

African American Serial Killers: Over-Represented Yet Underacknowledged

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Abstract: ‘Can you name an African American (black) serial killer?’ In the US, the answer is often silence. For those who can remember, it might be Wayne Williams, the so-called ‘Atlanta child murderer’. More astute individuals could mention the more recent D.C. Snipers who, while not comparable to the traditional media portrayals of serial killers, do qualify as such, based on the FBI’s assessment. The existence of African American serial killers is a fact that appears to have escaped the attention of the American public. Previous research has identified 90 black serial killers beginning in 1945, yet their notoriety and celebrity are absent from America’s popular cultural landscape. Despite the fact that numerous television shows, news reports and films address serial murder in fictional and non-fictional portrayals, there remains a dearth of information and portrayals regarding black serial killers. This is an interesting conundrum. The media show little reticence in portraying black males as low-level criminals, but rarely portray them as serial killers. This article suggests that the unquestioned ethnocentric profile of the serial killer as a white male in the US was created by the FBI, and subsequent media portrayals have reinforced this myth. Consequently, the predominant media portrayals of serial murderers are white male perpetrators. The impact of race-based assumptions among law enforcement agencies and the public regarding the criminality of any group poses a danger to that whole society.

Keywords: African Americans; blacks; celebrity; serial killers; serial murders

The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe . . . We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. (Berger 1972, p.8)

The lack of visibility and public awareness regarding black serial killers in the US¹ was created by law enforcement agents and its symbiotic relationship with the media, and it continues to be reinforced, even if unwittingly. True crime books, movies and television shows rarely portray African Americans as serial killers.² Equally significant has been the dearth of scholarly literature on these murderers, save for work by a few social scientists (for example, Jenkins 1993; Hickey 2002; Walsh 2005), further reducing their visibility and, therefore, public awareness. While the

existence of black serial killers is not part of America's collective consciousness, the notoriety and celebrity existence of white serial killers (for example, Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, Jeffrey Dahmer) remain prominent. This aspect of media portrayals among white serial murderers is even more intriguing since the aforementioned offenders are deceased, yet they remain prominent figures in serial-killer lore. African Americans' role as serial killers, however, reveals that, despite the fact that they are over-represented among the known serial killers, they remain virtually absent in contemporary pop culture. Hickey's (2002) research noted that one in five known serial killers is black, which shows a clearly greater proportion than might be statistically expected, since the percentage of the US population that is African American is approximately 13%.

This article suggests that the reasons for black serial-killer over-representation and underacknowledgement are complex and related to issues of race; they are particularly American in their origin and scope. In an effort to explain this phenomenon, three factors are examined: the continuum of negative imagery as a result of slavery; the FBI and media construction of the serial killer; and the commodification of the same. Discourse analysis (for example, Foucault 1972; van Dijk 1993; Philo 2007) provides a methodology towards that goal. A predominantly negative discourse has accompanied African Americans since they were first brought to the US to sustain an agrarian economy supported by chattel slavery. Furthermore, current US Mental Health statistics regarding black Americans, their levels of poverty, and criminal involvement suggest the long-term sociological impact of slavery (US Surgeon General 2001). Additionally, these factors reinforce the depiction of that group as being of low intelligence. Some (see, for example, Davis 1998; Wacquant 2002; Degruy-Leary 2005) have suggested that the continuum of predominantly negative discourse regarding African Americans has waned little since they were first brought to the US as slaves.

A case study employed in this work reveals a race-based disparity in media treatment of two multiple murderers. While this is but one case study, it provides a unique opportunity for a comparison of media portrayals and offers a road map for future research.³ The comparison of Harrison Graham and Gary Heidnik additionally suggests that our historic race-based perceptions continue to influence our criminal investigative focus, media portrayals and commodification of serial killers along racial lines. If there are negative perceptions regarding blacks as being the despised others, then there should be little wonder as to why there appears to be such a disparity in media treatment.

Oddly enough, even in death, the shelf life and number of news articles and books about the aforementioned white serial killers exceed those of even the most notable black serial murderers. Other than Wayne Williams and the D.C. Snipers, few black serial killers' exploits have become part of serial killer lore, compared with that of their white counterparts – yet as will be revealed, African Americans have engaged in serial killing since 1915. It is also suggested that, even when African American serial killers do receive media attention, their appearance lacks the iconic myth-building

characteristics of their white counterparts, features that extend the longevity of notoriety.

