Birth of a Nation'hood

Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case

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Introduction by Toni Morrison

"The Unbearable Darkness of Being: 'Fresh' Thoughts on Race, Sex and the Simpsons"
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Parade reports that the Ronald Goldman Justice Fund has raised several hundred thousand dollars, while the Nicole Brown Legal Fund has collected “only a minimal amount.” A lawyer close to the civil suit attributes the difference to the fact that “Ron’s father, Fred, and sister, Kim, have appeared on TV almost daily, attacking O.J.” The Browns, according to Parade’s analysis, “have been reluctant to attack O.J. publicly, because they don’t want to jeopardize their right to the custody of his children.” Parade concludes that the family’s reticence has hampered its fund-raising ability. Possibly, but the Browns actually have been, if anything, more visible in their grief than the Goldmans. The difference in the success of their respective fund-raising may be that the Goldmans are perceived as the more innocent, and thus the more sympathetic victims.

Some reports claim in fact that from his book, I Want to Tell You, and from autographing football cards and other memorabilia he earned more during his fifteen months in jail than he had during previous years.

Matt Krasnowski, “Topless photos of Nicole at issue,” San Diego Union-Tribune, July 26, 1996, p. A-5. As near as I can tell, Dominique Brown’s revelation was dramatically underreported in the press. Rivera Live, whose notoriously pro-Brown coverage of the case led Simpson’s lawyers to “theorize” an affair between Denise Brown and Geraldo Rivera, barely mentioned this rather startling revelation in the last five minutes of its July 26 show. Interviewed briefly by phone, a lawyer for the Browns claimed that Dominique left the photographs in question with a close friend, who sold them to the Enquirer. According to the attorney, Brown put the $32,500 she received for the photos in a separate account, which she has not touched. Although it defies common sense, the lawyer’s attempt to portray Dominique Brown as the innocent victim of a friend’s betrayal went unchallenged by the news reporter, John Gibson, who was sitting in for Geraldo Rivera as host. (The wire service reported that Brown sold seven photographs; Newsweek placed the number at five. See “Selling Her Sister’s Memory,” Newsweek, August 5, 1996, p. 68.)

Roger E. Sandler and Marilyn Johnson, “The Way We Live: A Place to Heal,” Life, June 1995, pp. 37–44; quotations from page 38. As the article explains, a Life photographer and his assistant spent the day before Easter 1995 with the Browns and Sidney and Justin—before, during, and after the family’s visit to Nicole Simpson’s grave.

Rivera Live, October 4, 1995. See also People, October 16, 1995, p. 50.


18. On this point, see Hortense Spillers, “Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or, Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed?” Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, eds., *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 25–61. In a brilliant reading of desire in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Spillers argues that Stowe “dispatches the child [Little Eva] to do a woman’s job; that is, the white woman’s desire for the black man is displaced onto Little Eva (“I want him.”) and thus made prepubescent pure. As Spillers writes, “the female child figure—in her daring and impermissible desire—stands in here for the symptoms of a disturbed female sexuality that American women of Stowe’s era could neither articulate nor cancel, only loudly proclaim in the ornamental language, which counterfeits the ‘sacrillegious’ of disguise and substitution” (p. 44).


29. Ibid., pp. 10–11.


31. As quoted by Geraldo Rivera reading from the deposition transcripts.

32. Although Denise Brown and others testified that Simpson glowered menacingly at Nicole throughout Sydney Simpson’s June 12 dance recital, a videotape shows an amiable Simpson laughing and schmoozing with the Browns after the event. Lou Brown shakes his hand and both Denise and Judith Brown kiss him on the lips. And although the Browns would later claim that they believed Simpson, who had long threatened to kill Nicole, was responsible the moment they heard she was dead, the family initially supported their former in-law in his claims of innocence. A full ten days after the murders, Denise Brown told the *New York Times* that her sister was not a battered wife and implied that the 1989 incident was the only instance of domestic discord of which she was aware. See Sara Rimer, “Nicole Simpson: Private Pain Amid Life in the Public Eye,” *New York Times*, June 23, 1994, pp. A1, A20.
leave the city, go to Idaho, Oregon, or Arizona, vote for Gingrich... and punish blacks by closing their day-care programs and cutting off their Medicaid.” Simpson’s acquittal confirmed the widely held, though intensely erroneous, belief that blacks are getting away with murder in this country; that they are doing as well or better than whites. Punitive measures aimed primarily at African Americans—the perceived source of all the nation’s ills and the assumed beneficiaries of its noblesse oblige—have extended way beyond white flight and Medicaid cutbacks. While we were preoccupied with the trials of the century (criminal, civil, and custodial)—while we were sleeping with O.J. and Nicole and Ron and Kato and Chris and Marcia, Marcia, Marcia—reactionary legislation at the federal, state, and local levels ended “welfare as we know it,” rolled back public assistance, Head Start, and affirmative action programs; limited immigration from the third world; and initiated the three strikes law designed to put even more black men permanently behind bars.

O.J. Simpson is by no means the cause of the white rage that blames and punishes the black other for the nation’s woes, but in his always-already-sexual black male guilt, he is its vindication, its “I-told-you-so.” The perception that “the black community,” constructed in the press as a mindless monolith, is solidly behind Simpson has made black people all the more complicit with his crimes, all the more guilty of malfeasances ranging from unAmericaness to literally and figuratively getting away with murder.

Newsweek columnist Jonathan Alter voiced the thoughts of millions, I’m sure, when he wrote after Simpson’s acquittal: “We expected more blacks to look beyond race to facts, as many whites had during the Rodney King trial. When so many blacks didn’t, it shocked us—and hardened us in ways that shocked us even more.” Pharaoh’s heart has been hardened, and he’s not about to let my people go. Because of the way racial mythology operates in America, Simpson’s fall from grace could never be just one horrendous step for a man; it has to be a giant leap backward for his kind. O.J. may have walked, but millions of dark people have already begun to pay for his sins.

Notes

11. I mean to evoke here the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe’s controversial studies of black male nudes rather than his entire oeuvre.
nection that might bring meaning to the violence that has
visited them; and there is a family that shies from the pub-
lic, that doesn’t care for the media, that wants to be by
itself.

The children may prefer to mourn in private. (Sydney has been
photographed sticking out her tongue defiantly at paparazzi,
and the Life article noted unselfconsciously that “Justin doesn’t
want to have his picture taken. He’s had so many hard things in
his life.”) The adult Browns, however, have always been very pub-
lic in their grief, regularly allowing journalists such as Diane
Sawyer or Geraldo Rivera to pick their festering wounds on
national television. Since his acquittal, O.J. Simpson has been
similarly public in his efforts to reinvent himself as victim
instead of villain and to market himself as a godfearing, Bible-
quoting crusader for racial justice who will go wherever there’s a
paying audience. I’ve grown used to the adults’ ringside grieving
and multimedia street hawking, but the pictures of Nicole and
the children sold to the tabloids and the graveside and hearth-
side photo shoots in Dana Point and Brentwood continue to
haunt me because I can’t figure out why “victims” would subject
themselves and their families, especially innocent children, to the
kind of public exhibition that the National Enquirer, Star, and Life
magazines represent. I can’t fathom it—not for love nor
money—but I suspect it’s one or the other.

Dark Men Walking

Often great tragedy offers up some degree of redemption, some
lesson, some element of hope. I have followed the Simpson case
closely for more than two years, but even in my most optimistic
and generous moments I have been unable to discern either
hopeful light or redeeming end to the tunnel into which this par-
ticular tragedy has plunged the media and the masses. We are in
no way that I can see the better for our obsessive immersion in
the life and death details of the Simpsons, the Browns, and the
Goldmans—for the endless trial coverage, the legal, social, and
psychological analyses, the inspections, dissections, cross sec-
tions, postmortems, and projections. And, if we are not actually
the worse for it all—for “feasting on the buffet of O.J. Simp-
son,” as one network executive put it—we have most certainly
been shown at our worst by it.

We kid ourselves and swallow whole the junk food we’ve
been fed for over two years if we believe that any of this—the
endless mediation of the Simpson saga—is really about a man
and a woman who were murdered, about two young children
robbed of their mother, a family robbed of a daughter, another
bereft of a son. It’s about race; it’s about sex; it’s about money. It
has long ceased to be about truth and justice, but it is very much
about the American way: our desire as a nation of voyeurs to
return to the Colosseum, to be titillated by the sexual transgres-
sions and personal tragedies of others.

