

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Birth of a Nation'Hood

Toni Morrison

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BY TONI MORRISON

Fiction

The Bluest Eye

Sula

Song of Solomon

Tar Baby

Beloved

Jazz

Non-Fiction

*Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power:
Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the
Construction of Social Reality*

*Playing in the Dark:
Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*

BY CLAUDIA BRODSKY LACOUR

*The Imposition of Form:
Studies in Narrative Representation and Knowledge*

*Lines of Thought:
Discourse, Architectonics, and the Origin of
Modern Philosophy*

BIRTH OF A NATION'HOOD

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

EDITED BY

Toni Morrison and Claudia Brodsky Lacour

INTRODUCTION BY

Toni Morrison



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Contents

The Official Story:
Dead Man Golfing
Introduction by Toni Morrison

The Greatest Story Ever Sold:
Marketing and the O.J. Simpson Trial
George Lipsitz

The O.J. Simpson Trial:
Who Was Improperly "Playing the Race Card"?
A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr.,
Aderson Bellegarde François, and Linda Y. Yueh

Dismissed or Banished?
A Testament to the Reasonableness of the Simpson Jury
Nikol G. Alexander and Drucilla Cornell

Color-blind Dreams and Racial Nightmares:
Reconfiguring Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw

Bigger and O.J.

Ishmael Reed

"Hertz, Don't It?"

*Becoming Colorless and Staying Black in the Crossover of
O.J. Simpson*

Leola Johnson and David Roediger

If the Genes Fit, How Do You Acquit?

O.J. and Science

Andrew Ross

American Kabuki

Patricia J. Williams

The Unbearable Darkness of Being:

"Fresh" Thoughts on Race, Sex, and the Simpsons

Ann duCille

Eye, the Jury

Armond White

The "Interest" of the Simpson Trial:

*Spectacle, National History, and the Notion of
Disinterested Judgment*

Claudia Brodsky Lacour

About the Contributors

The Official Story:

Dead Man Golfing

Introduction by Toni Morrison

We have been deceived. We thought he loved us. Now we know that everything we saw was false. Each purposeful gesture, the welcoming smile, the instant understanding of how we felt and what we needed. Even before we knew what was in our best interests, he seemed to anticipate and execute it right on cue. He gentled us toward our finer instincts; toward the medicine that would cure us; toward the rest we needed. He imitated our language in structure and content. And all with the most charming good nature—joy even. So obvious was his fidelity we had no doubt he would lay down his life for us. It seemed inherent, in his nature, so to speak. It was what he was born for.

It was not so. Not only did he not love us, he loathed and despised us. All the time he was planning to kill us. And

if he is let go, he will do it again; kill more of us. Why? Because he is an animal. Cunning, manipulative, subtle, but savage nevertheless. How could we have been so deceived? How could we have let our vigilance become so clouded? Was it the coast—dulcet, permissive, delusional? The weather—a long narcotic calm, enervating heat? The long journey to get to where we were? Or was it perhaps our need to be deceived? Desperate to be that effortlessly and deeply loved, had we fashioned and secured our own blindfolds?

Sitting in the courthouse at the trial watching Justice sway her scales; listening to sworn depositions; seeing the witnesses relive their horror, the survivors of the *San Dominick* could have pondered along those lines over the trial of the Senegalese man who, with a dagger and ferocious single-mindedness, took by murder control of a vessel in order to reverse his fortune, and who, in so doing, disrupted for a little while the routine business of the trade that bought and sold him. That trial took place in 1799 at the close of the eighteenth century, but an end-of-century population of watchers anywhere in the United States (or the world) has had similar thoughts concerning the case of Orenthal J. Simpson. Both are tales centering on the shock of deception; the sudden transformation of the unbelievable into belief.

Like the readers of Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno," contemporary "readers" of the Simpson case have been encouraged to move from a previous assessment of Mr. Simpson as an affable athlete/spokesperson to a judgment of him as a wild dog. He is clearly, according to mainstream wisdom, the latter. And the wild dog portrait layered over him contains a further incompatibility: cool, cunning, even intelligent malfeasance or raging, mindless, brutal insanity. The language developing around him portrays a thoughtful, meditating murderer capable of slick and icy-cold deliberations *and/or* a mindless, spontaneous killer—a kind

of lucky buffoon. That each cluster of adjectives cancels out the other is of no moment since contradiction, incoherence and emotional disorder “fit” when the subject is black. A single, unarmed black man on the ground surrounded by twelve rioting police can be seen as a major threat to the police. A beaten up, sexually assaulted black girl wakes up in a hospital and is “convicted” of raping and defiling herself. To ask why? how? is to put a rhetorical question—not a serious one worthy of serious response. Difficult explanations are folded into the general miasma of black incoherence.

