

Chapter 10

Euro-Americans

The Caucasian Evasion

Victims, Exceptions, and Defenders of the Faith

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In this chapter, Miller, Like, and Levin discuss how the media representations of whites portray them as law-abiding victims who are more "deserving" of support and help than people of color. According to the authors, such a depiction produces what they refer to as a "hierarchy of victims" in which white victims are presented as worthy and deserving of assistance while victims who are members of other racial groups are not. In presenting white criminals, the media rely on images of noncriminals and focus attention not on punishment but rather on explaining and answering "why" these offenders have committed such offenses. It is common, for example, for the media to point to the remorse and sorrow of white offenders, which are rarely sentiments presented of minority offenders. This chapter highlights not only how class, gender, and race intersect to produce media images of whites but also how such depictions of whites leave unchallenged the assumption that whites are noncriminal by nature.

Introduction

We recently came across a political cartoon drawn by Tim Jackson that concisely illustrates much of what is notable in the me-

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dia treatment of race and crime. The first frame shows a middle-aged white male newscaster reading the "Los Angeles Headline News" with an expression of boredom on his face: "A child is gunned down in yet another random act of violence in the mean streets—yadda, yadda, yadda . . . WAIT! This says the victim was White this time?!?" In the second frame, with a look of rage, and with fists clenched, the newscaster leans toward the camera and says, "Why you sick filthy street thugs! We're sick of these senseless acts of violence! This behavior simply will not be tolerated! We mean business!!!" The meanings behind this cartoon are layered: "Street thugs" are people of color; their victims are usually also people of color (and implicated as potential thugs themselves), and the only "true" victims of crime are innocent whites caught in the crossfire or preyed upon by these dangerous others.¹

This imagery also implies that whites who do commit violent crimes are somehow unique—they do not reflect white culture and society more generally. When the media focus on street crime, they typically do not pay attention to the routine participation of whites in such activities, although the majority of individuals engaged in street crime are actually white. The invisible white street thug is, thus, an important stereotype. It is often hard to recognize, however, because it is the white thug's very invisibility, his absence in media accounts, that makes him so stereotypic. One way to focus in on this ephemeral stereotype is to examine what images of whites and crime the media *do* pay attention to. For this chapter, we decided to examine the media stereotyping of whites and crime by looking at a number of recent prominent criminal cases that have involved whites. In doing so, we uncovered three important themes.

The first theme is an emphasis on whites as crime victims. This imagery is specifically class based (with a focus on the victimization of middle-class whites) and is often gender based as well (with a focus on white women as victims, often of sex crimes). What is compelling about these media stories is not just that whites are crime victims but also that they are the innocent targets of

crimes by "street criminals," who are most often (in the stories that make the news) men of color. These images create a contrast between those crime victims who are most "innocent" and thus "deserving" of public sympathy and a continuum of less innocent and less deserving victims.

The second and third themes we discuss both focus on white criminals, but in ways that differ from media depictions of criminals who are not white. Here an analogy may be useful. Scholars who study the impact of race on the educational system find that, unless they prove otherwise through poor school performance, white students are presumed to have potential based on talent and ability. In contrast, students of color are presumed to have deficiencies that require special assistance. Thus, for white students, a "discourse of potential" gives them benefits and opportunities based on how they are perceived. A "discourse of deficit" means that minority students are almost expected to fail, and will not stand out when and if they do so (Ferguson 2000).

Although this discussion of education may seem far removed from our focus on crime, we suggest that a similar pattern can be seen in the popular media's treatment of race and crime. Whites are presumed to be noncriminal by nature; thus, their crimes are in need of special explanation. As a result, in many celebrated cases in which the criminal has been white, a great deal of time and space has been dedicated to exploring those life factors that may have contributed to the creation of someone capable of committing the given crime. These factors include early childhood traumas, abuse, depression, mental illness, and so on—psychological and psychiatric causes of the crime. In contrast, when people of color commit crime, little attempt is made to explore the question of why. Because the question is not asked, the answer is implicit: It is in their nature.

Finally, many media images of the white criminal are romanticized. That is, the individual white criminal is portrayed as particularly intelligent or heroic, and the crimes reflect these valued traits. These images are often specifically masculine and upper or

middle class. Because they mirror dominant values in our society, their crimes are met with understanding and the criminals receive sympathy or admiration. As a result, the overall notion of white potential and goodness remains unchallenged. In the sections that follow, we will explore each of these themes in greater detail, discussing prominent examples to illustrate our points. In addition, we should note that while our primary focus is on race, this intersects with gender, sexuality, class, and celebrity to complicate matters further. Our discussion will illustrate some of these complexities. In addition, although we primarily examine nationally celebrated cases, we believe the handling of these cases by the media represents more common patterns. Occasionally we will provide examples that are not national to illustrate how such images operate in local news media as well.

Whites as Crime Victims

Perhaps the most consistent historical theme within the media regarding the relationship of whites to crime is the image of the white crime victim, assaulted by a man of color, typically an African American. Often the representation is that of a white woman whose victimization is explicitly sexual. As Chapter 7 highlights, the media have long been fascinated with portraying African Americans as violent and, in particular, with the image of the black rapist (Davis 1981). *Birth of a Nation*, one of the earliest feature-length films ever made, included a storyline about a young, innocent blonde chased off a cliff by a black man intent on ravaging her. This theme has carried through to the contemporary era. Specifically, when a case arises that fits this stereotype (a black man assaulting a white woman), it is the case most likely to receive media attention and to be treated harshly by the criminal justice system (Estrich 1987; Walsh 1987).

