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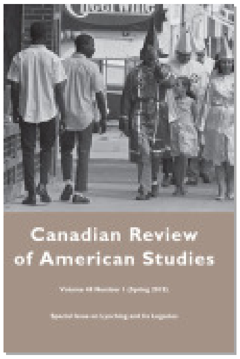

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"I'm Not Black, I'm O.J.": Constructions, Productions, and Refractions of Blackness

Priscilla Walton and Jonathan Chau

Abstract: The twentieth anniversary of O.J. Simpson's 1995 double-murder trial not only renewed interest in the spectacle of the case but also reopened dialogue about the racialization of Simpson. This article takes on understandings of black masculinities that have evolved over the last two decades and reconsiders the ways in which the "blackness" of Simpson was produced.

Keywords: race and Los Angeles, Simpson trial, Simpson miniseries, Simpson documentary, racial constructions, black male identities

Résumé : Le 20e anniversaire du procès d'O.J. Simpson pour double meurtre, en 1995, n'a pas seulement réveillé l'intérêt pour ce cas spectaculaire, il a également rouvert la discussion sur la racialisation de Simpson. Cet article aborde les différentes formes de la masculinité noire et la façon dont leur compréhension a évolué depuis 20 ans. On y réévalue les représentations de Simpson en tant qu'homme noir.

Mots clés : race et Los Angeles, procès Simpson, minisérie *The People v. O.J. Simpson*, documentaire *O.J.: Made in America*, constructions raciales, identité des hommes noirs

The focal point of the 1995 O.J. Simpson trial, reconstructed in FX's 2016 miniseries, *The People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story*, is O.J. Simpson's race; perhaps for the first time in twentieth-century race relations, blackness is shown to be permeable, unstable, and even inconsistent. In one telling scene from the miniseries, Christopher Darden, a Simpson prosecutor, yells at a protesting neighbour: O.J. is "not black, he hasn't been black in a long time," to which the neighbour responds, "He's black now—the police are after him." The question of O.J.'s race and his relationship to it underpin the

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murder trial, the miniseries, and Ezra Edelman's five-part ESPN documentary, *O.J.: Made in America* (2016), as the latter two place these questions at play with contemporary race relations in the United States.

The promotional trailer for the miniseries opens with a shot of actor John Travolta, portraying Robert Shapiro, as he responds to questions about his defence strategy. "You're going to say this case is all about race?" a reporter asks, to which Shapiro snaps, "Yes. Because it is." Effectively functioning as a bookend, the trailer closes with what is perhaps the most oft-quoted line of dialogue from the production. Clad in dull prison garb, Cuba Gooding Jr., as O.J. Simpson, accusingly interrogates his defence team: "You want to make this a black thing?" the fictional Simpson asks. "Well, I'm not black," he defiantly clarifies; "I'm O.J."

Simpson's quip foregrounds the fraught nature of the former football player's relationship with race. In Edelman's five-part documentary, sociologist Harry Edwards recalls his attempt to recruit Simpson—fresh off his 1968 Heisman Trophy win[1]—into a coalition of African American athletes who would campaign for civil rights. The member list of this collective reads like a "who's who" of athletic excellence, including basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar; football player Jim Brown; boxer Muhammad Ali; and sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who would be remembered for their iconic Black Power salute after winning medals at the 1968 Summer Olympics. In that same year, Simpson was widely regarded as the best college football player in the country. Expected to be selected as the first overall pick of the 1969 NFL Draft, Simpson was a natural candidate to be included in this collective of African American athletes, who leveraged their public visibility in order to foreground their concerns. Nearly a half century later, Edwards recalls that Simpson's response to the invitation was, "I'm not black, I'm O.J." The famous line becomes unhinged in time—it was delivered nearly three decades prior to the dramatized scene featured in *The People v. O.J. Simpson*—and proffered in an entirely different context. The line was *not* delivered at the terminus of Simpson's career but, rather, at the beginning. Moreover, the line was not delivered under duress, as the FX miniseries dramatizes; it functions instead as a guiding principle at the advent of Simpson's career.

