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In the first pages of Only the Clothes on Her Back: Clothing and the Hidden History of Power in the Nineteenth-Century United States, legal historian Laura F. Edwards introduces readers to Eliza‐beth Billings, an enslaved woman who in 1795 decided to abscond from her enslaver and the rural South Carolina farm on which she lived and worked as a bondswoman. But she did not escape empty-handed. Elizabeth Billings carried with her items that she believed held monetary value: her enslaver’s clothing. The shoes, dresses, and other garments that Billings pilfered from the woman who owned her would have, as Edwards argues, formed “the building blocks of a new life” (p. 1). Billings, however, was unsuccessful in claiming her freedom. It was the very clothing that she took on her journey of self-emancipation that hindered her journey. A bystander recognized that the clothing did not belong to her and reported Billings to a local magistrate. According to Edwards, she was ultimately charged with theft. This vignette, which details one enslaved woman’s ideas about property and the economic potential held in clothing, represents one facet of the broad analysis that Edwards does in this magisterial book.

In Only the Clothes on Her Back, Edwards explores the relationship between textiles, legal authority, and economic power through the claims that subordinated people, namely enslaved and free African Americans and white women, made to property in the United States during the nineteenth century. Edwards is interested in the intersection of legal and material culture. Using textiles as a lens, she considers the ways in which people relegated to the outskirts of legal culture asserted possession of textiles to make claims to property and, in the process, exercise legal agency. In Edwards’s incisive assessment, textiles represented a visible, and valuable, form of currency and conveyed legal standing to people who had little of either in nineteenth-century America. But, Edwards warns, “textiles only had so much legal power” (p. 12). Legal subordinates often could not declare legal rights at the federal level, which re-
vealed the limits of the legal and economic power that textiles represented.

Edwards organizes *Only the Clothes on Her Back* in three parts, with each component focusing on a distinct aspect of the legal significance of clothing and garments in the nineteenth-century United States. In the first part, Edwards focuses on the actual goods that subordinated people claimed, highlighting their legal and economic significance. She shows that the very people who have been omitted from the economic history of the global textile trade were often at the center of the type of commercial exchanges that historians have associated with white male merchants and traders.

In part 2, Edwards considers the ways in which legally subordinated people used textiles, especially in the early national era. People who were excluded from and not recognized by the law could make claims, through their attachments to property, to the law. In fact, she shows that enslaved people, free people of color, and white women recognized that textiles and other material goods were often a better index of economic value than currency and banknotes. Using myriad legal records, Edwards explores how subordinated people navigated a legal world in which they could not make formal legal claims, but they could use the law to exert property rights over textiles. The conundrum, as Edwards illustrates, was that women, enslaved people, and free people of color could not legally own property. Yet legal authorities considered their claims to a specific type of property, textiles, valid. Textile production allowed women's labor to gain economic value outside the domestic sphere. The grammatical choice here is important. Edwards notes that it was not only women, but the men who controlled women's labor, who benefited from women's work with textiles.

In part 3, Edwards interrogates the ways in which textiles shaped the architecture of the federal legal system. Unlike in the early national era, people on the legal margins began to experience a degradation of their legal rights through their engagement with textiles in the mid-nineteenth century. As the price of textiles declined because of the development of technologies that allowed for the widespread production of consumer goods, so too did the judicial mandates that had previously, at the local level, offered white women, people of color, and even poor whites a measure of legal agency. By the antebellum era, people found it “more difficult to use textiles as currency, credit, and capital” (p. 223). This development meant that as the nation barreled toward civil war, people without access to legal personhood rights could no longer wield the same measure of legal power through their possession of textiles.

In *Only the Clothes on Her Back*, Edwards has addressed an important but underexplored aspect of nineteenth-century economic life. She reveals the ways in which textiles shaped, and were shaped by, people at the margins of economic and legal culture in America. She shows how clothing can be a useful and generative lens through which to understand law and power in the nineteenth century. Edwards’s triumph is that she has shown through her deft and incisive analysis that textiles influenced much more than the clothes that people wore. Instead, textiles shaped the very nature of law and economy during the nineteenth century.
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