Pretty, Sassy, Cool: Slave Resistance, Agency, and Culture in Eighteenth-Century New England

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> There is in the African a latent lyricism which tends to express itself in movement, so that every gesture, every attitude of the body takes on a special significance which belongs to a language of which I caught only a few words.
>
> —Richard Wright[1]

30 May 1774, Daniel Vose paid between "Twelve Pence to Five Shillings" to have the following notice printed in the *Boston Evening Post* (image 1). Born in Milton, Massachusetts in 1741 to Captain Thomas Vose, Daniel would grow up to become a prominent leader in his own right. He would own a wholesale and retail store and a tavern in town that would also serve as an inn. Through his father-in-law, Jeremiah Smith, he would own perhaps one of the earliest paper mills in New England. He also would own several tracts of land and warehouses in the burgeoning township. During the escalating conflict between Great Britain and her North American subjects, the Massachusetts businessman would side with the rebels. His

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[1] Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), p. 47.

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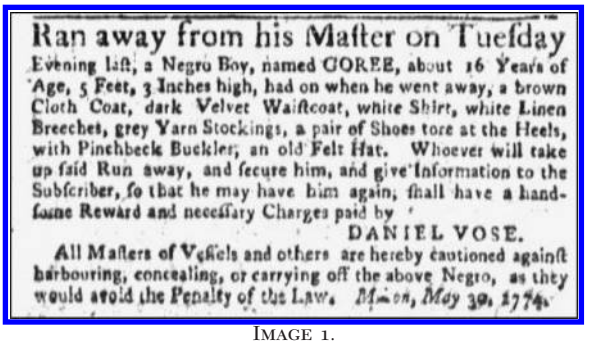

Ran away from his Maſter on Tueſday Evening laſt, a Negro Boy, named GOREE, about 16 Years of Age, 5 Feet, 3 Inches high, had on when he went away, a brown Cloth Coat, dark Velvet Waiſtcoat, white Shirt, white Linen Breeches, grey Yarn Stockings, a pair of Shoes tore at the Heels, with Pinchbeck Buckles, an old Felt Hat. Whoever will take up ſaid Run away, and ſecure him, and give Information to the Subſcriber, ſo that he may have him again, ſhall have a handſome Reward and neceſſary Charges paid by

DANIEL VOSE.

All Maſters of Veſſels and others are hereby cautioned againſt harbouring, concealing, or carrying off the above Negro, as they would avoid the Penalty of the Law. *Milton, May 30, 1774.*

Image 1.

house served as the location where the Suffolk Resolves were drafted.[2]

But unbeknownst to the tavern keeper, another rebel resided within his house. A recently imported, sixteen-year-old "Negro Boy" from Africa, Goree seized upon the emerging conflict to declare himself free of the tyranny of the king of ales.[3] Approximately four months before his owner met with others privately in a concerted effort to denounce "voluntary slavery," the African took matters into his own hands and protested with his feet.[4] When "he went away," the "5 Feet, 3 Inches" tall young man took with him all of the clothes he wore. His clothes, ironically, were all probably made in Great Britain. Although some slave-owners "used locally-woven cloth for their slaves clothing," Linda Baumgarten observed in her study about what dress signifies, "especially around the time of the Revolution, most of the material for slaves clothing in the eighteenth century were imported from England." Possibly mindful of New England's cold climes, Goree took an additional coat. Judging from the advertisement, Vose had printed in the *Evening*

[2]*Boston News-Letter,* Monday 17 April to Monday 24 April 1704, 2. Teele's *History of Milton, Massachusetts, 1640-1887* (Boston: Press of Rockwell and Churchill, 1887), pp. 150, 184, 303, 398-99.

[3]Antonio T. Bly, *Escaping Bondage: A Documentary History of Runaway Slaves in Eighteenth-Century New England, 1700-1789* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2012), p. 158.

[4]Joseph Warren, *At a meeting of the delegates of every town and district in the county of Suffolk: on Tuesday the sixth of September, at the house of Mr. Richard Woodward of Dedham, and by adjournment at the house of Mr. Daniel Vose of Milton, . . .* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1774).

Post and the *Essex Gazette,* Goree had managed to remain at large for well over three weeks. For the return of the fugitive slave, the tavern owner offered a reward of "six dollars." In this manner, the hunt for the "Negro boy" was afoot; chronicling, ironically, a founding father's disapproval with his bondservant's own *resolve* to be free.[5]

Runaway slave advertisements are an important source for historians of America's peculiar institution. Unlike probate or church records that provide useful but nonetheless limited glimpses of the past, notices for fugitive slaves have given scholars from many disciplines rich and complex texts through which to discern aspects of slave life and behavior. Like the WPA slave narratives of the antebellum era, the short vignettes hidden in the advertisements document the tales of bold African Americans who did not wait for freedom but created their own opportunities to emancipate themselves.

Since the publication of Gerald Mullin's seminal study, *Flight and Rebellion,* resistance has been a prominent theme or metanarrative in fugitive slave studies. Because flight signified resistance and resistance shattered the myth of the persistent stereotype of the happy, passive, dutiful slave portrayed in the work of U. B. Philips or the psychologically traumatized Sambo of Stanley Elkins.[6] Isaac Bee, for example, had been neither a "Zip Coon" nor a childlike plantation hand. Far from it, as his master told it, timidity was not in his nature. In 1774, the defiant, former Bray school scholar ran away from Lewis Burwell, a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses, presumably because "his Father was a Freeman" and "he thinks he has a

[5]Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* p. 158; Linda Baumgarten, "'Clothes for the People': Slave Clothing in Early Virginia," *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts* 14, no. 2 (November 1988): 40; Antonio T. Bly, "A Prince among Pretending Free-Men: Runaway Slaves in Colonial New England Revisited," *Massachusetts Historical Review* 13 (2012):89; Christian Warren, "Northern Chills, Southern Fevers: Race-Specific Mortality in American Cities, 1730–1900," *Journal of Southern History* 63, no. 1 (February 1997): 23-56.

[6]Graham White and Shane White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture: from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), chaps. 1–4; U. B. Philips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., 1918), p. 342; and Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 81-139.

Right to his Freedom."[7] Not surprisingly, following Mullin's example, other scholars have excavated in advertisements for runaways a plethora of resistance narratives. During the American Revolution, for example, several notices demonstrated that slaves were aware of the politics of the day, much like Vose's bondservant Goree. Benjamin Quarles, Sylvia Frey, and, more recently, Woody Holton portrayed blacks as forced founders.[8] Michael A. Gomez's work on runaway advertisements captured African American efforts to hold fast to their African past while Herbert G. Gutman and Philip D. Morgan's studies of advertisements recorded enduring black families.[9]

Missing, however, in this body of scholarship on slave resistance are the stories of the New England fugitive. Obscured by recent accounts of absconded slaves in the southern part of British America or that of the antebellum era, the story of Goree's flight and that of other New England runaways have been largely underreported. Because slavery in the North has been characterized as benign, milder or less harsh, the story of Vose's manservant is a seemingly unheralded one. Compared to that of his southern counterparts, the plight of the bondsman has been judged as not being brutal enough. In the South, slavery existed; in the North, there was servitude. While the two

[7]*Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), 8 September 1774. For a fuller account of Bee's story, see my "In Pursuit of Letters: A History of the Bray Schools for Enslaved Children in Colonial Virginia," *History of Education Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (November 2011): 429-59.

[8]Benjamin Quarles, "Lord Dunmore as Liberator" *William and Mary Quarterly,* 3rd ser., 15, no. 4 (1958): 494-507 and, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), chap. 3, esp. pp. 42-50; Sylvia R. Frey, "Between Slavery and Freedom: Virginia Blacks in the American Revolution," *Jour. of Soc. Hist.* 49, no. 3 (1983): 375-98, and, *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), chaps. 2 & 5; Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), chap. 5; Philip D. Morgan and Michael L. Nicholls, "Slave Flight: Mount Vernon, Virginia, and the Wider Atlantic World" in *George Washington's South,* ed. Tamara Harvey and Greg O'Brien (Gainsville: University Press of Florida, 2004), pp. 199-222.

