READING 29

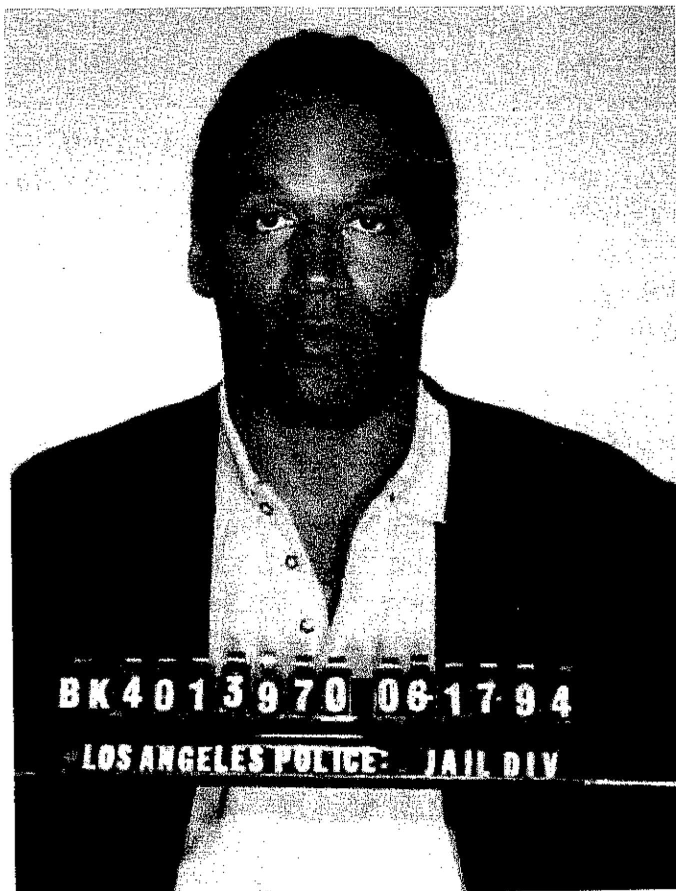
O.J. Simpson: The Trial of the Century

Haynes Johnson

O.J. Simpson had spent his career in the national spotlight. In 1967 as a running back for the University of Southern California, he led the Trojans to a Rose Bowl. The following year, he became everybody's All-American, flashing across the nation's televisions with a combination of speed and moves unmatched in the history of football. He won the Heisman Trophy, the Maxwell Award, and the AP and UPI Player of the Year honors. As a professional he was equally spectacular. Not only did he become the first runner to rush for more than 2,000 yards in one season, he also set National Football League records for the most 100-yard games and the most yards in one game. But O.J. was always more than his statistics indicated. His charm, smile, and charisma made him an icon. He was the first African-American athlete to become a major corporate spokesman, and after he retired, he became a film and television celebrity. Unlike previous black athletes, it seemed that every door in America was open to O.J.

All this changed on Friday, June 17, 1994. First, the Los Angeles County Police Department charged Simpson with the murder of his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend Ronald Goldman. Next, reporters tracked Simpson to a white Ford Bronco, driven by O.J.'s friend Al Cowlings. Followed by a flotilla of police cars and television helicopters, Cowlings drove Simpson along various Los Angeles freeways. Cheering spectators lined several stretches of highway, and all the major networks covered the entire drama. The trial that followed, which historian Haynes Johnson termed the "trial of the century," became a media event that shed light on more than Simpson's innocence or guilt. It illuminated American culture in the late twentieth century.

Everyone thinks they know him: O.J., the good guy, always smiling, always charming, always nonthreatening, always ready to sign one more autograph for adoring fans; O.J., the all-American sports hero, the amiable athlete turned affable TV commentator; O.J., the entertaining pitchman who is constantly seen in American living rooms, courtesy of TV commercials, leaping over barricades and racing through airports as he promotes his sponsor's products; O.J., the loving father and family man; O.J., the black man, who plays so long and successful a role as an appealing, self-effacing American icon, that he's no longer seen as black. In fact, he doesn't see himself as black—he's often quoted as saying, "I'm not black, I'm O.J." In manner, language, lifestyle, and personal association he passes, seemingly effortlessly, into the upper echelons of the white world. Exposed to the good life, courted by the powerful, he belongs to the best country clubs, moves in the best social circles, golfs with the corporate elite, travels on private jets to fabulous resorts, rubs shoulders with influential deal makers.



Never had an athelete risen and fallen as far as O. J. Simpson. From his days at USC to his trial for murder, he captured the attention of the nation.

So nonblack, so nonthreatening racially is O.J. that he becomes the first black athlete to be employed by corporate sponsors to endorse products not marketed solely to blacks. His marriage to a beautiful young blonde, a familiar golden girl of the nineties type, draws none of the sneers and hatred and jealousies that mark other interracial celebrity marriages. In the American heart and mind, O.J. is colorless. His celebrity status is such that even some who resent him do not express their feelings publicly. That is particularly true, and particularly complicated, when it comes to blacks.

After O.J.'s arrest for the murders, some of these hidden emotions surface. "He forgot that he was black," one black woman says when she phones a Dallas talk-radio show devoted solely to the O.J. case. "He didn't show love to us that he should have showed. But deep in our hearts, all of us loved him. He left us years ago." Another black woman calls the same show to say: "Even though he was with a white woman, he was something for our race to be proud of. I feel hurt. I feel hurt."

