dancers and Musicians, A Landscape with Huts on a Hill*, which features an identical background and multiple nearly identical figures, has been attributed to 1775, allowing for the reasonable assumption that *Dancing Scene in the Caribbean* can also be attributed to the 1770s.⁷ While this clarifies some of our qualms about provenance, the existence of this "sister painting" only lends itself to another ambiguity: *Dancing Scene in the Caribbean* is likely a composite. The similarity of figures, dress, setting, and composition between the paintings indicates that Brunias may have invented this scene: mixing setting elements, garments, and subjects from different islands to suit his vision. This is especially troubling when attempting to validate the existence of garments within Brunias' paintings: If Brunias was willing to create a composite to suit his vision, was he likewise willing to falsify the styles and garments within?

⁶ Brunias, "Dancing Scene in the Caribbean," Tate, London.

⁷ Agostino Brunias, "Villagers merry-making in the island of St. Vincent with dancers and musicians, a landscape with huts on a hill," 1775, National Library of Jamaica Digital Collection, <https://nljdigital.nlj.gov.jm/items/show/3871>.



Agostino Brunias, "Villagers Merry Making in the island of St. Vincent, with Dancers and Musicians, A Landscape with Huts on a Hill," 1775, Slavery Images: *A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*, <http://www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/2432>

Only furthering ambiguity, of 49 surveyed paintings and illustrations, Brunias' portfolio includes four instances of yellow and white striped and laced bodices, each styled slightly differently.⁸ Within *Villagers Merry Making in the island of St. Vincent...*, a nearly identical woman wears what appears to be the original bodice, but in this portrayal, laced more tightly as only to expose a small portion of her chest. In *The Market, Santo Domingo* (1775), an enslaved woman also wears a yellow and white striped bodice, this time appearing without sleeves, laced tightly, and worn with an undergarment exposed along the top edge.⁹ And within *Market Day, Roseau, Dominica* (1780), a mixed-race woman of color also wears a yellow and white striped bodice, in this case unlaced and tied at the front, styled with a white scarf around the shoulders.¹⁰ Given this variety of similar garments, is it unreasonable to assume that Brunias may have taken artistic license when painting the bodice itself?

⁸ Mutual Art, "Agostino Brunias." and Agostino Brunias, "This Plate (representing a Negroes Dance in the Island of Dominica) is humbly dedicated to the Honble. Charles O'Hara," 1779, John Carter Brown Library, <https://americana.jcblibrary.org/search/object/jcbcap-ljcb-1-1-994-1110001/>

⁹ Agostino Brunias, "The Market, Santo Domingo," 1775, Mutual Art, <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/The--Market--Santo-Domingo-/8317856B6FFB69BB32C93A1DEF246765>

¹⁰ Agostino Brunias, "Market Day, Roseau, Dominica," 1780, Yale Center for British Art, <https://collections.britishart.yale.edu/catalog/tms:587>

Fortunately, scholarly consensus sedates these fears. Brunias' work is often referred to as "ethnographic"; his depictions of Caribbean life feature "taxonomic images of specimens," serving the larger project of taxonomizing caste in the colonial Caribbean.¹¹ However, art historians assert that Brunias' work pays special attention to dress, pushing it beyond simply a form of racial taxonomy.¹² In fact, Brunias' attention to racial caste as he taxonomizes it proves this point. Across Brunias' portfolio, people of each racial caste are dressed in consistent and distinct styles. Free women of color ubiquitously wear a shawl or scarf around their shoulders, an elaborately printed headwrap, and a full length skirt, while exposed breasts, striped skirts, and tied-up skirts are largely reserved for enslaved women.¹³ By consistently and meticulously depicting dress along caste lines and by rendering garments in high detail, Brunias' portrayal of the striped bodice can, thankfully, be interpreted as a faithful representation.

Made: On materiality and acquisition.