An examination of the social artifacts that exist as a by-product of serial-killer celebrity reveals a similar disparity among collectibles (coffee mugs, t-shirts, posters, books) related to white *versus* black serial killers in the US (Branson 2010). The measurement and comparison of these social artifacts as an aspect of celebrity suggest that the independent variable of race may be a factor that ensures white serial killers more prominence than their black counterparts, and is worthy of future study. Unfortunately, limited available data prevent a formidable supportive statistical argument. A review of a popular murderabilia website *Murderauction.com*, which bills itself as ‘the world’s most reputable true crime auction house’ reveals a disparity among the social artifacts for sale related to black and white serial killers. This disparity is evidenced in both the amount of artifacts attributable to white *versus* black serial killers as well as the pricing.⁴

While there have been numerous black serial killers who have murdered during the same time periods as their white counterparts, their notoriety is limited. This article suggests that black serial killers are often portrayed as dimwitted and/or mentally retarded, in contrast to white serial killers whose media portrayals suggest the more iconic ‘Hannibal Lecter’ of *Silence of the Lambs* (Harris 1988): cunning, intelligent masterminds of murder. Ann Rule, famed author of numerous popular true-crime books addressing serial murder, stated a commonly-held belief of the serial-killer profile promoted among law enforcement:

... the majority of serial killers appear to share certain characteristics. First of all, most are White and are in the age group of 25 to 34 years of age. They are intelligent or at least ‘street smart.’ They are charming and charismatic ... (as cited in Holmes and Holmes 1998, p.14)

Subsequent fictional media portrayals have done much to reinforce this stereotype. The *Showtime* television show ‘Dexter’, based on Jeff Lindsay’s (2004) book *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, stars a character by the same name who doubles as criminal forensic investigator and serial killer. Similarly, Brett Easton’s (1991) book *American Psycho* features a young, handsome, wealthy Manhattan businessman, ‘Patrick Bateman’, as a serial killer.

To further illustrate the disparity of media attention, a brief examination of Harrison Graham and Gary Heidnik is offered here. No other contrast of white and black serial killers is more evident than a comparison of the 1987 arrests of these two multiple murderers in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Gary Heidnik, a white male accused of a double murder, was arrested on 24 March 1987, and, coincidentally, black serial killer, Harrison Graham, was arrested less than five months later, on 16 August 1987, for the murder of seven women. By the FBI’s definition of a ‘serial murder’⁵ as three or more murders by a perpetrator with a cooling-off period between each act of predation, only Harrison Graham qualifies as a serial killer, yet Heidnik received far more publicity, both at the time and

later. The disparate media portrayals of these two perpetrators provide what Yin (2003) terms a 'critical' and 'revelatory' case study. He suggests that a critical case:

... can be used to determine whether a theory's propositions are correct or whether some alternative set of explanations might be more relevant ... Such a study can even help to refocus future investigations into an entire field ... (p.40)

He further notes that a revelatory case: '... exists when an investigator has an opportunity to observe and analyse a phenomenon previously inaccessible to scientific investigation' (p.42).

During the trial of Harrison Graham, the *Philadelphia Daily News* (2003) reported that the prosecutor suggested: '... that Graham's ability to commit multiple crimes and then conceal them suggests he was more mentally functional than his lawyers have maintained'. The statement implies that Harrison Graham was more intelligent than the media portrayals that characterised him as mentally challenged. The same newspaper, years earlier, described Harrison Graham as having 'the mind of a child' (Heine 1988), while the *Philadelphia Inquirer* suggested that he was mentally 'retarded' (Lounsberry 2002). In contrast, even though Gary Heidnik failed to meet the FBI standard for a serial murderer, he was, nonetheless, elevated to that status within popular culture through film and books. For instance, Heidnik became the archetype for 'Buffalo Bill' in the previously-cited Thomas Harris novel, as well as the subject of Englade's (1988) non-fictional *Cellar of Horrors*. Harrison Graham has not, to date, been the sole subject of any books or movies, despite his numerous victims.

An argument can be made regarding victimology as a factor for media attention. Wilson (2009) focuses on the societies in which serial murders occur, noting that runaways, the elderly and children are its least protected members. In the case of Harrison Graham *versus* Gary Heidnik, as well as among the other numerous black *versus* white serial killers, the victimology is similar, yet media representations are disparate. Both killers utilised a similar methodology, luring low-income black women into their homes via money and drugs, yet the disparate portrayals of the two reinforce the stereotype of the black male as a brute. This portrayal reduced Graham's extensive and systematic murders to a lower level of crime, while Gary Heidnik was portrayed as employing sophisticated methods. The following comparison, *Table 1*, reveals similarities among the two killers. It should be stated that, due to no previous arrest record, little published biographical information was known concerning Harrison Graham prior to his capture. To date, there has been very little written about him, except for brief mentions in published compilations (for example, *The Encyclopedia of Serial Killers*, Lane and Gregg (1992)) and various Internet sources. The sources utilised for this case study of Graham consisted of police reports, associated criminal case-file materials, and a face-to-face interview (Branson 2011).

