

Dress, Social Death, and the Limits of Control:

Slavery in Colonial and Federal America

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On May 24, 1796, a runaway advertisement appeared in the *Philadelphia Gazette*, seeking the return of “ONEY JUDGE [*sic*],” an enslaved woman from the household of George Washington, for a reward of ten dollars. Included in the advertisement was a physical description, covering the basics of her appearance. This notice, however, lingered on one detail: she “...has many changes of very good clothes of all sorts,” enough clothes that she might pass for a free woman, and be able to pay for passage out of the city.¹ In single paragraph, written with the intention of facilitating her capture, the steward’s notice highlights clothing as not a trivial concern but rather a source of possible danger to the efforts to bring Ona Judge back to the Washingtons. Clothing, in this instance, is providing Ona with possible mobility, the ability to disguise her status as an enslaved person and upsetting the visual boundaries that American slave societies were built upon.

The case of Ona Judge was not exceptional. Throughout slaveholding America, dress functioned as a visible marker of one’s status. Enslavers made efforts to regulate the appearances of enslaved people by way of clothing allotments, coarse, uniform textiles, and highly visible, identifiable garments like livery. Enslavers could not control every aspect of an enslaved person’s wardrobe, however. As runaway advertisements like Judge’s reveal, enslaved people understood that dress could also serve as a liberating tool. Dress could be altered, layered, saved, or created, or exchanged to assert dignity, preserve cultural identity, or even facilitate escape. This paper argues that dress in the American South was a dual-purpose tool: used by enslavers as a tool of oppression, and by the enslaved as a resource for resistance. It is through dress that

¹ Kitt, “‘Advertisement’ [For the Capture of Oney Judge].” *Philadelphia Gazette and Universal Daily Advertiser*, May 24, 1796, 1.

power operated on the body. It is also through dress that enslaved individuals carved out autonomous spaces within a system that prohibited that same autonomy.

Historians of American slavery have long recognized that power in slave societies operated not only through law, labor and violence, but also through practices that shaped the intimate, everyday lives of enslaved people. In more recent decades, scholarship in material culture has provided new tools for examining power by treating and examining objects as historical evidence with social implications. Dress, as scholars of early America have shown, functioned as a language through which status, race, gender, and belonging were communicated and policed. Linda Baumgarten's work provides a foundation for nearly every other work focused on clothing and textiles in early America, emphasizing that garments and textiles can be read as a language of their own. This perspective challenges approaches to slavery that privilege labor regimes or moments of open rebellion as the primary arenas of historical significance. While those dimensions remain important a focus on clothing exposes how slavery relied on continuous, low-level enforcement embedded in everyday life.

Material culture studies offer a methodological intervention because enslaved people left few written records. Many of the written records of their existence that do exist were written by enslavers or well after abolition in December of 1865. Clothing—whether preserved through extant garments, art, the inventories of plantations, or through runaway advertisements—provides a view into the enslaved experience precisely because it was so closely regulated and so thoroughly embedded in daily life. Baumgarten's *Clothes for the People: Slave Clothing in Early Virginia* (1988) demonstrates how provisioning systems, textile choices, and livery (issued uniforms) reflected not only economic calculation but social ideology, producing visible distinctions between enslaved and free, field laborer and domestic laborer, man and woman,

adult and child.² By centering clothing as evidence, historians are able to trace how abstract hierarchies were translated into lived realities through fabric, cut, scarcity, and display.

Baumgarten emphasizes in her work that eighteenth century Anglo-American society was intensely attentive to appearance and that people were routinely judged “more at a man’s outside than his inside.”³ In slave societies, this logic was racialized: enslaved people’s clothing marked them as socially degraded and outside of the bounds of full humanity. Clothing thus functioned as a visual grammar of domination, communicated who belonged and who did not. When enslaved people were provided exclusively with coarse fabrics, minimal garments, or distinctive uniforms, the clothing choices being made for them enacted the primary function central to the concept of social death.

