

H-Net Reviews

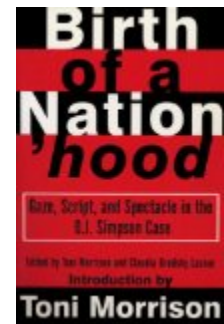
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Toni Morrison, Claudia Brodsky Lacour, eds. *Birth of a Nation Hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1997. xxviii + 418 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-679-75893-8.

Reviewed by John Barnhill (Defense Information Systems Agency Area Command, Oklahoma City)

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This collection reports and critiques two trials. Both took place at about the same time, and both were technically the People of California v. Orenthal James Simpson. The lesser of the two occurred in a courtroom and produced a verdict of not guilty. The other, much better known, took place in the media and gave us the only palatable verdict: guilty. And the guilt applied not only to the defendant but to all blacks, including the white and black jury, the defense team, and all others who failed to conform to the preconceived decision. Why were the two verdicts so different? All authors in this book of essays agree that it was simple all-pervasive racism, a racism that permeates every element of society and precludes even the semblance of justice for African Americans, a racism that the American orthodoxy denies.

The trial of O.J. Simpson, the trial of the century, is important for what it says about the two perceptions of racism. As Morrison says in her introduction, “the denial of racism is an ignorance of the most dangerous kind” (p. xii). Racism forms our stereotypes of O.J., the representative African American, as docile and feral, switching from one to another in an instant and without reason (another part of the stereotype is the irrationality of the beast). Racism defines him as guilty regardless of the evidence, motive, or proof. Racism preserves our national story against evidence that the prosecution case might have been weak, invalid, incompetent, and foolishly or malevolently reliant on planted or tainted evidence. Racism leads us to misread, misunderstand, and mistrust. And media-made myths perpetuate our errors, validate them, and keep us from facing our racism and beginning to overcome it. Having fit the crime into a preconceived ongoing story, we don’t look at the alternative

story—the one that has implications for the remaking of America the unbeautiful, America the land of race-based injustice, inequality, and exploitation. To establish the alternative story, the one of O.J.’s innocence, is to show the blinders that racism places on us, to show the irrationality of the American myth.

For what it represents, the life and trial of our stereotype deserve yet another look. The authors use the trial as a springboard to an indictment of American society. First, George Lipsitz, professor of ethnic studies at the University of California at San Diego, talks about the commercial influence on our lives, the media influence that perpetuates stereotypes and eliminates alternative stories with little sales appeal. Another essay discusses the duties of attorneys to mount the maximum possible defense, including attacking the credibility of key witnesses with a documented bias, including racism. These authors raise the question of whether the “race card” would have been an issue if O.J. were a non-black minority. Another essay affirms the rationality of the jury’s decision, relying heavily on Madam Foreman. Other topics are the validity of genetic evidence, skin color as a factor in the availability of opportunities to dark people (especially athletes), the double bind of black women as second class gender in a second class race, the American preoccupation with miscegenation, and the nature of justice. The underlying consideration is racism, which permeates the white society, its people and its structure, and which makes a mockery of the attempt try a black man fairly.

Several authors note that the case itself is largely insignificant. Had there been a white defendant or black victim, the trial would have gone unnoticed. But the

combination of white victim and suddenly-black-again alleged perpetrator made it a threat to the myth that America has overcome its racism, has incorporated all its citizens into a color-blind society, has affirmatively taken on the burden of lifting all to the same level of equity and justice. The authors, in their various ways, tear apart the myth. This book is a cry for justice, not a work of scholarship. The footnotes document the telling quotation, not the substantiating evidence. Sometimes logic loosens as the authors let emotion flow; their words in a stream gush forth anger and anguish. There is passion, but there is also a need for stronger editing. The essays vary in clarity, reason, evidence, and ability to stick to

the point. Even the worst, however, adds to weight to this overwhelming indictment of American racism. For what it is, this book is quite good. On the other hand, because emotion is fleeting while reason lingers, if I were allowed only one book on American racism, this would not be it.

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