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> I'm gonna do like a Chinaman . . . go and get some hop
> Get myself a gun . . . and shoot myself a cop.
> —Mamie Smith, "Crazy Blues" (Gussow 10)

ON A SWELTERING EVENING INTERMITTENTLY COOLED BY SHOWERS, Robert Charles and his younger roommate Lenard Pierce emerged from their New Orleans flat both wearing coats with the visible bulges of matching .38 Colt revolvers. Looking forward to a night with two of Charles's women friends, Pierce likely had not conceived of the twists and turns their immediate future would take. After stopping at Charles's sister's house, the men sat on the front steps of a home in a racially mixed neighborhood waiting for the two women. A dubious Pierce was likely not surprised by how soon they drew the attention of the Sixth precinct's police sergeant, who was responding to a report of "two suspicious Negroes." But Pierce was probably shocked by how dramatically Charles departed from the script of black deference to white civic and social authority when approached by three police officers. A patrolman named Mora later recalled that as he and two other officers questioned Charles and Pierce, "the larger of the two Negroes got up" in a threatening manner. Feeling imperiled by Charles's size, Mora reportedly grabbed him and began beating him with his billy club. After Charles freed himself from Mora's grasp, each drew his gun and fired a number of shots at the other. Charles's bullets struck officer Mora in the leg and grazed one of his fingers before Charles disappeared down the street. Still in shock, the officers arrested Pierce and called in the shooting, which sparked one of the bloodiest race riots in New Orleans history. Over the next five days, the incident completely dislodged city residents from a relatively peaceful racial coexistence as bands of white civilians rampaged through black neighborhoods searching for Charles (Hair 116-20).

Robert Charles's brazen self-defense against police brutality is astonishing because of where and when he lived. Roughly six months into the twentieth century, Charles lived in an American South where a likely innocent Sam Hose had recently been dismembered and cooked in the fast flames of a kerosene bonfire before thousands of revelers. He lived in a city where police brutalized blacks nightly, often condemning them to perish on one of the chain gangs, convict labor plantations, or turpentine camps across the South. He also found himself at the end of a decade of brutal lynchings that claimed the lives of scores of blacks each year ("Three Men Shot"; "10 Die"). Given these circumstances, what made men like Charles choose to fight and die rather than acquiesce?

In order to understand Charles's reaction, we need to understand how he fits into the broader context of African American history. Consciously or not, Charles mirrored the archetype of the African American badman hero which originated in Anansi spider and animal African trickster tales smuggled to the Americas in the memories of chained Africans. The badman hero model that partly informed Charles's actions emerged as an essential component of black culture during slavery. Similarly, it served as the apex of white fears of black masculinity, particularly during and after Reconstruction. Just as men like Charles and popular black folk heroes such as Stagolee and Railroad Bill personified an exaggeration of black disorder, violence, and masculinity, they also symbolized the black self and cultural defense ideologies that Negrophobic Southern whites condemned with Malthusian and social Darwinist ideas. Still, regardless of the questionable efficacy of the black badman hero, his model represented a format for resistance that we see historically in black popular culture and in the actions of men like Robert Charles.

In *From Trickster to Badman*, folklorist John W. Roberts addresses the evolution of African trickster characters into outlaw figures by analyzing the function of black folklore in different stages of African American history. He concludes that black communities forged after emancipation experienced diminished "social restraints against certain types of actions which violated the law" owing to the "brutality of black treatment by the law" (198, 197). Roberts also attends to the dilemma caused by the violent, self-centered, and often nihilistic actions of the badman for black citizens. In "transforming their conception of the trickster to create a folk hero whose actions unfolded primarily in the black community, African Americans had to be concerned with the consequences of condoning behaviors that potentially threatened both

their communal values and [their] well-being" (199). My analysis of the creation of the black badman hero figure in the African American popular imagination builds on Roberts's work by exploring the efficacy of socially subversive behaviors in the construction of black identity. It also considers immorality and illegality in the development of black communal and public consciousness in slavery and freedom, and in the course of implementing resistive behaviors. By analyzing the exploits of Robert Charles and thereby interrogating the application of the badman archetype in a historical context, I argue that the badman hero's persona was not only a model of resistance based on fantasy, but also became a valid option for blacks responding to constant threats to their lives and freedoms. Although it is impossible to determine whether or not Charles envisioned himself as fulfilling the folkloric and heroic deeds of storied black outlaws, for African Americans dealing with Southern Redemption measures and Jim Crow policies at the turn of the century, Charles's insurrection actualized the most cathartic aspects of badman hero narratives.

During slavery, African trickster tales and characters such as Br'er Rabbit composed a seminal aspect of black cultural creation and acted as a support around which blacks organized their sense of individualism. Remembering and telling tales involved slaves in a process of culture-building and self-validation that became essential aspects of their survival. Cogently assigning meaning to the lives of enslaved blacks, these narratives focused on social struggle and brimmed with themes of toppled hierarchy. Tales informed the manners, habits, and goals of the black community and often served as a means of education and cultural transference. Although they may have lacked technical information, their didactic elements could often be found in their treatment of moralism. Declining to teach moral rectitude, mythological narration instead instructed slaves on how to get by in their compromised condition.[1]

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[1]See Levine 90-91. It is easy to understand why slaves were attracted to stories that gave power to the powerless or that allowed mischief to vanquish authority. Some scholars argue that Africans identified with the witty and cunning trickster whose inferior status in the natural order of animals mirrored their own social status in the human world. Others argue that the trickster's use of immoral deception against white moral superiority reflected the oral tradition's African roots and the moral debasement of blacks in American society. Roberts treats these ideas in *From Trickster to Badman*; see also Piersen.

