

# Race Issues in the O.J. Simpson Case - Analysis of Alexander and Karaszewski's American Crime Story

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Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)

**Monika Boban**

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Crime Story

Završni rad

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Zadar, 2018.



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Zadar, 26. rujan 2018.

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## 1. Introduction

As Stuart Hall states, culture is one of the most difficult concepts to define; there is high culture that includes great ideas of an age expressed through art, philosophy etc., and there is mass or popular culture which includes popular music, literature and other activities that compose the everyday lives of ordinary people. What is important to emphasize about culture, according to Hall, is that it is focused not on things, but production and exchange of meaning between members of a particular society. That meaning depends on how we use and represent things, and meaning is directly connected to our cultural identity and sense of belonging. In modern times, meaning is produced by the mass media and exchanged through different cultural groups. (Hall, 8-9)

The power of mass media on society and the difference in meanings and representation in different social groups is a very interesting subject that I chose to analyze in this paper. Being a cultural phenomenon in many aspects, the O.J. Simpson murder trial proved an excellent material for analysis. Nicknamed “trial of the century” (Monroe), it took place in 1995 and drew colossal amount of media attention as one of the first televised trials as the defendant was a major celebrity. The aim of this paper is to note and analyze the ways in which different issues were represented in the media and their impact on society and culture, which includes the development of numerous documentaries, films and TV shows, such as *American Crime Story*.

The main issue with which this paper deals with is representation of race during the trial, supported by historical context and earlier representations of African Americans. In the second part of my paper I will be focusing on issues of race and gender through character analysis in Alexander and Karaszewski’s television series *People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story*.

## 2. Theoretical overview

In June 2017, popular American rapper Jay-Z published a song entitled “The Story of O.J.”, accompanied by an equally eye-catching music video. The song talks about racism in America, how it influences the members of the African American community, both rich and poor. The lyrics are simple yet powerful: "Light nigga, dark nigga, faux nigga, real nigga, rich nigga, poor nigga, house nigga, field nigga. Still nigga. Still nigga." (Jay-Z, 2017, track 2) The message Jay-Z is trying to spread is that, no matter how wealthy you are or how fair-skinned, at the end of the day you will still be unable to escape the usual black stereotype. The music video is visually stunning, though shocking at times. The black and white animation bears a striking resemblance to classic Disney and Warner Bros. cartoons which fundamentally presented African Americans as caricatures rather than “real” people. What makes those scenes in the music video different is their depiction of reality, rather than the romanticized truth present in the cartoons. There are scenes of black people being sold out, lynched, dressed and acting like savages, etc. Typical stereotypes like exaggerated limbs and lips are also present, alongside a caricature of Jay-Z himself eating a watermelon. At one point we see O.J. Simpson running towards cameras and reporters when Jay-Z raps: "OJ like, 'I'm not black, I'm OJ'... Okay." Although the song itself is not exclusively about Simpson, he represents the black man who succeeded and no longer felt obliged to his community, and Jay-Z strongly criticizes his actions.

In his essay *The Fact of Blackness*, Fanon talks about what it means to be a black person in a world where white people hold power. He argues that a black man cannot experience his own being if he is surrounded by his own people; he must be black but in relation to the white community. Speaking from experience, Fanon describes becoming aware of his own blackness and ethnic characteristics which, in the eyes of others, associated him with slavery, cannibalism and lesser intelligence. “A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man—or at least like a nigger. I shouted a greeting to the world and the world slashed away my joy. I was told to stay within bounds, to go back where I belonged.” (Fanon 5) Unable to escape what he calls an “inborn complex”, he becomes the slave of his own appearance since skin color is a very distinct feature in a man and often used as judging criteria. Still very present, color prejudice is described as irrational hatred of one race (usually richer) towards another which they consider inferior, rationalized and justified through tradition. (Fanon 2-8) Ordinary people are subject to stereotypes and mistreatment on a daily basis just as Fanon describes, but when it comes to the rich and

famous, the situation is considerably altered. O.J. Simpson rose to stardom as a football player in the 1960s, a particularly difficult time for African Americans in America. He became the national hero and was loved by everyone regardless of their race, which proves how money and celebrity status can influence the public perception of an individual. Followed by the murder charges and his acquittal in 1995, Simpson became a cultural phenomenon when he went from being what people described as “colorless” (Edelman) to a symbol of justice for black people in America. What is interesting about Simpson is that his case gives an insight into the American understanding of race, gender and celebrity status and exhibits the power of media. Opinions on whether O.J. Simpson managed to escape his blackness for a period of time or not vary between different communities, depending on the representation in the media and how individuals perceive it.

As Stuart Hall defines it in his lecture *Representation and the Media*, the word “representation” has double meaning, that of presenting and depicting (carrying a notion that something already exists and was being represented through the media), and the meaning of standing in for something or taking its place. According to him, representation is the way in which things depicted acquire their meaning but there is a gap between the true meaning and what is represented in the media. If events had one fixed meaning it would be fairly easy to measure the level of distortion in their representation, but what exists are certain facts and the meaning depends on what the public makes of the event, and of course, on how it is depicted. Representation does not occur after the event, it is a part of it and if one moves from one individual to another, one social group to another, one will notice that forms of representation inevitably change. Shaping us, our culture influences the way we make sense of the world and how we give meaning to certain things. It is safe to say that when it comes to representation of people and events in the media, especially in the United States, it is dictated by the “superior” group - white people.