At the same time, historians of African American visual culture caution against reading enslaved appearance as solely imposed degradation. Shane White and Graham White argue that Black self-presentation—including dress and bodily style—has historically operated as a complex form of expression, even in systems under which they were constrained. Their work reframes dress as not only evidence of domination but as a tool of subtle resistance. In the framework of social death, however, the subtlety of self-fashioning, especially as intentional resistance, becomes more urgent. Because enslaved people were denied recognized social existence, self-fashioning become an explicit denial of that power.

Examining the use of dress within the theoretical framework of “social death” as defined by Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), provides a framework for

² Linda Baumgarten, *Clothes for the People: Slave Clothing in Early Virginia*, 14, no. 2 (1988): 26–70.

³ "Letter from Peter Collinson to John Bartram, London, 17 February, 1737" *William and Mary Quarterly*, Second series, Vol. VI, No. 4 (October 1926) p. 304-305. As quoted in Baumgarten, *Clothes for the People: Slave Clothing in Early Virginia*.

understanding the applications of dress and status for both the enslavers and the enslaved. In *Slavery and Social Death*, the concept of social death is defined as being a condition of extreme marginalization, in which a person is denied of all rights, heritage, and social existence.⁴ In slave societies, racial hierarchies depend upon immediate legibility—the ability of the one race to identify those of the other as the enslaved quickly, and to police them. Dress functioned very similarly, as a visual mechanism of power. Runaway advertisements illustrate this in detail. Intended to recover fugitives, these notices catalogued the clothing, hair, jewelry, and physical traits of their subjects in what was sometimes painstaking detail. As projects like *Freedom on the Move* or *The Geography of Slavery in Virginia* emphasize, such advertisements constituted a public surveillance network in which complete strangers were prompted to read other's bodies for signs of enslavement. In this sense, dress helped sustain the social death of enslaved people by making escape from one's assigned status not only dangerous, but exceedingly temporary.

Because clothing was so central to the performance of racial order, it could also destabilize that order. Enslavers' anxieties—expressed in runaway ads like the one for Ona Judge, warning that a woman might “pass for free” if she was in possession of good clothes—reveal the fragility of status that relied on the appearances of its subjects. Advertisements like these highlight a tension central to the idea of social death: although enslaved people were subjected to relentless efforts at symbolic and material erasure, they continued to act, adapt and contest the meanings imposed on them. Many of them knew, also, that in some cases, all it took was a good dress to be able to pass as free for long enough to liberate oneself.

⁴ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Harvard University Press, 1985).

If social death describes the condition by which enslaved people were excluded from kinship, honor, and recognized social existence, then control under slavery must be understood also as the ongoing work required to maintain that exclusion. Enslavement was not self-sustaining; it depended on constant, public reiteration, and the continued efforts of enslavers to oppress and control the bodies of those they enslaved. Dress was one of the primary mechanisms through which this reiteration occurred. It rendered domination visible on the body itself. Through coarse fabrics—often dubbed specifically as “negro cloth” or “negro cotton”—minimal allotments, and distinctive livery, enslavers ensured that enslaved people’s subordination was not only enforced but also seen. Linda Baumgarten, in *Clothes for the People: Slave Clothing in Early Virginia*, quotes an eighteenth century letter as having accused Virginians at the time of judging others based “...more at a man’s outside than his inside...”⁵ This quote, and its reflection of eighteenth century Virginian culture, underscores why appearance mattered so deeply in slave societies. Clothing functioned as a form of shorthand for social value, and under slavery, it became a tool for reproducing dishonor. Enslaved people were clothed in ways that publicly marked them as outside the moral and civic community, reinforcing their exclusion from full social recognition.⁶

Plantation clothing allotments translated racial ideology into routine practice. Rather than reflecting neglect or accident, the systematic distribution of inferior and limited garments enacted social death by denying the enslaved access to the material signs of respectability and autonomy. Enslavers often selected fabrics primarily based on cost and durability, with coarse,

⁵ "Letter from Peter Collinson to John Bartram, London, 17 February, 1737" *William and Mary Quarterly*. As quoted in Baumgarten, *Clothes for the People: Slave Clothing in Early Virginia*.