These narratives contain critical points of connection with an African past. Although tales told by American slaves differed from those found in African folklore, the social and cultural meaning in black memory remained the same. African American slaves used folk tales in the same ways that their African ancestors had: as social and psychological armor that protected identity and suffused struggle with comedy and communal meaning. In his important study of African folk tales, English anthropologist R. S. Rattray explains that African Ashanti tales allowed public ridicule and open dissection of commonly avoided or taboo subjects. The custom of telling folk tales with various social implications gave Africans a sort of liberation from the "psychoanalyst's theory of 'repressions'" by creating an outlet for the madness engendered by oppressive social hierarchy (Rattray x-xii). Similarly, historian Lawrence Levine described slave tales as the "books" of the bondsmen that gave meaning to their lives and histories and provided a vehicle for channeling the "sicknesses" of slavery's hatred, anger, and frustration. In the tales, the impotent find power, the often brutalized becomes the brutalizer, and justice, based upon cathartic retribution, is promptly served (Levine 118).

Reflecting generally accepted positions in society, the anthropomorphized animals in trickster tales played out conventional or desired patterns of human behavior. Rabbit or Monkey triumphant over Wolf symbolized the agriculturalist surviving a harsh, rainless year or the villager finding momentary atonement in a social construction hardened against him. Likewise, the predatory Wolf, Lion, or Bear embodied the greedy, untrustworthy chief or the inhospitable earth left parched by a stingy rain god. Weaker and smaller than his adversary, the trickster prevailed with earthly wit and cleverness and often temporarily danced on the branches above the head of his oppressor.

Br'er Rabbit tales in particular, told during slavery and across the post-Emancipation South, comprised a central aspect of black cultural articulation well into the twentieth century. In Br'er Rabbit we see the prototype of the slave trickster and folkloric badman heroes such as Railroad Bill, Stagolee, and Robert Charles. Standing in the shadow of his formidable foes, Rabbit defends himself against the brutality of Wolf and Bear, constantly outwits Fox and Alligator, and emerges uninjured from numerous dilemmas, often at the expense of another animal's life. His dogged self-interest emphasizes caution and diligence and places thought and guile far above strength and power. Rabbit eagerly promotes a sense

of resourcefulness specifically tailored to the interests of the slave, including securing food, eschewing abuse, and protecting one's family. Moreover, his sense of self-defense was an inspirational tool that gave blacks a rare glimpse into the possibility of justice and reparation in a world that seemed devoid of it.

In the tale of Tar Baby, Rabbit's emulative model of resourcefulness and clever self-preservation is made most plain. Giving in to his curiosity and peevishness, Rabbit finds himself stuck to a doll covered in tar and turpentine and planted as a trap by Wolf, but saves himself with quick thinking. As Wolf carries him towards the river with plans of watching him drown, Rabbit convinces him that a thorny death in the briar patch would be a more grisly way to die. After Wolf tosses him into the bush, he makes his escape by hanging between the branches and freeing himself from his sticky captor. In another tale, Rabbit not only survives but seeks revenge. When Wolf traps him inside of the hollowed trunk of a tree and sets it on fire, Rabbit escapes through a hole and thanks Wolf for a great meal of melted honey inside. Running to inspect the tree for himself, Wolf is sealed inside the trunk and roasted to death by Rabbit. In yet another tale, Pig makes the mistake of trusting Fox, who takes refuge in his house during a storm. When Pig begins to realize Fox has placed him on the night's menu, he pretends to hear a pack of hunting hounds outside and hides Fox in a barrel into which he promptly pours a boiling cauldron of peas. (Harris; Levine 106-07).

These mischievous and entertaining tales of the weak overcoming the strong taught African Americans valuable lessons about surviving in the "peculiar institution" and beyond. They prepared slaves to ignore the moral implications of retributive actions such as stealing, lying, or occasionally defending themselves against authority. The Tar-Baby story emphasized the misstep in foolish curiosity and petulance while promoting the use of illusion against stronger foes. Rabbit's burning revenge on Wolf made clear the need to understand and respond to the ways of the powerful without moral rectitude limiting retribution. And Br'er Pig's close brush with Wolf's jaws highlighted the folly of trusting the intentions of one's oppressor. Furthermore, the clever Rabbit was often far too concerned with material gain to stop at survival or even revenge. He found motivation in extra food, wealth, dignity, and sexual desire and was often determined to acquire each by manipulation and trickery rather than through the futility of hard work and equity. Br'er Rabbit, therefore, not only served as a parable for survival, but also

ignited in the slave a blaze of individualism that the drudgery and torment of enslavement commonly eclipsed.

While these tales hardly influenced slaves to burn their masters alive or scald them with boiling peas, they informed and reflected a consciousness of the iniquities of slavery and created a specifically African American moral standard to counteract its effects. In all these stories, the weaker animal uses wit to survive and to redirect brutality toward the oppressor. Slaves may have acted out Br'er Rabbit's successes, but their triumphs were often more ideological than physical. Beyond the advantage of pilfered food or time away from long hours of work, slave trickster characters took pleasure in making the master look dimwitted, "thus exposing the myth of white omniscience." However, they rarely leveled the playing field as Rabbit did (Levine 131-32).

