Back to Nature: Marie Antionette and the Cottagecore Fantasy

Rose Caughie
Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos

Recommended Citation
Caughie, Rose (2023) "Back to Nature: Marie Antionette and the Cottagecore Fantasy," Anthós: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 3.
https://doi.org/10.15760/anthos.2023.12.1.3

This open access Article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0). All documents in PDXScholar should meet accessibility standards. If we can make this document more accessible to you, contact our team.
Back to Nature: Marie Antoinette and the Cottagecore Fantasy

Rose Caughie

In 1783, a royal portrait was displayed that incited as much fury as it inspired replication. “La Reine en Gaulle” (figure 1) by Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun may not look controversial to the modern eye. In it, Marie Antoinette is pictured in “a simple white muslin gown with a loosely gathered peasant neckline, cinched at the waist with a ribbon” and holding a rose. At the time, however, portraying the Queen wearing what would subsequently be termed the Chemise a la Reine caused so much anger in the court of Louis XVI that it was removed from its gallery only a short time later. Despite the ubiquitously outraged reaction in the court, or perhaps because of it, the Chemise a la Reine (also known as the Gaulle) became such a popular style that we can still see its impact today. In fact, it has a nearly identical modern successor in the Cottagecore aesthetic movement: the peasant dress.

Far more than just their striking visual similarities (figures 1, 2, & 3), Marie Antoinette’s Chemise a la Reine and Cottagecore’s peasant dress closely mirror each other’s social meanings and societal impacts. This essay will examine the two styles’ parallel relationships with romanticizing nature and aestheticizing feminine rural poverty. Next, it will reveal how Neoclassical ideals of whiteness are reflected in the dress's pure white fabric and the racially white Cottagecore archetype. We will further tease out how both styles rely significantly on

---

1 Figure 1: Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, La Reine en Gaulle, 1783, painting, Gallery 11, National Gallery of Art, https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.46065.html.
3 Dobie, Trading Places, 117.
4 Dobie, Trading Places, 119.
5 Figure 2: George Romney, Lady Lemon (1747–1823), ca 1780s, painting, Gallery 957, New York City, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/459127.
glorifying colonization and cultural appropriation. Finally, the essay will conclude with a consideration of how technological advancements in the textile and garment industry have continued to augment exploitative labor practices from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade through to the modern sweatshop. Through examples of 18th-century portraiture and modern content-creation media, particularly TikTok and Youtube, I will argue that the Cottagecore peasant dress and the *Chemise a la Reine* share potent, if unrealistic, escapism fantasies of simple living that have often invisible but devastating effects on at-risk communities.

**Definitions**

A modern aesthetic movement, Cottagecore encompasses a wide range of ideals including, but not limited to, fashion, architecture, interior design, food, activities, music, and lifestyle. The suffix -core, roughly translated to “aesthetic,” can be tacked onto any noun and refers to a grouping of aesthetics associated with a lifestyle. Highly feminized and romanticized, Cottagecore focuses on an entire caché of material and visual cultures associated with a fantasy rural life, most likely inspired by a reaction to the ongoing climate crisis.

**Back to Nature: The Pastoral Fantasy**

Our story begins at Petit Trianon, Versailles, where Marie Antoinette created a pastoral oasis for herself and her closest companions. It was here that she first took to wearing the *Chemise a la Reine* with regularity, though after the portrait controversy, she also began to wear it in the palace, to the shock of the court.⁶ According to author and fashion historian Caroline Weber, Petit Trianon was a comparatively small and rustic cottage-style home with an overgrown English garden which Marie Antoinette redesigned to be “a fusion of pastoral charm and neoclassical restraint.”⁷ This aesthetic choice also represented pre-existing trends of Anglophilia and romantic pastoralism.⁸ Intended as an escape

---

from the rigorous ceremony of her life at Versailles, Antoinette imposed “By Order of the Queen” informality of behavior and dress on her invited guests.9 In a letter to her childhood friend Princess Louise von Hesse-Darmstadt about being received at Trianon, she wrote, “I therefore kindly request that you will not come in formal attire, but rather in country dress.”10

At Trianon, she and her intimate friends engaged in amusements, including putting on plays for the King in which the Queen took on the roles of peasants and serving girls, in the style of Rousseau’s character Sophie.11, 12 Perhaps even more interesting is Marie Antoinette’s seeming attention to Rousseau’s writings on the “natural woman,” which raged against silhouette altering styles and highlighted what Madeleine Dobie calls a “back to nature” philosophy.13, 14 Though it is unknown if Antoinette owned these specific writings, she was said to have gone on pilgrimage to Ermenonville, Rousseau’s retreat and burial place, indicating a reverence for his works.15 This back-to-nature philosophy can easily be read as the natural form of the human body, which is highly visible in the softened silhouette of the Chemise a la Reine. However, given that the lifestyle simulated at Trianon also romanticized the shepherdess and the wild English-style garden, “back to nature” can also be read literally: back to the natural world or at least a fantasy version. In this situation, the latter is the more likely reality. The actual lives of shepherdesses had little to nothing to do with the frivolities of life.
at Trianon, given the infamous food instability experienced by the poor of France at this time.

