



Fabricating Intimacies: Artificial Silk and Frock Ladies in the Interwar Moment

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Abstract: This article analyzes Una Marson's short story "Sojourn" in tandem with fiction by West African journalist Mabel Dove, as well as contemporaneous newspaper references to fabric and attire. It uses the symbolic resonances of cloth to ask what we might see if the colonial subject waiting in the wings is a desiring female subject. The interwar period coincides with key moments in Anglophone Caribbean nationalism as well as anthropological interest in working-class female intimate relations. If centering the middle-class Jamaican woman's leisure and intimacy risks ideological conservatism, it offers an opportunity to be less sure about the endgame of nationalism – about what was desired – in a period that tends to be narrated in terms of the forward march to nationhood. Finally, it provides a chance to put West Africa and the Caribbean in a contemporaneous rather than diasporic, non-coeval relationship.

Keywords: textiles, intimacy, West Africa, Jamaica, nationalism

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In "Sojourn," a 1931 short story by Una Marson (1905-1965), a visiting English salesman finds himself charmed by the shy and efficient Jamaican stenographer and her middle-class family who are his hosts, as well as by the colony's "smartly dressed" modernity. Published in *The Cosmopolitan*, the Jamaica Stenographer Association's monthly periodical that Marson herself edited, "Sojourn's" references to artificial silk and to appropriate attire more generally offer rich symbolic resources for probing issues not necessarily fully captured by determining Marson's important place in feminist, intellectual, Pan-African, or political genealogies, which has been carefully analyzed.¹ If the interwar period is a key moment in the formation of the labour unions, political parties and cultural institutions that accompanied anticolonial struggles, and if Marson is a member of the class that is arguably best poised to benefit from these political and social developments, "Sojourn" asks what the single middle-class woman can expect if she wants a companion for the cinema. That is, it asks us to think of the pleasures of intimacy and leisure as an important and vexed prong of freedom.

Marson, Amy Bailey, and other black and brown members of the middle class in colonial Jamaica were remarkable interwar feminist reformers whose respectable liberalism can appear cautious or even conservative when read backwards from independence narratives that privilege strikers taking to the streets to demand a living wage across the region; or when compared with British Caribbean women in Limón, Costa Rica, taking their grievances before a hostile legal system (Putnam 2002); or to the Puerto Rican women who joined Socialist study circles, fought for better wages, or formed part of the "[m]ore than one thousand women seamstresses and embroiderers [who] signed a petition to the Puerto Rican legislature in 1918 urging the approval of 'a law that would liberate them from the inhumane exploitation which they have suffered from time immemorial.'"²

The narration of anticolonialism as the steady movement from imperial attachment to nation-building, and as the rise of party and union leaders and intellectuals harnessing the energies of enthusiastic but undeveloped masses,

has been tempered by careful analyses of the gendered and classed complexities of that era (Reddock 1990; French and Ford-Smith 1984). Indeed, as Nicole Bourbonnais shows, labor movements “were intimately linked to reproduction and sexuality” (Bourbonnais 2009, 42). Curiosity about “the Afro-Jamaican woman” and her desires runs the risk of reproducing social scientists’ claim to “know” her through the codification of her intimate relationships, as anthropologists would rush to do particularly after World War II (Robinson 2013). In centering the *middle-class* subject’s anxieties about who would love her, or recognize her, the danger is that my focus presses gender into the service of a particular class; in effect, “it comes to the aid of this black, heteronormative, maternal subaltern imaginary” as most worthy of recognition by the colonial state, and later by the postcolonial nation (Rowley 2010, 14).

But here I take up Veronica Gregg’s caution that there has been a flattening of the layered complexity of the purportedly staid middle-class black woman. Not only would Marson, Bailey, and others endure greater marginalization with the rise of formal party politics after World War II (coinciding with Bailey’s exit from the People’s National Party and Marson’s return to Europe), but Gregg urges that we must rigorously unpack “the ideological abstraction of the Negro woman” or “the iconography of the Negro woman,” given the collusion of the era’s policy makers with anthropological scholarship in keeping alive representations reaching back to the slaveholding era of a diseased and degenerate populace with perverted kinship structures, and dressing these up in the language of social reform (Gregg 2004, 29, 48, 52-53). I read “Sojourn” as precisely engaged in this unpacking, as it examines this dubious inheritance. Attending to the short story’s representations of intimacy and desire allows us to assess what is left over, what remains unresolved, in that historical moment’s regulations of productive, reproductive and other forms of labour. Marson’s portrait of a “dark” middle-class woman’s desire to be wooed presses us to enquire into the desiring female subject waiting in the wings, as she advocates for the expansion of imperial citizenship in the interwar moment.