O.J., the reality, is infinitely more complicated. His life story illuminates the continuing struggles of African Americans to escape the obstacles that keep them separated from the predominant white mainstream. O.J. Simpson, the gentle sports hero fans think they know, is, in fact, the product of a tough, violent upbringing in the slums of San Francisco.

His is a raw and painful childhood, but typical of blacks like him who live in the dismal public projects of the inner city. In the tough Potrero Hill district where he grew up,

Haynes Johnson, *The Best of Times: The Boom and Bust Years of America Before and After Everything Changed*, Harvest Books, Harcourt Inc., 2002.

70 percent of the blacks are on welfare, and, as in O.J.'s case, a majority of the children are raised without a father in the home. It's common for them to join a gang, as O.J. does at the age of thirteen when he becomes a member of the Gladiators. A year later, at fourteen, he experiences his first arrest—for robbing a liquor store. In junior high he joins what he once described as his "first *fighting* gang," the Persian Warriors. With them, he participates in pitched battles, usually on weekends, with rival gangs. In their world, violence is commonplace; brawling and stoning cars are part of a normal weekend. Witnessing sudden death is also a common experience. Years later, O.J. remembers being in gang fights "where a couple of guys got croaked."

By the age of fifteen, he has earned a reputation as being especially good with his fists. "I only beat up dudes who deserved it," he once explained, "at least once a week, usually on Friday or Saturday night. If there wasn't no fight, it wasn't no weekend." It was then, barely into his teens, that he wins renown within the gang culture for the manner in which he beats an older, much feared, leader of a rival gang, the Roman Gents, the toughest gang in the city.

After he ends his pro-football career, O.J. recalls that fistfight in a 1976 *Playboy* interview that reveals much about him the public would later be forced to confront, but does not want to. His fight is with Winky, then a battle-hardened twenty-year-old. "One night I was at a dance in the Booker T. Washington Community Center," O.J. remembers, "when, all of a sudden, this *loud* little sucker—an older O.J.—comes up to me and says, 'What did you say about my sister?' I'd heard of Winky—just about everyone had—but I didn't know that was who this cat was, so I just said, 'Hey, man, I don't know your sister. I don't even know *you*.' It wasn't cool to fight in the community center, so the guy started walking away, but he was still talkin' [illegible] to me and I yelled back, '[illegible] too, man!'

"Well, a few minutes later, I see a whole bunch of Roman Gents trying to get this cat to be cool, but nope, he's comin' over to me and he shouts, '[illegible], I'm gonna kick your [illegible]!!' And then—bingo!—the music stops and I hear everybody whisperin', 'Winky's gettin' ready to fight.' *Winky!* Damn, I didn't want to fight *him*. So as he walks up to me, I say, 'Hey, man, I really didn't say *anything* about your sister.' But before I can say anything else, Winky's on me, and swingin'. Well, I beat his [illegible]—I just cleaned up on the cat—and as I'm givin' it to him, I see this girl Paula, who I just loved, so *I* start getting loud. And as I'm punchin', I'm also shoutin': '[illegible]! *You gonna* [illegible] *with me??*'"

That's the O.J. his peers know. The public never does. Over the years, as he becomes enshrined among American sports heroes, O.J. adopts the style—and the speech—of the successful white world.

O.J. works hard at transforming his public persona from brawling street tough to smooth, confident member of the successful elite. Long before the brutal murders with which he's charged, Lee Strasberg, the acting coach who helped Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe, and other stars, and was then assisting O.J. in his Hollywood roles, says of O.J.: "He already is an actor, an excellent one." Strasberg adds, "A natural one." And once, while shooting a TV commercial with underprivileged black youths in Oakland, in the territory where he grew up, O.J.'s mask slips. Inadvertently, he begins employing the street language of his gang childhood. Furious, he announces he wants to redo the commercial. The second take goes perfectly. "That's what happens when I spend too much time with my boys," O.J. says afterward, in explaining his slip. "I forget how to talk white."

For O.J. and others like him, sports offers the surest path toward that road to success. It's not unusual for a black child from the slums with natural athletic ability to achieve an American Dream lifestyle and public fame.

It is highly unusual, however, to become a superstar athlete in spite of suffering from a severe childhood physical handicap.

As a two-year-old, O.J. Simpson was afflicted with rickets. The disease, resulting from a lack of calcium in the bones, a commentary on his impoverished inner-city diet, withered his legs and left him bow-legged and pigeon-toed. To correct his disability, leg braces were required; his mother, however, couldn't afford them. So for the next three years, O.J. shuffled around his house with an improvised contraption that enabled him to walk, while strengthening his legs. For several hours every day he put on shoes connected to each other by an iron band and struggled to walk. Ultimately, his handicap was corrected. The tenacity and drive displayed by this bow-legged kid with rickets who couldn't walk unaided is as impressive as any of the subsequent stories in the nineties that celebrate the determination to succeed of the new golden entrepreneurs of Technotimes.

From high school on, O.J.'s athletic prowess propels him up, and eventually out, of the world of his birth. His career ambitions are minimal. By his own account, he was "a lousy student" and "didn't exactly kill myself studying." He's so eager to leave the classroom that he thinks of enlisting in the Marines and fighting in Vietnam. By the time he graduates from junior college, he has smashed all existing football rushing records for that level of play and finds himself aggressively courted by recruiters of big-time collegiate athletics. They shower him with offers of full scholarships—and, typically, much more, most of it hidden.