In terms of behavioural antecedents, both men were found to have been subjected to childhood traumas often linked to individuals who

TABLE 1
 A Comparison of Gary Heidnik and Harrison Graham

Gary Heidnik	Harrison 'Marty' Graham
Caucasian American/white male	African American/black male
arrested on 24 March 1987 in Philadelphia	arrested on 16 August 1987 in Philadelphia
two victims murdered in Philadelphia	seven victims murdered in Philadelphia
does not meet FBI serial killer definition	meets FBI serial killer definition
methodology – luring women with drugs for torture and rape	methodology – luring women with drugs for sex and strangulation
cannibalism	possible necrophilia
early developmental issues – physical abuse	early developmental issues – sexual abuse
above average income	below average income
abusive father	foster homes – lack of patriarchal bonding
siblings	siblings
executed 6 July 1999	life imprisonment 20 December 2003
IQ high; one estimate 148 ⁶	IQ low: 70 or below
house	apartment
married, later divorced	single
children	no children
history of mental illness – extensive	history of mental illness – slight
drug use – some	street drug use – extensive
killed with a partner	killed alone
subject of one true crime book	not applicable
archetype for movie character	not applicable

engage in serial predation. While it is acknowledged that the Harrison Graham and Gary Heidnik case is a singular comparison, Jenkins (1993) suggests that the case is generalisable regarding the overall lack of public awareness of black serial killers due to race. Furthermore, while the suggestion that Heidnik's torture basement might have provided a more sensational story, certainly Graham's storing of seven victims' bodies in a slum apartment is just as gruesome.

The dichotomy of white and black serial killer portrayals should be viewed within the context of a media whose traditional ethos of 'if it bleeds it leads' apparently is not applicable to blacks who engage in serial murder. Walsh (2005) additionally suggests political correctness as a rationale for the media's reticence to portray blacks as serial murderers. In contrast, Entman and Rojecki (2001) note that the media show little reluctance to portray African Americans as violent criminals overall. African American males are often portrayed as criminals via news reports, as well as in fictional stories.

There appears to be little variance regarding the number of victims and manner of predations when examining black serial killers juxtaposed to their white counterparts. In 1939, Clarence Hill, an African American, shot⁷ couples in a lovers-lane area known as 'Duck Island' in the Trenton, New Jersey/Bucks County, Pennsylvania corridor. African American serial

killer, Coral Watts, was convicted of numerous murders which occurred in Canada, Texas and Michigan from 1974 through 1982. He may have been responsible for as many as 80 victims. Coral Watts drowned, hung, and tortured some of his victims. Andy Kahan, the Director of the Crimes Victims Office for the Mayor of Houston, Texas, in 2004, significantly notes:

What's amazing to me is everybody in America has heard of a Ted Bundy, a John Wayne Gacy, Jeffrey Dahmer. But when you mention the name of Coral Eugene Watts, 99.99 percent of the public has no clue who you're talking about. . . . (Leung 2009)

Coral Watts is suspected of committing more murders than Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and John Wayne Gacy combined, yet remains virtually unknown. Black serial killer, Kendall Francois, choked and beat many of his victims to death from 1996 to 1998 in Poughkeepsie, New York (Rosen 2002). From 2005 through 2006, Marc Goudeau, 'the Base-Line Killer', shot and raped his numerous victims in Las Vegas, Nevada. *Table 2* shows 153 African American serial killers who have predated since 1915. It should be noted that this table surpasses the number of African American serial killers previously set forth by Walsh (2005), beginning in 1945, which was limited to 90 black serial killers and contained errors. Walsh's table named two serial killers twice and attributed murders committed by David Selepe in Cleveland, South Africa to the similarly named city in Ohio (US).

The next section will attempt to dissect how race and serial murder converge to create what appears to be a perverted social hierarchy of crime in the US.

Roots of Black Criminal Imagery

In an effort to parse this conundrum regarding the media's reticence to portray African Americans as serial killers, while showing little reluctance to depict them as other types of violent criminals, it may be useful to examine briefly the history of black male criminal imagery in the US. Degruy-Leary (2005) and Wacquant (2002) suggest that black criminality and that group's over-representation within the American penal system are, in part, related to America's history of the slave trade. A historical continuum of negative imagery – visual and literary – occurs in the US. It is rooted in slavery, and easily translated into a criminal context. Portrayals of blacks as subhuman, childish, and only capable of the most mundane tasks, helped ensure their subjugation as an agrarian labour force. The unique US system of chattel slavery continued to turn African Americans into a threatening group for hundreds of years, typing them as 'folk devils', as defined by Cohen (1980). African Americans became despised 'others'. This demonisation of blacks aided the continuation of chattel slavery as a means of cheap labour, for it relieved white subjugators of any cognitive dissonance, allowing them to justify brutal treatment such as lynchings, castrations, and dismemberment.

