Creole Creations:
Unraveling Caribbean origins, makers and wearers of the *robe à la creole* c.1780-1815

Emma Pearce

In Paris, 1783, Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's scandalous painting of Marie Antoinette (figure 1) was exhibited at the Salon.[1] The portrait was met with indignation, the simple white dress she wore appearing to the public as if they were seeing the queen in her undergarments. Likely made from British cotton muslin, the gown was also seen as a snub to local French silk industries.[2] The dress was designed by Marie Antoinette and her dressmaker, Rose Bertin, to wear at Marie Antoinette's estate*, Petit Trianon* - personifying pastoral simplicity through its unlaced structure, ruffled neckline and ruched sleeves.[3] Although a very similar style of chemise gown had been worn by elite French women since at least 1781, the queen saw herself as the creator of this garment, which over the next decade became widely popularized across Europe.[4] In 1784, the *Galerie des Modes et Costumes Français* printed an engraving of Vigée-Lebrun's portrait, describing the dress as a *"chemise à la reine,"* thereby making an indelible link between the queen and the garment, and henceforth how the dress was widely known.[5]

Located on the other side of the Atlantic, a tiny (16.8 x 12.4 cm), delicate watercolour by William Hay (figure 2) dated 1798, depicts two women engaged in work. One sits, stitching a bundle of white cloth on her knee, whilst her companion watches on. The title of the watercolour: *Seamstresses, St. Kitts, Caribbean,* tells us the nature and location of their labor - the tools of their trade also shown in the scissors that hang from the waist of the standing woman, and the thimble on her middle finger. They wear simple, high-waisted sets of garments and the lightness of Hay's palette works to create a sense of the warm, hazy climate, their white cloth gleaming in the sun. On the doorframe, Hay has labelled the location as 'No. 23,' and on the verso of the watercolour inscribed that the likeness was 'taken at 6 o'clock in the morn'g' -

suggesting that these were real women, in a real location, at a real moment in time.[6] There is an ease about the watercolour, as though we are catching the women in an unmediated moment; they do not acknowledge the presence of the viewer, both absorbed in the product of their work, the very opposite of Marie Antoinette's poised display in her portrait.[7] Yet, despite its small size and intimacy, the watercolour situates these two women within a global network of textile production and consumption at the end of the eighteenth century - from the checked kerchiefs that the standing woman wears on her head and round her shoulders, to the white cloth they both wear and sew. What might be the connection between Marie Antoinette and these women, and their sartorial fashionings?

This question spurs the focus of this article, which explores the Caribbean origins, makers and wearers of the white muslin gown, or the *robe à la creole,* in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Marie Antoinette's *chemise à la reine,* despite its association with the French female elite, was initially an adaptation of dresses worn by the white wives of plantation owners in the French Caribbean, who returned to the French metropole and brought with them their fashions, described by Marie Antoinette in her diary as a "*robe à la creole."*[8] Although female creators, such as Vigée-Lebrun, Bertin and Marie Antoinette herself, are recognized as instrumental the representing, making and wearing of the *chemise à la reine* in Europe, its "Creole" origins have been often overlooked. This article therefore aims to explore the "Creole" connections of the so-called *robe à la creole* through two facets: firstly, through exploration of its Caribbean makers and secondly, the adoption of the garment by non-white wearers in the Caribbean. Focusing on the British and French Caribbean, it argues that the *robe à la creole* was not only the product of the labors of enslaved and free Caribbean people, and particularly women, of color, but that their parallel interactions with the garment also worked to disrupt and subvert the racist Neoclassical connotations that came to surround the dress in

Europe. This article moves back and forth between Europe and the Caribbean, further asserting that the dissemination of fashion was not a one way flow from metropole to colony, but rather part of a wider network of circulation and dialogue between the two.

The *robe à la creole,* under many different names and variations, has been studied extensively by fashion and art historians.[9] Many of these do discuss the garment's Caribbean origins - most significantly Amelia Rauser's recent publication, *The Age of Undress* (2020), which aims to resituate the dressing of women in the *robe à la grecque* as an artistic expression of Neoclassicism.[10] Rauser's chapter on whiteness discusses the Creole origins and significance of the garment and, in particular, its color in relation to Black bodies. Considering the garment in both styling and production she argues that "the abjection of the enslaved body and the plantation culture it inhabited stalked neoclassical dress."[11] Jane Ashelford's article 2018 article, "'Colonial livery' and the *chemise à la reine*, 1779–1784", too unpacks the development of Marie Antoinette's *chemise à la reine* amongst the white Creole elite in the Caribbean, tracing how this fed into the French metropole and the subsequent impact on French cotton production.[12] This article builds on the work of Rauser, Ashelford, among others, but ultimately aims to shift from the focus on white women to prioritize non-white Caribbean makers and wearers.

As a white British woman, I share an identity with those who have perpetuated colonial power and appropriation discussed throughout this article. Yet, my aim is to contribute to ongoing efforts to destabilize whiteness and Euro-centricity within fashion and art history. Similarly, it must be caveated that the visual and material culture explored here is produced predominately by European men, focusing artworks like Hay's *Seamstresses*, alongside the work of other artists such as William Berryman, Agostino Brunias, Edward Pelham Brenton, and written

accounts of the period. In fact, much of the uncovering of Caribbean makers and wearers is based on speculation. This is due to the fact that the work and identities of many enslaved and free Caribbean women of color is largely lost and untraceable to individuals. As Glenn Adamson examines, a major issue in studying material culture is the "phenomenon of loss," where a historical object no longer exists or has little presence in the historical records.[13] Clothing is a particular victim of this as worn objects subject to body odors, washing, general wear and textile re-purposing. This "loss" is particularly poignant in attempting to study enslaved women, where records of their very existence is fragmented, let alone preservation or recognition of their creative endeavors. To counter material loss, Adamson suggests we must "look at the edges of the perceived gap, in the hope of delineating its precise contours."[14] Saidiya Hartman, in the context of trying to recover enslaved female voices from the archive, also speaks of this gap, similarly suggests that "the loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none."[15] Although it is difficult to determine exactly what and how enslaved and free women of color in the Caribbean created and wore, we can similarly look at the edges of the gap, in an attempt to find traces of the identities of the women who made the dresses of white plantation owner's wives that inspired Marie Antoinette, and who later subverted its European connotations.