The image of the young, attractive, middle-class, white (often blonde) female rape victim is the epitome of our society's construction of the innocent victim of street crime. Perhaps the most telling contemporary case along these lines was the 1989 at-

tack on the woman known as the "Central Park jogger." She fit the prototypical media stereotype of the crime victim: young, attractive, financially successful, and the innocent victim of a random attack by strangers. For many years, it was believed that the strangers who attacked her were a group of young men of color on the streets looking for trouble. The crime was a media sensation, and the stories surrounding the attack had two themes: portraying the young men who were found guilty of committing the crimes as savage, animalistic, and unremorseful, and portraying the victim as innocent, good, and a fragile but brave survivor. A columnist for the *San Jose Mercury News* captured these themes succinctly when she wrote, "They were predators. She was Bambi" (in Hackett and McKillop 1989, 40).

The media's focus on the jogger as a fragile, brave survivor is perhaps best captured in the following description of her testimony during the trial:

Now the door swung open, and a young woman hobbled up the steps to the witness chair. Carrying only 90 lbs. on her 5 ft. 5 in. frame, with her blond hair cut in a pixieish wedge, she bore a resemblance to actress Sandy Duncan. After being sworn in, her hand trembling on the Bible, she was asked to state her name. She gave it in a strong, clear voice, and in that instant reclaimed herself from the headlines. She was no longer a symbol, but a woman—somebody's sister, somebody's daughter; a human being who looks in the mirror each morning and sees a scarred face looking back. (Kunen 1990, 32)

[T]he youths convicted of the attack were depicted as animals. They were described by police and quoted in the media as being "smug and remorseless" (Gibbs 1989, 20). Billionaire developer Donald Trump took out full-page ads in four newspapers calling for the death penalty in the case. Interviewed for *Newsweek*, he said, "I'm sick and tired of watching this kind of thing being perpetrated on an innocent public" (in Hackett and McKillop 1989, 40). As one author critical of the media's handling of the case noted, the Central Park rape fit well with the "white love affair with the notion of the inevitability

of black antisocial behavior" (Greenfield 1989, 86). In fact, it wasn't until December 2002 that the five young men—four African Americans and one Latino—found guilty in the case as teenagers had their convictions overturned. Though DNA evidence (available but not processed at the time of their trials) and the confession of a convicted rapist/murderer exonerated the young men, they had already completed sentences of up to 13 years.

This case clearly illustrates the operation of racial bias in both the criminal justice system and the public imagination. In addition, it highlights the equally important problem of our hierarchical treatment of victims. What makes one victim more deserving than another? This particular attack was incredibly brutal and the victim *was* worthy of tremendous support. However, it was both her race and social class that combined to create the media sensation surrounding the case. For instance, the prosecutor in the case, Elizabeth Lederer, called the Central Park attack "one of the most vicious and brutal crimes in the history of New York" (in Kunen 1989, 106; Trippett 1990, 40). But in 1989 alone, there were 3,254 forcible rapes reported to the police in New York City (Podolsky et al. 1990). There were hundreds of homicides. In fact, the man who ultimately confessed to the Central Park rape was arrested just four months after the Central Park attack for the rape and murder of a pregnant mother of three. She was slaughtered in full view of her children. Her name was Lourdes Gonzalez, and her case was not even a blip on the media's radar screen. So our question is this: What made the Central Park jogger case so special that it was not just vicious and brutal, not just one of the most vicious and brutal assaults in 1989, but also one of the most vicious and brutal assaults *in the history of New York*?

One of the most significant problems with media stereotypes about criminals and crime is that they create a hierarchy of deserving and less deserving victims. What about those crime victims who are not young, attractive, blonde, financially successful, and so on? What about those crime victims who are not white? The media pres-

ent a particular image as representative of the quintessential innocent crime victim. Consequently, all other crime victims are compared to this ideal, and many do not "measure up." They are deemed less worthy of sympathy, and their lives of less value. This may seem like a strong statement, but the evidence is quite compelling. It is not just the media that judge cases along these lines, but police agencies, the justice system, and much of the public as well.

A local case is illustrative. In Kankakee, Illinois, in 1995, two youths ended up as murder victims, but the media, the public, and the police responded to them in very different ways. A 10-year-old white boy disappeared and a 13-year-old African American girl disappeared but was suspected of running away. The boy's case "riveted the region for two weeks, prompting an extensive search and relentless media coverage" (White 1995). Television news crews from Chicago traveled 70 miles to Kankakee and covered the story around the clock, and the case (unlike the girl's) was covered by the Associated Press. After the boy's body was found, "a throng of media chronicled [his] burial" (White 1995). In contrast, the girl's saga didn't make any TV newscast. In fact, Kankakee's newspaper, the *Daily Journal*, wrote only three brief stories about her death. On the day her body's identity was reported, the demise of Whitey, a blind horse, got more ink (White 1995). This story is but one example of a consistent pattern within the media of perpetuating a hierarchy of more and less deserving victims, according to factors such as race and social class. This particular comparison only made the news because the Kankakee police chief was struck and disturbed by the contrast and spoke out.

The recent and extended public fascination with two additional cases—those of Laci Peterson and JonBenet Ramsey—again illustrate that we choose our victims based on how closely they fit with our definitions of goodness and innocence: a lovely, pregnant—and white—young woman in the case of Peterson, and a beautiful, blonde toddler beauty queen in the case of Ramsey. The murder of Laci Peterson by her husband

Scott Peterson has received a preponderance of media coverage over the last year, with public outrage heightened because she was eight months pregnant at the time of her death. Yet statistics show that African American and other minority women are disproportionately the victims of intimate partner homicide, and are more often the victims of violence at the hands of intimates, relatives, and acquaintances (Lauritsen and White 2001; Riedel and Welsh 2002). Make no bones about it: Laci Peterson was the victim of a horrific crime. But why are so many other victims—like Lourdes Gonzalez, also pregnant, but raped and killed in front of her children—not worthy of our attention, grief, and outrage as well?

