

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green color with a subtle vertical gradient. Scattered across the background are several stylized, light green leaf motifs, each consisting of two leaves on a short stem, arranged in a diagonal pattern from the top-left towards the bottom-right.

BLACK DEMONS

**The Media's Depiction of the African
American Male Criminal Stereotype**

Dennis Rome

 ***Greenwood***
PUBLISHING GROUP

BLACK DEMONS

**Recent Title in
Crime, Media, and Popular Culture**

Media Representations of September 11

Steven Chermak, Frankie Y. Bailey, and Michelle Brown, editors

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The Media's Depiction of the
African American Male Criminal Stereotype

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Crime, Media, and Popular Culture

Frankie Y. Bailey and Steven Chermak, Series Editors

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For My Students

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Series Foreword

This volume marks the launching of an exciting new interdisciplinary series on Crime, Media, and Popular Culture from Praeger Publishers. Because of the pervasiveness of media in our lives and the salience of crime and criminal justice issues, we feel it is especially important to provide a home for scholars who are engaged in innovative and thoughtful research on important crime and mass media issues.

This series will focus on process issues such as the social construction of crime and moral panics; presentation issues such as the images of victims, offenders, and criminal justice figures in news and popular culture; and effects such as the influence of the media on criminal behavior and criminal justice administration.

With regard to this latter issue—effects of media and popular culture—as this preface was being written, the *Los Angeles Times* and other media outlets reported that two young half-brothers (ages 20 and 15) in Riverside, California, had confessed to strangling their mother and disposing of her body in a ravine. The story was attracting particular attention because the brothers told police they had gotten the idea of cutting off her head and hands to prevent identification from a recent episode of the award-winning HBO series, *The Sopranos*. As the *Los Angeles Times* noted, this again brought into the spotlight the debate about the influence of violent media such as *The Sopranos*, about New Jersey mobsters, on susceptible consumers.

In this series, scholars engaged in research on issues that examine the complex nature of our relationship with media. Peter Berger and Thomas Luck-

man coined the phrase the “social construction of reality” to describe the process by which we acquire knowledge about our environment. They and others have argued that reality is a mediated experience. We acquire what Emile Durkheim described as “social facts” through a several-pronged process of personal experience, interaction with others, academic education, and, yes, the mass media. With regard to crime and the criminal-justice system, many people acquire much of their information from the news and from entertainment media. The issue raised by the previously mentioned report and other anecdotal stories of “copycat” crime is how what we consume—read, watch, see, play, hear—affects us.

What we do know is that we experience this mediated reality as individuals. We are not all affected in the same way by our interactions with mass media. Each of us engages in interactions with mass media and popular culture that are shaped by factors such as our social environment, interests, needs, and opportunities for exposure. We do not come to the experience of mass media and popular culture as blank slates waiting to be written upon or voids waiting to be filled. It is the pervasiveness of mass media and popular culture, and the varied backgrounds (including differences in age, gender, race and ethnicity, religion, etc.), that we bring to our interactions with media that make this a particularly intriguing area of research.

Moreover, it is the role of mass media in creating the much-discussed “global village” of the twenty-first century that is also fertile ground for research. We exist not only in our communities, our cities, and states, but in a world that spreads beyond national boundaries. Technology has made us a part of an ongoing global discourse about issues not only of criminal justice but of social justice. Technology shows us events around the world “as they happen.” It was technology that allowed Americans around the world to witness the collapse of the World Trade Center’s twin towers on September 11, 2001. In the aftermath of this “crime against humanity,” we have been witnesses to, and participants in, an ongoing discussion about the nature of terrorism and the appropriate response to such violence.

In this first volume in our new series, we have brought together scholars from a wide range of disciplines to examine the role of mass media in the social construction of reality in the wake of an event, such as September 11, that affected us all in profound ways. This volume is only the first in a series that we expect to be both timely and significant.

Frankie Y. Bailey and Steven Chermak,
Series Editors

Preface

The main idea for this book was developed, in part, several years ago when Susan Smith, a young white mother of Union, South Carolina, strapped her small children into the backseat of her car and drove the car into a lake. Before she confessed to this act, she told police and representatives of the media that her car had been carjacked by an African American male. She gave the police a description of a young African American male wearing a skull cap: the image of a criminal for most Americans. A small group of my undergraduate students and a few of my faculty colleagues and I would frequently gather informally to discuss current events and issues that pertained especially to the African American community. It was through these impromptu and informal gatherings that *Black Demons* was born. I would like to thank, from the bottom of my heart, these strikingly brilliant people who comprised these gatherings: Professors Fred McElroy, Gloria Gibson, and Coramae Mann; among my favorite undergraduate students were Pete Adams, Philmore Hutchins, and Christopher Bickel. Special thanks go to Rahsaan Bartet for his selection of icons used for the “conceptual entrapment of media” schema in chapter 3 and for his countless trips to the library to corroborate sources.¹ My good friends and mentors David Takeuchi, Carla Howery and Norma Nager deserve special thanks for the unconditional love and support they continue to give me. Special gratitude is due also to Wendy Beck for her reading of earlier versions of this manuscript, and thanks to my friend and colleague Steve Chermak for whom without his encouragement and support this manuscript would not have come to fruition.

My family has always supported my academic endeavors and, for this, my love for them is relentless—special thanks to my wife Natalia who has been a great companion, friend and beacon of light during cloudy and foggy days. I am what I am, in part, because of the exceptionally talented students I have been privileged to work with over the years. To them this book is dedicated.

Dennis M. Rome

1

Introduction

Portions of these grim messages were extended to black men's violence, especially that of the "violent" black, lower-class male. I was told that all black men were inherently aggressive and violent. They, like white men, could rape, plunder, assault, and murder our souls. Poor black men with Negroid features were particularly inclined to this behavior. I therefore acquired a deep-seated fear of the "savage" nature of black men who could not control their pent-up aggressiveness, hatred, and sexual urges. Believing them to be inherently criminal, my black female elders considered poor black men as the "other."¹

Another consequence for black America is that this "monster" image created by the white popular culture has been taken over by some poor blacks. According to Stallworth (1994), young black men and women both continue to follow patterns of slavery times. They become the monsters. Many fulfill white America's image of them legitimately by becoming successful gangsta rappers; others fulfill this image illegitimately by becoming "baaad niggers." Rappers, therefore, reinforce the popular belief that as "baaad-ass niggers" young blacks can achieve fame, recognition, and a sense of being (somebody). If they lose, however, they face a long stay in our jails and prisons or even bodily injury and death."²

The present study contends that the negative stereotypes that many people have of African American men are created to a significant degree by the mass media.