In the Simpson case the prosecution put forward a motive (jealous rage) to explain Mr. Simpson’s alleged feral behavior, but with the accumulation of hard evidence they did not have to prove its credibility. They needed a coherent case, not a coherent defendant. “Senseless” is the term most often applied to crime (and criminals) anyway.

In Melville’s narrative, the clutch of the plot is the control the author exercises over the reader. An American captain boards a ship in disrepair with gifts of food and good intentions. What he sees is what he is socialized to see: docile if disorderly blacks; a frail, un-manly [read “un-American”] captain attended by a devoted Senegalese. The American captain spends the day on board the *San Dominick*, happily observing, inquiring, chatting and arranging relief for the distressed ship’s population. Any mild uneasiness he feels is quickly obliterated by his supreme confidence in his assessment of the order of things. He is unmindful of nefarious plots, hints of danger, until he is about to return to his own ship. At that point the Senegalese and all of the captives behave in such a manner that, at last, the American realizes that he has been the dupe of the black men, who are in fact in rebellion, and that not service but the murder of white people has been in operation all the while. The long deferment of this realization is understandable partly because of his trusting

nature but mostly because of his certainty that blacks were incapable of so planned, so intricate an undertaking. Melville, releasing and withholding, massaging and sabotaging, rationalizing and raising doubt, hiding and exposing, tells the story of an innocent white captain while simultaneously critiquing the racist foundations of that innocence.

Initially we are led to believe we are watching the behavior of a natural servant: adept, reassuring. Finally we learn ("in a flash" along with the American if we are not paying attention, earlier if we are) that all the while we were watching a traitor whose rage to kill is suppressed or set free at will. The Senegalese, "in whose rude face . . . like a shepherd's dog . . . sorrow and affection were equally blended," morphs from faithful dog to "snakishly writhing" murderer. Melville describes the American's epiphany: "Now with scales dropped from his eyes he saw the negroes, not in misrule, not in tumult, . . . but with mask torn away, flourishing hatchets and knives, in ferocious piratical revolt. Like delirious black dervishes . . ." In the morphing process the transition from one thing to another thing is not quicker than the eye, but, because of its speed and facility, the radical change appears inevitable. The new features appear to be already embedded in the original. The abrupt switch of the Senegalese from one kind of animal to another is easy: first because the modifying terms are limited to the non- or barely human, but most important because the reversal is played out with and on a black man. Illogic, contradiction, deception are understood to be fundamental characteristics of blacks and in judging them there need be no ground or reason for a contrary or more complicated view. For centuries the debate in human versus animal discourse has rested on blacks, thus relegating to them the essence of contradiction. Even when permitted conceptually to enter the kingdom of *Homo sapiens*, blacks have historically been viewed as either submissive children, violent ones, or both

at once. Very few African Americans of a certain generation can forget how the infamous eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* put it: “the mental condition of the negro is very similar to that of a child, normally good-natured and cheerful, but subject to sudden fits of emotion . . . capable of performing acts of singular atrocity . . . but often exhibiting in the capacity of servant a dog-like fidelity.” When the scholarly vocabulary of race is itself primitive the belief-language of popular culture is equally retarded. What might be illogical for a white is easily possible for a black who has never been required to make, assumed to make, or described as making “sense.” Therefore when race is at play the leap from one judgment (faithful dog) to its complete opposite (treacherous snake) is a trained reflex. From this reductive viewpoint blacks are seen to live outside “reason” in a world of phenomena in which motive or its absence is sheltered from debate. Or, as a William Faulkner character put it, “a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior.”