On the plantation, the Br'er Rabbit character type most realistically manifested itself in stories of slaves rebelling against their masters' objectives and gaining small advantages. Because slavery constantly threatened black collective identity and well-being, circumvention of the master's authority was more expedient than outright violent rebellion. Survival was often contingent upon subversion without complete disruption of the system, and such behavior became the foundation of African American folk hero tales. Tales told of a slave named John's continuous battle with his owner came to symbolize any subversive actions slaves took against the plantation hierarchy. Living in constant tension with "old master," John never completely folds into servitude. Songs lampooning the master's inability to stop John praise him for his special form of self-beneficial stealth:

> O some tell me that a nigger won't steal,
> But I've seen a nigger in my corn-field;
> O run, nigger, run, for the patrol will catch you,
> O run, nigger, run, for 'tis almost day. (Levine 125)

His cunning and nerve separate him from the rest of the slaves, allowing him the space and time to create his own world within the plantation. John enjoys the occasional pork chop and extra whiskey, escapes the sting of his master's whip, steals valuables from the big house, and repeatedly exploits the plantation's weak spots for self-interest. While John's frequent allegorical triumphs over his owner inspired slaves, his defeats reminded them of the immutable realities of slavery (Roberts 61).

John's antics provided vicarious triumph to the listener and storyteller, but they were not simply wishful thinking in allegorical form. In addition to presenting a mode of momentary escapism from harsh realities for enslaved people, they often served as realistic models of behavior. Levine argues that in order to improve their own lives and enact a sort of justice that was missing, blacks often translated the tactics used by tricksters like Br'er Rabbit and John into their own actions. They had to modify their weak position by living the perpetual proverb that "White folks do as they pleases, and the darkies do as they can" (Levine 121). In other words, on the uneven battlefield of the plantation, blacks understood they would have to do what they could to get by even when their actions were morally questionable. For this reason, the animal trickster became the slave trickster who, after slavery, would inhabit the same mnemonic space in folkloric tales and continue to mirror and respond to the deprivations and desires of black Americans as the badman hero.

The counter-authoritarian actions of the slave trickster or outlaw may be difficult to see as heroic if one is unwilling to remove him from an Anglo-American configuration of heroism. The familiar urge to see in heroes only a moralistic idea of virtue and in villains only malice is analogous to the desire to see in the oppressed only suffering and impotence. For example, scholars such as Fred O. Weldon have disputed the effect of trickster tales on black culture-building by viewing the actors in these tales as "ineffectual dissembling tricksters" seeking the pleasure of "private revenge" (187) rather than as communal uplift and psychological protection for their group. For Weldon, unlike Anglo-American folk heroes, African American folk figures were incapable of supporting significant cultural evolution and instead resided merely in the fantastic nether regions of black consciousness (170-80). But heroism is not an immutable concept forever married to acceptable behavioral categories, and the hero himself is not trapped in the ideological quicksand of one group's conception of normative models. Speaking of the morality of the slave trickster, Roberts explains that "actions dubbed heroic in one context or by one group of people may be viewed as ordinary or even criminal in another context." Within the hero, then, those who have created him through admiration find the ideal conception of themselves relative to their social and cultural perspective. Folk heroes, existing as a segment of our "differential identity," often "act within boundaries defined by our perception of

immanent social needs." Therefore, a hero's actions must be sanctioned to some extent by those who fashioned him, and must address a portion of their "emergent realities" within the context of their urgent needs (Roberts 1-2).

In *Bandits,* Eric Hobsbawm puts immoral hero creation into a comparative context. The criminal hero, or bandit, is created when two segments of society are engaged in a social conflict of equality. Richard Slotkin echoes this paradigm of hero creation in his study of American Western mythology involving struggles between white outlaws and law enforcement in post-Civil War dime store novels. The heroes in these novels, Slotkin explains, are "criminals drawn to banditry by a mixture of social injustice and an innate propensity or 'gift' for antisocial behavior." Much like the black badman hero, Western outlaw heroes act as "social bandits whose outlawry was a response to injustices perpetrated by corrupt officials acting at the behest of powerful moneyed interests." Public interest and admiration for famous bandits such as Deadwood Dick and Jesse James in many ways represented a response to increasing class stratification and "the aggressions of advanced capitalism" in Gilded Age America. However, these heroes, Slotkin suggests, did not derive their popularity from a genuine interest in figures of social banditry. Unlike the decades-long evolution of African folk tales into badman folk ballads, white outlaw heroes became popular as mainstream national media appropriated them for commercial purposes: "The case of Jesse James suggests that in modernizing or adapting the *ideology* of social banditry to capitalism, mass culture gradually replace[d] real historical deeds and political struggles with generic mythologies." In contrast, mainstream national media never accepted black badman heroes even within the context of popular culture, and their amoral and outstanding misdeeds remained fastened to the fantasies of African Americans locked in a distinctly binary racial struggle (Slotkin 127-28).