Clothing cements ties to or dramatizes breaks with the past; it indexes material and emotional nuances of social status, racial, ethnic, religious and other affiliation, surveillance, self-fashioning and desire. Clothing also offers the metaphorical resonance of legal personhood, of being clothed with or stripped of rights. Theorizing the French Revolution in the wake of the Second World War, Hannah Arendt discusses the *persona* or mask, the “legal personality” through which citizens perform public personhood in society, the protective power of which was “torn away” during the Reign of Terror (Arendt 2006, 98). While this implies a rights-bearing subject who is *produced*, whose rights cannot be taken for granted as *natural*, Ayten Gündoğdu notes that this must also mean that “not every human being is automatically recognized as a person,” contrary to what human rights discourse tends to assume, and this provides a sobering lens on the plight of the migrant’s statelessness today (Gündoğdu 2015, 102). This sense of a being whose personhood cannot be taken for granted is reminiscent of social death, as theorized by Orlando Patterson, in which members of the “naturally alienated” enslaved community “were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives,” so that their affirmation of kinship or other social ties was “never recognized as legitimate or binding” (Patterson 1982, 5-7). If being clothed can be interpreted following the Latin *investire*, implying variously being adorned or enveloped, vested with power and authority, as well as the profitable investment of money, then the stripping bare implied by social death marks a fraught genealogy of accumulation and personhood for Caribbean subjects. Marson and other members of her generational cohort such as C. L. R. James (b. 1901) and Nicolás Guillén (b. 1902) were born on the cusp of massive migrations into Panama, Trinidad, Cuba, and other territories, migrations that were generating and redistributing wealth in ways that both undermined and reinforced older systems of accumulation and patronage. Clothing’s intimations of wealth, propriety and comfort or the absence of these are an apt metaphor of such changes, but can also register as irrelevant to the social upheaval of the period under discussion here.

In considering a period that is both mired in empire and deeply entangled with a chronology we have tended to maintain about the future nation in the anglophone Caribbean context, we sometimes assume that those social actors must be fighting to bring something into being, or if not, are perversely dazzled by empire's gleam. But rather than rescuing or redeeming that generation I am trying to understand their complex postures, to avoid tripping them up in teleological projects that are more in keeping with our wishful thinking about present predicaments than their own sense of their time. No doubt we look to them with these imposed temporalities because of the despair of some of us, at least, about our present; we didn't think that we would be *here*, when *here* means the wariness with some feminist assumptions that pervades Michelle Rowley's text, cited earlier, or with the neoliberal present that has followed radical projects such as the Grenadian Revolution, in which we inhabit "a world in which the idea of the revolutionary overcoming of the past is no longer viable as a way of thinking futurity" (D. Scott 2014, x).

Caribbean labourers have joined others across the world in stitching the expensive designer clothing that renders some global consumers fashionable. Recall that in Stephanie Black's *Life and Debt* Jamaican workers who are replaced by Chinese workers show how one constituency gets swapped out for another in the precarious global arena of sweat shops, but also how some workers get cast as particularly suited to the demands of transnational capitalism (Black 2001; Kang 2002). We must assume that these workers, Jamaican and Chinese, also sometimes desire the clothing that they are fashioning. Meanwhile, the region's athletes receive lucrative contracts to be identified with global brands: is this small-state sovereignty in the age of globalization, or branding as a new enslavement?

Recently, Yarimar Bonilla has cautioned independent territories in the region against our investment in "flag independence," arguing that the entire region is marked by varying degrees of the category of the "non-sovereign" (Bonilla 2015). She argues that we have inflated the Westphalian model of the "territorially bounded, culturally homogenous, economically self-sufficient

liberally democratic state” to the status of a “universal norm” rather than a “provincial myth” (Bonilla 2013, 153). As she revisits Aimé Césaire’s postwar embrace of *département* status for Martinique, she paints a vista of bad and less bad options, quite different from the usual scenario by which the decision not to choose independence can only be interpreted as bad faith (Bonilla 2015, 20-24). As I am reading backwards from my present to a past that is not necessarily Marson’s own sense of her future, I want to learn to be less certain about the futures of the past. Bonilla urges us to be less certain that we know what those who came before us meant, to avoid rooting them down in a project such as that of the future nation that is not necessarily present in their discourses. Marson’s portrait of artificial silk and smartly-dressed Jamaicans might permit us to limn out the material and symbolic resonances of a respectable black feminine imaginary, doomed to wait wistfully – “in vain,” as her eponymous 1930 poem put it (Marson 1996, 128) – even as it presents itself as properly clothed for full personhood.