[9]Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), pp. 262-69; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998), pp. 498-558.

institutions supposedly had little in common, Goree's flight suggested otherwise. Except for Lorenzo Greene's *The Negro in Colonial New England,* William D. Piersen's *Black Yankees,* and a few others, scant are the studies of the New England fugitive. A study of those brave, captive souls, this essay explicates the life of the northern fugitive, revealing what Rhys Isaac would have characterized as terrifying narratives of historical dramaturgy, illuminating specifically three aspects of early slave life in New England, namely pretty, sass, and cool.[10]

Like those printed in Virginia, South Carolina, Pennsylvania, and New York, advertisements for New England runaway slaves reveal as much as they try, unwittingly, to conceal about the brutal politics of slavery in the North. Residing in what Ira Berlin characterized as "societies with slaves," that is societies in which slavery represented a marginal part of the economy, enslaved African Americans resisted their condition there much like slaves in other parts of British North America.[11] Indeed, their relationships with their masters proved equally unruly and cantankerous. Although they in fact represented only a small fraction of the population, they left behind a rich and textured record of a complex subculture in which African and American elements blended. Unfortunately, many of these instances, due in no small part to popular prejudice and racial bias, were misunderstood or even mocked by the sons and daughters of Plymouth Rock. "For African Americans," William D. Piersen

[10]Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (New York: Atheneum, 1968) and Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 323-57 and "On Explanation, Text, and *Terrifying Power* in Ethnographic History," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 6 (1993): 217–36. For more recent studies of New England slavery, see Joanne Pope Melish's *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998); Robert K. Fitts, *Inventing New England's Slave Paradise: Master/Slave Relations in Eighteenth Century Narragansett, Rhode Island* (New York: Routledge, 1998); John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003); and, Catherine Adams and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[11]Ira Berlin, "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on British Mainland North America," *The American Historical Review* 85, no. 1 (February 1980): 44-78.

explained, "came out of a tradition too sophisticated to regard violence as a primary mode of" resistance. Instead their "resistance proved too subtle and too civil" for their masters and "for our own cruder more violence-laden culture to recognize."[12] Examining the notices masters placed in newspapers for the return of their missing property, their expressions of culture also proved equally illusive.

Pretty illustrates one example of this complexity. Within the context of Clifford Geertz's anthropological work, *pretty* represents a "thin description," a type of symbolic mask. In other words, it is a form of veneer. It is limited in what it can signify. In the context of Umberto Eco's work, *pretty* represents a cultural dictionary of meanings. In western terms, *pretty* is primarily an adjective. It is a beautiful thing; something graceful or pleasing to the eye. In African terms, it signifies the same. Among the Yoruba people, *lẹwa* or *liwe* or *dara* means beautiful, stunning, or striking. Similarly, in the Kikongo language, *nkenga* signifies beauty or handsomeness; *magāna, shaawa, armashi,* and *keau* denotes pretty, prettiness, beauty, and beautiful among the Hausa speaking peoples. In the Ashante and Fante language called Tshi, *fe* or *fe fe* means pretty, nice, beautiful, handsome, amusing. Within the Diaspora however, *pretty* connotes more than just something attractive. In an African-Atlantic context, it is more or less a verb, a response, a reaction to racial prejudice. Almost subconsciously enslaved African Americans deployed *pretty* as a device to withstand bigotry and bias long before the flamboyant musings of the twentieth-century boxing legend Muhammad Ali who routinely declared himself good-looking in an America that insisted otherwise.[13]

[12]William D. Piersen, *Black Legacy: America's Hidden Heritage* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), pp. 3-54.

[13]Clifford Geetz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 5-7; Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 145-46; Samuel Crowther et al., *Dictionary of Yoruba Language* (Lagos: Christian Missionary Society, 1913), p. 13; W. Holman Bentley, *Appendix to the Dictionary and Grammar of the Kongo Language* (London: Baptist Missionary Society, 1895), p. 758; Charles Henry Robinson, *Dictionary of the Hausa Language,* 3rd ed. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1913), 1:17, 241, 323, and 187;

Brought in chains from Africa to America, peoples of African descent were not only denied dignity but were also characterized as uncivilized and ugly. Because of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Africans were thought backward, savage, and uncouth. In racial terms, blackness equated wickedness, disgrace, death, and disaster. In stark contrast, whiteness signified good, pure, and clean, the opposite of black. "The most arresting characteristic of the newly discovered African," Winthrop Jordan explained in his seminal study of race in the early English-speaking world, "was his color." Adventurers and travelers "rarely failed to comment upon it; indeed when describing Negroes they frequently began with complexion and then moved on to dress (or rather lack of it) and manners."[14] Crossing the Atlantic, these ideas of perceived African inferiority forged the very foundation of institutions of racial slavery in British North America. "Once the cycle of degradation was fully under way, once slavery and racial discrimination were linked [and codified by law], once the engine of oppression was in full operation," there was no turning back. To be black was to be a dreadful, profane thing. To be a black was to be a stain or blight. "By the end of the seventeenth century in all the colonies of the English empire there was chattel racial slavery."[15]

Despite the cruelty of these institutions, enslaved African Americans rejected the efforts of their masters and the larger society to reduce them to the level of mere brutes or chattel. To that end, they developed ways to protest their treatment, and in that context, *pretty* was born. An aesthetic of African-Atlantic culture, pretty became an articulation of personhood, individuality, and dignity. In other words, it signifies somebodyness, an enduring term Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would coin

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J.G. Christaller, *Dictionary of the Ashante and Fante Language* (London: Evangelical Missionary Society, 1881), p. 117. The use of the term African is intended not to be confused with a racial identifier but refers to a process of creolization in which Americans of African descent redefined themselves and their culture as neither African nor European.

[14]Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), pp. 4, 6.

[15]Jordan, *White over Black*, p. 98.

during the civil rights movement. On a literal level, pretty implies beauty or attractiveness. On a symbolic level, however, it exemplifies the persistent nature of the human spirit. Long before the Mardi Gras Indians in New Orleans dressed up in colorful, lavish costumes, perhaps even before African American slaves sang, danced, and performed in vivid and grand style at Negro Election Days in New England, the Pinkster festivals in New York, the General Training Day parades in New Jersey, and certainly before slaves celebrated Christmas in the antebellum South (*jonkonnu*), enslaved African Americans declared their prettiness.[16]

In 1738, Bristol, "a negro Fellow" who belonged to "Mr. George Tilley" ran away. In addition to reporting that his servant left with "a Felt Hat, a homespun striped Jacket, and striped Linen Breeches, a Cotton and Linen Shirt, no Stockings, [and] a pair of old Shoes," the Boston tavern owner recalled that the "tall and slim" man walked "very upright." Bristol's walk, undoubtedly, made an impression on his master. One for which Tilley had been more than willing to commit to print at his own expense. Considering the notice of his escape printed in the *Boston Evening Post*, the thirty-five-year-old runaway slave's expression of *pretty* or personhood not only earned a passing notice from his master, but also projected, albeit subtly, an act of defiance. Tacitly, Bristol rejected any notion that he had been any less of a person than anyone else. By walking upright, he challenged his master's authority and those who believed African Americans should be both meek and docile in public. By walking upright, he boldly assumed the laurel of human dignity. Bearing in mind the notice Tilley had printed, Bristol's prettiness might have been something he learned from his African homeland and brought to America.[17]

[16]Michael Smith and Alan Govenar, *Mardi Gras Indians* (Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing, 1994), pp. 93-140; Shane White, "'It Was a Proud Day': African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741-1834," *Journal of American History* 81 (1994): 13-50; Penne L. Restad, *Christmas in America: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 75-90.

[17]Bly, *Escaping Bondage*, p. 29. Bristol's owner noted that he "speaks with broken English" suggesting African birth.

