Criminal Self-Representation in African American Popular Culture

UNDER A Bad SIGN

JONATHAN MUNBY

UNDER A BAD SIGN

Criminal Self-Representation in African American Popular Culture

JONATHAN MUNBY

The University of Chicago Press CHICAGO AND LONDON

JONATHAN MUNBY is senior lecturer in American studies and film studies at the University of Lancaster in England and a fellow of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University. He is the author of *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from "Little Caesar" to "Touch of Evil,"* published by the University of Chicago Press.

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

Printed in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 1 2 3 4 5

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-55035-0 (cloth)
ISBN-10: 0-226-55035-4 (cloth)
ISBN-13: 978-0-226-55036-7 (paper)
ISBN-10: 0-226-55036-2 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Munby, Jonathan.
Under a bad sign: criminal self-representation in African American popular culture / Jonathan Munby.
p. cm.
ISBN-13: 978-0-226-55035-0 (cloth: alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-226-55035-4 (cloth: alk. paper)
ISBN-13: 978-0-226-55036-7 (pbk.: alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-226-55036-2 (pbk.: alk. paper) 1. African Americans in popular culture. 2. African American arts. 3. Crime in popular culture—United States. 4. Popular culture—United States. I. Title.
E185.M898 2011
973'.0496073—dc22 2010048788

♾ This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

Under a Bad Sign

Acknowledgments

Many people have contributed to the completion of this book. Its inception can be traced to a seminar that Lary May and Paula Rabinowitz asked me to deliver on hip hop's gangsta culture toward the end of my graduate studies in the American studies program at the University of Minnesota. The media hype and moral panic surrounding gangsta culture in the early 1990s bore an uncanny resemblance to the troublesome reception of Hollywood's white ethnic gangsters in the 1930s, the subject of my research at the time. The chance to discuss the gangster/gangsta relation also fueled the development of an undergraduate course on African American popular culture. So I have the American studies faculty and fellow graduates in Scott Hall, as well as the students on the consequent course, to thank for setting me on the road to writing *Under a Bad Sign*. A particular shout-out has to go to John Wright, who insisted I dig up Claude McKay's *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* in the rare books section of Wilson Library to see how deep the provenance and complex the relationship was between black denizens of the American city and their gangster culture heroes.

Since then, various people have enabled me to think through and present the many aspects of an interdisciplinary and multimedia project. Dan Flory and Eithne Quinn, fellow researchers in issues of race and criminal representation in American popular culture, have been truly generous in sharing their ideas. Csaba Toth and George Lipsitz have never stopped cajoling and encouraging me from across the Atlantic, and I thank them for supporting me through sponsoring guest lecturing and research visits to the United States. I thank James and Yoshi Marshall for

being wonderful hosts on my research visits to Los Angeles—and Ms. Lillian Allen, hundred-year-old Hill District beautician and community organizer, who, having attended my Pittsburgh lecture on race film moviegoing in the 1930s and 1940s, strengthened my faith in the project by telling me that I had "told it as it really was."

In the UK, Michael Heale and Richard King have never hesitated in providing institutional backing for the project. Douglas Tallack and Liam Kennedy, through the "Three Cities" conferences co-hosted by the Universities of Nottingham and Birmingham's American studies programs, provided vital venues for the first formal articulation of ideas central to the book—I thank them in particular for making it possible to meet Carlo Rotella, who told me I had to read the novels of Julian Mayfield if I wanted to further explore the culture of the numbers racket in Harlem. I thank Mark Jancovich, Peter Stanfield, Mark Glancy, Scott Lucas, and Winfried Pauleit for inviting me to present papers related to this book at their respective institutions—and for being such supportive colleagues. My African American Popular Culture students at Lancaster University have all contributed—I hope they can see something of their own ideas in the book. Thanks go to Nick Gebhardt, Patrick Hagopian, Max Haymes, and Tim Hickman—fellow Americanists at Lancaster—all of whom have influenced my work directly through team teaching and research seminar discussion, as well as through informal quotidian banter and the sharing of anecdotes, news, and references over matters relevant to my research. Equally, I have benefitted immeasurably from the irreverent intellectual companionship and support of Fred Botting, Mick Dillon, Paul Fletcher, Richard Rushton, and Scott Wilson—all of whom have helped me laugh, chill out, and think mo' better thoughts.