Although we have all danced to the undulating tom-tom
rhythms of the Simpson samba, some of us will pay more dearly
to the piper than others. For some the consequences of the
Simpson case, like the story itself, may well be endless. Here I’m
thinking not only about the children and the families of the vic-
tims, but also about the black masses smeared by the backslash
from the same grime and guilty pleasures that made Simpson a
national obsession.

Shortly after the verdict, a writer in L.A. e-mailed a friend
at the New York Times the “intentionally provocative” message that
once Simpson walks, “whites will riot the way we whites do:
Losing Isaiah. Berry plays a recovered dope addict who regains custody of the son she abandoned as a baby, not simply because she's the birth mother but because her militant black lawyer (Samuel L. Jackson), who believes that “black babies belong with black mothers,” shows that the white adoptive parents (Jessica Lange and David Strathairn) are raising the black child in a completely white environment “where he never sees anyone like himself,” not even in children's books. Interestingly enough, some of Simpson's public statements about his concern that his children be immersed in their African-American heritage sound remarkably like dialogue from the movie.

What troubles me about the custody question, however, is less the whitening of these historically black children than their possible exploitation within an “extended family,” which, if its principals were black, would likely be labeled dysfunctional, given what the media would certainly identify as the “unwed mother” status of the resident daughters, the history of alcoholism and unemployment, and the absence of fathers or male role models other than the aged grandfather who's already demonstrated that he can't control or protect his daughters.

But if the thought of the Browns raising Sydney and Justin is disquieting for a few, the likelihood of their being returned to the man presumed to have murdered their mother is horrifying for the many—perhaps the most tragic turn of all in a saga suffused with outrages, insults, and abominations. Those who shudder at the thought of what these children have already lived through, including the murder of their mother, can't bear the idea of their living with their father or with what much of the world believes about their father. For some, then, the most disturbing questions of the Simpson case are not about O.J.'s unpunished guilt, but about his children's much-punished innocence.

In considering the custody question, it may be important to note that O.J., too, sold family photographs to the tabloids—not of Sydney and Justin, as far as I know, but of his post-trial reunion with his older children, Arnelle and Jason, and other family members and friends. Shot on location at the Brentwood estate, two Star “world exclusive” special issues featured cover stories and “dozens of fabulous intimate photos” of Simpson welcomed home by his “nearest and dearest,” including his older children, his sisters, and his aged, infirmed mother (Oct. 17 and 24, 1995). Both Star exclusives were sanctioned by Simpson and stamped with his corporate seal of approval—“Copyright © 1995 Orenthal Productions and Polaris Communications.” Both carried the warning “Publication without written permission is prohibited.”

Directly rebutting reports that “Simpson intended to exploit the youngsters he fathered with Nicole,” Star took pains to point out that the reunion with Sydney and Justin occurred in private. “Even though STAR was with O.J. during the days after his release from jail, we left him and his children alone to cherish their first hours,” the magazine hastened to explain. Yet in a case where nothing is sacred, where everything and everyone is up for sale, including family, one has to wonder if there is any house that can be a home for the Simpson children. Is there any place where they can indeed be safe, protected as children instead of pandered as commodities, as Orenthal’s most marketable productions?

Lift magazine concluded its day-in-the-life photo essay on the Simpson children with the claim that there are two families residing within the larger Brown household:

There is a family that longs to be understood, to share the burden of its grief with the wider world, to make a con-
ciliatory toward his former son-in-law”—said that he feels “a friendly approach to custodianship is better for the children.” In a cynical reading, “friendly” (as opposed to, say, “cooperative”) represents a telling word choice: Brown doesn’t want to bite the hand that feeds his grandchildren. From the children’s perspective, he is no doubt right about the importance of cordiality; the kids love their grandparents and their father and would surely be further traumatized by open hostility between the two camps. But even if they are not actually beaten themselves, children are never completely outside the physical and emotional abuse inflicted on their mothers. It’s difficult, therefore, to reconcile Lou Brown’s conciliatory attitude toward his former son-in-law with his conviction that Simpson habitually battered and then brutally murdered Nicole.

Taking up for the Browns on the talk shows on which she has become a frequent guest, attorney Gloria Allred, who at one time represented the family, has condemned as “outrageous” the suggestion that the grandparents’ desire to retain custody of Sydney and Justin has anything to do with the substantial child support payments they receive from Simpson (a figure considerably less than the $10,000 a month he reportedly paid to his ex-wife for the children’s support). Allred accused Simpson and his lawyers of further victimizing the Browns by trying to turn public sentiment against them just as the civil suit is about to begin. She and others implied, in fact, that Simpson’s attempt to regain custody, initiated on the eve of the wrongful death hearings, was strategically timed to win him sympathy as a loving father kept from his children by greedy, vengeful grandparents. The tabloids clearly agreed, with the Globe, declaring that the “evil,” “heartless,” “devious O.J. Simpson” was “using every trick in the book” in a desperate attempt “to wrench his kids away from his mur-

dered wife’s parents”—“even leveling charges of racism at them” (Sept. 17, 1996).

For the most part, the battle over the children took place (as well it should) outside the glare of television cameras. Neither side was silent, however, about the other’s alleged dirty tricks and ulterior motives or the righteousness of its own claim to custody. In the same Geraldo interview mentioned earlier, Lou Brown indicated that where the children are concerned he intends to utilize “all the advantages of a binuclear upbringing so we can get away from this racial crap that came out at the trial.”37 It’s not clear what “advantages” Brown has in mind, but I would take this tacit acknowledgment of the children’s bira
ciality as a sign of good intentions if I weren’t left wondering how this “binuclear upbringing” will happen under the guardianship of a white man who dismisses as “crap” the profoundly historical racial issues surrounding the case and the culture of which his grandchildren are a part.

Only those wrapped in the skin privileged by the dominant culture have the luxury of taking race lightly or cavalierly dismissing its social, economic, and legal consequences. Well-intentioned, loving, white liberal efforts to erase race—to transcend color—can leave mixed-race children unprepared to survive in a hostile world that will ultimately identify and treat them not as white or raceless or even biracial, but as black. At least that’s the argument Simpson made the cornerstone of his campaign to regain custody of his children. Claiming that the white Browns aren’t culturally equipped to raise black children, the “nouveau-black” Simpson and his attorneys reportedly argued in effect that Sydney and Justin were being whitenized by their environment.

Truth is stranger than fiction, and such an argument worked for Halle Berry’s character in the popular 1995 film
sion of journalists and the public viewing of the children. The New York Post columnist and tabloid TV personality Steve Dunleavy claims to have spent a day in the life of the Browns, observing the Simpson children at play in their grandparents’ home, which he characterized as a sanctuary, despite his own apparently easy, welcomed penetration of the so-called safe house.

Geraldo Rivera has similarly described himself as a good friend of the Browns and a frequent guest at the Dana Point home, where the children live. A picture is worth a thousand words, they say, and although Geraldo has frequently had his picture taken with the Browns, Life magazine has a cover and eight pages of hearthside and graveside photographs of the Simpson children to back up its claims of intimate knowledge of their home life. An “exclusive” photo essay on the family appeared as the cover story in the June 1995 issue.

Photographed and published apparently with the Browns’ full cooperation and participation, the Life cover story, “The Simpson Children One Year Later,” displays Sydney and Justin, then nine and six, at their mother’s grave and at their grandparents’ home. “Here’s who Sydney and Justin live with now,” the article explains, listing Nicole’s parents; two of her three sisters, Denise and Dominique; and their sons. Although the article goes on to describe how friendly neighbors in this gated Orange County community, three blocks from the beach, “thoughtfully turn over the tabloids in local stores when family members come in,” it doesn’t explain how or why a Life photographer and his assistant were offered such intimate access to the Brown household and the Simpson children. On the contrary, Life, like Dunleavy and Rivera, lauds the Brown home as “a place to heal,” where the children are “protected from the frenzy surrounding their father’s trial by the nurturing love of their extended family.”

It is particularly ironic that this gushy tribute to the Browns as long-suffering guardian angels opens with a page-and-one-half color shot of Sydney wrapped in what are supposed to be the protective arms of her godmother, Dominique, “the aunt who most reminds her of mom.” This of course is the same aunt who sold pictures of her beloved niece and her slain sister to the National Enquirer.

