

## Birth of Cool

*Like music, a wise cat surmised,  
Life is sweet when improvised.*

The birth of Black bondage, which occurred in 1661, when the Virginia assembly authorized the practice, advanced a novel form of social classification. Older societies were partitioned along lines of clan, creed, or culture. Slaves were captured foes or convicted felons. But Black bondage changed the scheme as it divided the land into bands of color. The social order directed African Americans to play subservient roles with a submissive air. Simultaneously, it inflicted white people with a sort of blindness that induced them to eye Blacks with compassion or contempt. Black bondage became a cruel regime that called for a cool response from captives.

Like a pyramid, past societies have had a narrow top and wide bottom divided by a stack of middle grades. Ancient social orders based their ranks on strict rules that linked lots to luck. The cultures pressed people to live at the level of their ancestors. In antiquity, ordained guardians of communal standards foresaw doom for individuals who dared to rise above the rung of their forerunners. By design, the bottom part shored up the upper echelon. The configuration rendered conditions ripe for the cultivation of underdog designs around the rings of the underpinning masses.

The United States was supposed to be different. At birth, it professed to offer “all men” a fair chance to climb to the top or collapse at the bottom of society depending on their own determination. Its founding document, the *Declaration of Independence* (1776), denied that any person was born to stand on the back of anyone else. The original vision of the nation appeared without room for fixed fortunes. In the beginning, the desire of underdogs for a fair chance to improve their lot animated the land. Calling

for a fluid society where waves of individuals, unchecked by cultural bars, rise or fall in accord with their resolve, the national development nailed a dream of the downtrodden since the start of the first hard and fast human hierarchy. The nation was not supposed to erect any social structures that denied the children of people who had little status in society a fair chance to rise from the ranks of their parents.

The country had to turn a blind eye to a glaring contradiction to maintain its image of itself as a society without an order that condemned a person to spend a lifetime under the weight of another. Wishes for cheap labor, though, saddled the land with Black bondage long before Thomas Jefferson put pen to paper. The nation was born with an embedded paradox: slavery in a land sold on liberty. Whites trained to have Blacks under their thumb grew to believe it was their natural right; the former came to resent having their rank called into question. The practice of Black bondage produced a state of schizophrenia, which brought on the bloody Civil War over whether “all men,” regardless of their shade, deserve an equal opportunity to rise or fall in society. Undoubtedly, the conflict stemmed from the preexisting condition of Black bondage at the birth of the nation, contradicting the Declaration of Independence, causing dissembling to have an appeal to the enslaved, and converting scores of slaves into smooth operators.

Since the establishment of the slave system, African Americans have faced a steady stream of bias and brutality capable of causing enough emotional distress and physical injury to drown them in a sea of sorrow. Celebrated cultural critics depict Blacks as dark bodies that have fallen into dire straits and struggle in desperate need of help to stay afloat. “Trauma” circulates as a buzzword in contemporary Black social studies. Researchers have postulated that generations of oppression have left Black people in a poor mental state with feelings of helplessness, hostility, and hopelessness. They imply that Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), a figure rendered dysfunctional by trauma, captures the souls of Black folk.

The drift of the current conversation about African Americans is centered on criticism of racism in effect as a scourge that impairs and dispirits Blacks. It overlooks their creative designs forged to promote their welfare. The prevailing narrative backed by scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, who authored *Scenes of Subjection*, paints Blacks in the bosom of the country as bodies lacking the ability or strength to adopt a mode of behavior that could enable effective resistance to degradation. It fails to witness a resolve to make a way out of no way, which Black churches began urging during the dark days of Black bondage. Some Black studies have missed how much

resilience has marked Black culture. In reality, a dedication to weather threats to their dignity, triggered by terrible designs woven into the social system, has marked heroic Black figures in the eyes of their fellows.

Slavery started in need of a pardon because it broke the basic rule on which the nation stood. Black bondage violated the imperative that everyone receive equal treatment. There had to be an excuse for the practice to continue in the wake of the American Revolution fought to free the country from everlasting subjection to the British Crown. The faith of the Founding Fathers that “all men” are born the same made it a sin to place whites over Blacks. It was necessary to count the latter as a breed, species, “race” distinct from white bloodlines. Approval of the system warranted the conversion of African Americans into a lot inferior to whites by nature. “Blacks” needed to signify “not men” in white minds. Belief that color signified character had to take hold.

