Book Review: Monica L. Miller, <i>Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity</i> (2009)

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"The history of black dandyism in the Atlantic diaspora is the story of how and why black people became arbiters of style and how they use clothing and dress to define their identity in different and changing political and cultural contexts." (1) Here, Monica L. Miller stakes her claims to the meaning of a phenomenon that lies at the intersection of race, fashion, and agency in the modern world. If you approach her argument through the apparently superficial nature of its concerns, those of style, as opposed to substance, you may regard this text as little more than a catalog of types into which the unwitting, ill-suited black body has been modeled and remodeled according to the capricious designs of a dominant culture. However, in her treatment of a figure whose history elucidates the minefield of cultural politics that is contemporary black masculinity, Miller is arguing not so much that clothes make the man but rather more vitally that clothes tell a story. In this case, it is a story about modernity. At its best, <i>Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity</i> is a story about the way in which styling the body became a signature act of modern identity formation, one that was always contestatory and remains, necessarily, incomplete. <p>Amidst a repertoire of variations on the figure of the dandy, a mode of fashionable self-presentation identified with men of distinction in the late 18th and 19th centuries, Miller submits the black dandy as the one who most fruitfully opens up for examination the space between style and substance, between masculine and feminine, and between spaces of identification that are at once European and colonial, on the one hand, and by virtue of the persons who inhabit them, underneath their imperial clothes, African and diasporic, on the other. In so doing, she makes the critical argument that beyond the well-known economy of cotton that strung together the Atlantic world of the 19th century, black people contributed to the fashioning of modern genders and class roles, performing cultural labor that ought not go unacknowledged when we consider modernity as a culturally distinct time and place as well as a phase in the emergence of capitalist production. While the productive economy of slavery may call to mind rough garments, uses of fashion that work against individuation and positive distinction, Miller notes, black people performed their subordination often enough in fancy clothes, functioning as status symbols, and sometimes they did so for the express purpose of entertaining themselves and others. Thus, Miller is able to posit the black dandy as a figure who from his origins necessarily fails to contain but instead telegraphs the contradictory faculties ascribed to fashion in the modern imagination. The black dandy can at once serve the aims of dominance and threaten to burst out of his seams, dressed up as a man of status in a carnival; he appears disarmingly effeminate and pregnant with revolutionary possibility, playing his part in the costume drama of racial competition. As one of the earliest embodiments in Miller’s study warns, try as you
might to put him in his place, the black dandy is "here, dere, and everywhere." (2)

Performance studies provides the grounding for Slaves to Fashion's unique theoretical approach to the phenomenon of dandyism and fashion in general. Departing from semiotics-based approaches to clothing and those articulated in British Cultural Studies, most notably by Stuart Hall, Miller splits the difference between attention to the black dandy's historical context and his status as a floating signifier, the outward appearance of which can point to any of a number of meanings, depending on their audiences and occasions. Thus, her first chapter's touchstone for the black dandy, the 18th-century comic theater character Mungo, sets the stage for an analysis that will consider actually staged productions of blackness in dandy's clothing as informative to the phenomenon as the quotidian rehearsals of identity that make race, gender, and class part of a daily routine. Mungo, a blackface buffoon who delighted audiences around the Atlantic, also appears as a trickster in Miller's study, because his role suggests that the well-dressed servant, like many in his day, may let the value of his clothes go to his head and influence his awareness of his own value. Value accrues to Mungo not only as a commodity who can be disposed of as chattel in the marketplace of human flesh but also as a symbol who makes wealth visible in his period's unique economy of seeing and being seen. What makes Mungo's dress amenable to Miller's analytic of performance is the ambivalence of the prototypical black dandy. His defiant, witty dialogue, the first ever staged in the black English of the Caribbean, implicitly carries out the threat his clothes portend: that he will get too big for his britches. The willful denial of black agency in which the audience participates made The Padlock, the play in which Mungo played a crucial role, more than a spectacle. It was the hidden transcript to a sort of everyday ritual. Miller draws on other studies of the 18th-century Atlantic stage to show how judgments of taste were instrumental to drawing lines around social strata. Rehearsing their roles in Mungo's creation, Anglo-American socialites learned to identify later black dandies and dandies in blackface, such as the freed slave fencing prodigy Julius Soubise and the archetypes of blackface minstrelsy, with Mungo as well as the style of the "Macaroni," the ostentatious cohort of English dandies who returned from the Grand Tour enamored of European fashions. Miller spares us the joke, but the emergence of the Yankee doodle as dandy, styling himself apart from his predecessors through process more than substance, maintaining his own landed, racialized, and gendered aristocracy in new clothing, was indebted to a tradition in which black and blackface performances, as well as depictions of slaves as status symbols in painting and emergent print cultures, showed early Americans how to look the part of proper white people.