Frock Ladies and Cloth Wives

Another member of Marson’s generational cohort allows us to explore a particularly vivid usage of the metaphor of clothing, before returning to “Sojourn.” Mabel Dove (born, like Marson, in 1905, and also known by a number of other journalistic aliases, and as Dove-Danquah when she was briefly married to a prominent nationalist) explored the social roles of the “cloth wife” and “frock lady” in her short fiction, plays, and newspaper columns. This allowed her to make wry social commentary on the gendered, classed and racialized social roles of the west coast cities of Lagos (Nigeria), Accra (Gold Coast), and Freetown (Sierra Leone), to which she was connected by parentage, birth or employment. In “The Torn Veil,” published in 1947, a woman finds her usefulness as a “cloth wife” brought to an end when her socially mobile husband acquires another wife. While he is “young and struggling” she is an adequate mother to their three children but after he gets a degree and considers running for political office, he looks around for a “frock lady.” She leaves the house with the children

after admonishing him. On his wedding day he has an apparition of this first wife dressed in a “white brocaded silk cloth” with a “long bridal veil” (13), and her beauty makes him regret his new marriage. He trips in an effort to catch her, and dies from the fall; meanwhile, a telegram the next day announces that, living in another town and not in direct contact with him, she died at the same time that he did.

We can define the “cloth woman” as the perceived inferior, uneducated woman who is dressed in traditional African attire and probably engages in commercial activities external to the household such as market trading (Newell 2002, 13). She is also not recognized as a wife in the legal or Christian sense. By contrast, the “frock lady” is perceived to stay in the confines of the home – defined in nuclear rather than extended terms – and to embody Victorian ideals of respectability, probably as a Christian convert (Newell 2002, 4). As Stephanie Newell as noted, this opposition issues from the anxieties of the husband at the center of this familial arrangement, since in reality many frock ladies were also poorly educated, in a social milieu in which women had less access to education. For Newell, the significance of this distinction between two types of wives redounds to a man who, dressed in a wool jacket and trousers manufactured in England, resented both women’s authority and the growing number of men who were more recent converts and less educated than he was.

We might read “The Torn Veil,” then, as Dove’s critique of the wider social forces that shaped these domestic relationships to the advantage of men of a particular privileged class. This was also a critique of Native Customary Law that allowed men to exploit their partners, legislation that Dove would fight against when she entered the legislature in the 1950s. In the story, he comes to his senses, as it were, when he sees his first love clothed in white and begs her forgiveness; this after his earlier reaction to her protests and to her departure with the children was to privilege the blow to his ego and to consider whether or not to ask her family to repay her bride price. Here the veil, a symbol of the clothing that she could not wear in life and which the new bride’s ability to wear

further marked her abjection, becomes the means by which she entices her former lover and literally brings about his downfall. That is, it is because he catches the phantom veil that he falls against the table and dies. We could surmise that his lingering desire and his guilt, as well as her own despair and her desire to have been able to wear such clothing in life, together produce the apparition which ultimately kills them both.

The Native Customary Law and polygamy had constituted a social conundrum for Gold Coast nationalists generations earlier. The fiction of J. E. Casely Hayford and others, for instance, sought to rationalize the institution as representative of a parallel modernity that Africans need not be ashamed of in the face of British colonial claims of premodern immorality (Newell 2013). “The Torn Veil” stresses the degreed man’s thoughtless casting away of a soulmate in order to pursue shallow societal norms, but also stresses her and her children’s vulnerability; in exchange for years of social and physical reproduction, she is left with nothing, her children cannot inherit, and she and her family are socially indebted to a man who has traded her in for a better model. Interestingly, Dove’s play *A Woman in Jade*, serialized in the *Times of West Africa* [Gold Coast] in 1934, portrays frock ladies who, educated and with male fiancés who are their social counterparts, carry on compromising sexual relationships with white men. In scenes of nightlife that are meant to critique the women’s moral judgement for consorting with expatriates, their betrayed beaux also come in for censure since their impending marriages will not disrupt these men’s relationships with “two or three” cloth girls (Dove 2004, 67). The frock lady, then, finds herself caught between reprehensibly consorting with white men and meek fidelity to a man who will keep his cloth women when he marries her.