Scientific conceptions of race that emerged in the eighteenth century offered cover for Black bondage in a nation that railed against tyranny. Arguments for monogenesis, the theory that humans come from a single pair of ancestors, gave way to avowals for *polygenesis*, holding humanity consists of diverse sorts from different sources. Thinking of people as members of races characterized by their complexion spread like a virus through the country. Benjamin Franklin in his *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind* (1751) generally split the world into three separate shades: white Europeans, Black Africans, and tawny Asians. *Crania Americana* (1839), written by Samuel George Morton, a pioneering advocate of *polygenesis*, professed that humanity was composed of different groups with uneven degrees of intelligence, discernible by the size of their skulls, the biggest of which belonged to whites and the smallest to Blacks. In 1848, Charles Pickering published *Races of Man and Their Geographical Distribution*, postulating the existence of eleven types of humans. Later, concurring with Morton, Josiah Clark Nott collaborated with George Gliddon to co-edit a collection of articles, titled *Types of Mankind* (1854), arguing that there are different races with unequal crania and that Black skulls were close in size and sense to those of chimpanzees.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant in *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986) described racial categories as social constructs whose substance and significance are determined by socioeconomic and political influences. The authors wrote, “Race consciousness, and its articulation in theories of race, is largely a modern phenomenon” (13). They added, “The social sciences have come to reject biologicistic notions of race in favor of an approach which

regards race as a *social* concept” (14). Omi and Winant observed, “In the United States, the racial category of ‘black’ evolved with the consolidation of racial slavery” (18). Their findings sustain the conclusion that Black bondage instigated the racial category of “white” and propagated the development of personalities prone to bedevil Blacks and push them to practice dissembling. Classic slave narratives divulge that the slave system trained white men to see themselves as messiahs or masters in relation to Black people.

John C. Calhoun represents a good example of a white man who developed a messiah complex. Scion of a slaveholder and senator from South Carolina, where the shipping industry lived off the import of Africans seized for sale into slavery, he professed ahead of the Civil War that the slave trade was a “positive good” for everyone involved in the business. His boyhood contacts with Black people, pinned under his weight, primed him to argue, during a session of Congress in 1837, whites and Blacks are tantamount to “two races of different origin, and distinguished by color, and other physical differences, as well as intellectual.” Calhoun said, “The relation now existing in the slaveholding States between the two, is, instead of an evil,” a godsend; he asserted, “There never has yet existed a wealthy and civilized society in which one portion of the community did not, in point of fact, live on the labor of the other.” The senator held that the riches of every affluent civilization has been “unequally divided” with a meager “share” being “allotted to those by whose labor it was produced, and so large a share given to the non-producing classes.” In the view of Calhoun, prosperous sites outside the Southern States perpetuated inequality by means of “brute force and gross superstition” or “subtle and artful fiscal contrivances.” He swore that a “direct, simple, and patriarchal mode” marked the management of Black bondage; the senator insisted that a rare social system left as much “to the share of the laborer,” and “exactd” as “little” in return from their workers as Southern slavery; a “kind superintending care” by whites permitted Black slaves to fare better than “the tenants of the poor houses in the more civilized portions of Europe” (Calhoun 224–25).

In substance, Calhoun drew from his background a picture of African Americans that painted them close to children in need of parental guidance. Of course, as a rule, parents and children are separated by “physical differences, as well as intellectual.” The upbringing of the senator trained him to regard young and old Blacks as identical scraps of whole cloth covered with pitch and clear of prudence. His opinion implied that Black bondage was a commendable enterprise because it made good use of Black lives that otherwise would have suffered the trials of orphan youths on their own in

the streets. The white slaveholders in the United States, the senator suggested, deserved pats on their backs for producing great wealth by enslaving childish Blacks in a fatherly manner.

Calhoun's heritage blinded him to the propensity of the slave system to engender cruelty by accustoming whites to look down on Blacks. Slavery made slaves favor livestock in the minds of slaveholders who took to heart a sense of themselves as men born to be masters of Blacks. Deep in the heart of Dixie, generations of white males descended from the owners of slaves fell heir to notions that they were born to whip Blacks into shape for their use. The mindset inclined the enslavers to subject the enslaved to lechery, lashing, and lynching on a whim. Babies were snatched from their mother's breasts and sold at auction to slave traders. Black slaves who chafed at the impositions of slaveholders had their bare backs flogged until streams of blood ran from their flesh. Blacks in bondage judged unruly were strung up on a tree over a bonfire to choke and burn to death.