Addressing the urgent needs of this struggle, Levine's work interprets black badman hero creation as a normative response to the dispiriting conditions of economic and social imbalance. He argues that outlaws become heroes and models of resistance when legal institutions help to maintain that imbalance. Just as the swindling trickery of the animal and slave tricksters represented an attempt to equalize societal imbalances in African social hierarchy and on the plantation, the badman folk hero responded to the need to combat police brutality, forced labor,

clandestine night roller violence, occupational discrimination, and public lynching for African Americans in the emancipated South. With freedom came new practices for white control of black behavior and labor, including sharecropping, convict leasing, and black codes. Still, black Americans coped by establishing black institutions and urban neighborhoods, and by exercising the freedom to participate in many aspects of urban life, leisure, and criminality.[2]

Historian Joel Williamson describes the decades after Reconstruction in budding black communities as a disordered time of accelerated alienation that triggered disengagement from white society. He argues that a firm focus upon white ideals of family, faith, and enfranchisement during Reconstruction lent a sense of integration and stability to the formation of free black communities. As segregation laws increasingly marginalized blacks, a measure of communal disorientation caused individual blacks to "fall away" from the centers of black communities and take their place on the fringe of broader society. They were not only forced to the margin but embraced their position, having spun out of the orbit of the "human universe" and placed themselves outside of the law (57). Walled away from the order and stability of the dominant white society and "missing the protection" of the plantation, blacks were left in isolation and self-hatred according to Williamson. As whites threatened the black community with lynching, unfair laws, sharecropping, and convict labor, Williamson asserts, blacks threatened their own isolated communities with a "churning . . . formless black rage" (58).

Although Williamson's theory wrongly presupposes that black community could not be built outside of the orbit of white cultural norms, the idea that black societal isolation may have created a sense of individual detachment and emotional exile is worth exploring. It is possible that out of the disorder and "disorientation" of a marginalized

[2]Williamson's idea of a combination of industrial growth alongside urban growth and black alienation from white cultural values and proclivities is essential to the argument of badman creation. As black Americans moved to urban centers, they frequently adopted a set of counter-Victorian values and modes of behavior. Williamson explains that because black women could find jobs in cities more easily than could black men, men were often thrust into a lifestyle of hustling. This created a disconnection between black men and women that manifested itself in single-parent matriarchy family structures and a firm embrace, by some segments of the black community, of the masculinity-infused, destructive yet increasingly admired behavior of real life badmen (59).

black community came the continued relevance of the tactics of the slave trickster, reinterpreted to fit a new urban context. The forgivable actions of the trickster long employed during slavery became criminal after emancipation as the institutional framework overseeing black behavior shifted from the plantation model to that of state and national laws. In adapting of trickster behavior to serve their needs in the late nineteenth century, African Americans increasingly found themselves outside of the law. Habits that historically exploited unscrupulous masters proved worthless to wage workers, and often deadly to sharecroppers and convict laborers.

Robert Charles undoubtedly found himself distressed by the urban disorder Williamson describes. There is very little evidence that he was a habitual criminal, but as he watched the three officers approach him that night on the street he had plenty of reason to feel disengaged from white society. He had previously lived in Mississippi when the "Mississippi Plan," an attempt to disenfranchise black voters and dismantle Republican rule, manifested itself in violent night terrorism and armed resistance to black suffrage. In 1898 he watched complex registration laws such as the "grandfather clause" blatantly plunder voter rights from powerless black districts of Louisiana. After Charles moved to New Orleans expecting a better life, his friends described him as visibly angered by the Constitutional provisions against black voters in his new home state. Furthermore, his fear and anger over the recent Sam Hose lynching in Georgia, in addition to countless others in his own state, certainly contributed to a growing sense of alienation, fear, and anger ("Race Riots in New Orleans").

Feeling alienated and vulnerable to aggressive new laws and public racial violence, African American men turned to the model of the black outlaw hero. By the turn of the century, black folklore brimmed with tales and songs featuring heartless, unimpressionable murderers who "had the strength, courage, and ability to flout the limitations imposed by white society" (Levine 420). Badman ballads often measured a protagonist's success by how prolific a murderer he was, as in this black work song:

> I'm de bad nigger,
> If you wants to know;
> Look at dem rounders
> In de cemetary row.
> Shoot, nigger,
> Shoot to kill. (Odum 67)

Much like modern hip-hop, these songs and tales glorified the violence and cold-blooded abandon that seemed to exempt badmen from the drudgery, racism, and oppression of everyday life. When the trickster's chicanery lost its potency, badman folkloric heroes like Stagolee, John Hardy, and Railroad Bill answered the needs and fantasies of budding black communities with their oppositional exploits and unwavering, conscienceless pursuit of self-interest. Relatively free from the oppressive paradigm of white interpretation, hidden and subversive actions in slavery became hopeful outward expressions of citizenship in freedom. No longer revered for the theft of the slave owner's errant pig or surplus butter, badmen made their living by gambling, peddling cocaine, and pimping in open-air markets. Success outside of accepted moral values and evasion of the law became virtues in emancipation equivalent to the avoidance of the master's whip in bondage.

As a result, the badman's folkloric model became a useful cultural and psychological tool for black Americans around the beginning of the twentieth century. Although his violence and self-interest counteracted prevailing values of faith and family, his actions created an alternative model to seamless black deference to white power and confirmed a sense of masculinity that had been extinguished in slavery. Novelist Richard Wright believed folklore helped to "clarify [black] consciousness" and offered emotional attitudes that impelled action for good or bad (Brown 1). For a young Cecil Brown, the same was true: he saw his uncles as Stagolee's badness personified and admired their nights of booze, women, and knife-fights in local jook joints. Brown considered Stagolee a "god of virility" (1) who decorated the stories of young black field hands with all of the vulgarity, impulsiveness, and daring they wished for in their own lives.[3]

The tales Cecil Brown's uncles still told and emulated well into the twentieth century originated around 1890 in the real life exploits of Lee

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[3]Wright's story "Big Boy Leaves Home" examined the implementation of folkloric badman hero ideas in the main character. Four black boys swimming naked in a watering hole are discovered by a white woman who wavers between lust and fear before she screams, drawing an enraged white man with a gun. Big Boy wrestles away the gun after two of his companions are killed and is faced with the decision between murdering the aggressor or allowing the man to tackle him and recover the weapon. When Big Boy shoots and kills the white man it is clear that he had no other recourse, which can be related to the fear and obligation of self-defense that Robert Charles must have experienced. Knowing that he had already gone too far by defending himself, there was no reason to surrender (Brown 1-2).