If at first the black dandy was dressed for a role in which enslaved and free blacks served to educate the desires of a white consuming public, the career of the black dandy sprung from object of consumption to protagonist in the literary transformations through which Miller examines him in the 19th and 20th century. The instructional narrative that runs through these literary examples in Chapter 2 of
Slaves to Fashion stems from an American variation on what Miller calls "crimes of fashion." Attempts to make sense of the rituals throughout European and American histories in which members of different social strata switch roles and revel in a world turned upside down have coined the term "carnivalesque" to describe the pleasure and the order of such inversions, but Miller situates the cross-class, cross-racial, cross-dressing that characterizes crimes of fashion in the context of slavery to assess how these transgressions display, if they do not always upset, the limits of self-fashioning for black and white alike. Underlying the trajectories of characters in Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson, and Melville's Benito Cereno is a history of anxieties about what it means for black people to change clothes—their and others'. At the turn of the 20th century, black author Charles Chesnutt resolves the problem that constantly being held to account for crimes of fashion poses to upwardly-mobile black Americans by using the black dandy as a figure through whom we might alter the meaning of appropriating high fashion. By laying claim to stylish material possessions but reneging on the obligation to appear in blackface or the ability to pass for white that the latter would connote in earlier fictions, the contrasting dandies of Chesnutt's novel The Marrow of Tradition confront "not only the effect of the minstrel past on black representation and identity, but also the challenge New Negroes face in working through such stereotypes as part of their program of uplift." W.E.B. DuBois remembered Chesnutt as the dean of black letters and, notably, the consummate gentleman. It is this example of the black dandy retaining his composure while suspended between black and white that makes him the model citizen of a world that turns toward cosmopolitanism, as Miller hypothesizes. Chapters 4 and 5 of Miller's text may be considered as a piece. A shorter but in-depth look at DuBois's recently reappraised novel Dark Princess unearths the politics of style at the root of DuBois's agenda for the revolution of the darker races, one that he envisioned in several guises. First, his recourse to sartorial metaphor and performative self-styling appear to subvert the game of masculine one-upmanship through which latter-day racial scientists like Robert Park fancifully construed the black penchant for style and expression as more "ladylike" than manly. As elsewhere, Miller pays attention to the way in which the male homosocial staging ground of racial power lends itself to DuBois's fancy for the ostensibly feminine within the black masculine, the white within the black American; indeed, it inspires DuBois to deliver a speech proposing a marriage between the Teutonic Strong Man and the African Submissive Man at Harvard. In the final analysis, however, the black dandy also furnishes indispensable varieties of female masculinity with which to style the revolution. Admirably, Miller recognizes the character of Sara, the black woman whom DuBois's black dandy protagonist rejects in favor of the eponymous Dark Princess in the novel, as an analytically crucial figure by submitting her to the author's theory of the aesthetic. DuBois is important to Miller's critique of the black dandy because he espouses, in his life and art, what he aspires to show the world through the hero and heroine of Dark Princess: "Matthew's European experience has given him what America denies Sara: access to
the aesthetic that bears a direct relation to politics and even revolutionary change. In fact, in Europe, he follows his creator’s footsteps, finding there the potential ‘of looking at the world as a man and not simply from a narrow racial and provincial outlook.’ This new perspective allows Matthew the psychological space he needs to be inspired politically by aesthetic experiences, to focus his energy on fighting for the right of black (and darker) people to ‘love and enjoy,’ as DuBois puts it in ‘The Criteria of Negro Art.’” (4) DuBois suggests, as a black dandy patriarch, that black and darker peoples might freely choose to love and enjoy modes of dress and self-presentation that feminize men and masculinize women, much to the consternation of critics who would strip his peculiar wedding of aesthetics and politics of its decisively racial accoutrements. Calculatedly anti-essentialist, resolutely anti-racist, and incomplete in his pro-feminist tendencies, DuBois’s black dandy parries attempts to remove him from the space of contradiction that makes his work a generative model for African American Studies.