Life’s day-in-the-life photo essay may represent an unread chapter in the Simpson saga from yet another angle. The Browns are everywhere in the photos and in the children’s lives; the Simpsons are nowhere. A caption reports, without critical comment, that at school Sydney and Justin use the last name “Brown.” It is an extraordinary thing that these children, who historically would be considered black, have been returned to the home of the white father, entrusted into the care of their white grandparents, aunts, and cousins, while their black relatives, including a half-sister and a half-brother, have been virtually disappeared by the media as part of their extended family.

It seems we have come full circle; from the lost daughter, blackened by her marriage to a black man, to the reclaimed children, whitened by their return to the household of the white maternal grandfather. Despite the historical potency of the one-drop rule, the Simpson children are never spoken of as black or even mulatto. I might think this a good thing, if I didn’t know that race unremarked really means “white,” even as it is their unspoken blackness—the skin and sin of their black father—that makes them, like him, curiosities, fitting subjects for commerce and cover stories, despite their youth and absolute innocence.

In an interview with Geraldo Rivera the day of the verdict, Lou Brown—whom People aptly described as “remarkably con-
able evidence—including the Browns’ own inadvertently self-incriminating testimony—suggests that her family was hardly a port in the stormy marriage.

In any case, fair or not, the sense that Nicole Simpson’s life was sacrificed on the altar of a bad marriage from which her family did nothing to save her has led some of the most cynical among us to put the Browns on trial for crimes ranging from negligence to pandering. It’s cruel, however, to lay such an indictment at the feet of a family suffering the loss of a loved one. But the mainstream media’s failure to question the Browns’ motives, while at the same time giving them a forum to solicit not only sympathy but money, may be tantamount to aiding and abetting the pursuit of something other than truth and justice. Now that millions of dollars are at stake instead of a mere conviction, the Browns are bearing witness to Simpson’s abusive behavior and death threats in a way often quite different from the heard-no-evil-saw-no-evil ignorance they claimed earlier. And, perhaps out of respect for their grief, few if any in the media have called them on their contradictions or on the complicity that their testimony suggests. If what they say about Simpson’s treatment of Nicole is true—if she told them that he beat her, stalked her, threatened to kill her, and nearly raped her in a “sexual rage,” as they now claim, what does this same testimony say about them and their continued affectionate relationship with Simpson?

But while vilifying the Browns for the past is a fruitless exercise, watching them in the future may be a justifiable scrutiny, given their guardianship of the Simpson children. The attorneys representing O.J. Simpson in the civil suit have implied that the Browns are profiting financially from Nicole’s death, raising questions about her personal effects, the possible exploitation of the children, and the fiscal management of the Nicole Brown Simp-son Charitable Foundation for Battered Women, of which Denise Brown is chair and Lou Brown president.

In addition to donations to the charitable foundation, the Browns (and the Goldmans) have also solicited and received monetary contributions to help defray the costs of their civil suits. Simpson and his counsel aren’t the only ones wondering about the foundation’s finances and Simpson’s hefty child support payments, but the charge that the Browns have benefited financially from the tragedy is more than a little hypocritical coming from the Simpson camp, since O.J., who clearly spent a fortune defending himself, has also made millions on the murders and, having copyrighted himself, stands to make considerably more.

However hypocritical, such loaded questions from the defense forced Dominique Brown to admit during her July 25, 1996, deposition that she was paid $25,000 by the National Enquirer for four photos of her dead sister—including at least one of Nicole sunbathing topless in Mexico—and another $7,500 for three snapshots of her niece and nephew, Sydney and Justin Simpson. One of these photos is of Justin visiting his mother’s grave; the other two show the children at the beach and at Sea World. Having earlier refused to answer questions about the photographs, Dominique Brown was ordered to testify by a judge who ruled that her testimony could reveal a financial interest in the outcome of the civil suit, thus raising questions about her credibility as a witness.

Other members of the Brown family either refused to comment on or denied any knowledge of Dominique’s public sale of such private moments. But while mother, father, and sisters may claim a blissful ignorance of Dominique’s action, there have been other occasions when the entire family has sanctioned the intru-
daughter’s choice. The daughter, by the way, appears to have nothing much to recommend her as a suitable mate for this extraordinary man other than what O.J. Simpson might have called her “angel whiteness.”

Like the film’s fictional daughter, Nicole Brown made an uplifting marriage to a black man of means, although her parents, too, it seems, were not initially thrilled with their daughter’s choice. In his deposition for the civil suit, Lou Brown reportedly testified that he initially opposed the marriage because O.J. had beaten Nicole even before the couple tied the knot. We don’t know exactly what it was that made the concerned father change his mind, but with his fame, fortune, generosity, and even-better-than-Sidney Poitier good looks, Simpson no doubt seemed a better catch than a high-school-educated teenaged waitress from a working- or middle-class family might otherwise have hooked, even with her much-remarked classic white American beauty. Moreover, in terms of color and class, Simpson, even more so than Poitier’s character, had been whitened by wealth and fame. *Sports Illustrated*, in fact, described him as a man “who not only seemed just like us [read “white”] but also seemed better—richer, more handsome, more popular, an overwhelming success.”30 Perhaps the Browns, like the Tracy and Hepburn characters in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, were overwhelmed by their son-in-law’s “credentials.”

From a Hertz dealership and college tuitions to shopping sprees and Club Med vacations, the Browns, according to the defense attorney Johnnie Cochran, were part of a “circle of benevolence” for which O.J. Simpson footed the bill. Many speculate that it was the glitter of Simpson’s gold that blinded the Browns to the high price their daughter was paying for the good life. Unfortunately, the family’s otherwise inexplicable behavior leaves room for such nasty speculation. Lou Brown acknowledged

in one of the family’s numerous TV appearances that Nicole once tried to show him pictures of her bruised body, but he brushed them aside. In the more recent court depositions, both Mr. and Mrs. Brown testified that Nicole told them that O.J. was going to kill her; “we passed it off,” Juditha Brown said. Amazingly, Mrs. Brown also admitted that when Nicole expressed such fears just weeks before her murder she assured her that “he’s not going to kill you; he’s not going to leave his money to everybody else.”31

An apparent non sequitur, the allusion to O.J.’s money seems an odd response to a daughter’s expressed fear for her life. But then this is the same mother who kissed the lips of the man she says treated her daughter like a common prostitute, offering her $5,000 for a one-night stand just weeks before he made good on his repeated threats to kill her. Ironically, by virtue of the very details that they now want the world to accept as evidence of a pattern of abuse, the Browns evidently had good reason to believe that their daughter wasn’t just crying big bad wolf. However, far from challenging the man who they believe abused their daughter—even on the day she died, a day they say Simpson glovered at Nicole menacingly throughout their granddaughter’s dance recital—the Browns were caught on video warmly embracing, laughing with, and kissing their former in-law.32

According to Faye Resnick, Nicole herself had made the connection between Simpson’s generosity to her family and their deference to him at her expense. Nicole supposedly complained that her parents and sisters “weren’t at all supportive” when she left her husband. “They absolutely wanted me to stay with O.J.,” Resnick writes, quoting a conversation she allegedly had with Nicole in Cabo San Lucas. “O.J.’s done a lot for my family. They love him. I’m not saying they don’t love me. They do. They’re wonderful. They just love him more.” Other perhaps more reli-
lexicons trace the word’s origin to the Latin mulus or mula, meaning “mule,” or to the Spanish for mule, an animal whose birth is of course also unusual. Whatever its actual derivation, the word mulatto clearly has a far more complicated and culturally impacted etymology than any given dictionary definition suggests. What’s at stake in these various myths of word origin? Is there some cultural rationale behind the mule’s train of thought that is so clearly evident in English lexicons? English derivations yoke together as “unnatural” the offspring of ass and horse, on the one hand, and white and black, on the other, imputing to the progeny of humans of different races the same strangeness and sterility of the mixed-specied animal. Muwallad, mulus, mula, mulato, mulatto, mulatto, mule. Would it even be possible to accurately trace the derivation of such a culturally loaded word? I think not, because, much as with the “mountain of evidence” in the Simpson case, it is impossible to separate provable fact from racially tainted fiction.

The Returns of the Native

There are circumstances under which the lost daughter, the daughter gone native, and even the dead daughter can be returned to the home and the law of the father. Sometimes ruined daughters are returned to the community through the redemption of great suffering, sacrifice, and good works. (Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne comes to mind.) Other times they are returned through death, as in the case of Richardson’s Clarissa, or reborn through their own daughters, as with Charlotte Temple in Susanna Rowson’s novel of the same name.