In the final stages, William L. Van Deburg and George Lipsitz provided great feedback on the manuscript, and my editorial team at the University of Chicago Press was exemplary in supporting me. Erin DeWitt and Tim McGovern handled my myriad minor queries with friendly efficiency, and Dawn Hall did a splendid copyedit. Over the entirety of the project, Doug Mitchell has proved to be the paragon of patience—thanks for hanging in there.

Some parts of this book are based on previously published material: A shorter version of chapter 2 appeared as "The Underworld Films of Oscar Micheaux and Ralph Cooper: Toward a Genealogy of the Black Screen Gangster," in *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film*, ed. Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 263–80; part of chapter

4 appeared as "Signifyin' Cinema: Rudy Ray Moore and the Quality of Badness," *Journal for Cultural Research* 11, no.3 (2007): 203–19; and part of chapter 5 appeared as "From Gangsta to Gangster: The Hood Film's Criminal Allegiance with Hollywood," in *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches*, ed. James Chapman, Mark Glancy, and Sue Harper (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 166–79. I thank the editors and all those involved in reading and providing valuable critical feedback on these earlier drafts.

Primary research for this book was conducted at the New York Public Library Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture; the Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Reading Room, Washington, DC; and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles. Research at these various institutions in the United States was aided by support from Lancaster University's Faculty of Arts and Humanities and Faculty of Social Science research funds. The project also received the generous and invaluable support of an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Research Leave Award. In addition, I am grateful to the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, Harvard University, for awarding me a Sheila Biddle Ford Foundation fellowship, which greatly aided in the final revision of this book.

I can only apologize if I have forgotten anyone. Given the support I have enjoyed, it should be clear that any failings and shortcomings in the book are entirely mine.

As with all large projects, they have their ups and downs—and some folks have had to put up with the downs more than others. Alexander and Hannah Munby have humored my low-budget film and arcane music proclivities in the battle to control the DVD and CD players. Love and greatest thanks go them and to Karen Juers-Munby, who has always been there for me.

Contents

Acknowledgments vii

INTRODUCTION: "Cruel Stack O'Lee": Trickster Badness and the Fight against Subordination in African American Vernacular Culture 1

1 Original Gangsta Culture: Fortune Economy and the Criminal Mediation of Black Entry into Urban Modernity 23

2 Sin City Cinema: The Underworld Race Films of Oscar Micheaux and Ralph Cooper 51

3 Hustlers in the House of Literature: Julian Mayfield, Chester Himes, and the Black Literary Ghetto 79

4 From *Up Tight!* to *Dolemite*: The Changing Politics of Baadasssss Cinema 113

5 Keeping It Reel: From Goines to Gangsta 149

EPILOGUE: Global Gangsta—Life in Death 175

Notes 183 Index 203

INTRODUCTION

Trickster Badness and the Fight against Subordination in African American Vernacular Culture

"Cruel Stack O'Lee"

Police officers, how can it be
You can arrest everybody but
Cruel Stack O'Lee
That bad man!
O, Cruel Stack O'Lee!

Mississippi John Hurt's 1928 blues song "Stack O'Lee" tells us that African American folklore's most infamous "badman" is so bad that even the police steer clear of him. Hurt's version of this tale was sung in the context of a society ruled by Jim Crow laws designed to support a system of racial segregation that also made black people subordinate to white in the American South.[1] As Cecil Brown surmises, in such a world "there was probably no place ... where a white policeman was afraid of arresting, shooting, or killing a black man."[2]

The singular ability of the mythological black badman to remain immune to white power, however, depended on his ruthlessly violent treatment of members of his own community. The story goes that Stack O'Lee (who also goes by other variants, such as Stagolee and Stagger Lee) shot and killed Billy Lyons in a dispute over a five-dollar hat, rejecting Billy's pleas for clemency as a married man with two children to care for. When bad old Stagolee is finally arraigned, executed, and sent to hell, his capacity for evil means that he outranks Satan himself:

> When de devil wife see Stack comin' she got up in a quirl,
> "Here come dat bad nigger an' he's jus' from de udder worl'."

