O.J. Simpson's Case: Evident Racism Within the Legal System

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By the late 20th century, racial tensions remained deeply rooted in the American South. The region's rejection of progressive reforms, clinging onto nationalistic ideals, was a defining tenet of its culture. In the years leading up to the O.J. Simpson case, the United States was grappling with the problem of rising racial tensions especially post Rodney King riots. These riots challenged the LAPD's cruel behavior inflicted upon Rodney King, which highlighted the shared widespread frustration over police brutality specifically among African Americans.[1] The LAPD's act of beating up Rodney King, however, had the negative consequence of spreading a new pride within the South.[2] The wrongful convictions of the Central Park Five in 1989 in which Black defendants received harsher sentences than their white counterparts further raised questions regarding how race played a role in the judicial system. It was as if some Americans believed the storm of controversy would pass by quickly, but as Sheldon Cooper in *The Big Bang Theory* states, "I'm sure some fool in the Donner Party said the snow would stay any day now. I'd like to think they ate him first." For many African Americans, the case represented an opportunity for a Black defendant to receive the kind of presumption of innocence often denied to them, whilst many white Americans saw this as a failure of justice. Reflecting on this divided

[1] Jim Newton, "How Rodney King helped O.J. Simpson win a not-guilty verdict," *Los Angeles Times*, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2024-04-11/oj-simpson-rodney-king-lapd-nicole-brown-simpson-ron-goldman.
[2]Jeff Wallenfeldt, "Los Angeles Riots of 1992," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified February 4, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/event/Los-Angeles-Riots-of-1992.

era, Simpson eerily states, "[i]t's strange. They say people don't change, but I say they're wrong. People change, but it's usually for the worse."[3] The O.J Simpson case demonstrated how race played a key role in the trial, with the defense using the LAPD's history of racism and mistakes in the investigation, like the bloody glove and Mark Fuhrman's racist comments, to create doubt, which split public perception and made the trial more about race and distrust in the legal system rather than actual evidence.

The revelation of detective Mark Fuhrman's history of racist remarks became a powerful tool for the defense, transforming the O.J. Simpson trial from a question of guilt or innocence into an indictment of racism within the LAPD. The defense team, led by Johnnie Cochran, highlighted Fuhrman's past use of racial slurs and police brutality, and argued that his racism not only made him an unreliable witness but raised the possibility that evidence might have been planted in order to frame Simpson. This practice, although unethical, was quite common among police. The infamous "Fuhrman Tapes" contained over 40 recorded logs of racial slurs and violent remarks directed towards Black individuals. These transcriptions, made visible to the public by Laura Mckinny, were published whilst the case was in progress.[4] In one of the most disturbing quotes, Fuhrman stated, "Commander Hickman, was a d*ckhead. He should be shot. He did that for one thing. He wants to be chief, so he wants the city council, and the police commissioner, and all these n***** in L.A. City government and all of 'em should be lined up

[3] O.J. Simpson, *If I Did It* (New York City: O.J. Simpson, 2007), 123, accessed March 27, 2025, https://archive.org/details/OJSimpsonIfIDidIt/page/n5/mode/2up.
[4] Fuhrman, Mark. Interview. 4929 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles California.

against a wall and f*ckin' shot."[5] This is where the trial's logic started to resemble a Seinfeld episode; "You know, we're living in a society!" Jerry once screamed, and during this trial, that society was apparently one where a detective could casually suggest city councils be shot and still be considered a reliable witness. In another, he added, "[t]hat we've got females . . . and dumb n******, and all your Mexicans that can't even write the name of the car they drive."[6] This revelation reshaped views of the LAPD, and created an unbreakable view of the police which completely altered the direction of the O.J. Simpson case. This historical distrust was not the first of its kind: events such as the Rodney King beating and the 1992 riots had already created the belief among many African Americans that the justice system held some sort of prejudice against them. New York Times article "Tale of the Tapes" examines how the O.J. The Simpson trial became a defining moment in American legal history, not just for its celebrity factor but for how it exposed a deeper perception of racial tensions regarding the LAPD. The defense skillfully leveraged the LAPD's history of racial bias and misconduct to cast doubt on the prosecution's case, making the trial more about systemic injustice rather than the material evidence. A crucial turning point was the exposure of former detective Mark Fuhrman's past racist remarks, which included derogatory slurs and admissions of police brutality. These revelations severely damaged the credibility of the prosecution's investigator, allowing for the defense to argue that the case was tainted by racism and also evidence tampering.[7] This narrative was further reinforced by