Other New England slaves expressed similar instances of pretty. When Samson absconded in 1748, his master, "Josiah Browne of Sudbury," noted that the middle-statured man "walks light & spritely on the Ground." John Hunt of Watertown made a similar observation about his runaway. According to the advertisement posted in the *Boston Evening Post,* Prince strutted; he pimped, to use a modern colloquialism. Intent on stowing away aboard a vessel heading toward Great Britain, the thirty-three-year-old "handy Fellow" who had "been used to farming Business" walked with a "small Hitch" or delay. Like George Tilley's slave, Captain Daniel Hoar's Jack, John Belden's Lankton, and Joseph Taylor's Quam all walked "very upright," breaking with both tradition and social etiquette in which straight posture suggested class, power, character, and identity. Like African American fugitives in other parts of British North America, New England runaways also had "a swaggering Air with" them in their walk. They strutted, slowly, casually, and rhythmically to music they heard, "however measured or far away."[18]

Enraged by their slaves' usurpation of their authority, incensed by their brashness, and infuriated by their loss of valuable property, many New England slave owners documented unintentionally other examples of *pretty*. In 1757, when John ran away from his master, "Joseph Lynde, jun.," he pretended "to be a Doctor." When Pompey York absconded from Gershom Flagg, he too believed that he had owned himself. By his master's account, the "very deceitful" man could read and write. He also pretended "to be a new Convert, and is very forward to mimick some of the Strangers that have of late been preaching

[18]Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* pp. 74-75, 155-56, 173-74, 225, 235. In reference to Clem's "swaggering Air with him in his Walk," see Lathan Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisement: A Documentary History from 1730 to 1790* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), 2:88. Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992), pp. 64-65; Shane White and Graham White, "Reading the Slave Body: Demeanor, Gesture, and African-American Culture" in Bruce Clayton and John Salmond, eds., *Varieties of Southern History: New Essays on a Region and Its People* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), pp. 41-61; Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854; repr., New York: Harper Brothers, 1950), p. 449.

about among us." Taking into account the reprints of the notices for the slave that appeared in the *Boston News-Letter* and *Gazette,* the slave preacher's ruse proved quite successful. He put the additional articles of clothing and the "Dail Mould and other Tinker's tools" to good use. For over six years, Pompey York remained at large, spreading the good news when the occasion presented itself. Mary Roger's Prince pretended in the same manner. In addition to the clothes she presumed he would undoubtedly sell, the matriarch of the heralded Rogers family informed the public that the veteran of the French and Indian War would try to enlist again, pretending himself a "Free-man," while pretending also "a great deal of Religion." When Thomas Seymour's "Negro man named Tack" left "Sunday night," August 1783, the twenty-five-year-old country-born slave did not leave alone. Quite the contrary, as his master had recorded in the *Connecticut Courant* that following week, the "well made" man who carried with him several articles of cloths and a "Flute and Fife," left with "a Negro Wench of Mr. Platt's of this town, who carried her cloaths and female child." The "40 years old" woman, he sulked, "thick and fleshy . . . pretends to be his wife."[19]

Besides documenting examples of *pretty,* these instances of presumptuous characteristics document something of the immense ambivalence of eighteenth-century slave masters who were forced to turn to the press to help them retrieve their stolen property. Instead of acknowledging their servants' humanity, they elected not to do so. "For runaway slaves," Alex Bontemps explained, "to pretend to be anything other than themselves in order to avoid recapture was a necessity." The converse was also true of many slave masters who had little choice but to ask for help through the press. Put another way, when New England slave owners referenced their bondservants' *pretending* natures, they inadvertently recognized their prettiness. Because "in the ads for runaway slaves, fugitives described as being highly acculturated and also having a high regard for themselves were seen by advertisers as pretending

[19]Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* pp. 73-74, 98, 141, 230.

to be something they were not and could never become," that is human or full persons.[20]

Although miffed, some New England slave owners acknowledged their bondservants' prettiness and in more explicit terms. In 1761, when Cyrus ran away, his master, John Lloyd of Stamford, imagined that the country-born "Negro Man Servant" probably thought himself quite *pretty*. Though "very black," he railed, Cyrus had been "active and ingenious in all sorts of Country Business, and is a good Butcher." Ralph Isaac made a similar report about his manservant. "Primas," he warned the readers of the *Connecticut Courant*, "is about 27 years old, trim built fellow, something yellowish; has pretty long hair for a negro, and I think has lost one of his toes: he lately run away from the Jersies and was taken up in this town." Prior to leaving with another slave, named Peter, the impertinent servant had been "a handy fellow, and pretty good carpenter." Understandably upset, Isaac also committed to print: "'tis likely he may have a pass, and change his name from Primas to Charles." In the same way, Stephen Turner's slave, also named Primas, Stephen Royce's Prince, and Ephraim Wheeler's Jack were all described as being "good" fiddlers. In 1784, when his "Negro servant named Enoch" ran, Jordon Post, Jr. characterized the "thick sett, pretty black" man as "great whistler." The same had been true of John Hartt's Isaac. Although he went away with only few clothes, his master revealed that the fifteen-year-old was "very witty," well-mannered, and "an excellent Whistler." An artful lad, Hartt believed Isaac once free would change his name. Struck by the slave's physical presence, Joseph Prout, as the agent of "Timothy Prout, Esq.," either his brother or father, described Caesar as a "good looking Fellow." Moreover, he thought the forty-year-old "well-sett" man "subtle, cunning, [and] sly." He "shows his fore Teeth considerably, especially when he laughs." The countenance of Mark Hunking's "Negro Servant" was also far from being that of the humbled, demure slave. Living in Barrington, New Hampshire, Caesar, "a straight

[20]*The Punished Self: Surviving Slavery in the Colonial South* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 154-55.

Limb'd Fellow about 5 Feet nine Inches high . . . bro't up to Farming Work" possessed a "smiling Countenance." Caesar grinned and smiled, his demeanor pretty, his mouth toothy and full "with myriad subtleties." Almost in admiration of the man's visage, Hunking reported that he has "very white Teeth." John Billings of Boston also described his absconded slave woman in pretty terms. "About 24 Years old," he observed that Dinah was a "handsome likely Wench."

Incidentally, Billings's description of Dinah potentially concealed an ugly aspect of New England master-slave relationships: sexual exploitation. During the 1730s, when the Boston slave owner posted the notice, 3 percent of the numbers of slave fugitives were described as mixed race persons; by the 1750s, 12 percent. Concerns over interracial sex might have been more conspicuous than these figures suggest. As early as 1705, New England legislators openly discouraged miscegenation.[21]

In a possibly patronizing tone, New England slave owners also noted their servants' prettiness when they acknowledged their mastery of their King's English. In the *New England Chronicle,* for instance, Elizabeth Symonds recalled that her "negro man named Pomp . . . speaks good English and can read tolerably well." In addition to carrying "away a green coat with metal buttons, a handsome hat, cut small, a durey coat, 2 kersey jackets lined with red baize, a black serge jacket, a lapel'd striped holland jacket, a sailor's white knotted jacket, a white holland shirt, a striped cotton and linen shirt, 2 check linen shirts, 2 woolen ditto, a pair of black knit breeches, 2 pair of shoes, a pair of silver shoe and knee buckles," she noted, exasperated at the end, that the presumptuous twenty-eight-year-old servant "carried away a piece of sprig'd stuff." Apparently during his flight toward freedom, Pomp stopped along the way to enjoy a piece of tobacco. Jo however, who belonged to "Mr. Samuel Capen of Dorchester," spoke "very good English."

[21]Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* pp. 27, 90-91, 94, 209-10, 214, 230, 231, 251, 296-97, 303, 27. For the quote from Dunbar's poem, see Paul Lawrence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask," *Norton Anthology of African American Literature,* ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y McKay, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 896; and "A Prince among Pretending Free-Men," pp. 98-100.

TABLE 1
LINGUISTIC PROFICIENCY OF NEW ENGLAND FUGITIVES

	Proficient				
	Speaks Excellent English	Speaks Well	Speaks Little	Speaks none	n/a
1730s	33%	1%	7%	2%	57%
1740s	41	3	5	0	51
1750s	39	4	14	0	43
1760s	41	5	3	0	51
1770s	30	3	6	0	61

Source: Antonio T. Bly, *Escaping Bondage: A Documentary History of Runaway Slaves in Eighteenth-Century New England, 1700-1789*. Maryland: Lexington Books, 2012.

When his Moses absconded, John Dennis described his "mulatto man . . . of a yellow complexion" as fluent as well. Aside from suspecting that "he has directed his course towards Bedford, in Dartmouth, and that he has got a pass with, dated last November," the Newport, Rhode Island slave owner thought his servant spoke "exceeding good English." Other New England owners also referenced their bondservants' command of their language. Instead of describing them as stammering or stuttering or as speaking broken or indifferent English, perhaps an early reference to *Gullah*, well over one-third of the runaways recorded in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire newspapers spoke "good English," if not better (table 1). Several fugitives were conversant in several European languages. In 1737, William Mirick informed the readers of the *Boston Gazette* that his servant Peter, whose "Hair is longer than Negro's hair commonly is . . . talks good French and Spanish, and pretty good English."[22]

While pretty concealed subtle forms of resistance, sass registered instances of slave agency. In western settings, sass

[22] Bly, *Escaping Bondage*, pp. 37, 45, 190, 268. For an overview, see my "A Prince among Pretending Free-Men," p. 101. My usage of the term "Gullah" references the creolized tongue that emerged throughout British America as a result of Africans from different ethnic backgrounds learning and modifying the language of their masters. See D. J. Dillard, *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United State* (New York: Random House, 1972).