Now, we may begin piecing together the striped bodice's life, first by investigating its materiality. Evidently, the yellow and white striped bodice was not made of the plain, rough osnaburg which enslaved people in the British Caribbean were provided to make their own clothing out of, or less commonly, to wear as ready-made clothing. This plain weave cotton was either used for fashioning work clothing, or sold to other slaves in order to purchase finer fabrics and garments.¹⁴ If not the osnaburg provisioned to enslaved people, the most readily available and accessible fiber in the British Caribbean during the second half of the eighteenth century was linen. Not only do a host of Brunias' works depict Caribbean linen markets which sold striped

¹¹ Danielle C. Skeehan, "Caribbean Women, Creole Fashioning, and the Fabric of Black Atlantic Writing," *The Eighteenth Century* 56, no. 1 (2015): 116-118.

¹² Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700–1840*, all.

¹³ Mutual Art, "Agostino Brunias."

¹⁴ Steeve O. Buckridge and Rex Nettleford, *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1750-1890*, (University of the West Indies Press, 2004), 29-36. and Ms. A. C. Carmichael, *Domestic manners and social condition of the white, coloured and negro population of the West Indies*, (London: Whittaker, Treacher, and co., 1833), 142.

fabric similar to that which the bodice was made of, but enslaved people are well documented in their use of fine printed linen fabric when fashioning special occasion wear. Likewise, in the British colonies, linen was more readily available and cheaper than fabrics composed of other fibers like cotton.¹⁵ British textile exports to the American colonies also support the theory that the bodice was constructed from a linen or linen-blend fabric. By the end of the eighteenth century, British, Irish, and Scottish striped linen was being imported into the American colonies in substantial quantities. Likewise, peak linen exports to the American colonies occurred between 1760 and 1790, coinciding with the bodice's depiction.¹⁶ Similarly, between 1760 and 1774, 66% of commercially available fabric in Jamaica, another British sugar colony, was composed of linen.¹⁷ Referring to British export logs as corroboration is significant here because of the British empire's success in implementing a mercantilist framework and corralling trade through the mother country. While linen fabric may have been manufactured in India, Ireland, Scotland, or Britain, it very likely passed through a British port on its way to the Caribbean.¹⁸ Even further, there is evidence that enslaved people may have been provisioned with fine linen fabric by plantation owners, if in limited quantities.¹⁹

With fiber substantiated, we now turn to weave. Existing accounts of people of color's finery point to chintzes (glazed, printed cotton) and muslins (in the eighteenth century, a fine cotton gauze) as primary materials.²⁰ However, solely based on visuality, these textile types may

¹⁵ Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700–1840*, 37. and Robert S. DuPlessis, "What did Slaves Wear? Textile Regimes in the French Caribbean," *Monde(s)*, no. 1 (2012), 188–189.

¹⁶ N.B. Harte, "The British Linen Trade With The United States In The Eighteenth And Nineteenth Centuries," *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, no. 605 (1990), all.

¹⁷ Robert S. DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650–1800*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

¹⁸ DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic : Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650–1800*, 57.

¹⁹ Carmichael, *Domestic manners and social condition of the white, coloured and negro population of the West Indies*, 143.

²⁰ Carmichael, *Domestic manners and social condition of the white, coloured and negro population of the West Indies*, 147.

be ruled out; the yellow striped fabric is not rendered in a finely printed pattern, nor with the fabric characteristics associated with muslin (unstructured, soft drape). Instead, these fabrics are more consistent with mixed-race free womens' depicted dress. As a clue, we may turn to a garment in the painting's background with similar fabric characteristics—the shortgown. A loose fitting garment of striped fabric, split at the front and tied in a singular connection, the shortgown depicted to the left of the shirtless woman bears striking resemblance to the striped bodice in question's materiality. Surviving mid to late eighteenth century shortgowns are consistently composed of linen-cotton blends (cotton warp, linen weft), often as a holland or siamoise.²¹ Returning to the presumption of linen fabric, extant fabric pattern books from the American colonies give evidence to fusitan (cotton-linen blend) as another likely contender. While only documented in New York, fusitan fabric was imported from Britain to the colonies in the second half of the eighteenth century and woven with nearly identical patterns to the striped bodice's.²² British-produced and imported cotton-linen fusitan may just be the best contender to describe the bodice's materiality.