Defining the *robe à la creole*

Before moving to these makers and wearers, it is first necessary to define the *robe à la creole.* The term 'Creole' is a slippery one, but was primarily used in the eighteenth century to describe any permanent settler in the Caribbean - white or Black, free or enslaved - especially if the individual had been born there.[16] It was is a term that implied hybridity: a mixing between African and European cultures, uniquely tied to the Americas, and especially the Caribbean.[17]

The inspiration for Marie Antoinette's *robe à la creole* was the dresses of white Creole women in the Caribbean colonies, known as *gaulles.*[18] Ashelford suggests more specifically that Marie Antoinette was perhaps influenced by a ballet performed for her in 1779, *'Mirza, Ballet en action par M. Gardel,'* set in the French Caribbean and in which the lead dancer wore a muslin '"Creole" style gown.[19] The thinness and simplicity of dress that was so scandalous to French viewers in the Salon in 1783 was a necessity for women living in the hot Caribbean climate. Contemporary commentators in the French Caribbean particularly stressed the lightness and looseness of the garb of white women. French nobleman Alexandre-Stanislas Wimpffen, for instance, remarked in the late 1780s that the white women of Saint-Domingue wore for everyday use: "a single petticoat and a loose gown of the finest muslin."[20] Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, a white Martinique-born slave-owning politician, similarly described white women "wearing clothes of a lightness demanded by the hot weather."[21] The work of Agostino Brunias, an Italian painter predominately working in Dominica and St. Vincent (both of which switched between British and French governance throughout the eighteenth century) provides a further visual representation of this. In *View of Roseau Valley, Island of Dominica, showing Africans, Carib Indians, and Creole Planters* (figure 3), two of his female "Creole Planters" on the bottom right wear stark white dresses, ornamented with ruffles around the neckline and the hems of their sleeve and skirts. The skirts of their dresses are tinted with pink and blue hues, perhaps revealing colored petticoats under the thin white material which match the colors of the ribbons tied at their chest.[22]

"Creole" dress also appeared in European fashion plates as early as 1779. A plate in the *Galerie des Modes et Costumes Français* (figure 4) features an ensemble described as:

> Creole clothing…worn by our French women in America: it is a long muslin dress with sleeves that tighten at the cuff. The dress is a little altered at the waist and open at the neck in the style of a shirt…open at the front, where it attaches to the top with a pin, and with a ribbon belt like the *Lévite*; over the top a caraco without sleeves. This figure is wearing a hat said to be from Granada.[23]

This engraving shows a garment quite different to Marie Antoinette's 1783 ensemble, although both are made from muslin material, feature a ruffled bodice and sleeves, and a ribbon sashed waist. Notable, also, is the description of this garment being tied "like the *Lévite*" – a sashed gown influenced by the Ottoman *kaftan* – thereby demonstrating the myriad of global influences on French fashion at this time.[24] The three-quarter length open caraco-style jacket and underskirt still also retains elements of earlier European eighteenth-century garments, such as the mantua or *sacque* dress. Marie Antoinette's desire for simplicity, however, did away with these accoutrements, with the only ornamentation on her garment in figure 1 being a colored sash and ruffles on the neckline and sleeves.

The popularization of *robe à la creole* dresses in France, largely fueled by Marie Antoinette's fashioning of the garment as the *chemise à la reine,* had diffused into wider Europe by the end of the eighteenth century. An English variety of the *robe à la creole* appears illustrated in a German fashion magazine *Journal des Luxus und der Moden* in 1790, where it was described as a *Fourreau à la Creole* (figure 5). The plate is captioned: "two young ladies, one from London and one from Paris," one wears a "*Fourreau à la Creole*" and the other "*a Caraco und Jupe Trainante*."[25] The woman from London on the left wears the *Fourreau a la Creole,* which is described as being made of muslin and having "English ruffles," featuring full-length sleeves with frills at the cuffs and a *fichu* covering the breast. This "London" variation, with full-length

sleeves with frills at the cuffs and *fichu* covering the breast, largely resembles Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire's styling of the dress (as represented in her portrait by Thomas Gainsborough). Georgiana first wore this style garment in 1784, having been given it by Marie Antoinette herself.[26] This plate in a German magazine, displaying an English variation of a French fashion aptly demonstrates the circulation and dissemination of the gown across Europe by the last decade of the eighteenth century.

Materializing Caribbean Makers

In its various iterations in both European and the Caribbean, the defining features of the *robe a la creole* were its long sleeves, ruffled adornments, and, crucially, its muslin materiality. Muslin was a thin translucent textile produced from finely-woven cotton, the production of which was originally dominated by the Bengal region of India where it had been made since at least the fourth century BCE.[27] By the end of the eighteenth century, however, Britain had overtaken India in the production of muslin, largely due to new technological innovations that allowed for its mass production.[28] Marie Antoinette and Rose Bertin frequently used imported British cloth for the Queen's wardrobe, and it is speculated that the muslin for Marie Antoinette's *robe à creole* was specifically of Scottish manufacture.[29]