traditionally signified impertinence, disrespectful speech, or talking back. A word of West African origin, it also signified confidence, assertiveness, and resilience. Associated with Eshu or Elegba, the trickster Orisha in the West African Yoruba religion (*Ifá*), sass functioned primarily as a verb, an expression of wit, or a verbal assault. Though there are undoubtedly similarities between European and African notions of sass, sass from an African–Atlantic perspective differs from its European and African counterparts in that its emphasis is not primarily negative in its connotation. Instead it is ambivalent in its intended signification. That is to say, sass is both positive and negative at the same time (table 3). By design, sass, like Eshu or Elegba, exemplifies the art of misdirection. In anthropological terms, it exemplifies what Clifford Geertz would call a "thick description." It is cognitive, pastiche, parody, and dexterous. Unlike pretty that denotes a cultural dictionary of semiotic meaning, sass is an encyclopedia in what it embodies.[23]

Unabashedly imitative in their declarations of independence, brazenly measured in their choice of apparel and accessory, mockingly cognitive of the challenges their flights posed to the authority of their masters, notices posted for absconded slaves documented numerous examples of sass. Besides his "pleasant Countenance for a Negro," Fortesque Vernon cautioned the public, Joseph was "a well sett Fellow" who spoke "little English, but can speak good French." When he left, he carried an assortment of apparel: "a felt Hat, and a Handkerchief about his Head, a blue double-breasted Jacket, and a strip'd homespun ditto, a cotton and linen Shirt, brown Serge Breeches, a Pair of polish'd Steel Knee Buckles, and red Garters to be seen below his Breeches, speckled Yarn Stockings, and a Pair of work'd Shoe Buckles which look like Silver." But perhaps more interesting or should we say sassy than his assorted bundle of clothing had been his fancy for baubles. Joseph, his master

[23]Joanne Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), chap. 1, esp. pp. 30-31; Geetz, *The Interpretation of Cultures,* pp. 6-7; Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation,* pp. 145-46.

recollected, had "Holes in both Ears, with several Turns of brass Wire through them." While it is reasonable to assume that the man traded some of the clothes he stole for food or a room, it is doubtful that he would forego wearing the earpieces. Although he was a slave, Joseph's earrings symbolized his vanity. Clearly he wore them proudly knowing that with them he asserted his liberty. In terms of his own design, Joseph defined himself. The same had been true of Cuber. When the "five & thirty Years of old" slave woman planned her flight in 1737 from "Mrs. Pullen," she took "a light coloured Riding Hood and a striped homespun Jacket & Petticoat" and "a pair of Gold Ear Kings in her Ears." As her distressed mistress complained, the bondservant not only thought herself pretty, but quite sassy as well. When James Smith's "French Negro named Francis" absconded, the "Sugar Baker" told the readers of the *Boston Evening Post,* the "well featured" man thought much of himself. "Taken from Martinico," the former West Indian slave "sometimes wears a Gold Ring in his Ear."[24]

Other New England fugitives demonstrated *sass* in different ways. When two of his slaves, a man named Robin, the other a woman called Jin, left in 1770, Benjamin Hale turned to the press. Not a day had passed before he employed the services of Thomas Green and his *Connecticut Courant*. Both were of middling stature, Hale reported. Both "spoke good English." Both stole a considerable amount of clothes. Robin carried away with him "one dark brown Coat one Great Coat light blue two blue Jackets, one white Cotton ditto one Beaver Hat, 5 Shirts, 2 Pair of Breeches, and sundry other Cloaths." Jin took with her: "4 Gowns, one white one Chince one Wollen strip'd, a Shalloon Quilt of a light Blue, a Pair of Stays, and many other Things." By Hale's account, Robin and Jin's bid for freedom seemed a concerted act. In anticipation of remaining gone for an indefinite period of time, they left with several changes of clothes.

Of particular interest among their assorted lot of clothing was Jin's *pair* of stays. Because the "wearing of stays," Baumgarten

[24]Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* pp. 35-36, 58, 99-100.

IMAGE 2.

explained, "was considered essential for the properly dress [*sic.*] lady in the eighteenth century Anglo-American culture. Stays did much more than just shape the figure into a cone from waist to bust or mold a tiny waistline" (image 2). Normally absent among the clothes that were given to slave women, stays affected not only Jin's form, but her walk as well. Put simply, Jin walked upright. In public, she appeared erect. Besides affording her the appearance of a lady in her own right, Jin's stays informed onlookers that she was indeed a free person. Instead of appearing shy, Jin appeared rather sassy.[25]

Caesar also expressed the aesthetic of sass in his own way. When he left John Woods of Groton in 1739, the "pretty short well set Fellow" carried "with him a Blue Coat and Jacket, a pair of Tow Breaches, a Castor Hat, Stockings and Shoes of

[25]Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* p. 207; Baumgarten, "'Clothes for the People,'" pp. 29-30.

his own, and a Blue Cloth Coat with flower'd Metal Buttons a white flower'd Jacket, a good Bever Hat, a Gray Wigg, and a pair of new Shoes of his Master's, with some other Things." Considering the notice printed in the *Boston Evening Post,* Woods believed that the bondservant did not act alone. "It is suspected," he brooded, "there is some white Person that may be with him or design to make Use of his Master's Apparel above described." Whether or not he stole the clothes for himself or perhaps to sell or give to someone else, the fact remains, he chose the clothes. If his intentions were to sell them, he brokered the deal. Furthermore, considering the items Caesar took, the "Gray Wigg" clearly stands out. In New England, wigs signified status; the ornament's color connoted respect. Much like Jin's stays, Caesar's wig represented an accessory most inappropriate for an African American, especially those who were enslaved. To possess the headpiece exclaimed sass; to don it something else. In the context of Grey Gundaker's study of African–Atlantic culture, Caesar's wig represents a type of textile *nsibidi,* an African informed graphic system in which language is communicated. By taking the wig, Caesar, ironically a Roman cognomen that meant hairy, articulated something of his aspiration to be free. Actually wearing the headpiece, however, would have highlighted or magnified that aspiration. Caesar, in short, might have crowned himself free. While we do not know for sure whether or not John Woods's slave actually wore the wig, Margaret Jeykll's had. In late September 1741, her slave Pompey "broke out of Bridewell." Besides revealing that the twenty-two-year-old man wore a "black Cloth Jacket, blue Cloth Breeches, gray Rib'd Stockings and new Shoes," the advertisement printed in the *Boston Gazette* observed that he "had on a black Lambskin Wigg." Cato also proved himself an equally sassy person. Four years after Caesar broke jail, Captain Joseph Hale's manservant ran away. A "short and small" man, Cato spoke "good English," he "can read and write," and he "understands farming Work." In addition to an extra pair of shoes, he "took with him a Violin, and can play well thereon." Likewise, the captain reported, Cato had been known to wear "a black wigg." Nathan Brown's mulatto servant

Warreson, Mathew Caldwell's Step, Joseph Moody's Prince, and several other New England slaves occasionally wore or were seen wearing wigs when they stole away. As a result, striking were their countenances; sassy, their demeanors.[26]

Perhaps more subtle were those expressions of *sass* that were noted in terms of slave kinesics. Like the pensive smirk of the hunter mask of the Dogon people of West Africa, the nonverbal traits slave masters observed in runaway advertisements concerning their people were not only elusive, but also complex in what they conveyed. Contrary to descriptions of bondservants as nervous and stammering, fugitive notices offer other examples of sass. In 1779, for example, three of Edward Hindman's slaves ran away. Although one of them by the name of Bud had a "down look" and he "speaks low," his master thought him quite crafty nonetheless. That is to say, despite his supposedly demure demeanor, the "thick, well built" man tended to "shew his teeth when he speaks," revealing subtly something of his true nature and the power of his beguiling downward glaze. Almost like a photograph, Hindman's description of Nabey who ran away with Bud captured the appearance of an equally sassy bondservant. She is a "low spoken [but] subtle crafty creature," he reported. The "well cloathed" couple was intent on leaving the colony. "It is most likely their design is to get on board some privateer," he suspected, "and its probable the girl may be dress'd in mens cloaths." In their endeavor to steal away themselves, Nabey's masculine apparel was surely sassy.