“Although ideas about race are in their rawest forms fictions of our collective imagination, they have real and meaningful consequences—economic, psychological, and otherwise.” (Dirks 3) According to Wolfreys, race may refer to a group of people who share certain interests, beliefs, habits or characteristics. When it comes to racial categorization, genealogical and biological approaches are the two principal ones, and while the genealogical approach is concerned with origin and heritage, the biological approach deals with anatomical differences. Talking about modern definitions, differences between races are determined in the assumption that certain groups of people who live in particular areas share physical



similarities and features associated with their behavior. However, when it comes to white people, they do not see themselves in the terms of race unless they feel threatened, which leads to conclusion that only non-white people are “raced”. Therefore, it can be concluded that skin color plays a big role in determining racial identity and very often non-whites are reduced in cultural representations and seen as “the other”. (Wolfreys 204-211) Race is also very often related to social status, the way someone dresses, speaks or the place where they live, as well as their occupation. (Spencer 43) All these characteristics lead to the creation of stereotypes, or, in other words, prejudiced perceptions of others. (Kulaszewicz 16) As my paper will be concerned with the issue of race in the United States, I feel inclined to list some of the most frequent stereotypes in connection to African Americans.

Popular culture, omnipresence in our lives, has had the power of giving racist, distorted depictions of blackness for a considerable amount of time, leaving significant consequences on society. (Dirks 3) Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the image of black people has changed many times, sometimes improving and sometimes worsening. First instances of classical black stereotypes appeared in the Minstrel Show (first popular entertainment form in the US that appeared in the 1840s), in the characters of Zip Coon and Jim Crow. (Lemons 102) Although different in appearance (Zip Coon was portrayed as a dandy wearing a top hat and large clothes and Jim Crow wore rags), both spoke in a very peculiar manner, which ridiculed the way in which African Americans speak. (Lemons 102) Jim Crow, aside from being depicted as not very bright, is also engaged in stealing chicken, the only activity in which he shows signs of not being lazy, or in other words, he is a criminal, a stereotype which will become much more prominent in later decades. (Lemons 102) People of African American origin also tend to be portrayed as maids and servants, as seen in the examples of Aunt Jemima, Old Uncle Tom, “the ol’ mammy” and countless other, which actually became so frequent they seemed normal and simply entertaining, that many did not even notice how degrading this depiction was. (Lemons 102) Although it was not developed fully when the Minstrel show came to existence, as Lemons emphasizes, popular culture is an excellent way to see into the mind of the masses, to show us what people like and what their opinions on certain matters are. (Lemons 103) Not being high culture, or folk culture, it is produced for mass consumption, and that being said, it acts as a mirror of the society. (Lemons 103) The depiction of African Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was mainly comical, but from the late 1800s onwards, it became grotesque and animal-like, and if we implement the statement that popular culture imitates real life, we can conclude that this reflected the

way in which society humiliated them. (Lemons 104) Aside from being depicted as physically ugly (very dark faces with huge red lips, exaggerated limbs), black people were also portrayed as chicken thieves, watermelon addicts, lazy, unintelligent and promiscuous people who like to drink and gamble, and can potentially get violent. (Lemons 111)

Being extremely powerful, media has a great influence on its consumers, and they will form their opinions about certain groups of people based on the depiction given in the media. (Kulaszewicz 12) This is true when it comes to crime as well. If people begin to combine race and crime, they will also judge criminal activities based on their judgments, in this case, of African Americans. (Hurwitz 1997, 376) Some research have shown that in the eyes of the public, African Americans who have committed crimes are seen as more guilty than whites who have done the same; they are less likely to be rehabilitated and more aggressive and prone to violence, thus deserving more severe punishments. (Hurwitz 1997, 379) Portrayed like this, they are expected to commit “black crimes” involving violence, rather than being found guilty of tax evasion. (Hurwitz 1997, 380)

As people are prone to judgment, in modern times many politicians tend to “play the race card”, thus manipulating the masses, in order to get what they want, especially in presidential campaigns, as was the case with the infamous Willie Horton ad in the 1990s. (Hurwitz 2005, 100) In most cases, “playing the race card” is supposed to worsen the public image of African Americans, “confirming” the above mentioned stereotypes, but sometimes, as in the case of O. J. Simpson, tables can turn to serve an entirely different purpose.

### 3. Background and context

Racism had existed in the United States since the colonial era but after the abolishment of slavery in 1865 it became a much bigger issue. Although free, many African Americans found themselves jobless and without much security or civil rights, so a part of them continued working for their former masters. In order to preserve power and a desired social order, organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan were established, as well as the segregation rules which separated black and white Americans. (Head) During the twentieth century there were many riots and countless African Americans were unjustly mistreated by either whites or the police whose actions, because of how they were presented in public, seemed reasonable. What started the U.S. civil rights movement were the death of 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955 and the shocking acquittal of his murderer. (Nittle, “Shocking Moments in 20th Century Black History”) Till’s mother decided to show the world photographs of her son’s mutilated body after he allegedly flirted with a white girl and caused an emotional response in black communities all over the world. (Nittle, “Shocking Moments in 20th Century Black History”)

The Oscar-winning documentary *O.J.: Made in America* (2016) directed by Ezra Edelman, thoroughly portrays the happenings in American society in the twentieth century, especially the social status of African Americans and their relationship with the police force. It mainly focuses on the Los Angeles area where the black population always felt they were being treated differently from other citizens just because they were black. In 1950, William H. Parker, Chief of the Los Angeles Police Department, reestablished his forces (The LAPD, “Chief Parker”). To the misfortune of non-white citizens, the department became untouchable with most of its members being white men who denied any police brutality and presented themselves in a much better light. (Edelman) Although the members of the LAPD praise Parker to this day, describing him as the “prototype of the ideal Chief” (The LAPD, “Chief Parker”), African Americans are persistent with the claim that he was simply a racist who based his relationship with the community on lies and fear. (Edelman)

Tensions between the police and the residents stimulated by poverty, unemployment and segregation reached their peak on August 11, 1965 when the six-day long Watts riots began. (Rothman) It is very interesting to observe reactions to the Watts riots; while Chief Parker compared rioters to “monkeys in a zoo”, African American activists stated this was a riot against inhumane living conditions, lack of education and prospects. (Rothman) The white population, oblivious to the situation in the black community, was shocked to see such violent scenes on their television, as the Watts riots were one of the first events of this kind in