Though ostensibly an amateur endeavor, guided by principles of good sportsmanship, American collegiate athletics, especially football, long since has passed into the realm of high-stakes, high-revenue professional sports. It's the biggest of businesses, awash in cash, commercialism, and corruption. It's all about money. A young potential superstar like O.J. finds himself at the center of a virtual bidding war. "A whole bunch of 'em were offering all kinds of under-the-table shit," he recalls of the college recruiters who besieged him. "In addition to a regular scholarship, most of the schools were talking about $400 or $500 a month and stuff like a car. One school was gonna arrange for my mother to clean up an office for $1,000 a month; another was gonna get my mother a house."

Whatever the offer, O.J. more than proves his worth; he richly rewards those who invest in him. Both in college at USC and then in the National Football League with the Buffalo Bills, his athletic ability attracts legions of paying fans. They fill the stadiums. With them come the networks and the sponsors. They vie for the right to telecast his games, not only locally, but nationally. These generate still more revenue.

Through it all O.J. soars. As his earnings multiply, he acquires more of the taste for and the trappings of the affluent life. To an adoring public, he becomes a self-effacing, beloved superstar. It's an intoxicating role. O.J., like so many sports heroes who achieve celebrity at an early age, takes the fawning worship of starstruck fans and effusive praise of sports announcers as his due. So, too, he takes as his natural right the physical gratification that comes with quick fame and wealth—the easy and endless sexual conquests, the eager girls on their knees, the constant adulation of faithful camp followers. No wonder primal urges are unchecked. Stars believe they can always get away with outrageous behavior, and often do. In the nineties, sports stars become involved in even more notorious cases, often resulting only in slaps on the wrist for the offenders, if that. Rules are made for lesser mortals.

But the idea that such a supposedly familiar public figure could be capable of the monstrous murders with which he's accused is simply inconceivable. Indeed, the public can

be excused for being so misinformed about O.J. and the life he's led. The O.J. the public has grown to love is wholesome, charismatic, uncomplicated.

As with so many other celebrities, especially sports celebrities, O.J. has led a charmed life, protected by a cordon of publicists, agents, producers, sponsors, sportswriters, and commentators, and protected no less by the police who treat him as an untouchable. Even in prison, O.J. demonstrates the power of special privilege accorded the celebrated star. In the Los Angeles County Men's Central Jail, where he is incarcerated along with sixty-four hundred other inmates, O.J. lives alone in a row of seven cells. Most of the other inmates are housed two to six in a single cell. They wait in line to use pay phones. O.J. doesn't. They must bathe in communal showers. O.J. showers by himself. Other prisoners are limited to visits of only twenty minutes a day. O.J. sees his lawyers and forty specially designated visitors for up to ten hours a day.

When asked about this special treatment, a sheriff's deputy justifies it by saying: "O.J. Simpson was living in a Brentwood estate worth $5 million, now he's incarcerated in a 9-by-7-foot cell. . . . It's all relative."

Not until the aftermath of the murders do other aspects of his life become widely known.

Within days, former friends and associates tell reporters of his jealousies, his rages, his record of hitting on women, casually, repeatedly, his blatant sexism and possessiveness. Once, in a fine Santa Ana restaurant where O.J. was hosting a group of his friends and his wife for dinner, he grabbed Nicole's crotch and loudly proclaimed, "This belongs to me." On another occasion, as testimony later reveals, he boasted to an acquaintance how easy it would be to kill someone by slashing his neck with a knife—and demonstrated, with gestures, how he would do it. And once, according to information a former Hollywood associate of his tells prosecutors, when the subject of Nicole's boyfriends was raised O.J. angrily vowed to "cut their fucking heads off" if he ever finds them driving his cars.

The public knows nothing about this side of O.J. It certainly has no knowledge of the devastating record of desperate telephone calls Nicole Brown Simpson made to police emergency numbers over the years, both during her marriage and after her divorce, as she sought protection from a violent, battering O.J. Nicole's police emergency calls document not only O.J.'s explosive violent nature, but also the failure of both police and judicial authorities to take effective action to stop his abusive behavior. Not that such failure is unique in Nicole's case; police routinely fail the battered wife, as numerous court records show. That dreary kind of record was compounded by the circumstances of the O.J. case. O.J.'s a superstar; superstars receive different treatment.

All this changes after The Chase and the arrest. Police and prosecutors, or both, immediately slip tape recordings of many of Nicole's 911 police emergency calls to local TV stations and the networks. Along with the recordings are equally damaging leaked written reports of police investigations of those incidents.

One police report, on New Year's Day 1989, describes how Nicole, wearing only bra and sweatpants, runs from bushes where she's hiding after having called police from inside their Brentwood mansion. Badly beaten, her lip cut, one eye blackened, Nicole keeps telling officers, "He's going to kill me; he's going to kill me." Does he have any guns? police ask. "He's got lots of guns," she replies. Then she bitterly complains to the police: "You never do anything about him. You talk to him and then leave. I want him arrested."

At that point, according to the police account, O.J. appears in a bathrobe. "I don't want that woman in my bed anymore," he screams at police. "I got two other women, and I don't want that woman in my bed anymore." When warned he is going to be ar-

rested, O.J. yells: "The police have been out here eight times before and you're going to arrest me for this? This is a family matter. Why do you want to make a big deal out of it? We can handle it."

Ultimately, Nicole doesn't press charges, but a city attorney files misdemeanor charges of spousal abuse against O.J. He pleads no contest, is fined $970, ordered to perform 120 hours of community service, and attend counseling sessions twice a week for three months. He's also given two years' probation.