Marson and Dove’s similarities – stenographers, journalists, political activists, writers across a range of genres, frock ladies in British colonial societies who share with their respective male counterparts a sense of straining against the barriers to their desire for vigorous political participation – do not make them the same. Marson’s training and employment as a stenographer allowed her a significant foothold into avenues for social mobility but also illustrated the limits

of a well-educated black middle class with finite economic resources. Conversely, Dove acquired her training as a stenographer stealthily; her father sent her to finishing schools in England expecting her to enter the professions and marry within her well-off family's social class when she returned to West Africa. Marson's social and economic unsteadiness is very different from Dove's rootedness in generations of a well-to-do social milieu. At the same time, the careers as well as the fiction and non-fiction of both allow us to see their gendered, racial and classed negotiations. Placing both figures in the same conversation, albeit briefly, allows us to explore the extent to which the Caribbean may be relevant to current discussions of "intimate interactions [that] multiplied the possible subject positions Europeans and Africans could occupy, challenging the centrality of a hierarchical colonizer/colonized dichotomy as the key locus of conflict in European-African encounters during the colonial period....[and of] African women who did not automatically experience disempowerment and did not, for various reasons, understand themselves to be lower-status members of society on the basis of their sex" (Abosedo). It also nudges us out of the temptation to position West Africa in a relationship of static diasporic past relative to the Caribbean.

Cloth ties both regions together and is also a factor in the terrible transformations in the meanings of personhood. Cloth is woven into the histories of slave-trading, enslavement and indentureship. Textiles were traded for humans, gold and kola nuts by Europeans who acquired or tried to reproduce in Manchester mills the patterns and textures of a demanding and discerning African clientele; across slave trade routes, heirloom cloth from Africa, Europe and Asia was carefully stored in family chests in prosperous households or covered the body in multiple layers of adornment as signs of prestige (LaGamma and Giuntini 2008, 18, 20). The coffle march, dungeon, and Middle Passage entailed a stripping of clothing and personhood to facilitate the remaking of an efficient tool of western prosperity (Hartman 2007, 110-135). In the Americas, plantation rations of coarse osnaburg and sumptuary laws governing the placement of head ties and ruffles pointed both to the limits

placed on enslaved people and free people of color and the consternation caused by their disinclination to stay in their presumed place (Buckridge 2004).

Clothing was also part of the meaning-making/signification system governing past or present, African-born or diasporic, in systems of visibility which would eventually utilize the camera as a medium through which supposed inherent essences and imposed modernities could be observed. Thus in the early twentieth century Harry H. Johnston used photographs of “Africans” and “New World Negroes” as the basis for his claim to tell the difference between “Negroes” on both sides of the Atlantic, and Krista Thompson has shown how Afro- and Indo-Caribbean people were posed on donkeys or with fruit in order to create a visual presentation of the Caribbean as ordered and quaint for tourists imagined as white and modern (Johnston 1910; Thompson 2006). Visiting Jamaica in the late 1890s, Boston tourist Allan Eric noted of an indentured immigrant Indian woman: “Her arms are wound about with silver bracelets from wrist to shoulder, silver rings on every finger, her ankles bound with very heavy silver anklets, and silver rings again on every toe” (Eric 1897, 83). This implied that such women were exotic, “traditional,” compliant, and *full of culture* as opposed to rowdy, *uncultured* Afro-Caribbean women. Eric notes of these immigrants’ wages that they were “beaten into jewelry and worn by the women for safe keeping. Each company brings a native silversmith” (83), and he thus draws our attention to them as wage-earners in the Americas who, in effect, wore their savings on their bodies. They often paid a terrible price for moving these savings with them as they asserted the right to choose or reject their intimate companions.³

With “Sojourn,” Marson invites us to place artificial silk and textile factories in Birmingham wartime and interwar imperial contexts of luxury and consumption, as well as longer historical trajectories of commerce, cloth, and servitude. Bearing out Stuart Hall’s despairing description of Jamaica -- “I come from the most exquisitely-differentiated color/class system in the world” (Akomfrah 2013) -- we can note how carefully clothing and posture are delineated, but also complexion. Thus in “Sojourn” Helen is not only “graceful” but “dark” like her

