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Jody Benjamin, *The Texture of Change: Dress, Self-Fashioning and History in Western Africa, 1700–1850*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2024. xvi + 253 pp., illustrations, maps, notes bibliography, index. ISBN 978-0-8214-2547-3, US\$34.95 (pbk).

In *The Texture of Change*, Jody Benjamin draws upon the meanings of textiles and texts as reflections of the political positions, slavery and socio-economic identities of people living in Western Africa and the Caribbean from 1700 to 1850. The words ‘text’, ‘textile’ and ‘texture’ are etymologically related to the Latin verb *texere* (‘to weave’). Its past participle, *textus*, refers to something with a woven structure, such as a narrative; the English word ‘text’ derives from the Old French word *texte*. The Latin word *textilis* (‘woven’) has become the word ‘textile’ in English, while the Latin word *textūra* was adopted by English speakers as the word ‘texture’.¹ Textile-related activities, such as weaving and spinning, and loom parts frequently serve as metaphors in novels such as *Moby-Dick*:

[In an Arsacides shrine], trees stood high and haughty, feeling their living sap; the industrious earth beneath was as a weaver’s loom, with a gorgeous carpet on it, whereof the ground-vine tendrils formed the warp and woof, and the living flowers the figures ... Through the lacings of the leaves, the great sun seems a flying shuttle weaving the unwearied verdure. Oh, busy weaver! unseen weaver! – whither flows the fabric? ... The weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving he is deafened, that he hears no mortal voice.²

Like the destiny of the ship *Pequod* and its captain and crew – who all but one perish – indigo-dyed handwoven cloth and historical events inform the situation of the movements of those living in Western Africa and those transported by slave ships from Western Africa to the New World in the eighteenth and mid nineteenth centuries.

The different ethnic groups in Western Africa who moved to the east and south were associated with different types of handwoven textiles, which were made into hand-sewn garments. Some were dyed with indigo, some were hand-embroidered and some were resist-dyed with mud. Some elaborately decorated textiles, such as the ‘magnificent’

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1. Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (New York, 1983), 698.
 2. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (New York, 1851), 461–2.

kusaaba robe that was used to overthrow the Kaarta chief, Fulakoro, by the ruler of Segou, Mamari Biton Kulubali, were described in a traditional oral account (45).

Leaders of other ethnic groups, such as the Fulbe and Tukulor, who had converted to Islam, relied on textiles and elaborate garments to display their political power and social status. But they also relied on sacred texts to support their leadership positions, along with important imams who read the Qur'an. For those who were Muslim and able to read Arabic, this privilege enabled them to avoid the consequences of the slave trade.

In the early eighteenth century, the transcontinental slave trade expanded to overtake European demand for gold from Mali and Ghana. As Benjamin explains, an 'India piece' (a measure of Indian-imported indigo-dyed cotton cloth) was used 'to account for the numbers of enslaved individuals purchased in Africa and delivered to the Americas' (74). This accounting system clarified the connection between enslaved Africans and imported Indian textiles. Nonetheless, when the French merchant La Courbe met Maram Njaay, the first wife of the late Waalo king, in Saint-Louis, Senegal, he found her with women spinning cotton. Njaay was in charge of the production and trade in handwoven indigo-dyed cloth, which could be used as a form of currency within regional markets in Western Africa (77).

Yet the importance of cotton in the expanding cotton textile industry underscored the need for manual labour in cotton fields in the Caribbean and southern United States. Men and women from the Sahel were taken by boat down the Gambia River to Guinea-Bissau and later to cities such as Saint-Louis via the Senegal River. In 1776, one British slave ship, the *Swallow*, travelled from Saint-Louis to Barbados and Mississippi. On its way back to London, it was taken by an American ship. While the *Swallow* was allowed to return to Britain, the five Senegambian crew members were taken as prisoners of war (10). Indeed, West Africans were captured and transported to the coast during the period of the slave trade, while an influx of imported Indian-made textiles, including indigo-dyed cotton cloths, competed with sales of West African women's indigo cloth production. Later, in the mid nineteenth century, Indian wax-print and fancy-print textiles – which were subsequently manufactured in Britain and the Netherlands – were taken by ship to coastal markets and by boat upriver in Western Africa, as they were the imported textiles most in demand by West African consumers.

A particular group of African men living in Saint-Louis worked as *laptots* (sailors and interpreters), travelling up and back along the Senegal River to sell imported textiles and buy slaves and goods for overseas export (125). They also used their earnings to purchase expensive handwoven, indigo-dyed *kusaaba* robes and embroidered cloth belts to be worn on their return. (It should be noted that it would have been helpful to have had a more informative index, with terms such as *laptots* provided with an English translation – that is, 'sailors'.)

European merchants living in coastal cities such as Saint-Louis, Senegal, in the eighteenth century and colonial officials in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in the nineteenth century collected locally made textiles and garments for themselves and for museum collections. One famous handwoven, indigo-dyed cotton *kusaaba* robe came to France via the French navy and was placed in the naval museum (Musée de la Marine du Louvre) in 1830. It is presently kept in the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris (42). At the same time, European garments and accessories were acquired by traditional rulers in Western Africa. This self-fashioning

underscores the integration of textiles and dress, such as English trousers, petticoats, hats and military uniforms, in the expanding globalizing economy of the seventeenth century (195).

The Texture of Change includes a vast amount of information on textile production and consumption in Western Africa, the transatlantic slave trade, and textile shipments between East Asia, Western Africa and Europe. This detailed focus on the importance of textiles and dress also enables readers to understand the contributions of women in the process of West Africa's incorporation into the global trade networks during the seventeenth to mid nineteenth century, rather than simply as slaves carried on ships to the Americas. This extraordinary study of Western African societies and waterborne mobility underscores the complicated and contradictory intersection of textile production and marketing by boats via West African rivers, alongside transatlantic ships taking slaves to the New World.

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