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Coming Apart at the Seams: Violence, Fashion, and Race in the Civil

War South

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Abstract

How did the material culture of fashion shape power relations between plantation mistresses and their slaves? This inquiry engages the rich historiography on the master-slave relationship. Most historians have not fully appreciated the ways that things had agency and infused violence into the household. While there is a wide agreement that white women oppressed their slaves, few scholars have explored the ways that fashion became contested. In the diary of Northeastern Louisiana's Kate Stone, one finds numerous incidents of slaves taking and using clothing as a form of resistance. Clothing was also frequently captured or destroyed by Union soldiers, especially United States Colored Troops (USCTs), many of whom were freed slaves and resented the symbolism behind Southern clothing. Extravagant clothing choices for Southern women came at the cost of a labor system based on the exploitation of slaves, a symbolism understood across the South. The destruction of fine clothing led to an increased warning of alternatives, like homespun materials. Wearing these homespun materials furthered Southern rage at the collapsing intuition of slavery and visualized their feelings of decline. Like many of her class, every day as Kate Stone got dressed, her clothing reminded her of her fall from the pedestal of being an elite woman.

Keywords: Material Culture, Emancipation, Civil War, Gender History, Southern Histor

In March of 1863, while visiting a family friend, Kate Stone came face to face with her worst fears. There were “fiendish-looking, black Negroes” in the house, ransacking and looting the place. The “negroes were completely armed” and “there was no white man with them” to offer white solidarity against unrestrained racial violence. Stone found refuge in a bedroom until “a big black wretch, with the most insolent swagger” burst into the room “talking all the time in the most insulting manner.” He went through the wardrobe, took what he pleased, and made threats against the occupants of the room, including threatening to kill a baby for fear it may grow up to become a “jarilla.” He then approached Stone and her little sister, Amanda, causing them to turn “white as marble.” Racial and gender boundaries were infringed as the assailant was “standing on the hem of my dress while he looked me slowly over, gesticulating and snapping his pistol.” Stone had never been as frightened before as she was in the time that “seemed to me an age.” The unnamed assailant released his hold after less than a minute, but it would be more than two hours until the looters completely left the house. Fearing more violence, Stone and the other occupants fled the house. As they left, they saw “strange Negro men standing around” who “did not say anything, but they look at us and grinned and that terrified us more and more” (Stone 194).¹

Having a gun put to her head by a black man was the realization of Kate Stone’s worst fears about what African Americans would become without slavery. The Emancipation Proclamation combined with nearby Union army maneuvers eroded slavery in Northeastern Louisiana and forced Kate Stone to realize the dichotomy between her ideal world and the world in front of her. When the Mississippi River and the northern parts of the river valley were conquered by United States troops in the middle of 1862, the 436,000 African Americans in the region bore down hard on the system of chattel slavery, seeking opportunities for freedom and

beginning to lay the foundation for black service in the Union army (Mathisen 104). Stone had been raised to believe in a paternal master-slave relationship where blacks were unquestioningly loyal to their white masters. Stone's experience in March of 1863 terrified her. It had been one thing for a few slaves to be lured to Union lines by the promise of freedom, but it was another for blacks to actively resist their former masters.

Throughout the Civil War, fashion provided evidence that racial and gender norms were under threat. Theft and deterioration of Stone's clothing demonstrated the fragility of her position as a wealthy plantation heiress. Simultaneously, the improved material conditions of African Americans demonstrated their newly acquired status as freed people. For some black men, their status as Union soldiers demonstrated black claims to citizenship in the United States (Stone xvii, xxvi).² Despite its importance to other disciplines, historians of the American South have paid little attention to the dynamics of fashion in emancipation. "Fashion, defined as the prevailing style of dress in a particular time or place, has often served as a means of self-expression as well as a marker of social class, political loyalty, and ethnic background" ("Torn Bonnets" 338). In an era where the status of peoples was constantly in flux, paying close attention to evolving material circumstances adds a new layer to our understanding of the process of emancipation.

Historians frequently make passing references to clothing as hierarchical distinction in 19th Century America, but few have fully appreciated its significance. Most broadly, Kate Masur has identified that fashion was a key demonstrator of social hierarchy in Civil War America (78). Masur's analysis focuses on the question of equality but fails to recognize that enslaved people sought material evidence of their freedom through possession of the finery that the planter class had acquired at the cost of the enslaved's exploitation. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese was the first to

argue that plantation mistresses used fashion ruthlessly to establish their elite status over other white women, as well as over enslaved women (“Torn Bonnets” 338-339; Fox-Genovese 212-216). Stephanie Camp added a new layer of depth to the understanding of the dynamics by plantation fashion by uncovering the way that enslaved women exercised resistance by using dress to demonstrate the differences between laboring on their masters’ time and relaxing on their own time. By wearing finer clothing during their free time, enslaved women challenged their subjugated status (Camp 561).