father, or “dark tan” like an “East Indian” (Marson 1931, 9-10). She is neither “almost black” like the market women whose barefoot picturesqueness is required for precisely this social anchoring of the middle-class subject, nor is she “very fair,” approximating whiteness to the untrained eye, like her mother and brother (Marson 1931, 9). In this sense skin shade and its narration constitute a sort of social attire that is attached to norms of inclusion and exclusion. Helen marks herself off from the visiting salesman, blue-eyed Sydney Hamilton: “Now, Harry, you are a boy and the gods made you fair,” she points out to her brother, who wants her to come out to the movies with the two men, “But my going out with him is another matter. I am dark...” (Marson 1931, 24). Even so Sydney is so smitten by her gentle ministrations, that on the eve of her departure, after asking her permission, he kisses her “reverently and devoutly as though she were a goddess,” before returning to England to marry his beautiful white belle, and leaving Helen to hope that “some day the joy of love would be hers” (Marson 1931, 27).

The artificial silk that Sydney has come to persuade Caribbean consumers to buy helps us to tease out connections between intimate exclusions, and the relationship between colony and metropole in this interwar period. Experiments with wood pulp, cotton waste, cellulose acetate and other material since the mid-nineteenth century by French, British, Belgian and US chemists, engineers and investors, had produced an array of technologies and brands, including rayon and viscose, that were specifically or loosely implied by the term “artificial silk,” and that by the 1920s were no longer considered cheap substitutes for raw silk, but autonomous textiles of high quality in their own right. Advertisements and articles breathlessly announced new developments: swimsuits that could withstand sea water, or fashion shows in which the bridal party was outfitted in artificial silk from head to toe. It was reported that a German company was interested in building a factory in Jamaica to make artificial silk out of sugarcane fibre, and the Jamaica Agricultural Society proposed that “ladies” with time and land could make a “nice little income” by growing mulberry trees and cultivating silk worms to make raw silk, since the Imperial Institute Advising Committee on Silk-Producing, no less, had determined that the demand for and

production of artificial silk had not affected the demand for raw silk as a “higher grade” of not just textile but, it was implied, of taste, as well.⁴

What was not always so clearly articulated was that cotton – that is to say cotton that was not combined with rayon – was severely affected by these developments. This staple of the British economy represented by its iconic Manchester and Lancashire mills was under duress. “Cotton is not played out yet,” T. Williams of Textile College in Blackburn, was reported as saying, the very declaration implying the possibility that the opposite was nearer the truth.⁵ In the very month of the publication of Marson’s story, from February 16-27, the British Industries Fair was held in the UK, and the clothing industry sponsored pavilions. The Queen visited both the British Clothing Textile Exhibition and the Exhibition of British Artificial Silk Goods, and she enjoyed the variety of colors and patterns, taking orders for fabric to be delivered to the Palace.⁶ Her interest and the demand it generated was a boon for an industry that may well have been “played out.”

All the more reason, then, for British firms to be keen on British West Indian consumer demand, and for traveling salesmen to drum up business in imperial territories. But did they take seriously Caribbean people’s tastes, as consumers who were confident about their self-fashioning? Advertising in newspapers and in journals such as Marson’s – for shirts, dresses, lingerie and home furnishings in a range of fabrics – suggested that local merchants did, and other reports suggested that it was advisable for prospective merchants overseas to do so as well. “Market Worth Attention of Manufacturers” noted the demand in Jamaica for men’s shirts in both the British style and the American “tunic” style, adding that a working-class male clientele desired cheap cotton shirts with collars, in blue, gray and brown.⁷ Because of the presence of tailors and seamstresses there was high demand for “piece-lengths” of voile, crepe de chine, georgette, gingham, cambric, and other fabrics. Although cotton hosiery was popular, there was also a demand for silk and artificial silk. In this market, embroidery had competition from the Swiss and German competition for ribbons and lace. During the war the US had gained a foothold, and Canada was also competing

for consumers of fabric. Thus, British firms needed to study these consumers with specific demands, who had other territories competing for their business.

An official from the Trinidad-based Trade Commission noted that prospective exporters to the West Indies from the UK needed to become fully acquainted with the complexity of the West Indian market.⁸ Barbadians didn't have the same tastes as Trinidadians, he pointed out, and Jamaica was nine shipping days away from Trinidad, so that you couldn't just lump the region together and call it a market. He advised firms to include instructions for proper laundering and dyeing with their orders for textiles. Echoing advice from the previously quoted article, that a single "capable man" could represent multiple firms marketing non-competing items, this piece noted that firms needed to hire a sub-agent, and that this person could combine a business visit during the winter month with a vacation.