Returning again to the popular theme of interracial rape, the recent media attention to the Kobe Bryant rape trial is additional evidence of our collective fascination with the white victim/black offender category. Coverage of this case was complicated by Bryant's celebrity: because of his fame, the problem of racial bias was a noted feature in some of the media reports, and analyses of the case gave Bryant the benefits typically reserved for privileged white men. When *People* magazine first featured the case, it included photos that illustrate our cultural fascination with celebrity: Bryant and his wife, Bryant taking pop star Brandy to the prom, Bryant with the president, Bryant celebrating a Lakers' title win (Hewitt et al. 2003a). In later coverage, sports analogies were prominent, as with *People* magazine's "Score Sheet for Kobe: Weighing the Points Made in Court" (Hewitt et al. 2003b). When *Newsweek* featured Bryant on its cover, it included an editorial in which the editor described that colleagues "wondered whether by simply putting the basketball superstar accused of rape on the cover, we would imply his guilt and play into pernicious stereotypes about black men" (Whitaker 2003, 6). He explained, however, that doing so "showed how deep a nerve the Kobe Bryant story has touched . . . [and] could shed new light on the case and on the man himself" (Whitaker 2003, 6).

On the other hand, the victim—described in a *Newsweek* article as "blond, [and] girl-

ish-looking" (Samuels et al. 2003, 51)—did not receive the unabashed sympathy a white accuser would have in a case where the African American accused was not a celebrity. Instead, as is typically reserved for the treatment of intraracial rapes involving white victims and accusers (intraracial rapes involving African Americans rarely receive media coverage), ideologies about sex and gender led to a wide range of accusations about the young woman's character, mental stability, and sexual history (Hewitt et al. 2004). Owing to Bryant's celebrity, the case did not play out in the media in the typical way an intraracial rape case involving a white accuser would. But it nonetheless received the extended attention it did—and struck the "nerve" noted by *Newsweek's* editor—in large part because the victim was white and the accused was African American.

Stereotypes about race have other consequences as well. Given the strength of media images of African American criminals victimizing innocent whites, it is not surprising that white criminals have attempted to escape responsibility for their crimes by calling on these popular stereotypes. Perhaps the two most noted recent cases are those of Susan Smith and Charles Stuart. In 1994, Smith drowned her two young children and told authorities they had been kidnapped when she was carjacked by an African American man in a knit cap. In 1989, Stuart drove to the outskirts of a predominantly African American neighborhood in Boston, shot and killed his pregnant wife, shot and injured himself, and then claimed they had been the robbery victims of an African American man in a jogging suit. Each evoked racial symbols of white fear to shift attention away from themselves.

Both Smith and Stuart were eventually found out, but not before each spent time as a sympathetic media figure. Stuart, for instance, was cast as a devoted, heroic husband and father-to-be who, even after the horrible attack, still tried to save his family. A director for the show *Rescue 911*, which aired a segment on the "attack," described arriving on the scene to find Charles Stuart's arm around his dying wife, noting that "it was as if even at that moment he was still try-

ing to protect her" (Brower et al. 1989). Early on, the media and police treated the Stuart case as "the symbol of senseless urban violence" (Stanko 1990, 1). The neighborhood in which they were "attacked"—near the hospital where they had attended Lamaze class—was described in *People* magazine as "menacing" and "crime-plagued." Within hours, police swept into the community where the shooting took place, stopping and frisking hundreds of young African American men, and the mayor "ordered all available detectives to work on the case" (Carlson 1990, 10). The deep public outrage and sympathy the case initially triggered were direct results of the belief, fostered by media coverage, that a menacing black criminal had destroyed the lives of a decent, loving, white, middle-class family.

The Psychology of White Criminals

Whereas the African American perpetrators in many celebrated cases with white victims are described as animalistic and savage, many white criminals are viewed as tragic anomalies. Particularly when the criminals are middle class, a great deal of energy is spent trying to figure out why they have gone astray—why their enormous potential has been lost. As we noted in the introduction, given a presumption in the media that whites are not violent or criminally inclined by nature, individual whites who deviate from this image need to be explained. The search for understanding may reflect, more than anything, the need to distinguish these individuals from whites as a whole in order for the presumed purity of the category to remain intact. Thus ensues a struggle, played out in the media, to figure out what makes these individuals so different from "the rest of us." Although it may not be the primary drive behind the psychological analysis of offenders, an additional result is the humanization of these individuals, which includes recognition of the ways in which they have been shaped by their life histories and the potential for redemption. Nowhere is this search for understanding and its consequences more clear than in the case of Jeffrey Dahmer.

Dahmer's crimes are without question some of the most gruesome in recent history. A serial killer who confessed in 1991 to murdering 17 people, he sodomized, mutilated, dismembered, and cannibalized the bodies of his victims, storing body parts throughout his apartment. However, even while early media depictions of Dahmer and his crimes used language such as "evil," "chamber of horrors," and "monster" (Chin 1991; Chua-Eoan 1991), from the start the focus was on examining the traumas of Dahmer's childhood in search of an explanation for his behavior. For example, a story in *People* noted that Dahmer was "raised in [a] well-to-do community" (Chin 1991, 33) and that his "ordinary, even banal background at first seemed to mock efforts to fathom what lay behind such evil." However, the article quickly focused on Dahmer's early childhood. Chin noted that "Dahmer was traumatized at an early age. At eight, he was sexually abused by a male in the neighborhood" (see also Prud'Homme 1991). His homicidal behavior was also linked to his parents' "bitter divorce" when Dahmer was a senior in high school. Dahmer's stepmother explained that "the desertion [by his mother] really affected him" (Chin 1991, 34). Dahmer was described in the *People* article as a "quiet loner" whose "inner disturbances continued to erupt to the surface." In a companion story in the same issue of *People*, a psychologist who studies serial killers explained that they "all have been abused, emotionally, physically and quite often sexually" (Tayman 1991, 36).