In sum, the slave system fostered two sorts of white attitudes toward Blacks. Both of them believed whites and Blacks represented "two races of different origin, and distinguished by color, and other physical differences, as well as intellectual." Slaveholders like Calhoun possessed a genteel persuasion that prompted them to show slaves compassion. His counterparts had a rustic perspective that provoked disdain for Blacks. Calhoun's view blocked out the reality of contemptuous enslavers who abused Blacks without a second thought. With his fellow traffickers in the practice of involuntary servitude, the senator nevertheless forever shared the common trust of slaveholders that whites rank above Blacks in worth.

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), chronicling his life and times trapped in the bowels of Black bondage, renders stark portraits of a few contemptuous racists. The slave narrative offers the author's original master, Captain Anthony, as the first example of a racist slaveholder with a lecherous streak who regards Blacks with disdain. Douglass recounts how Captain Anthony was enraged because Aunt Hester, an enslaved "woman of noble form, and of graceful proportions" with "very few equals, and fewer superiors, in personal appearance, among the colored or white women" in the region, saw another slave against the master's wishes. In reaction, the slaveholder "stripped her from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back, entirely naked." Captain Anthony bound Aunt Hester's hands "with a strong rope, and led her to a stool under a large hook in the joist" where he propped her on the chair. Tethering her hands on the peg, he extended her arms "so that she stood upon the ends of her toes." Then, the white man

rolled “up his sleeves” and “commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor” (Douglass, *Narrative*, 41–42).

On another occasion in Douglass’s slave narrative, the author remembers Mr. Austin Gore, whom he credits with “possessing, in an eminent degree, all those traits of character indispensable to what is called a first-rate overseer,” that is, a superb manager of slaves. Mr. Gore was disposed to eye “the slightest look, word, or gesture, on the part of the slave” as an expression of “impudence.” Bidding “the most debasing homage of the slave,” the white man “committed the grossest and most savage deeds upon the slaves under his charge” with “consummate coolness.” One day the overseer declared a slave named Demby “unmanageable” because the vassal fled a whipping and “plunged himself into a creek, and stood there at the depth of his shoulders, refusing to come out.” In response, “without consultation or deliberation with any one,” Mr. Gore “raised his musket,” took “deadly aim at his standing victim,” and discharged his weapon. In a second, the body of Demby “sank out of sight, and blood and brains marked the water where he had stood.” Defending his misdeed, Mr. Gore “argued that if one slave refused to be corrected, and escaped with his life, the other slaves would soon copy the example; the result of which would be, the freedom of the slaves, and the enslavement of the whites” (51–52).

Mr. Edward Covey is a third fiend depicted in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. He was not a “pious” master “who [held] slaves for the very charitable purpose of taking care of them.” The figure “was a professor of religion” as well as a “member” and “leader” of a Christian congregation. He gained renown and remuneration as a “nigger-breaker;” a handler who took on obstinate slaves with an aim to transform them into obliging servants for their owners. Douglass in his teen years had differences with his second master, Captain Auld, which caused his owner to lease him to Mr. Covey for a year. The writer recounted how one week passed “before Mr. Covey gave [him] a very severe whipping,” which slit [his] back, “causing the blood to run, and raising ridges on [his] flesh as large as [his] little finger.” Douglass testified, “During the first six months, of that year, scarce a week passed without [Mr. Covey] whipping [him],” and so leaving him “seldom free from a sore back” (72).

The novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) illustrates that past slaveholders came in two styles. Author Harriet Beecher Stowe drew figures in the work from a fair knowledge of slavery in Kentucky across the border from her Ohio family home in Cincinnati. She also gathered ideas from the life story

of Douglass along with the *Life of Josiah Henson* (1849), detailing a crippling beating that Henson suffered at the hands of a cruel master before the slave took flight to Canada. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe featured Augustine St. Clare, who favors the type of paternal slaveholder whom Calhoun had in mind when the senator called Black bondage a "positive good." *Uncle Tom's Cabin* presents Simon Legree in contrast to St. Clare, who cares for the novel's enslaved such as Uncle Tom and Topsy in a fatherly manner. Akin to Mr. Covey, Legree projects limitless piety while the slaveholder molests and mauls slaves at his mercy.