The very first words of "Sojourn" announce this latter point as a dilemma for the prospective salesman, as Sydney's father warns him that his trip to Jamaica is for business, not pleasure. This perhaps speaks partly to the Caribbean's longstanding place in global arrangements of consumption, as the region has been perceived as facilitating *metropolitan* modernities, but forever positioned as never modern enough in and of itself; thus, travel there solely for business would be inconceivable. Later, Helen's father teases Sydney about this, too. But of course Sydney is fated, like other fictional characters in this genre, not just to go to the beach or other local attractions, but to enjoy it conspicuously, since such stories are in effect also tourist guides. But if the line between business and vacation can be blurred – if Sydney can successfully market artificial silk *and* go to Doctor's Cave Beach – what other lines might be crossed? Here it is interesting that as much as "Sojourn" is suffused with Helen's disappointment, it is the English visitor's discomfort that is also at stake. He has encountered a modernity that is incomprehensible to him because he is apparently not worldly enough to recognize and be at home in it. It is not the young stenographer and her motorcar mechanic brother living with their parents in a home with "every modern convenience" who have to figure things out. It is Sydney, the "typical

Englishman” from Birmingham, who has to learn to read signs that are new to him. This is a modernity that he was not prepared for because his putatively “national” Englishness has masked its thorough dependence on its imperial and colonial contexts, acknowledging its existence in wartime and economic crisis. Expecting monkeys and insects in a tropical environment Sydney is stunned by the “unmistakable modernity of the city” when he is in Kingston (Marson 1931, 8). He had not expected to interact with persons who are like those he would meet in “select circles” in a London drawing room (Marson 1931, 9). He marvels at the “fashionably attired women” and the “fine figures” of the “coloured [sic] girls” (Marson 1931, 24). It is Sydney who is constantly off-kilter, anxious about what to wear, worrying that he is not properly attired as he moves from one event to the other. Perhaps indicating that Helen’s despair at his eventual leave-taking is not one-sided, and that intimate lines had been in danger of being more fully breached, we are given the detail that he greets his girlfriend on his return to Birmingham “without any qualms of conscience” (Marson 1931, 26).

In her discussion of the Cotton Queen contestants of Lancashire and other cities who were expected to modernize and revitalize flailing British industries from the early 1930s onwards, Rebecca Conway notes that the stereotypical clog- and shawl-wearing Lancashire Lass no longer matched the reality of the factory girl who now sported makeup and fashionable stockings of artificial silk for a night out at the cinema (Conway 2013). There is perhaps a national misrecognition of young women’s desires and modes of consumption, which we want to heed the call to take seriously: “...an alternative approach to the Modern Girl’s agency involves foregoing the desire to decide whether Modern Girls were dupes or resisters of consumer capitalism...” (Weinbaum et al. 2008, 22). On the one hand, this speaks to metropolitan belatedness; Marson’s fictional Englishman is as clueless about the British Caribbean as are the English about changes afoot *within* so-called national English contexts. What is complicated for fictional Helen, however, is that a night out at the cinema in Kingston is circumscribed by gender and complexion in a way that it is not for “fair” Harry, Helen’s brother. There is a failure here of full recognition between colony and metropole, as represented by relations between a salesman and his market or a visitor and his

host (do you know where we are? what do you know when you know us? are we just a market? can you see us?); but perhaps moreso between Helen and her own society. The prospect of a night out in Kingston signals a failure to achieve full personhood that remains unresolved.

Some two decades earlier, anticipating Sydney's experience of walking in Kingston's modern, bustling environment with "smartly dressed" men and women who are carefully, racially demarcated from each other but also from the aforementioned market women (Marson 1931, 8), the editor of Jamaica's *Daily Gleaner* had described strolling in downtown Kingston in similar terms: King Street was "the finest in all the West Indies. It is well paved, well served by electric cars, taxi-motors, and horse-cabs... [the visitor] will see every shade of complexion to be found in the island. The buggies and motor cars drawn up by the sidewalks contain dames of fair or olive hue... Girls of chocolate color, with dresses fitting them 'like gloves' step briskly along...Swarthy men, black men, brown men, fair men move up and down, not rapidly but with what after a while the visitor would come to consider a good pace, the heat considered" (De Lisser 1913, 73). Here H. G. de Lisser claims an apparent belatedness for a different, parallel cosmopolitanism from the one he imagines for his non-local readers, appealing to what Jamaica's residents *share*, even while he carefully distinguishes dark-skinned pedestrians from light-skinned carriage-riders. This is an optimistic picture but its underlying social hierarchies are reflected in three other commentaries. When, in 1916, Marcus Garvey wished to show a prominent visitor that Afro-Jamaicans were economically and psychologically damaged by colonialism, he noted that "our black girls" despised Afro-Jamaican men, and that anyone walking about would notice "hundreds of Black prostitutes" (Williams 1970, 4, 6; Smith 2013). Diametrically opposed to de Lisser's, Garvey's portrait of the city still hinged on a racialized representation of the public sphere.