TABLE 2

Known African American Serial Killers (by Date) as of 15 July 2010*

Name with Known Predation Dates	Victims	State
Sydney JONES, bef. 1915	13	AL
Jake BIRD, 1920s–1947	40+	WA
Jarvis CATOE, 1935–41	8	Washington, DC area
Clarence HILL, 1939–42	6	PA, NJ
Monroe HICKSON, 1946	4	SC
Lemuel Warren SMITH, 1958–77	5	NY
Devernon LEGRAND; Steven LEGRAND, 1963–70 or later	6+	NY
Winston MOSELEY, 1963–64	3	NY
Vaughn GREENWOOD, 1964–76	11	CA
Clarence WALKER, 1965	14	TN, OH, MI
Postal LASKEY, 1965–66	7	OH
Winford STOKES, 1969–78	3	MO
Lester HARRISON, 1970–73	7	IL
David ROBERTS, 1971–74	4	IN
Tony ABLES, 1971–87	4+	FL
John Floyd THOMAS jr, 1972–89	30+	CA
Calvin JACKSON, 1973–74	9+	NY
Anthony COOK; Nathaniel COOK, 1973–81	8+	OH
Eddie Lee MOSLEY, 1973–87	16+	FL
Ray Dell SIMS, 1974–77	5	CA
Coral WATTS, 1974–82	13+; possibly 80+	TX, MI, Canada
Howard Arthur ALLEN, 1974–87	3	IN
Charles 'Junior' JACKSON, 1975–82	8	CA
John HENRY, 1975–85	3	FL
Carlton GARY, 1977–78	7	GA, NY?
William HANCE, 1977–78	4	GA, IN
Bobby Joe MAXWELL, 1978–79	10	CA
Vincent GROVES, 1978–88	14	CO
Gerald PARKER, 1978–79	5	CA
Wayne WILLIAMS, 1979–81	5+	GA
Cesar Francesco BARONE, aka Adolph James Rode, 1979–93	5+	FL, OR
Donald MURPHY, 1980	5+	MI
Michael Darnell HARRIS, 1980–82	9	MI
Vernon BROWN, 1980–86	5+	IN, MO
Thomas W. HAWKINS jr, 1980–89	3	PA
Reginald Wendell PERKINS, 1980–2000	4	TX, OH
David BULLOCK, 1981–82	6	NY
Beoria SIMMONS, 1981–83	3	KY
Brandon THOLMER, 1981–83	12+	CA
Wilbur JENNINGS, 1981–86	5+	CA
Norman BERNARD, 1983	3	NC, CA
Milton JOHNSON, 1983	17	IL
Kevin HALEY; Reginald HALEY, 1983–84	8	CA
Anthony JOYNER, 1983–84	6	PA
Alton COLEMAN; Debra BROWN, 1984	9	OH, IN, IL

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Name with Known Predation Dates	Victims	State
Horace KELLY, 1984	3	CA
Anthony WIMBERLY, 1984–85	3	CA
Wilbur JENNINGS, 1981–86	5+	CA
Nathaniel CODE, 1984–87	8	LA
Louis CRAIN, 1984–87	5	CA
Timothy SPENCER, 1984–87	4	VA
Melvin JOHNSON, 1984–88	3	IL
Jeffrey Gerard JONES, 1985	4	CA
Anthony MCKNIGHT, 1985	5+	CA
Robert ROZIER, 1985–86	7+	FL, NY, MD
Curtis Don BROWN, 1985–86	3+	TX
Michael TERRY, 1985–86	6	GA
Lonnie Franklin jr, 1985–2007	11	CA
John BROOKS, 1986	6+	LA
Michael PLAYER, 1986	10	CA
Harrison GRAHAM, 1986–87	7	PA
Ronald GRAY, 1986–87	4	NC
Morris SOLOMON, 1986–87	7	CA
Ivan Jerome HILL, 1986–94	8	CA
Alexander Wayne WATSON jr, 1986–94	5+	MD
Walter E. ELLIS, 1986–2007	8	WI
William Howard DAVIS, 1986–2008	3+	GA
Clinton BANKSTON, 1987	5	GA
Yusef RAHMAN, 1987–88	4	KS, NY
Chester TURNER, 1987–88	11	CA
Patrick BAXTER, 1987–90	3	NY
Elton JACKSON, 1987–96	12	VA
Anthony KIRKLAND, 1987–2009	5	OH
Ray Shawn JACKSON, 1989–90	6	MO
Sam CHINN, 1989–95	3	NY, TX
Timothy HAWKINS, 1989–2001	3	MD
Christopher PETERSON, 1990	7	IN
Cleophus PRINCE, 1990	6	CA
George RUSSELL, 1990	3	WA
Henry Louis WALLACE, 1990–94	9	NC
Edward George MCGREGOR, 1990–2006	4	TX
Eugene BROXTON, 1991	5	TX
Earl RICHMOND, 1991	5	NJ, NC
Benjamin ATKINS, 1991–92	11	MI
Jerome DENNIS, 1991–92	5	NJ
Nathaniel WHITE, 1991–92	6	NY
Gregory CLEPPER, 1991–96	8	IL
Arohn KEE, 1991–98	3+	NY
Alfred Lee ROBINSON, 1991–bef. 2007	4	FL
Samuel IVERY, 1992	4+	CA, AZ, IL, AL
Bryan Maurice JONES, 1992 or bef.	4	CA
Michael HUGHES, 1992–93	8	CA
Lorenzo FAYNE, 1992–94	5	MO
Ralph HARRIS, 1992–95	6	IL
Charles Lendelle CARTER, 1992–2007	4+	GA