Subjection to Black bondage exposed to Harriet Jacobs the two types of slave owners that Stowe described in her novel. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1860), recording the fortunes of Jacobs in slavery, shows that the system posed an awful dilemma for her at a tender age. She faced a choice between serving as a courtesan for a gentleman given to sympathy or living as a concubine for a degenerate gripped by heartlessness. Each of the options in effect required Jacobs to trade sex for the prospect of security. The merciless man identified as Dr. Flint was her designated master. A surrender to his wishes promised to leave Jacobs without a shred of dignity since he had a habit of degrading Black women under his control. The kind man named Mr. Sands was a neighboring slaveholder with the air of a messiah. He seduced the slave girl with flattery before he left her with two children and moved with a blushing white bride to the nation's capital after he was elected to represent his state as a senator in Congress.

While in general Jacobs and Stowe agreed that the kinds of slaveholders amounted to two sorts, the women disagreed about the respectability of the paternalistic type. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* illustrates a want of appreciation by slaveholders for the true humanity of African Americans, regardless of whether or not the enslavers appeared compassionate or acted cruel in their relationships with Blacks. Jacobs offered assurance that the slave system spread an imperious mentality among whites that disposed them to imagine Blacks as a distinct species with the intellect of children or cattle. Thus, as a rule, slaveholders caused her to feel like a kid in a charity school for juveniles with brain damage or a cow stuck in a swamp full of snakes. Jacobs disapproved of fatherly slaveholders comparable to Mr. Sands right along with perverse owners of slaves similar to Dr. Flint.

Although Jacobs agreed with Stowe about the two types of slaveholders, she disagreed with the white woman about the nature of Black people. The difference of opinion stemmed from the fact that Stowe as much as Calhoun credited African Americans with owning little if any more sense

than a child. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* implies that Tom as well as Topsy are better off in the custody of a benevolent white master such as St. Clare. The omniscient narrator of the novel expresses certainty that Blacks and whites are dissimilar in essence. For instance, she says, "Uncle Tom" possesses "truly African features," which incline him to open his heart to others with a "humble simplicity" (Stowe 18). She attributes to the slave an "impassioned and imaginative" (25) temper that she feels is typical of Blacks. The narrator also intimates that St. Clare is praiseworthy for inducing his cousin Miss Ophelia to serve as a guardian for Topsy committed to teaching the Black girl to behave as an obliging ward.

Under the weight of the slave system, sustained by false impressions of Blacks, African Americans were pressed to crouch, cringe, and cower in the presence of whites. Douglass captured the most wretched possible impact of Black bondage on the enslaved in his account of his stay with Covey. He wrote, "I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there." In "a few months," though, the heartless fiend "succeeded in breaking me." The writer reflected on being "broken in body, soul, and spirit." Douglass confessed, "The cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died," as "the dark night of slavery closed in upon me." He exclaimed, "Behold a man transformed into a brute" (74).

Nonetheless, Douglass was human, all too human. Therefore, he was no more prone in his life to take the demeaning subjugation of Black bondage lying down than Jefferson was prepared in his time to stomach the tyranny of the British Crown. The African American adopted a course of action based on a mode of reasoning aroused by his humanity. A passion to preserve his dignity moved him. He developed an aptitude for underdog scheming, a frame of mind accountable for a form of subterfuge, employed by a person who has little social status in an effort to ease, if not escape, the dehumanizing burden of living under the weight of other people. The slave system pushed Douglass to assume the guise of a "smooth operator," a deft dissembler, given to the deployment of deception for the sake of a real improvement in his lot. Masking his feelings and intentions came to free him from a lifetime of indignity imposed on him by whites who looked down on him.

Douglass took an approach that was common among Blacks in bondage. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* brings to light the fact that Jacobs choose the given course of action. She resorted to smooth operating in order to mitigate the degrading effects of Black bondage. Hundreds of published narratives recounting the fortunes of African Americans enslaved in the land



reveal that deft dissembling became part and parcel of the culture that the slave system sowed among Blacks stuck in the bowels of the social structure. The noted literature demonstrates time and again that it became routine for Blacks to put on a show that seemed to meet white expectations while it gave them the slip as far as possible within the confines of the social order.

The institution of slavery, in sum, governed by whites convinced that Blacks were born to occupy the lowest rank on the social hierarchy fostered a determination among African Americans to live by their wits. It raised a spirit that prompted Blacks to take after fabled Br'er Rabbit caught in the clutches Br'er Fox. Black bondage, declared a "new refinement in cruelty" (Equiano 58) by Olaudah Equiano, the eighteenth-century African native sold into the business, no doubt provoked the enslaved to use their heads. Under the circumstances, the slaves hatched a heroic ideal that commends being able to read a room and size up a situation. The subjects of the system set their sights on finding a way to make a way out of no way. Blacks in bondage schemed to triumph over a tragic situation. Smooth operating became their model *modus operandi*.