The gap between these two opposing and mutually cancelling perceptions forms an unbreachable chasm, and the need to know which label is correct ought to stimulate a search for reasonable explanations of such shape-shifting behavior. Insights into motivation, however, do not arrive when the lens is misty with racist assumptions. When the “delirious” irrational behavior of the blacks (How dare they try to go free? How evil. How stupid. Did they really think they could get away with it?) is given a human context we are able to discover another narrative. The other story Melville is (not) telling, yet is provoking us to discover for ourselves, is a complicated, powerful racial narrative in which the denial of racism is an ignorance of the most dangerous kind.

Readers of *True Crime* stories are accustomed to tales that require the perfect marriage of Jekyll and Hyde, of perfidy accompanied by superhuman gifts, of outrageous luck in the grip of a psychotic episode. They are fictions styled for popular taste and the satisfaction of discovering once again that, however clever, the villain is known even if not brought to justice. Yet it is precisely the absence of a rational analysis of behavior that leads one to the thought(less) process the American captain in "Benito Cereno" entertained. And it is the absence of a rational analysis of behavior that is so disturbing in the O.J. Simpson case. Given the propensity to ascribe irrationality to black behavior; given the planned versus unplanned, the subtle mind versus mindlessness that the alleged motive and the murderous actions had to embrace; given the difficulties the "time line" presented in believability; given the claims of race as a blinding force for the defendant and the jury, it would be interesting and possibly revealing to try to imagine an un-raced figure executing the murders. Not a race-transcending "crossover" into the white world; not a beloved, faithful hero capable of betraying whites and "falling" back into blackness, but a figure functioning within the bounds of credibility, but beyond the hysteria of race-inflected rationales.

I have wasted piles of paper trying to complete a believable narrative of such a figure. Using all of the admissible evidence, the time line put forward by the prosecution, the dotty explanations of things never found (weapon, blood-steeped clothes, etc.), the movements the killer is assumed to have made, I tried to construct a plot any reader would accept. I shaped it as fiction because fiction has its own internal laws of character logic where action and chance and psychology must work together to illuminate character. In other words, its standards of believability are higher than those in life. Even (especially) in the world of magic, of science fiction, of fantasy, a certain

level of coherence must be achieved. I tried it with a cunning, pre-meditating killer. I tried it as an explosive, spontaneous slaughter. I gave the character an intricate interior life; then a simpler one. I made him a drug user; a drug hater; a devoted father; an indifferent father; a violent husband; a patient husband . . . All my efforts collapsed into nonsense. Without the support of black irrationality, without the license provided by the convictions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the fictional case not only could not be made, it was silly.

The gargantuanism of the trial—its invention of wild dogs and angels, stick figures and clowns, its out-lawry—aroused immediate suspicion. Examining the weight the case has come to have, one is struck by how quickly guilt was the popular verdict. It may have been this early gigantism that made Mr. Simpson's guilt increasingly remote to some African Americans. Not because they knew or loved him (not even because he is black); nor because they suspected foul play. Early on it began to look like white mischief—the kind that surfaces when the opportunity to gaze voluptuously at a black body presents itself. The narrative of the entertainment media and their “breaking story” confederates was so powerfully insistent on guilt, so uninterested in any other scenario, it began to look like a media pogrom, a lynching with its iconography intact: a chase, a cuffing, a mob, name calling, a white female victim, and most of all the heat, the panting, the flared nostrils of a pack already eager to convict. For many, black and white, the passion they felt in the wake of the media onslaught was real, hinging as it did on violence and treachery. Mr. Simpson became the repository of fear. Every woman who had felt or witnessed the insensate brutality of men, who had tenderly touched her body where bruises, swellings and breaks limned the violence she had suffered, saw in him the lover she had (or should have) fled. Men who had let their guard down and actually loved this charming black man,

men who relished the comfort they felt in his company, or remembered the beauty of his runs—forever, it seemed—across fields long and wide must have felt they had loved the wrong kind of man. The media's instant and obvious preference for a guilty man created an early if not immediate public rage at having been deceived, of having profoundly flawed judgment. Mr. Simpson was accused of multiple murder. But he was guilty of personal treason.

A woman opens her door, steps out and has her head chopped off. A man performs a neighborly gesture and is cut to pieces. The media response to this obscenity was excessive, manipulative and generally obfuscatory. But the blood it smelled belonged not to the victims but to the prey—a potent sensation aroused by the site and sight of a fallen, treacherous, violent black body, and sustained by the historical association of such a body with violence as dread entertainment.