All de devil' little chillun went sc'amblin' up de wall,
Say, "Catch him, pappa, befo' he kill us all."
Stack he tol' de devil, "Come on, le's have a lil fun,
You stick me wid yo' pitchfork an' I'll shoot you wid my 41."
Stagolee say, "Now, now, Mister Devil, ef me an' you gonna have some fun,
You play de cornet, Black Betty beat de drum."
Stagolee took de pitchfork an' he laid it on de shelf
"Stand back, Tom Devil, I'm gonna rule Hell by myself."[3]

Stagolee's success is predicated on being a bully who can bully the bullies, a man who can take on the devil but who is also a sociopath among his own people. While the terms of this ur-type's heroism are paradoxical and seemingly counterproductive, they continue to structure African American cultural production.

African Americans have made probably the biggest impact on American (and global) culture in the realm of mass culture. Frequently, however, mass entertainment success for African Americans has depended on pandering to white racist visions of black identity. The costs involved in ministering to a distorted white mirror have had to be weighed against the benefits involved in gaining access to the realm of mass representation. This book focuses specifically on the stakes involved in the choices black popular cultural producers have made in perpetuating *criminal* visions of themselves and their community. In so doing this book charts the history of a significant form of self-conscious black "minstrelsy" from the mythological badmen of African American folklore to the "gangsta" rappers of today.

The rise to popularity of hip hop culture and rap music—especially gangsta rap—has raised awkward questions about the need of the disenfranchised to be complicit with their oppressors as a prerequisite to success. Most conspicuously, gangsta rappers have profited from the self-conscious marketing of stereotypes that equate black male youth with ghetto life and violent criminality. My project examines the complex history of African Americans' own controversial and seemingly counterproductive investment in criminal self-representations of black identity across popular American media (in music, fiction, film, and television) and over the last century. In the process I shall be asking what role such self-representation, or "*noir* by noirs" to borrow a phrase from Manthia Diawara, has played in the ongoing struggle to breach the limits of essentialist and binary racial categories in the construction of black cultural identity.[4]

Overall this book provides a historical genealogy that connects the discourse on the more controversial elements of black hip hop culture at the turn of this century to the first quest by black folk to be recognized as modern rather than being associated stereotypically with the plantation South, at the beginning of the last century. The book shows how and why black popular cultural producers of music, fiction, film, and television have consistently mobilized African American badman imagery against the grain in their attempt to meet, negotiate, and counter the problems of a society built on racialized hierarchies.

In the course of writing this book, the people of the United States have elected an African American as president for the first time. While such a historical breakthrough might signal the beginning of the end for Stagolee, Barack Obama's journey to the White House was something predicated on a road made possible by hellion dreams. Over thirty years ago, George Clinton, the funk maestro of the appropriately named Parliament, described a future that seemed to be the stuff of drug-induced fantasy, America-as-"Chocolate City" (CC):

> Uh, what's happening CC?
> They still call it the White House
> But that's a temporary condition, too.
> Can you dig it, CC?
> ...
> Chocolate city
> Are you with me out there?
>
> And when they come to march on ya
> Tell 'em to make sure they got their James Brown pass
> And don't be surprised if Ali is in the White House
> Reverend Ike, Secretary of the Treasure
> Richard Pryor, Minister of Education
> Stevie Wonder, Secretary of FINE arts
> And Miss Aretha Franklin, the First Lady
> Are you out there, CC?
> A chocolate city is no dream.[5]