In 1911 a letter-writer to the editor of the *Jamaica Times* questioned her respectable prospects in the context of being snubbed by women of a higher class when they "happen[ed] to meet downtown," even though they'd been

introduced several times. She felt "dismissed" as a marital contender by Jamaican gentlemen, despite her "unsullied" purity and "untarnished" name.⁹ These are all commentaries from the period of Marson's early youth. In the early 1930s period of "Sojourn's" publication, Amy Jacques Garvey remembers encountering a high school acquaintance in Kingston, who commented on the difference between her light skin and that of her infant son: "I haven't seen you in ages. What are you doing with this little black baby?" (Taylor 2002, 121; Garvey 2014, 22-23). In a 1937 article in the *Daily Gleaner*, Amy Bailey criticized Jamaican employment advertisements that expressed a preference for light-skinned women (Bailey 2011, 517-18). Thus women who shared the class position of fictional Helen – respectable, educated, middle-class – felt disrespected. Let us be clear. They felt entitled to the recognition denied to the barefoot market women in "Sojourn," women such as the street vendor whose alleged comments on her intention to attend the Jamaica Exhibition in Kingston in 1891 remind us of the wider social claims on silk and its capacity to confer prestige and pleasure, than "Sojourn" or its creator might allow: "When a lick on me silk frock and fling on me parasol over me shoulder and drop into Exhibition ground den you will know weder I is a lady or not."¹⁰ How would the changing social order reflect this insistence on wearing a silk frock, and should we understand Marson and members of her class to be threatened by this, given that their social and political advocacy was exactly that – *advocacy*, which more often than not presumes speaking for the other?

Marson encouraged Jamaican women to run for office in the municipal and legislative elections, in a February 1937 article in Jamaica's *Public Opinion* (Gregg 2005). Pointing out that there were "now sixteen women in the Turkish House of Assembly," Marson was nevertheless pointedly local: "Social work" was being done by "the older set," which she specified to mean "English people or women form Jamaica's white social circle," and she encouraged more of "our women" to get involved. Drawing on notions of heterosexual domesticity, as well as women's special role as intuitive and decisive as distinguished from "plodding" and "unimaginative" husbands, she urged women to interest

themselves in social work as “the best training for a political career” (Gregg 2005, 132).

Writing a few years earlier as “Marjorie Mensah” in the *Times of West Africa*, Mabel Dove encouraged eligible women to vote in the upcoming elections for the Gold Coast Legislative Council. Not all women could vote yet, and no women could run for office, but this didn’t mean that “our precious votes” should be frittered away. Since men were “fickle beings,” it was important not to waste votes on “the fellow who always has a lot to say and forgets it all when he gets up to speak in the Council or elsewhere, only to remember it most effectively when he is at a safe distance from the place” (Moynagh and Forestell 2012, 158). While it is easy and even appropriate to read Marson and Dove’s articles as exemplary of earlier waves of feminism, working within the boundaries of suffrage for a select, propertied few instead of trying to leverage more far-reaching gains of social equality, or freedom from capitalism, the assessment of unimaginative men, whether politicians or intimate companions, is still striking. Furthermore, in Marson’s case it is important to recognize that “social work” was a loaded racialized term originating in the transmutation of anxieties about white women’s work outside the home into “doing good works” as a respectable occupation. For Marson to propose that women like herself enter this social domain, therefore, was a breach of social mores (Gregg 2005, 41-43; Reddock 1990).