Numerous follow-up articles about Dahmer appeared in the media—when he stood trial, was convicted, and was sentenced; when books about him and the case came out (including his father's); and finally when he was himself murdered in prison. His media story was ultimately one of redemption. This redemption was accomplished in three ways. First, as previously noted, journalists attempted to understand how traumatic life experiences had contributed to the creation of a man whose "inner furies" (Chin 1994, 38) drove him to commit his crimes. Dahmer's father published a memoir on the topic, and Dahmer himself was interviewed on *Dateline NBC* in the

quest to understand what went wrong. Second, from the time of Dahmer's arrest, media stories highlighted his progressive religious conversion. After his arrest, it was noted that he "spen[t] his days reading the Bible" (Treen and Tamarkin 1992, 75). After his attempt to plead insanity failed, Dahmer was quoted as explaining,

I knew I was sick or evil or both. Now I believe I was sick. I know that I will have to turn to God to help me get through each day. I should have stayed with God. I tried and failed and created a holocaust. (Schneider 1992, 38)

In the *People* story on Dahmer's death (tellingly entitled "The Final Victim" after he was murdered in prison), much of the story was devoted to describing "Dahmer's budding religious beliefs" (Gleick 1994, 126). This and other articles focused on his newly contemplative Christian lifestyle. Of Dahmer's murder, his minister is quoted as saying that Dahmer was "a very nice, decent guy. . . . He was ready to meet his maker. I believe he is in the hands of God."

The focus on Dahmer having "found God" was tied explicitly to the third and most significant way in which Dahmer was able to find redemption and forgiveness through the media's construction of him. This was the focus on Dahmer's deep remorse and his stated desire to die in order to provide justice for the families of his victims and atone for his sins. At the trial, he was described as "quietly apologetic," with "his head bowed in seeming humility" (Schneider 1992, 38). This particular article ended with a statement made at the trial by Dahmer:

I have seen [the victim's families'] tears, and if I could give up my life right now to bring their loved ones back, I would do it. I am so very sorry.

Dahmer's desire to die was perhaps key to his redemption, as it was described as his means of atoning for his sins. After he was killed, it was noted that "Dahmer, like the families of many of his victims, felt he deserved to die" and "yearn[ed] to be removed from this earth" (Gleick 1994, 126). The religious significance of these statements was

confirmed by his minister, whom the article quoted as noting that

Dahmer often contemplated "the question of death," asking Ratcliff if he was "sinning against God by continuing to live."

Although Dahmer's case represents an extreme—given the gruesome nature of his crimes and the number of victims—the same themes are nonetheless present when we examine other celebrated cases with white defendants. The focus is on the psychological state of mind of the individuals in question and the life experiences that may have pushed them to commit their crimes. This is particularly the case with white female criminals, who have presumably gone against their nature both as whites and as women. The goals, again, are to understand what caused these individuals to behave against their nature, as well as to create distance between them and the category(ies) to which they belong (e.g., white women). The implication is that without some traumatic causal mechanism (childhood abuse, psychological problems, etc.), the crimes would not have taken place. This observation does not imply that media discussions absolve white offenders of responsibility for their crimes, but rather that they are much more likely to examine the question of "Why?" when the offender is white.

Of course—particularly in the case of women—just because the offender is white and their psychology and social history are scrutinized for explanation, does not necessarily mean they will not be vilified. This occurs most often when the individual's privileged racial status is outweighed by their overlapping membership in other stigmatized categories. The case of Aileen Wuornos—a lesbian and admitted prostitute—is illustrative. Charlize Theron's 2003 Oscar-winning performance in the film *Monster* made Wuornos a household name. Executed in Florida in 2002, Wuornos has been widely described as "America's first female serial killer" since her arrest for seven homicides in 1990. She was the subject of two sensationalistic "true crime" books, both rushed to press to capitalize on the at-

tention the case received when it broke, as well as the 1992 made-for-TV movie *Overkill*. Wuornos was a prostitute since childhood, and was working on the interstates in Florida at the time of the killings. The seven men she killed were clients.

Monster, which was released after Wuornos' death, represents a recent attempt to humanize the woman behind the spectacle. Aside from Theron's compelling performance, *Monster* received mixed reviews at the box office. Ironically, much of the critique was aimed at the purported overly sympathetic portrayal of Wuornos, which included attention to the brutal rape she sustained at the hands of her first victim, as well as a tortured youth that makes Jeffrey Dahmer's seem idyllic in comparison.

In contrast, most popular accounts of Wuornos and her crimes depicted her as a man-hating "madwoman" on a "murderous rampage."² This is documented in chilling detail in the 1992 documentary, *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer*. In fact, some of the most compelling—and telling—facets of the Wuornos case are the events, including the media sensation, that occurred after her arrest. For instance, the documentary reveals that the arresting officers hired an attorney to negotiate with film companies after Wuornos' arrest. This attorney also represented Wuornos' lover, Tyria Moore, who was the primary prosecution witness against Wuornos during her trial. Because of their desire to sell the story of the world's "first female serial killer" to the media, the documentary provides compelling evidence that the officers had a powerful stake in constructing Wuornos as a murderous man-hater, and in not investigating Wuornos' claims of self-defense. (For example, though her public defenders did not present this evidence at trial, the first man Wuornos killed was a convicted sex offender who had previously spent 10 years in prison. Despite describing a brutal rape that culminated in his shooting, Wuornos received the death penalty.)

In contrast with many other white offenders—even those accused of much more gruesome crimes like Dahmer's—the dehumanization of Wuornos remained a systematic

feature of media accounts and her treatment by the criminal justice system. The fact that Wuornos was a lesbian played prominently in the why and how of her demonization. Even her race could not redeem her (see Farr, 2000).

The more heinous the crime, the more the focus on the psychology of white criminals appears to increase, as illustrated by the Dahmer case. The media are almost sleuthlike when trying to understand how a white individual—especially a middle-class white—could be involved in such terrible crimes. This interest in understanding is intensified further when a white adolescent or white youths are involved. So it is not surprising that when shootings in predominantly white suburban schools began occurring with seeming frequency over the past five years, the media were right there to cover the stories.

