American Crime Story: The People v. O. J. Simpson: An indictment of American celebrity culture

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Halfway through its 10-episode run, the FX network's television mini-series *The People v. O. J. Simpson* has garnered considerable attention and positive reviews. Much of the praise is deserved.

At the center of the series is the double murder in June 1994 of Nicole Brown Simpson—the ex-wife of former football star and media personality O. J. Simpson—and her friend, Ronald Goldman. The subsequent indictment and eight-month-long trial of Simpson, at the end of which he was acquitted, took the American media by storm and to a certain extent solidified and legitimized the current celebrity obsession in the US. The gap between what had been contemptuously termed "tabloid journalism" and serious news gathering essentially disappeared in the course of the Simpson trial, and has never re-emerged.

Staying true to the account provided by lawyer and television analyst Jeffrey Toobin in his book, *The Run of His Life: The People v. O. J. Simpson*, the first five episodes of the FX series largely focus on the personalities of the two legal teams and the festering celebrity culture that they, along with Simpson himself, came to exemplify.

On June 12,1994, Brown Simpson and Goldman are found brutally murdered outside her luxury condo. Following an investigation, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) tries to serve a warrant for the arrest of O. J. Simpson (Cuba Gooding, Jr.), only to find that he and friend and former football player Al Cowlings (Malcolm-Jamal Warner) have escaped in a white Ford Bronco. The slow-speed pursuit of the Bronco is played out on live television. Simpson later surrenders to police.

Simpson's close friend and legal advisor Robert Kardashian (David Schwimmer) and celebrity lawyer Robert Shapiro (John Travolta) form a "Dream Team" of attorneys that also includes F. Lee Bailey (Nathan Lane), Johnnie Cochran (Courtney B. Vance) and Alan Dershowitz (Evan Handler). Leading the case against Simpson, charged with two counts of murder, are the prosecution team of Marcia Clark (Sarah Paulson), Bill Hodgman (Christian Clemenson) and Christopher Darden (Sterling K. Brown).

Confronted with nearly incontrovertible physical evidence (not to mention numerous instances of Simpson having physically abused Nicole), the Dream Team resorts to arguing that the LAPD is prejudiced against African Americans (the 1992 Rodney King beating and other incidents are recalled several times) and has framed Simpson for the killings.

Basing their case on physical evidence, the prosecuting team quickly discovers to their dismay that the "race card" is working and adds African American Darden to the courtroom team, while an internal conflict within the Dream Team—Bailey leaks a statement to the media in regard to Shapiro's incompetence—results in a coup that places Cochran in the lead role.

These internal conflicts, plus the recent publication of the salacious, tell-all book about Nicole by her "friend," Faye Resnick (Connie Britton), help fuel the explosive opening courtroom scenes that conclude the first half of the mini-series.

America's celebrity culture is deservedly skewered by *The People v. O. J. Simpson*, and while the behavior of all the series' main characters exhibits to some degree the harmful effects of the corrupt social atmosphere, the series focuses particularly on

Shapiro's conduct. A name-dropping celebrity lawyer (he represented, among others, Johnny Carson, Marlon Brando's son, Christian, and baseball player Darryl Strawberry), Shapiro is painted as being better known for negotiating deals for his famous clients than for winning cases.

Nearly every scene involving Shapiro displays his self-promotion or greed, or both. As he watches Simpson's escape in the Bronco on live television, Shapiro (who has already concluded that O. J. is guilty) shouts at the screen, "Go O. J.! We're still in the game!" Later, as the equally egomaniacal Bailey escorts Shapiro through a crowd of protesters (for whom Shapiro feels a mixture of fear and contempt), he knowingly reassures his Dream Team partner with "Come on, Bob, pretend we're at the Oscars."

LAPD officers are intended to represent the other end of the celebrity spectrum, i.e., ordinary individuals whose fantasies come to life confronted with an unworthy, often illusory celebrity figure. Realizing the power of his fame, Simpson has often invited police officers to his mansion to enjoy his pool or just hang out. As a result, the investigators sent to question O. J. are obviously star-struck, to the point where they are hesitant to ask him tough questions.

And when the cops first stop the fleeing Simpson on the freeway, one tells the other (both of whom have pointed their weapons at the former football star), "I'm not shooting O. J. Simpson unless I'm authorized."

The People v. O. J. Simpson reminds the viewer that Simpson's Dream Team made the "race card" famous for entirely self-serving reasons. Following the publication of a *Time* magazine cover in late June 1994 that featured a darkened image of Simpson termed racist by Cochran and others, Shapiro has an epiphany of sorts. He realizes that charging the notoriously racist LAPD—especially the ultra-right detective Mark Fuhrman (Steven Pasquale)—with having framed O. J. will be the best defense.

The opportunist nature of this tactic, adopted and promulgated by the rest of the defense team, is underscored by the fact that Simpson did not have any history of fighting racism or any special interest in such a fight. We learn that all but one of Simpson's rich golfing buddies were white, middle-aged men. In another scene, upon learning of the tactic, Simpson declares, "I'm not black, I'm O. J."

Travolta excels as Shapiro. He is capable of delivering self-promoting and even cruel pronouncements with an aplomb that bespeaks self-assurance and arrogance, while at other times he responds to threats to his authority with a child-like, whining tone. Travolta's eyebrows and his skin, which looks to be on the verge of melting, create a perfect exterior for his character's equally plastic interior.

Vance's Cochran is a chameleon whose run-ins with the LAPD have taught him to be tactical at all times—even his outbursts are orchestrated to fulfill an all-consuming need to win.

Gooding Jr. does not create an entirely believable O. J. Simpson, partly because he is not given enough screen time to fully develop the character, but also because his Simpson lacks the charm (even if it was, as we learn, fabricated) and movie star good looks that Toobin's book and our memories of the ex-football star, television and movie personality endow him with.

Given the serious nature and dramatic tension of *The People v. O. J. Simpson*, one wishes that the mini-series had been aired without the innumerable commercial breaks. On too many occasions, a scene is wrapped up too tightly and quickly to serve the needs of the advertisers.

Setting aside these minor flaws, FX and the makers of *The People v. O. J. Simpson* are to be commended for not bowing to the present noxious atmosphere of identity and gender politics in their presentation of the notorious Simpson case.