Other New England fugitives employed the mask of deference to veil their flights. In 1763, when Dimas, a country-born slave left his master in North Kingston, Rhode Island,

[26]Bly, *Escaping Bondage*, pp. 30, 60, 63, 87-88, 151, 154; Grey Gundaker, *Signs of Diaspora, Diaspora of Signs: Literacies, Creolization, and Vernacular Practice in Africa America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 42-44, 53. For a fuller discussion of *nsibidi*, see Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), pp. 227-29, 244-68. While Graham White and Shane White provide us an insightful account of slave hairstyles as expressions of self-worth, they overlooked this aspect of slave resistance, agency, and culture. "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries" *Jour. of Soc. Hist.* 61, no. 1 (February 1995): 45-76.

the downward-looking man revealed his true self by running away, carrying with him "a new Jacket and Breeches of Snuff colour'd" and a "forged Pass." In both the Providence and the Boston *Gazettes,* Lodowick Updike styled the "young Negro Man" as "subtle artful Fellow." Likewise, when Nathan Parker's "Negro Man named Cole" ran, he "took with him, a light blue Coat, and also a light Coat, a check Holland Jacket without Sleeves, a Pair of check and a Pair of white Trowsers, a new check and an old white Shirt, and a new Felt Hatt." In spite of his "demure Countenance" or perhaps because of it, he also "took with him a very good Gun, with the Name of his Master engrav'd at large on the Thumb Piece which was Silver and an old Sword." Clearly Lodowick Updike's servant was not the self-effacing person he thought.[27]

Whether by looking downward and avoiding eye contact or assuming a limp stance, fugitive slaves' demonstrations of deference unmistakably served as a cover for other designs. Not uncommon in West African societies, these articulations of sass recognized authority. But in the New World, they communicated something else. Misleading in their acknowledgement of power, runaways' downward looks functioned as a defense mechanism, a way of disengaging, averting, and redirecting the undesirable gazes of their watchful masters. In his study of Kongo influences on African-American culture, Robert Farris Thompson characterized one of these disarming, non-verbal stances: *nunsa*. A pose in which persons averted their heads, *nunsa* evaded anger and disapproval. If New England masters' references to fugitives' *surly* countenances concealed the fact that slaves used their bodies to express themselves, such

[27]Kenneth R. Johnson, "Black Kinesics: Some Non-Verbal Communication Patterns in Black Culture," *Perspective on Black English,* ed. J. Dillard (Hague: Mouton and Company, 1975), pp. 296-306; Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* pp. 120, 123, 223. For useful analyses of slaves demeanor, see Michael P. Johnson, "Runaway Slaves and the Slave Communities in South Carolina, 1799 to 1830," *WMQ* 38, no. 3 (July 1981): 432-33; Jonathan Prude, " To Look upon the 'Lower Sort': Runaway Ads and the Appearance of Unfree Laborers in America, 1750-1800," *JAH* 78, no. 1 (June 1991): 141-142, 153-54; Gwenda Morgan and Peter Rushton, "Visible Bodies: Power, Subordination and Identity in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World," *Jour. of Soc. Hist.* 39, no. 1 (Autumn, 2005): 43-47.

gestures also reveal another aspect of sass. *Telama,* for instance, is a gesture in which a person extends one's arm out in front of another person, motioning stop while the other hand rests with an angled arm on their hip. Like *nunsa,* its intent is redirection; it is neither hostile nor deferential. Perhaps these gestures were what Captain Thomas Lawton had in mind when he tried to describe his absconded servant to the readers of the *Boston News-Letter*. Caesar, a "Molatto Slave," is a "thick and well set" servant, he noted succinctly, "with "bushy Hair" and "a down Look and surly Countenance." Taken together both *nunsa* and *telama* gestures signified subterfuge, at once redirection and misdirection. Indeed, both represent a part of the complex cultural package Africans brought to America.[28]

Names afforded enslaved African Americans their most brazen expressions of the aesthetic. Reluctant to answer by another name, New England fugitives achieved pretty and sass. Such had been the case of Captain Benjamin Reed's bondservant. In 1753, Sambo left his master's house in Lexington. In addition to pretending "to be a Doctor," and carrying with him a Bible and "some other Books," he called "himself Samuel Hank." Captain Samuel Carlton of Salem told a similar story. When his "lusty Negro Fellow" Millet ran away, he observed that the fugitive had been "branded on his Breast, and talks good English." He also noted that the imposing "six Foot high" man had been "a Shoemaker by Trade, and carries his Tools in a Bag." Besides his tools Millet clearly thought he owned himself. Before itemizing what his absconded property carried with him, Carlton observed that the slave artisan preferred to be called by the name "Tom Brown." William Williams's Cato who "sometimes calls himself Archalus," John Salmon's "Andrew" who liked the name "Andress" better, and Samuel Miller's "Cato" who chose for himself "Jo Adams" all assumed alternative identifiers.[29]

[28]Johnson, "Black Kinesics," pp. 299-300; Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1981), pp. 167-69; 123-24; Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* p. 39.

[29]Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* pp. 29, 54-55, 59-60, 68, 93.

So too did Daniel Rogers's slave. The notice he placed in the *New Hampshire Gazette* portrayed inadvertently northern servitude as a complex struggle, a difficult negotiation between masters and slaves. In addition to describing Cato as a "spry" man, his master told neighbors that his slave "formerly went by the Name of Mingo." More than that, when the absconded slave named for either the Roman statesman or his grandson, a Stoic, left his owner, Rogers disparaged the slave as a "great Lyer, and very Cunning." Despite Cato's transgression however, the self-professed gentlemen and benevolent patriarch appeared more than willing to overlook his offense. "If he will return immediately," he explained, "he shall be forgiven this Time." Cato, who preferred to be called Mingo, however, did not take the bait. Instead, it appears that the crafty fugitive placed little confidence in his master's superficial and condescending magnanimity. Whenever the newspapers had been read aloud, he might have mused, somewhere in dark places, who indeed played the game of lying better, he or his master? Despite whoever won the imagined contest, the country-born man did not return. Rather, he remained at large for several weeks judging from the other advertisements his master printed in the *Gazette*. Like Rogers's Mingo, Joseph Foster's mulatto servant proved defiant. Describing his property in sassy terms, Foster reported that "he is a spry, likely-looking Fellow," but has been "guilty of running away." Although "he is not very Black, he passes for a free Man. He formerly went by the Name of Worrison, but has since changed it to Jonathan Spane." Evidently, Worrison did not like his new name and, in all likelihood, feigned ignorance when called. Joseph Callender, Jr. was also the ruler of an unruly kingdom and fought with his slave. Reflecting his own personal choice, Coffy preferred the name Sambo. In 1742, when Sambo ran away, his master, a Boston grandee, reported "he pretends he was freed by the Rev. M. Waldron of Boston, with whom he formerly lived."[30]

[30]Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* pp. 48, 100, 300.

TABLE 2
NEW ENGLAND NAMING PATTERNS FOR FUGITIVES

	Naming Categories					
Periods	African	Biblical	Classical	Work or Geographical	Anglo or Western	n/a
1730-39	27%	20%	15%	5%	21%	12%
1740-49	20	15	29	13	16	7
1750-59	18	15	29	10	20	8
1760-69	13	22	23	13	20	9
1770-76	9	13	26	14	28	10

Source: Antonio T. Bly, *Escaping Bondage: A Documentary History of Runaway Slaves in Eighteenth-Century New England, 1700-1789*. Maryland: Lexington Books, 2012.

The persistence of African names registers even stronger evidence of sass. While Africans represented 5 percent of the fugitive population, over twice the number of enslaved New Englanders who ran away had African names. Of the five hundred runaway slaves who appeared in newspapers printed in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire between 1730 and 1776, a little over 16 percent of those who protested with their feet names had African origins (table 2). Among the most common were Cudjoe, Quaco, and Cuffey for males and Juba, Mimbo, and Cuber for females. Most were names given for the day children were born. Cuffee, for instance, meant Friday among the Hausa-speaking peoples of western Africa. One of many lingua franca or trading languages, Hausa spanned the Gold and Slave coasts of the African continent—from modern-day Côte d'Ivoire to the Central African Republic. Correspondingly, Mimbo, Quash, and Juba are also day names for Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. Other African names were creolized variants. In 1749, "David Wallis of Woodstock" offers us one such example when his "Negro Man Servant, named Christmas alias Quosbe, a short Fellow" ran away. While "Quosbe" might be a deviation of Quas (clean and tidy), Quashey is the Hausa word for Sunday. In spite of its many negative connotations that can be traced back to the once popular character in antebellum minstrel

shows, "Sambo" is a word is of African origins. Among the Hausa-speaking peoples, it was the name given to second sons. By contrast, among the Kongo peoples of modern-day Angola, Gabon, Cameroon, and the Congo republics, "Sambo" signified a tribal mark, prayer, worship, and spiritual ascent. Aside from Christian names like Dinah, Moses, Emanuel and Mary, classical names like Scipio, Caesar, Cato, and Cloe, place or geographic names like London, Boston, Bedford, and Cambridge, western names like George, Hector, Violet, Pero, and Toney, enslaved New Englanders had names that reflected the day, time, or place of their birth or their order in a family. "Christmas" clearly highlights a holiday birth. The same is true of Major James Brown's bondservant. Robin, as he recalled, had sometimes been "call'd Christmas."[31]