As a lost daughter come back to and embraced anew by her white family—both through her death and through the life of her own daughter, Sydney, so like her—Nicole Brown Simpson fits into each of the last two categories of return. But some have suggested another classification for her entirely, one not of return but of returns; for, as a daughter whose marriage not only elevated her own social and economic standing but that of her family as well, Nicole Brown Simpson and the seventeen years of abuse she endured have already brought the Browns considerable dividends. The hard, mean fact is that, given the pending multimillion-dollar wrongful death suit her family has filed against O.J. Simpson, she may be worth even more in death than she was in life.

Occasionally, where class, success, and social position seem almost to trump race, the white daughter who marries the black other can be returned to her family by virtue of the marriage itself—by having married up, if not entirely well. This phenomenon might be called the Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner Syndrome, after the 1967 Stanley Kramer film, starring Sidney Poitier as a thirty-seven-year-old black research physician taken home to meet the parents (Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy) of his twenty-three-year-old white fiancée (Katharine Houghton). The parents, a well-to-do liberal couple, both of whom work, are not thrilled at the prospect of a black son-in-law. (Nor are his parents happy with their son’s choice of a white wife.) But Poitier as the dashing, distinguished doctor is so perfect—so well-mannered, well-educated, and well-professioned—that he transcends both his black skin and his black working-class background (his father’s a mailman). Awestruck by the doctor’s professional credentials and personal charm, Tracy’s character asks his wife: “How do you suppose a colored mailman produced a son with all the qualities he has?” In other words: how did a black man produce a “white” son? After considerable hand-wringing and soul-searching, mother and father of the bride decide to tolerate their
Although such questions might be asked of the Simpson family portrait, Williams actually raised these issues in the context of reading the case of surrogate mother Mary Beth Whitehead, whom the court decided was contractually obligated to surrender her daughter Sara, the so-called Baby M., to William Stern, the man whose child Whitehead had contracted to bear. The judge’s decision in the custody suit turned in part on “the supposition that it is natural for people to want children ‘like’ themselves.” But exactly what constitutes likeness, Williams asks. What if instead of producing a visibly white child, Whitehead had given birth to a “recessively and visibly black” one? “Would the sperm of Stern have been so powerful as to make this child ‘his,’” Williams asks, and, moreover, what constitutes “the collective understanding of ‘unlikeness’?”

Historically, in the United States, race has been an important constitutive factor, both in the reproduction of family likeness and in the construction of national identity. The outward and visible unlikeness of blacks and Asians in particular was used to deny citizenship and the rights and privileges thereof. Nancy Armstrong argues that, although the dominant model of Anglo-American nationalism depends on white colonists and their descendants marrying their own kind, another permits the white daughter to “go native”—to mate with the Indian—and reproduce the English household with other than entirely white players.27 “No matter who makes up this household or where it comes from, it can incorporate, imitate, reenact, parody, or otherwise replicate whatever appears to be most English [read white] about the English family. Such a household,” Armstrong concludes, “produces a family peculiar to the settler colonies.”28

It seems to me, however, that such families have been most readily tolerated where the ethnic and racial mixing has occurred between whites and those who look least different, that is, those who come closest to looking like the white founding fathers and mothers. I’m not convinced that such acceptance has ever been grandly or largely offered the Anglo-African family. There has been little or no room in the national romance for white women who “go African,” who marry black like Nicole Brown, and reproduce a mulatto household.

So unspeakable is such coupling in the Anglo-American scenario that the English language has no name of its own for it and its offspring. The terms that have historically been used to describe the products of black-white miscegenation—mulatto, quadroon, octoroon—are borrowed from Spanish and French. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word mulatto, for instance, as “a person having one White and one Black parent; a person of mixed White and Black parentage”; it traces the term’s origins to the Spanish and Portuguese word mulato, meaning “young mule.”

Now, I wouldn’t presume to challenge the OED, but having been well trained by my profesora de español, Señorita Lenore Padula, I know that young mule in Spanish is muleta, not mulato. Cassell’s Spanish Dictionary confirms my understanding, defining muleta as “young he-mule” and mulato as “tawny colored”; however, el diccionario de la lengua española traces the etymology of mulato to the Arabic muwallad, meaning “someone of mixed ancestry.” The Arabic influence makes sense, given that the Moors were in Spain from 711 to 1492. The Arabic root for muwallad appears to be walada, “to be born,” or tawallad, “to give birth.” Other related forms of the word, according to the Arab-English Dictionary of the Literary Language, include mawled, “a time of birth”; milad, “day of birth, pertaining to the birth of Christ”; and, especially, mawaled, “special birth.”

It’s interesting that in all of the Spanish dictionaries I consulted, the origins of the word mulato relate to color and to mixed or otherwise “special” or unusual birth, while all of the English
27, 1994) and *Star* (July 12, 1994) magazines. Taken in 1986, the photograph to which I refer depicts a seemingly naked (at least from the waist up) O.J. and Nicole embracing each other and cradling their infant daughter Sydney between them. At any other moment, this portrait of nude black and white parents and brown child would invite a biological or sociological reading: its wide circulation after the murder of the white wife/mother, however, invites an hysterical one—all the more so because of the way the magazines presented the pictures. *Star* included an inflammatory caption: “How this dream family portrait turned into a murderous nightmare.” Using large, blood-red type, *People* titled its cover “LOVE AND DEATH,” adding in only slightly smaller black letters, “The Nicole Simpson Murders: The shocking story of the volatile relationship between O.J. and his beautiful ex-wife.” For the brain-dead who might have missed the point, *People* inserted alongside the family portrait a snapshot of Nicole’s body being removed from the scene “where she and Ronald Goldman were slain.”

In its naked, sensual display of interracial sex and the biracial family, the Simpson family portrait is an unAmerican Gothic, whose black presence and white absence simultaneously speak the nation’s secret sins, great hopes, and worst fears. I must admit, however, that my reading of this photograph is impacted by my inability to separate it entirely from another image that seems to me to repeat it: a two-paged Benetton ad of a white child and a black child embracing each other in almost exactly the same way as the Simpsons.

The white child is blond, blue-eyed, and rosy-cheeked, with Shirley Temple curls and a cherubic glow that is in part the effect of lighting. The black child, presumably a boy, is dark-skinned and dark-eyed, with kinky short black hair combed to resemble two horns. Like the Simpsons, the boy and girl in this photograph are—at least as far as we see—naked, but because they are children, their bare shoulders don’t bespeak sexual intercourse and miscegenation as the Simpson family photo does. Yet, it is exactly their youthful innocence that presents itself as a false clue. As the Simpson photo becomes more than ever a cautionary tale in light of the white wife’s murder and the black husband’s presumed guilt, so too does the overdetermined angelic white innocence and demonic black guilt of the embracing children. The spectator reads the danger of their profound *unlikeness* in ways that their youthful innocence belies.

American consumers have bought (although not entirely without complaint) another widely published two-page Benetton ad—this one depicting a white baby nursing at black breasts. We see only the black breasts and the white baby, not the black woman, and, because the racial signifiers are, as Henry Giroux says, “so overdetermined,”26 we know that the unseen woman behind the breasts is irrelevant beyond her wet-nurse function. If we follow what I think is the logic of Benetton’s United Colors advertising campaign, an image like this one is supposed to disrupt precisely because it doesn’t disrupt, because it is taken for natural. The truly disruptive or shocking image would be that of a black child suckling the breast of a white woman. As the legal theorist Patricia Williams has asked:

Is there not something unseemly, in our society, about the spectacle of a white woman mothering a black child? A white woman giving totally to a black child; a black child totally and demandingly dependent for everything, sustenance itself, from a white woman. The image of a white woman suckling a black child; the image of a black child sucking for its life from the bosom of a white woman.26
the Simpson circle have been quoted as saying, "She had an alcohol problem. She'd get drunk and say and do things you normally wouldn't do." Even the vanity plate on her white Ferrari—L84AD8 (late for a date)—was evidence against her.

But of course the most damning "truths" about Nicole are those told by her best friend, Faye Resnick, in her bestselling instabook *Nicole Brown Simpson: The Private Diary of a Life Interrupted* (1994). In what I think is supposed to be an authenticating commentary, novelist Dominick Dunne, who covered the Simpson trial for *Vanity Fair*, says of Resnick's first book:

Sure it was dirty. Sure I could have done without the blow-job episode, where the guy wakes up from his sleep and says "Thanks" to Nicole. But the book had a sense of truth to it, even honor, in a Brentwoodian sort of way. She portrayed expertly the telling moments of control, belittlement, and cruelty in the post-marital relationship of Nicole and O.J. Simpson.