Los Angeles to be caught on camera. (Edelman) Most of the citizens thought very highly of the LAPD, describing the officers as people who “always did a great job, and would smile and wave at us”, unaware of the poor treatment that African Americans received. (Edelman) This continued in the seventies and eighties, during which Daryl Gates was in charge of the LAPD, who in 1979, when two police officers killed Eula Love over a \$22 bill, supported their claims that they were compelled to act in order to protect themselves. (Edelman) During “Operation Hammer” in 1987, searching for drugs and destroying the property of black residents with hammers, police officers demonstrated an immense force (Mitchell), which was in my opinion something that would not happen in a white neighborhood. Being treated as they were and unable to change their image in public because powerful white men like Chief Gates had all the power, it is understandable why majority of African Americans did not feel protected and served by the police. (Edelman)

Two famous 1990s racist incidents are the Rodney King beating and the murder of Latasha Harlins. (Edelman) On March 3, 1991 four white police officers were filmed clubbing and kicking an unarmed Rodney over fifty times. (Matiash and Rothman) Just a few days later, Latasha Harlins was shot in the back of the head during a dispute over some orange juice by a Korean store owner who only got probation. (Edelman) This verdict caused great discontent and is said to be one of the causes of the riots in Los Angeles the following year. (Edelman) In April 1992 police officers tried for the beating of Rodney King were acquitted in Simi Valley and just a few hours later began what would become the most violent riot in the history of Los Angeles with property damage estimated to one billion dollars (The LAPD, “1992 Civil Unrest”). One of the incidents recorded shows a group of African American men beating a white truck driver in the street, a scene which in my opinion looks identical to the King beating but was presented in the media as more gruesome. (Edelman) This incident is still very important even today because it served as evidence for what the black community had been accusing the officers for decades – police brutality. The media had a great impact on what would serve as the “beginning of the end for the old imperial LAPD” by constantly showing the tape and making it impossible to ignore. (Morris)

### 3.1. O.J. Simpson

Born on July 9, 1947 Orenthal James “O.J.” Simpson was raised in Portrero Hill, predominantly African American neighborhood with low-income public housing. (Edelman) According to Edelman’s documentary, raised by a single mother in poverty, Simpson was determined to succeed in life and become “the American hero”. When he moved to Los Angeles as a teenager he became an instant star in college football winning the Heisman Trophy in 1968 and establishing a large fan base. (Edelman) Even in his early interviews, when answering questions about his own racial identity, Simpson had stated that he never separated people according to their skin color and always wanted to be judged by his competence and nothing else. (Edelman) As the only or one of few black men on the USC campus, Simpson surrounded himself with almost exclusively white rich youth, and while friends and family claim that after being “plucked out of black consciousness” at a very young age he was easily influenced and beguiled by white society, many believe his statements and later actions were deliberate in order to succeed. (Edelman) In 1968 Simpson was approached by the members of the Olympic Project for Human Rights, an organization which, in fighting racism in the United States, wanted to boycott the 1968 Olympic Games. (Edelman) They attempted to enroll as much elite black athletes in their civil rights movement as possible, assured their celebrity status would help their cause considerably. (Edelman) Questioning the purpose of their endeavor, Simpson rejected the offer by infamously stating “I’m not black. I’m O.J.” (Edelman) After Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in black gloves at the podium during the Olympics, Simpson commented that that gesture only resulted in the ruin of their sports careers and he would never let such organizations pull him into politics because what he was doing was not “for principles or black people” but for O.J. (Edelman)

During the 1970s, Simpson played professionally for the Buffalo Bills, married his first wife with whom he has three children and started a career in show business by starring in commercials for companies such as the car rental Hertz Corporation. (Edelman) After retiring from football in 1979, Simpson used his celebrity status to stay in the limelight, even establishing himself as an actor. (Edelman) Probably aware that he had to play by the rules of rich white people in pursuance of stardom, Simpson did everything in his power to appeal to the white audience. (Edelman) After Carlos and Smith’s demonstration in 1968, the whites were “looking for someone to erase the threat of these seemingly angry black athletes” (Edelman) and O.J. Simpson proved the perfect candidate. Very early in his career he became

the first African American spokesman for Chevrolet which was revolutionary in a way, but on the other hand, as many of his working colleagues point out to this day, O.J. Simpson seemed to be colorless. (Edelman) He let himself be molded the way white society wanted him, not objecting or taking offense at their efforts to change his mannerisms or speech to proper English. (Edelman) Because he was willing to erase his black identity, Simpson was accepted by the white society and that made him marketable earning him fame and money, but also a great amount of resentment from his own community. (Edelman) Many African Americans, especially civil rights activists, felt betrayed by Simpson when he denied his support for their cause first in 1968 and times later, stating that as a public figure it was his obligation to try and make things better for those who could not fight for themselves. (Edelman) Instead of being vocal about issues which prevented his community from progressing, he alienated himself, which is very interesting and essential knowledge in understanding why the 1995 trial and his acquittal were so shocking and debatable.

In 1985 Simpson married his second wife Nicole Brown with whom he had two children before divorcing in 1992. (Edelman) Their relationship, which lasted over a decade, was very tumultuous and Simpson was allegedly violent towards his wife. (Edelman) Up until 1989, police was called eight times into their home on Rockingham Avenue in Brentwood but he was never arrested as his wife would not press charges. (Edelman) In 1989 a severely beaten Nicole finally asked for his arrest but the trial ended with Simpson only getting community work which he turned into a golfing tournament for his famous friends. (Edelman) Here one can observe just how powerful and untouchable he had become because of his celebrity status. In the media he presented himself as a rather likeable individual, and because the public was exposed to this image of him for a very long time (directly connected to the definition of popular culture and its consumption), it was difficult to associate him with the notion of domestic abuse. Those who built his image of an American hero and celebrity were quick to ignore the truth because it would be inconvenient. (Edelman) Surrounding himself with well-known, rich and influential people, Simpson secured his own status in society, became an “anomaly” living in a rich white neighborhood like Brentwood and being “loved by the cops”. (Edelman) Later events irretrievably altered his public image in both black and white communities, making him one of the most controversial Americans in history.