Simpson's sidestepping of his blackness encompasses the entirety of his public persona. In the nearly three-decade period between his Heisman-winning college season and his criminal trial, Simpson was a star college athlete, a superstar professional athlete, a reality television character, an actor, an author, a pitch person, an acquitted murderer, and a convicted killer. The common thread running throughout these seemingly disparate roles is that Simpson's public persona has been defined by the acts that he performs. Yet, the sheer diffusion of roles that constitute the subject of O.J. Simpson suggests that the actual *site* of O.J. Simpson is so overdetermined that it may be near impossible to detangle the threads: Simpson is not *just* a former athlete, nor a former actor, nor an alleged killer—he is all of these things simultaneously.

Indeed, the forces that coalesce at the site of O.J. Simpson are heavily racialized. His Heisman Trophy was awarded on the basis of his athleticism, and his subsequent success in the NFL merely re-affirms the belief that blackness can be equated to athleticism. Writing for *Ebony* in 1983, in a special edition focusing on "The Crisis of the Black Male," Walter Leavy looked back to the previous decade, observing that "Black athletes often dominated the statistics in baseball, football and basketball, and moved to the top in records and salaries" (49). "It looked as if Blacks had it made in sports," Leavy grimly notes, "if in nothing else" (49). As has been widely discussed, Simpson's legal defence hinged on an intentional racialization of the accused. It is a racialization that endures now, long after Judge Lance Ito delivered the verdict and brought the 1995 trial to a close. Today, Simpson stands as a metonymic representation of what Toni Morrison sees as "the whole race needing correction, incarceration, censoring, silencing" (xxviii).

Yet, this pervasive, contradictory notion of blackness that functions as the unifying mechanism through which Simpson is signified across the disparate threads of his persona would appear to be at odds with the prevailing notion that Simpson was somehow an emblematic symptom of what (after the inauguration of President Barack Obama) was termed "post-racial," a sentiment that suggests race can be transcended. Writing for *The New York Times*, Greg Howard links this illusory phenomenon to "a caste system in which [two] groups of people could occupy the same spaces yet have completely different experiences: a white America and a black America." Yet, Howard notes, "there are a few blacks—the most singular and spectacular among us—who have unique and priceless gifts to offer. Racial transcendence happens when white America takes these gifts for itself, in exchange for acceptance within white culture." To Howard, this adoption—or, more accurately, co-opting—of the "humanity of black superhumans" allows the representative subjects to "move, supposedly, beyond blackness, their talents granting them safe passage through white spaces, mouths, and memories." This positions blackness as a detriment, establishing a fantasy of racial transcendence that is, as Howard notes, "anchored in the fallacy that the handicap is blackness itself, rather than a society that terrorizes and undermines blacks at every turn."

To ascribe a sense of post-raciality to Simpson requires one to think of his career as defined by his adherence to the traits and characteristics of what is sometimes referred to as the figure of the "exceptional Negro": a figure that defies racist stereotypes by functioning as the inversion of racist expectations. An issue of *The Negro History Bulletin*, published in 1940, traces the history of this term to slavery, which was "justified on the grounds that the Negro was childlike and had to remain under the direction of someone who would make use of his brute force and in turn provide for him the necessities of life"; on the other hand, "[t]he exceptional Negro in a later period became one showing other evidences of being a man" ("The Story"). The anonymous news article attributes the rise of the figure to the Reconstruction period, in which "the exceptional Negro was one who could take care of himself in that very difficult situation of an impoverished country in a disorganized condition," in a time when "[m]any Negroes who could not easily readjust themselves in that transition from slavery to freedom died of poverty and disease." Yet, those who were "able to come to the front were gladly welcomed by whites, *even to the extent of intermarriage*" ("The Story"; emphasis added).

Simpson's athletic prowess, coupled with his jovial, non-threatening demeanour, afforded him all the privileges of "coming to the front," as it were. Howard's article offers a reconsideration of the ways in which Simpson was depicted as a public persona in the 1970s, with particular attention paid to Simpson's 1978 commercial for Hertz. Just as Edelman demonstrates in his documentary, Howard describes the commercial as the construction of "an entire false reality" being built, in which "[n]o other black people could be in the shot," while Fred Levinson—the commercial's director—"added white bystanders, who cheered on Simpson as he sprinted through the empty hallways, telegraphing that he was safe, and therefore that they were too." To Howard, the commercial is a prism that refracts Simpson, transforming "a man with hickory skin, full lips, a wide nose and a nappy Afro" into a statement that says, "He's African, but he's a good-looking man. He almost has white features."