Clothing worn by white women and provided to the enslaved were key signifiers of racial and gender norms. Stephen Berry has noted that the importance of Southern white women’s hoop skirts in reinforcing cultural beliefs about their role in society. Planter women wore hoop skirts, measuring 30 feet in circumference, so that when “in the streets and shops the skirt provided a buffer between her and a world that she was in but not of; she sat atop a kind of cloud, moving without motion in her portable domesticated space” (Berry 80-81). In his recent study of the sexual violations of enslaved men, Thomas Foster argues that white women frequently forced enslaved men to wear clothing that left their genitals uncovered, making them vulnerable to sexual assaults. Foster argues that “exposure of enslaved men’s bodies was one way that the institution of slavery reinforced a system of subjugation” (Foster 18). The central role of clothing in the maintenance of antebellum slavery would only become more important during the process of Emancipation.

Early in the war, Stone was discomforted by the prospect of slaves escaping and perpetrating violence against whites. In February of 1862, Stone reports family members saying there is a runaway on the loose, which “makes one feel creepy when alone at night” (Stone 88). The increase in runaway slaves was a sign that Southern life was shifting. Stephen Stowe argues

that plantation mistresses recorded in their diary events involving African Americans because they provided the clearest evidence that normal life was shifting. Stone's writing of the runaway was a tacit acknowledgment that slavery might not survive the war. Federal armies' usage of black laborers in Louisiana during 1862, many of them plantation runaways, further demonstrated the changing world. Stone recorded blacks eagerly escaping towards Union lines. Stone feared that the family slaves would be cruelly worked to death by Yankees who did not value black bodies in the same way Southern plantation mistresses did. Yankees and Negroes working together, combined with the absence of white men being away in the army created "an anxious time for only women and children" (Stone 88, 127-128; Stowe 88). Stone was caught between two worlds: one where whites owned docile black laborers, and one where blacks pursued freedom by any means necessary.

Political and military events in 1863 forced Stone to face the reality that the enslaved were not a docile labor force. On March 2nd, Stone recalled an incident between Jane, an enslaved cook, and Stone's Aunt Lucy. The two got into an argument and Jane "cut a great gash in Lucy's face with a blow from a chair and hurt her severely." Stone recalled "the scene of terror" with "blood streaming down Lucy's face" and the cry of fire as the loom room caught fire, believed to have been set by Jane. Jane promptly took her two children and fled the plantation but fearing an uprising and with only one white man acting as protector, Stone paraded around with a revolver – that she did not realize was unloaded. Jane's rebellion against her white female masters also demonstrates the gendered aspects of slave rebellion (Stone 175; *Mothers of Invention* 59; Sheehan-Dean 273). Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notes that the extreme forms of resistance, including multiple forms of violence, were rare, but embody the most important part of female resistance: racial disparity overcoming gender solidarity (Fox-Genovese

329). In her study of an 1865 female led slave insurgency, Thavolia Glymph notes that the harder Southerners fought to preserve slavery, the more it crumbled (“Rose’s War” 506, 516).

The widespread conscription of white Southern men into the military exposed cracks in the institution of slavery. Men being away on distant battlefields led to less policing of slaves, including slave patrols, in turn exposing the feeble responses of Southern women to slave agency. Kimberly Harrison builds upon Glymph’s argument by adding that slaves more frequently challenged plantation mistresses because they were aware of the inferior role that mistresses played in the household (Harrison 108). It is worth noting that men were mostly absent from the room that Stone was hiding in. Though there was one adult male in the room, he seemingly did little to defend the women after he was threatened by the raiders. Stone herself was aware she could do little should the enslaved become violent, writing of her “helpless situation” with “three ladies and two little girls and not a white man.” The Emancipation Proclamation mandated that slaves, like Jane, become “the coauthors of their own liberation.” Emancipation, would require action, including violence (“Roses War” 516).