As already hinted at, Cottagecore also equates this style of dress with pastoral life and a reverence for the natural world. In her video titled “My Cottagecore Dress Collection! Pastel Dress Try-On Haul!!” YouTuber Majelle shows off three very similar white peasant dresses, which she describes as “white frilly milkmaid dresses.” Holding up the first of the three, she says, “There is nothing more Cottagecore than a white frilly dress like this.” Her description, and the dresses’ striking similarity to the Chemise a la Reine (figure 3), closely mirrors Honoré Gabriel de Mirabeau’s searing critique of Marie Antoinette’s “gown and apron of a country wench” in the Vigée-Lebrun portrait. Perhaps even more revealing, Majelle explains what she likes about her white peasant dresses:

I love a little white dress moment. And I love a little white, puff-sleeve, frilly, like, just dancing in knee-high grass with wildflowers all around you in the summer and the sun is just a warm haze and you can, like, smell the flowers. ‘Cause that’s what those dresses represent to me, and that’s why I have so many of them.

This description shows that the dress is more than just a dress. It represents an entire fantasy of connecting with nature, free from the worries and obligations of modern life.

---

16 Figure 3: Majelle, “My Cottagecore Dress Collection! Pastel Dress Try-On Haul!!” February 3, 2021, try-on haul video, 15:33-15:43, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ya0xzD9u3kU&t=1170s&ab_channel=Majelle. Permissions for the use of the image in Figure 3 provided by Majelle.
17 Weber, Queen of Fashion, 161.
On TikTok, one can easily see that this connection is still alive and well. It is common to see Youtube try-on hauls that feature a young white woman putting on the modern equivalent to the *Chemise a la Reine* and describing the paradisiacal tableau that they envision when they wear it: frolicking in fields, tending to their farm animals, or picking homegrown vegetables. On TikTok, there is a popular sound clip in which the user waxes poetic on their desire to run away to the countryside and live a simple, rural life. This audio is most often played over a fast transitioning slide show of Cottagecore aesthetic pictures, which almost always includes this *Chemise*-esque look. In a 2021 article for *The Michigan Daily* criticizing Cottagecore, Harper Klotz writes, “A quick search of Cottagecore shows mostly similar images: white women in impractical dresses standing in fields.”\(^\text{19}\) The dress is an integral part of the equation. Klotz also brings up the inherent fantasy aspect of the aesthetic. Very few, if any, farmers actually wear white peasant dresses on a daily basis. However, in this kind of media, the history of the *Chemise a la Reine* silently informs this seemingly oxymoronic association between the difficult and dirty reality of farm work and the escapist fantasy of doing this work while wearing pristine white cotton dresses.

**The Big White Lie: Neoclassicism and the Whitewashing of History**

Indeed, the whiteness of both the dresses and the majority of Cottagecore content creators is not incidental. Of course, the whiteness of linens had long indicated status, wealth, and even morality. In the 1740 anonymous Blois edition of the “Propreté en général,” the author writes, “cleanliness... is all the more necessary in that it makes up for the other when it is lacking: for if your clothes are clean, *and especially if your linen is white*, there is no need to be richly dressed: you will feel your best, even in poverty.”\(^\text{20}\) (emphasis added) However, this author is not taking into consideration how expensive keeping linens white

---


\(^{20}\) Georges Vigarello and Jean Birrell, *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 373.
was, meaning that people with white linens were likely already richly dressed.\textsuperscript{21} The pure white of the \textit{Chemise a la Reine} likely stands as a defining difference between a Queen cosplaying poverty and the real poor people of the period. Further, the impossible whiteness of a Cottagecore peasant dress shows a distinction between fantasy representations of rural life and reality.