### 3.2. The case

In the early hours of June 13, 1994 police was called to the crime scene at South Bundy Drive in Brentwood where the very brutal murders of O.J. Simpson's ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ronald Goldman took place. (Edelman) Both victims died as a result from multiple stab wounds and Brown's throat was slit. (Edelman) The crime scene evidence included a left glove and a bloody trail leaving the scene which indicated that the killer was wounded. (Edelman) After learning that the victim was Simpson's ex-wife, a few police officers including detective Mark Fuhrman went to O.J.'s nearby Rockingham estate to notify him about the murders. (Edelman) They were told by his tenant Kato Kaelin that Simpson had left for Chicago a few hours prior, but his alibi became questionable after Fuhrman found a right glove at the back of the house and blood on his white Ford Bronco. (Edelman) Upon his return from Chicago Simpson was handcuffed and taken to custody as the primary suspect but released after the police questioning. (Edelman) As his blood was found on the crime scene and evidence was piling up against him, Simpson started gathering what would later be known as "the dream team" of lawyers, first of which was a famous celebrity lawyer, Robert Shapiro. (Edelman) Stating that he wanted to avoid "a media circus", he worked on a deal with the police and was supposed to surrender Simpson to the detectives at 11 o'clock on June 17, but when O.J. failed to appear, he was labeled the fugitive of justice and the LAPD was actively searching for him. (Edelman) At that time, Simpson was in the car with his friend Allen Cowlings, speeding the freeway and threatening suicide. (Edelman) When the car was spotted by the reporters from helicopters, began the infamous "Bronco chase" for which the police were often criticized and which lasted for hours. (Edelman) He was taken back into custody and pleaded not guilty at his first court appearance on June 20. (Edelman) Before the trial began, the Prosecution was very confident they would win this case having an abundance of evidence pointing to Simpson, alongside with his history of domestic violence. (Edelman) The case was assigned to Judge Lance Ito and the trial began on January 24, 1995. (Edelman) Two hundred and sixty-seven days of trial ended with three and a half hours of deliberation by the jury who found O.J. Simpson not guilty in the case of double murder on October 3, 1995. (Edelman)

### 3.2. The media

The “Trial of the Century”, as it was nicknamed in the press, drew colossal amounts of media coverage. CNN (Cable News Network) covered every minute of the case, with their viewership increasing by seven hundred per cent. (Alderman 86) What happened to the media, especially television news, at the time was that their function changed from “recapitulation” of the events to “continuous updating” which ultimately gave more time and meaning to what was being reported. (Alderman 86) Even very early on in the case, the media saw the great potential of this story and countless cameras were present when Simpson was first arrested, with reporters climbing trees to get a better view of the scene. (Edelman) The Bronco chase was being covered from air and broadcast live (Edelman) with reporters commenting every minute of it which, in my opinion, resembled a football game rather than a police chase. The police, who would not stop Simpson, were displaying unusual police behavior in slowly following him while crowds of people gathered along the freeway with signs like “Free O.J.” or “We love you O.J.” (Edelman) One of the reporters of the chase, Zoey Tur emphasizes that police would not have acted the way they did, “if O.J Simpson were black”, but because “he transcended race and color to the exalted status of celebrity, he got a motorcade.” (Edelman) By the time the trial had started, both the prosecution and the defense tried to use the media to their advantage because they knew it would be one of the most important factors in deciding if the most famous American ever charged with murder would be found guilty or not. (Edelman) Judge Ito’s decision to let the cameras inside the courtroom was initially considered a positive step in helping American citizens understand the legal system but the attempt failed. (Edelman) Being the first celebrity case of this sort and magnitude since the Lindbergh kidnapping in 1932, people’s appetite for it was immense and consequently the press stopped giving the public the news in terms of significance and fought for ratings. (Edelman)

Most agree that this case never felt like a murder case and, unfortunately, the victims were mainly ignored. (Edelman) The two people whose lives were taken in a violent manner and who never got justice were also failed by the media who mostly talked about this case in reference to O.J. Simpson. While researching the media coverage of the trial, I noticed that the second victim, Ron Goldman, was particularly forgotten, to say “less important” and smaller a headline than O.J. Simpson allegedly killing his wife. It is no wonder that Goldman’s family members were enraged by the public’s interest in Simpson’s 2007 book



entitled *If I Did It* in which he hypothetically describes Nicole and Ron's murders. (Edelman) Goldman's father stated that Simpson was given a voice only because it meant money for both him and the publishers and he became relevant in the media again. (Edelman) The only time Simpson lost a battle in this war was in civil court in 1996 and 1997 when he was found guilty of the murders and had to pay \$33 million to the families. (Edelman) This trial was not televised and there was a different dynamic to it, with Simpson reportedly being "cocky" and laughing during the process, showing a completely different side of himself, unlike the 1995 trial when he was always aware when camera was filming him. (Edelman)