What qualifies Dunne to judge the "truth" of Resnick's storytelling? I'm not sure, but he's hardly alone in treating the author like the oracle of Brentwood and her potboiler like the gospel. Confiming every stereotype about black male brutality, sexual prowess, penis size, and animal appetites, Resnick's book blackened O.J., to be sure, but it also darkened Nicole along with him. Purporting to speak for Nicole through her private thoughts and confidences, the book told white fathers what they most fear and least want to hear about their daughters:

Nicole was ruined by O.J. because she would never be able to be with a white man, ever... The truth was that the two men who had truly satisfied her in bed were O.J.

Simpson and Marcus Allen. Because of them, Nicole was becoming convinced that only a black man could really satisfy her.

It was an inside joke that O.J. would never lose Nicole because she would never find another man who could give her the quantity and quality she was used to.

In case we missed the size of the point, Resnick went on to share Nicole's confidence that "almost every white man she'd been with didn't satisfy her, didn't measure up." Hence her irresistible attraction to and insatiable appetite for the black football star Marcus Allen, whose penis Resnick claims Nicole once likened to a large piece of driftwood.

Like Mapplethorpe's photographs, Faye Resnick's exposé, which might well have been titled *She Had to Have It*, focused on the black male penis ("O.J. was "one of the fastest cocks in town") and Nicole's fondness for it. Explicit details about her bedroom raiding and bawhopping painted a portrait of a party girl you wouldn't necessarily want next door—unless perhaps you were the black male neighbor awakened in the middle of the night by her, shall we say, lip service. The defense implied it, but Resnick's portrait proved it: no innocent damsel to be championed, Nicole Brown Simpson was a "player" (Resnick's word) whose lifestyle invited her murder. If you lie down with dogs, you might not wake up.

**Brown Like Me**

But of all the images of the Sensuous Simpsons, the most haunting may be a certain family portrait, versions of which have made several appearances, including on the covers of *People* (June
informed you about the chapter’s “No O.J. Project,” including detailed information about the June 12 candlelight vigil, the chapter’s “No O.J.” Mother’s Day project, and its campaign against the domestic violence for which Simpson is the symbol.) Yet Nicole Simpson herself is lost, disappeared, often absent in her own story.

She is absent, for example, from the magazine cover that O.J. Simpson’s darkened mug shot made infamous: the June 27, 1994, issue of Time, whose caption announced “An American Tragedy.” Simpson’s altered image dominates the page, suggesting that “the bloody odyssey of O.J. Simpson,” rather than the murders of Nicole Brown and Ronald Goldman, is the real American tragedy. Noting the victims’ absence on Time’s “American Tragedy” cover, Wendy Kozol insists that we must ask not only for whom is this a tragedy but also “why is this specifically an ‘American’ tragedy? What is the linkage between the personal and national in this murder? And why is race an integral factor in this story of domesticity gone awry?”\(^{20}\) She answers her own questions by suggesting that the murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman upset the very domestic ideals central to the American family romance.

I want to push Kozol’s reading a little harder. The fact that images of Nicole Simpson and Ronald Goldman are missing from the cover, and the coverage more generally suggests just how much the racial drama of a black man of white means is the actual American tragedy, the real drama. Nicole Brown’s function, however essential to the steamy, seamy plot, is, I will say again, primarily symbolic. Time followed up its “American Tragedy” issue with an eight-page cover story on domestic abuse, published the next week. Nicole Brown Simpson was neither on the cover nor much in the story. Not to be outdone, Newsweek also had a cover story on domestic violence in its July 4 issue.

Nicole Simpson was pictured on the cover, but, again, the story inside was not about her; she in fact merited only a paragraph in an eight-page article. Her absence, if not erasure, may be explained by the extent to which her “naughty Nicole” image upsets the “Birth of a Nation” narrative in which innocent white women throw themselves off cliffs to spare themselves and the nation the stain of African blood.

Far from jumping off cliffs to escape black men, Nicole Brown Simpson reportedly jumped into bed with several of them, and that was her undoing as a white daughter. If we didn’t know it from her sexual liaisons with black men (O.J., Marcus Allen), the endless tabloid photos of her in bikinis, short, tight, black dresses, halter tops, and skimpy cutoffs tell the tale: they incite us to conclude that the lady was a tramp. What other kind of white woman would so willingly receive the polluting semen of black men? A cover photo in the Enquirer of Nicole in a close encounter with two white men, one of whom has his hands on her breasts, even managed in some circles to divert sympathy from her as the murdered wife to O.J. as the cuckolded husband.\(^{21}\) Such trashy photos and the news that Simpson caught her fellating one of her lovers on the living room couch, while the children slept upstairs, were enough to win O.J. sympathetic nods from the likes of Rush Limbaugh.

Family members like Denise Brown and friends like Candace Garvey were anxious to tell the world that Nicole was a devoted mother who cared for her children herself rather than employing a nanny. But other, mostly anonymous friends and associates, were equally eager to tell the tabloids and the talk shows and the TV cameras that the second Mrs. Simpson was a party girl, who drank too much, danced too late, and dated too often. Nicole “was no young innocent”; she “knew what buttons to push”; “she wasn’t little Miss Suzy Homemaker,” members of
the white captivity narrative, though in their texts “captivity” refers to a variety of social and psychic forms of confinement as well as to the physical bondage of chattel slavery. How, for example, is Harriet Jacobs’s (Linda Brent’s) story like Mary Rowlandson’s? What is the nature of Janie’s confinement in Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God or Pecola’s captivity in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye? Is Alice Walker’s Celie in The Color Purple a modern version of Samuel Richardson’s title character in Pamela?

If we ask these kinds of questions, we might begin to see a novel like Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black (1859) as both a captivity narrative and a quintessentially American text. Our Nig tells the autobiographical tale of Frado (Frado), a mulatto girl who is abandoned by her white mother and left to live and labor as a virtual slave in the New England household of a white mistress with an unlimited capacity for cruelty. But to tap into the Mandingo Syndrome and the meta-narrative of domesticity, race, sex, and nation that underpin the text, we have to look not only at the captivity of Frado, “Our Nig,” the thrown-away mulatto daughter, but also at the blackening of her white mother, Mag Smith, whose poverty and general lack of white male protection already placed her in a vexed relation to the national romance, but whose marriage to a black man of better means than she pulled her “another step down the ladder of infamy.”

For Jim, the African Mag married in desperation, the white woman is a prize—the original trophy bride, what the novel describes as “his treasure—a white wife.” In the national narrative—and Our Nig is a national allegory—Mag, the white wife, is completely lost once she marries and has children by a black man. She ceases to be a white daughter of potential service to the nation and becomes instead black like the man she sleeps with. In Wilson’s words: “She was now expelled from companionship with white people; this last step—her union with a black man—was the climax of repulsion.”

What a courageous move for Harriet Wilson: to write the unutterable but no less present American narrative of interracial coupling between black man and white woman, to speak the white daughter’s black desire. I want to be careful not to overstate the case, however. Mag doesn’t so much desire the African Jim sexually as need him economically. But in presenting the union of a black man and a white woman as chiefly an economic arrangement, Wilson joins white women writers such as Jane Austen in exposing holy matrimony as an affair of the pocketbook as well as the heart, at the same time that she also complicates and blackens the category of desire. Under the cover of convenience, she implicitly makes explicit the interracial sex act whose white female desire the national narrative (not to mention the nineteenth-century woman’s narrative) must cover over.18

To see the power and perseverance of this covert narrative—the modern “climax of repulsion”—we have only to return to the psychosexual drama of the Simpsons that absorbed the nation for two years: to what the feminist theorist Wendy Kozol has described as a racially charged “story of domesticity gone awry.” I want to suggest that like Harriet Wilson’s Mag Smith, Nicole Brown is both the white trophy wife and the disgraced lost daughter blackened by her marriage to and having brown babies with a black man. Rather than doing what the true white woman does in the face of the sexually threatening man of color—die—she willingly submitted to copulation and miscegenation. She slept with the enemy and populated the nation with his mulatto babies. Her murder has indeed been taken up by some feminists as a cause célèbre. (If you called the L.A. chapter of NOW during the first half of 1996, a recording
rain.” The athletic black body is an alien land, an exotic continent to be claimed and tamed by the camera in endless low-angle shots that chart the subject's nether regions.

