

What Does “Sambo” Mean?

One of the beliefs that was crucial to the success of the transatlantic slave trade was that slaves, in general, were happy with their condition. Sure, there were a few troublemakers, but the general story slaveowners told themselves was that Africans could tell that they were being brought into a higher order of civilization, and were grateful for it. Also, they drew a real and widely accepted distinction between “paternal, benevolent” slavery and “cruel” slavery. Many slaveowners claimed that “cruel” slaveowners gave slavery a bad name. This was a fundamental part of the psychological acrobatics that something like the slave trade makes humans do to themselves. A mass commitment to self-delusion was necessary to fight the guilt. Slaves, too, played their part in convincing their masters they were happy—life was easier that way. Slaveowners didn’t see troublemakers as expressing the general feeling of other slaves, they were seen instead as “bad” slaves and a bad influence, and the sooner they could be punished or removed from the group, the sooner everybody could go back to being happy. So, over time, savvy slaves learned to manipulate these expectations, and slip on and slip off social masks when their masters were around. You know this, cuz you’ve done it. Have you ever been slacking off at work, and then your boss comes around and you start working harder and talking about how much you like your job? Or you’ve been working all day and you fake an appointment when your boss asks you to do one more thing before you leave? We do it because we want to keep our jobs or get promotions, slaves did it because they didn’t want to be seen as troublemakers, but the spirit is the same. When people exert power over you, they are in a position to make you act in ways you might not normally act. Slave historians have given the name the “Sambo” mask to explain this phenomenon of slaves acting like they were happy when their masters were around or making excuses to get out of work, but then relaxing into a more authentic self when around other slaves.

The 1791 Haitian Revolution, just off the Florida coast, shattered many Americans’ delusions that slaves were happy with being slaves. This was the first time that a slave rebellion had completely overthrown and ousted their colonial government—the French—and it convinced many Southern slaveowners that any slave was a potential threat. Southern towns started enforcing laws that controlled where slaves could go and what they could do there. In 1800, Gabriel’s Rebellion in Virginia led many Southern states to tighten those restrictions even further. Slavery became even more restrictive after 1822’s Denmark Vesey Rebellion in South Carolina, and even moreso after the Nat Turner Revolt in 1831, again in Virginia. This was the atmosphere under which Abraham Lincoln’s strongly antislavery Republican Party came into power. Southern states felt their economic system under attack from every side. And it meant war.

And something strange happened over time. Since the notion of race involved combining physical attributes with behaviors, part of the construction of the black race became that blacks were naturally good-natured, but lazy. It was around these stereotypes that the Jim Crow minstrel show and the Andy Amos radio show would gain national acclaim for hilarity. America became comfortable with the shucking, jiving, smiling black face. These perceptions invaded media and popular culture, especially in the years after slavery ended, which resulted in the backlash called the New Negro Movement, where

people like W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey tried to finally disprove all of the negative stereotypes from slavery. They didn't quite get them all, though.