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Name with Known Predation Dates	Victims	State
James E. SWANN, 1993	4	DC
David MIDDLETON, 1993-95	3	CO
Andre CRAWFORD, 1993-99	10	IL
Hubert GERALDS, 1994-95	6	IL
Johnny Ray JOHNSON, 1994-95	4	TX
Anthony BALAAM, 1994-96	4	NJ
Eugene BRITT, 1995	9	IN
Robert Lee PARKER, 1995-96	4	WA, GA
John WILLIAMS jr, 1995-97	5	NC
Kendall FRANCOIS, 1996-98	8	NY
Charles Lee DUFFY, 1997	3	GA
Elroy CHESTER, 1997-98	5	TX
Alfred GAYNOR, 1997-98	4	MA
Dewayne Lee HARRIS, 1997-98	3	WA
Paul DUROUSSEAU, 1997-2003	7	GA, FL
Lorenzo GILYARD, 1997-2004	12	MO
Lucious BOYD, 1998	3+	LA
Ivan L. PAGE, 1998-2001	3	MI
Juan COVINGTON, 1998-2005	3	PA
Vincent JOHNSON, 1999-2000	6	NY
Edward Charles WILKINS jr, 1999-2000	3	GA
Daniel O. JONES, 1999-2001	5	MO
Jeffery Lee GUILLORY, 1999-2002	3	LA
Donald E. YOUNGE jr, 1999-2002	7	UT, MO
Raymond HOPEWELL, 1999-2005	5	MD
Robert Franklin SMALLWOOD jr, 1999-2006	3	KY
Rodney Troy BIXLER, 2000	3	KY
Geoffrey GRIFFIN, 2000	7+	IL
Maury TRAVIS, 2000-02	17+	MO, IL
Dellmus COLVIN, 2000-05	5	OH
Marc SAPPINGTON, 2001	4	KS
Kevin TAYLOR, 2001	4	IL
Willie James HODGES, 2001-03	3	FL, OH, AL
Shelly Andre BROOKS, 2001-06	7	MI
Quincy Javon ALLEN, 2002	4	SC, NC
Howard Milton BELCHER, 2002	4	GA
John MOHAMMED; Lee MALVO, 2002	11+	VA, MD, DC, LA, AL, WA
Derrick Todd LEE, 2002-03	5+	LA
Henry Lee JONES, 2002-03	4+	FL, TN
Cory MORRIS, 2002-03	5	AZ
Terry A. BLAIR, 2003-04	9	MO
Emerson TUCKER, aka John Turner, 2003-07	3	IL, NY, NJ
Vincent HUDSON, 2004	3+	IL
Matthew Emanuel MACON, 2004-07	7	MI
David Lance BRUCE, 2005	3	OH
Gary SINEGAL, 2005	4+	TX, LA
Nicholas WILEY, 2005	3	NY
Mark GOUDEAU, 2005-06	9?	AZ
Antwan PITTMAN, 2005-09	5+	NC

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Name with Known Predation Dates	Victims	State
Joshua Julius ANDERSON, 2006–07	5	OK
Samuel James COOPER jr, 2006–07	5	NC
LaMarques Devon MCWILLIAMS, 2006–07	10	TX
Anthony SOWELL, 2008–09	11	OH

(Note: * It should be noted that a table such as this cannot have completely accurate figures. The information has been gathered from multiple sources (for example, Lexis/Nexis for print articles and other Internet sites (such as <http://www.crimezzz.net>), and verified by court documents when accessible), because no comprehensive crime database can be accessed to include only African Americans. In addition, as noted in this article, the definitions of serial, spree, and multiple murderers vary. This chart utilises the FBI definition of serial murder (three or more deaths with cooling-off periods).)

It further permitted the creation of laws that ‘established’ them as three-fifths human. Individuals attempting to run away were considered fugitives and, therefore, criminals. Furthermore, post-slavery Black Codes from 1800 to 1866 (Wilson 1965), as well as Jim Crow laws (named after a popular stereotypical buffoon character from minstrel shows) specifically targeted African slaves, who even when eventually freed, were not treated as equals in matters of public access, marriage and education. Wacquant (2005) suggested that, once freed, blacks were seen as a rootless migratory race: ‘Negroes were believed to be naturally shiftless and improvident’ (p.133). These laws ensured even stricter measures to keep black Americans legally segregated and relegated to the lower rungs of the US economic system (Adams and Sanders 2003). Laws and social policies, as well as systematic efforts to restrict access to education, made clear the negatives associated with being black in America (Wacquant 2002). DuBois (1903) suggested that the ills of black people in the US did not arise solely because of the image thrust upon African Americans by the dominant culture, but were compounded by the self-image it helped create, a phenomenon he termed ‘double consciousness’. Ferri’s theoretical view (cited in Grupp 1968) that man’s criminality results from his social and telluric environment, as well as from his anthropological history, within the context of slavery may offer a rationale for black criminality.