Shelton, a man who notoriously murdered Billy Lyons for touching his Stetson hat during a card game. In the tradition of the trickster hero who circumvented white authority to find material and personal gain, Stagolee was a pimp, known for his "knuckle-length sleeves," gold rings, "manicured fingers," long cigars, and "milk-white" crown (Brown 23). Folk tales depicted him as the epitome of badman swagger and style:

> Wore blue-suede shoes and carried a diamond cane;
> Had a six inch peck with a be-bop chain.
> Had a one button robe and a lap-down hat;
> And ever' time you saw me I looked just like that. . . .
> I'm that mean son-of-a-bitch they call "Stackolee." (Abrahams 46)

Saloon murders were common in the early 1900s, and Stagolee's reputation for violence, plus an adventure surrounding his capture and execution, catapulted him into folkloric status. He was not a "good-guy," and although he presented an emulative model of black masculinity, it was not one that built community. Instead, it embraced disorganization and trouble readily adapted to the prevailing danger of being black in the South and angrily lashing out at the slightest threat.

Figures such as Railroad Bill provide evidence of even further detachment from societal anchors to drift into chaotic lives full of violence. Bill reputedly cared no more for his wife and kids "than the rocks in the bottom of the sea," and emotionlessly swung from a rope for his crimes after a string of murders and cop killings. Folk tales expressed admiration for the meanness and violent abilities of men like Railroad Bill:

> Railroad Bill he was a mighty mean man
> He shot the midnight lantern out the brakeman's hand
> I'm going to ride old Railroad Bill. (Gussow 18)

In real life Railroad Bill was Morris Slater, an Alabama turpentine camp worker who shot and killed a police officer for mishandling him. Reputed to have used conjuration in his exploits, Railroad Bill's supernatural abilities included transforming himself to elude police and haunting the forests of southeast Alabama after his death (Roberts 171-73).

In contrast to the destructive badman, black folk heroes like John Henry provide models for defeating white authority without illegality.

The fictional Henry races a steam-powered drill, using only a hammer to dig a tunnel in an attempt to save the jobs of a mostly black digging crew. Henry beats the drill to completion but is promptly defeated by exhaustion and dies. Nevertheless, his superhuman feat, stoicism, determination, and martyrdom are remembered as the unselfish traits of a moral black hero in sharp contrast with felonious badman heroes. Levine calls cultural heroes like John Henry moral hardmen who never prey upon their own people and seek victory within the legal system they inhabit. Rather than abandon their place in society, they instead amplify their abilities, transcend stereotypes, and produce realistic modes of behavior for other African Americans. For example, boxer Jack Johnson's defeat of Jim Jeffries created a realistic model of broken stereotypes and lawful triumph that blacks everywhere could celebrate as a personal victory. Likewise, the fictional story of Shine, the only black worker on the doomed Titanic, created an opportunity to ridicule overt white opulence and depict a sense of justice in the continued contest between the black worker and the white employer. Each time Shine emerges from the bowels of the ship to warn of rising water levels, he is angrily told to get his "black ass" below deck. Eventually, Shine jumps overboard and with Herculean arms swims all the way to the European shore. By the time the Titanic is swallowed by the sea, Shine is "shootin' craps in Liverpool." This story, which replicates the old trickster tales more than do Johnson's or Henry's, exemplifies a black heroic feat without questionable morals while still realistically expressing black angst and resentment (Levine 420-25, 427-28).

Regardless of the danger he may have posed to white and black society, behind the black outlaw hero could often be found useful defensive ideologies and a spirit of black autonomy. Although bloodlust and callousness were his most noticeable and revered traits, he was symbolic of the black revulsion to historic maltreatment and inseparable from the broader mosaic of black responses to white oppression. Despite the heinousness of Robert Charles's shooting spree in New Orleans, his motivation is best understood when viewed in the context of a black tradition of badman heroism and a latent sense of resistance to legally sustained racial violence. When the police and media found the Voice of Missions pamphlets among Charles's belongings in his abandoned room, their promotion of armed self-defense by blacks incensed white New Orleanians. Supervised by Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and distributed by Charles, the publication urged black New Orleanians to "Get guns!"

and defend themselves against racial violence by "turn[ing] loose . . . missiles of death and blow[ing] the fiendish wretches into a thousand giblets." Charles had been a member of the International Migration Society (IMS) for four years before his death, volunteering to hand out free pamphlets to black New Orleanians in his spare time. He was also in frequent correspondence with Bishop Turner, having become a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in reaction to his anger over the killing of Sam Hose. One of his former levee co-workers, William Butts, explained that Charles felt "it was the duty of every negro to buy a rifle and keep it ready against the time they might be called upon to act in unison." These sentiments make it clear Charles was a proponent of black self-defense and had come to view violence as a viable option against frequent racial antagonism in the form of police brutality.[4]