[5] Fuhrman, interview.
[6] Fuhrman, interview.
[7] Elizabeth Gleick, "O.J. Simpson Case: The Tale of the Tapes," *Time*,, accessed March 27, 2025, https://time.com/archive/6727805/o-j-simpson-case-the-tale-of-the-tapes/.

investigative missteps such as the controversial handling of the bloody glove, which the defense used to suggest that the police had manipulated crucial evidence.[8] As a result, rather than viewing the trial purely as a murder case, much of the public, especially African Americans who had long experienced discrimination by law enforcement, saw it as a referendum on police corruption and racial injustice. The jury's decision to acquit Simpson reflected not only doubts about the evidence but also a broader lack of trust in the fairness of the legal system, illustrating how racial prejudice shaped the trial's outcome and influenced public confidence in American justice. [9]

Another dramatic turning point of the case was the prosecution's presentation of the bloody glove, which was found at Simpon's house and allegedly linked him to the murder of Nicole Simpson and Ronald Goldman. When asked to try on the glove, Simpson struggled to fit it onto his hand, leading defense attorney Johnnie Cochran to declare, "if it doesn't fit, you must acquit." This moment, combined with the concerns of how LAPD handled evidence, helped to enforce the claim that the case was corrupt with errors and misconduct. Not to mention, Fuhrman was the one who discovered the glove, and his racist past led many to believe that the glove was placed in a fraudulent manner. Later, when Fuhrman was exposed during his testimony regarding him discussing police brutality and saying slurs, the trust of the legal system vanished. The exposure of Fuhrman's racism, therefore, deepened existing mistrust in law enforcement and lent credibility to the defense's claim that Simpson was being targeted because of his race.[10] The

[8] Gleick, "O.J. Simpson,".
[9] Gleick, "O.J. Simpson," .
[10] Aaronette White. "O. J. Simpson Trial: We Are All Guilty." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 28 (1996): 102–7. https://doi.org/10.2307/4065766.

article “O.J. Simpson Trial: We Are All Guilty” examines the broader societal implications of the trial, arguing that its outcome was shaped not solely by the material evidence that was presented as the trial progressed, but furthermore by historical injustices and the crystalized racial prejudices influencing both the jury and the publics’ perception.[11] Central to the defense’s strategy was the emphasis on the LAPD’s history of racism, a tactic that proved to be highly effective in discrediting the prosecution’s case especially when paired with the Mark Fuhrman tapes. This argument reinforced the defense's argument that the case was tainted by institutional bias and that the possibility of evidence tampering could not be ignored. This shift in focus from the specifics of the crime to the broader issue of racism resonated specifically within African American communities, in which distrust of law enforcement had been engrained by decades of discrimination stemming from slavery into segregation.[12] Consequently, the trial’s outcome reflected not only reasonable doubt regarding Simpson’s guilt but also a wider societal reckoning with the failures of the American justice system. The public’s sharply divided reaction to the verdict highlights the extent to which race and historical tragedies shape perceptions of legal fairness, demonstrating that the Simpson trial was as much about race and systemic inequities as it was about guilt or innocence regarding O.J. Simpson.[13] Specifically, this is drawn out within African American communities, in which the trial served as an extension for evident racism from the LAPD.