Since 1996, the public has been bombarded with the media's unrelenting interest in school violence. One of the first cases to receive notoriety was that of Luke Woodham, a 16-year-old student at Pearl High School in Pearl, Mississippi. On October 1, 1997, Woodham, who stabbed his mother to death before heading to school armed with a rifle, killed two classmates and wounded seven others (Pooley 1999). A year before the Woodham murders, Barry Loukaitis, age 14, killed a teacher and two students at his junior high in Moses Lake, Washington. A more recent fatal incident occurred in Littleton, Colorado, at Columbine High School in 1999 (Adams 1999). Two students, 18-year-old Eric Harris and 17-year-old Dylan Klebold, killed 12 classmates and one teacher, in addition to critically wounding 23 other students. The massacre ended when the boys killed themselves at the school.

For each year from 1996 to 1999, in an "ideal" suburb, a school became the scene of lethal violence in which one or two disgruntled students conveyed their rage by gunning down their classmates, and in some cases a teacher also. During this period, the media extended lengthy coverage to seven of these school shootings. Certainly the nature of these acts and the violence displayed by the

young perpetrators warrant public attention. However, school violence did not begin in 1996 with Barry Loukaitis, nor did it end in 1999 at Columbine. These cases were of importance and "deserving" of widespread media coverage because they all involved young, middle-class, white perpetrators. The shootings occurred in small communities and were committed by presumably wholesome, average white boys. Immediately following each shooting, the focus of the media was, Why? What would cause these kids to commit murder?

Time magazine perfectly pinpointed the sentiment of the media in one of its numerous articles on the subject, entitled "Yes It Can Happen Here" (Pooley 1999). Many of the newspaper headlines and magazine and journal articles offered the same picture of stunned confusion over how these incidents could have happened, as if school violence is not something that can occur in white schools. The implication of the media's approach—yes, it can happen *here*—evokes the discourse of potential described earlier in the chapter. Implicit, as well, is that school violence *there* (e.g., urban, nonwhite communities) is expected, reflecting the marginalization of these communities as not really part of mainstream America (*here*).

Thus, nonwhite, urban violence warrants minimal media attention and explanation. However, when a white youth with "potential" commits a violent act, the media address this as a phenomenon that must be explained. As one article on Eric Harris states, "Harris was not a likely candidate for suburban mayhem . . . he was just a quiet boy trying to fit in" (Pooley 1999, 26). This statement implies that something must have caused him to act in the manner he did; his actions were out of character. So it became the media's job to find out why Eric Harris and his friend murdered their classmates and teacher. To do so, the media turned their attention once again to the psychological and emotional health of the youths, focusing on the links between their mental states and factors such as media violence, "goth" music, and bullying.

For instance, *Time* indicated that 15-year-old Kipland Kinkel was "depressed" and

"took Ritalin, then Prozac" when he killed two students and injured 20 others at his high school in Springfield, Oregon. The article goes on to list possible family problems and cultural influences that may have motivated the crime. In the case of Andrew Golden, age 11, and Mitchell Johnson, age 13, *Time* listed the rap music of Tupac Shakur, video games such as *Mortal Kombat*, being teased by classmates, and rejection by girlfriends as reasons for their killing a teacher and four students at their middle school (Jackson 1999). In other cases, family separation, depression, and the ingestion of prescribed medications were indicated as the causal factors (Pooley 1999).

Returning to the example of Columbine, Harris and Klebold were described as "bright, maladjusted kids united in their intelligence and disdain for the jock culture of Columbine High," a culture whose members taunted and tormented them (Adams 1999, 41). Eric Harris was described as motivated as well by recent rejections from the Marine Corps and several colleges. Adams notes that Harris' "class was moving ahead, but despite his intelligence, he was not" (p. 41). Dylan Klebold was described as shy and sad but looking forward to going away to college before the murders occurred. These young men were portrayed not as "bad" kids, but as bright, intelligent individuals driven to extreme measures, pushed to act out violently by their experiences and mistreatment at Columbine—individuals in need of understanding. Thus, a *Newsweek* article written by a classmate of Harris and Klebold following the Columbine mass murders is entitled "Mourn for the Killers, Too" (Adams 1999).

Undoubtedly, much investigation went into finding out what everyday life was like for these troubled youths, and what could have caused them to react in the manner they did. The blame, in all of these instances, seems to have been shifted from the youths who perpetrated the violence to social situations that led to psychological problems that ultimately drove them to commit mass murder. Undoubtedly, these situations may have had some bearing on the murders committed by these adolescents; however, they are not atypical of most American teenagers.

Few, if any, would refute that many teens listen to music with violent lyrics, watch violent movies, have been rejected by girlfriends or boyfriends and teased by classmates, and have endured family problems. Yet most teens do not go to school armed with semiautomatic weapons and kill their teachers and classmates. When white, suburban youths, who are assumed to have tremendous potential, do engage in such acts of violence, however, an explanation is apparently warranted and the media will go to great lengths to provide it.

To further explore this theme, and to contrast it with the treatment of people of color, we will compare the cases of five women implicated in the homicides of their children: Susan Smith, Andrea Yates, Hedda Nussbaum, Awilda López, and Ophelia Yip. As noted above, Smith's attempt to blame the disappearance of her two young sons on a black carjacker was short-lived. As her story fell apart, she eventually confessed to drowning the boys and told authorities where they could find the bodies. Andrea Yates, a white woman, was convicted in 2002 of drowning her five children, aged 7 months to 7 years. Her case brought national attention to the issues of postpartum depression and schizophrenia. Hedda Nussbaum and her common-law husband, Joel Steinberg, were arrested in 1987 after the beating death of their 6-year-old daughter, Lisa. Both were white and upper middle class. Steinberg was a lawyer, and Nussbaum had been a children's book editor. Charges against Nussbaum were eventually dropped when evidence suggested that Steinberg had repeatedly abused and tortured both Nussbaum and their daughter. The case brought national attention to the issue of family violence. Awilda López, who is a Latina, was arrested in 1995. She also was charged with the beating death of her 6-year-old daughter, Elisa, after several years of suspected abuse. The case made the national media specifically as an indictment of the child welfare system, which had failed to remove the child from her mother's home despite repeated reports of abuse. Ophelia Yip, a Chinese immigrant, killed herself and her

four children in 1991 by driving her van off a pier into the Los Angeles Harbor.