Still, Bishop Turner's ideas of self-defense were not new to Charles. As a child, his father, George Charles, often brought him to African Emigration Society meetings, where he would have heard much about defensive measures. He was certain to have heard Br'er Rabbit and slave trickster tales throughout his lifetime growing up in Mississippi or in the work songs sung at levee camps. He was also very likely familiar with the legends of Stagolee and Railroad Bill and may have found emotional value in their determination to avoid being wronged or unjustly killed. Accordingly, he made a habit out of defending himself in the past, even when it would have been easier not to. During his time in Vicksburg, Mississippi, in the 1890s, his contemporaries knew him for religiously carrying a Colt .44 pistol and boasting that no policeman would arrest him without a fight. In 1892, also in Mississippi, Charles and his brother were involved in a shootout in broad daylight with a white railroad flagman. The Rolling Fork *Deer Creek Pilot* reported on May 28, 1892, that two black men fired "very hotly" at a retreating flagman, who eventually gave them what they wanted before they simply walked away. The object Charles and his brother risked their lives for was a

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[4]When Bishop Turner published his article "Negro, Get Guns!" he, like Charles, was accused of fomenting a race war. As a leader in the African Immigration Society, he also heavily opposed black participation in America's declaration of war on Spain in 1898, declaring that he hoped Filipino soldiers would "wipe [black] soldiers from the face of the earth" for fighting on the wrong side of the war (Litwack 270; New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, July 29, 1900).

pistol that another passenger had stolen from them on a previous train ride.[5]

Regardless of Charles's attitude about police and white authority, he had not come into contact with the law very often in his life and people who remembered him viewed him as a peaceful and quiet person. Daniel J. Flummer of the IMS called him a faithful distributor of the society's pamphlets who "always kept within the bounds of law and order in advocating emigration" (Hair 105). Furthermore, Annie Cryder and Fanny Jackson, two elderly women who lived in the front rooms of the house Charles occupied, called him a "scholar" who carried an "air of elegance" (Hair 115). That elegance may have come from the fine clothing he purchased from Hyman Levy, a New Orleans clothier who told the New Orleans *Sunday States* that he considered Charles a "stylish negro" of above average intelligence and too honest and upright to have been a criminal (Hair 96). Even Jelly Roll Morton considered him a "seemingly harmless little fellow" who made very little noise and could be described as "orderly."[6]

These character endorsements did not keep the media and police from turning Charles's obvious defense into the lunatic shooting spree of a cocaine-crazed representative of black retrogression. A "bottle of cocaine" reportedly found in Charles's room added to the popular theory that he had slipped into the vortex of black barbarity when he attacked the police officers. Although investigators never formally identified the powdery substance, the alleged presence of cocaine and black self-defense literature convinced white observers that Charles was a "thief" and a "dirty wretch" whose intention in life was "one of evil toward the white man" (New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, July 25, 1900; Hair 132). Describing the drugs and the texts as an explosive combination driving Charles's actions, the New Orleans *Times-Democrat* and other tabloids called him a cocaine fiend who "steeped his

[5]The incident, which the newspapers did not directly link to Robert Charles, is very convincingly connected to him in William Ivy Hair's account of Charles's life (*Carnival of Fury* 54-56).

[6]Jelly Roll Morton, who worked in New Orleans' Storyville district around the turn of the century, remembered Robert Charles as a newspaper seller on the corner of Dryades and Melpomene streets. He calls him a "harmless little fellow" who "tore up the entire city of New Orleans for a week." Although he did not know Charles, in his biography he was quoted as remembering him at his spot on the corner yelling "Get your *Picayune*, Get your paypire!" (Lomax 56; New Orleans *Times Democrat*, July 25, 1900).

little brain in the poison" and had "drummed into his head" exaggerated ideas of oppression by "sentimental writers" (Hair 179). Another paper accused Bishop Turner of being responsible for "the exaggeration of the murderer's already fiendish disposition toward the whites" and some suggested that Flummer be tarred and feathered for feeding him ideas of black agency (Hair 192).

Nevertheless, we can see Charles as a turn of the century incarnation of an often admired but rarely seen form of black resistance in the South. While black badmen like Charles created a contentious model for emulation and expressed a formless sense of rage, they wreaked havoc on the white imagination by inflaming fears of black insurrection and white contamination by retrogressive behavior. Just as the interplay of white fear and control created the badman hero indirectly, so too did the self-defensive image of the black hero, real or imagined, perpetuate white fear. This strong sense of negrophobia caused some whites to reject the paternalistic ideal of racial harmony. They opted instead for a Darwinian theorem of racial antagonism that imagined black retrogression into a primordial archaic state once free from white guardianship.

Believing that no two races could thrive or survive side by side, proponents of racial Darwinism argued that the inevitable racial conflict would precipitate black extinction. In order to avoid the tragedies of miscegenation and contamination that would accompany this struggle, physician Edward Gilliam and other Darwinists recommended the removal of all blacks through repatriation. Others more optimistically believed that black "feeble exotics" would spare the world the struggle and kindly fade away at the hand of their own inadequacies much sooner than later. Subsequently, nature would preserve the "favoured races in the struggle for life" (as the subtitle of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* would have it) and see to the disappearance of the unfit. (Fredrickson 229, 231). This Malthusian line of thought saw starvation, disease, and vice as natural mechanisms for pruning away undesirable and weak branches and preserving the stalk for the stronger ones. Darwinism and Malthusianism therefore served to transform the idea of black retrogression into a necessity rather than a tragedy, and gave a needed sense of relief to antsy Southern whites obsessed with solving the "Negro problem." However, in the meantime, the avoidance of perceived contamination and debasement through miscegenation or close racial contact loomed large.