²¹ "Shortgown," Colonial Williamsburg, 1800-1830, [https://emuseum.history.org/view/objects/asitem/items\\$0040:98793](https://emuseum.history.org/view/objects/asitem/items$0040:98793). and "Short Gown," Five Colleges and Historic Deerfield Museum Consortium, 1750-1800, https://museums.fivecolleges.edu/detail.php?t=objects&type=ext&id_number=HD+F.235.

²² "NYC Henry Remsen Jr. & Co. Pattern book of textile," Winterthur Library Digital Collections, 1767, <http://contentdm.winterthur.org/digital/collection/Textiles/id/3238/rec/21>

Sample 220 (left) and 231 (right) demonstrate similar qualities to the striped bodice's fabric.
 "NYC Henry Remsen Jr. & Co. Pattern book of textile," Winterthur Library Digital
 Collections, 1767, <http://contentdm.winterthur.org/digital/collection/Textiles/id/3238/rec/21>

As we begin to investigate the striped bodice's manufacture and acquisition, the archive's silence begins to set in with deadening permanence. While I will explore multiple theories which may have accounted for the production and sourcing of this garment, attempting to verify each becomes futile, if impossible, given holes in the written and visual archive. Also importantly, the striped bodice was likely a form of special occasion wear, as evidenced by the social setting which it was painted into, its fabric composition, and its style, which we will discuss in-depth at a further point.

First, a Mrs. Alison Carmichael, author of *Domestic manners and social condition of the white, coloured and negro population of the West Indies* (1833) after a four year stint among the planter class in St. Vincent and Trinidad, gave account of a probable mode of garment production and distribution: herself. As mistress of a sugar plantation, Carmichael found it her duty to distribute clothing which she produced—at least by her own account—in the European style for her enslaved laborers.²³ In doing so, Carmichael wielded the power to both control aesthetic difference between her slaves and herself and impose European standards of modesty onto her slaves, but did not exercise this power, instead conceding to the style preferences of enslaved people.²⁴ Such, the striped bodice may have originated in the hands of a plantation mistress who distributed clothing as a means of aesthetic control, or as an act of pseudo-benevolence—“civilizing” and anglicizing the clothing of a lower caste. In the same vein, there is ample evidence of plantation mistresses handing down worn out clothing to their

²³ Buckridge and Nettleford, *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1750-1890*, 35.

²⁴ Skeehean, “Caribbean Women, Creole Fashioning, and the Fabric of Black Atlantic Writing,” 122.

enslaved laborers. This practice “encouraged a feeling of dependence on whites”, while “simultaneously reinforcing and maintaining social distance”.²⁵ In this case, the bodice may not even have been manufactured in the Caribbean, but imported with the plantation mistress from Europe, only complicating things further.

Despite dependence on plantation elites, ample evidence also exists to suggest that enslaved people were active agents in acquiring fine dress. In Jamaica, enslaved people took up apprenticeships with milliners in order to reproduce fashionable styles from British mainland ladies magazines.²⁶ As such, enslaved tradespeople wielded the ability to produce their own finery, competent and knowledgeable in the European style. Within her book, Mrs. Carmichael also reaffirms this theory: enslaved peoples’ “gala dresses are provided very often by themselves.”²⁷ Here, Carmichael may also refer to self-provision in terms of purchasing finery, which enslaved people were also well documented in doing. Despite compulsory full-time plantation labor, Caribbean enslaved people found ways to procure supplemental income by means of hunting, fishing, growing produce, or skilled artisan labor. With this income, enslaved people primarily bought clothing and accessories, along with foodstuffs— a likely contender for the bodice’s procurement.²⁸

While less likely than the circumstances above, enslaved people may also have received fine clothing as a gift: from romantic partners, in exchange for sex with plantation owners, or as

²⁵ Buckridge and Nettleford, *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1750-1890*, 34-35. and DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic : Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650-1800*, 131.