#### 3.4. Playing the race card

This case was never just a famous football player charged with murder; it surely would not have been this controversial and important as it is if all involved had been of the same race. Race certainly played the biggest role in Simpson's acquittal and the man who made the best of it was Johnnie Cochran, a famous civil rights lawyer who joined the team sometime later in the case. (Edelman) Although most famous for his line in this very trial "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit", Cochran had been a respected lawyer fighting for African American rights since the 1960s. (Edelman) If one goes into the issue of race a bit deeper, one will understand that there are two views on Cochran's approach in defending Simpson, those who think that he ruthlessly played the race card and those who, including the lawyer himself, claim that there was no need to because everything in America is about race. (Monroe) In my opinion, the issue here is not whether the race card was played or not, but if it was justifiable or not. Cochran joined the "dream team" at a perfect moment, just when the public was informed about detective Mark Fuhrman's rather troublesome past which included the usage of racial slurs and exaggerated force when dealing with African Americans. (Edelman) Considering that Fuhrman was essential to the prosecution's case since he found the bloody glove behind Simpson's house, the defense team took the advantage and accused him of planting it. (Edelman) The glove was not the only questionable evidence; the whole crime scene was dealt with quite unprofessionally and carelessly, forensics handled material without wearing gloves, a blanket from inside the house was put over the body of one victim potentially contaminating it and so on. (Coates) Now we come to the difference in understanding this from the point of view of these two groups of people, white and black. In his 2016 article, Ta-Nehisi Coates, American journalist and author, recalls his atypical

reaction to the Simpson verdict. Inspired by Edelman's documentary which was made over two decades after the trial had ended, Coates reveals why, at the age of nineteen, he was enraged by the acquittal, but also tries to explain the position of those who supported Simpson. Regarding the mishandled evidence, Coates points out that white people might consider those mistakes as technicalities, while African Americans might seriously doubt the accuracy of the evidence. Although the notion of police planting evidence is perhaps implausible to a white person, it is certainly not so for a black person if one is aware of how they were treated by the LAPD in the past. (Coates) The defense knew that, used it and introduced race into the case. Cochran was the main figure in this team of lawyers because, as a civil rights lawyer, he was the only one who would connect Simpson's case to LAPD's treatment of African Americans and the only one who knew how. (Edelman)

The fact is we will never know for certain if the evidence was planted or if Simpson was indeed guilty of this crime, but it is biased to say that all members of the white community ignored his race and their own prejudices. In her own analysis of the case, White claims that there was certainly a dose of racism included in forming a judgment about Simpson because "white America's image of a criminal bears a black face". (White 3) Considering the stereotypes connecting African Americans to crime mentioned in the previous chapter (they are "more guilty" than white people), I feel obliged to agree with White. Stating that "we are all guilty", she blames both sides including white feminists who refused to acknowledge the racism, as well as African American activists who disregarded sexism in this case. (White 2)

After the publication of the controversial tapes in which detective Fuhrman talks about killing black people and escaping punishment because "you're God", it is understandable why Simpson's support among African Americans grew. (Edelman) After taking the Fifth Amendment in court when asked about planting evidence, Fuhrman strengthened the belief that he was capable of it. (Edelman) On the other hand, in playing the race card Simpson's defense team, especially Cochran, was trying to beat the system that had been unfair to black people. (Edelman) What bothered many, including a number of African Americans who had not forgotten Simpson denying help to his community, was Cochran's effort to portray him as yet another civil rights victim. (Edelman) Coates states that he did not understand why the black community was so interested in a man who showed no interest in them and what the LAPD's brutality had to do with someone who lived so far away from the Los Angeles ghettos. (Coates) Having a predominantly black jury (nine jurors were African American), the

“dream team” went on to create an illusion of Simpson with which they could relate. (Edelman) In Edelman’s documentary one of the lawyers, Carl Douglas, reflects on the day jury visited the Rockingham estate. Simpson’s house was re-decorated, his photographs with white celebrities like Donald Trump were taken down and “pictures he had probably never seen before” with African Americans were put up. (Edelman) Douglas blatantly states that, had there been a Latin jury, they would have had “a picture of him in a sombrero, a mariachi band and a piñata on the staircase”. (Edelman) Needless to say, their attempts on improving Simpson’s reputation as an African American were successful, and alongside with moments like Fuhrman’s Fifth Amendment and the gloves not fitting (which was a particularly powerful scene to watch) led to his acquittal. The documentary features two jurors, Yolanda Crawford, who claims the jury was not influenced by race but that the prosecution’s case was mishandled, and Carrie Bess who admits their decision was compensation for Rodney King. (Edelman) Praised by the black community, Cochran and the team did win this case, but as Pastor Mark Whitlock says in Edelman’s documentary *Made in America*, the public’s excitement about the system working for one African American person was not long lasting because it did not change the white society’s treatment of black people, it was simply “a victory for a rich guy named O.J Simpson.” (Edelman)

#### 4. *American Crime Story*

In this part of my paper I will be focusing on the analysis of the FX 2016 series *American Crime Story* created by Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski and produced by Ryan Murphy among others. The first season of this true crime series entitled *People v. O.J. Simpson* was based on a 1997 book *The Run of His Life: People v. O.J. Simpson* by Jeffrey Toobin and on actual media recordings. It was received very well by both the public and the critics, earning multiple Emmy and Golden Globe awards. There were many on-screen adaptations of the case and trial since 1995, but what this one gives the viewer is an insight into multiple perspectives; it does not deal exclusively with Simpson as an individual or the murder. It tells the story from characters’ point of view studying the problems of racism, sexism, domestic violence and the power of the media and fame. The series’ popularity is yet another proof that today’s society has not resolved issues from the past and that the public can still relate to events from over twenty years ago. Representation of events through ten episodes is not one-sided and characters are not flat but three-dimensional which gives us, the

viewers, an opportunity to comprehend the complexity of this case, its setting and main participants.

