

Clothed in Meaning

Literature, Labor, and Cotton in Nineteenth-Century America

The rise of both the empire of cotton and the empire of fashion in the nineteenth century brought new opportunities for sartorial self-expression to millions of ordinary people who could now afford to dress in style and assert their physical presence. Millions of laborers toiling in cotton fields and producing cotton cloth in industrial mills faced a brutal reality of exploitation, servitude, and regimentation—yet they also had a profound desire to express their selfhood. Another transformative force of this era—the rise of literary publication and the radical extension of literacy to the working class—opened an avenue for them to do so.

Cloth and clothing provide potent tropes not only for physical but also for intellectual forms of self-expression. Drawing on sources ranging from fugitive slave narratives, newspapers, manifestos, and mill workers' magazines to fiction, poetry, and autobiographies, *Clothed in Meaning* examines the significant part played by mill workers and formerly enslaved people, many of whom still worked picking cotton, in this revolution of literary self-expression. They created a new literature from their palpable daily intimacy with cotton, cloth, and clothing, as well as from their encounters with grimly innovative modes of work. In the materials of their labor they discovered vivid tropes for formulating their ideas and an exotic and expert language for articulating them. The harsh conditions of their work helped foster in their writing a trenchant irony toward the demeaning reduction of human beings to “hands” whose minds were unworthy of interest. Ultimately, *Clothed in Meaning* provides an essential examination of the intimate connections between oppression and luxury as recorded in the many different voices of nineteenth-century labor.

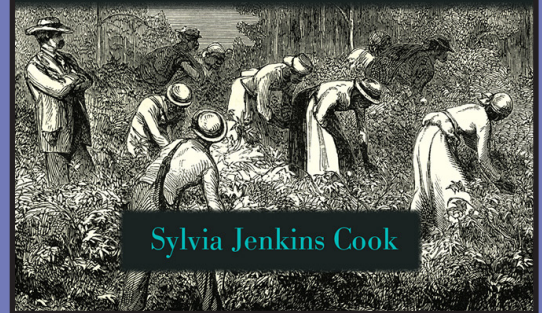
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