The incident attracts little news attention. It has no demonstrable effect on O.J.'s public popularity. "It was perplexing," a female former employee of NBC Sports remarks to *Sports Illustrated* immediately after the murders. "People at NBC Sports used to always remark about the beating, shaking their heads and saying, 'Here's a man who used to beat his wife, and none of America cares or remembers.' People refused to believe because they thought he was such a nice guy."

It isn't just the American people who don't believe or care about such behavior. Neither do O.J.'s corporate bosses. Three months after the 1989 incident, NBC signed O.J. to an annual $400,000 broadcast contract, and he got another contract for more than half a million dollars a year from Hertz rental car, the sponsor of his TV commercials.

Even more damaging are tapes leaked to CNN and then broadcast over that network in prime time days after O.J.'s arrest. These include a 911 call Nicole made to police from inside her home, after her 1992 divorce, on October 25, 1993. The transcript of that phone conversation frighteningly foreshadows her fate on the front steps of her townhouse less than a year later:

911 Operator: *911 emergency.*

Nicole: *Could you get someone over here now, to 325 Gretna Green. He's back. Please.*

911 Operator: *Okay. What does he look like?*

Nicole: *He's O.J. Simpson. I think you know his record. Could you just send somebody over here?*

911 Operator: *Okay, what is he doing there?*

Nicole: *He just drove up again. Can you just send somebody over?*

911 Operator: *He just drove up. Okay, wait a minute. What kind of car is he in?*

Nicole: *He's in a white Bronco. But first of all, he broke the back door down to get in.*

911 Operator: *Okay. Wait a minute. What's your name?*

Nicole: *Nicole Simpson.*

911 Operator: *Okay. Is he the sportscaster or whatever?*

Nicole: *Yeah.*

911 Operator: *Okay. What is—*

Nicole: *Thank you.*

911 Operator: *Wait a minute. We're sending the police. What is he doing? Is he threatening you?*

Nicole: *He's fuckin' going nuts.*

Her furious profane response doesn't stop the police operator from asking still more questions and still not responding swiftly.

In view of what happens later, Nicole's words as she tries to explain her fear of O.J. are especially chilling: "The kids are upstairs sleeping and I don't want anything to happen."

She explains to the police operator how O.J. came to her townhouse earlier, broke down her back door, went upstairs and pounded on her door until she fears it, too, will be broken. "Then he screamed and hollered," she says, "and I tried to get him out of the bedroom because the kids are sleeping in there."

The 911 Operator replies laconically, "Okay." Nicole, her tone increasingly urgent, continues trying to describe the danger she feels. The operator interrupts, maddeningly, to say, "Okay. So basically you guys have just been arguing?"

At that point, the tape picks up the background sound of a male voice, roaring and

shouting unintelligibly. The conversation continues:

> 911 Operator: *Is he inside right now?*
> Nicole, desperately: *Yes, yes.*
> 911 Operator: *Okay, just a moment.*
> O.J. Simpson: *[Unintelligible.]*

Through the sound of O.J.'s angry shouting, the tape clearly picks up a fragment of Nicole's plaintive voice: "—the kids. O.J.— O.J., the kids are sleeping."

The police operator interjects with yet another question: "He's still yelling at you? Just stay on the line, Okay?"

The conversation ends with a heartbreaking appeal from Nicole. "O.J. O.J. O.J. Could you please leave. Please leave."

After another frightening encounter with O.J., Nicole expressed the terror she felt in a tape recording. It's entered into the public record, along with a diary she kept in the years prior to her death. The diary details her fears of O.J.; it also describes the beatings and humiliations she suffers, including a vivid account of how O.J. once "beat me for hours." On the tape, she says that during O.J.'s rages he "gets a very animal look in him, his veins pop out and his eyes get black." Looking at him, she fears that "if it happened once more, it would be the last time." Eight months later, she's hacked to death.

In the aftermath of O.J.'s arrest, the revelations about Nicole's terror-stricken emergency calls and O.J.'s prior record for wife abuse initially focus great attention on the issue of domestic violence, particularly violence against women. For years, advocates and activists have been trying to place that issue squarely on the public agenda. Now O.J. gives them the perfect opportunity to get across their message about the prevalence of wife battering and spousal abuse. They appear on television to air the problem. They write op-ed pieces. Congress even holds hearings.

Black women are prominent among these advocates. Many speak out against O.J.'s violent behavior toward Nicole, as they have been doing repeatedly about violence committed against women by men, whether black men or white men. At this point in the O.J. story, they don't view the case along purely racial lines. As in the highly charged Supreme Court confirmation hearings for Clarence Thomas, women see abuse or harassment, while men see an "electronic lynching." Indeed, just a day after Nicole's body is discovered, the domestic violence issue appears to be creating further sharp divisions between African-American men and women.

On that Monday a female judge in Indiana refuses to free Mike Tyson, the former black heavyweight boxing champion then serving a six-year jail sentence for rape. Immediately, Indianapolis talk shows are besieged by angry callers. Women, many of whom identify themselves as black, praise her decision but add that Tyson should serve more, not less, prison time. Some believe he should have served the full sixty years to which he could have been sentenced after being convicted on two counts of criminal deviant sexual conduct and rape.

African-American male callers, by contrast, are outraged at the judge for not immediately freeing Tyson. The champ is "the greatest," they say. He never should have been imprisoned in the first place. He's the victim of a "scheming woman." The female judge's ruling proves how "the system" castrates and lynches black men. This becomes a theme that repeats itself ever more forcefully during the O.J. trial as the issue of domestic violence against women is overtaken by an even more combustible one—race.