The usage of violence by blacks caused white Southern women to fear them more than they feared Union soldiers. Kate Stone wrote, “I can stand anything but Negro and Yankee raiders. They terrify me out of my wits” (Stone 202). Her experience with violence increased how serious Stone took the threat of future violence. When two family members seemed flippant about the incident, Stone chidingly wrote in her diary that “They had not a brutal Negro man standing on their dress and fingering a pistol a few inches from their heads.” Stone’s emphasis on the infringement onto her dress demonstrates how important fashion was as a signifier of social status. Further, witnessing her aunt be attacked by a slave and then experiencing armed blacks justified Stone’s fears of racial violence. Stone believed that next time should the masses

of enslaved around them pursue violent retribution: “we would be practically helpless...since there are so few men left at home.” The only reason Stone was alive was because “the Negroes do not want to kill us...” (Stone 298). Stone tried her hardest to deny and repress her fears of racial violence, only acknowledging them in her diary entries, where the rest of the world would never see them (*Mothers of Invention* 60).

Beyond the implications for the existing racial order, the invasion of her personal space and looting of her clothing had class and gendered implications. Not only did the assailant step on her dress, Stone reports he “went through all the drawers and wardrobe taking anything he fancied” (Stone 196). Clothing provided clear evidence of the changing world around them, as a month after the incident, Stone wrote of news from Brokenburn, where “negroes quarreled over the division of our clothes” (Stone 130). With their masters gone, the slaves had taken their clothing. Directly seizing the dresses eliminated a system where they would be given by the plantation mistresses as a reward for good behavior. Joan Cashin elaborates, noting that by taking the mistress’ clothing, slave women could strike a blow against the mistress, planter class, and Confederacy. Clothes, as the most personal belonging, were an easy target for hostilities toward planter women (“Torn Bonnets” 351). Slave women, according to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, understood that white Southern women relied on fashion to mark their class position (Fox-Genovese 216). On stealing from masters in general, Drew Gilpin Faust notes that “theft assumed wider significance, taking on the characteristics of a contest between master and slave in which the master was by definition always the loser...it was clearly a battle for power as well as for the specific goods in question” (*Hammond* 92-93). Enslaved and free blacks recognized the uncertain situation facing the Stone family and used the moment to strike back and assert themselves.

The Stone family's corresponding changes in their fashion demonstrated the fragile position of the family's status as elite slaveholders. As the Stone family sought refuge in Texas, Kate's mother, Amanda, went to Shreveport, Louisiana to buy clothing for the family. Kate records that "Mamma spent nearly a thousand dollars buying clothes, five or six dresses. Everything is so enormously high. A plain delaine dress \$200 and a velvet mantle or poplin dress cannot be bought for less than \$1,500. She did not indulge in one of these" (Stone 267). As Thavolia Glymph demonstrates, elite Southern women defined themselves partially off their consumption of luxury goods, including clothing. Women had indulged in expensive gloves, French calico, black silk and the like, but wartime necessity meant that this impractical consumption needed to halt (*Out of the House of Bondage* 77). Around the same time, Stone recorded in her diary that at church "Mamma and I were the only women folks without the awkward, ungraceful cages. No doubt the people thought us hopelessly out of date. We have not worn them for a long time. Nothing looks funnier than a woman walking around with an immense hoop—barefooted" (Stone 225). Stone's abandonment of the hoop skirt was a recognition of its impracticality, but also that it failed in its purpose of isolating her from a world of "lower-class people." As Stephen Stowe notes, "the point of the hoop skirt had always been 'you cannot come close to me' but with Stone's dress – and therefore personal space – having been encroached on, there was little point in continuing the illusion of any boundary between Southern women and the war (Stowe 62).

More evidence of Stone's crumbling class position came with the enlistment of black men in the Union army in 1863. Stone reported that "the country is in a deplorable state" and that the "the outrages of the Yankees and Negroes are enough to frighten one to death." The root of the problem was "a great many of the Negroes...have been armed by the officers, and they are a

dreadful menace to the few remaining citizens.” Resultingly, “the country seems possessed by demons, black and white” (Stone 175). Sharing the same fears, Louisiana Planter Pierre Soniat appealed to Union General Nathaniel Banks not to arm blacks because “great crimes might be committed by them. The negro regiments, in particular, being organized and armed are especially to be feared” (Berlin et al. 84). Stone and Soniat clung to the hope that this may be just a temporary slave insurrection that would target former masters. Tens of thousands of former slaves became Union soldiers, but very few ever lashed out violently at white Southerners.

