



'New Raiments of Self': African American Clothing in the Antebellum South (Dress, Body, Culture)

Helen Bradley Foster

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This book examines the clothing worn by African Americans in the southern United States during the thirty years before the American Civil War. Drawing on a wide range of sources, most notably oral narratives recorded in the 1930s, this rich account shows that African Americans demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the role clothing played in demarcating age, sex, status, work, recreation, as well as special secular and sacred events. Testimonies offer proof of African Americans' vast technical skills in producing cloth and clothing, which served both as a fundamental reflection of the peoples' Afrocentric craftsmanship and aesthetic sensibilities, and as a reaction to their particular place in American society. Previous work on clothing in this period has tended to focus on white viewpoints, and as a consequence the dress worn by the enslaved has generally been seen as a static standard imposed by white overlords. This excellent study departs from conventional interpretations to show that the clothing of the enslaved changed over time, served multiple functions and represented customs and attitudes which evolved distinctly from within African American communities. In short, it represents a vital contribution to African American studies, as well as to dress and textile history, and cultural and folklore studies.

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