A decade later, Simpson would take this image of "safeness" to Hollywood, playing the role of Nordberg in the *Naked Gun* series. Despite the trilogy's slapstick trappings, Simpson's character served as the straight man to Leslie Nielson's clumsy, foppish character, refining and reinforcing the persona that the flesh-and-blood Simpson began developing two decades prior, functioning as a version of what Spike Lee would later call "the Magical Negro." In this regard, Simpson's talent was not merely on the gridiron but was primarily located in his ability to use "his wit and charm in the service of making white people feel safe" (Howard).

This is a characterization that Simpson himself denies. In an interesting rejection of Edwards's contention that Simpson saw himself as something other than an African American, HBO's 2002 documentary, *O.J.: A Study in Black and White*, begins with a scene in which Simpson insists, "I'm a black guy, always been a black guy, never been anything but a black guy." As noted above, the systems of signification that constitute Simpson's public persona are also unrelenting in their attempts to inscribe blackness onto his body. But this sense of blackness is thwarted by equally powerful—and, up until 1995, largely *successful*—cultural attempts to *strip* that same blackness from his body.

Despite Simpson's claims in the 2002 HBO documentary, critics have long been sceptical of his connection to the black community. In a response to the documentary, the late sportswriter Ralph Wiley views Simpson as a man who "tried and almost succeeded at being everything *but* a Black guy." Michael Eric Dyson makes a similar indictment of Simpson, arguing that "O.J. wanted to get as far away from his ghetto roots as his legs, wealth, fame, and diction could carry him" (47). Dyson reads Simpson in the same vein as Wiley, functioning as a figure who "appears … uncomfortable with the idea that you can be identifiably black and have all those things" that Simpson enjoyed between 1968 and 1995 (47). To Dyson, Simpson's success in connecting with a mainstream, largely white audience appeared to manifest at the cost of Simpson "drown[ing] his racial identity in an ocean of whiteness" (47). The extinguishing of racial identity manifested in Simpson's performances; Dyson suggests that resulted in "O.J.'s spectacular rise to fame [which] was aided not only by his extraordinary gifts, but because he fit the mold of a talented but tamed black man, what was known in his youth as a 'respectable Negro'" (49). Similarly, Wiley explains that while Simpson "fooled himself" and "fooled white people," he "didn't fool very many black people." He goes on to note that "white people were confused and let down" by Simpson's double-murder charge, because they "had decided that OJ Simpson was a 'unifying symbol of all races.'" Still, Dyson quickly points out that "Black people didn't decide that. Black people didn't think that up. Black people didn't even believe that. Who was he unifying, and to what end?" (49).

In an essay entitled "Black Jurors: Right to Acquit?" Paul Butler shares his reaction to Simpson's acquittal in a manner that speaks to the concerns shared among many African Americans. Butler confesses that when "I heard the verdict in the O.J. Simpson case I wanted to cheer, but was the only black person in the room" (38). Butler goes on to nuance the definition of "reasonable doubt," the very tenet by which the accused is either found guilty or not guilty, explaining that what "is reasonable to a black person may not be reasonable to a white person, especially in matters involving the police" (39). Butler's point is especially salient today, at a time when African Americans such as Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Antonio Martin, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, and Alton Sterling are summarily executed at the hands of a police force that appears to be informed by systemic, racist ideology. On principle, the police are *supposed* to protect and serve; but the lived experiences of African Americans, as expressed through movements such as Black Lives Matter, suggest something very different.

While Black Lives Matter is a decentralized network of activists who operate on the same guiding principles as Edwards's 1968 collective of black athletes, their concerns are recurrent throughout several centuries of American history, dating back to the days of slavery. For the purpose of this article, we would like to focus on two events that occurred in Simpson's era, in the same city in which Simpson was accused of, tried for, and acquitted of the double-murder of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman.

The persecution of African Americans in Los Angeles was erased for the international audience in 1984, when the city hosted the Olympic Games. The twenty-third Summer Olympics was a milestone event, marking America's return to the games following the boycott of the 1980 Games in Moscow. The 1984 Games were also noteworthy for being the first privately funded event in Olympics history, which resulted in a surplus of over 200,000,000 dollars, while spurring the creation of 70,000 new jobs (Zirin). In short, the 1984 Summer Olympics represented a return to American prosperity, both in terms of economics and athletics, with the host nation winning 174 medals. So great was the divide between America and the rest of the world that, with eighty-three gold medals, the host nation had won more gold than the second ranked country's total medal count. In the summer of 1984, America was at the top of the world, and Los Angeles was its crown jewel.