While there are numerous theories as to how the unique history of slavery has impacted African Americans (for example, Anderson 1999; McWhorter 2000, 2005; Degruy-Leary 2005), there simultaneously exists a unique over-representation of African Americans within America’s penal system. Within that framework, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the psychological toll on blacks, taken from their homeland, enslaved for hundreds of years, and whose natural response was to seek freedom, as the French philosopher, Alex de Tocqueville (*circa* 1831), suggested, was inestimable. The resulting trauma and discrimination in the US, where even post-Emancipation Proclamation blacks lived as second-class citizens (for example, Davis 1998; Covington 1995; Wacquant 2001, 2005), continues to take its toll on the African American community.

While this work does not consider the numerous theories regarding black criminality, it is significant to note the unique and unparalleled history of social exclusion of African Americans in the US. To place the dynamics of this social exclusion in perspective, less than 60 years ago the landmark Supreme Court decision '*Brown v. the Board of Education*'⁸ was ruled unconstitutional. The repeal of this law, along with others forbidding separate, but so-called equal institutions, as well as the co-mingling of races, are equally recent Supreme Court decisions. It is also important to comprehend how the unique history of blacks being legislated as subhumans may have contributed to a self-image, as well as that held by the dominant culture. The continuum of negative imagery covers a whole spectrum, from the sexual black beasts of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (Bogle 2001), to razor-carrying hustlers on post-slavery sheet music covers, child-like simpletons among black collectibles (Harris 1974; Turner 1994; Goings 1994), and contemporary media portrayals of urban thugs, drug dealers, and misogynistic street hustlers. That image is consistent with individuals portrayed as lacking intelligence and bearing irrational rage (that is, animals). These portraits, as will be shown in the next section, do not gibe with the fabricated image of the serial killer in the US. Images do not necessarily depend on facts. Overall, the negative imagery set forth in the discourse regarding African slaves had less to do with who they were as people, as opposed to portraying them as subhumans lacking intellect to rationalise their continued subjugation. It is suggested that hundreds of years of social exclusion and negative imagery have, although they have diminished in some forms, continued to portray blacks as the despised others, even when engaging in serial murder.

The FBI and Media Construction of the Serial Killer

During its testimony before the US Congress in 1984, in an effort to secure funding for its fledgling Behavioral Science Unit, the FBI created the myth of the white male serial murderer as an emerging threat. This, as Jenkins (2002) notes, was an act of self-promotion. Its goal was to establish the agency's own expertise by defining serial murder as a new phenomenon in the US, despite the lengthy history of (the not yet named) serial murder throughout human history (Ramsland 2005). The FBI created a standard ethnocentric profile of a white male serial murderer based on its own nascent research (Ressler, Burgess and Douglas 1992). Jenkins (2002) suggests that, during this testimony, the FBI's depiction of the serial murderer as a white male stoppable only by a law enforcement agency of extraordinary means, fed our mythological concepts of night stalkers, such as werewolves and vampires. The FBI's invented 'super predator' went unchallenged:

... serial murder enjoyed such an impact because of its mythological connotations. To over-simplify, it was rhetorically and politically necessary during the early 1980s

to posit the existence of uniquely dangerous predatory villains, against whom no counter-measures were too extreme . . . (Jenkins 2002)

Agents of the FBI's newly-formed and newly-funded Behavioral Science Unit would assume the role of modern-day Van Helings, able to analyse (that is, profile) and apprehend these super predators. Despite this bid to become the *de facto* law enforcement agency to investigate serial murder, the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit members did not have the intellectual *bona fides* or overall scholarship needed to convince those in the social science world. Despite the title 'Behavioral Science Unit', most of its members were not behavioural scientists or recipients of higher academic degrees. In addition, the FBI's criminal profiling methodology from crime scene analysis was flawed (Canter *et al.* 2004). The FBI (Ressler, Burgess and Douglas 1992) conducted a study of 36 serial offenders, not all of them serial murderers, only three of whom were stated as being 'non-white'. The implication is that the FBI's initial research did not include any substantial representation of offenders other than white males. In addition, Beasley (2004) notes that in this initial study of 36 offenders, only 25 were actually serial murderers. Coupe (2003) stated: ' . . . critics have noted that the FBI has made few changes to its [criminal profiling] approach in 20 years' (p.36). In doing so, the FBI created a profiling matrix for serial offenders that is devoid of any social or cultural context other than the most pervasive in the US (that is, white males).

This fledgling agency research, as well as its much-vaunted profiling techniques (which have become media touchstones), has been criticised by numerous social scientists (for example, Turvey 1998; Egger 2002; Petherick 2006). In the US, there are numerous critics of the FBI's methodology, yet the myth of the white serial murderer as super-predator and the magic of the FBI's criminal-profiling methodology persist. As America's premier law enforcement agency, the agency has a history created by the implicit partnership of its founder, J. Edgar Hoover, with the media. FBI agents have enjoyed media attention since their celebrated days over half a century ago as 'G -Men'⁹ who apprehended dangerous criminals with iconic monikers like 'Pretty Boy Floyd', 'Baby Face Nelson', or Al 'Scarface' Capone. There is a celebrated photograph of FBI founder, J. Edgar Hoover, striking a pose for journalists as he aimed a Thompson sub-machine gun. This early publicity promoted his tough-guy image and willingness to fight fire with fire in order to rout gun-toting hooligans. Two popular television series, *The Untouchables* (1959–63) in the 1960s and *The FBI* (1965–74), touted the agency's professionalism and incorruptibility. From 1998 through 2006, *The FBI Files* re-enacted the agency's most famous cases with a former agent as the host. This kind of partnership between law enforcement and the media is not unusual. Mawby (1999) suggests that the media present more opportunities for the police to communicate messages and promote their public image.