It's also interesting to note how professional sports repeats the language, though not the economic relations, of slavery: owners, players—sometimes called properties—buying, selling, trading. The playing field is one place—perhaps the only place—where men of different races can openly grab and fondle each other, while hundreds, thousands, even millions watch. Law enforcement represents a possible third site for the exercising of latent desires for the other: the black male body under arrest, frisked, patted down, probed, cuffed, spread, and ordered to "assume the position," which, after all, is the stance of anal intercourse. Placed under a certain kind of scrutiny, then, the most manly acts, acts, and attitudes may well be exposed as something else entirely. The king is dead; long live the queen.

The Brentwoodian Captivity of Nicole Brown

In order to situate the Mandingo Syndrome and my larger claims about the blackness of blackness within the metanarratives of domesticity, race, sex, and nation of which they are a part, I want to turn for a moment to one of the earliest articulations of American identity: the captivity narrative. Classic Anglo-American captivity narratives, such as Mary Rowlandson's 1682 autobiographical tale, tell the story of the white woman's abduction by and confinement among Indians and document what Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse describe as the lost daughter's "single-minded desire to return home," unsullied by native hands (or other parts of the male anatomy). According to Armstrong and Tennenhouse, the captivity narrative "described an experience that people of 'the middling sort' in England could not have imagined were it not for the colonial venture; it asked its readers to imagine being English in America.” I would add that in addition to advancing Englishness, such narratives also constructed whiteness: that is, they figured national identity as white, where what the Anglo- or Euro-American woman does is not just stand by her man in building the new nation but lie under him, bear his children, carry on his culture, and otherwise do her domestic duty. And the white woman's proper domestic duty is to preserve and reproduce the white household, or die trying.

This historical civilizing mission is well documented in fiction and film—westerns, for example—where just as the restless natives are about to attack, the frontiersman and his woman exchange a meaningful look as he hands her a gun. The audience understands what she is supposed to do: if all is lost, she is to shoot herself rather than "allow" herself to be captured and raped by Indians, even though we know that rape was not a part of native cultures. What the true woman/white daughter does under siege, then, as Nancy Armstrong has suggested, is die. It's the Anglo-American way: the custom of "a culture that abhors a mixture" and "prefers a dead daughter to an ethnically impure one.”

The "native" daughter—that is, the red daughter or the black daughter—by contrast, lives, survives her sexual assault, and in so surviving loses any possibility of achieving the national, domestic identity that her colored skin has already removed her from anyway. This is the theme that numerous black women writers take up in the nineteenth century and in the twentieth as well. Not only do these writers appropriate and combine the forms of the sentimental novel and the slave narrative, as many critics have argued, they also take back and blacken
erotic fetishizing of the black male body, especially the penis. I mean by Mapplethorpsm something more than mere homo-eroticism, however. I mean the term to identify an appetite that doesn’t start or stop with simply gazing, but that acts out its desire in passionate, even violent deferral. White men’s sexual desire for and exploitation of black women is historically manifest; their erotic desire for black men, however, is equally well covered up—so much so, in fact, that it most often masquerades as both hyperheterosexuality and rabid racism. What I am suggesting, then, is that not only does homophobia mask homophilia, as many have long maintained, but Negrophobia masks Negrophilia in much the same way. It is its implied liter- alness that has made the term “nigger-lover” such fighting words among white men.

The multiple repressions and displacements involved in both Mandingoism and Mapplethorpsm are, of course, of Freudian proportions, but they also point out just how self-absorbed Freud really was. His phallicentric theory of female penis envy rises from a displacement only a man could make. Only a man could look at his own penis and assume that a woman would want to own it, wear it, have it. Only a white man could look at a black man’s penis and assume that his white woman would want to have it. “Projecting his own desires onto the Negro,” Fanon wrote, “the white man behaves as if the Negro really had them.” This displacement represents the ultimate intention “phalussy”: white men project their own latent desire for the black male penis onto white women and punish black men for a desire that is finely their own: to fuck a black man, to fuck like a black man, to fuck white women with a black penis. The necessarily absolute repression of such desires may explain why the racism of someone like Mark Fuhrman particu- larizes itself in an acute animus against interracial—that is, black male-white female—coupling. (White male-black female couplings are either unremarked upon or sanctioned. Part of Fuhrman’s defense against charges of racism was that he once dated a black woman.) Such racial hatred veils a triply transgressive desire that crosses the boundaries of gender, race, and sexu- ality. In a Lacanian analysis, the tyranny born of the white man’s unrequited desire for the black phallus might be known as the Out-Law of the Father.

I don’t know for certain whether Mapplethorpsm has its roots in slavery or the other way around. But it’s no accident that both male and female slaves were often exhibited and sold in the nude, their naked bodies fondled, groped, and gazed upon by white men in the marketplace and on the plantation. Anyone who thinks that all of this nudity, gaping, and groping was just a matter of the master’s dispassionately assessing the reproductive organs of his property may be interested in a certain bridge for sale in Connecticut. White homophilia can only countenance itself by feminizing the black male it desires. Thus the domi- nant/submissive, master/slave power relation of the peculiar institution was the perfect locus for playing out forbidden racial and sexual fantasies.

The sports arena, often dominated by beautifully athletic black male bodies, remains another. The 1996 Summer Olympics were blacker than ever; they were also nuder than ever in modern times, with athletes posing naked for a photo essay in the July issue of Life entitled “Naked Power, Amazing Grace.” Most of the athletes displayed in the article, like the majority of the ath- letes in the Games, were black, giving an interesting import to the journalist’s observation that “the Olympic body is another country, its beauty as exotic and varied as that of any distant ter-
evidently so potent that one drop of black semen can turn a white woman brown and a white man green with envy. This is the real meaning behind the “one-drop” rule: the law of “hypodescent,” which historically has defined anyone with a percentage of “African blood” as black. It’s not so-called black blood that is the issue, however; it’s black semen. And the operative “psychosis” isn’t the Othello Syndrome but what I am calling here the “Mandingo Syndrome”: white women’s penchant for and willing submission to black men and the national anxiety that even the possibility of such consensual coupling has traditionally evoked. As the media theorist John Fiske writes:

America has a long tradition of using the beauty and vulnerability of the white woman as a metaphor for its social order. The nonwhite male out of sexual and social control, then, individualizes and sexualizes the threat of the other race, now primarily the Black race, though in the nineteenth century the figure of the male American Indian threatening the white female captive functioned identically. Sergeant Stacey Koon offered as justification for beating Rodney King the fear that King posed a “Mandingo” threat to a white policewoman.

I doubt that Stacey Koon knew what he was actually implying when he invoked the Mandingo image, for if we trace his allusion to its literary and cinematic roots, it would be the white policewoman who posed a sexual threat to Rodney King, not the other way around. In Mandingo, both the trashy 1975 film and the steamy Kyle Onstott novel on which it is based, it’s not the loyal African slave (played badly by boxer Ken Norton) who poses a sexual threat to the young white mistress (Susan George); it’s the already ruined white plantation lady whose reckless sex-

ual desire threatens the life of her husband’s favorite slave, Mede—a tall, dark, handsome Mandingo she forces to “pleasure” her, both to satisfy her own lust and to punish her husband for preferring his black concubine to his white wife. Her threat to cry rape if Mede refuses to have her way with her places the moronically loyal slave in a dilemma of biblical proportions: he must serve two masters, one of whom is determined to make him her mistress.

Ultimately Mede pays a high price for his loyalty. (So does she, for that matter.) When the white wife gives birth to a baby too dark to be her husband’s, the infant is made to bleed to death, and the African is shot, pushed into a vat of boiling water, and then run through with a pitchfork. The nigger-loving wife is merely given the same toxic toddy that’s used to kill slaves too old or infirm to work, but the Mandingo’s crimes—sleeping with a white woman and knocking her up—are so horrible that the cuckolded husband has to kill him three times over.

It’s important to understand that in Mandingo, much as in the syndrome I’ve given its name, it’s the white woman who aggressively pursues (or willingly submits to) the reluctant black man. Too terrible to contemplate, the Mandingo Syndrome has never been clinically diagnosed—except by me. (I’m not a doctor, but I play one in this essay.) Its dread and unspeakability lie precisely in its consensual nature: the fact that Mandingo-Syndrome sex isn’t a matter of the black male’s uncontrollable lust for and rape of white women, but of the white female’s sexual desire for the black man.