What is very eye-catching about this adaptation is how its creators decided to begin and end it. Namely, the first episode, entitled “From the Ashes of Tragedy”, does not begin with the story of Simpson’s life and career or some scenes from the trial that have become an inseparable part of American pop culture; it begins with actual footage of the Rodney King beating and the 1992 civil unrest in Los Angeles. The strong visual is accompanied with King’s voice in the background saying: “Can we all get along?” What is communicated to the viewers is that this series will not deal with something simple and black and white but with cause and effect. As this is not the main point of *American Crime Story*, Simpson’s guilt or innocence is not discussed, the emphasis is on events and people who allowed him to walk out of that courtroom a free man. (Mangan) The sizable cast and various stories help us understand the importance of this case and its influence on mass culture; in its aftermath we got numerous tell-all books and new celebrities who started the trend of reality television. At the very end of the episode ten, “The Verdict”, the last thing we see are photographs of Nicole Brown and Ronald Goldman, two victims whose fates were forgotten as this murder trial transcended into something much larger.

The next two subchapters will deal with subjects I found most interesting while watching *People v. O.J. Simpson*, the contrast in the context of race between Simpson’s lawyer Johnnie Cochran and Prosecutor Christopher Darden, both of whom are African American and the sexist public treatment of Prosecutor Marcia Clark.

#### 4.1. Johnnie Cochran and Christopher Darden

The reason why I chose to analyze Cochran and Darden is their intriguing relationship before and during the trial. What held my attention was the dynamic between them; both African American, but fighting for a different cause on opposite sides, these two men powerfully clashed every time they appeared together on screen. Played by Courtney B. Vance (Cochran) and Sterling K. Brown (Darden), the two lawyers display a different side to them, something that was not shown in documentaries or court footage. During the course of the *American Crime Story* we see both their virtues as flaws and just how layered they are. The main cause of their conflict was race and the way each of them dealt with their blackness.

Both were undoubtedly excellent lawyers, cared about their community, and led quite different lives from O.J. Simpson, always aware of their skin color.

The imminent conflict is implied at the very beginning of the series, when Cochran criticizes his younger colleague for not fighting harder in another lost case of police brutality, telling him that he must “choose a side” and indicating that fair play is not always an option. In the first few episodes neither Darden nor Cochran are a part of the case but as the situation evolves, their presence becomes inevitable. As was established previously, Cochran did play the race card in the courtroom; however, the idea was not his but Robert Shapiro’s (John Travolta) who convinced Simpson to hire him. In the early stages Cochran stated multiple times that he would not accept a place in Simpson’s team of lawyers because he liked to win, and this case was lost from the beginning. During the Bronco chase, Darden is seen with his family and neighbors having a barbecue. He talks to his neighbors over the fence (the split screen could also represent different opinions inside the black community), their attitudes differing as he states that Simpson is not deserving of their support because he never “gave back” to his community and “became white”, to which his neighbors respond that O.J. became black as soon as the police started chasing him. Despite his father’s warnings not to get involved as the case will inevitably become about race, Darden accepts Marcia Clark’s (Sarah Paulson) offer as a Prosecutor. In *The Fact of Blackness*, Fanon talks about the inability of the black man to escape his blackness and gain recognition from the white man. To escape the mentioned “inborn complex”, he must “assert” himself “as a black man” (Fanon 5), which Cochran does, or he is forever tormented by it, as Darden is. In my opinion, it can be said with certainty that both men were offered to participate in this trial because of their skin color, as Fanon puts it: “The presence of the Negroes beside the whites is in a way an insurance policy on humanness” (13). However, they accepted for different reasons. To elaborate that, I must mention two instances when their back stories were shown.

In a flashback from 1982, we see Cochran driving his two daughters to dinner when he is pulled over by a police officer. After he protests that he did nothing wrong but drive in a nice car in a white neighborhood he is handcuffed while white passers-by and his children watch in horror. The officer releases him after learning that he is the assistant district attorney, but that does not diminish the fact that he was publicly humiliated and as Fanon notes in previous chapters, the slave of his own appearance. In the same episode (“The Race Card”) Darden tells Clark how every time he entered a classroom in college people would stare, making him feel that he “took some more worthy person’s place”. Combating classic black

stereotypes of being lazy and unintelligent, as stated in the previous chapters on stereotypes, is difficult and, as he points out, “those feelings never leave”. (00:24:11) Being aware of their past experiences, one can understand their initial motives. Cochran’s main goal, as the older and more experienced lawyer who was disappointed by the system on multiple occasions, was to fight for the whole black community and to bring justice to mistreated African Americans through O.J. Simpson. Darden’s aim, however, was justice served (it is important to stress that Darden was convinced Simpson was guilty, while Cochran’s opinion was not analyzed in detail in the series). Nevertheless, it is clearly shown that Cochran, aware of the magnitude of the case, was also driven by his own ambition as he tells his wife that he would be dissatisfied if another lawyer got Simpson acquitted.

*People v. O.J. Simpson* thoroughly depicts Cochran’s carefully planned strategy that started with him implying on various talk shows that the LAPD might have been involved in a set-up. In a particularly interesting scene (in “100% Not Guilty”) Johnnie tells O.J. that when he became the first black assistant attorney in office he wanted to change the things inside but realized very early on that it was impossible. That explains to the viewer why and how Cochran became so recognizable with his preach-like speeches and learnt to use the media to his own advantage. It is impressive to see him use his skills throughout the series. Fully aware that race was the most powerful discourse (“a formal treatment of a subject in speech or writing” (Mills 2)) in American society he used it to get what he desired; he often started his speeches quoting Martin Luther King Jr., insisted on more black jurors and acted as the main decorator of O.J.’s Rockingham estate for the jurors’ tour proclaiming: “I like me some blackness” (“The Race Card”, 00:39:01). However, not even he was spared when the media started exposing the secrets of all those involved with the trial. His colleagues were shocked when Cochran’s ex-wife appeared on a talk show (alongside a lover with whom he had a child) and talked about his own domestic violence. Visibly annoyed Cochran becomes very dismissive of journalists and once again uses race to distract the public and protect his reputation. It is interesting to note that during his many choreographed speeches in the courtroom, Cochran fails to mention the victims thus keeping the jury focused on a much more general subject of racism.