When Smith's crimes came to light, the press immediately began the search for an explanation. In addition to focusing on childhood traumas, the themes included the stresses of an unfaithful husband, a failed marriage, and subsequent single parenthood (Gibbs 1994; Levitt 1994). As in the case of Dahmer, stories about Smith following her incarceration focused on her tremendous remorse but, even more so, on the intense pain she suffers from having to live with the knowledge that she murdered her children. She was described as "spen[ding] much of her time in jail weeping and talking to photos of her sons" (Hewitt et al. 1995, 76), as "weep[ing] every day for . . . the children she drowned," and as "'confused' and 'seriously depressed and suicidal'" (Cerio and Sider 1995, 69). Consequently, articles written at the conclusion of the Smith case (when she was sentenced to life in prison) focused on the themes of understanding and forgiveness.

The Yates case focused attention on postpartum psychosis and schizophrenia, as well as the limitations of the insanity defense. For example, after her conviction and life sentence, *Newsweek* ran a story entitled "A Crazy System," describing how the case has forced the nation to "ponder its method of coping with madness" (Geselman and Clemetson 2002, 30). In fact, Yates' conviction was overturned in January 2005 based on challenges to the testimony of one of the prosecutor's psychological expert witnesses, though she remains in a psychiatric facility. In addition to bringing widespread attention to mental illness and the system's failures in addressing it, media attention to the Yates case also focused on her religious faith, traditional upbringing, and typical middle-class family life, and especially on what a "good girl" she had always been.

Because Yates appeared to fit so neatly into the forms of femininity highly valued by our culture, her crime received extensive popular coverage. A *Newsweek* cover story led with the line: "Andrea Yates was the ultimate caregiver—until depression and the strains of raising five children drove her to

an unspeakable crime" (Thomas et al. 2001: 20). In addition, like the Smith case, stories about Yates focused on her suffering and remorse after the crime. For example, a 2001 *People* story entitled "Her Private Hell" described Yates as "tormented by memories of the children she drowned." A friend interviewed for the story explained that during visits, "she wailed, she cried uncontrollably. She asked, 'how could I have done that to my children?'" (p. 69). Likewise, a brief 2001 *Newsweek* article notes that Yates has "finally begun to grieve," and describes her time in prison: "she's made a few friends, attends Bible study, performs household duties and relishes tending prison gardens" (Geselman 2004, 8). Thus, her media redemption was tied not just from the need for attention her case brought to the problem of mental illness and its treatment, but also to her return—with medical intervention—to traditional femininity.

In the López case, there was little attempt in the popular media to try to understand the causes of the mother's actions. To state that she was a "crack addict" who became pregnant with Elisa while staying in a homeless shelter seemed answer enough (Peyser with Power 1995; Van Biema 1995). There were no articles detailing and psychoanalyzing every incident of abuse and every trauma that may have triggered her treatment of her daughter. Instead, López was described by Peyser and Power (1995, 42) in *Newsweek* as "ranting, wild-haired," and screaming when she was arrested, and police said she had "shown little emotion" since her arrest. Under the headline, Peyser and Power's story began, "How a mother—now charged with murder—got away with years of grisly abuse." It was mentioned only in passing that López was the repeated victim of serious spousal abuse, including an incident in which her husband stabbed her 17 times, leaving her hospitalized.

In contrast, *Time* ran a story about the Steinberg/Nussbaum case entitled "Hedda Hellish Tale," which began as follows:

She still limps. Despite plastic surgery, her nose is crushed and her upper lip is permanently split. But when she testified last week in a Manhattan courtroom

against her former live-in lover, who is accused of beating to death their illegally adopted 6-year-old daughter, Hedda Nussbaum spoke in a firm, clear voice. What emerged was a bizarre tale of violence, drug abuse, isolation and mind control inflicted by disbarred lawyer Joel Steinberg. Asked why she never escaped from Steinberg's thrall, Nussbaum had a simple reply: "I worshipped him." (Ellis 1988, 32)

Nussbaum, like López, was reported to be addicted to cocaine; however, whereas López was poor and Latina, Nussbaum was upper middle class and white. She and Steinberg reportedly freebased cocaine together after their daughter was beaten unconscious prior to calling for help (Ellis 1988; Hackett et al. 1988). Nussbaum's victimization at the hands of her abusive partner resulted in the charges against her eventually being dropped after prosecutors became "convinced she had been so battered psychologically and physically that she could not have participated in beating Lisa" (Ellis 1988, 32). Instead, Nussbaum testified against Steinberg in the death of their daughter.

In addition, Smith's, Yates', and Nussbaum's cases were followed by lengthy media stories such as *Newsweek's* "Why Parents Kill" (McCormick et al. 1994), "Motherhood and Murder" (Thomas et al. 2001), "The Schizophrenic Mind," and "Prisoners of Pain" (Gelman with Elam 1988); *Time's* "Parents Who Kill" (Van Biema 1994); and op-ed pieces on the difficulties of motherhood (Quindlen 2001). These stories sought to explore the social and psychological dynamics of the crimes to help explain and understand the events, but also to garner greater public attention to the problems of mental illness, wife abuse, and the strains of motherhood as important social problems.