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

With the exception, perhaps, of literary criticism that has attended to the way blues musical themes and structures have been integral to black literature, existing scholarship has tended to study significant aspects of African American culture separately. Seminal work has been done

on the black literary tradition, popular music, and cinema. Yet there is surprisingly little work that attempts to discuss these various media together, as a cultural ensemble. Furthermore, most studies of African American propagation of seemingly counterproductive self-images have been fueled by the topicality of the issue, the moral panics surrounding gangsta rap being a prime example. It is rare to find work that has a developed understanding of how contemporary criminal self-images produced by black Americans are part of a rich legacy of race rebellion. Vital work on badman folklore and the role of oral tradition in culture building has been conducted by scholars such as Roger D. Abrahams, Alan Dundes, Lawrence Levine, Bruce Jackson, and John W. Roberts. Such studies need connecting to other arenas and other historical moments of African American self-representation.[6] Recently, Jerry H. Bryant has shown how the folkloric badman has influenced concepts of violence in African American literature, setting an example for those of us interested in tracing the import of such criminal tropes and figures beyond their oral form and origins.[7] Perhaps most provocatively, Abdul JanMohamed, in his compelling study of Richard Wright's writing, makes a case for the resistant and emancipative political potential of the redeployment of violence and death (of suicide and murder) in the context of a culture subjected since slavery to the constant threat of death.[8]

Accordingly, I take my cue from scholars who have initiated forays into cross-media analysis, on the one hand, and those who have made more extensive historical links between the choices that black popular cultural producers make today and their forebears, on the other. The former approach is exemplified in Houston A. Baker Jr.'s examination of the relationship of the blues to African American literature, and S. Craig Watkins's analysis of recent black cinema's relationship to other arenas of black audiovisual expression.[9] The latter approach is demonstrated by Robin D. G. Kelley's initial linking of gangsta rap to a long tradition of badman signifying, and William L. Van Deburg's broad analysis of the significance of African American popular culture heroes from sports, film, crime fiction, and music in sustaining hopes for a better day coming during the 1960s and 1970s.[10] His subsequent study of African American villainy provides invaluable insight into the antebellum construction of the black badman as part of a nation-building process by a prejudicial white ownership class and its attempted subversion by disenfranchised blacks. This idea of a double investment from both sides of the color line during the forging of ideas about citizenship and nation in the early

republic is used primarily to underscore the contradictory power of the gangsta in contemporary America.[11]

As much as this work draws attention to how slavery fostered the conditions for violent social banditry on the part of the fettered (exemplified most sensationally by Nat Turner), other studies have highlighted how the folkloric black badman came to full prominence only in the postbellum era, precisely as a means to mediate not so much fear of the black man per se but the fear of black freedom. If the postbellum black badman seemed complicit with white resentments under Reconstruction, he was also a violent figure of identification for those who felt, in turn, betrayed by the capitulation of Reconstruction to the culture of Jim Crow. As George Rawick highlights, the postbellum period was one of increased hostility and division between whites and blacks defined in part by the struggle for and against ways to continue the subordination of African Americans consequent on the formal abolition of slavery.[12] And in one of the pioneering treatments of folkloric outlawry in black culture, Lawrence Levine argues: "The creation of these kinds of heroes required the growth of a more pronounced Western orientation, the decline of the sacred universe, and the growth of the individualist ethos among black Americans. All of these developments accompanied freedom."[13]

My study fills in and elaborates on this work by giving more concerted attention to the way different periods of the twentieth century are related in their use and abuse of the black badman across a wider range of interrelated media. In bringing together elements normally kept separate by disciplinary boundaries and by the lack of an extended historical perspective, *Under a Bad Sign*'s engagement with the long history or genealogy of black criminal self-representation in American popular culture across various media contributes to this new trajectory.

Adopting an interdisciplinary and multimedia approach allows us to examine the cross-fertilizing of different forms and registers of black popular expression while examining the relationship between these forms and those of the dominant culture. Moreover, this book, in providing a more extended historical frame, shows how past and present struggles bear a strategic resemblance to each other. Understanding the provenance of today's postindustrial, media-hijacking image of the African American outlaw or gangsta helps overcome historical amnesia about how such self-representation is part of a rich and long-established vernacular response to being "othered" in white America.