Drawing on their African past, New England slaves also adopted names for themselves and their children that reflected traits or characteristics they had hoped to instill. "Abboo," for example, the name of Kathrin Kerr's "40 Years of Age" runaway servant meant "more" or "again" in the Efik tongue. In Arabic it meant father or patriarch. In a similar manner, "Mercy," the "Mulatto Wench" who belonged to the "Bunch of Grapes & Three Sugar Loaves in King Street," had probably been named by her parents. The name of Jerathmeel Rowers's "Molatto Slave" also reflects African traditions. In the Yoruba tongue, "Oney" or oni signified "sacred abode." Other fugitive names revealed the presence of Islam in pre-colonial Africa. Translated, the name of John Bulkey's slave girl "Billah" meant literally "by Allah" or with or belonging to God or Allah. In Arabic,

[31]Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* pp. 30-31, 79-80. For a fuller account of slave naming practice, see Newbell Niles Puckett, *Black Names in America: Origins and Usage* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1975), pp. 347-469; Lorenzo D. Turner, *Africanism in Gullah Dialect* (1949; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1969), pp. 31-190; J. L. Dillard, *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 123-35; Cheryll Ann Cody, "There Was No 'Absalom' on the Ball Plantation: Slave-Naming Practices in the South Carolina Low Country, 1720-1865," *America Historical Review* 92 (June 1987):563-96; Thornton, "Central African Names and African-American Naming Patterns," *WMQ* 50, no. 4 (October 1993):727-42; and Jerome S. Handler and JoAnn Jacoby, "Slaves Names and Naming in Barbados, 1650-1830," *WMQ* 53, no. 4 (October 1996): 685-728.

"Binah" signified wisdom. A variant of Malik, Jaleel Brenton's "Melech" meant king or lord.[32]

But perhaps the most interesting African names that appear in runaway advertisements are those for fugitives who combined African and American identities together and forged new ones in the New World. Though several fugitives, like Jonathan Black, Edward Stanley, John Batter, Nicholas Cunningham, Elijah Bartlet, Tom Scipio and others were sassy in their own right, those who adopted African and European titles were a particular lot. Muddying Ira Berlin's notion of charter generations that are thought to have disappeared by the early 1700s, these bold individuals embraced both their African past and their American present. These individuals might have served as cultural go-betweens in the thriving trans-Atlantic economy and thought themselves the equals of their American and European contemporaries.[33] In 1754, "a Negro Man Servant," named "Scipio Congo," left Philip Curtis who lived in Stoughton. By his master's account, Scipio Congo was of middling stature and had "irregular" teeth. In his notice printed in the *Boston Gazette,* Curtis revealed that Congo had some familiarity with maritime life because, in addition to being able to "read and write," the fugitive had "threatened" to "go to Sea." Most interesting however were his names. For unlike most enslaved New Englanders, he had two. Considering his surname, it appears that the "24 Years old" man might have once been a native of the Kongo people. If he were conversant in African and European languages, he could have served as an interpreter or he might have worked in the maritime trades. At one time, he might have even crossed the Atlantic. Whatever the case, one thing is certain: during the eighteenth century, Berlin's charter generation or the Atlantic creoles did not just drift away, quietly

[32]Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* pp. 35, 43-44, 61, 96-97, 135-36; Maneka Gandhi and Ozair Husainly, *The Complete Book of Muslim and Parsi Names* (1994; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 90, 261, 305-306, 311, 90, 261.

[33]Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), *Generations of Captivity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Linda Heywood and John Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

and silently, into the darkness of history. Quite the contrary, as Congo's story revealed, they persisted and carried on and left something of themselves behind. William Mingo provides us a similar story of creolization. "Born in New-England," Mingo probably had parents who had not forgotten their African past. In spite of the many horrors of slavery, they remembered. Like many black Yankees, Mingo's African day name reflected the day of his birth. Short for Domingo, Mingo means Sunday in Spanish and Portuguese. Like Scipio Congo, the New Hampshire slave spoke "good English" and deliberately stole away to pass for free.

When "Joseph Coffee, aged 37 Years" ran away, he did not leave alone. "He had with him," Theophilus Hopkins clarified, "a small Indian Sqauw." In all likelihood, the unnamed woman had probably been Coffee's wife. Considering the notice, the couple decided to leave after the "large Negro Man" had "lost both of his great Toes." Apart from registering another example of sass, Coffee's names reveal another example of enslaved African Americans struggling through life on their own terms. In the Hausa language, his African name meant "inspiring feeling of helpless fear" which is ironic considering how he might have lost his toes. In other words, Coffee might have proven an unruly slave, one who might have run away repeatedly. While there are few records in New England that address the punishments of runaways, fugitive advertisements nonetheless often include evidence of the brutal marks of servitude. The slave made flesh the spirit of his name. Fearlessly, Coffee might have distressed his owner who thought that by maiming the man he would compel him to stay put. His master failed; Coffee was determined to be free.[34]

Besides pretty and sass, notices for New England fugitives document what Robert Farris Thompson defines as the aesthetic of the cool or *itutu,* which translates as "mystic coolness." An expression of African-Atlantic culture, the cool signifies control and balance, harmony and creativity, emotion and spirit, healing and purification. It is percussive, polyrhythmic,

[34]Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* pp. 95-96, 126, 173; Puckett, *Black Names,* p. 370.

improvisational, a call and response, and derisive. Although there are similarities between the African and European notions of the cool as an expression of self-control, in Thompson's view the aesthetic differs from its western counterpart in terms of context. Unlike the western notion of cool which signifies primarily calm, composure, and hedonistic individuality, its African counterpart signifies spiritual symmetry and communality, articulated not only during times of immense stress or strain but also during times of pleasure or ecstasy. Symbolically, itutu is the ultimate representation of sass. It is Geertz's "deep play." Far above and beyond the cognitive aestheticism of sass, it appears on the surface irrational. Underneath however, it signifies much more. Like the ivory carved masks of old Benin or the bronze head sculptures of the Yoruba, it appears on the surface stoic, glazed eye and emotionless, unmoved and precise. But in actuality, it is a deep articulation of religious bliss or ecstasy, kissing symbolically the sky, the preverbal face of the gods. In other words, itutu is a moment of communion with the ancestors[35] (see table 3).

While Thompson has uncovered features of this graceful "mask of calm" in African-Atlantic art, in the bricolage of African-American yard and garden work, the poetic ebb and flow of Brazilian capoeira, the multifaceted textile work of African-American quilters, and in the brilliant street graffiti that appears on buses in Haiti, the cool can be found in eighteenth-century America slave culture as well. In the glaring stare of a New England fugitive, there is one of many examples. In 1760, after Prince, the Rogers' family slave, absconded, Mary Rogers recalled that the black servant "looks very serious and grave, and pretends to a great deal of Religion." A self-proclaimed "New-Light," Prince's newfound sense of faith might explain the bondservant's cool demeanor that differed profoundly from the measured downward look of other runaway slaves. His

[35]Robert Farris Thompson, *Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music* (New York: Periscope, 2011), pp. 1-7, 16-23. For a fuller account of cool in a western context, see Dick Pountain and David Robins, *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