It is ironic that the justification for Black bondage rested on belief that Blacks lacked the sense of whites. Slaves had to put considerable smarts to swift use to preserve their dignity. Living their best life depended on staying all eyes with an ear to the ground and the teeth to wing it. They had the human intelligence to see how whites saw them as if they were simple children or stupid cattle. Every Black person who survived bondage in the land with pride learned well that underdogs who live to tell tales grow quickly. Mastering their masters was their key to relief from dishonor and degradation. At the end of the day, in order to maintain their self-esteem, the enslaved had to sharpen their wits beyond those of their masters who rated them dumb.

Some studies of Black bondage dispute this assessment. The research at issue sustains the opinions of former slaveholders who supposed that African Americans amounted to a species separate in color as well as character from whites. For the most part, these accounts of the slave system came from scholars who were apologists for the institution. They contended that Blacks were docile and submissive in nature. Historian Ulrich Bonnell Phillips was a celebrated advocate of the bias. He produced the first acclaimed analysis of Black bondage in the twentieth century. In *American Negro Slavery* (1918), Phillips wrote that Blacks harbored a "racial quality" that rendered them "submissive rather than defiant, light-hearted instead of gloomy, amiable and ingratiating instead of sullen," and their makeup "invited paternalism rather

than repression” (Phillips 770). On the whole, *American Negro Slavery* upheld the notion that Blacks had little more sense than children, and so Black bondage was a benign institution that promoted the welfare of the enslaved.

Phillips’s work stood as the authoritative study of Blacks in bondage until the middle of the twentieth century when Stanley Elkins wrote *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1959). Overall, Elkins rejected the idea that Blacks were inherently as unsophisticated as children. He granted observers cause to find African Americans inclined to behave in an infantile manner. Elkins argued that slavery produced a “Sambo” mentality, an infantile psychology among Blacks that made them depend on whites for guidance. He hypothesized that “the typical plantation slave” was “docile, irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing.” Insisting that the average slave was “full of infantile silliness” and his “relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and childlike attachment,” Elkins attributed the alleged “Sambo” personality to stupefying repression incorporated in the management of the slave system that inhibited the mental maturation of the enslaved (Elkins 131).

*The Peculiar Institution* (1956), written by Kenneth Stampp, arrived three years before Elkins’s *Slavery*. Stampp put forward a thorough refutation of *American Negro Slavery*. He repudiated the racist belief that Blacks were endowed with little more intelligence than children. Moreover, he asserted that Black bondage was an iniquitous institution devoid of redeeming value. He provided evidence that enslaved Blacks fought against their enslavement through various forms of subterfuge including dragging their feet on the job and stealing their masters blind. Stampp faulted previous studies of Blacks in bondage for taking to heart the slaveholders’ perspective and failing to take into account the slaves’ point of view.

John Blassingame made an explicit point of relating the slaves’ side of the story. He studied a fair number of books written by former slaves. The list included the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) along with the *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave* (1847), plus *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) by Solomon Northup and *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868) by Elizabeth Keckley. In *The Slave Community* (1972), Blassingame presented his findings after he remarked that “historians have never systematically explored the life experiences of American slaves” (xi). He stated, “Rather than identifying with and submitting totally to his master, the slave held onto many remnants of his African culture, gained a sense of worth in the quarters, spent most of his

time free from surveillance by whites, controlled important aspects of his life, and did some personally meaningful things on his own volition" (xii). Aiming to discredit Elkins, Blassingame wrote, "The Sambo stereotype was so pervasive in antebellum Southern literature that many historians, without further research, argue that it was an accurate description of the dominant slave personality" (226). As a matter of fact, the disputant submitted, "There is overwhelming evidence, in the primary sources [i.e., slave narratives], of the Negro's resistance to his bondage and of his undying love for freedom" (192). By any means necessary, Blassingame indicates, enslaved Blacks sought to preserve their dignity.