Looking again at Rousseau’s writings, we get an even more influential reason for the ideal of whiteness. In one description of ideal dress, he clearly advocates for the supremacy of classical Greek statuary as the perfect form of dress.\textsuperscript{22} It is one theory that Neoclassicism deeply influenced the development of the \textit{Chemise a la Reine}, the popularity of which coincides with the discovery of ruins at Herculaneum and Pompeii.\textsuperscript{23} Stripped white over the centuries, these statues deeply inform dress, art, and racial ideals to the present day (figure 4).\textsuperscript{24} Although scholars have known for centuries that Greek statuary was painted in brilliant color, the idea that they were always pure white has continued to plague us.\textsuperscript{25} In fact, even today, Greek statuary is used in white supremacist arguments to bolster the idea of the beauty and purity of whiteness.\textsuperscript{26} It should not come as a surprise to us, then, that this zeal for pure white dresses and pale white models permeates the Cottagecore aesthetic. Koltz writes, “There is a lack of visible people of color... The few POC (people of color) creators that embrace the trend are buried under the Eurocentric images that social media tends to favor due to

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{21}Vigarello and Birrell, \textit{Concepts of Cleanliness}, 369.
  \item \textsuperscript{22}Dobie, \textit{Trading Places}, 116.
  \item \textsuperscript{23}Weber, \textit{Queen of Fashion}, 150.
  \item \textsuperscript{24}Figure 4: Marble statue of a woman, 2nd half of the 4th century BC, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
  \item \textsuperscript{25}Margaret Talbot, “Color Blind,” \textit{New Yorker}, October 29, 2018, 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{26}Talbot, “Color Blind,” 3.
\end{itemize}
biased censorship. The line between reclaiming countryside life and a history of racism, sexism, and colonialism is at times uncomfortably thin.”

What’s Yours is Mine: Colonialism, Cultural Appropriation, and Homesteading

Indeed, the whiteness of the Chemise a la Reine and the Cottagecore peasant dress and their wearers does not reflect the cultural origins of the garment. Though partially inspired by the Greek Chiton, appropriation of both Eastern and Caribbean aesthetics heavily played into the creation of this style. To begin, the literal and figural “fabric” of the aesthetic is originally made up of fine Indian cotton muslins. The mass import of cotton from the East to Europe began with the Dutch and British East India trading companies. In 1700 approximately 3-8% of French wardrobes were made of cotton, but by 1789, that number rose to 25-40%. The association of cotton with the East is especially clear in the terminology associated with these fabrics, such as the term Muslin, or Mousseline, which comes from the city of Mosul in present-day Iraq. As the century progressed, France increasingly sought to produce its own cotton, growing it in the Caribbean and Louisiana colonies, weaving it in France, and then often selling it back to the Americas and Africa. As Madeleine Dobie notes, “By the 1780s, cotton was the second largest export, after sugar, of France’s most productive colony, Saint-Domingue.” Nonetheless, the change

Fig. 5. Agostino Brunias, Linen Day, Roseau, Dominica - A Market Scene, Ca. 1780, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

27 Klotz, “Cottagecore.”
28 Dobie, Trading Places, 90.
29 Dobie, Trading Places, 119.
31 Dobie, Trading Places, 92.
does not correlate with a shift in terminology or the Eastern orientalism that the French associated with muslins.

Beyond cotton’s associations, the actual form and styling of the *Chemise a la Reine* was heavily appropriated from the East and especially the Caribbean. The dress itself is most commonly attributed to styles worn by female colonists in the Caribbean. However, the styling of the *Chemise* with a headwrap is perhaps even more informative. Women in France associated this style with Eastern turbans, but they are actually more likely an import from the enforced wearing of headwraps by enslaved women in the Caribbean. Brunias’ *Linen Day, Roseau, Dominica - A Market Scene* (figure 5) is a good example of this, as it shows women of multiple classes and races “wearing head wraps strikingly similar to those soon after popularized in Paris.” It is particularly important to note here that the preferred association with appropriated Eastern fashion acted as a smokescreen for the real source, France’s enslaved labor force.

While the “exotic” associations have been lost in Cottagecore styles, the colonizer’s aesthetic is still extremely prevalent. This can perhaps be best seen in the romanticization of homesteading. Again, this is popular on every content creation site. These accounts show images and videos of women in flowing dresses transforming their land into an agrarian paradise, storing and preserving food, raising livestock, and more. This is not an issue in and of itself. However, with a largely white American (and sometimes Australian) content creation force, much of this homesteading is thinly veiled appropriation of lands stolen from various Indigenous peoples. It's a clear romanticization of colonial practices by people still wearing colonially appropriated styles.