But outside of the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, where the majority of outdoor events were held, the city concealed a grim reality from the eyes of the world. Three years earlier, the Watts riots had raged through South Central Los Angeles for six days, from 11 to 16 August 1965, leaving unemployment rates for African American males peaking at a staggering 45 percent in 1968. Compounding the staggering poverty was the rise of what would eventually be known as the American crack epidemic, stemming from drug dealers in Los Angeles converting powder cocaine to a solid substance that could be smoked. This new form of cocaine, which became known as "crack," hinged on volume; the drug could be produced cheaply, sold in smaller quantities, and generate a more intense high. If cocaine in the 1980s was a drug for the affluent, crack was *the* drug for the disenfranchised. The widespread use of crack, particularly in urban communities such as South Central LA, was felt quickly and violently. In a study of the cultural aftershocks of the crack epidemic, Steven D. Levitt and Kevin M. Murphy note the following:

> Between 1984 and 1994, the homicide rate for black males aged 14 to 17 more than doubled, and the homicide rate for black males aged 18 to 24 increased nearly as much. During this period, the black community also experienced an increase in fetal death rates, low birth-weight babies, weapons arrests, and the number of children in foster care.

With the world's top athletes coalescing in Los Angeles against the back-drop of gang violence, Mayor Tom Bradley and Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) Chief Daryl Gates executed the first of several operations designed to remove gang members from the city's streets. These gang sweeps were responsible for the detention of hundreds of young black men, who were held in custody for the duration of the Olympic Games. From Gates's standpoint, the gang sweeps were a success that facilitated a safe, secure Summer Olympics. The success of the gang sweeps emboldened Gates; Dave Zirin explains that, because "Gates emerged from the Olympics as an untouchable hero," he and his department were incentivized to "stay in 'Olympic mode,'" treating the city "as occupied territory." Further militarizing his mostly white police force, Gates, who developed the first Special Weapons Assault Team units in the same year that Simpson won the Heisman Trophy (1969), inaugurated a number of initiatives designed to respond to the city's violent gang conflicts. In addition to the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) program, Gates designed an elite special operations unit titled Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums, or C.R.A.S.H. Gerald Chaleff, a member of the Webster Commission that investigated the LAPD's response to the Rodney King riots of 1992, recalls C.R.A.S.H. functioning as "a police department inside the police department," consisting of "experienced officers ... whose job was to be on the streets; get to know all the people in gangs; get to know all the different gang members; get to know where the gang territories were; and to help stop criminal activity among and between gangs" ("L.A.P.D. Blues"). C.R.A.S.H. operatives enjoyed an elite status, with a freedom of mobility and a lack of oversight. This potent combination resulted in C.R.A.S.H. becoming, "in effect, the most badass gang in the city," with their "own code of silence covering an increasing number of illegal activities; their own lingo ... and their own gestures, secret hand signs, and party pads" (Starr 92). In this regard, the motto employed by C.R.A.S.H. was remarkably accurate: "We Intimidate Those Who Intimidate Others."

C.R.A.S.H. would be dismantled in March 2000, but not before leaving behind a legacy that included "a 33 percent spike in citizen complaints against police brutality" (Zirin) between 1984 and 1989 that were *not* prosecuted by the cooperative District Attorney's office. Similarly, 1,400 officers "were investigated on suspicion of using excessive force" between 1986 and 1990, with fewer than 1 percent being prosecuted (Zirin). But C.R.A.S.H.'s legacy is largely defined by the Gates-spearheaded Operation Hammer in April of 1987.