Within the fecund, self-perpetuating meta-narrative that has followed, not only has the gravitas of the crimes *in themselves* been lost and forsaken in favor of excitement and frivolity and profit, not only has the resolution of the trial been declared inoperative, the race-based nature of the narrative is reduced to a footnote, an aside, a secondary debate about whether race mattered in the case and if so, how deplorable. There seems to be a universal sorrow that these proceedings were distorted, sullied by race, that its intervention was false, even shrewd; that it should have been (and but for the isolate Mr. Fuhrman and an “uneducated” [read black] jury, could have been) race-free—confined wholly to non-race-inflected evidence, a disinterested legal process in which even to mention race as a major factor rips away the blindfold that Justice wears and forces her to make decisions based on visual bias. Such massive denial of the social (even the material) world, a denial which found its best and worst expression in the “race card” phrase, still has the capacity to astonish.

Although some of the media made an effort at restraint, flecks of saliva regularly soiled its reportage. The predictable pounce on every scrap, every leak, every mucus thread of lie or gossip associated with these proceedings revolted and mesmerized. And while media avarice and shamelessness were remarked upon and condemned by the avaricious and the shameless, and while the aggression of the journalists, photographers, commentators and hucksters was routinely deplored by the aggressors themselves, the reporters (collectors and distributors of the narrative) seemed somehow as helpless as fawns in the industry headlights with as much choice as bullets in the barrel of corporate media guns. If there were journalists eager to get other stories before the public, their disappointment at seeing their efforts repeatedly collapse must have been deeply painful. The marketing of every iota of the case had its own relentless power and there was no competition between dollars and disinterested analysis. Between dollars and a rival story. Dollars won.

Yet something more was going on; something more than a hot property of mayhem loaded with the thrill that a mixture of fame, sex, death, money and race produces. That something more was the construction of a national narrative, an official story. One of the most alarming aspects of the Simpson case is the shotgun wedding of the commodified, marketplace story and the official story.

A national narrative is born in and from chaos. Its purpose is to restore or imitate order and to minimize confusion about what is at stake and who will pay the price of dissension. Once, long ago, these stories developed slowly. They became over time national epics, written, sung, performed and archived in the culture as memory, ideology and art.

In some modern nations the construction of a national narrative is given over to a government agency and their uniformed enforcers. Government-owned or -controlled

press and electronic media carry whatever message is deemed necessary to the health or status quo of the body politic: that the dead are disappeared; that the bloody crisis is the fault of the oppressed; that the problems are alien; that justice is accessible to the deserving and all is well.

In other nations the manufacture of a public truth is harder—cautioned and delayed by a free press, an openly dissident citizenry, a reversible electorate. Normally, in a democratic climate, managed opinion proceeds at a moderate pace. Recently, however, democratic discourses are suborned by sudden, accelerated, sustained blasts of media messages—visual and in print—that rapidly enforce the narrative and truncate alternative opinion. The *raison d'être* of this narrative may vary, but its job is straightforward: the production of belief. In order to succeed it must monopolize the process of legitimacy. It need not “win” hands down; it need not persuade all parties. It needs only to control the presumptions and postulates of the discussion. For the very struggle for monopoly assures the name and reach of the debate. Spectacle is the best means by which an official story is formed and is a superior mechanism for guaranteeing its longevity. Spectacle offers signs, symbols and images that are more pervasive and persuasive than print and which can smoothly parody thought. The symbolic language that emanates from unforeseen events supplies media with the raw material from which a narrative emerges—already scripted, fully spectacularized and riveting in its gazeability. The fortuitousness of the event which contributes to the construction of a public verity can mislead us into thinking that the power of persuasion lies in the events themselves, when in fact it is the already understood and agreed-upon interpretation of the events that is sold and distributed as public truth. Underneath the commodified story (of violence, sex, race, etc.) is a cultural one. While it is the commercial value of the story as product that gave the Simpson case its

gigantism, it is the force of the cultural narrative that gives it its staying power. The spectacle is the narrative; the narrative is spectacularized and both monopolize appearance and social reality. Interested only in developing itself, the spectacle is immune to correction. Even and especially when panels are assembled to critique the process, the dialogue is confined to the terms the spectacle has set.