For the increased production of not only muslin but also other Indian-imitation textiles, Britain needed cotton from its Caribbean colonies. The late eighteenth century therefore represents a brief but important period of dominance of the Caribbean in textile production, as by the 1810s, the islands could no longer meet the demand for cotton, and the southern United States rose to become the chief producer of the nineteenth century.[30] The main cotton-producing islands were the British governed Jamaica and Barbados.[31] In his 1793 *History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* Bryan Edwards, a pro-slavery British politician,

reported that 11,380,338 lb of cotton was imported into Britain from the Caribbean in 1784 alone, which by 1787 had doubled to 22,600,000 lb.[32] There was similarly a mass demand for cotton in France. In 1785 the import of foreign (including British) cloth was restricted in order to protect French industry and, hence, cotton production the French colony of Saint-Domingue also greatly increased.[33] To produce more cotton, more labor was needed, and so between 1784 and 1790 the number of enslaved laborers transported to Saint-Domingue almost doubled.[34] And not only was cotton vital, but indigo - mainly grown in Jamaica, Saint-Domingue, Guadalupe and Martinique - was needed to bleach muslin and create its intense white appearance.[35]

Behind the elegant façade of white muslin, therefore, was the exploited agricultural labor of enslaved peoples. For cotton production, large areas of land would have been cleared, soil hoed, seeds planted and then, ten months later, the raw cotton from pods harvested.[36] The cotton would then have to be ginned (a process to remove seeds) and hand-picked to remove any debris.[37] Indigo, similarly, was produced through hoeing trenches on cleared land, hand-sowing seeds and later picking the indigo branches.[38] These were then placed into large cisterns, mixed with water and fermented for twelve hours.[39] After this, enslaved laborers would walk naked in the tank, beating it with paddles to make the indigo oxidize.[40] This was unpleasant work, and the fumes from the process were highly toxic. As Edwards callously remarked, one of the main "inconveniences" of indigo production, alongside bad weather and insect pests, was "the mortality of the negroes from the vapor of the fermented liquor."[41]

This raw cotton and indigo was then exported to Europe where much of the textiles produced, particularly in Britain and France, were then exported back to the Americas.[42] As can be seen represented in another of Brunias's paintings, *Linen Market, Dominica* (figure 6) there was an

abundance of textiles for sale in the French and British Caribbean. The composition depicts a bustling panorama of market exchange and an array of products for sale in the Dominican port town and capital of Roseau. The harbor setting and boats in the background of this painting further speak to the Atlantic crossing of these exported and imported textiles. In the center right of the composition a light-skinned woman is depicted. She wears a white dress with ruffles very similar to that of Brunias's *Creole Planters* (figure 4) and is being offered up a length of white fabric by a seated, darker-skinned woman, who is also wearing a simple white garment. At first glance, it might be assumed this standing light-skinned woman is white, however, as Mia L. Bagneris has problematized, determining the precise racial positioning of many of Brunias's figures is very difficult, and his seemingly white women could also be light-skinned, mixed-race "mulatto" women.[43] What is clear, however, is that this central woman has agency, able to choose what she is buying and how she is styling herself.

In both Brunias's *View of Roseau Valley* (figure 3) and *Linen Market* (figure 6), behind the light-skinned women wearing *robe à la creole*-style dresses, is a darker-skinned figure holding a parasol.[44] Although we do not know for certain that these attendants are enslaved, we can assume they are in some form of servitude. Perhaps the woman in the *Linen Market* might be tasked with sewing into a garment the cloth her mistress is buying; perhaps she even sewed the *robe à la creole* that she is wearing. As established, the inspiration for Marie Antoinette's *robe à la creole* was the dresses of the wives of European plantation owners. It was often the role of enslaved women on plantations to make clothes for their white mistresses.[45] Enslaved seamstresses were sometimes even sent to Europe to learn fashion trends and upon return recreate them, as well as copying European styles from magazines – further evidence of the circum-Atlantic interchange of fashion.[46] Working as a seamstress was considered a skilled profession for an enslaved woman and this was reflected in their prescribed monetary value. [47]

An account book for the Frontier Plantation in Jamaica in July 1773, for example, records the valuations of two enslaved seamstresses named Jean and Jeany. These women are each valued at £100, whereas the enslaved field women's values range from between £30 to £90.[48]

Despite the economic worth of such seamstresses, there are surprisingly few surviving artistic representations of them. Potentially, more representations might still be uncovered. For example, the London Society of Artists catalogue for 1777 records an oil on canvas painting by Philip Wickstead, who worked under the patronage of the plantation owner William Beckford in Jamaica, named *Mulatto Woman Teaching Needlework to Negro Girls.*[49] This painting is now lost, but the fact that it was exhibited at the Society of Artists suggests that these seamstresses were considered appropriate pictorial subjects.[50] Moreover, from the title alone, the skills of this "mulatto woman" are revealed in not only her ability to sew but also teach others. Hay's *Seamstresses* (figure 2) is perhaps one of the best surviving depictions of seamstresses at work, although much less grand in scale and medium. The seated woman depicted here is very light-skinned, but her African ancestry is suggested in her tightly curled black hair peeking out from under her headwrap. She wears a high waisted white jacket, a patterned chintz cotton skirt and a white apron. She sits stitching a piece of white fabric - which we might even speculate is part of a *robe à la creole*-style garment.

William Berryman, an English book-keeper and artist working in Jamaica during the early nineteenth century, similarly depicts two seamstresses at work in his *Portraits of two native women, one black and one light-skinned, Jamaica* (figure 7). Even though the sketch is unfinished, the dark-skinned woman on the left can clearly be seen sewing, eyes downcast towards her project, whilst her lighter-skinned companion looks out towards us. Berryman does not give us much indication of what they are creating, instead focusing on the faces of the

women and their checked headwraps in delicate watercolour.[51] Both Berryman and Hay's representations also reveal the collaborative nature of these four women's interaction with textiles, working in commune and, in the case of Hay, assisting each other with their projects. The soft smiles of Hay's seamstresses further suggests a friendship between the two women, a kinship found even within a system of potentially forced labor.