Another thing that becomes clear as the series progresses is that Cochran played the race card not only in favor of Simpson, but also against Darden. Relying on the power of the media, he represented Darden as a “black man who’s being used by the DA’s office” (“The Race Card”, 00:04:40) instantly impairing his public image. At one point in “The Race Card”

Darden confronts him, telling him his comments were disrespectful, to which Cochran replies: “Brother, I ain’t trying to be respectful. I’m trying to win.” (00:15:37) When Darden addresses the court on the issue of detective Fuhrman and his usage of racial slurs, saying it should not be mentioned because such words are divisive, inflammatory and inevitably evoke an emotional response from any African American, Cochran uses the opportunity to shame him. After he states that every black person is offended by remarks that the jury might be “blinded to the truth” if they hear the N-word, Cochran leans towards Darden and whispers: “Nigger, please” (“The Race Card”, 00:21:30), letting him know that he will use his own community against him. When an African American reporter tells him that a black prosecutor cannot contribute to his community because he chose “the opposite side”, Darden becomes aware of the power of Johnnie’s discourse which, in my opinion, leads Darden to trying to upstage him and results in failure. Both men are subjected to stereotypes on different occasions; F. Lee Bailey (Nathan Lane) suggests that Cochran should deliver the opening statement in a “downtown dialect easier for them [the jury] to understand” (“100% Not Guilty, 00:51:01), and Clark appoints Darden to examine Fuhrman to leave a better impression. Aware of his blackness, Cochran uses it for personal gain, while Darden in trying to fight it and defeat Johnnie starts making mistakes; after Clark rejects a few his proposition he confronts her: “You put me on this trial because you wanted a black face, but the truth is, you never wanted a black voice.” (“Manna from Heaven”, 00:23:36)

Their last confrontation happens after the trial is over (“The Verdict”) and represents two different viewpoints on the verdict. Expressing many people’s opinion, Darden tells Cochran this victory was not a civil rights milestone and that the police would continue with the same treatment of African Americans unless they are rich and from Brentwood. However, in the next scene Cochran gets recognition in the media for his efforts in encouraging changes in the legal system and cries stating: “That’s the victory!” (“The Verdict”, 00:44:32)

#### 4.2. Marcia Clark

Another important issue that the show addresses is gender inequality through the character of the Prosecutor Marcia Clark. As Trier-Bieniek and Leavy state, it is important to understand that “sex” and “gender” are not synonyms in any context; sex is a biological category, while gender is a socially constructed set of ideas of what it means to be masculine or feminine and how those notions are applied to a person depending on their sex. (Trier-

Bieniek and Leavy 3) Deviation from the norms is discouraged by our society and we learn to live with those stereotypical patterns of behavior as an integral part of our being. We once again must mention media and how, in a way, we become the products of it. As we are under its constant influence, representations in the media start merging into real life and we tend to forget how limiting those displayed stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity actually are. (Trier-Bieniek and Leavy 32) Generally speaking, as a society we live under certain rules of how we should behave, dress and what professions we should enter.

As Judge Lance Ito (Kenneth Choi) remarks at one point in the series (“Manna from Heaven”), women who work in male-dominated professions are very often targeted because they defy norms. That Marcia Clark was unfairly treated during the Simpson trial is common knowledge, but *American Crime Story* deals with it in detail showing not only how the media treated her, but also how it affected her as an individual. From the beginning of the series we see her being criticized for almost everything she does. During the Simpson trial in which she was a prosecutor, Clark was also going through a second divorce and a battle for custody of her two young children. It is interesting to see those two sides of her portrayed in the series; a strong-willed woman devoted to her work and a mother trying to do what is best for her family. Her scenes switch from the courtroom in which she defies stereotypes by doing “a man’s job” and loudly fighting for what she believes in to the other courtroom in which gets punished for stepping out of the norm. After constantly feeling guilty for working late and being attacked by her ex-husband who petitions for primary custody, she angrily asks: “Why should I be penalized for doing my job?” (“Marcia, Marcia, Marcia”, 00:07:14) Besides being criticized by her ex-husband who portrayed her as a bad mother in the media, her problems were ridiculed by her male colleagues, in particular Cochran. In the same episode, Cochran answers the court’s question about being able to examine a witness in one day if not for “any acts of God or further childcare crises from Miss Clark” (00:24:49). She calls him out saying that his remarks offend her as a woman and a mother and that underestimating her personal problems in the courtroom was inappropriate. If one thinks about it, it is almost impossible to imagine a man being subjected to the same kind of criticism because in accordance with gender norms, men are expected to work while women are expected to raise children. By disobeying these norms, women usually earn epithets “bad” while men rarely do.

The mistreatment soon transcended her personal life and expanded to her appearance and demeanor. After jury research, during which both men and women made comments like “she seems like a bitch”, “acts like everybody’s stupid” and “I wouldn’t want to be her



boyfriend” (“100% Not Guilty”, 00:23:07), Clark realizes she was going to receive a different treatment than her male colleagues in the media. Not long after the trial had started, the public interested in her started growing; photographs of her were featured on both television and in the newspaper, mocking and analyzing her choice of clothing, hairstyle and mannerisms and concluding that she “doesn’t care what she looks like”. Again, if one thinks about it, men are very rarely subjected to this kind of scrutiny as stereotypes allow them to escape strict norms when it comes to appearance. Whether it is in movies or real life, women are expected to follow the narrow norms of feminine image, while it is fully acceptable for men to be of any size or appearance. (Trier-Bieniek and Leavy 35) When the media goes to the extremes of conducting polls about the public’s opinion of her, Clark is advised by colleagues to “soften” her appearance, wear more skirts, change her hairstyle and try to smile more. In translation, she was told to conform to the feminine stereotypes in order to gain public approval. This massive interest in her appearance can be connected with the fact that, when it comes to popular culture and the media, those in charge of creating and modeling it are men, so “it is not surprising that we often see stereotyped portrayals of femininity and masculinity” (Trier-Bieniek and Leavy 15). Visibly hurt by the constant criticism, she is shown in a hair salon getting a makeover, but as she appears in court the next day very proud of her new image, situation worsens. In one of the most moving scenes in my opinion, the moment she enters the courtroom everyone starts laughing, cameras flashing in her face while Judge Ito adds: “Good morning, Miss Clark. I think.” (“Marcia, Marcia Marcia”, 00:34:46) The scene of her public humiliation ends with Clark crying, followed by numerous newspaper headlines like: “Marcia Hair Verdict: GUILTY” and “Curls of Horror”.