Certainly, fictional FBI agent, Clarice Starling, of the previously-cited film and book *Silence of the Lambs*, follows this model, as does FBI agent, 'Smoky Barrett', in Cody McFadyen's (2006) novel *Shadow Man*. It is

worthy of note that the serial killers in these contemporary works of fiction are still white males, a media reinforcement of the emerging threat the FBI posited before lawmakers in the 1980s. Media depictions of the white male serial killer continue to be aided by the media and law enforcement (especially the FBI), and reflected in literature and films. In 1986, the film *Manhunter*, an adaptation of Harris's (1981) first novel about Hannibal Lecter, *Red Dragon* (later also a film by the same name in 2002), reveals the techniques of FBI profiler, Will Graham, as he hunts a white serial killer named the 'Tooth Fairy'. Continuing in the vein of mass culture portraits of FBI operatives, the popular CBS weekly television show *Criminal Minds* follows FBI agents who profile serial killers. It is interesting to note that, to date, only one episode out of 148 aired has featured a black serial killer. Similarly, among the plethora of movies regarding white serial killers, only one 1997 film *Switchback*, starring an African American actor (Danny Glover), was found. More critically Mitchell (2006), the author of the true crime book *Evil Eyes*, based on black serial killer, Coral Watts, raises several questions in the book's epilogue. He asks why Watts, as a serial killer, could not be a popular icon, noting that, despite Watts's numerous murders during an age when mass media proliferate news stories, Watts is far less known than Bundy or 'Son of Sam'. He further points out that Watts's story was co-opted for two television shows, NBC's *Crossing Jordan* and CBS's *Cold Case*. Ironically, both male actors who portrayed the pseudo, Watts-like character in the two programmes were transformed by the producers' scripts and casting choices – both became white, rather than African American.

It should be noted that the commodification of the serial killer has created a lucrative market, including sales of books – many by former FBI agents. Former FBI profiler, John Douglas, is the co-author of *Mind Hunter* (Douglas and Olshaker 1995); *Obsession* (Douglas and Olshaker 1998); *The Cases That Haunt Us* (Douglas and Olshaker 2000); *Inside the Mind of BTK* (Douglas and Dodd 2008). His colleagues, Robert Ressler (Ressler, Burgess and Douglas 1992; Ressler 1997) and Roy Hazelwood (Hazelwood and Michaud 1998, 2001), have each penned books as well.

There has also been a commodification of serial killer collectibles or 'murderabilia' for items related to their crimes (that is, 'murderabilia'). Schmid (2005) echoes this sentiment in *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture*, a book that stems from his earlier (1995) dissertation, 'Mad, bad and dangerous to know: serial murder in contemporary American culture'; both illuminate America's fascination with serial killers. Despite their predations, serial killers have become icons with celebrity status. Research suggests that, in general, the road to celebrity is based on the public's ability to relate to the individual (Penfold 2004). Tithcott (1998) notes that Jeffrey Dahmer looked like someone to whom the dominant culture could relate, while Ted Bundy, a law student, was also seen as part of the mainstream. John Wayne Gacy was a contractor and a member of local business associations, once having had his picture taken with the former First Lady of the United States, Rosalind Carter.

Fatal Consequences

Blacks have engaged in serial killings since at least 1915. The issue is not really one of equal media treatment – though this is unequal – but rather that the myth of the non-existence of black serial murderers creates a metaphorical cloak that permits their predations to go unnoticed. The dangers posed by the public's and law enforcement's lack of awareness were most evident during the D.C. Sniper investigation, when profilers suggested that the perpetrator(s) were white males. In light of the existence of 153 serial killers identified in *Table 2*, since 1915, the D.C. Sniper investigation should be viewed as a shot over the bow of law enforcement. A black serial murderer team terrorised citizens in Maryland and surrounding areas. It did not become known until after their capture that the two had also committed murders in Tacoma, Washington; Montgomery, Alabama; and possibly Tucson, Arizona. So ingrained was the myth of the white male serial murderer that the African American head of the task force, Chief Charles Moose, remarked:

Our two principal suspects were both African American. In American criminal history, serial killers are rarely black. The profilers had missed this entirely. No one expected the suspects not to be white men . . . (Moose and Fleming 2003, p.292)

Further noting how the suspects defied the standard criminal profile, Washington, DC.'s African American Police Chief, Charles Ramsey, acknowledged: ' . . . We were looking for a white car with white people, and we ended up with a blue car and black people . . .' (Lewis 2004).