It was clear from the beginning that the real (as opposed to legal) possibility of Mr. Simpson's innocence was a story that had no legs and would not walk, let alone sell. Such a story would be a very sad (but not uncommon) one of a double murder by assailants unknown. A best-seller story requires the familiar ingredients of "a good read": fame, death, money, sex, villains and, of course, pace. (How often we heard commentators grumble about the boring days, the absence of "drama"; how often they cut away from explications of hard evidence because it was "droning," untheatrical; how often witnesses were judged as good based not on what they had to say, but on their "performance"—on how much the camera loved them.) In a culture dominated by images, Mr. Simpson is ideal—already an entertainer with a surfeit of the talents successful entertainers have. Also, he is black. When race culpability or pathology is added to this market brew, profits soar and the narrative coalesces quickly, takes on another form and moves from commodity to lore. In short, to an official story.

In the case of Mr. Simpson the theme of racial culpability rapidly became obvious.

First came the assertion/denial of race. A kind of doublespeak in which race is both flagged and erased. There was a quick made-for-television movie, shown before the trial. It featured a brutal, repellant, already-convicted-in-the-film's-eye version of Mr. Simpson. The plot ended just before the main character does the deed the viewer is programmed to accept as reality. The darkened photograph

on the cover of a national magazine—a decision to distort inconceivable with another alleged killer Timothy McVeigh—was an early harbinger of how this narrative was going to be scripted. Racial irrationality in all of its manifestations was soon imposed on all language, all visuals that referenced the story.

The official story obliterates any narrative that is counter to it. Nowhere is there a narrative of the literal innocence of Mr. Simpson. There are hints, equivocations, protective covers, but such a story is unimaginable. And unprofitable. “Reasonable doubts” of his guilt in court have become pervasive doubts of his innocence in the media. Just as the real lives of the Senegalese and his fellows are largely unimagined, imagining the consequences of a provably innocent Mr. Simpson is lethal. What if the punditocracy is wrong? What if the average person has been ambushed on the “information highway”? By now, the interests are so vested the official story is already in gear to protect itself. The rehabilitation of Detective Fuhrman will soon come. No book or interview time will be orchestrated for any but those convinced of or flirting with Mr. Simpson’s guilt.

The verdict, unenforceable by the spectacle, ran counter to its agenda and had to be instantly voided. The story of racial incompetence, which was the theme all along, was reinforced by the attack on the jury as incapable of making an intelligent decision, as being (unlike other juries) grossly uneducated. The presumption of innocence demanded of them is being called “ethnic bias,” a sort of lunatic, vaguely illegal “sympathy” rather than a prerequisite courts are bound to demand. Jury nullification becomes the topic of the day. The messengers of this view of the jury (journalists, commentators, even lawyers) see themselves as the American captain in Melville’s story saw himself: objective (or maybe too trusting in their dealings with blacks), non-

racist truth-seekers, innocent transcribers of a language they may truly believe is unraced.

Racial deviance was further detected in the polls. If these polls are correct twenty-five percent of the white population—more whites than the *total* number of African Americans in the nation—resist the official story and believe Mr. Simpson to be innocent. But, like the non-black jurors, they are erased, swallowed in the maw of the official narrative; blackened by default. Their resistance to the official story does not count. Nowhere was the jury described as “mixed.” In any case, both groups are dismissed: the blacks who believe Mr. Simpson innocent are exhibiting ethnic closure; the whites who agree are suffering from liberal paralysis.

Part of the resistance to a blanket condemnation of Mr. Simpson may be a wariness of a tale that emerged fully formed, one that needed so much volume, space, and required amazing sleight of hand and tongue in cheek. A story that kept telling us that we were asking for it like a new breakfast cereal we simply had to have. Force feeding us until we thought the taste was our own invention, our own hunger.