The flip side of the López case is that, perhaps because the victim was also Latina, the case itself did not receive repeated popular media coverage. Elisa's brown skin meant that she did not make as gripping a victim as Andrea Yates' white children, Nussbaum and Steinberg's white daughter, or even Yates and Nussbaum themselves. Whereas

the popular press followed these cases from start to finish, including multiple articles in *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *People* magazines, only *Time* and *Newsweek* ran stories about Elisa's death, and these appeared in only one issue (Peyser with Power 1995; Van Biema 1995). The focus of these stories was the failure of the child welfare system to intervene and remove Elisa from her mother's home—not to understand or examine what social factors and life traumas created a mother capable of killing her own child. When López was convicted of her daughter's murder (and sentenced to 15 years to life), it was noted in two sentences in *Time's* "Milestones" section. Ophelia Yip and her four children received no national media attention. Her case went entirely unnoticed (Meyer 2001).

Our goal in comparing these cases is not to imply that the white individuals highlighted here do not deserve the attempts to understand their actions, or even to offer them redemption or forgiveness. Instead, we problematize the fact that this process tends to be reserved exclusively for whites. Cases such as Dahmer's, Smith's, and Yates' come to resolution by emphasizing the individuals' remorse, sorrow, and suffering experienced as a result of their crimes—not suffering meted out through criminal justice punishment but internal suffering caused by the deep guilt they live with for their crimes. This emphasis on remorse, contrition, and ultimate forgiveness is in direct contrast with media constructions of many individuals of color who have committed violent crimes. The contrasts between Smith, Yates, Nussbaum, and López are exemplary (and the invisibility of Yip is equally telling), as are the descriptions, noted above, of the young men wrongly convicted of the Central Park rape as smug, remorseless predators.

The media's consistent attempts to answer the question of why a particular white criminal has committed his or her crimes illustrate the extent to which whites as a category are not perceived as capable of crime by nature. In contrast, the question "Why?" is not the focus when the defendant is a person of color. This lack of attention presumes that the answer is obvious and thus not in need of asking. The implication is that somehow it is

in his or her nature, to be expected, or at least not surprising. But for whites, the question is of critical importance: how could someone whom we know to be good by nature turn to behavior that is bad? The result of the media's intense pop psychology is that white criminals are seen in human terms. Moreover, unless—as was the case with Wuornos—they are otherwise in a marginalized group, white offenders are granted a degree of sympathy and understanding, and ultimately can achieve forgiveness and redemption, no matter how heinous their crimes. This type of humanization rarely occurs when the criminal is a person of color.

The Romanticized White Criminal

The images of white criminals in many cases serve to reinforce the dominant values of our society. In contrast to their depictions of people of color, the media sometimes choose to romanticize white criminals. These images of white criminals pick out dominant and valued themes in American society and portray the perpetrators as "criminals, but . . ." where *but* takes the form of crime as resistance to the failures of the social system, crime as a means of achieving economic gain, or crime as the display of intelligence and intellectual savvy. By examining two types of romanticized portrayals, we can better understand this additional facet of media images of white offenders.

The portrayal of white criminals as fighting against a failed social system elicits sympathy for criminal behavior on the grounds that the crimes are protecting a larger social order. On December 22, 1985, Bernhard Hugo Goetz was accosted on a New York City subway by four black teenagers. After he was asked for the time, then for a match, and then for \$5, Goetz pulled out a handgun and shot and wounded all four youths. For his crime, Goetz was charged with attempted murder, assault, reckless endangerment, and illegal possession of a firearm.

The Goetz case was striking in the way his vigilantism was framed as illegal yet heroic. Immediately after the incident, Goetz began to receive supportive phone calls from many sympathetic New York residents. Rather

than being depicted as a dangerous criminal, Goetz was seen as representing the failure of public safety. Goetz was acquitted on the 12 counts stemming from the attempted murder, assault, and reckless endangerment charges and was only convicted of illegal possession of a firearm.

Thus, in the (white) popular imagination, Goetz was depicted as an otherwise good man taking the law into his own hands in the face of a system that has broken down in its ability to protect whites from dangerous minority "others." He elicited a sympathetic response to his railing against the system: the romanticization of vigilantism, and the protection of American values at any cost, are highlighted in the Goetz case. As one of his neighbors put it, Goetz was a "very quiet and a very smart guy. He's not the violent type . . . but he's also not the type to let people abuse him" (Daley 1985, 3B).

The second way that white criminality is romanticized is through white-collar and corporate crime. This type of criminality is often overlooked in the popular imagination about crime and in many academic studies of crime, and yet it has a far greater cost than most street crimes. But it is not only the non-violent nature of such crimes as fraud, embezzlement, and securities infractions that sets them apart from more violent crimes. The conformity of white-collar crime to dominant American values, combined with the mostly white, professional stature of the criminals, makes these individuals worthy of our collective admiration.

Michael Milken is such a criminal. In 1990, Milken pled guilty to six felony counts of fraud and agreed to pay \$600 million in penalties for violating the laws of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) in connection with junk bonds. These high-risk instruments were used to finance companies during the mid-1980s. Their often risky nature, combined with Milken's expertise in convincing investors to use them, resulted in a highly lucrative income for him. However, SEC officials accused Milken of working these bonds by misleading investors, manipulating markets, and often bribing other stockbrokers to go along with his schemes. When Milken pled guilty to the six counts, it

was part of a plea bargain agreement. Though he was ordered to pay \$600 million, estimates of his income suggest that between 1983 and 1987 Milken earned over \$1 billion, with one year's salary during that time topping out at \$550 million. In fact, Milken's lawyer at the time worried that if the case went to trial, Milken's wealth would prejudice jurors against him (Paltrow 1990).