⁶ “Clothing for Monticello’s Enslaved Community,” Monticello, July 4, 2026, <https://www.monticello.org/encyclopedia/slave-clothing>.

homespun Virginia cloth and imported osnaburg common fabrics for enslaved clothing.⁷ These materials were not neutral; they marked the body of the wearer as laboring and socially degraded. Madelyn Shaw, in *Slave Cloth and Clothing Slaves: Craftsmanship, Commerce, and Industry*, emphasizes that enslaved people received their clothing as an allowance from their enslavers, and that this practice bound bodily comfort, property, and economic efficiency together permanently for the enslaved.⁸ The clothing and/or fabric allotted to the enslaved was rationed, issued and withdrawn at the discretion of the enslaver. Clothing never truly belonged to the enslaved in any real way under this system, reinforcing the idea that enslaved people possessed neither property nor self-ownership.

Control through dress, as stated before relied heavily on visibility. Slave societies required that enslaved status be immediately legible, particularly in public or crowded spaces where the threat of flight loomed. Distinctive garments—whether coarse field garments or the livery of house servants—ensured that enslaved bodies could be read quickly and categorically.⁹ Livery illustrates this logic especially well. Although it could appear elaborate, livery functioned as a uniform of subordination. Enslaved servants placed in highly visible roles wore clothing designed to display their enslavers' wealth while ensuring that the wearer could not be mistaken for a free person. Livery—the designated uniform of the vast majority of male house servants—was often fashioned after older styles of suits, made of heavy wools, and garnished with lace and trims and sometimes even the coat of arms of whatever prominent family the livery was made for. The enslaved were well aware of the symbolism of the livery they were provided as uniform.

⁷ Monticello, "Clothing for Monticello's Enslaved Community."

⁸ Madelyn Shaw, "Slave Cloth and Clothing Slaves: Craftsmanship, Commerce, and Industry | The MESDA Journal," *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts*, <https://www.mesdajournal.org/2012/slave-cloth-clothing-slaves-craftsmanship-commerce-industry/>.

⁹ Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America* (Yale University Press, 2011), 132.

In May 1783, an ad was placed for a runaway by the name of Mungo in the *South-Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*. The advertiser described the livery that Mungo had left with but added that he had taken with him several other suits and would almost certainly have changed.¹⁰ Mungo was well aware that the livery he left in would have been not only an identifier of his status as an enslaved person, but also an identifier of his enslaver. The implementation of uniforms like livery ensured that an enslaved person or servant could not be confused easily for a free person, thus reinforcing racial hierarchy through controlled presentation. In this way, even if an enslaved person was in possession of “good” clothing, social death would be maintained by denying the possibility of misrecognition or upward mobility based on one article of “good” clothing.

Gender constructs also played a role in structuring the enforcement of social death through dress. Enslaved women’s clothing was shaped in particular by expectations surrounding labor, sexuality, reproduction, and domestic visibility, making their bodies especially subject to surveillance. Plantation and household records show women’s garments were often tied to age and work status, marking transitions into gendered adulthood through clothing changes imposed rather than chosen. Domestic service intensified this control. Institutions such as Mount Vernon provided enslaved housemaids with better clothing because their bodies were on display within the elite white households that enslaved them. This visibility subjected enslaved women to closer scrutiny and reinforced their roles within the household economy. Dress helped manage the contradiction of making enslaved women visible without granting them social recognition, creating a sort of social death in which the subject is treated more object than person.

¹⁰ *South-Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser* (Charlestown), May 20, 1783, in Lathan A. Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from the 1730’S-1790 : South Carolina* (Greenwood Pub Group, 1983), p.715.

Perhaps the clearest expression of control through dress appears in the very runaway advertisements that express dress as resistance. Created to recover fugitives, these notices cataloged the garments, hairstyles, and accessories of the enslaved in great detail, extending the reach of the slaveholding regime into a broader public. Hundreds of thousands of runaway ads were printed in colonial and federal America, asking strangers across the states to participate in enforcing enslavement by identifying enslaved people visually. Within the framework of social death, runaway advertisements reveal how enslavers attempted to prevent the re-socialization of fugitives by fixing their identities to their dress. To be recognized as enslaved was to be denied the possibility of belonging. The frequent calls to clothing in these advertisements reflect enslavers' understanding that if appearance failed to communicate acceptable subordination, then the system itself would be at risk.