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[11] Aaronette White, "O.J. Simpson Trial: We Are All Guilty," *JSTOR*, no. 28 (1996): https://doi.org/10.2307/4065766.
[12] White, "O.J. Simpson,". 102-107
[13] White, "O.J. Simpson,". 102-107

Public reaction to the trial was divided along racial lines, reflecting the perceptions of the justice system as a whole. According to Carl E. In Enomoto's study on public sympathy for Simpson, African Americans were significantly more likely than whites to believe in his innocence, and African Americans further viewed the justice system as biased against Black individuals.[14] This divide was influenced by historical injustices which can be linked to the Rodney King beatings and other instances of racial discrimination and police brutality, which ended up shaping how different communities perceive the trial. Enomoto's findings also revealed that age, gender, and education played a role in public opinion. Older, wealthier, and more educated individuals were less likely to be sympathetic toward Simpson, while Black respondents overwhelmingly expressed support for him.[15] The study further depicts how jury selection played a crucial role in shaping trial outcomes. Jury consultants on both sides sought individuals who would be sympathetic to their arguments. The final jury, which was African American dominated, was more receptive to the claims of systemic racism. This aligns with the concerns of the fairness of the jury selection process, since legal teams strategically challenge the racial composition of the jury.[16] Enomoto notes such practices reinforce the idea that trials are not purely about evidence but also about the biases and lived experiences of the jurors themselves. The trial demonstrated how public perceptions of race and justice can shape legal

[14] Enomoto, Carl E. "Public Sympathy for O. J. Simpson: The Roles of Race, Age, Gender, Income, and Education." *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 58, no. 1 (1999): 145–61. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3487883.

[15] Enomoto, "Public Sympathy," 145.
[16] Enomoto, "Public Sympathy," 159.

outcomes just as much as material evidence.[17] The trial turned into a battle between evidence and police misconduct, with the notion the evidence could be placed by corrupt cops. Bulkin and Thompson highlight how visual media played a role in shaping the racial narratives during the trial. For instance, Time Magazine was criticized for darkening Simpson's mugshot, making him appear more ominous and menacing, whilst other publications contrasted his image with that of Nicole Simpson, a white woman who embodied the white race.[18] These visual comparisons took a stance on the situation: they played into empirical evidence of Black criminality, reinforcing public biases. Extending beyond the media portrayals, the trial highlighted the deep mistrust between African Americans and the legal system.[19] Many African Americans saw Simpson's prosecution as another instance of racial bias faced within the legal system, mimicking what occurred in the case of Rodney King. Racial disparities in public opinion regarding Simpson's guilt were not about the case itself, but about a broad frustration shared among Black men during the time.[20] In this article, Daniel M. Petrocelli highlights the key differences between criminal and civil proceedings in his article "Reflection on the O.J. Simpson Case." As someone who was on the party who initiated this legal battle, Petrocelli examines how the civil trial offered an opportunity to revisit the evidence that had been dismissed or overlooked in the criminal trial. He emphasizes the impact of the differing standards of proof: whereas the criminal trial required proof beyond a reasonable doubt, the civil case only required a smaller amount of this evidence,

[17] Enomoto, "Public Sympathy," 159.
[18] Bulkin, Ellie, and Becky thompson. "The Spectacle of Race and Gender in the O.J. Simpson Case." *Off Our Backs* 24, no. 9 (1994): 10–23. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20834931.
[19] Bulkin and Thompson, "The Spectacle," 10-11
[20] Bulkin and Thompson, "The Spectacle," 10-11