Milken's character was romanticized in the film *Wall Street*, but it is not necessary to look as far as Hollywood to show how Milken was glorified. For instance, after the conviction, the *Los Angeles Times* attempted to rank Milken among the great financial "rogues" of history. It noted that only time will tell if Milken will be derided (as one official pointed out) as "among the worst violators of securities laws in U.S. history" or as a man

who breathed life into corporate havens with a new means of financing and who fell because he crossed the line in an age when many on Wall Street seemed to have done the same. (Richter 1990, 1D)

In fact, it was Milken's financial knowledge and his accumulation of wealth that placed him on a par with America's captains of industry rather than with America's "most wanted." In 1993, Milken was invited to co-teach a series of lectures at UCLA's Graduate School of Management. In justifying paying a known felon to teach graduate students in business, Bradford Cornell, who co-taught the course with Milken, argued that

this is not a class on ethics. UCLA is not saying that Milken is a role model . . . but his practical experience and knowledge about the workings of American capital markets are unparalleled. (Cornell 1993, M5)

More recently, the Martha Stewart case has been prominent in the news. Her case adds an important gender dimension to media coverage, but ultimately ends—like Milken's case—in rich rewards. Accused of insider trading, Stewart was ultimately convicted for lying about a stock sale. After her indictment and during her trial, a great deal of the media's portrayal focused on the contrast between her public persona and her be-

havior behind the scenes as a ruthless, calculating "bitch." This portrayal is unabashedly gendered: male CEOs are rewarded for just such aggressive business acumen; Stewart was demonized. In fact, there was even speculation that her case would not have been pursued so aggressively had she not been a woman—an "uppity" woman who dared to play hardball in a man's world (Smolowe and Cotliar 2004).

Despite this harsh treatment early in the case, once Stewart was convicted and began serving her time, the focus shifted and she was a heroine once again. Articles during her incarceration focused on her efforts as a prison homemaker—cooking, cleaning, and participating with other inmates in decorating contests. Summing up, *People* magazine noted that "even behind bars, Martha Stewart shows that living well may indeed be the best revenge" (Lambert et al. 2004, 103). Even more accolades followed Stewart's release. As *Newsweek's* editor remarked of "the third act of this remarkable drama," Stewart emerged "from a five-month prison stint . . . not in disgrace, but wealthier and more in demand than ever, with a stronger stock price, a crack new business team and two hot TV shows in the works" (Whitaker 2005, 4).

Why are these criminals romanticized? Part of the answer is the fact that they are white, wealthy, and typically male. Patricia Williams argues that it is impossible to even imagine a scenario in which a lone black man firing on a group of white youths under the same circumstances as Bernhard Goetz would receive support from the New York community (Williams 1991, 76–77). Goetz's whiteness allowed him to become a "defender" of dominant social values in a way that is virtually impossible for women or nonwhites. In the case of Michael Milken, we can see that it is not just race and gender but also class that distinguishes the degree of criminality we assign to deviant behavior. Because of his business smarts (in addition to the large sums of money he has given to universities and to private medical research foundations), Milken was seen as a brilliant investor who just went too far. Stewart reemerged as a popular heroine, not just be-

cause of her wealth and business acumen, but also because she successfully countered the media imagery of herself as a hard-hearted bitch. It was her continued embrace of the feminine world of hearth and home that led her, as *People* magazine predicted, to "phoenix-like, rise again" ("The Many, Many Moods of Martha" 2004, 156).

Thus, how the media choose to portray criminals depends in part on their race, gender, and social class and in part on how closely these criminals conform to the dominant values of American society. Hollywood correctly picks up on the fact that some perpetrators are perceived as less criminal than others. As one commentator put it in the Goetz case, "although my mind tells me that Goetz was wrong, my gut aches with understanding for him" (Kilpatrick 1985, 5A). Likewise, Milken was a financial guru who was caught crossing the line. However, his expertise warranted a lucrative position at UCLA to teach the "practical" workings of capital markets. In both cases, we can see that the images of criminality depend heavily on the race and gender of the criminal, as well as on the degree of conformity between the crimes they commit and the dominant values of American society.

Conclusions

The images of whites and crime in the media have a number of significant consequences, all of which function to perpetuate racial inequality and the oppression of people of color in America. The media continue to present an image of criminal victimization that fails to capture the realities of crime in America. As one social commentator notes,

random violence against the white middle class [does] not constitute the bulk of crimes, or even a very large minority of them. Why give them so much more than their share of attention? (Anderson 1995, 9)

One result of this attention is that these images play into the public's fear of crime. White women, in particular, report higher levels of fear of crime than other groups, even though their likelihood of victimization

is lower than that of most groups (Ortega and Myles 1987). In addition, this fear of victimization focuses on public crimes—crimes by street criminals and strangers. As such, it diverts attention away from many forms of private violence. Although women report heightened levels of fear of crime by strangers, women's experience with violence is mostly private—date and acquaintance rape, domestic violence, and so on (Stanko 1990). Media attention to stereotypical crimes diverts the focus away from these important issues.

In addition, these media images project a hierarchy of victims in which some victims are seen as more deserving of public attention, outrage, and sympathy than others. When people of color are victims of crime, their cases are deemed less newsworthy by the media, ultimately sending the message that their lives are of lesser value. Evidence suggests that these beliefs are carried through into the criminal justice system as well. For example, researchers have found that the harshest sentences in rape cases are meted out to African American men who rape white women, whereas the least severe sentences are given to men who rape African American women, whose victimization is taken less seriously, regardless of the race of the perpetrator (Walsh 1987).

The media also differ in their treatment of white offenders compared with offenders of color. First, because crime is not seen in media stereotypes as a white phenomenon, white participation in ordinary street crime typically does not make the news the way it does when an African American or another person of color is involved. The category *white* is not associated with crime in the media in the same ways that the categories *black* or *Hispanic* are. White criminals who make the news are discussed and understood in ways that do not challenge the fundamental assumption that whites as a whole are noncriminal. This is in contrast with media portrayals that insinuate that people of color are criminal by nature.

We have described two categories of white offenders that appear in the media: the psychologically troubled criminal and the romanticized criminal. The most significant