The discarding of the ragged clothing of enslavement in favor for donning “the blue suit” of Federal military service demonstrated the further unravelling of Southern slavery. The success of uniformed black troops fighting against Confederate forces at the June 7th, 1863 battle of Milliken’s Bend further challenged Stone’s worldview. Stone had long dreaded the use of black soldiers and now they were fighting in close proximity to where she lived. In her study of Milliken’s Bend, historian Linda Barnickel notes that Northeastern Louisiana, where Stone lived, was prime territory for mass enlistment of black soldiers into the Union army (21). Stone wrote of the battle: “The news of today is that our men were repulsed at Miliken’s [sic] Bend... it is hard to believe that Southern soldiers – and Texans at that – have been whipped by a mongrel crew of white and black Yankees...It is said the Negro regiments fought there like mad demons, but we cannot believe that. We know from long experience they are cowards” (218). For Stone, the defeat of Southern white men by black men fighting in Union uniforms challenged what she previously believed about the superiority of a Southern white man. Contrary to Stone’s expectations that blacks were innately cowardly, they fought well at Milliken’s Bend despite having only been “inexperienced in use of arms- and some of them having been drilled but a few days, and the guns being very inferior” according to District of Northeastern Louisiana

Commander Brigadier General Elias S. Dennis. In the same report, Dennis wrote that the “African Brigade” first made the enemy “waver and recoil” with a blast of fire at a short range before the outbreak of a “most terrible hand to hand conflict” where they used the bayonet in “contesting every inch of ground...” (Berlin et al. 442). Following the battle, rumors circulated alleging that Confederates had executed captured black prisoners and their white officers, which while disputed in truth, would have seem justified to Kate Stone and many white Southerners who viewed black soldiers as rebellious slaves not entitled to the rules and protections of warfare (Barnickel 76).

More than a year later, Stone again had to confront the usage of black soldiers. From Oak Ridge, Louisiana in September 1864 Stone wrote of a raid by 200 black soldiers led by white officers who burned the nearby villages of Floyd and Pin Hook. As evidence of their savagery, citizens were given no time to retrieve their possessions. Contrastingly, Major Charles Chapin, who lead the raid, wrote in his official report that time was indeed given for citizens to retrieve their possessions.³ Further evidence of Yankees being uncivilized was that “they were very rough and insulting in their language, tore the pockets from their dresses, and the rings from their fingers, cursing, and swearing” (*OR* 294-295). Implied from Stone’s entry is her distaste for the taking of property, no matter how small, from civilians, an act expressly prohibited by US policy, though one often violated. The destruction of dresses was also prohibited but was commonplace in military-civilian interactions. There were continued gender implications for the destruction of the dresses, as Joan Cashin notes that a deeply engrained misogyny, predating the war, was mostly responsible. Ultimately, the soldiers destroyed clothing because they understand the powerful statement it made against white Southern women, particularly members of the collapsing planter class (Cashin 344, 351).⁴ Stone attributes the harshness of the raid to

Confederate guerillas increased activity in the raid. What was most punishing was that black troops were the ones exacting the retribution, as Stone records “The Yankees know they make it ten times worse for us by sending Negroes to commit these atrocities... Washington has done all in its power to incite a general insurrection throughout the South, in the hopes of thus getting rid of the women and children in one grand holocaust”(Stone 297-298).

Tensions between blacks and white employers—formerly masters—were heightened immediately following the Civil War. Stone found African Americans familiar to the family in a state of “insubordination, insolent, and refusing to work.” She did not connect this to her entry a few days earlier where she reported “occasionally we hear of a Negro shot down and lying unburied in the woods.” Two years later, in her lone entry for 1867, she records that many of the family’s former slaves left and that her brother had to go to New Orleans looking for workers “and brought back a number of ex-Negro soldiers, who strutted around in their uniforms and were hard to control.” Stone reflects “I was deadly afraid of them.” The continued wearing of Federal military uniforms by African Americans in the post-war period demonstrated to the former slaveholding class that black laborers would not accept subjugation in Reconstruction. They had successfully achieved their liberation and were unwilling to return to the deprived material circumstances of slavery. Stone’s lone 1867 entry tells of an incident in the spring where her brother Johnny got into an argument with a young black worker, “shot and came near killing him, and was mobbed in return.” Grasping onto the threads of paternalism, Stone credits one of the blacks for saving her brother and the arrival of her Uncle as the “Negroes brought him [Johnny] to house – a howling, cursing mob with the women shrieking, “kill Him!” and all “brandishing pistols and guns” (Stone 256, 356, 362, 368).