²⁶ Skeeahan, “Caribbean Women, Creole Fashioning, and the Fabric of Black Atlantic Writing,” 111.

²⁷ Carmichael, *Domestic manners and social condition of the white, coloured and negro population of the West Indies*, 143.

²⁸ Buckridge and Nettleford, *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1750-1890*, 38. and DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic : Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650-1800*, 136.

incentive for more productive plantation labor.²⁹ Likewise, enslaved people could have stolen garments from the people who claimed ownership over them, often pawning this clothing for garments which suited their tastes.³⁰ In any case, Caribbean slaves were able to procure fine garments— like the striped bodice— in numerous ways. Unwilling to submit to a white-supremacist and paternalistic scheme of “involuntary consumption,” enslaved people were active agents in dressing themselves, asserting individuality and control, no matter how insistent the plantocracy was on depriving them of such.³¹

Worn: On personhood.

Until this point, this essay has concentrated on *what*: the striped bodice’s provenance, materiality, and source. However now, we transition to asking *why*, a markedly more difficult quandary to reconcile. In an attempt to restore not only the life of the striped bodice but the person who wore it— made especially pertinent by the dominant culture’s insistence on enslaved bodies as commodities— we ask not only who wore the bodice, but *why*?. Why did this woman choose to acquire and wear the striped bodice? Was how she chose to wear it intentional? Why did she choose this style of garment? What significance did this choice, and the bodice’s style, hold? To the impossibility that these questions pose, I attempt to address them not with certainty, but hope, possibility, and mindfulness to the limits of the archive. From this point on, I hope not to recover the past, but understand its impact on modernity.

Who wore the striped bodice when it was captured by Brunias? This poses the first problem when attempting to recover personhood; given the composite nature of *Dancing Scene in the Caribbean*, the woman depicted in the painting likely didn’t exist. Unlike Brunias’

²⁹ DuPlessis, “What did Slaves Wear? Textile Regimes in the French Caribbean,” 184. and DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic : Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650–1800*, 136. and Carmichael, *Domestic manners and social condition of the white, coloured and negro population of the West Indies*, 143.

³⁰ Buckridge and Nettleford, *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1750–1890*, 40.

³¹ DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic : Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650–1800*, 127.

attention to sartorial detail, his goal of caste taxonomy necessitated an erasure of personhood; uniformity was manufactured in order to communicate a strict, white-supremacist social order. Yet, one verifiable characteristic is the pictured woman's enslaved status. As Brunias' taxonomic project suggests, racial castes in the British Caribbean were defined by three groupings, conveniently spelled out in Mrs. Carmichael's book title: African-born or -descended enslaved people, free mixed-race people, and the white plantocracy. In painting, these groups are distinctly separated, not only by dress, but by skin tone. While this form of differentiation likely didn't exist as uniformly in reality, Brunia's art removes personhood in favor of consistent categorization, only making our search for the striped bodice's wearer more difficult.³² The woman's enslavement may also be verified by how she wears the bodice—with her chest visible through loose lacing. As a means to race-making projects generally, and in Caribbean visual culture, depicted nudity was a symbol of the "savage" while traditional European dress of "civilization".³³ By choosing to depict partial nudity, Brunias asserts the woman in the striped bodice's caste. This is not to say that Brunias invented how the bodice was worn in order to signal caste—his attention to sartorial styling, as previously discussed, is paramount. However, the inclusion of partial nudity nonetheless serves as a racialized symbol.

Perhaps by dissecting the striped bodice's style and the manner in which it was worn (styling), something may be gleaned of the wearer's existence, if only in fragments. When I chose to investigate the striped bodice, I was struck by its similarity to stays— a European laced undergarment which functioned as bust support for eighteenth century women. As enslaved peoples' special occasion wear was often made in European style or passed down from plantation mistresses, the striped bodice may have been a fashion of colonial import. However,

³² Buckridge and Nettleford, *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1750-1890*, 10.