The role of laundresses can similarly be considered alongside the work of seamstresses in maintaining the whiteness of the *robe à la Creole*-style garments.[52] The Caribbean sun and water gave muslin a distinctly brighter color which was essential for the stark whiteness of the *robe à la creole*, unlike in Paris where the dirty water left cloth with a yellow tinge.[53] Women in Bordeaux and Nantes even sent their white dresses to Saint-Domingue to be specially laundered.[54] An eighteenth-century visitor to Nantes remarked that:

> What must be admired most is their fine linen and the resplendence of their shirts which they send to be washed... in the mountain streams of Saint-Domingue, where water whitens clothes much better than in French rivers...[55]

This method is represented in Brunias's *View of Roseau Valley* (figure 3), where the majority of the composition is taken up by women washing white cloth. The various stages of laundering are shown here: from beating the cloth against the rocks with wooden paddles to wringing it out and carrying it back in baskets. This is juxtaposed with the finished product of their labors - the luminescent whiteness of the dresses of the female "Creole planters." Brunias depicts this same river again in *View on the River Roseau, Dominica* (figure 8), where the sweeping landscape is broken up by the various figures washing white cloth in the river. On the right of the composition, large swathes of red and white fabric are lain across the rocks to dry in the

bright sun. A lone woman stands slightly off-center, with her mountain of stark white laundry beside her, observing her fellow laundresses stooped over in the river.

Neoclassical Appropriations

The labor of indigo growers and these laundresses, in particular, was fundamental to creating one of the key features of the *robe à la creole*: its whiteness. This was essential to the connotations that the *robe à la creole* took on in Europe at the end of the turn of the nineteenth century, where it heavily influenced and became conflated with a very similar garment known as the *robe à la grecque,* which was in vogue from around 1794 till 1815.[56] Likewise made of white muslin, this garment drew inspiration from the ancient Greek *peplos* and thin drapery of classical statues.[57] One of the defining difference between the *robe à la creole* and the *robe à la grecque* was its high waistline, which was tightened with drawstrings to make the lower half of the body appear like a classical column or caryatid.[58] Rauser's extensive study into this garment credits its invention to a range of sources, including the muslin dress worn by Vigée-Lebrun to paint, and the Neoclassical performances of Emma Hamilton (for which Vigée-Lebrun also took credit) - therefore still very much in dialogue with the *robe à la creole's* introduction amongst the elite in France.[59]

The ancient Greek influence of the *robe à la grecque* was utilized in Europe, and particularly France, to further Neoclassical discourses, where it featured in a vast array of visual culture. One such example of this can be seen in a c.1798 painting from the circle of Neoclassical artist Jacques-Louis David, titled *Portrait of a Young Woman in White* (figure 9). Here, a woman is depicted wearing a high-waisted stark white *robe à la grecque.* The gown tapers below her breast, with folds of fabric cascading down her lower body like a fluted column shaft. The

upper part of her body is largely exposed, with short sleeves and the thin fabric covering her shoulders and breasts almost completely translucent, revealing a glimpse of her nipples.

This portrait, with its tantalizing conflation of white fabric and white flesh, might be read in terms of Angela Rosenthal's suggestion that in Europe at this time there was a conscious artistic construction of female whiteness coinciding with rising anti-slavery sentiment.[60] She links this concept with the increased interest with the Greek mythological figure of Pygmalion in the same period, where white ivory metamorphosizes into white skin.[61] The Pygmalion myth is also adopted by Rauser, where her overarching argument is that white muslin dresses made women appear like "living statues": embodiments of Neoclassicism.[62] Joachim J. Winckelmann, the leading proponent of eighteenth-century studies on Classical art, in his 1764 *History of Ancient Art* wrote on marble that "a beautiful body will…be the more beautiful the whiter it is," and ideal beauty was, like water, "free from all foreign admixture."[63] Rauser suggests that the donning of the *robe à la grecque*, therefore, allowed a female wearer to "align herself with the most elevated and prestigious aesthetic discourses of her era."[64]

The *robe à la creole,* in its later iteration as the *robe à la grecque,* was appropriated to exemplify these Western Neoclassical ideals that revered pure whiteness, thereby erasing Caribbean origins. The racist implications of the *robe à la grecque* are further made overt in a pastel by John Raphael Smith, *A Lady Holding a Mask* (figure 10), which mobilized the garment in a direct binary to blackness. Here, a white woman looks out at the viewer; her white dress translucently rendered in soft pastel. From her shoulders slips a domino (a thin black masquerade cloak) and she holds a mask with the caricatured features of a Black person's profile.[65] The white and black juxtaposition of race and material here is explicitly opposing, used to emphasise the supposed beauty of white European femininity.

Caribbean Re-appropriations

Despite these discourses which aesthetically excluded non-white women from wearing the *robe à la grecque,* the garment was still worn by women of color in the Caribbean. The modish associations that the *robe à la creole* took on in the metropoles of Europe had been remarketed into the Caribbean colonies even from the initial adoption of the garment by Marie Antoinette. In the late eighteenth century, several advertisements for *chemises à la reine* featured in the Saint-Domingue newspaper, *Affiches Americanes*, which emphasized their links to the Queen. In February 1783, for instance, a "Madame Joly" advertised her services, selling "muslin, taffeta" and other fashionable items. Originally from Saint-Domingue, she claimed to be "newly arrived from Paris" where she was "a pupil of a Miss Berthin [Rose Bertin – Marie Antoinette's dressmaker and credited designer of the *chemise à la reine*]…*marchande de modes* to the Queen."[66] In January 1785, a "Madame Paul" similarly advertised her services as a "fashion merchant and maker of *chemises à la Reine*."[67]

This ongoing exchange between metropole and colony can be seen to continue into the turn of the nineteenth century. Returning again to Hay's *Seamstresses* (figure 2) from 1798, we can see the fashionable high-waisted silhouette of the *robe à la grecque* has been adopted by both women. The standing seamstress in particular exemplifies this, with her stark-white high-waisted bodice tapering just under her breasts, ruffled on the hem, accompanied by a straight column-like skirt.[68] A further example is revealed in the sketchbook of Edward Pelham Brenton, a British naval officer and historian who served in the Caribbean in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and whose sketchbook (dated c.1802-8) features various illustrations of people and landscapes in Barbados and Jamaica.[69] In a sketch titled *Portrait of a West Indian Lady* (figure 11), he depicts an elegantly posed woman swathed in white fabric.