But there’s another aspect to the syndrome that is, if anything, even more unspeakable: white male desire for the black male body, or what I have decided to call “Mapplethorpsm,” in honor of the white gay photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, whose studies of nude black men are legendary for their homo-
The basic proprietary quality of marriage—what some have called its domestic slavery—is a deep structure that women have been challenging for centuries. It has found one of its most finely honed challenges in women's literature, including the work of black women writers. Zora Neale Hurston's fiction, for instance, can be read collectively as an extended critique of male dominance—a critique that I would argue comes to its fullest fruition not in Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), for which she is best known, but in her last and perhaps least read novel, Seraph on the Suwanee (1948), where Jim Meserve, the white male protagonist says to Arvay Henson, his "useless ... play-pretty" fiancée: "Women folks don't have no mind to make up nohow. They wasn't made for that. Lady folks were just made to laugh and act loving and kind and have a good man to do for them all he's able, and have him as many boy-children as he figgers he'd like to have, and make him so happy that he's willing to work and fetch in every dad-blamed thing his wife thinks she would like to have." 

For Jim Meserve, as for his real-life counterparts, the woman's physical beauty is of fundamental, commercial importance—the commodity she brings to the marriage like a dowry. Within the confines of middle- and upper-class marriages in particular, the husband's masculinity, economic status, and sexual prowess are confirmed by the ornamental display of his wife's beauty and by his perhaps less conspicuous but no less potent consumption of her sexual goods, her "labors of love," as it were—the outward and visible sign of which is the production of offspring, whom he also owns. Abstract ownership of female desire and real economic power over the nonlaboring wife entitle the husband to unlimited access to his mate, whose beautiful body excites or produces desire.

Although courts now acknowledge the possibility of marital rape, historically the wife's resistance or lack of desire has not been viewed as an impediment to her husband's "rightful" claims to the fruit not only of his labor but of hers as well. This has been the white man's way. But as black women have long noted, it's a model of patriarchal performance from which black men are by no means exempt. Sojourner Truth initially opposed the ratification of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments precisely because they made no mention of the rights of black women. "If colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs," she argued, "the colored men will be masters over women, and it will be just as bad as it was before." 

In Their Eyes Were Watching God, Janie Crawford, Hurston's most famous character, is initially attracted to Joe Starks, the man who would be mayor, because of his "like a white man" ways—his business sense and his willingness to work for her comfort in contrast to her first husband's plans to put her to work behind a plow. But as Janie is silenced and put on display merely as another of her husband's material possessions, she learns what the critic Sally Ferguson says white women have known for some time: "men who make women objects of their labor tend to treat them as things bought and owned." 

If O.J. Simpson treated his wife like property, it might be read as another way in which he functioned like a white man. It has been easier, however, to claim his behavior as part of a black syndrome rather than a patriarchal one—as a "black thing," rather than a "man thing." Whatever else black men may be guilty of, such interpretations make their original sin blackness itself.

The Mandingo Syndrome

This last observation leads me back to what I want to say about the browning of Nicole Simpson. The blackness of black men is
been provoked by Nicole’s rejection of him as a Black man. Perhaps she, as a so-called ideal California blonde, symbolized the American dream for O.J. and losing her revealed that he could never be totally accepted into the White world he coveted.”

Published four months before the case even went to trial—before the jury was empaneled, in fact—these if/perhaps/maybe speculations seem particularly irresponsible, coming as they do from a respected black psychiatrist with a public presence (he was a consultant to the Cosby Show) and a loyal following in Ebony, for which he frequently writes. Even with the caveat that he doesn’t know what motivated O.J., Dr. Poussaint’s conjectures are as dangerous as Dr. West’s. In fact, woven throughout Poussaint’s commentary are threads of the Othello Syndrome. From news reports, the doctor determined that Simpson “felt he owned Nicole like a piece of chattel” and, “in a bizarre twist,” may have seen his white wife “as a rebellious slave who needed to be executed.”

Worse still than this explanation that presumes guilt is the fact that Poussaint’s psychoanalysis moves from the specific case of O.J. Simpson to the general psychic condition of all black men. “The Simpson case should be a reminder of the complexity of Black males’ relationships with the White world and the emotional toll it takes,” he opined, adding that the prevalence of crime and violence among black men is evidence of “their psychological vulnerability.”

It is amazing to me—and may be a sign of the dementia that attacks all of us who touch this case—that so many attempts to explain Simpson’s assumed crime, even those by well-intentioned, concerned citizens and expert witnesses, such as Alvin Poussaint, manage to simultaneously racialize the crime and criminalize and animalize all black men. Surely as a psychiatrist and as an educator Poussaint knows that the dominant/

submissive, master/slave domestic pattern remains the primary model of heterosexual (and perhaps even homosexual) coupling in the United States. Yet, if we follow the logic of his analysis, we must conclude that black men possess, dominate, beat, brutalize, and even murder their wives—especially their white wives—not because they are men functioning in a patriarchal society that condones and even submorns such behavior, but because they are black.

I’m one of those people who believes that race is always an issue in the United States, but I think that here a Marxist analysis of domestic economy under patriarchy might be more useful than a racial analysis of what has been figured as specifically or uniquely black male behavior. Historically, a major measure of a society’s advancement as a civilization has been the status and treatment of “its” women. This appraisal not only has defined social advancement in terms of the female body, it has also made the woman’s exemption from material production—that is, her leisure rather than her labor—the signifier of civic success and viable nationhood. Where men are civilized, women as wives, mothers, and daughters are the promoters, protectors, and preservers of high culture rather than the producers of material culture.

Within this patriarchal, capitalist framework, heterosexual coupling functions as a domain of male power in which labor or material culture (figured as male) has ultimate dominion over leisure or high culture (figured as female). The legitimate compensation for men’s labor is the conspicuous consumption of the surplus value of women’s leisure: her female sexuality. In other words, women’s indebtedness to the men who “own” them through wedlock isn’t limited to the concrete patriarchal possession of the female body but extends to the abstract ownership of what women produce in such relationships: desire.
black man as the signifier for all male violence, but she herself is a lost cause, a disappeared daughter, curiously written out of anything other than a metaphorical role in a national narrative that might well be called “The Rebirth of a Nation,” in dubious tribute to D.W. Griffith’s hugely successful 1915 film. In the film, as in The Clansman, the novel on which it is based, the need to protect white women from the sexual threat posed by lusty black bucks serves as the rationale for the rise of the Ku Klux Klan.

But Birth of a Nation isn’t the only drama that the Simpson saga has evoked; nor are its innocent southern belles the only specimens of sexually threatened white womanhood Nicole Brown recalls. As a white woman who married a black man, the second Mrs. Simpson serves a symbolic function in the white imagination roughly akin to that of Shakespeare’s Desdemona. It should come as no surprise, then, that some experts have labeled the psychodrama in which her dead body plays a starring role the “Othello Syndrome.”

A form of paranoid psychosis first identified and named by British psychiatrists in 1955, the Othello Syndrome is characterized by “intense jealousy of a spouse and delusions of infidelity, often leading to violence.” According to Dr. Louis J. West, race is a key component of the disorder. Six months into the trial, a cover story in Los Angeles magazine summarized West’s theory and applied it to O.J. Simpson: “Race discrimination leads to self-loathing in certain black men, causing them to believe that any white woman who accepts them is worthless. They project that autohatred onto their wives, experience irrational suspicion and lash out.” The article claimed, in fact, that Simpson fit the syndrome so perfectly that, “according to a well-placed source in the defense camp”—F. Lee Bailey, a longtime acquaintance of Dr. West—asked the psychiatrist to be an expert witness for the defense. Although he denied that he and Bailey ever discussed the case, West did offer a diagnosis: “If [Simpson’s] guilty, it’s quite likely this is a case of the Othello Syndrome,” he’s quoted as saying. “It’s hard to find a more accurate model ... O.J., like Othello, was seen to be a heroic figure, larger than life, rich and famous. He was older and more experienced than his wife. He was black; she was white.”

Without an M.D. behind my name, I guess I can’t just dismiss this kind of theorizing as armchair psychobabble, especially given the credentials of those making the Othello diagnosis: Dr. West is the former head of UCLA’s Neuropsychiatric Institute, and the novelist Jonathan Kellerman, who authored the Los Angeles magazine article about the syndrome, is himself a trained psychologist. But what is it about this case—except the respective races of the subjects, black man/white woman—that makes it acceptable for professionals and clinicians to publicly comment on the mental state of a “patient” they haven’t examined, interviewed, or studied? What is it about this case that lures men and women of conscience, decency, and intelligence into offering analyses and making judgments that their scholarly practice, if not their professional ethics, would otherwise forbid?