Taken together, clothing under slavery was not merely about labor efficiency or social order; it was about continuously facilitating social death. Through provisioning systems, visibility regimes, gendered dress codes, and surveillance practices, enslavers worked to deny enslaved people honor, autonomy, and recognized social existence. Control through dress ensured that enslavement was not enforced but normalized—written onto the body in fabric, cut, scarcity, and in a non-verbal language. This framework clarifies why clothing becomes such a powerful site of resistance as well. Control depended so heavily on appearance, acts of self-fashioning, adornment, and strategic dress did not merely challenge rules; they challenged the logic of social death itself.

Dress was one of the means by which slavery rendered domination visible, naturalized inequality, and enforced exclusion from social life. Yet because it operated on the body, it also became a space where domination could be felt, negotiated, and at times, resisted. Within

slaveholding American society, a system defined by social death, resistance did not always—or even usually—take the form of open, violent rebellion. Because enslaved people were formally excluded from recognized kinship, legal personhood, and honorable social existence, acts that asserted selfhood and autonomy constituted meaningful challenges to domination. Clothing and appearance were central to these challenges in large part because enslavers relied on visual markers to enforce racial hierarchy and dishonor. Rather than overturning slavery, acts of self-fashioning were representative of partial refusals of social death: they reclaimed presence, identity, and mobility within a system designed to deny them of all three.

Dress provided enslaved people with one of the few available means to contest the symbolic degradation imposed by slavery. Despite being issued coarse and uniform clothing through plantation allotments, enslaved people frequently altered, repaired, and recombined garments to assert individuality and dignity. Shane White and Graham White argue that Black style has historically functioned as an indirect but powerful politic—one that operates through metaphor, gesture and appearance rather than outright confrontation.¹¹ Within a framework of social death, these practices take on more significance. To “look sprucy,” to style one’s hair carefully, or to arrange clothing in deliberate ways constituted intentional refusal of enslavement’s insistence on dishonor and governance of appearance. By making themselves visible on their own terms, enslaved people asserted a sense of self not fully capturable or policeable via legal definitions of property. While these acts could not restore legal personhood, they could interrupt the social erasure on which social death, and thus the system of American slavery depended.

¹¹ Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin’: African-American Expressive Culture, from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Cornell University Press, 1998). p.70-75.

Clothing also functioned as a means of preserving cultural memory and social connection, countering the alienation from one's peers, another central aspect of social death. Headwraps, jewelry, and patterned textiles—frequently noted in runaway advertisements—reflected continuities with West and Central African aesthetic traditions, even as their meanings evolved in the Americas. Runaway advertisements unintentionally document these practices due to enslaver's belief that detail would aid in capture. Read against their intended purpose, such descriptions reveal adornment as a tool to maintain a social world beyond that of the plantation.

Perhaps the most explicit challenge to social death through dress occurred when enslaved people used clothing to move through public space—to pass as free, to travel, or to escape. Slave societies depended on the assumption that racial and legal status could be read at a glance. When appearance failed to communicate subordination reliably, the system was destabilized. Enslaved people like Ona Judge, knew that being in possession of “good clothes” could be enough to “pass for free,” even might be enough to secure passage on a ship.¹² Such language reveals a critical vulnerability in the visual regime of the system of American slavery. If could clothing could itself obscure enslaved status, then the racial hierarchy that slavery predated upon was not self-evident, but rather artificial and therefore contestable. It is also evident from a number of the inventories provided in runaway advertisements that when an enslaved person accumulated clothing suitable for a self-liberated life, they were not only preparing to flee, but to assert a claim to existing beyond the status of bondage.