She wears the familiar white, high-waisted *robe à la grecque*, adorned by a white shawl and white necklace. On her head she dons a man's beaver hat, ornamented with white fabric which flows out artfully behind her. Markedly, Brenton has made a clear distinction between the white of her ensemble, simply accented with gray watercolor wash, and the light brown of her skin. He uses only two colors in total to differentiate between skin and clothing - notably unlike the blurring between white fabric and white flesh in the *Portrait of a Young Woman in White* (figure 9).

Although the precise racial positioning or free or enslaved status of Brenton's *West Indian Lady* and Hay's *Seamstresses* is difficult to determine, it is likely that they are mixed-race, or so-called "mulatto" women. Hay's seated seamstress in particular, along with Brenton's *West Indian Lady,* are notably light skinned.[70] As has been noted by Kay Dian Kriz, "while not all mulattoes were free people of color, nor all of the latter mulattoes, there was a slippage in colonial discourse" between the two.[71] Self-presentation through clothing was key to this "slippage," with Kriz further commenting that a "mulatto" was seen as someone "who disdained physical labor and possessed the financial resources for luxuries such as fine clothing."[72] This is demonstrated in a further sketch by William Berryman (figure 13), depicting a light-skinned female figure, elusively captioned as "La Duchesse." Berryman represents this woman sitting on a window ledge, wearing a checked headwrap and another *robe à la grecque* style gown - characterized by its low cut, high waist, short fitted sleeves, and (we might assume) white color. Crucially, her idleness is juxtaposed with the manual labor of darker-skinned women depicted "digging corn holes" in the adjacent sketch. The woman in the window is presented by Berryman as a seductive fantasy, anonymized and exoticized as a mysterious "Duchesse," and dressed finely in a fashionable *robe à la grecque*.

The fine dress of such "mulatto" women was frequently remarked upon in written accounts of the Caribbean, where they were often depicted as objects of desire and exotic pleasure for the enjoyment of white men.[73] Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry in Saint-Domingue commented on "That Seductive Mulatto Woman", who dresses in: "valuable muslins, kerchiefs, and stuffs and cloths…"[74] She is later presented by Moreau as nothing more than a doll, as he describes how "the favored lover dresses up his conquest…"[75] Although accounts such as Moreau's generally condemned "mulatto" women's showy and frivolous adornment, they also reveal the skills of such women in styling and displaying their bodies. In his *Description topographique* Moreau (here specifically speaking here of enslaved women), describes how:

> It would be hard to believe how far the expense of a slave negress can go; she puts all her glory, and one of her sweetest pleasures, in having a lot of linen…The greatest token of love that one can give to a negress is to…take her or send her to a merchant, to choose superb muslins, and Indian and Persian fabric, from which she makes herself skirts.[76]

He goes on to remark how these presents are often futile and do not allow male "lovers" "rights" to the woman.[77] Although relations with white men such as this subjected enslaved and free women of color to horrific sexual abuse and power imbalance, they did also mean that these women may have had more means by which to accrue textiles and thereby fashion themselves.[78] Moreau's "negress" can be seen here to use her sexuality in order to gain materials, notably including muslin, in order to gain commodities to craft her own clothes, thereby enhancing her social identity.

"Mulatto" women were widely recognized as trendsetters, and as such were much envied by white women.[79] In Leonora Sansay's novel *Secret History* (1808), a fictional account of the days leading up to the Haitian Revolution, "mulatto" women are described as "the hated but successful rivals of the [white] Creole ladies."[80] The account of Mrs. A.C. Carmichael, a white wife of a Scottish plantation owner residing in St. Vincent and Trinidad during the early 1820s, further reveals the expertise of women of color when it came to fashion. Commenting on the attendants of a "public ball", she proclaimed that she:

> …was very much amused by observing what connoisseurs the negro women are of dress – standing near me, at one time, I heard them criticise every thing I wore, both in the materials and make.[81]

Although written with an air of scorn, Carmichael's description of these women as "connoisseurs" undoubtably divulges their knowledge of fashion and taste which is clearly far more on-trend than her own.

The donning of the *robe à la grecque,* which had been integral in furthering Western Neoclassical discourses in Europe, by women of color, might therefore be read as an act of sartorial mimicry and subversion. In Homi Bhabha's discussion of colonial mimicry, he uses the phrase "*almost the same but not white"* to describe the '"partial" presence' of the colonized Other mimicking the colonizer's modes.[82] Applying this to the context of wearing these white muslin dresses, the statement becomes even more significant. Whether done consciously or not, the wearing of the *robe à la grecque* by Caribbean women of color, which had been appropriated in Europe to revere an unadulterated whiteness, could be viewed as subversive in its destabilization of the conflation of white material and white flesh. Although many of these

women, undeniably, were only able to dress in such a way due to their light-skinned proximity to whiteness, the very fact that most or many were mixed-race disrupts, and creolizes, the notions of purity associated with Neoclassicism, which, to return to Winckelmann, should be "free from all foreign admixture."[83] Accounts such as Sansay's and Carmichael's demonstrate that not only not only did these women become procurers and wearers of fashionable dress, they also became authorities of it, as visually represented in the works of Hay, Brenton and Berryman.