allowing for the initiators, or plaintiffs, to establish Simpson's liability more effectively. Petrocelli also underscores how the civil trial provided a more controlled legal environment, one that was free from some of the external influences, media posts, and racial tension that had overshadowed the criminal proceedings.[21] Moreover, his reflections address the broader societal and legal consequences of the trial, focusing mainly on how the contrasting verdicts fueled public debate over the fairness of the American justice system. While his account offers a valuable perspective on legal strategy, it leaves room for further exploration of how the racial and social divisions that shaped the criminal trial also influenced the civil proceedings. A deeper examination of jury composition and decision making in both trials could provide insight into the role of societal attitudes in shaping judicial outcomes, particularly in racially charged cases. Furthermore, an analysis of the long-term consequences of the verdict, both for the victims' families and for public trust, would offer a more crystalized understanding of the case's legacy. Ultimately, these reflections help to reinforce the idea that the O.J. Simpson case was not just an ordinary case about an one man's guilt or innocence, but rather a case that served as a defining moment that exposed the complexities of race and media influence in the judicial system. To fully understand the public's reaction to the Simpson trial, however, one must also consider the broader racial context that preceded it; particularly, the 1992 Los Angeles riots erupted following the acquittal of four white police officers charged with police brutality specifically in the incidence of Rodney King, an African American motorist, which was caught on video and broadcasted across the country. The not-guilty verdict sparked what came to be known as the

[21] Bulkin and Thompson, "The Spectacle," 10-11

Rodney King Riots of 1992, in which a period of violent unrest resulted in more than 60 deaths. These riots were a manifestation of decades of racial injustice, systemic police brutality, and economic disparities that plagued African American communities in LA and beyond.[22] The unrest was not just about Rodney King, rather it was a reaction to the failures of the American legal system to hold law enforcement accountable for racial violence. This mistrust of the justice system, specifically seen within Black communities, set the stage for the O.J. Simpson trial, in which many viewed not just as a high-profile murder case but as a broader reckoning with racial inequities in the United States.[23] This strategy proved effective in shifting the focus of the trial away from the forensic evidence and toward the credibility of law enforcement. For many African Americans, the trial became a symbolic figure to represent past injustices, including the Rodney King case, where police officers had walked free despite evidence of brutality. Juror Carrie Bess later confirmed this connection in an interview when she was asked, “Do you think that there are members of the jury that voted to acquit O.J> because of Rodney King?” She answered, “Yes.” When asked how many, she responded, “Oh probably 90 percent of them.” When the interviewer asked if she personally felt that way and if the verdict was payback, Bess replied, “Uh-huh.”[24] These quotes from the interview illustrate how the trial’s outcome was influenced by a collective desire to challenge the legal system’s pattern of racial discrimination. Simpson’s acquittal was thus perceived by many as one of the few instances where a Black

[22] Wallenfeldt, "Los Angeles."
[23] Wallenfeldt, "Los Angeles."
[24] Taylor Lewis, "Home • News O.J. Simpson's Not-Guilty Verdict was 'Payback' for Rodney King, Says Juror," *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 2020, https://www.essence.com/news/oj-simpson-not-guilty-verdict-payback-rodney-king/.

defendant was able to evade a system that criminalized African Americans for centuries. This perception further reinforced divisions in public opinion, with many white Americans seeing the verdict as a miscarriage of justice while many Black Americans viewed it as a long-overdue reckoning with systemic racism. Conclusively. The trial's significance extended far beyond Simpson himself, rather, it became a national symbol of race, law enforcement, and fractures within the American legal system that had been exposed by the Rodney King riot just a few years prior.

The O.J Simpson trial was far more than a legal battle over innocence as any normal trial is traditionally conducted, rather it was a reflection of deep-seated racial tensions and long-standing distrust in the American legal system. Racial prejudice played a key role in shaping the jury's decision making process, as the defense shifted the focus from evidence to systemic racism within the LAPD.[25] Furthermore, the exposure of Detective Mark Fuhrman's racist history and the mishandling of crucial evidence such as the bloody glove reinforced the defense's argument that Simpson was being targeted by a corrupt and biased system. These factors created doubt in the minds of Black communities and juries, leading to the acquittal that was perceived by society as a stand against racial injustice rather than a verdict on evidence. The trial exposed the extent to which race influences public perceptions of the legal system, and scholarly writers' works such as Carl Enomoto's research on public sympathy reveal that African Americans were far more likely to believe in his innocence and held corrupt views of the legal system.

[25] White, "O.J. Simpson," 102-107.

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