

The Juice is Loose: O.J. Simpson, Post-Verdict Racial Discourse and the Return of the 'Primitive Black'

Tara Magdalinski
Sunshine Coast University College, Australia

Following the 3 October acquittal of O.J. Simpson, the U.S. and international media began with their "post-match" analyses of the verdict. Scenes of cheering blacks, scenes of teary whites were presented as examples of the reactions that were dividing the United States. The visual reactions were supported by numerous polls that highlighted the racial divide in the North American community over the case: blacks overwhelmingly believed in Simpson's innocence, whereas most whites thought he was guilty.

The ways in which these reactions and polls were presented pointed to a larger problem within American society and within the media in particular. The representation of blacks and whites, and their respective responses to the verdict increasingly became located in an overall racist discourse which emphasised the "emotional" or "irrational" nature of blacks' responses, while demonstrating the "rational" nature of whites' reactions.

Much work has been done on the social construction of race, and the way in which racial stereotypes continue as natural descriptions. The media reports of the O. J. Simpson verdict reinforced many of the stereotypes about blacks which have their foundations in early and late 19th century scientific discourse about race and behaviour. Analyses of the racial make-up of the jury and initial speculation about the motivations for the jury's decision were situated in a racist framework, which attempted to explain the verdict in a rational (white) way. Immediately after the verdict was read, at a press conference, Gil Garcetti, Los Angeles District Attorney, said the jury was "swayed by emotion, not reason." This set the scene for wider media analogies to emotion and reason.

Historically, black male bodies have been hyper-masculinized in Western society. These images at various times have been used to justify slavery, encourage white fear and understand the so-called "physical superiority" of blacks in sports. Despite the emphasis on the black male and the masculinized nature of the black 'race,' the black community has been overwhelmingly feminised. Similar terms that have served to explain female behaviour and ultimately marginalise them, have been applied to blacks. Terms such as emotional, irrational, hysterical were used to describe black reaction to the O.J. Simpson verdict. Whites on the other hand were disappointed, incredulous and disbelieving. Indeed, black reaction was reduced to the level of black solidarity whereas white responses were conclusions based on rational examinations of the 'mountain of evidence.'

The attempts to link black decision-making with emotions reinforces the stereotype of an animalistic creature ruled by the body. In most racial discourse, the physicality of blacks has been the starting point from which to understand black behaviour. Cultural notions of the body tied in closely to the emerging science of biology which also remained focused on the body in an attempt to explain the racial differences between.

This paper analyses the U.S. and Australian electronic and printed media in an attempt to locate the racist discourse revolving around the O.J. Simpson case in a wider analysis of race and American society. The significance of this study lies in its analysis of the contemporary media portrayal of race and racial differences, and the link it establishes to a wider historical analysis of race and the body in the United States