The race card, as exemplified by the character of Mark Fuhrman, plays powerfully on deeply held African-American fears and resentments. It intensifies the already strong belief that blacks cannot expect fair treatment from the nation's criminal justice system. The O.J. case, in this reasoning, becomes an opportunity for racial payback to counter past wrongs extending back to the very beginnings

of the American experiment—the wrongs of slavery, of murder, of rape, of castration, of lynching, of segregation, of discrimination, of injustice. Fanning racial flames even higher is the performance of the black press, where O.J. is portrayed as yet another "victim" of white racism perpetrated by the combined conspiratorial efforts of a white legal and police establishment and a "white media."

While O.J. becomes another example of a black hero being destroyed by the white conspiracy, Johnnie Cochran, O.J.'s lead attorney, is hailed as a new black hero. He's even called a new civil rights leader for his defense of O.J. In sharp contrast, one of the key prosecutors, Chris Darden, also black, is condemned in the same black press as being a contemptible "house Negro" for prosecuting O.J.

In the end, race, not domestic violence, not corruption at the core of professional athletics that inspires above-the-law attitudes among its pampered stars, not even murder, becomes the emotional touchstone of the O.J. case.

No thinking American in the nineties could be surprised to learn that the United States still suffers from pervasive racial prejudice. Despite African-American advances in employment and income opportunities; despite the ending of legal segregation in housing, in schools, in the military; despite integration of previously all-white police departments enabling blacks to become chiefs of police in such former racial trouble spots as Birmingham, Alabama, and Charleston, South Carolina; despite anti-discrimination laws and affirmative action programs aimed at combating discrimination nationwide, racial suspicion and racial hostility still afflict the United States. The shock produced by the O.J. case comes not from the discovery that racial resentment and anger exist. The shock comes from the depth and virulence of them.

In the O.J. trial, everything is seen through the distorting prism of race. Blacks and whites examine the same evidence and draw starkly differing conclusions from it. One side sees a murderer; the other sees a victim. One sees clear and compelling evidence of guilt; the other sees a sinister conspiracy that seeks to convict the innocent.

Barely a month after O.J.'s arrest, 63 percent of whites answering a Time/CNN poll say they believe he will get a fair trial. Only 31 percent of blacks feel the same way. While 66 percent of whites believe he received a fair preliminary hearing, only 31 percent of blacks agree. Seventy-seven percent of whites believe the case against O.J. is either "very strong" or "fairly strong." Only 45 percent of blacks agree.

As the trial begins, the racial lines harden. Out of public view, the sequestered jury becomes riven with increasing racial tensions. Black and white jurors use separate gyms, watch movies in separate rooms. Black jurors complain that whites on their panel are given preferential treatment by sheriff's deputies. They suspect the deputies are secretly searching their housing quarters while they are on jury duty seeking evidence of bias against the prosecution or to discover they have been violating the judge's orders not to read news accounts about the case. One black juror, after being removed from the panel, goes on TV to accuse a white juror of kicking her. She says the same white juror stomped on the foot of another black juror in the jury box. Another black juror files a formal protest to Judge Ito about the racism perceived by black jury members.

Six months into the trial, a national survey by Lou Harris and Associates finds that 61 percent of whites believe Simpson is guilty. Sixty-eight percent of blacks think him innocent. Only 8 percent of all blacks surveyed believe that O.J. murdered Nicole and Ron. (Twenty-four percent of blacks polled say they aren't sure about O.J.'s guilt or innocence.)

By trial's end, a state of near total racial polarization exists across America.

In the O.J. case, the public fascination with violent entertainment and courtroom drama mixes with the conjunction between capitalism and celebrity. The case becomes a prime example of how profit seekers can manufacture and exploit a mass audience and how

television provides the perfect vehicle to promote that rush to profit. As Walter Lippmann observed in the wake of the TV quiz scandals that rocked the television world at the end of the fifties, "While television is supposed to be 'free,' it has in fact become the creature, the servant, and indeed the prostitute, of merchandising." To that point, Lippmann thought television's major influence had been twofold: first, "to poison the innocent by the exhibition of violence, degeneracy, and crime, and second, to debase the public taste." He should have seen the nineties.

In the O.J. case, everyone cashes in—the media, the lawyers, the judge, the jury, the publishers, the entertainment industry, the marketers of items bearing on the case. Even friends and foes of O.J. profit, eagerly, aggressively, shamelessly. Not least among them is O.J. himself, as well as supposedly bereaved relatives of the victims. The O.J. trial becomes not just "a rush to judgment," as his lawyer dramatically and repeatedly warns; it becomes a rush to capitalize, and capitalize in a way America has not witnessed before.

Not that the phenomenon of exploiting tragedy and sensation is new. . . .

In the O.J. case, the difference from the past lies not in the human instinct that lures crowds and hucksters to scenes of disaster. In the nineties, the difference lies in the ability of everyone, everywhere, to participate vicariously in those scenes as they are occurring.

For this capacity, thank technology. Mobile TV minicams and earth-orbiting satellites provide the technical ability to go live, virtually instantly, from any scene of disaster or scandal. For the decision to bring more and more of these scenes into everyone's living room, credit a number of factors that converged in the nineties. Intense competitive pressures among proliferating cable channels scrambling to wrest market share from the traditional networks created increasing demand to broadcast the latest, most sensational newsbreaks as they happen—and the more scandalous and lurid the better. As cable channels focused increasingly on the sensational and the scandalous, the old networks adapted by furnishing more of the same in an attempt to hold their declining audience.