John L. Mitchell, writing for the *Los Angeles Times* in 2001, recounts the infamous gang sweep operation in terms and tones that signify warfare. In an article titled, "The Raid that Still Haunts L.A.," Mitchell describes Operation Hammer as "an all-out search for drugs and a massive show of force designed to deliver a strong message to the gangs." Led by C.R.A.S.H., LAPD officers "descended on two apartment buildings ... smash[ing] furniture, punch[ing] holes in walls, destroy[ing] family photos, rip[ing] down cabinet doors, slash[ing] sofas, shatter[ing] mirrors, hammer[ing] toilets to porcelain shards, dous[ing] clothing with bleach and [emptying] refrigerators." The LAPD even left their own graffiti, painting over existing tags with phrases such as "LAPD Rules" and "Rollin' 30s Die." The eighty-eight officers who participated in Operation Hammer—none of them ranking higher than sergeant—rounded up dozens of residents, many "humiliated or beaten," yet "none was charged with a crime" (Mitchell). Despite the destruction of the two buildings, "The raid netted fewer than six ounces of marijuana and less than an ounce of cocaine" (Mitchell). This outcome was not unexpected. Todd Parrick, who participated in this extreme version of Gates's Olympics gang sweeps, recalls: "We weren't just searching for drugs. We were delivering a message that there was a price to pay for selling drugs and being a gang member." "At the time," Parrick explains, "if you were selling dope, we were going to knock your house down with a battering ram" (qtd. in Mitchell). What enabled C.R.A.S.H.'s disproportionate use of force was the lack of oversight. Parrick remembers that despite being a rookie, "nobody told me to stop. No one said, 'Cut it out'" (qtd. in Mitchell). The inexperience of the police officers who executed Operation Hammer was such that, while raiding the two apartment buildings, "no one was in charge to execute the search warrant" (Parrick qtd. in Mitchell).

Despite the illegality of the operation, C.R.A.S.H. members were untouchable. Chris Darden, who later became a member of the prosecution team in Simpson's criminal trial, was only able to prosecute three of the eighty-eight officers—on charges of misdemeanour vandalism. All three were acquitted, which Darden attributes to the code of silence shared by LAPD members, "which deterred officers from testifying against one another" (Mitchell).

Against this back-drop, voices of resistance began to emerge in the form of an aggressive style of art: West Coast hip hop. While the history of hip hop—both the music and the culture—exceeds the parameters of this article, it is worth noting that artists such as N.W.A., Compton's Most Wanted, DJ Quik, and Ice-T developed almost exclusively as figures who were targeted by the LAPD, celebrating the very culture that C.R.A.S.H. violently opposed. In contrast to the party-centric lyrics of East Coast hip hop, South Central rappers embraced the gang culture of their city in order to articulate the anger of a community. Suddenly, gangs such as the Bloods and the Crips were being mentioned in songs that would play on Los Angeles radio stations such as KDAY. Earning the ire of organizations including the Parents Music Resource Center, hip hop artists would release songs with titles such as "Fuck tha Police," "Cop Shot," "Cop Killer," and "Colors," which referred to the traditional colour-based forms of identification adorned by gang members.

If hip hop voiced the anger of a community, the Los Angeles riots of 1992 served as the visceral, physical articulation of the same fears, anger, and frustration of a community that had been systemically and violently oppressed. The riots occurred as a result of the acquittal of Theodore Briseno, Stacey Koon, Laurence Powell, and Timothy Wind, police officers who were recorded beating Rodney King following a high-speed pursuit. Despite the savage beating, in which the LAPD officers hit King fifty-six times with their batons, violently crystallizing the ethos of the LAPD, the four were acquitted of all charges at 3:15 p.m. on 29 April 1992. By 5:00 p.m., riots erupted and laid flat entire areas of Los Angeles.

Through the extreme violence perpetrated upon black bodies, the LAPD highlighted a common point of reference, which all African Americans could share; the O.J. trial, three years later, provided another. If there was a sense of jubilation over Simpson's acquittal, at least some of that jubilation stemmed from the idea that Simpson had beaten a system that was purposely constructed to entrap black bodies, as the Rodney King verdict proved all too well.

It is not surprising, then, that the *People v. O.J. Simpson* miniseries opens with the Rodney King riots. While the series is, to be sure, heavily dramatized, the FX production is also steeped in a level of racial problematics that still echo today. Countering Chris Darden's comment, noted in the introduction, that Simpson had not been black for a long time, is its rebuttal: "He's black now—the police are after him." Simpson's racial shifting throughout the trial permeates the miniseries. After being appointed head prosecutor, for example, Marcia Clark notes to her colleagues that should Simpson be tried by a jury of his peers, that jury would consist of twelve wealthy, middle-aged white men.