It is essential to recognize the limits of clothing as a tool of resistance. Appearance can be misread or misinterpreted, stolen garments could provoke punishment, and self-fashioning did

¹² Kitt, “‘Advertisement’ [For the Capture of Oney Judge].”

not erase the violence of enslavement. Yet, within a theoretical framework of social death, these limits do not negate the significance of dress; rather, they clarify its stakes. Resistance under slavery often functioned not as an emancipation but as survival with meaning—as refusal to surrender entirely one’s identity or dignity. By asserting control over their appearance, enslaved people challenged slavery’s demand for total domination. Dress became a space where enslaved individuals could say, in material form, that they existed, and were more than the system that oppressed them claimed them to be. In this sense, dress did not end social death, but it did puncture it—revealing humanity and creativity that slavery could never fully extinguish.

Examining clothing through the lens of social death reveals broader implications for how historians understand power, resistance, and agency under slavery. Domination in slave societies did not operate exclusively through spectacular violence or formal legal structures but through ordinary, material practices that shaped how enslaved people were seen and understood. Dress functioned as one of the most immediate and intimate sites where social death became legible: fabric, fit, and appearance communicated racial hierarchy, dishonor, and exclusion in many ways that did not require explanation. In this sense, material culture was not merely supplementary to slavery’s operation, but central to its daily reproduction.

Viewed through the lense of social death, dress emerges not as a peripheral detail but as a central arena where the daily struggle between control and resistance unfolded. Dress under American slavery functioned as a critical material mechanism through which social death was produced, maintained, and contested. Clothing was not a peripheral concern or a surface detail of enslaved life; it was a primary means by which racial hierarchy was made visible and enforceable on a day-to-day basis. Through regulated allotments, coarse textiles, gendered dress codes, and the surveillance practices embedded in runaway advertisements, enslavers used

material culture to inscribe dishonor, dependency and exclusion directly onto the body. In this sense, dress worked as a technology of social death, continuously reiterating enslaved people's exclusion from recognized personhood, autonomy, and belonging.

At the same time, the very visibility that made clothing an effective instrument of control also exposed the fragility of slavery's racial order. Because social death depended on continual performance and recognition, it could never be fully secured. Enslaved people understood this instability and responded by manipulating appearance in ways that asserted dignity, preserved cultural identity, or facilitated mobility. Acts of self-fashioning—whether through alteration, adornment, or the strategic accumulation of clothing—did not dismantle slavery, but they represented partial refusals of the conditions that slavery imposed. In these moments, enslaved people challenged the assumption that their bodies could only signify property, labor, and dishonor. Whether through adornment, alteration, or strategic use, dress allowed enslaved people to intervene in systems that defined who and who did not count as fully human. These interventions did not dismantle slavery, but they disrupted its symbolic totality. Recognizing such behavior as partial refusals of social death reframes resistance as being situational, and often understate rather than exceptional, violent, or otherwise explosive.

Reading material culture alongside coercive primary sources such as runaway advertisements reveals slavery not as a static system but as a contested visual regime. Advertisements intended to recover fugitives inadvertently record enslavers anxieties about misrecognition, passing, and escape, demonstrating that appearance could never be permanently fixed. For enslaved women in particular, clothing became a site where gendered social death was both enforced and disrupted, as garments meant to display household order or racial subordination could also enable movement and self-assertion beyond the grounds of the

plantation. These tensions underscore social death as not simply imposed once, but continuously reproduced and maintained—therefore, social death was also always possible for interruption. By foregrounding material culture, this study illuminates how grand systems of domination operated through ordinary objects and daily practices. Clothing connected ideology to embodiment, translating racial hierarchy into lived experience while also offering enslaved people limited but meaningful means of resistance. Understanding dress as both a tool of control and a site of refusal allows us to see slavery not only as a regime of violence, but as a fragile social order dependent on continual visual reinforcement. In that fragility lie the traces of enslaved people’s agency—evidence that even within the constraints of social death, humanity persisted, adapted, and resisted being rendered invisible. Seen in this light, the struggle over dress was not trivial or aesthetic but fundamental to the maintenance and contestation of social death. When Ona Judge fled with “many changes of good clothes,” and drew the concern that she might “pass for a free woman,” she revealed the instability at the heart of slavery itself: a system so dependent on appearance that the change of a dress could momentarily undo the social death that it so carefully enforced.

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