The disgraceful attack talk-radio programs, with their growing audience and increasing influence, also affected the electronic and celebrity culture of the nineties. With their daily airing of ideological conspiracies and preoccupation with scandals—proof never necessary and rarely even a consideration—the talk-radio shows demonstrated the impact, and the money, to be made by appealing to the worst in people. Television, especially cable, followed their lead; tabloid TV joined attack radio in filling more of the nation's airwaves. "Trash TV" was on the rise.

None of this readily explains the appeal of these offerings, however, or the paradox they present about American society in the nineties. Americans, after all, were better educated, more sophisticated, more tolerant, more aware of subtlety and nuance and the imperfectability of public and private lives than ever before. They were, in the main, practical and realistic, generally hard-eyed, and not easily swayed by cheap appeals to emotion. So why were so many so captivated by such tawdry daily fare?

Part of the answer rests in the nature of the times. The best of times they may or may not have been, but they were certainly times blessed by an absence of crises—crises domestic or foreign, economic or social, environmental or medical. Freed from the kinds of concerns that compel public attention, Americans were also free to indulge in the titillation of gossip and scandal. They were free to be entertained by the spectacle of celebrities and public figures brought low. And with relentless, nonstop intensity, the electronic media dished up scandal in helpings that enabled every citizen to share in every gory, sordid detail.

Nor was O.J. the first of the great scandalous spectacles Americans witnessed in the nineties. By the time of O.J., Americans were conditioned to witnessing a succession of long-running scandalous episodes. No sooner did one end than another took its place. Each attracted an immense audience; each received frenzied media coverage; each was treated as if it said something significant about American society and thus deserved intense attention; each fueled an appetite for more of the same; each became a springboard for a successor, happily supplied by producers of Teletimes who sought and supplied the latest scandal for public consumption, all in a breakneck race to boost ratings.

So many were there, and so rapidly did they replace each other, that it seemed as if the single most defining characteristic of America in the nineties was an all-consuming preoccupation with scandal—scandal that over time merged into one continuous serial production.

The names of the players and the particulars about the scandals changed, but the object was the same—scandal, always more scandal: Dr. Kevorkian and the first assisted suicide; Rodney King, beaten viciously by Los Angeles policemen; Jeffrey Dahmer, "the homosexual cannibal," and horrific acts of mass murder; Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, sexual harassment, and pubic hairs; Mike Tyson and rape; Tailhook and sexual assault in the Air Force; the Packwood diaries and sex on Capitol Hill; Michael Jackson and that young boy; Nancy Kerrigan, Tonya Harding, and their violent skating rivalry; Lorena Bobbitt and her husband's severed penis.

All these occurred before O.J. Other episodes flitted across the TV screens during and after the long period when O.J. dominated the national stage: Susan Smith and her two drowned children; the Menendez brothers; JonBenet Ramsey, the pathetic six-year-old pushed by parents to compete in beauty pageants by tarting up and acting like a budding Lolita, found murdered in the basement of her home; Louise Woodward, the young British nanny, and the death of the child in her care; the murder of fashion designer Gianni Versace in a Palm Beach oceanfront mansion, perfectly providing a spectacle that combined synthetic glamour and glitz with salacious tales of gay sex; the clearly deeply troubled teacher, Mary Kay Letourneau, and her sad, sick affair—naturally labeled by the tabs "forbidden love"—with her thirteen-year-old student; Dick Morris, a president's Machiavellian pollster, sucking the toes of that prostitute on a Washington hotel balcony; Marv Albert, the loudmouth sportscaster, biting a woman in another hotel room near the capitol, providing perfect fodder for the televised celebrity and scandal culture, and being returned to the air as a sports commentator, apparently no less popular, or perhaps more so, than when his scandalous behavior created yet another mass spectacle.

Drawing the most intense media focus and public attention were the trials that resulted from many of those episodes. They were the easiest to cover and offered a convenient running plot line of scandal and suspense.

The cumulative effect of these events was to divert attention from the really great episodes of the nineties, and especially from two that came into play with tremendous force then. One, as we've seen, was the revolution in science, technology, and medicine rapidly changing life on the planet. The other was the growing concentration of great blocs of power through the greatest wave of mergers ever, creating new entities reshaping the basic economic and social structures of the nation.

As time passed, few Americans could recall specific details of the various episodes to which they were exposed or their outcomes. Nonetheless, stamped in the collective public memory was a hazy montage of sensationalized scandals. While people professed to be repelled by media excesses and obsessive attention to scandal, they also took guilty

pleasure in watching, and wallowing in, the spectacle.

Two weeks after O.J.'s arrest, CNN dispatched its cameras, and a correspondent, to a popular Atlanta fast-food restaurant, aptly named The Varsity, for a daylong sounding of public attitudes about the O.J. case. The slice of vox populi aired was highly revealing. Virtually every person interviewed expressed the same kinds of underlying ambivalence. They hated what they were seeing, or so they said, but they were watching all of it.