³³ Carmichael, *Domestic manners and social condition of the white, coloured and negro population of the West Indies*, 149-150.

of the many extant examples of stays and other laced European bodices across the century, none match the striped bodice perfectly and were universally styled with an undergarment. Even the most similar European garment, what seems to be a blend between stays and a laced stomacher pictured in Jean-Etienne Liotard's *La Liseuse*, is not a perfect match. This garment's center front opening forms a "V" and also is worn over multiple undergarments, contrasting features of the striped bodice.³⁴ In the same vein, there is evidence of Caribbean people of color wearing a French style, the *échelle* (ladder)—a bodice adornment consisting of a lattice of ribbons. Again, this style is similar to what is depicted, though not quite identical.³⁵ And yet another style, shortgowns (mentioned previously), bore a distinct resemblance to the striped bodice and were accessible to enslaved people, but lacked the lacing which make the striped bodice distinct.³⁶



The most similar archived European garment to the striped bodice.
Jean-Etienne Liotard, "La Liseuse," 1746, RijksMuseum, Amsterdam,
<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/SK-A-228>.

³⁴ Jean-Etienne Liotard, "La Liseuse," 1746, RijksMuseum, Amsterdam, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/SK-A-228>. and "A Varietie of Lacings," *The Fashion Archeologist*, last modified June 15, 2020, <https://thefashionarcheologist.com/research--essays/a-varietie-of-lacings>. and "History of Stays 1740-1780," *Silhouettes: Historic Dress and Costume*, <https://silhouettescostumes.com/the-eras-we-build/history-of-stays-1740-1780/>.

³⁵ DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic : Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650–1800*, 152-153.

³⁶ "18th Century Women's Short Gowns," 18th Century Notebook, http://www.larsdatter.com/18c/shortgowns.html#google_vignette. Note: There is ample evidence of shortgowns in North American slave runaway advertisements, demonstrating the accessibility of this style to enslaved people.

Given these many similar styles, it may be most reasonable to assume that the yellow and white striped bodice was a hybrid garment, inspired by these many European influences, though produced in not quite the same form. It would also be reasonable to assume that, if worn in European custom, this garment would be laced shut and/or worn with one or more undergarments to preserve white conceptions of modesty. This then begs: If this bodice was of or inspired by European fashion, why was it worn in the manner which it was depicted?

So now back to *why*?. Why would this woman choose to wear a garment designed by the dominant culture's fashion regime and intentionally bastardize it by wearing? Perhaps, this misappropriation of the dominant culture's fashion acted as a form of countercultural resistance against its hegemony. This would not be a novel concept to Caribbean slaves who, for example, appropriated European garments in carnival attire as a form of mockery and a reclamation of power.³⁷ Importantly, Caribbean slaves were able to develop a counterculture using colonizers' clothing as a tool given the plantocracy's own neglect of their human property. Distinct sartorial differentiation between castes could not be enforced, nor access limited to European clothing, by the planter elites' own desire to remain removed from the effects of their brutality.³⁸ In this case, the striped bodice's loose lacing may function as a mockery of European conceptions of modesty and refinement, especially in the heat of the Caribbean. Leaving the front of the bodice open and choosing to omit undergarments would not only have been more comfortable and practical for dancing in the Caribbean heat, but also rejected European sartorial sanctimoniousness. To this, choosing to style the bodice this way was a countercultural act of resistance.

³⁷ Buckridge and Nettleford, *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1750-1890*, 177.

³⁸ DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic : Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650-1800*, 163.