This stage of racial antagonism troubled Darwinists who feared that the ongoing feud would pollute white purity. Sociologist Pierre van den Berghe theorized that the post-Emancipation period initialized a competitive period of race relations that plunged blacks and whites into cultural and economic struggle outside of the structural separation provided by the plantation system. Published in 1905, William B. Smith's book *The Color Line* traced what he considered to be thirty years of black decline into genetic obscurity leading to eventual extinction. Smith warned against white sympathy for the vanishing black man, imploring whites not only to allow him to make his biological swan dive, but to feel inspired by it and remove their philanthropic endeavors from the evolutionary process.

Racial Darwinists like historian Joseph A. Tillinghast concurred, asserting that an African background of superstition, wars, famine, child neglect, and promiscuity were "inherited characteristics" that left blacks ill-prepared for "the exacting conditions of American industry" (193). This way of thinking functioned to justify white injustice by shifting the focus from African American racial disadvantage and white policies of oppression to black inadequacy and failure to prosper after emancipation. Darwinian thought justified the failure of radical Reconstruction policies and condemned white paternalist aid to black development as a disruption of the purportedly natural black decline. Furthermore, it validated harsh policies aimed at controlling black behavior and reducing the risk of white contamination by a doomed race. George M. Fredrickson calls it a "convenient rationale for new and more overtly oppressive racial policies." Race hate propaganda and pseudo-scientific reasoning bolstered white resolve to allow blacks to wallow in disease and poverty while they drank and drugged themselves into oblivion. Among Darwinists a consensus grew that quarantine and overt control were the best methods for preventing black inadequacy from dragging innocent whites into the morass of African inheritance (255).

This fear of black depravity gave credence to what many whites saw as a cultural defense in a burgeoning race war. The reality of black badmen like Robert Charles added considerably to the white conception of black degeneracy and retrogression after emancipation. In the imaginations of pro-slavery whites, African Americans possessed a dual nature: "docile and amiable" under white tutelage but "ferocious and murderous when free." They feared that black "overdeveloped sexual

organs," derived from an ancient primordial reservoir of animalistic passion, might threaten white womanhood. While the formation of the black outlaw hero created modes of behavior and societal relevance for fledgling black communities, his alter-ego, the black brute, who resided in the largest house on the street of white fear, provided ongoing moral justification for policies against black freedoms (Fredrickson 276).

The disparity in black and white perception of black masculinity, humanity, and fitness for civilization around the turn of the century created the conditions for Robert Charles's response to police brutality and the subsequent rioting. For whites, Charles, like Railroad Bill and Stagolee, embodied the feared "churning . . . formless black rage" set loose like a hurricane by Reconstruction, cheap whiskey, and cocaine. However, as we have seen, Charles's ideas and reasoning were not formless, but had evolved from a determination not to be victimized and from involvement in black nationalist organizations. As chaotic, murderous, and formless as his last few days may have been, Charles's well-forged ideas of self-defense guided his hand until his death. White observers immediately reconstructed him into a wretch and cocaine fiend, but some black observers saw the validity of the discontent and rage expressed by Charles's insurrection (Williamson 44-58, 201-09).

Like many outlaw folk heroes, Charles had an uncanny ability to take on a number of enemies with cool precision, courage, and an even hand. Finding seemingly magical ways of inflicting wounds and surviving his own, he actualized the superhuman traits often bestowed upon fictional characters. After being wounded in the gunfire exchanged with patrolman Mora, Charles returned to his home to dress his wounds and retrieve his Winchester rifle. During the five days spent eluding and fighting New Orleans police officers and civilian mobs searching the city for him, Charles often struck out with deadly precision. Following the original shooting, Charles later fired at four police officers as they cornered him, killing two of them, including a police captain. Describing the scene, one newspaper depicted Charles as calloused and cruel during the shootout. As the "remaining two [officers] were sheltered and protected for a time by two colored women . . . Charles fired two more bullets into the body of" the fallen captain. Although a "considerable force of policemen surrounded the building," Charles escaped. When he decided to emerge nearly two hours later, he needed no trickery or illusion. He simply drove the remaining officers away with gunfire and left the scene with a limp. However, Charles's success at eluding officers

and killing those who got in his way exacerbated the city's tense race relations. For the next two days, enraged white city residents took up weapons and descended upon black districts. The "negroes of New Orleans," the *Independent* reported, "were at the mercy of riotous mobs; several were killed, and many were wounded or brutally beaten," while others simply remained "in concealment." In their anger over Charles, white mobs dragged blacks from streetcars and beat them to death and destroyed black owned buildings, including a "fine negro school building" ("Race Riots in New Orleans"; Hair 121-28).

Charles continued to resist arrest until the fifth day of the manhunt, when the police discovered him taking refuge in the house of a friend. Exhibiting what seemed like superhuman strength, he took multiple gunshot wounds and avoided thousands of bullets rained down upon his hiding place. Returning fire, Charles managed to kill three men and wound several more. This brought him to a total of eight kills, many of whom were police officers. When the police finally drove him out by burning the building, he exited with smoke-filled lungs and raised his gun to fire on a crowd of thousands before he was shot and stomped into the mud ("Race Riots in New Orleans"; Hair, 160-74).

