

When Capitalism and Diversity Collide: African American Employment in the Clothing and Accessories Retail Trade in Washington State

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Discussions of African American's current industrial and business endeavors in the clothing and accessories retail trade in Washington State must be grounded in historical context. The social, political, and economic experiment that has come to be known as the United States of America would not exist without the labor of enslaved Africans, whose work laid the very foundation for the development of this country. Moreover, the economic pursuits of present-day African Americans are inextricably linked to the brutal subjugation of their ancestors, as well as the inequitable conditions they continued to experience after slavery was abolished, many of which still exist today. While the concept of race is a relatively new phenomenon in world history, atonement for the descendants of enslaved Africans may be necessary to achieve a post-racial future.

Keywords: textiles, post-racial, capitalism, diversity, cotton, African Americans

TEXTILES IN PRECOLONIAL AND COLONIAL AFRICA

In precolonial West and West Central Africa there was a large textile industry comprised of weavers, spinners, and dyers who cultivated cotton and indigo (Walker, 2009). Africans who manufactured clothing usually produced it as part of the domestic economy, but in some areas textile manufacturing had commercial significance. During precolonial times the Asante, Yoruba, and Nupe distributed clothing commercially (Walker, 2009). Textile manufacturing was one of the most important industries in precolonial Africa. Cotton was also grown, spun, and woven in Northeast Africa between the third century BCE and the fourth century CE. (Kriger, 2005). Textiles may have also been imported during times of increased demand. Wax-print fabric initially sold by the Dutch in Southeast Asian markets serves as a prime example of imported textiles in colonial West Africa. After the Dutch failed to sell large quantities of imitation batik in Southeast Asia, they introduced it in West African markets using a Javanese printing and dyeing technology to copy patterns already found in the region with much greater success (Sylvanus, 2016). Today wax-print is a powerful symbol of status and identity particularly for West African women (Sylvanus, 2016).

THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

The Trans-Atlantic slave trade shifted cotton exports from the East to the West. Enslaved Africans and their descendants were the primary cultivators of cotton in North America. Large scale production of cotton

was not in effect until the development of the cotton gin in 1793 (Fincher, 2022). Since cotton is one of the primary materials used to produce clothing and other accessories, retailers in North America and across the globe benefitted greatly from slave labor. After the Civil War, chattel slavery was adopted where Africans were enslaved on a hereditary basis and North American cotton exports grew to 60% (Fincher, 2022). While cotton was one of the primary crops cultivated with the labor of enslaved Africans it would be problematic not to acknowledge all the other forms of work they completed, which directly contributed to the nations development such as digging drainage ditches, constructing levees, and raising buildings (Trotter, 2019).

SEGREGATION

After the Civil War and a period known as reconstruction which was not sufficient in rebuilding the American South, state Jim Crow laws prohibited African Americans from patronizing specific clothing and accessories retailers (along with other businesses) who built their wealth buying cotton from plantations in the South for use in the development of their products. State Jim Crow laws and lynchings triggered the great migration, when between 1916 and 1940 about 1.6 million African Americans moved from rural areas in the South to industrial cities in the Northern U.S. (Knox, 2022). The civil rights movement intensified pressure for textile mills and other businesses in the South to integrate their operations and by 1978 African Americans held a quarter of the textile production jobs in the South (Minchin, 2012).

OFFSHORING IN THE CLOTHING AND ACCESSORIES RETAIL TRADE

For years, made in the USA clothing and accessories retailers thrived particularly in the South and Northeast. However, the introduction of automation and the rise of import competition from China meant that manufacturing jobs steadily declined (Minchin, 2012). The increase in offshoring meant that garment design was still done in the US, but production would be completed by low wage workers in countries that were not able to enforce strict labor or environmental standards like those in industrialized nations. Child or forced labor and hazardous environmental practices became the reality in the clothing and accessories retail trade (Rosen, 2002). Complaints about hazardous materials being used in consumer retail products are becoming more commonplace. A video detailing one recent complaint from a customer of the fast fashion brand SHEIN who went to urgent care after being chemically poisoned by a jar of gold flakes she bought to decorate her nails went viral (Bartov, 2022). Forced labor in the apparel supply chain stemming from China's detention of Uyghur's resulted in U.S. legislation targeting finished products that were made with cotton originating in the Xinjiang province (Wicker, 2022). For now, the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which went into effect June 2022, has created a climate where firms are at least interested in appearing to comply with Customs and Border Patrol enforcement policy regarding where the cotton they used originated from (Wicker, 2022).

RE-EXPORTS AND THE CLOTHING AND ACCESSORIES RETAIL TRADE

While trade deals such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the United States Mexico Canada Agreement (USMCA) have in some respects facilitated increased trade between Canada, Mexico, and the United States, much of the exports under such agreements fall into the category of re-exports, which allow maquiladoras or factories on the northern border of Mexico to import raw materials from Canada and the United States and export them back into Canada or the United States as finished clothing and accessories products (Dorocki & Brezgowy, 2014).

THE CLOTHING AND ACCESSORIES RETAIL TRADE IN WASHINGTON STATE

According to the Washington State Department of Revenue (2022), clothing and accessories retail sales were at \$5.3 billion during June 2021 and had increased 41.1% since the same time in 2020. While Washington State has had a trade surplus in the past where more was exported than imported, in November

2022 Washington State had a negative trade balance of \$506 million (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2022). Washington State now ranks 9th out of the 50 states in exporting and its trade balance rank is 31st out of the 50 states (GlobalEdge, 2022). Ideally, Washington State would want to have a positive trade balance and export more than it imports. Normally, states with higher export totals are healthier financially and directly contribute to bringing down the national trade deficit (Knox, 2020).

AFRICAN AMERICAN EMPLOYEES IN WASHINGTON STATE'S CLOTHING AND ACCESSORIES RETAIL TRADE

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), African American employees comprise 21.2 % of the sales and office positions nationwide. During 2021, African American employees received considerably less earnings than those who identified as White or Asian. African Americans are the third largest racial group in Washington State (Office of Financial Management, 2021). African Americans who work in clothing and accessories related positions in Washington State are likely descendants of those enslaved Africans who picked cotton on plantations, as well as children of African Americans who were impacted by segregation in the clothing and accessories trades, additionally they often earn less than sales employees in other industries. Researching this phenomenon, is paramount to understanding the perceived lack of support within the African American community for domestic manufacturing in the clothing and accessories retail trade, exposing the perils of offshoring clothing and accessories production to developing nations, and atoning for past injustices within the industry.

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