Excised from the official story is Mr. Simpson’s life among and within his black family. The official story has limited his biography to an insolent, womanizing golf life. Although it is promoted as a life of sexual prowess, drugs, alcohol, infidelity and violence—characteristics associated with black male misbehavior—it is lived in an all-white world. A separate world with walls so high even the running champion could not scale them. We are repeatedly told he “never did anything for his community,” meaning he was not a vocal, high-profile activist, although why Hertz (or Nike, Hanes, Pepsi, Midas or any company) would choose a black activist as its spokesperson is not made clear. In addition, the children he had with his second wife have been scripted as white children with no relationship with or

relation to their sisters and brother, aunts and grandmother, cousins or any of the Simpsons who are African Americans. His children by his first wife have provoked no media interest (lucky for them). This surgical excision functions under the guise of the enforced racelessness of the case—a guise that works if whites are the only ones who are unraced, neutral. Consider the “whitening” of his “black” children; the clear assumption that they are “safe” with the white side of their family. (Racelessness was a hope, a goal, Mr. Simpson, like many many others, believed had come to fruition in his own life and was possible in all our lives. But declarations that racism is irrelevant, over or confined to the past are premature fantasies.)

The effectiveness of the official story can be seen in several quarters. Many African Americans found themselves intimidated in the workplace, unwilling to voice even minor aspects of a counter-narrative lest they be accused of . . . what? showing race preference? It was easier to say nothing or agree.

Women were especially intimidated—because to question the story amounted to approving of or dismissing domestic violence.

Some people were persuaded of Mr. Simpson’s guilt by hunches; some by their own examinations of the examinations, but most had no choice in the wake of the official story. Even the huge problems associated with and discrediting the DNA-verified blood samples have been eliminated from common parlance. There is blood, after all. In the popular mind’s eye there is a scene like something out of *The Shining*. The house at Rockingham awash in blood. Great splashes in the foyer, up the stairs, cascading down the edge of a porcelain sink. Smears and globs of it everywhere: car, bedroom, socks. The 1.4 cc; the .07 of a drop; the flecks smaller than a child’s littlest fingernail grow in the imagination, flood and saturate exponentially to “all that blood. What about all that blood?” Or whatever the

amount, it is conclusively identified. The wide scientific controversy about the inclusionary properties of DNA, about the absolute, unequivocal necessity for flawless handling in order to get anything but worthless results, are read as the intellectual nit-picking of eggheads and therefore dismissed.

It is important to note that police methods can alter perception in the construction of a public truth. And one of the chief arguments in the Simpson case was whether police corruption was absurd or isolate. The story avoided as best it could whether corruption was endemic. It suggested that “massive” collusion would be necessary to pull off such a thing as tampering with evidence—and, since we are in the race-denying mode, what would be the motive? For middle and upper classes the police are the praetorian guard. They are the men in blue who riot for them, in place of them, who are implacable in their pursuit of the disorderly, the unhoused and the criminal, and who sometimes have to violate law to enforce it. For whites to consider police corruption as systemic rather than occasional is to place themselves in the untenable position of being shielded *by*, rather than protected from, chaos. The desire for protection from blacks at all costs encourages recklessness and the weapon of choice may be an arrow tipped with poison at both ends. Acknowledging the predatory nature of a psychotic cadre within the police force would necessitate the suppression of the ultimate social nightmare: one in which pockets of gestapo turn their “commitment to law and order” on to *them*; break into *their* houses without warrants; manipulate evidence against *them*, handcuff *them*. To open up that debate (as Alan Dershowitz tried to do) proved too toxic for the body politic and was expunged from the official story. It would take the whole department to effect such a conspiracy, wouldn’t it? “Conspiracy” is a term routinely used to end further analysis—a junk word applicable to boneheads hooked on JFK lore and alien landings. Laughable. Many African Americans agree. Evidence

placement and tampering doesn't need the conspiracy of a whole department. Such actions need only what they have: averted eyes and trained "testilying." The ordinary everyday experience of African Americans with the police is acknowledged, but since blacks and criminality are understood to go hand in hand, the outrage that should be the consequence of lawless police is muted. The New York Dirty Thirty (the 30th Precinct in Harlem that had preyed on the population for years) and the Philadelphia police (now testifying to years and years of planting evidence and brutality) are both scandals among many more that broke in the last three years, one during the year Mr. Simpson's attorneys put forth police misconduct as a factor in the collection of evidence.