TABLE 3
EXPRESSIVE AESTHETIC CHARACTERISTICS IN THE AFRICAN-ATLANTIC WORLD

		Cultural Traits		
Aesthetics	Alternate Names	African	European	African-Atlantic
Cool	Itutu (Yoruba)	Spiritual	Attitude	Spiritual
	Zizika (Kongo)	Transcendental	Ego	Transcendental
	Talala (Ashanti)	Communal	Individual	Sublime
Sassy	Lafojundi (Yoruba)	Brazen, bold	Brazen, bold	Artful
	Kabalu (Kongo)	Saucy	Saucy	Shrewd, Nimble
	Sese/sisi (Ashanti)	Impertinent	Impertinent	Cunning, Adroit
Pretty	Lęwa (Yoruba)	Handsome	Handsome	Dignity
	Nkenga (Kongo)	Beautiful	Beautiful	Somebody-ness
	Fe Fe (Ashanti)	Attractive	Attractive	Pride

experiences with death firsthand might also explain the widow's reference. According to a history of the Rogers family, Prince attended his mistress's sons, Robert and Richard, as their personal body-servant during the French and Indian War. Whilst his masters defended both God and Britannia's glory in America, the sable evangelical cooked their meals, cleaned their clothes, and served as their tailor and barber. On occasion, in the thick of battle, he might have even fought alongside his owners. "He was in the Service the last Year," his mistress recounted, "and has offer'd to inlist sundry Times, pretending himself to be a Free-man." Sometime before he claimed he had owned himself, Prince got smallpox. After returning from Fort William Henry, Richard Rogers contracted the pox and shortly thereafter died of the disease. Surviving smallpox and the many horrors of war, Prince's cool, his stony "looks" might have reflected a serenity one finds in surviving death, much like the introverted and yet distanced gaze slave artist Scipio Morehead captured in his portrait of Phillis Wheatley whose writings were fixated on the subject of death and transformation. Either way, evangelism might have provided solace from

the graphic, disturbing, and distressing events he had witnessed firsthand.[36]

James Smithwick observed a similar remoteness in his slave's stare. Boston, perhaps named for city of his birth, had "a very serious Look." Brought "up to the Sugar-Baking Business in this Town," the skilled slave gained the ire of his owner who elected to send him to the West Indies: Grenada. Purportedly, Boston did not care much for his new surroundings. Not long after becoming the property of one "Daniel Campble" he not only left, but also got "on board some Vessel bound" for home. In addition to describing the man, the captain advised the readers of the *Boston Gazette* that his absconded slave "speaks good English." Like Prince, Boston's cool demeanor might have been inspired by religion. "He can read," Campble observed, "in a Psalter, and at Times very fond of Singing Psalm Tunes." Like Prince, Boston might have discovered solace in a religion which manifested itself in a cool appearance.[37]

The cool of other Black Yankees was also documented, perhaps mistakenly, as an aloof gaze. Neither demure nor defiant, itutu might have been what Joseph Raynolds noticed when his "Negro Man named Pero" ran away in 1782. "A quiet peaceful fellow," the Rhode Island slave owner remembered, the "5 feet 7 inches high" man "looks somewhat sleepy with his eyes." By contrast, Primus's look elicited fear. It was intense, almost threatening. In 1748, when he went away, he carried with him "a good Kersey Coat and Breeches, a Tow Shirt and Trowsers, a good Felt Hat, Stockings and Shoes." Besides recounting his age and the "Wen on the Joint of one of his great Toes," Joseph Clap of Situate remembered that "he looks up glaring with his Eyes." Like the jarring, polyrhythmic energy of free jazz music, Primus's glare warranted mention by his master. In all likelihood, Clap thought the servant's gaze an evil stare. A malevolent look, one that many Africans and Europeans believed

[36]Thompson, *Aesthetic of the Cool,* p. 28; Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* p. 141; Robert J. Rogers, *Rising Above Circumstances: The Rogers Family in Colonial America* (Bedford, Canada: Sheltus & Picard, 1998), pp. 8-9; 12-13, 115-87, 200-01.

[37]Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* pp. 162-63.

possessed the power to cause harm, the evil eye embodied several elements of Thompson's mask of the cool. Pulsating in intensity, for example, it is percussive. Without utterance, as the advertisement Clap had printed in the *Boston Weekly News-Letter* makes plain, it is nonetheless a call and response. In its intent to injure or conjure misfortune, Primus's glaring eyes mocked his master's authority, critiquing subtly his condition as a slave. Within an African-Atlantic context, the bondservant's deportment of the cool might have actually represented a solicitation, a plea to his ancestors for help.[38]

While the Whites' seminal study of enslaved African Americans' fondness for certain clothing that rejected their master's notions about how they should dress registers other instances of the cool, missing are the stories of those who achieved the aesthetic in other ways. In addition to the clashing (*kengi*) textures and textiles, the visually percussive patchworks of intense red, yellow, green, and blue hues slaves wore, New England fugitives' choices in accessories embodied itutu. Amid the striped pants and white cotton stockings and coarse jackets and checkered linen shirts and silk handkerchiefs and scarlet broad coats and vests, all which gave the appearance of *mamio* or textile patchwork, an uniquely American type of *kinte* cloth attire of slaves, there were also numerous pairs of pumps and shoes with silver buckles, brass, glass, or metal button coats, and gold-trimmed hats. Like their counterparts in the South, northern slaves fancied bright colors partly because the vivid energy and high optical effect invoked their African past in which color signified power, wealth, and status. "A blending of styles and taste," as Piersen put it, "marked the dress of black New Englanders. The slaves brought an African eye to European materials and created something new out of their owners' used clothing and their own purchases. The black style of dress in New England, as for enslaved people elsewhere,

[38]Bly, *Escaping Bondage*, pp. 79, 269. For useful accounts concerning the evil eye, see *The Evil Eye: A Folklore Casebook*, ed. Alan Dundes (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), pp. 181-200 and *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah (New York: Rutledge, 2004), pp. 121-22.

encouraged a contrasting celebration of life in bright colors, demonstrating joy in physical attractiveness. The boldness of this affirmation was generally considered unseemly by white observers, probably because they belied what they believed should be the humble demeanor and position of bondsmen." In a world in which clothes communicated status, many slaves' choices made sense in both an African and European context. With the proper apparel, a slave could redefine him- or herself as free. They could assume numerous occupations and successfully hire themselves out. Momentarily, they could probably secure room and board and could be both pretty and sassy. More than that, by accessorizing, enslaved African Americans could also achieve the cool.[39]

Clashing colors and textiles notwithstanding, fugitive slaves fancied shining things, sparkling and reflective surfaces, surfaces that symbolized water signs. To use a colloquial term, they liked bling. Tracing the roots of the aesthetic back to the Yoruba, Kongo, Ejagham, Mende, and other West African peoples, Thompson noted that water symbols like shells, sand, and reflective surfaces like glass, mirrors, and polished rocks embodied best the cool because, metaphorically, it personified calm and tranquility, inertia and enormous power. Water represented the spirit divide between the world of the living and the world of the ancestors. Long before the Greeks believed that the river Styx formed the boundary between Earth and the land of the shades or spirits, well before Christian traditions conceptualized baptism in terms of spiritual death and rebirth, African peoples throughout the continent believed that water separated the living from the dead. Among the people of the Kongo, for example, "the horizontal line divides the mountain of the living world from its mirrored counterpart in the kingdom of the dead." The Wolof people of Senegambia held fast to this belief. To reach the land of their ancestors, David

[39]White and White, *Stylin'*, chaps. 1–4; Piersen, *Black Yankees*, p. 101. *Mamio* is a type of patchwork textile linked to West African cultures. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 217.

P. Gamble revealed, the Wolof believed that the souls of the deceased had to traverse a body of water. The Bambara people of Senegambia, the Tshi- or Twi-speaking peoples of the Gold Coast, the Ewe-speaking peoples of the Slave Coast, and the Edo-speaking peoples of the Bight of Biafra also shared this belief which explains, incidentally, the universal custom of libation in African cultures.[40]

Not surprisingly, it is in these traditions that we find the most likely source for slave choices in accessories. For many, glass, brass, and metal buttons, shining silver buckles, and gold-laced hats and garments had deep resonance. In the mind of many slaves, the shimmering characteristics of those articles might have reflected the symbol of water as a spiritual medium. In this context, slave clothing served two purposes. One invoked the aesthetic of sass in that it reflected slaves' choices about what to wear. The other reflected the aesthetic of the cool in that it spoke to deeper meanings of taste, fancy, and whim. Joseph Homan's "Negro Man, named Jack," for example, provides us one of many illustrations of the cool as both textile and texture. In 1770, the runaway, "born in Martinico," took with him "a blue Coat with Mohair Buttons, a black Jacket with black Glass Buttons, blue Breeches with white metal Buttons, and a red worsted Cap." Visually, the man's color palette was far from subdued. Indeed, in African-Atlantic terms, it invoked immense power. The colors blue and white, for instance, are illustrative of water and "mystic coolness." Both are favored by the Yoruba *orisha Yemaja* who personifies the ocean, the source of mankind, and the essence of motherhood. Likewise, among the Akan-speaking people of West Africa, blue signifies the sky, peace, and harmony, while white signifies purification.