The foregoing critique speaks as clearly to misreadings of DuBois as an aesthete as Miller’s following chapter on the Harlem Renaissance does to the controversies of the black public sphere. Both of these problems to which the black dandy calls attention, Miller argues, revolve around the conception of the broader frame of reference in which black and dandy are situated as particular terms. Whether "universal" or "modern," the wide world stage onto which the black dandy "strolls," "saunters" (as he often does in <i>Slaves to Fashion</i>) or swaggers, is one informed by blackness in diaspora, which Miller alternately styles poly-cultural and syncretistic, as well as the many-colored, many-gendered, careers of fashion. Yet Miller is working against attempts to fit the black dandy into the binaries that determine what is universal, on the one hand, and what is particularly black; what is modern, and what is "just" black modernism? In the misapprehensions that are confounded by the black dandy’s failure to conform to an identity that is, stylistically, either masculine or feminine, and genealogically, white or black, the problem is presuming that these terms exhaust the available categories. Seen as a way of wearing out cross-racial and transgender possibilities, the black dandy’s presence invokes a public that is at once expansive enough to accommodate the visibly black male who transgresses by laying claim to an idealistic and idiosyncratic vision of desirable masculinity rather than hypermasculinity and, at the same time, more amenable to the particular demands of its off-color and queer constituents. "A concentration on the dandy’s cosmopolitanism," Miller contends, "establishes the black dandy as a figure with both European and African and American origins, a figure who expresses with his performative body and dress the fact that modern identity, in both black and white, is necessarily syncretic, or mulatto, but in a liberating rather than a constraining way." (5) In public displays ranging from the Silent Protest against lynching in 1917, the return of a black infantry regiment from France in 1919, the annual Hamilton lodge drag ball, and all the scenes of black people in their Sunday best, their well-worn uniforms, and at their most spectacular, Harlem diffused a dandy aesthetic that performed the transgression and transformation of consciousness central to the promise of modernity and modernism. The contention that public acceptance of
the drag ball's parade indicated "that Harlem had become a queer place at least 'one startling step beyond' black and white, masculine and feminine, modern and avant-garde" (6) suggests that Miller is resigned to a certain equivalency between modernity and sexual liberation, with its concomitant implication that anything less than the appearance of tolerance in its usual forms would be backwardness. Yet the fact that the black dandy is the ambivalent figure who sutures together this spectacle must make the reader stop, and turn: could it be that Harlem's public gender insubordination survived the presumption that black and modern are irreducibly Other to one another for the same reason that the black dandy survived his servile role in blackface--because the apparent contradiction between essence and appearance, in both cases, was just that, apparent? <Embedded video, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5s9iZFwUnqI&feature=fvst>

<Embedded video, http://player.vimeo.com/video/6950165> It is the survival of the "cosmopolite self-concept," a term coined by James Weldon Johnson to describe the sense of agency that empowers the self-fashioning of the black dandy, that occasions the subjects of Miller's last chapter. In assessments of visual artists including Isaac Julien, Iké Udé, Lyle Ashton Harris, and Yinka Shonibare, MBE, this chapter links the tactics of the black dandy to critical approaches that are contemporary but no longer modern. These artists reflect on the "black is beautiful" mantra of Black Power and the earlier rapprochement between blackness and the beautiful, envisioned by Chesnutt, DuBois, and Johnson, which was instrumental to the politicized aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement. The black dandy occurs as a useful point of entry to this critical conversation because of the way in which fashion signals cultural capital. Most incisively, by raising the spectre of the "post-black" as they knowingly appropriate the dandy style, along with its racialized and gendered history, the artistic personae crafted by these culture workers ask if the head-turning quality of "post-black" might have meaningful currency precisely because it calls to mind a prized awareness of the latest fashion, on the one hand, and a drive to set new trends, on the other? Currency, as it turns out, may lie at the root of the dandy's cryptic origins. Differentiating its implications from the more clearly denigrating epithet "fop"--one who displays an affinity for foreign style and remains, forever, a slave to fashion--the term "dandy" might register etymologically with the "dandiprat," a 16th-century English coin worth three half-pence. (7) Though Miller is careful to announce the OED's disclaimers about this suggestion for the dandy's provenance, the notion that black people, once dressed up and down by slavers and speculators, might coin their own meaning and perform it in public through the tokens of membership among the elite--a pocket square, a parasol, hat cocked at a precise angle, the jingle of change in one's purse--resonates throughout the story of those who make fashion their slave. The revisionist thrust of the black dandy's art is not without the appearance of deference to history, at least. Miller notes that for Shonibare, the legacy of the black dandy is a way to practice what his clothes and his work say about his politics as an artist of African descent: "Yes, I'm here to protest... but I am going to do it like a gentleman. It is going to look very nice." (8) <p>
Endnotes:

2. Ibid., p. 33.
3. Ibid., p. 135.
5. Ibid., p. 178.
6. Ibid., p. 188.
7. Ibid., p. 204.
8. Ibid., p. 266.

Illustrations:

A. Charles Chesnutt.jpg

Caption: Author Charles Chesnutt, with indispensable bowtie and hat, San Diego, 1906
http://cplorg.cdmhost.com/u?/p4014coll12,9


Caption: Profile of Yinka V. Shonibare, MBE, including his fashion, class, and leisure-themed photographic works "Diary of a Victorian Dandy" and "Dorian Gray."

C. Janellemonae.png and link to video, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5s9iZFWUqlq&feature=fvst


D. cover.jpg

E. dandy jim.jpg

Caption: “Dandy Jim, from Carolina.” Published by Firth and Hall, 1843 (New York)

F. mungo.jpg
Caption: Actor Charles Dibdin as Mungo in <i>The Padlock</i> in blackface, wearing striped jacket and breeches, bending to lift a large covered basket
http://imagesearch.library.illinois.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/actors
&CISOPTR=3098&CISOBOX=1&REC=1

G. ike ude.jpg
Iké Udé