The D.C. Sniper case, much like the Graham *versus* Heidnik comparison, is critical and revelatory because it exposes the continued inaccuracy of law enforcement agents' ability to profile serial murderers. Due to their mobile and organised methodology, the D.C. Snipers remained undetected by law enforcement for several months because they were assumed to be white males. Black serial killer, Derrick Todd Lee, also defied the standard criminal profile while murdering women in Louisiana (Stanley 2006). While the initial FBI serial killer profile of Derek Todd Lee was released on 3 September 2002, he continued to murder until his capture in 2003 (Stanley 2006). The popularity and commodification of the FBI's serial killer profiling mystique exists, despite the previously-cited studies suggesting its fallibility. The British Home Office in the mid-1990s, analysing how many arrests were made by profiling 184 crimes, suggested only a 2.7% success rate (Gladwell 2009). An obvious question is, how many lives might have been spared if the law enforcement agents tasked with the investigation of serial murderers had been able to think beyond stereotypes created by themselves and promoted by the media?

Despite the fact that 153 black serial murders have been documented in the US, media portrayals reinforce public perceptions of serial murder as the sole domain of white males. Even though there is currently more information regarding African American serial killers than has been previously known, in no small part due to the Internet and a 24-hour news cycle, there is still more research needed in this area to comprehend the

media's apparent reluctance to bring African American serial murderers into any sustained public awareness. There appears to be no definitive work or exclusive compendium of black serial killers analysing methodology, behavioural antecedents, or victimology, all of which might shed new light on this subject. Few, if any, authors to date have offered more than minimal coverage of these criminals in their works.

Conclusion

An examination of American history reveals that the negative imagery of African Americans made it feasible and even readily acceptable to view blacks as low-level violent criminals. That image, however repulsive, is not in accord with the FBI's portrayal of the serial killer in the US as a white, male super-predator. This article suggests that the exclusion of African Americans from the contemporary matrix of serial killers in the US is race-based. The history of slavery and resulting paradigms of discrimination within America has had an incalculable impact on American society as a whole, including both the victims and the perpetrators. Most notably, the race-based perceptions held and promulgated by law enforcement and the public have been reinforced and spread by the media. To deny the existence and portrayals of black serial killers or avoid the subject for reasons of 'political correctness' is a hindrance to law enforcement and a detriment to this particularly curious area of criminological and media studies. It is important to understand that, because blacks are often portrayed in the media as criminals of a predatory nature (Entman and Rojecki 2001), the aforementioned, iconic-like qualities of the prototypical white male serial murderer are not easily attributed to, or associated with, blacks within American society, even when they do engage in the aberrant behaviour of serial murders. Furthermore, this misperception, if allowed to continue, poses an inherent danger for society as a whole, as their predation goes undetected. This anonymity and lack of research pose a looming danger to society.

Notes

- 1 A significant quality of the US media and culture is its global reach. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to suggest that American media representations are likely to influence equally UK perceptions of serial killers.
- 2 While acknowledging the existence of white and black female serial murderers, this article focuses on African American males. Furthermore, the terms black and African American are operationalised to indicate those males who are of African ancestry and within the context of this article, committed serial murders in the US.
- 3 Branson (2011) discusses the methodology employed in greater depth.
- 4 At the time of this research, *Murderauction.com* featured items from numerous white serial killers such as John Wayne Gacy 'skull clown' paintings and a sweater worn by Richard 'Night Stalker' Ramirez. Starting bids for both items approached \$2,000. Less than a handful of black serial killer items were offered, among them were a handwritten envelope belonging to Paul Duroseau (starting bid \$14.99), and a similar handwritten envelope from Kendall Francois (starting bid \$4.00); another such

envelope written by Coral Watts was selling for \$55.00. In contrast, an envelope penned by Ted Bundy sold at the same site for \$275.00, while another document signed by him was offered for \$3,000. A handwritten letter and envelope belonging to lesser-known white serial killer, Danny Rolling, ‘The Gainesville Ripper’, was offered for \$99.99, and a signed Christmas card and envelope sent by Britain’s ‘Yorkshire Ripper’, Peter Sutcliffe, had a starting bid of \$349.99.

5 cf. US Title 28 Sec. 540B.

6 This estimated IQ was reported by Victor Fiorello (2007).

7 Utilising a shotgun, Clarence Hill’s manner of predation was similar to that of white serial killer, David Berkowitz, aka the ‘Son of Sam’ in New York City almost four decades later, during the summer of 1977.

8 Formerly known as *Oliver Brown et al v. the Board of Education of Topeka et al.* On 17 May 1954, the US Supreme Court ruled that separate schools for black and white students were unconstitutional. Documents related to this landmark civil rights case are available at: <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/brown-v-board/> (accessed 25 June 2012).

9 The term ‘G-Man’ is slang referring to law enforcement agents of the US government. In 1935, a major Hollywood movie by the same title was released, starring James Cagney and Ann Dvorak.

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