Another issue the official story both exposed and blanketed is the matter of domestic abuse, by which is meant the physical harm males do to females—the reverse being rare, warranted, a joke or all three. There are patently excessive responses to these claims. A six-year-old boy was suspended for kissing a girl classmate on the cheek (prompting the question of whether expulsion would have been the consequence if she had kissed him). And there are undoubtedly some fabrications, abuse being the easiest and most effective claim in divorce settlements. But the more recent understandings of the law and the unassailable argument of men and women who are trying to get the general population and the courts to take this issue seriously lead toward one conclusion: a female must not be physically accosted by a male under any circumstances—excepting a demonstrable threat to his or somebody's life. That means whatever the reasons, there are no excuses. If she slaps him, he is not to retaliate in like manner. If she curses him, humiliates him or degrades him, he must not hit her. If she betrays him with another sexual partner, he must not hit her. If she abuses his children or burns his supper; wrecks his car or chops off his penis; whether she is

shooting up, messing up or cleaning up, he must not hit her. Why? Because he is stronger. The power relationship is unequal. (Except when she is armed.)

As for sexual assault, the thinking is similar. Rape is a criminal act whatever the circumstances. A woman riding the subway nude may be guilty of indecency, but she may not be raped. If she invites or even sells sex at 10:00 and refuses it at 10:45, the partner who disregards her refusal and forces sex is guilty of rape. If she is drunk, asleep, mentally defective, paralyzed or dead, she must not be raped. Why? Because sexual congress must be by consent. And males are stronger.

Trying to ensure that view has been difficult partly because the masculinist side of the debate (She was “asking” for it) still pervades, but also because in the negotiation of power, the physical strength and the allegedly uncontrollable sexual hunger of males are seen as unequalizing factors. The unpopular counterargument that concerns female responsibility in these matters of power is a subversive, almost treasonable one. Men must be retrained and socialized into non-aggressive, respectful behavior. But women, whose historically repressive social education has been ruthless and whose self-esteem has been systematically plundered, are understood to have no responsibility. As long as the wildly irresponsible claim of “It doesn’t matter what she does” is the answer to the helpless, hopeless idiocy of “She made me do it,” the complicity in power/abuse relationships will be unaddressed. It *does* matter what she does. And she can’t *make* you. But the dialogue that lies between those two positions is being buried under the detritus of the Simpson case. His “not really” blackness damns him because not only has he admitted and been convicted of spousal abuse, sexual brutality is part of the package when anyone “falls” back (or is returned) into the metaphorical ghetto. The people opposed to Mr. Simpson’s speaking engagements say that

his censure is necessary because he is a batterer. I should think that would confirm his place in the domestic abuse dialogue, assuming that, rather than monologue, is the agenda.

Within this official story are issues that can remake and unmake America: violence, class, race, capitalism, the control and distribution of information, equitable justice, constitutional guarantees, privacy, patriarchal power, to name a few. But the grammar of the meta-narrative has been forcibly limited to the question, Did he? The answer is available to some, certainly to Mr. Simpson, but any other answer is a hunch—educated or uninformed, but still a hunch. So the substitute question is, Do you think he did it? As a stripped-down, litmus test question it gets an answer: Yes, I do. No, I don't. But the question is not stripped down; it is loaded with additional meaning. It has become a ploy disguised as a disinterested query that really asks, Are "they" guilty or innocent? "They" meaning we blacks, those blacks, we men, those men. Are "they" getting away with murder?

As troubling as the development of a national story is, equally troubling are the subsequent efforts to secure it, render it unimpeachable—all the way from silencing the defendant to slandering any attempt to contest the official story.

The sustained determination to shut Mr. Simpson up, we are told, is the result of profound moral outrage, and his need for funds is felt to be an insult. (He is liable for child support and damages, but is permitted only to distribute money, not earn any.) He tries to market a self-justifying video; interviews on TV shows (except the black one) are cancelled. Mr. Simpson just "calls in" from distant unspecified places to comment on what the meta-narrative is deploying. To the spectacle he is a disembodied voice, a phantom, a social cadaver and a minor irritant in the official gaze, which cracks occasionally to expose him golfing. A

“dead” man arrogantly alive. This silencing is very interesting. If what Mr. Simpson has to say is so worthless, so self-serving, why not let him join the other worthless narrators loading the airwaves? If he is lying, what is there to fear but another televised distortion among a flood of them? The official story has apparently won the confidence of almost everybody. The censorship is not seen for what it is: a blatant attempt to control the narrative by dismissing or trivializing all counter-narratives—narratives that neither support the market story, which is still earning money, nor intervene in the agenda of the official story. The feelings and comments of anti-Simpson forces are solicited daily. In the civil case no phalanx of reporters seek friends or family of Mr. Simpson to note or report their response to the case. Only the plaintiffs get to speak and contribute to the shape of this narrative. There is no investigation of any alternative story, and if there is to be one, the burden of producing it is not on the district attorney or on investigative reporting, but on Mr. Simpson himself. So it is passing odd that he has the onus to reveal a story he is forbidden to tell.