Further re-creolization of the *robe à la grecque* might be seen through its pairing with non-European forms of dress, such as the headwrap. A form of headwrap is represented in almost all of the visual representations of Caribbean women discussed throughout this article, often worn alongside white muslin dresses. Headwraps in the Caribbean had a practical function – used to defend the hair against lice and the sun, covering up unwashed hair, or protecting hair that had recently been styled.[84] They were also used to ornament the head, and could be tied in various expressive and innovative ways, as has been shown in the work of Steeve O. Buckridge.[85] Looking once again at Hay's *Seamstresses* (figure 2), we can see how both women have tied their headwraps in similar ways on the top of the head. The African-American headwrap varies from a European-style handkerchief head covering (which is usually tied at the nape of the neck) by its tying near the crown of the head, and where hair is gathered up to elevate the effect of the headwrap – as can be seen by both of Hay's subjects.[86] The standing seamstress wears a headwrap made of checked cloth which is matched by a similar red, white and blue Madras neckerchief ornamenting her white bodice. Significantly, these headwraps were also adopted by white women in the Americas, and, as with the *robe à la creole*, made their way into fashions in Europe.[87] The appropriation of these headwraps by white women can be read as further evidence of the fashionable ingenuity of Caribbean women of color,

demonstrating, as with the *robe à la creole,* how their creations were able to influence fashion on the other side of the Atlantic.

This article has sought to find the "creole" origins, makers and wearers of the *robe à la creole.* It has speculated on the potential Caribbean makers of white muslin dresses whose collaborative labors likely made the garments that so inspired Marie Antoinette. Even as the *robe à la grecque* in the later eighteenth century celebrated the conjoining of white cloth and white skin, women of color in the Caribbean can be seen to destabilize this through their fashioning of the garment and their knowledge and command of wider sartorial trends. The *robe à la creole* can be used more widely as a vehicle for visualizing the interconnections between Europe and the Caribbean in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, exemplifying how fashion styles were continuously adopted and adapted between metropole and colony, fundamentally problematizing where and *who* we might see as the center of fashion. Although we might never uncover the identities of Hay's *Seamstresses,* we should certainly consider women like them alongside Marie Antoinette, Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and Rose Bertin as makers, wearers and popularisers of the epochal white muslin dress.

Notes

With many thanks to Esther Chadwick who supervised the original version of this article at the Courtauld Institute of Art, and to my current supervisor at the University of Edinburgh, Viccy Coltman, who has advised on it since. I am very grateful for the constructive comments of the editors and reviewers at *SECC,* and to ASECS for their funding of image permissions.

[1]Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe 1715-1789* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 226.

[2] Sonia Ashmore, *Muslin* (London: V&A Publishing, 2012), 61; Naomi Lubrich, "The Little White Dress: Politics and Polyvalence in Revolutionary France," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* 3 no. 23 (2016): 279.

[3] Jane Ashelford, "'Colonial Livery' and the *chemise à la reine,* 1779-1784," *Costume* 2 no. 52 (2018): 218.

[4] Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims: Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 186; Lubrich, "The Little White Dress," 279.

[5] Ashelford, "'Colonial Livery' and the *chemise à la reine,"* 218.

[6] With many thanks to Charlotte Lefland at Yale Centre for British Art for providing this information for me from the curatorial file.

[7] The watercolour is also inscribed on the verso as "presented to 'Wm. Corbett Esq'r by his friend Wm. Hay," so authorship and voyeurism, by and for two (presumably) white men, should certainly be recognised despite its apparent authenticity.

[8] Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe 1715-1789,* 227; Caroline Weber, *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 150; Danielle C. Skeehan, *The Fabric of Empire: The Material and Literary Cultures of the Global Atlantic* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2020), 88; Weber, *Queen of Fashion,* 150; Lubrich, "The Little White Dress," 279.

[9] See in particular: Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims,* 172-199; Claire E. Cage, "The Sartorial Self: Neoclassical Fashion and Gender Identity in France 1797-1804," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 42, no. 2 (2009): 193-215; Ashelford, "'Colonial Livery' and the *chemise à la reine,* 1779-1784," 218-239; Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth Century Europe 1715-1789,* 226-228; Weber, *Queen of Fashion,* 150; Lubrich, "The Little White

Dress," 280-282; Philippe Halbert, "Creole Comforts and French Connections: A Case Study in Caribbean Dress," The Junto, 2018, accessed February 23, 2023, https://earlyamericanists.com/2018/09/11/creole-comforts-and-french-connections-a-case-study-in-caribbean-dress/; Jonathan Michael Square, "Culture, Power, and the Appropriation of Creolized Aesthetics in the Revolutionary French Atlantic," *Small Axe Salon* 36 (2021), accessed Jan 28, 2023, http://smallaxe.net/sxsalon/discussions/culture-power-and-appropriation-creolized-aesthetics-revolutionary-french.

[10] Amelia Rauser, *The Age of Undress: Art, Fashion and the Classical Ideal in the 1790s* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 124-154.

[11] Rauser, *The Age of Undress,* 139.

[12] Ashelford, "'Colonial Livery' and the *chemise à la reine,* 1779-1784."

[13] Glenn Adamson, "The Case of the Missing Footstall: Reading the Absent Object," in *History and Material Culture,* ed. Karen Harvey (London: Routledge, 2009), 240.

[14] Adamson, "The Case of the Missing Footstall," 244.

[15] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no.2 (2008): 8. I am also influenced by Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 78 and her concept of reading source material "along the bias grain" in order to "accentuate the figures of enslaved women."

[16] Tim Barringer and Gillian Forster, "Introduction," in *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds* ed. Tim Barringer, Gillian Forrester and Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2007), 3.

[17] See: Kamau Braithwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), xiv-xv; Richard D. E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997); Verene A. Shepherd and Glen L. Richards (eds.), *Questioning Creole: Creolisation Discourses in Caribbean Culture* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2002).

[18] Ashelford, "'Colonial Livery' and the *chemise à la reine*," 224.

[19] Ashelford, "'Colonial Livery' and the *chemise à la reine*," 228.

[20] Francis Alexander Stanislaus Baron de Wimpffen (translated by John Wright), *A Voyage to Saint Domingo, in the Years 1788, 1789, and 1790* (London: T. Cadell Junior and W. Davis, 1797), 294.