In turn, when Simpson chooses the white, wealthy, middle-aged Shapiro as his lawyer, his decision becomes problematic given the racial makeup of the downtown jury, who would decide the trial. Both Clark and the defence use jury consultants to assess the probable mood of the jurists (assumed to be black). Clark disbelieves the result that black jurors don't like her, and dismisses it, preferring to "go with her gut." On the defence side, Shapiro's detective uncovers Mark Fuhrman's pension case file, in which the detective argues he can no longer function as a detective because he is so filled with racial hatred (Toobin 114). As the original lead detective who found the most damaging evidence, this discovery was a bombshell that Shapiro couldn't wait to use in Simpson's defence. Shapiro also knew what O.J. did not—that Shapiro was not a trial lawyer (he was known as a negotiator and always pled his cases) and that a trial lawyer was necessary for a case that, with the Fuhrman information, would be steeped in race. Jeffrey Toobin, whose book, *The Run of His Life*, provides the basis of the TV miniseries, observes that there was really only one lawyer who could handle this particular case: "Who else but the foremost black attorney in Los Angeles to conduct a defense based on race" (43)? Again, as noted in the introduction, while Shapiro argued their choice to Simpson,

> O.J. demurred. He liked Cochran, had even talked to him several times since the murders, but he wasn't sure if he wanted him as his lawyer. It is one of the richer and more revealing ironies of the case that only O.J. Simpson—"I'm not black. I'm O.J."—failed to understand the preeminent place of race in his own defence. Simpson was himself so alienated from the world of his fellow black Angelinos that he alone failed to recognize what was obvious to whites and blacks alike: that Johnnie L. Cochran, Jr., had been waiting his whole life for this case, and this case had been waiting for Johnnie as well. (43)

Unlike the other attorneys on the case, Cochran knew his downtown jury and behaved accordingly; in preparing the defence, he re-ethnicized Simpson for the jury. In a famous sequence, noted by most authors who write about the case and dramatized in the miniseries, Cochran's law firm redecorates Simpson's Brentwood mansion for the jury visit to the scene of the crimes. This necessarily lengthy quotation outlines the staging of Rockingham:

> The white women on the walls have to go, and the black people have to come in. All along the wall on the curving stairway, pictures are taken down. Ditto for the photos of white women downstairs . . .

> Simpson always surrounded himself with photographs of his friends. Rockingham's walls, end tables, and shelves overflowed with them. The faces were overwhelmingly white. That's not the way to please a jury dominated by African-American women. "We've got to have pictures of his family, his black family, up there," Cochran says. (Schiller and Willwerth 210)

In the miniseries, as the court moves through the house, Simpson asks his defence team, "who *are* all these people?"

Simpson's legal team purposely racialized Simpson in a manner that runs contrary to the public persona that allowed Simpson to navigate in largely white circles, performing as a sort of "exceptional Negro," who, through his athletic abilities, grace, and charm, had access to the sort of wealth and privilege denied to most people, certainly to most African Americans. In this regard, the notorious 27 January 1994 issue of *Time*, which famously altered Simpson's mug shot to make his skin appear darker, is emblematic of the ways in which race was inscribed upon Simpson's body. When Cochran implores Simpson—both in the FX miniseries, and in the real circumstances of the case—to allow him to try his case freely in front of a jury that he, not Simpson, knows, he does so in order to tap into the discursive power of racism as a plausible defence. With a police officer like Fuhrman—who had uttered racial epithets, taken part in some of Gates's C.R.A.S.H. operations, and suggested on a tape intended for a screenplay that "all black bodies should be burned," and who had found the most damning evidence—coupled with the sloppy Los Angeles crime lab, which defence attorney Barry Scheck called the "cesspool of contamination," racism as a defence was not difficult to execute.

While the prosecutors tried to advance their spousal abuse argument, their efforts were met by Cochran and turned inside out, as is clear from the miniseries' portrayal of Darden and Cochran arguing over the "N-word." Darden is trying to keep race out of the courtroom, and contends that "the 'N-word' … is a dirty, filthy word … [that will] evoke some kind of emotional response from any African-American." He concludes his argument that use of the epithet "would inflame the passions of the jury. It would be dangerous." Unfortunately, his efforts to keep race out of the trial engenders a competition of "authentic blackness." Cochran wastes no time in calling Darden on his efforts, citing his remarks as "the most incredible … I've heard in a court of law." He goes on to state that "[i]t is demeaning to our jurors to say that African-Americans, who have lived under oppression for 200-plus years in this country, cannot work within the mainstream, cannot hear these offensive words. I am ashamed that Mr. Darden would allow himself to become an apologist for this man [Fuhrman]." Darden is left looking ridiculous, while Cochran, who has clearly "won" this debate on race, becomes the authority on blackness (*The People*).