**The Fabric of Western Civilization: Slavery and the Sweatshop**

---


33 Dobie, *Trading Places*, 120.


35 Ibid.
The rise of France’s colonial cotton production in and appropriation from the Caribbean brings us to our next issue: exploitative labor. The invention of the cotton gin in this period drastically increased the speed with which cotton could be produced, resulting in a sharp increase in cotton’s popularity and the proliferation of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.\textsuperscript{36} It is, therefore, not a coincidence that the rise of colonial whiteness as a beauty ideal coincides with the racialization of enslaved people as Africans. Much has been written on the horrors of colonial enslavement, so I do not feel the need to elaborate on the shocking work conditions enslaved Africans and Indigenous Carribeans suffered. Far from the peasant-girl plays at Trianon, Africans, and Caribbeans labored endlessly to make the \textit{Chemise a la Reine} craze possible.

The increased production speed in the modern world has had a similar effect. As Dobie puts it, “Just as the unpaid labor of slaves was overshadowed by the emphasis placed on Oriental provenance, so today the labor of low-paid textile and garment workers in ‘offshore’ sweatshops and maquiladoras is similarly effaced by the appendage of prestigious metropolitan labels.”\textsuperscript{37} Largely unseen, the people working to make Cottagecore peasant dresses are living and working under horrific conditions. One example is the Chinese fast fashion brand Shein. On TikTok, Shein hauls are an extremely popular form of entertainment. A “haul” is a video of someone opening a large number of packages of new items bought online, usually clothes. The hashtags #shein and #sheinhaul have an incredible combined total of 10.9 billion views.\textsuperscript{38} Shein’s estimated value sits at around 30 billion dollars.\textsuperscript{39} Cottagecore is a popular subsection of the Shein Haul and mostly features dresses similar to the \textit{Chemise a la Reine}.

\textsuperscript{37} Dobie, \textit{Trading Places}, 93.
Recent revelations of Shein factories in the Channel 4 documentary, *Untold: Inside the Shein Machine* show workers in extremely unsafe conditions (figure 6). They work approximately 16-hour days, with a staggering 500 garment-per-day quota, and often with only one day off per month. Far from the first news of this kind about fast fashion brands, new reports of horrible conditions in East Asian sweatshops are a regular occurrence in the West. Further, modern cotton production has largely shifted to China, where the enslavement of the ethnic minority group, the Uyghurs, has become the topic of worldwide controversy. A 2022 report reveals, "Since 2017, the Chinese authorities have detained as many as one million Uyghurs and subjected them to forced labour [in Xinjiang]... About 20% of the world’s cotton comes from China, and 84% of that

---


42 Onibada, “Shein Launched A Resale Platform.”

comes from Xinjiang.\textsuperscript{44} Unfortunately, it is abundantly clear that the horrors created by the 18th-century cotton industry remain with us today.

\textbf{Conclusion}

From a shared connection with pastoral simplicity to the exploitation of textile workers, the histories of Marie Antoinette’s \textit{Chemise a la Reine} and the Cottagecore peasant dress are deeply intertwined. Like the peasant dress, the \textit{Chemise} is steeped in escapist fantasy that glorifies rural femininity while ignoring the reality of the difficulties of that life. Indeed, the two aesthetics are further linked by the Neoclassical-inspired privilege they give to whiteness both in fabric and skin tone. Despite this Euro-centricity, they also both rise from cultural appropriation and the romanticization of colonialism. Finally, like the \textit{Chemise a la Reine}, the peasant dress is built on the exploitation of minority groups. This is because the two styles are more than just similar; they represent the same unbroken line of Euro-supremacist policy and practice. Wrapped up in the desire for beauty, a return to nature, and the ownership of land, both the \textit{Chemise a la Reine} and the Cottagecore peasant dress allow their consumers to daydream of a peaceful, bucolic existence. All the while, the burden of this fantasy falls on the backs of the enslaved and exploited.

Bibliography

www.favikon.com/blog/shein-haul-tiktok.


https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/.


ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
https://www.proquest.com/docview/1929523018?parentSessionId=3snfKHZbOla4iuWqb1nJ95CrZJ4IROOSbjVOkkpJTtU%3D&pq-origsite=primo&accountid=13265.


www.michigandaily.com/arts/cottagecore-beautiful-aesthetic-issues-address/.

Majelle. "My Cottagecore Dress Collection! Pastel Dress Try-on Haul!!" February 3, 2021. Try on haul video, 25:45. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ya0xzD9u3kU&t=1170s&ab_channel=Majelle](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ya0xzD9u3kU&t=1170s&ab_channel=Majelle).


