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What O.J. Simpson Taught Me About Being Black

By JOHN McWHORTER FEB. 3, 2016

It is easy to forget how beloved a celebrity O. J. Simpson was in his time — Heisman Trophy winner, N.F.L. superstar, Hollywood actor and pitchman supreme. Until he was arrested in the brutal slayings of his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ronald L. Goldman, after a televised police chase that transfixed the nation, he seemed to have transcended his roots in San Francisco housing projects.

Yet if Mr. Simpson's guilt seemed clear to much of America, African-Americans were disinclined to see it that way. Over months of lurid televised court testimony — now being dramatized in a series that started this week on FX — Mr. Simpson became a symbol, to many blacks, of endemic racism in the justice system. And when a jury with nine black members declared him not guilty on Oct. 3, 1995, black people across the country cheered.

I wasn't one of them.

I must admit I was as disappointed as many whites that black college students gleefully applauded the verdict as if Mr. Simpson were one of the Scottsboro Boys. While the police and prosecutors had been far from brilliant, and reasonable doubt was, well, reasonable, Mr. Simpson's innocence seemed decidedly unlikely.

At the time, what I saw was people ignoring the facts in favor of a kind of tribalism. A black journalism professor asked me, as a linguist, to lecture on language and the trial. I'd be glad to, I told him, but I thought Mr. Simpson was guilty. I never heard from him again.

Meanwhile, black friends and family continued coming up with ways that damning evidence could have been planted and obsessing over the use of a racial epithet by a police detective in the case. I felt alienated, angry, disappointed.

But I was missing something. The case was about much more than bloody gloves and bloody footprints. It was about the centrality of police brutality to black Americans' very sense of self.

I came to realize this when, disgusted with the verdict and the response to it, I began to investigate — at first informally — why so many of my fellow blacks' takes on racism seemed to me to be more fitting to 1935 than 1995.

After a while I realized that the rub was that my life had spared me from experiencing or even seeing police abuse. I had seen the video images of the vicious beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles officers four years earlier but had lived too fortunate a life to spontaneously see it as something that could happen to me.

To this day I am bemused by the occasional white person who assumes that I have a "story" to tell about triumphing over racism, that I was raised by working-class parents just getting by. I grew up solidly middle class in quiet, leafy suburbs — one integrated, one all black — where the police were the last thing on anyone's mind. Racism had brushed my life now and then, but not at the hands of the police. This was what kept me from processing the O. J. Simpson business "blackly," as it were.

What I found when I spoke with people after the Simpson verdict, though, and have found since with numbing regularity, is that what prevents real racial conciliation and understanding in America is the poisonous relations between blacks and the police.

I asked a black office worker what made him so sure Mr. Simpson had been framed, and he recounted just that kind of malfeasance by Oakland cops when he was growing up. And I learned not to assume that only men had such feelings. I asked a

middle-class young black woman why she, too, felt that racism was the core of our experience. She instantly told me a story about her brother being senselessly harassed by cops for driving in “the wrong place.”

The conversations were what ultimately prompted my interest in writing about race. And while the positions I took in books and articles went against the leftist orthodoxy, when it came to cops, my feelings had become the same as those more politically correct than I, and that won't change.

Racism is experienced in many ways, but as Ellis Cose has put it, “Rage does not flow from dry numerical analyses of discrimination or from professional prospects projected on a statistician's screen.” Talk to most black people about racism and you need only count the seconds before the cops come up.

Amid the round-the-clock cable coverage of the Simpson case, America learned the difference between what the cops mean to black people versus what they mean to most others.

Too few got the message at the time.

But after the killings of Walter Scott, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray and other unarmed blacks by the police over the past two years, the conversation has changed. Many non-black Americans who were disgusted by the Simpson verdict have become more aware of the ubiquity of police brutality in black lives.

I suspect that the black response to the verdict, if it happened today, would surprise far fewer whites than it did 20 years ago.

The Simpson show has been over for a long time, so long that now we can watch it performed by actors as an actual show. Its ending wasn't pretty, but it was telling, and today I understand why.

John McWhorter, a linguistics professor at Columbia, is the author of “The Language Hoax” and the forthcoming “Words on the Move” and “Talking Back, Talking Black.”

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