The final blow from the media comes as she once again makes headlines when her first husband sells her old nude picture to a magazine. After Judge Ito sees how disturbed she is and court goes into recess, we see Darden comforting Clark who tells him that she is not a public personality and cannot deal with the attention like, for example, Cochran. It is interesting to note that in the following episodes Clark’s wearing brighter colors and jewelry and is more silent than in the beginning, although none of this is explicitly indicated. Later on we find out that she decided to become a lawyer after being raped at seventeen years old. Despite being aware of all the disadvantages of doing a “man’s job” she was motivated to deliver justice to other people who had been victims themselves. Taking all this into consideration, one can comprehend the unfairness of our society who was more interested in her appearance rather than her contributions. My efforts were to show that how Clark was

represented can be directly connected to the general representation of women in popular culture.

Media's unjust treatment of women continues to this day and examples most similar to Clark's can especially be found in politics. Politicians such as Hilary Clinton, Theresa May or Angela Merkel to name a few cannot escape the media judging their hair, make-up or clothes. (Wylie) Degrading newspaper headlines like the Daily Mail's "Merkel's weapons of mass distraction" (Beaudoux) describing her cleavage during a social even in 2008 can greatly impair their public image, as well as the constant focus on their appearance, their marriages and roles as wives and mothers. All those things combined result in women not being taken seriously and further strengthen gender roles and professional power over women.

On the other hand, there is ignorance which could also be found in the multilayered Simpson case and it has to do with one of the victims, Nicole Brown. During the spectacle that was this case Brown, the murder victim, was forgotten and rarely mentioned in the media who were focused on Simpson, his celebrity lawyers and LAPD officers showing another instance of gender inequality. In my opinion, it was so because there was nothing "interesting" about Brown that the media could use in order to attract mass audience up until the point when her friend Faye Resnick published a tell-all memoir about her (Jerome), providing a "reason" for the public to form criticism and judgment and proclaim her a "bad" wife and mother because of her alleged relationships and behavior that would probably go unnoticed had she been male.

## 5. Conclusion

Simpson's verdict was aired live all over the United States as millions Americans awaited the epilogue to the "trial of the century". Oprah Winfrey's audience, who also watched the verdict live, mostly consisted of whites and African Americans and their reactions to the verdict can serve as a general example of how the public responded. Taking the background and context of this case into consideration, it is not a surprise to see the better part of blacks cheering while the whites watch in shock (there were some exceptions). As seen in Edelman's documentary, America stayed divided when it came to O.J. Simpson and it had a great impact on his life. Living in Brentwood became uncomfortable and he tried his best to come as near as possible to the black community, which in my opinion was the extension to playing the race card in court.

Becoming an inseparable part of American pop culture, the Simpson case had a colossal impact on society then and continues to do so. It altered television news and started an era of tell-all books and reality TV stars who continue to influence society more than twenty years later. Alexander and Karaszewski's *People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story*, unlike some similar adaptations, does not focus solely on Simpson and the "dream team"; it discusses a whole range of issues like race, gender, domestic violence, celebrity status and media power, all of whom are essential in understanding the course and the outcome of the trial. It is a very complex and layered case which undoubtedly had a big part in shaping today's America, from social relations to pop culture.

*American Crime Story* contains an abundance of issues that could be analyzed; problem of Judge Ito's race, racist and misogynistic attitudes of detective Mark Fuhrman and so on, but due to the limited number of pages in my paper, I was unable to analyze them all. As my paper is mainly about the issue of race and racism, I chose to examine how it affected Cochran and Darden's relationship and ultimately the outcome of the trial. Another important issue that the series concentrated on was sexism which was in the shadow during the case. I chose to analyze Clark's position because it warns of the dangers of not just sexism but the immense power of the media.

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7. Race Issues in the O.J. Simpson Case – Analysis of Alexander and Karaszewski's *American Crime Story*: summary and key words

The O.J. Simpson trial from 1995 is one of the most famous and most complicated cases in modern history. One of the first recorded trials, it drew huge amounts of media attention and became a part of American popular culture. It is not simply a murder case, as it also deals with issues such as racism, gender inequality, domestic violence, media power and many others. Those issues are presented in this paper with emphasis on racism and gender through the analysis of three characters from Alexander and Karaszewski's TV series *The People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story*.

Key words: O.J. Simpson, racism, gender, media power, American Crime Story

8. Problem rase u slučaju O.J. Simpsona – Analiza serije *American Crime Story* Alexandera I Karaszewskog: sažetak i ključne riječi

Suđenje O.J. Simpsonu iz 1995. godine je jedno od najpoznatijih i najkompliciranijih u modernoj povijesi. Kao jedno od prvih snimanih suđenja, privuklo je ogromnu pozornost medija i postalo dio američke popularne kulture. To nije samo slučaj ubojstva jer se bavi i problemima kao što su rasizam, rodna nejednakost, obiteljsko nasilje, moć medija te mnogim drugim. Ti problemi su predstavljeni u ovom radu s naglaskom na rasizam i rod kroz analizu tri lika iz serije *American Crime Story* Alexandera i Karaszewskog.

Ključne riječi: O.J. Simpson, rasizam, rod, moć medija, American Crime Story