Engaging the history of African Americans' own investment in badman representation is necessarily dirty work. The issue is not reducible to the imposition of stereotype by a dominant group over a subordinate one. The appropriation and proliferation of a violent and criminal self-image by African Americans has everything to do with wresting the badman's meaning from the enemy. The often-close correspondence between the environment of the badman fable and real lived conditions for lower-class African Americans only complicates matters. A convenient confusion of culture for behavior services the interests of those who would blame the iniquity of African American impoverishment on the black poor themselves. Yet as I hope to illustrate here, the badman as a cultural construct constitutes an ingenious way to speak truth to power.

Any examination of the badman type will necessarily raise important questions about the politically oppositional value of popular cultural expression in the ongoing black quest for full enfranchisement in the United States. Doing such work involves overcoming prejudices as one confronts the problem of disciplinary boundaries, on the one hand, and residual understandings about what is fit for academic study, on the other. As Todd Boyd puts it so clearly:

> Why have I never read an intense study of the films of Rudy Ray Moore, the novels of Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines, the music of Tyrone Davies, etc.? Why? Because they do not fit in so easily with what we consider acceptable, and because they are works of the lower class that have never transcended the work of folk culture in which they exist. In addition, their politics are a huge stumbling block in light of the resulting contradictions.[14]

Well, I hope that this book goes some way toward remedying such exclusions (especially in terms of Rudy Ray Moore and Donald Goines).

THEORETICAL STAKES

My approach is sensitive to the distinct modes of analysis associated with discrete modes of communication. I highlight, however, the limits of existing models and paradigms of popular cultural analysis and race representation—especially in cases where the maintenance of certain boundaries tends to affirm the ontology of blackness and whiteness in the process. To this extent, my approach is indirectly responsible to questions raised about (the use and abuse of) race within critical and cultural theory about the academic reification and sequestration of black studies.

Critical race theory and whiteness studies have attended to the way the racial contract guarantees white privilege while keeping its benefactors blind to their own complicity in a racialized system. Scholars such as Derrick Bell, Homi Bhabha, Richard Dyer, Paul Gilroy, David Theo Goldberg, George Lipsitz, Charles W. Mills, and David Roediger have shown that raising white consciousness (or naming whiteness) is a vital part of the struggle to redress the injustices visited on people of color not only in the United States but also globally.[15]

Black feminist scholars such as Hazel Carby, bell hooks, and Michelle Wallace have led the way in attacking the limits of essentialist race thinking—seeing racial subjectivity as something both abrogated and reinforced in its relationship to gender.[16] Recently, scholars such as Victor Anderson, Michael Eric Dyson, Kenneth Mostern, Ross Posnock, and Mark Reid have all addressed the way the impasse of essentialist race thinking has structured and defined the philosophical reflection of seminal African American intellectuals and political leaders.[17]

As such black studies has increasingly come to bear an awkward relationship to this kind of critical engagement with racism. Ironically, in a political climate increasingly hostile to affirmative action, calls for something that breaches racial ontology or breaks down essentialist identity politics may undermine the very rationale that has until recently guaranteed the existence of institutional space for nonwhite academics—and for the study of black culture per se. The very ground and language of civil rights and black advancement is at stake. And hip hop's most commercially successful forms (gangsta and "Mack" rap, for example) have only muddied the water. Objections to or skepticism about the resistant character of black popular culture seem increasingly justified in a mass-media world that has co-opted African American talents to service conspicuously capitalist and patriarchal ideologies.

Yet any understanding of the power of black popular culture to resist or transform dominant ideologies has to first analyze the relationship of African Americans to masks constructed by white racism. The body of theory that comes closest to this aspect of my work is that concerning minstrelsy. Work on minstrelsy has concentrated primarily on *white* appropriations and constructions of black masks (Susan Gubar, W. T. Lhamon Jr., Eric Lott, and Michael Rogin, for example).[18] Minstrelsy is seen rightly as a contradictory act of white racist colonization. In contradistinction, my work examines what is at stake in the comparatively underexamined area of African American investment in and apparent complicity with such an imposed notion of blackness. Clearly, such self-

representations attest to the hegemonic power of white racism in determining black identity. Yet while I am indebted to the work of Frantz Fanon in this regard, I shall be attending to the *counter*hegemonic possibility of criminal self-representation that resides in how it plays with the designated subordinate position of blackness in the field of cultural relations.[19] Most particularly I shall concentrate on the way criminal self-representation pressures a "*productive* ambivalence" (to borrow a phrase from Homi Bhabha) *within* the logic of colonial discourse.[20]