Although he acknowledged that his commentary was pure conjecture, Dr. Alvin Poussaint, a highly respected black professor of clinical psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, couldn’t resist the opportunity to offer his own long-distance diagnosis in the pages of Ebony. After speculating that, if Simpson committed the murders, he might have been mentally ill or temporarily insane, the doctor went on to suggest that, if not crazy in the legal sense, a jealous, spurned O.J. may simply have snapped, allegedly murdering the woman he could no longer possess out of an “if I can’t have her, nobody will” attitude. In a move that seems both to name the villain and blame the victim, Poussaint suggested that the abusive husband’s “final heinous act may have
new, of course. There was never a moment in the public production and consumption of the Simpson case when "O.J." as the media insist upon calling him familiarly, was innocent. From the first repeatedly displayed image of the not-yet-accused Simpson in handcuffs on June 13, 1994, to parting shots of the just-acquitted Simpson in mid-smile (or was it a smirk?) on October 3, 1995, the graphics and the grammar of trial coverage both assumed guilt and helped to produce it.

Elsewhere I have argued that not only was the presumption of guilt overdetermined by the news and entertainment media, it was also racially coded in predictable, deeply historical ways, as the press at once subtly and overtly linked Simpson's assumed crime to his color, to his gang past, to what black men to the ghetto born are destined to do by nature. In this essay, I want to focus not on the blackening of O.J. Simpson—of which Time's darkened mug-shot cover photo is probably the most infamous example—but on the browning of his white ex-wife, Nicole.

Like many who followed and commented on the trial, I have been known to speculate that had the murder victim been the black ex-wife instead of the white one, there would have been far less media attention and public fascination. Here, I want to advance a rather different theory. I want to argue the relative irrelevance of Nicole Simpson as a white woman. I want to suggest that although her marriage to a black man in possession of a great fortune elevated her social and economic standing, it also blackened her and robbed her of any claim to the cultural legitimacy of true white womanhood or to favorite-daughter status. The narrative that held its audience captive for more than two years is the fall of a black man who would be white—not the death of a white woman who did sleep black.

I came to this understanding of Nicole Simpson's relative irrelevance when I began to wonder why O.J. Simpson is still alive. If he is as guilty as we continue to assume he is, why isn't he dead? I understand why he isn't in prison: in a tragic but wholly predictable show of racial solidarity, twelve ignorant, mostly colored jurors let the brother go. But why isn't he dead? The blood of a white woman was spilled by a black man. Where are the avenging angels? Where are the angry white men of conscience? Why are Nicole's only male champions the Puerto Rican talk-show host Geraldo Rivera, who continues nightly to make Simpson's guilt his show's lead "news" story, and the black deputy district attorney, Christopher Darden, the self-proclaimed "lightning rod for the bigotry, insecurity, and misunderstanding of an entire nation," who has cast himself in the role of avenging lone ranger? Where is the Klan? the lynch mob? Historically, black men have been strung up, castrated, and burned alive because someone said they looked at, spoke to, or thought about a white woman. Yet here, there, and everywhere golfs the black man who bedded, beat up, and nearly beheaded a white woman and lived to deny it—at Oxford University, no less. Where is the irate father? Where is the hit man? I mean, as retribution goes, a civil suit is so civil.

I was genuinely baffled by this civility in the face of a white woman's murder until it came to me as I was preparing a lecture on captivity narratives that, like the captive colonial daughters I was reading about, Nicole Brown Simpson had ceased to be a white woman once she married a black man. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., was right, I thought: race is a trope. Her dead body may be worth millions in civil court, but Nicole Simpson had little surplus value in "real life," except perhaps her decorative female sexuality itself and the financial benefit her marriage to a black man of means and property brought—indeed, continues to bring—her white family. Her awful murder can be appropriated for a national campaign against domestic abuse that figures a bestial
dance, do battle, and die for the titillating pleasure of the populace. The Romans diverted themselves by throwing Christians to the lions and by watching gladiators, usually male slaves, fight to the death right before their eyes in the Coliseum. Today, we consider such human sacrifice barbaric. One could argue, however, that in airing dirty laundry and personal tragedy as public spectacle, the mass media—tabloids, TV talk shows, and even the more respectable press—play to the same coliseum mentality that thrilled at the sight of human slaughter. We have become a nation of voyeurs, who despite (or maybe because of) our advancement as a civilization, retain what the black psychiatrist Frantz Fanon described as “an irrational longing for unusual eras of sexual license, of orgiastic scenes, of unpunished rapes, of unrepressed incest.” And perhaps because the black male, as Fanon also explained, is instantly reducible to his genitalia and imagined transgressions, the black man for all seasons—*homo erectus*—has superseded baseball’s boys of summer as the one to be watched.

For some time now, our national avocation of scopophilia has been particularly well plied by supermarket tabloids (*Star, Globe,* and the *National Enquirer*) and by TV talk shows (*Jenny Jones, Jerry Springer, Richard Bey, Ricki Lake, Maury Povich, Montel Williams,* and especially *Geraldo*). Black men who do all manner of socially unacceptable things are the most frequent subjects of these shows. But never in the history of mass communication has there been a more voluptuously viewable male specimen than the black body of O.J. Simpson or a more highly speculated tragedy than what has come to be known as “the Simpson case”: the June 1994 murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman and the subsequent arrest, trial, and acquittal of O.J. Simpson. Simpson may have stalked his ex-wife and admittedly peered through the window as she entertained other lovers, but, with the help of the media, millions of us have had the opportunity to stalk him and to peek both at him and with him.

Part of what has made the man, the woman, and the case so delectable, so conspicuously consumable is the extent to which its details immediately draw our gaze below the belt. The December 1995 cover of *Spy* makes the focus of our collective attention graphically clear. Riffing the cover of the inaugural issue of *George,* John F. Kennedy, Jr.’s, glossy new political magazine, the *Spy* cover morphs O.J. Simpson’s likeness into the same colonial garb and General Washington stance that Cindy Crawford sports in *George.* The bare midriff and spread legs of Cindy Crawford are replaced with those of O.J. Simpson, simultaneously positioning the former All-American as an object of desire and a false patriot. The caption spread across his crotch declares “By George, He’s Guilty!” while a sidebar script promises “1,001 Reasons Why the O.J. Trial Is the Most Absurd Event in the History of America.” Inside, a second photo depicts the putative O.J.—still in colonial costume but with added black leather gloves—grinning broadly, grabbing his crotch à la Michael Jackson, and giving the country a gloved finger. Themselves a clever hoax, the photographs speak volumes about race, sex, desire, and transgression. O.J. Simpson, the greatest trickster of all times, stands founding-father erect among his multiple transgressions, thumbing his dick at the nation, if not the world—the black man who broke all the taboos and literally got away with murder.

The not-guilty verdict has long since come down in *The People of the State California v. Orenthal James Simpson,* but the jury remains out on the issue of Simpson’s innocence. Or it might be more accurate to say that, despite the not-guilty judgment, nearly all of the mainstream media and—if we believe the polls, reports, and postmortems—most people remain convinced of Simpson’s guilt. This national presumption of guilt is nothing
The Unbearable Darkness of Being: “Fresh” Thoughts on Race, Sex, and the Simpsons

Ann duCille

To understand why O.J. was so compulsively attracted to Nicole, you’d have to understand his mind-set. O.J. seemed to hate being black and, although he tried to conceal it, avoided any real connection with the black community. His marriage to Marguerite was in the days before he knew he could actually cross the line and, except for the color of his skin, seemingly become white. Marguerite was probably the last black woman [sic] O.J. would ever be with. Nicole was, in O.J.’s words, “angel white.”

—Faye Resnick, Nicole Brown Simpson

I don’t mean to diminish the horror of the crime . . . Everyone wants the murderer punished. But Nicole. Nicole. She embodies a little discussed wound in the heart of many African-Americans: the white wife.


I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.

—Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks

They stalk. They publicly humiliate. They murder. And afterward, they don’t feel very bad. Welcome to the Othello Syndrome.

—Les Angeles, July 1995

Ancient civilizations often entertained themselves at the expense of the weakest among them: slaves, male prisoners of war, and female captives cum concubines forced to