Marson’s “Sojourn” gestures towards the interiority of a female character who performs chaste femininity, who yearns, rather than being assertive about her sexual choices (since presumably any assertion risks confirming stereotypes of salaciousness), who attracts the white English foreigner, but not as his marital mate, the desired imaginable role. Dove’s “Torn Veil” does not, as we have seen, center a frock lady, which is the social role to which Marson’s Helen would more closely correspond, yet they are connected. In Dove’s story the veil and the apparition of which it is a part constitute an ephemeral *something*, an inexplicable sign of an emotional attachment that exceeds the groom and the wider society’s negligence, perhaps, or an ambivalence about value. That is to

say, if her appearance in a splendid white dress confirms that the dress does indeed have value, whereas the story had seemed to indicate its wrongheaded and painful excess, then it suggests that the woman who is passed over for someone else might desire even those things that are out of reach, impractical or which demean some feminist accounts of women's worth. The dress transforms her, literally or metaphorically. In Marson and Dove's stories, even ambiguous, unstated, impractical desires are acknowledged and affirmed.

Thus, as their peers, including colonial middle-class men, appeal to folktales, to custom, to law or to political activism to challenge British colonial imposition of institutions deemed to be unfair or "alien," simultaneously sometimes chiding women for undermining claims to respectability, "The Torn Veil" sheds light on the female desiring subject who activates patriarchal fears about colonial emasculation, about symbolic and actual inheritance, and about her wayward erotic autonomy; "Sojourn" ponders whether or not the social world is ready to accept full participation of at least some of its subjects. Partly through the prism of cloth itself we discern how selfhood is stitched together for the more public, anticolonial maneuvers of the interwar moment.

In our contemporary moment visual and performance artists attempt to come to terms with sometimes painful legacies of adornment, accumulation and dispossession, often by demystifying the notions of compensatory authenticity that retain such a hold over us. They often do so by seizing on notions of artificiality as a means of undermining narratives of authenticity. Trinidadian-Canadian artist Andil Gosine casts the cutlass in silver or in white gold in order to rework an object recalled as both murderous and loving; he also considers the "wrecking of Indian names" both as a "dehumanization of the indentured" and a dreadful opportunity, since "the distortion and changing of names also simultaneously perplexed and interrupted the caste system" (Gosine 2012; Gosine 2016, 51). British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare defamiliarizes what has come to be identified as authentic African fabric to probe Indonesian and other "origins" of "dutch wax" fabric, while Nigerian-American artist Njideke Akunyili Crosby incorporates similar textiles in ensembles of collage in order to submit

imposed itineraries and admonitions to her generation's divergent routes. In poignantly exploring British colonial subjectivity in terms of desires that must be deferred or kept under wraps, these stories from interwar Jamaica and the Gold Coast ask us to put modern women's tastes and consumption on the table alongside their respectability and activism.

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¹ For an incisive discussion of "Sojourn" see Rosenberg 2004. For Marson as creative writer see, for instance, Donnell, DeCaires Narain, and Rosenberg 2007. For Marson's biography see Jarrett-Macauley. On Marson as feminist see Ford-Smith. On Marson's important postwar career at the BBC, where she facilitated the careers of many Windrush-era writers see, for instance, Proctor.

² Findlay 171, quoting "Peticones recibidas en la Cámara de Representantes," *La Democracia*, November 30, 1918, 10.

³ As the collaborators of the digital project "Panama Silver, Asian Gold" point out, it was this accumulation by indentured immigrants, as well as by British Caribbean and Haitian migrants to Panama and elsewhere in the hispanophone Caribbean that helped to fund the education and social mobility of Marson and her generation, and the nationalist struggles and creative writers of the 1950s, even as this inheritance would be repudiated as crass, new money (Cobham 2014). Rhonda Cobham-Sander, Donette Francis and Leah Rosenberg's digital humanities project is called "Panama Silver, Asian Gold: Migration, Money and the Birth of Modern Caribbean Literature."

⁴ "A Projected New Industry for Jamaica," [Jamaica] *Daily Gleaner*, November 21, 1925, 3; "Fostering of Silk Industry in the Island," *Daily Gleaner*, March 1, 1927, 18.

⁵ "Artificial Silk," *Daily Gleaner*, January 17, 1925, 12.

⁶ "£100,000 Order Sets Up Exhibition Record," *Daily Gleaner*, March 14, 1931, 26.

⁷ "Market Worth Attention of Manufacturers," *Daily Gleaner*, October 18, 1928, 7.

⁸ "Mr. Paterson Speaks on the West Indies," *Daily Gleaner*, May 21, 1929, 19.

⁹ "Working Girl in Jamaica," *Jamaica Times*, February 18, 1911.

¹⁰ Carol Tulloch 23, quoting from Miss May Jeffrey-Smith's 1959 *Jamaican Memories*; Tulloch points out that Jeffrey-Smith, a middle- or upper-class Jamaican is recounting memories from age 9, and thus we must assess their accuracy in that context.