As JanMohamed articulates in his analysis of the contingent terms of freedom at the heart of Richard Wright's writing, it is imperative that we attend to the political logic behind choices that otherwise appear inchoate, insane, and irrational. In Wright's oeuvre, violence and recourse to actual-death (through suicide and/or taking the life of another) is understood as a negation of the social death of slavery and Jim Crow—a way to resist perfect subjugation by the master. In the context of a "life" determined by the constant threat and fear of death, "freedom" is redefined as "seizing the capacity to actualize [one's] death away from its monopolistic control by the master."[21]

Under the aegis of white racism, the ordinary character of the black life-world is one where one is unavoidably guilty—"guilty of blackness." It is not surprising, then, that the criminal milieu (or noir predicament) is one that has held special attraction for African Americans as a prescient space to dramatize and expose not only the contingencies of white power but also the power to resist. As such, my approach engages the "ill-logic" of criminal self-representation on the part of black popular cultural producers as a form of strategic essentialism in the battle to counter one's psychological, social, and economic determination through race and to sustain the possibility of a postracist world.

OVERVIEW

Criminal self-representation in African American popular culture has taken different forms and has a long and complex history (which can be dated at least to 1895, the putative date of origin for the Stagolee saga[22]). Today's gangsta rappers are very much part of a rich vernacular tradition of "toasting" and "signifying" (verbal sparring) about badmen and tricksters that can be traced back to stories of slaves outwitting their masters. The more famous toasts about Stagolee, the Signifying Monkey, and Shine need to be examined as vital responses to forms of subordination not only for their historical value (as the origins of an enduring tradition) but also for their critical-theoretical significance with regard

to the struggle against racism. The badman-pimp-hustler-trickster demands to be known as something other than "other"—and yet does this through seeming conformity to a white racist stereotype about black male behavior and priapic prowess. Moreover, these stories demand complicity between teller and tale. For the value that inheres in these stories lies as much in their style and quality of telling as in their content. The "toast" is only as good (or bad) as its teller; the badman's story demands a dynamically "baad" performance from its narrator. Audiences and rivals engage and respond to the teller's performance, fueling escalation in derogatory braggadocio.

As a figure of ambivalent value to the community that both venerates and fears him, the badman-pimp-hustler-trickster of black folklore clearly violates the doctrine of racial uplift that is meant to pave the way to equality. He is antithetical to that which the leaders of the struggle against racial subordination have required and invoked to legitimate their cause: the idea of a unified and virtuous black community. He claims a name (possession of a reputation) through the disrespecting of other's names (bragging and besting others through superior insult exchanges—leading more often than not to murder).

In exploring the ambivalent value of the black badman figure, this book raises questions about the attribution of moral and political purpose to impoverished forms of cultural production. In the process it rejects the easy syllogism that low-budget fare equals poor culture symptomatic of counterproductive politics. Given its ludic (or disruptively playful) relationship to essentialism and appearance, criminal self-representation in African American popular culture necessarily runs the gamut of encounters with the problem of racial ontology, identity politics, "blackulinity," and minstrelsy. Although the book is organized chronologically, it remains sensitive to the "ill-logic" of its subject matter.

Chapter 1 ("Original Gangsta Culture: Fortune Economy and the Criminal Mediation of Black Entry into Modernity") examines how and why one of the most definitive features of black Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s was the numbers racket (or policy). The heyday of the Harlem Renaissance was also the golden age of the black gangster. These modern urban Stagolees operated as numbers racketeers or policy bankers, as dealers in black fortune. It was one's fortune (good or bad) to have been born black in white America. One needed fortune in order to make it (to acquire a fortune). And black gangster enterprise held powerful significance among African Americans as an emulative modern cultural practice. The numbers racket constituted a simulation of corporate or-