Or perhaps, the way in which the bodice was worn was not an act of resistance, but of asserting personhood, value, and agency in the face of a dehumanizing regime. By appropriating and bastardizing the symbols of her oppressors, the woman who wears the striped bodice may have performed what anthropologist Barbara Babcock dubs a “symbolic inversion”: a “behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates or in some manner presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms.” By wearing their oppressor’s clothing, enslaved people could, as historian Steeve Buckridge puts it, “demonstrate the futility of attempts to exclude them from society.”³⁹ With inverted significance, the colonial fashion regime’s dress gained the ability to make enslaved people feel beautiful, whole, and lifted “to the ontological status of ‘somebody’.” Restated: if clothing could function to “strip” enslaved people of their status as people, then it could also, refashioned, “foster self-empowerment” as a form of “therapy.”⁴⁰ Styling a European garment in an intentional and personal way could have allowed the woman in the striped bodice to feel in control, empowered and beautiful, or simply like a person in the face of intense violence.

Indeed, as we reflect on the worn bodice, speculation is seductive. Isn’t it hopeful to believe that this garment assisted one woman in a lifelong resistance against the exceedingly brutal system that was chattel slavery? It’s comforting to know that these yellow and white stripes potentially allowed this woman to feel feminized despite a society which attempted to de-feminize her as a tool of sugar production—that these laces may have allowed her to feel in control despite constant deprivation of agency. But in doing so, we demand that this woman’s life and her clothing be made “useful or instructive” towards our goals for history.⁴¹ So instead

³⁹ Buckridge and Nettleford, *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1750-1890*, 178.

⁴⁰ Marsha Pearce, “Looking Like People; Feeling Like People: The Black Body, Dress and Aesthetic Therapy in the Caribbean,” *Culture Unbound* vol. 6, no. 4 (2014): 862.

⁴¹ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 4.

of making unethical demands, let the above speculation serve only as an exercise in optimistic possibility; While we hope that these theories are true, importantly, we cannot know if they are.

Conclusion: A fashion regime, subverted.

The yellow and white striped bodice made of cotton-linen blend fabric is not necessarily important on its own. But, depicted and stored within an imperial archive, the bodice becomes an instructive example of what Shane White dubs, “unconscious evidence.”⁴² By wearing and styling the striped bodice, an enslaved person insisted upon their agency and personhood by bastardizing an element of the imperial fashion regime. Once depicted and stored within the empire’s own archive, a forced admission of failure in 1) controlling or depicting controlled racial castes in the interest of enforcing white supremacy within the Caribbean colonies, and 2) reducing enslaved people to chattel and economic instruments, was necessitated. This garment and its depiction serve as “material testimony” and “petition” to enslaved people’s propriety over personhood, better yet, within the empire’s own archive.⁴³ Even depicted within an attempt to devalue personhood via the imperial project of racial taxonomy, the bodice’s insistence on enslaved agency and humanity persists, “infecting” the archive from within.⁴⁴

Not only serving as testimony to enslaved personhood and the fragility of colonial control, the bodice’s existence within an imperial project is especially important given its subversion of the paternalistic colonial conception of one-way cultural exchange between the mother country and colonies. By an assertion of uniqueness and by bastardizing the mother country's sartorial culture, the striped bodice is evidence of an uncontrolled fashion regime moving in the wrong direction across the Atlantic, and in doing so, subverting imperial goals.

⁴² Shane White, “The Allure of the Advertisement: Slave Runaways in and around New York City,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 40 (2020): 621.

⁴³ Skeehan, “Caribbean Women, Creole Fashioning, and the Fabric of Black Atlantic Writing,” 112.

⁴⁴ Onyeka Igwe, “Unbossed and Unbound: How can critical proximity transfigure British colonial moving images?” (PhD diss., University of the Arts London, 2021), 15.

While we must heed Hartman's warning not to “fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none,” without misportraying certainty as to the striped bodice or its wearer’s fate, we can learn from both.⁴⁵ The yellow and white striped bodice’s existence serves as testimony to the persistence of humanity in the face of the most extreme oppression and violence possible; of an insistence on fashionability, personhood, agency, and power despite every attempt to the contrary.

⁴⁵ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 8.