The subjects of slave narratives prove "Sambo" was little more than a figment of the white imagination divorced from reality. The central figures of the stories engage in masquerades that afford relief from abuse. Deliberate plots against the wishes of their masters empowered real-life slaves such as Brown, Keckley, and Northup to escape bondage. It's the same story in the case of Douglass and Equiano. *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860) by Ellen and William Craft provides a perfect example. The narrative records the couple's flight to freedom by way of a ruse in which Ellen Craft exploited her fair complexion to pretend to be a young white man traveling to Philadelphia for medical treatment with a devoted slave who in truth was her dark-skinned spouse. The married Crafts were animated by underdog thinking stirred by a wish to rise in society.

Prissy the simple maid played by Butterfly McQueen in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) evokes Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and also shows that white people were hanging onto the Sambo myth four-score years after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. The role assumed by McQueen in the motion picture obscures the actuality that the slave system induced the development of a discreet disposition displayed by the Crafts. Supposedly McQueen's performance as Prissy in *Gone with the Wind* bothered her conscience. If Paul Laurence Dunbar had lived to witness McQueen play the simple maid, he would have seen that the scripting of her role left out the spirit that saved Blacks in bondage from being consumed by dejection and despair. Dunbar was born a free native of Ohio in 1872. Before he died in 1906, he achieved renown as a poet, praised by William Dean Howells in *Harper's Weekly*. Dunbar grasped the spirit of Blacks stirred by the slave system. By means of the poem "We Wear the Mask" (1896), he gave readers an inkling of the heroic Black psyche induced by slavery that occasioned a certain coolness in the face of demeaning compassion and deadly contempt. Dunbar wrote:

WE wear the mask that grins and lies,  
 It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes—  
 This debt we pay to human guile;  
 With torn and bleeding hearts we smile  
 And mouth with myriad subtleties.  
 (*Lyrics of Lowly Life* 197)

African American literature contains ample proof that Black bondage ingrained smooth operating in Black culture. Since the publication of *The Heroic Slave* (1852), Douglass's novella, Black fiction has featured heroes who mask their feelings and aims from the white world. The approach is taken by the main character in Brown's novel *Clotel* (1853). Fiction about Black fortunes outside slavery, beginning with Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), indicate that Black bondage established conditions that turned dissembling into an African American trait. *Iola Leroy* (1892) by Frances Harper as well as *The Conjure Woman* (1899) by Charles Chesnutt make certain that in the wake of slavery, Blacks engaged in deception for the sake of their welfare. Following the outlawing of Black bondage, honored members of the Black community went on hiding sneers behind smiles and grimaces beneath grins, as Nat Turner did as a slave before he led the slave rebellion that shocked the slaveholders of Virginia in 1831.

Neo-slave narratives in particular verify that smooth operating represents a mode of behavior adopted by Blacks to avoid mortification and molestation. The genre consists of fiction involving themes and settings typical of the slave narratives written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by enslaved Blacks. Such fiction, full of underdog designs, flourished late in the twentieth century. Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) is given credit for initiating the development. Her book, appearing at the inception of the Black Arts movement, preceded works such as Ernst Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981), and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986). Although the phenomenon is thought to have peaked with the publication of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), noteworthy neo-slave narratives have appeared in the twenty-first century, such as Edward Jones's *The Known World* (2003), James McBride's *The Good Lord Bird* (2013), Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), and *Yellow Wife* (2021) by Sadeqa Johnson. All of the novels support the conclusion that the pursuit of happiness for African Americans since the birth of Black bondage has depended on the achievement of a cool style,

featuring skill at reading a room and sizing up a situation with underdog reasoning intent on turning tragedy into triumph.

No doubt, African American literature includes Black figures beaten and broken by white men with superiority complexes. Sethe, who loses her mind in *Beloved*, represents the sort of figure who is shattered by the horror to which slavery exposes her. Still, she stands in contrast to heroes in neo-slave narratives and related works. Sethe cannot hold a candle to resilient Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston, resourceful Ida in *Another Country* (1962) by James Baldwin, or resolute Dana in *Kindred* by Octavia Butler. Idols of Black letters use their imagination to make the best of a bad situation. As Booker T. Washington recalls doing in *Up from Slavery*, they exercise ingenuity to overcome “miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings” (Washington 1).

Close readings of selected neo-slave narratives follow below. Beforehand, examinations of classic slave narratives occur. The ventures uphold that slavery furnished fertile grounds for maestros of improvisation to emerge and exploit beliefs holding Blacks inferior to whites. Below, proof surfaces that a cool style came to life on the heels of Black bondage. The upcoming pages convey that thinking of race as a biological condition gave rise to impressions that prompted Blacks to seem reconciled to being an underdog while engaging in acts of resistance to the social position.