[21] Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry (translated by Ivor D. Spencer), *A Civilization that Perished: The Last Years of White Colonial Rule in Haiti, 1797-8* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985), 32. This publication is an largely abridged version of Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint- Domingue* (Philadelphia: Chez L'Auteur, 1797) translated into English.

[22] The racial identity of these female "creoles" is ambiguous. I suggest they might be white women with hesitancy. As Mia L. Bagneris, *Colouring the Caribbean: Race and the Art of Agostino Brunias* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2018), 201, states in relation to this painting: "Whether they are two white women, a white woman and a mulatress, or even two mulatresses remains a mystery."

[23] Translation by author, with many thanks to Stella Scobie for her assistance. Note that "America" here refers both to the mainland and the Caribbean colonies. As Ashelford "'Colonial Livery' and the *chemise à la reine*," 227 also highlights, the inclusion of the "Grenada" hat is also a reference to the French capturing of the Caribbean island of Grenada from the British in 1779.

[24] Kendra Van Cleave, "The Lévite Dress: Untangling the Cultural Influences of Eighteenth Century French Fashion," *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings* 1119 (2018).

[25] Justin Friedrich (ed.) "Mode-Neuigkeiten," *Journal des Luxus und der Moden* vol 5 (July 1790): 420, accessed October 21, 2022, https://zs.thulb.uni-jena.de/receive/jportal_jpvolume_00055202. Translation by author, original German reads*: zwei junge Damen, eine Londnerin und Pariserin, jene in einem Fourreau a la Creole; diese in einem Caraco und Jupe trainante.*

[26] Ashelford, "'Colonial Livery' and the *chemise à la reine*," 232.

[27] Ashmore, *Muslin,* 11-32.

[28] Ashmore, *Muslin,* 27-35.

[29] Ashmore, *Muslin,* 61.

[30] Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric that Made the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 202.

[31] Riello, *Cotton*, 200, 194.

[32] Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies With a Continuation to the Present Time, Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 323.

[33] Ashmore, *Muslin,* 59; see Ashelford, "'Colonial Livery' and the *chemise à la reine*," 234-235 for more on the impact of the *chemise a la reine* on French cotton manufacture.

[34] Ashelford, "'Colonial Livery' and the *chemise à la reine*," 235.

[35] Jenny Balflour-Paul, *Indigo: Egyptian Mummies to Blue Jeans* (London: British Museum Press, 2011), 66; Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth Century Europe 1715-1789,* 228.

[36] D. Gail Saunders, "Slave life, slave society and cotton production in the Bahamas," *Slavery and Abolition* 11 no. 3 (1990): 334-5.

[37] Saunders, "Slave life," 336.

[38] Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies,* 237.

[39] Balflour-Paul, *Indigo,* 110.

[40] Balflour-Paul, *Indigo,* 110. See: Lorri Glover, *Eliza Lucas Pinckney: An Independent Woman in the Age of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 60 on enslaved knowledge of carpentry in North American indigo production.

[41] Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies,* 335.

[42] Robert S. DuPlessis, "Cotton Consumption in the Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century North Atlantic," in *The Spinning World: A Global History of Cotton Textiles,* ed. Giorgio Riello and Prasannan Parthasarathi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 227-228.

[43] Bagneris, *Colouring the Caribbean,* 182-214.

[44] Even if these light-skinned women were "mulatto" women rather than white, it is noted that many still had servants or slaves. See for example Anonymous (ed. Barry Higman), *Characteristic Traits of the Creolian & African Negroes in Jamaica, & c. & c. (1797)* (Mona: Caldwell Press, 1976), 10 which notes that 'mulatto' mistresses were 'commonly attended by a negro girl.' See Erin Trahey, "Among Her Kinswomen: Legacies of Free Women of Color in Jamaica," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (2019): 257-288 for a discussion of free women of color owning enslaved people.

[45] Karol K. Weaver, "Fashioning Freedom: Slave Seamstresses in the Atlantic World," *Journal of Women's History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 47

[46] Weaver, "Fashioning Freedom:," 44; Danielle C. Skeehan, "Caribbean Women, Creole Fashioning, and the Fabric of Black Atlantic Writing," *The Eighteenth Century* 56, no.1 (2015): 111.

[47] Bernard Moitt, "Women, Work and Resistance in the French Caribbean during Slavery, 1700–1848," in *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective* ed. Verene Shepherd, Bridget Brereton and Barbara Bailey (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1995), 70, 77.

[48] Invoices and Sales Book, 1770-1776, T-SK 22/5, Glasgow Life: Glasgow City Archives.

[49] Algernon Graves, *The Society of artists of Great Britain, 1760-1791; the Free society of artists, 1761-1783 ; a complete dictionary of contributors and their work from the foundation of the societies to 1791* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1907), 227. Many thanks to Chiedza Mhondoro for drawing my attention to this catalogue entry.

[50] Philip Wickstead was patronised by Jamaican plantation owner William Beckford. It is possible that this painting, and/or other preparatory drawings for it was lost in a hurricane which 1780 which destroyed much of his work. See: F. Cundall, "Philip Wickstead of Jamaica,*" Connoisseur* 94, (1934): 174-75.

[51] Little is known about the biography of William Berryman, see Rachel Newman, "Conjuring Cane: The Art of William Berryman and Caribbean Sugar Plantations,"(PhD Diss, Stanford University, 2016).

[52] As Anne Lafont, "Fabric, Skin, Color: Picturing Antilles' Markets as an Inventory of Human Diversity," *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura* 43, no.2 (2016): 139 notes, the French for laundress is *banchisseuses* - which literally means "whiteners."

[53] Ashelford, "'Colonial Livery' and the *chemise à la reine*," 230.

[54] Ashmore, *Muslin,* 60; Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade: 1440-1870* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 10.