Stone used former slaves who had been faithful to the family during the war to retain her sense of privilege and racial ideas despite the fact that the system of chattel slavery had been demolished. A family slave named “Uncle Bob” was the model slave to Stone, who wrote that “he was as faithful as any white man could be,” especially because he watched the family’s precious clothes during their wartime travels. Uncle Bob was among the slaves who remained at Brokenburn during the war, his wartime fidelity most demonstrated by joining Stone’s brother Johnny in attempting recapture Jane after she slashed Stone’s aunt Lucy. Even when not directly observed by the family, Uncle Bob protected the family’s silver during the war, an act that earned him the praise of “best old darkie” because he was “humble and respectful”—even in November 1865 when he was a free man. Uncle Bob’s protection of the silver allowed Stone to hold on to one last reminder of the material circumstances of slavery and discard the memory of the struggle for material objects during the process of emancipation (Stone 365-368). Diary incidents regarding African Americans were often tightly narrated with a clear purpose. They enter the narrative, are used to make a point, before being returned—and silenced—into the mass of other blacks. Stone wrote of Uncle Bob in that way, using him to demonstrate the fidelity of slaves. His individual recognition is unique, as Southern women, including Stone, tended to write of slaves in groups, as portable people with little about them that could not be altered, whether by whipping or some sort of instruction. Stephen Stowe notes in his reading of Southern diaries, including Stone’s, that African Americans were “not individuals so much as part of the diarists’ personal landscape of home and things cherished.” During four years of change, uncertainty, and loss, the ability for Stone to remain confident in the loyalty of one black preserved a small vestige of her antebellum beliefs (Stowe 115).

The March 26, 1863 incident where a black man stepped on the hem of her dress demonstrated to Kate Stone that her world was coming apart at the seams. What would have been an unthinkable event in 1860 was a reality in 1863 because of the Civil War's erosion of antebellum Southern gender and racial norms. The infringement onto her clothing was an intentional affront to her status as a wealthy white woman. The fashion that had long demarcated the difference in position for plantation mistresses and the enslaved became a way for enslaved and free African Americans to weaken the position of the planter class. White Southern women's broad hoop skirts were supposed to be insulate them from the messiest affairs of "the peculiar institution" but as most Southern men were away in the army, slaveholding women were face to face with the challenges of maintaining slavery. With nearby Union armies offering support, the enslaved at Brokenburn struck for their freedom, utilizing the body politics of fashion to demonstrate their newly acquired status as freed people. The later enlistment of African American soldiers, many of them formerly enslaved, into the Union army, clad in the same uniform as white soldiers, dually demonstrated the empowerment of black men and the weakening of slavery. Kate Stone refused to concede that the Confederate cause—slavery was crumbling before her eyes, even though her material circumstances demonstrated otherwise.

Notes

1. Stone's entry is dated April 25th, 1863 but refers to the event as happening on March 26, 1863. The Stone family fled Brokenburn on March 25th ahead of Union army maneuvers in the area. For Stone's writing of the full event, see Kate Stone, *Brokenburn: The Diary of Kate Stone, 1861-1868*. Edited by John Q. Anderson. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 194-197.

2. Brokenburn was in Northeastern Louisiana, about thirty miles northwest of Vicksburg, Stone was 20 years old, living on the plantation owned by her mother and worked by about 150 slaves. Stone's father died in the 1850s, predating the family's move to Brokenburn. Stone had three brothers who were old enough joined the Confederate army in 1861, two of whom died. A fourth, younger brother fights in Louisiana in 1864, leaving the plantation entirely to the Stone women. See *Brokenburn*, xvii, xxvi.

3. Charles Chapin report in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies: Series 1, Volume XLI, Part 1*. (Washington.: Government Printing Officer, 1893), 294-295. The *OR* references many of the minor raids and engagements that Stone records in her diary, during her time in Louisiana and Texas. Chapin's report and Col. A Watson Weber, 51st USCT, Operations in Louisiana and the Trans Mississippi states and territories. Pages 294- 295. Both Chapin's report and Col. A. Watson Weber, 51st USCT, note that the actions were undertaken in an attempt to gain information about recent guerrilla violence – violence that Stone's youngest brother may be involved in.

4. Joan Cashin, "Trophies of War: Material Culture in the Civil War Era." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 1, no. 3 (September 2011) 344, 351. Cashin notes that women's attire was the war trophy most desired by Northern soldiers because of the economic symbolism behind the

clothing. Women's clothing especially was a target, as soldiers infrequently dressed in the clothing for their own entertainment. More commonly, soldiers destroyed the clothing. Fancy attire – a symbol of economic position- was frequently a way for man to channel their hostility towards economic elites.

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