Darden's weaknesses had been exposed by this altercation, and the defence team uses its knowledge of the young black prosecutor to goad him into trying the bloody glove, which Fuhrman had found on Simpson at Rockingham. Darden foolishly allows Simpson to try on the original glove over latex—rather than the new glove he had purchased for this event. Unbeknownst to him (and to everyone until Edelman released his documentary), O.J. had stopped taking his arthritis medication so that his hands would swell. Of course, the glove did not fit, leaving the prosecutors looking foolish, and the defence and Simpson surprised and delighted.

The trump card of the trial, of course, was the tapes Fuhrman made for a screenplay—the tapes on which the detective spews racial hatred and uses the "N-word" over forty-one times (Toobin 321). The story of the tapes is enacted in one of the final episodes of the series, which dramatizes Cochran and Bailey's trip to South Carolina to get the tapes and bring them back to Los Angeles. When they get back, they have difficulty entering the tapes into court, because the tapes reveal that Lance Ito's wife, police captain Margaret York, had lied. Finally, Cochran becomes so furious that he and a group of black luminaries go on television and plead to the public that the tapes should be played. Ultimately, Ito plays them in court, but out of the jury's earshot. The tapes include Fuhrman stating, "These niggers, they run like rabbits"; "That's where niggers live"; and a long recital that appeared to be Fuhrman's account of a C.R.A.S.H. raid, in which he tortured and killed black suspects (Toobin 325). The tapes sickened those who heard them, and Cochran was infuriated when Ito allowed only two snippets to be read to the jury. But those two snippets were enough—the trial was effectively over the day the tapes, which Cochran called "manna from heaven," surfaced. And with the tapes, the line had been drawn—either acquit the newly black Simpson or vote with the white prosecutors (Darden had already been dismissed as an "Uncle Tom") and their racist detectives.

The act of *re-racializing* Simpson—reinscribing a blackness onto a body that had largely been stripped of the stereotypical features once commonly associated with African American males—also served to take Simpson, who had once represented safety, who had once appeared in films with Leslie Nielson, who had once boosted Hertz's sales numbers and brand recognition by staggering amounts, and turn him into a hero of police victimization. At the time, while the black community cheered Simpson's verdict, for many, the cheer was for a black man who had amassed a fortune and who could beat the system that had oppressed the disenfranchised for so long—the enfranchised Simpson, oddly, proved that the law worked the same for black and white—if the accused had enough money to counter it. Whether Simpson's innocence was believed is questionable.

To return to hip hop lyrics, songs that reference Simpson in the years following his trial suggest that, in music, at least, O.J. had become an ambiguous figure. In the 1996 rap "The Hop," A Tribe Called Quest chant the line, "Watch me stab up the track as if my name was O.J. Simpson." Twenty years later, Kendrick Lamar, the heir apparent to the South Central hip hop legacy, casts himself as "a baller-slash-killer like O.J. Simpson." Even the most famous "gangsta" rapper of the 1990s, 2Pac, celebrated being "free like O.J. all day." These lyrics resonated for hip hop audiences; conversely, for a white audience in 2016, aware of Black Lives Matter and the treatment of African Americans by the police, the not-guilty verdict surely became less of an outrage than it was perceived to be at the time, when it was believed to be responsible for the overturning of California's Affirmative Action laws in 1996.[2]

We thus contend that to read Simpson's sentiment "I'm not black, I'm O.J." as an indicator of race transcendence is to grossly misread the true semantic payload. Rather than viewing Simpson as a post-racial figure, we argue that by "being O.J.," Simpson is inextricably trapped by race. Through the extensive racialization of his body, which simultaneously performs whiteness while existing in manifest blackness, Simpson becomes a prism by which race is refracted. While the performance continues, he can act as he likes, but when that performance is halted, as it was with the not-guilty verdict, his blackness prevails and the repercussions of his actions can be felt. Hence, white rage over the verdict means that Simpson can no longer "be O.J.," and, true to form, after committing a robbery at gunpoint in 2007, Simpson has been condemned by a white judge to a prison term of thirty-three years—the same length of time he would have served had he been found guilty of the double homicide (Edelman).

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Notes

1 The Heisman Trophy "recognizes the outstanding college football player whose performance best exhibits the pursuit of excellence with integrity" ("Heisman Trust").

2 In November 1996, Proposition 209 was voted in, abolishing affirmative action programs in the state and cited by Marcia Clark (12) and others as the result of the Simpson verdict.

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