Television provided much more than "updates." It offered a new form of public entertainment—a live, free theater of spectacle and sensation. O.J. had it all, the serious and the sordid. It was irresistible. In the process, old news barriers and taboos were broken; practices previously deemed unacceptable by mainstream news organizations became acceptable amid rapidly evolving standards of the electronic age. Even some talk-radio hosts expressed concern about the negative impact they were having on the public. Days after the murders, during a Los Angeles convention of national talk-show hosts, one of them acknowledged to a *CBS Evening News* interviewer that with the O.J. case talk radio had "gone totally over the line." Then the talk host quickly added: "With each case we say that—and the line gets pushed further." That didn't stop the lines separating accuracy from rumor, fairness from unfairness, good taste from bad, from being driven farther and farther apart.

Distinguished news executives from both print and television bemoaned the lowering of journalistic values, the cheapening of reportage, the omnipresent "gotcha" aspects, the circus atmosphere that typified the coverage. "I don't like the idea that a murder trial has been turned into an entertainment special," Don Hewitt, the executive producer of *60 Minutes*, wrote in a *New York Times* oped article. "There are certain moments in American life that have a certain dignity." Not an O.J. moment, though, especially an O.J. moment that increases ratings and one that shows the growing public appetite for more of the same—more of the spectacular, more of the sensational, more of the scandalous. Which, of course, is what the public got.

Long before the trial even began, virtually all hope had vanished that it would provide for a watching world an example of the American criminal justice system at its best, a serious civic proceeding that exemplified the most cherished judicial attributes: dignity, decorum, and fairness. It quickly degenerated into a spectacle that demonstrated some of the worst characteristics of Teletimes. No one escaped unscathed. The lawyers fought among themselves, played as much to the TV cameras as to the jury, argued their cases in impromptu press encounters at every opportunity, leaked damaging information to the press, and also exhibited a taste for cashing in on the instant celebrity television had conferred upon them. One attorney on the defense team was involved in a New York trial that conflicted with O.J.'s. He asked for and won a postponement from that engagement; then he asked for another postponement from his New York obligations, in effect arguing it would be unfair to him financially if he were denied the chance to participate in the O.J. show, never mind his East Coast client. This time, his request was denied.

The jurors squabbled among themselves. At times, they, too, acted petulantly. Once, they even acted mutinously. On that occasion, thirteen of the eighteen remaining members of the panel showed up in court dressed in black. They threatened to refuse to enter the jury box until Judge Ito heard their protests about his decision to dismiss three of their guards in the wake of charges the guards gave some jurors favorable treatment. Though it wasn't known until after the trial ended, many of the jurors already had sold their stories to tabloid TV shows, granting exclusive interviews immediately after the verdict. And the judge, despite early expressions of confidence that he would

live up to his reputation for ensuring scrupulous courtroom discipline and decorum—Ito would exercise his usual "cool manner and firm hand," one puff piece had predicted before the trial—showed himself to be petty and temperamental, given to angry outbursts against media excesses and threatening often to ban cameras from his courtroom.

Yet Ito himself astounded lawyers and law professors across the country when he permitted himself to be interviewed extensively by a local Los Angeles TV correspondent in the midst of the O.J. proceedings taking place in his court. Portions of the interview, conducted at Ito's home, were then broadcast each night beginning at eleven o'clock Sunday, November 13, for an entire week over L.A.'s KCBS Channel 2. More astonishing yet, these nightly airings on the local "Action News" broadcast took place during one of four so-called sweeps periods each year. The sweeps are the critical times when TV audiences are measured to help set advertising rates—the bigger the audience, the more money stations can charge their advertisers. Nor was the timing of Ito's interview with the commercially crucial sweeps period accidental. The channel promoted those nightly segments of his interview in full-page newspaper ads and in on-air promos, all intended to entice more viewers.

Reaction in the legal community, and in some press circles, was swift and strongly critical. In San Diego, a defense lawyer expressed typical consternation. "It's out of control," Elisabeth Semel told the *San Francisco Chronicle's* legal affairs writer. "The side show is obscuring the heart of the case." In Los Angeles, another prominent defense attorney, Harland Braun, voiced astonishment at how "a garden variety murder involving a celebrity" now is "going off into all kinds of side shows. Ito has become a side show. It's unbelievable."

And in New York, a respected legal scholar on judicial ethics at the New York University School of Law, Stephen Gillers, reflected sadly that "There's something about the big publicity monster. It co-opts everybody."

It certainly did in the O.J. case, nor was that trial the first that raised serious questions about the "publicity monster" that accompanied sensationally televised court hearings. By the time of the O.J. case, forty-seven states permitted TV cameras in courtrooms, and with the advent of the around-the-clock cable telecasts of CNN and such popular programs as "Court TV," the televised trial had become a staple of the electronic media. "Court TV" alone had been televising them for several years before the O.J. trial.

As for the rhetoric about how televising the trial live from Los Angeles would provide a great national civics lesson, and all the pretrial arguments from freedom of the press advocates who urged that cameras be allowed in the courtroom not only as a constitutional right but as a check on abuses, in the end the O.J. Simpson trial produced more public cynicism and disgust.

When it works as it should, the American criminal justice system is a noble, indispensable defender of freedom and individual rights. That it often does not work as well amid the scandal culture of Teletimes is only one of many lessons emerging from the nineties.

O.J.'s saga was over. After riveting the nation for a year and a half, after a trial lasting for nine months, after a jury was sequestered for 265 days facing a virtual ton of overwhelmingly incriminating evidence to assess, it took those O.J. Simpson jurors only three hours of deliberation before rendering their verdict on October 3, 1995—not guilty on all charges.

The same cameras and technology that brought O.J. live into people's homes and offices for all those months now captured America's reaction to the outcome.

Just as in the beginning, the cameras brought Americans together, and then sharply divided them.