[55] Pierre H. Boulle, "Slave Trade, Commercial Organization and Industrial Growth in Eighteenth-Century Nantes*," Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, 59, no. 214 (1972): 88.

[56] Harper Franklin, "1800-1809," Fashion History Timeline - Fashion Institute of Technology, June 25, 2020, accessed April 25, 2022, https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1800-1809/; Aileen Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress : Fashion in England and France 1750 to 1820* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 71; Hilary Davidson, "Looking Back Through Fashion: Regency Romances and a "Jumble of Styles,"" in *The Edinburgh Companion to Romanticism and the Arts,* ed. Maureen McCue (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 503.

[57] Lubrich, "The Little White Dress," 275; Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, "Nudity *à la grecque* in 1799," *The Art Bulletin* 80, no.2 (1998): 311-335; Cage, "The Sartorial Self," 193-215.

[58] Rauser, *The Age of Undress,* 21, 93; Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims,* 175.

[59] Rauser, *The Age of Undress,* 18.

[60] Angela Rosenthal, "*Visceral* Culture: Blushing and the Legibility of Whiteness in Eighteenth Century British Portraiture," *Art History* 27 no. 4 (2004): 575. See also: Anne Lafont, "How Skin Colour Became a Racial Marker: Art Historical Perspectives on Race," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 51, no.1 (2017): 89-113.

[61] Rosenthal, "*Visceral* Culture," 563.

[62] Rauser, *The Age of Undress*.

[63] Joachim Winckelmann (ed. David Irwin), *Winckelmann: Writings on Art* (London: Phiadon Press, 1972), 118, 119.

[64] Rauser, *The Age of Undress,* 127.

[65] Esther Chadwick, Meredith Gamer, and Cyra Levenson, *Figures of Empire: Slavery and Portraiture in eighteenth-century Atlantic Britain* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2014), 33.

[66] "Avis Divers," *Supplement Aux Affiches Américaines,* 19th February 1783, *University of Florida Digital Collections* (accessed Nov 15, 2022), https://dloc.com/AA00000449/00017/images/89. Translation by author, original French reads: *Mde Joly, éleve de Mlle Berthin, Marchande de modes de la Reine, nouvellement arrivée de Paris…son magsin est bien assorti en mousseline, taffetas…*

[67] "Spectacle," *Supplement Aux Affiches Américaines*, 22nd January 1785, *University of Florida Digital Collections* (accessed May 3, 2022), https://dloc.com/AA00000449/00018/images/37. Translation by author, original French reads: *Madame Paul, Merchande de Modes & faiseuse de chemises à la Reine*; Halbert, "Creole Comforts and French Connections: A Case Study in Caribbean Dress."

[68] Hilary Davidson, *Dress in the Age of Jane Austen: Regency Fashion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 276.

[69] With many thanks to the African History Project for drawing my attention to Brenton's work via their Instagram (@africanhistoryproject). See also: Douglas Hamilton and Robert J. Blyth (eds.), *Representing Slavery: Art, Artefacts and Archives in the Collections of the National Maritime Museum* (London: Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd., 2007), 256.

[70] As noted by Moitt, "Women, Work and Resistance in the French Caribbean during Slavery," 70, 77, there was much cross-over between "mulatto" women and women working as seamstresses.

[71] Kay Dian Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indie*s (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 45.

[72] Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement,* 45.

[73] Bagneris, *Colouring the Caribbean,* 136-181; Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement*, 37-70.

[74] Moreau de Saint-Méry, *A Civilisation that Perished,* 83-84.

[75] Moreau de Saint-Méry, *A Civilisation that Perished,* 83-84.

[76] Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique*, 60. Translation by author, original French: *On aurait peine à croire jufqu'à quel point, la dépense d'une négresse esclave peur aller; elle met toute sa gloire, & une de ses plus douces jouffances, à avoir beaucoup de linge…La plus grande marque d'amour qu'on puisse donner à une négresse, c'est de lui fair* couper des cotes*: c'est-à-dire, de la conduire ou de l'envoyer chez un marchand, pòur choiser les superbes mousselines, les indiennes et les perses, dont elle se fait des jupes.!*

[77] Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique*, 60. Translation by author, original French: *Combien d'entr'elles savent, par un manènge étudié, inspirer l'espoir à de crédules amans, déjà dupes depuis long-tems, lorsqu'ils s'apperçoivent que leurs présens ne leur acquièrent aucun droit!*

[78] See: Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives,* 62-69 on these troubling relations.

[79] Weaver, "Fashioning Freedom: Slave Seamstresses in the Atlantic World," 49.

[80] Leonora Sansay, *Secret History or, the Horrors of St. Domingo* (Philadelphia: Bradford & Inskeep, 1808), 77-78.

[81] Mrs. A.C. Carmichael, *Domestic Manners and Social Condition of the White, Coloured and Negro Population of the West Indies, Volume 1* (London: Whittaker, Treacher and Co., 1833), 46.

[82] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 128, 123.

[83] Winckelmann, *Winckelmann: Writings on Art,* 119.

[84] Steeve O. Buckridge, *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1760-1890* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2004), 94.

[85] Buckridge, *The Language of Dress, Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica,* 88-92; see also: Nicole Willson, "Sartorial Insurgencies: Rebel Women, Headwraps and the Revolutionary Black Atlantic," *Atlantic Studies* 19, no. 1 (2022): 86–106 for a discussion of agency and the headwrap for Caribbean women of colour.

[86] Helen Bradley Griebel, "The African American Woman's Headwrap: Unwinding the Symbols," Cornell University, 1995, accessed Nov 15 2022, http://char.txa.cornell.edu/Griebel.htm. See also: Helen Bradley Griebel, "The West African Origin of the African-American Headwrap," in *Dress and Ethnicity,* ed. Joanne B. Eicher (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1995), 207-227.

[87] Rauser, *Age of Undress,* 143-4; Willson, "Sartorial Insurgencies," 97-98.