[40]Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit,* p. 109; David P. Gamble, *The Wolof of Senegambia* (London: International African Institute, 1967), p. 71; Gwendolyn Mildo Hall, *African in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), p. 45-50; A.B. Ellis, *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast of West Africa* (1887; repr., Anthropological Publications, 1970), p. 150-57; A.B. Ellis, *The Ewe-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1890), p. 105-108; R.E. Bradbury, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria* (London: International African Institute, 1964), p. 53.

The alluring color red, in contrast, connotes danger, power, and death. In the Yoruba culture, it is the preferred color of *Shango,* the *orisha* of fire, lighting, and drums. Among the Akan-speaking peoples, red signifies blood and death. Graphically, Jack's "white Buttons," another water color, and his smoldering "black Glass Buttons" clashed or *kengi* against his red cap. Deliberately, they stood out. Purposefully Jack made a statement of fashion. His clothes sought the attention of others. They demanded acknowledgement and represented a pictorially percussive, polyrhythmic call and response.[41]

In his bid to be free, the former slave seemed a bit overdressed. Surely the safer course in his endeavor would have been to dress down, to dress the part of a bondservant, fading thus into the background of colonial New England life. Anticipating subterfuge, Homan warned the public at large that his fugitive slave might change his "Cloaths, as he had more at Beverly." Whether or not he made it to Beverly, we might not ever know. One thing however is certain. In his appearance, Jack's clothes were cool. And although he spoke "bad English," an observation that might conceal an African past, the fifty-year-old man owned himself, if but for a time.[42]

In the context of Thompson's study of Kongo influences on African American culture, Jack's bling, that is, his bright "white Buttons" and his shimmering "black Glass Buttons" were the cool because they resembled water characteristics, much as his blue-colored coat. In an African context, they probably functioned as a type of invocation in textile, as an appeal to his ancestors for guidance. Taken together, Jack's sparkling buttons, blue coat, and red cap represent symbolically a form of *nkisi,* a spiritual talisman, as Thompson has explained, that beseeched ancestors for protection. The bondservant remembered his ancestors, much like Sukey, a colonial Virginia slave woman had

[41]Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit,* pp. 12, 87-97. In Thompson's study of African American culture, the color red embodies the spirit of the orisha Shango and therefore the power to cure and destroy. In Piersen's study, the color red, specifically red-colored textiles, were at the center of tragic stories in which Africans were tricked and carried to the New World. Piersen, *Black Legacy,* pp. 35-42.

[42]Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* p. 183.

when she purchased a looking glass in John Hook's store. Consequently, midway between the townships of Marblehead and Beverly, Jack's choice of clothing besides documenting sass reflected his African background with the clothes signifying the cool, a real and imagined defense against those who would return him to his master.[43]

William Vernon's Robin proved an equally cool character. Like Jack, Robin understood the importance of dress. The morning of his flight, the "16 & 17 Years of Age" boy had on an arresting assortment of clothes. The "yellow Complection" fellow, his master reported at the time of his absconding, wore "a dark blue German Serge Coat with Mohair Buttons of the same Colour, a red Plush Jacket, check Shirt, dark Breeches, light-coloured blue Worsted Stockings, and small round Silver Buckles in his Shoes." In addition to the clothes he had worn, he had taken a bundle of "green flower'd Russel Banyan, blue Serge Breeches, a pair light blue Stocking, and an Ozenbrigs Frock." Like Jack, Robin did, nonetheless, have a destination in mind. He is "gone to Chelsea," his master explained. With the North Star at his back, he headed toward freedom. In that endeavor, his silver-buckled shoes, "red Plush Jacket," and "blue Worsted Stockings" were not only an articulation of the cool, but also a *nkisi* talisman, when considering his clashing color palette and contrasting textiles.[44]

The verbal dexterity New England fugitive slaves demonstrated in their efforts to be free other patterns of the cool. Not to be confused with those who spoke "good English" or "very good English," runaways who were "talkative," who were verbose, garrulous, and excessively conversational demonstrated cool in a different manner. In potentially precarious environments, these masters of language mesmerized jailors, charmed

[43]Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* p. 183; Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit,* pp. 117-31. Suckey was a slave woman who belonged to Richard Stith, a colonial Virginian justice. In "Suckey's Looking Glass: African Americans as Consumers," Ann Smart Martin explored her life as a consumer, focusing specifically on her purchase of a mirror as representing a nuanced crossroads where African and European cultural ideas met. *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 173-93.

[44]Bly, *Escaping Bondage,* pp. 129-30.

would-be slave patrols, and persuaded prospective employers or bosses to let them go. In smooth-talking, insinuating ways, they embodied the cool. When "Charles Ward Apthorp of Boston," for example, turned to the press to help find his absconded slave, he described the "sturdy well set Fellow" as "talkative." To be sure, Cato's gregariousness earned him a reputation or, as his master put the matter, he "is pretty well known" about town. Although Cato wore a variety of colorful clothing, Apthorp made it a point to observe his man's loquaciousness. That is to say, even though he spoke "bad English," perhaps a dialect that resembled *Gullah*, Cato managed to endear himself to the residents of Boston. Speaking a peculiar mixture of African and English, the "bangy legg'd" man's oratory appeared to have charmed Bostonians. Reportedly chatty, Cato must have disarmed and won over people with his words whose music-like cadences were probably thought pleasing to the ear, if not always clear as to their intent. Like his choice of clothing, a "blue cloth Jacket and whitish cloth Breeches, both trm'd with red, and metal Buttons, a blue and white check'd linen Coat, a Cloth coloured Camblet Coat, and Drab Surtout Coat with Horse Hair Buttons," Cato's spoke in cool tones that did not alert the public to the fact that he was a fugitive. Just days after his bondservant broke free of "a pair of iron handcuffs," Caleb Humastun gave similar report. In the *Connecticut Courant*, he described Boston as "pretty talkative and flattering." Boston "will tell any story to deceive," he continued, "so as to prevent being secured." Whilst betraying perhaps a measure of pride in his slave man's cunning character, Humastun cautioned the public accordingly: "Whoever shall take him up is cautioned to take care he don't again escape." Mary Roger's Prince, William Home's Caesar, and Isaiah Thomas' Charles Perril also demonstrated the gift of gab.

Like fugitive slaves elsewhere in British America, New England runaways were pretty, sassy, and cool. George Babcock certainly thought so. In 1772, when his "Mulatto Man" left, the South Kingstown slave owner noted that when "he went away," the determined man had on "a dark mixed coloured broad cloth

coat, trim'd with black, a brown cut plush waistcoat, a pair of black knit breeches, a checked shirt, worsted stockings, calfskin shoes, and silver buckles." Pero, the slave, also took "a felt hat, had a white Holland shirt, and check'd trowsers with him." Like many other pretty slaves, he strutted. He "goes leaning forward," his master explained, "and swing [*sic*] his arms very much when he walks." Like many sassy New England runaways, he styled his hair. By Babcock's recollection, Pero had cut his hair "short on the top of his head, and left longer in his neck and foretop." He was also cool. Or, as his masters informed the readers of the *Newport Mercury,* the well-clad, swaggering man was "very talkative."

Goree had also been pretty, sassy, and cool. The vignette of the young man's life concealed in the advertisement Daniel Vose had bought in the *Boston Evening Post* revealed an equally complex and rich story like Pero's, one in which he had emancipated himself, fought against the odds, and forged a new life in a new world. Indeed, like John Wakefield's "Bonney" and Shubael Downs's "Five," Goree's name not only captured aspects of his unique experience in the Atlantic world, but also highlighted his resolve to be free and is demonstrative of the complexities of New England slave resistance, agency, and culture. A recent arrival, the African-born man was given an impersonal place or pejorative name. As "Bonney" had probably been named for a port, river, if not a kingdom in Africa and "Five" for the number of servants Downs procured for a particular day, Vose, in all likelihood, had named him after Goree Island, a port island from which New England's slave traders acquired many of their slaves.[45]

Like *Venture* Smith and *Phillis* Wheatley, whose names can also be traced back to their trans-Atlantic experience, Goree's name reflected his painful journey from Africa to America. What he made of it all, we may never know. Still, we can nonetheless ascertain one thing for sure. When he left, Goree "took away with him" something more than just an ambiguous

[45]Piersen, *Black Yankees,* pp. 6-7; Lorenzo Green, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (1942; repr., New York: Athenum, 1974), pp. 37-38.

identifier. Conceivably, the bondservant might have even chosen the name for himself, as a reminder of what he had lost, as a keepsake of what he had endured. In either case, Goree's flight documented pretty, sassy, and cool in his own way.[46]

[46]For a fuller account of Goree Island and the slave trade, see George E. Brooks's *Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003).

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