In Los Angeles, a deathly silence settled over the courtroom when the clerk began

reading the verdict beginning with the words, "In the matter of the people of the State of California versus Orenthal James Simpson, we the jury find the defendant. . . .

Screams of joy and cries of outrage rang out in the courtroom at the pronouncement "not guilty." Those same conflicting emotions were immediately displayed in televised scenes across the country.

Pandemonium swept black neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Worshipers in a black church there began jubilant celebrations. Others took to the streets amid wild cheering.

In Washington, D.C., in black neighborhoods along North Capitol Street in sight of the Capitol, young black men gleefully leaned out of passing cars and high-fived each other, some shouting, "The Juice is loose."

Outside public buildings where throngs gathered with people carrying portable TVs and radios, in public school classrooms where students listened over public address systems, in packed office conference rooms where workers watched the TV screen, news of the verdict showed blacks joyfully cheering and whites shocked into silence.

Of the many public-reaction scenes broadcast live that day and later repeated on evening network telecasts, two in particular showed the immensity of the racial divide the verdict exposed.

At Howard University, black law students, watching the verdict from the vantage of the school that more than any other has provided historic African-American leadership in the civil rights movement, spontaneously burst into prolonged cheers when they heard the words "not guilty." At the same moment, other cameras panning the faces of mostly white law students at Columbia University recorded stunned expressions and gasps of disbelief.

National reaction broke along the same racial fault lines. To an extraordinary degree, whites thought: O.J. literally got away with murder because of a racially biased jury. Blacks believed the verdict just because they thought sufficient evidence existed of a white police frame-up that more than raised reasonable doubts about his guilt, or because a not-guilty verdict symbolized payback by blacks against whites for past acts of injustice, or because of a combination of these and other factors. Out of the torrent of commentary the verdict unleashed, one remarkable example emerged, though it does not seem to have attracted much notice, certainly not the Pulitzer Prize for commentary it deserved.

Writing on deadline immediately after the verdict that day, Michael Wilbon, a *Washington Post* sports columnist who is black, memorably expressed the greater dimensions and significance of the case. Under the title "A Celebrity Goes Free," Wilbon described the uniformly jubilant reaction of blacks across America and commented:

All over urban America you could find these scenes yesterday. It was as if acquitting O.J. Simpson made up for Rodney King and Emmit Till. For all the black fathers and uncles and grandfathers who'd been jailed unjustly, for every brother who has been framed or railroaded, beaten into a confession or placed at the scene of a crime when he was a million miles away. You know what? It doesn't make up for it. I'm a lot less concerned with O.J. Simpson's guilt or innocence than I am with this unqualified embrace of a man simply because he is a celebrity.

He addressed the greater implications of America's obsession with and glorification of celebrity, placing special emphasis on the effect on black Americans. "All of America has become mesmerized by celebrity in the past 20 years," he wrote.

But nobody buys into celebrity, nobody's suckered inescapably into it like black people, my people, the people who can least afford it. You know what happens every single day in urban courtrooms in this country? Black juries, or pre-

dominantly black juries, convict people of crimes with no more drama than necessary. Ordinary, everyday people. But not the chosen ones. You know who the chosen ones are in black America? People who dunk, tackle or sing. Can't touch them. A black delivery man on trial facing the same evidence Simpson faced is a black delivery man headed to prison for life. . . . I worry that the people who feel overjoyed at Simpson's acquittal don't get it. Simpson is free because he played football, because he turned that into a movie career and he's rich. Period. This doesn't symbolize anything or portend great changes in the judicial system to somehow ensure a better shake in the future for African-American citizens. . . . I worry that we, black people, are so desperate for heroes we'll take the worst candidates on the face of the earth because they ran sweet or had a nice crossover dribble. In the last year we fawned over a drug user (Marion Barry), a convicted rapist (Mike Tyson), and a wife-beater (Simpson), as if those three somehow reflect the best of what we offer to society at-large or our own communities.

Wilbon wanted his readers to know he wasn't "naive about one of the primary emotions involved here: vengeance," adding:

A lot of black people could care less about Simpson and see him truly for what he is. They simply see this as payback, even if the score is still about 1 million to one. They feel the chickens might have come home to roost yesterday for all of our relatives and ancestors who've been beaten and raped and lynched and murdered by whites without any consequence whatsoever. . . . The bigger issue here, of course, is race. It's always race. What we've seen on television and heard on radio before and after the verdict only confirms that blacks and whites have a completely different reality when it comes to some things. You see evidence, I see a plant. I see a racist cop, you see a defense attorney's diversionary tactics. The lines aren't always that clear, but they were in this instance.

With disturbing eloquence, he posed the larger challenge arising from the Simpson case: "Until we as a nation begin to pay attention, those two separate realities will continue to exist. And in one of those worlds, a blind and undying love for anyone famous will continue to drain us of energy that ought to be channeled in another direction."

Study Questions

1. Why did O.J. Simpson become the first black athlete to be employed by corporate sponsors?
2. How did O.J.'s career as a celebrity differ from his childhood?
3. How did O.J.'s celebrity status shield the O.J. his friends knew from the public? Why did his previous actions with Nicole go unnoticed?
4. Why and how did race become the central issue in trials like the O.J. Simpson case?
5. What do trials like Mike Tyson's and O.J. Simpson's say about race relations in the United States?
6. The O.J. Simpson case illustrates the proliferation of the mass media in the 1990s. How has technology affected the way Americans in the 1990s receive and interpret news?