After Charles's death, New Orleanians struggled to find ways to deal with his memory. The difference between black and white methods of coping is important. Newspapers like the white-owned *Independent* attempted to assail his character by claiming he "led a dissolute life." In triumphant proclamation, civic leaders attempted to soothe worried white New Orleanians by declaring Charles an anomaly. He represented, they claimed, the swan song of a black archetype deriving courage from Northern interlopers; overindulgence in spirits and cocaine; and a savage, bestial inheritance from a lurid, shadowy continent. Claims by those who knew Charles that "he deeply resented the dis-enfranchisement of his race in Louisiana" made his action even more ominous. For most whites, the whole Charles affair was one to be quickly forgotten. They wished to see his five-day insurrection disregarded as the admixture of drugs and the spontaneous combustion of black rage (*Independent* August 2, 1900; Williamson 205).

For many African Americans across the country and in New Orleans, Charles was not only hard to forget but was often granted entrance into the pantheon of black heroes. Wishing to show sympathy and solidarity with Charles, black boxer George Baker walked into a Battle Creek, Michigan, police station and fired at the Chief of Police, but missed.

Another black man, Louisianan Melby Dotson, possibly suffering from fearful delusions sparked by the Charles affair, shot a train conductor in West Baton Rouge Parish (Hair 184-85). Anti-lynching advocate Ida B. Wells also showed support for Charles by justifying his actions in "Southern Horrors." She made it clear she believed Officer Mora's assault on him was "completely unprovoked":

> Charles knew that his arrest in New Orleans, even for defending his life, meant nothing short of a long term in the penitentiary, and still more probable death by lynching at the hands of a cowardly mob. He very bravely determined to protect his life as long as he had breath in his body and strength to draw a hair trigger on his would-be murderers. (161)

Wells was not alone in her praise of Charles's actions. Jelly Roll Morton praised him for his marksmanship, bragging that "the way [Charles] was killing them off it looked like the department might run out of officers" (Lomax 56). But open praise for Charles was dangerous and quickly became clandestine or simply disappeared. The day after Charles was killed, a white man murdered a black man for openly praising Charles. Other likewise fatal eruptions of violence in the weeks following the riots kept black celebrations to a minimum.

Adam Gussow theorizes that black New Orleanians sang Charles's praises for decades in a blues song subsequently forced underground because of the danger of singing it. Years after the incident, Jelly Roll Morton remembered a "song that originated on him" that was "squashed very easily by the [police] department" and anyone else who heard it. He claimed to have once known the song but had willfully forgotten it "in order to go along with the world on the peaceful side" (Lomax 57). This song, Gussow believes, became the model for the song "Crazy Blues," composed by Perry Bradford and made popular by Mamie Smith in 1920. In this rendition, which Bradford composed in the Storyville vice district of New Orleans around the time of Charles's death, Smith vows to "Get myself a gun . . . and shoot myself a cop." The disappearance of the song is evidence that while blacks quietly celebrated Charles's rare defense against ubiquitous white violence, white media propaganda and a concerted effort to erase him from communal memory drove his praises into the recesses of black consciousness (Gussow 11).

Whether it was cocaine, an ideological determination to defend himself, or simply a reflexive reaction to the sting of a billy club that sparked Charles's one man insurrection will never be known. What is

certain is that after that initial shooting, Charles knew that death or escape were his only choices, and he responded out of fear for his life. However, the difference between black and white interpretations of the incident hint at the purposes of badman hero creation. White New Orleanians feared the challenge to established convention that Charles posed and responded to his actions as if they represented the potential of the city's entire black population. Simultaneously, they took a certain measure of comfort in the idea that men like Charles were anomalies dislodged from racial customs by alcohol, cocaine, and wrongheaded political philosophies. The logic followed that maintaining the restrictions of Jim Crow laws and limiting black access to mind-altering substances could prevent similar insurrections. In contrast, the existence of songs like "Crazy Blues" indicates that many African Americans saw Charles's exploits as symbolic retribution that avenged historical injustices. As a result, the badman hero in narrative form became symbolic of a collective black desire to rectify inescapable racial imbalances and cruelty, and a model for real life badmen.

Charles was certainly not alone in staging violent resistance against white authority in the South. In the first decade of the twentieth century, numerous newspapers reported accounts of "crazy" black men attacking white police and citizens. In 1909 the *Atlanta Constitution* reported on a black man, "crazed by cocaine," who had shot a man and his son, killed a doctor, wounded a merchant, and "struck down a policeman"—all on the same day ("Three Men Shot"). In another account, the *New-York Tribune* told of "two drug crazed mulattos" who "carried on a reign of murder" that left ten residents dead in Harriston, Mississippi ("10 Die"). Even more extreme, the *Times* reported the story of Bill Way, who dashed down a street in Monroe, Louisiana, and shot twenty-one residents in the business district ("Negro Shoots 21 Men"). Like Charles, these men often occupied the same space in the black popular imagination as heroes like Stagolee and Railroad Bill because they lived out retaliatory fantasies. In the evolution of the badman hero, Charles was a modern day Br'er Rabbit replacing clever temporal tricks aimed at rigid social hierarchy with urbanized gun-wielding martyrdom for self-interest, self-defense, and violent resistance. Much like the archetypical black villain, Charles, a hard-working man engaged in the negotiation of his survival with an increasingly inhospitable New Orleans, had completely given up on America the moment Patrolman Mora's billy club landed against his skull.

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