Eeny, meeny miney moe
Catch a nigger by the toe
If he hollers
Let him go.

Let him go? If he hollers—if he speaks? Let him go? Then, by all means, he must not speak a word.

There will be no multi-million-dollar contracts signed for a neutral investigative book describing, advancing or even hinting strongly at any other narrative—a narrative more complicated than the one that echoes the spectacle’s rapture and mainstream’s desire. Any such story will be thrown into the refuse heap of vested interests, of ethnic

bias or discredited liberal reasoning. It is socially correct to doubt his innocence but it is literally safer to declare him guilty. Instead of “nigger lover,” “murderer!” is shouted to his associates and well-wishers. Instead of burning crosses stuck in yards, death threats are e-mailed or dropped in mailboxes. To avoid snubbing, disdain and threats the protective cover is “I think he did it, but had I been on the jury I would have acquitted him.” It is an odd opinion reminiscent of the “I think he did it, but I think he’ll walk” statement heard so often at the beginning of the case, a statement uneasily close to “I think he did it, but I hope he walks.” What could that possibly mean? If convinced of his guilt, why connect it with freedom? Does it mean Mr. Simpson is or should be above conviction, jail-time, execution? Or is it the fusion of the race-inflected official story and a longing for a living black man repeating forever a narrative of black insufficiency?

It is curious how satisfying the idea of Mr. Simpson as a dead man golfing has become. The pity belongs to the dead; but according to headlines, cover stories and book titles the status of American tragedy belongs to Mr. Simpson. Is that another denial of race or a signal of its presence? If he is guilty, isn’t “tragedy” a bit grand? And why “American,” one wonders?

I began this essay with “Benito Cereno,” an American tale in which, because the racist point of view of the narrator is hidden, the watcher is forced to discover racism as the paramount theme, the axis upon which all the action turns. Like Melville’s “long benighted” captain, most white Americans are still in denial—that is, public denial. And to suggest how these denials inform and are informed by culture I would like to end with another American narrative.

The film *Birth of a Nation*, based on the novel *The Klansman*, gathered up and solidified post-Civil War America’s assumptions of and desires for white supremacy. The Simpson spectacle has become an enunciation of post-

Civil Rights discourse on black deviance. Both of these sagas have race at their nexus. Not in spite of but because of the overdetermined claims: that race was “inserted” in the trial, or that the trial “became” about race, or that it degenerated into a racial referendum, it is clear that the Simpson official narrative, like *Birth of a Nation*, is ruled by race. Like *Birth of a Nation*, the case has generated a newer, more sophisticated national narrative of racial supremacy. But it is still the old sham white supremacy forever wedded to and dependent upon faux black inferiority.

They are out to break him, said one of Mr. Simpson’s lawyers after the trial. And, of this date, it is hard to see how they can fail. The appetite for a live head on a stick is ravenous. So, perhaps, we will see what the American captain in Melville’s fiction saw and wanted to see: the head of the Negro “fixed on a pole in the Plaza.” But that was not all there was to see. Melville pushes the image beyond the desires of the American captain to insinuate into the reader’s mind a far more complex issue. He does not use the Senegalese’s proper name toward the end; instead Melville applies the generic label “the black,” as if to stress the point implied: unlike a white, the black individual is forced to stand in for the entire race.

The official story has thrown Mr. Simpson into that representative role. He is not an individual who underwent and was acquitted from a murder trial. He has become the whole race needing correction, incarceration, censoring, silencing; the race that needs its civil rights disassembled; the race that is sign and symbol of domestic violence; the race that has made trial by jury a luxury rather than a right and placed affirmative action legislation in even greater jeopardy. This is the consequence and function of official stories: to impose the will of a dominant culture. It is *Birth of a Nation* writ large—menacingly and pointedly for the ‘hood.