

# [***Opinion: O.J. Simpson was never who we thought***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BSF-B8T1-JBSS-S005-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; So now that he is dead, what is there to do with the perpetually troubling, infuriating American conundrum that was Orenthal James Simpson?

My guess is that we'll do the same thing we've been doing for all his public life, right up until Thursday, when his family [*announced*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/11/us/oj-simpson-dies/index.html) his death, at 76, from prostate cancer. We'll just keep making O.J. Simpson up in our heads, using our own biases and presumptions. What else is there to do, after all, with a blank, empty space? And that, in the end, is what O.J. Simpson was: a vacuum, a void, a place for people to project their feelings rather than deal with the enigma of who and what he really was.

Those feelings, to say the least, changed drastically over the decades when his fame turned to notoriety, when he went from being among the most widely beloved of celebrities to one of the most despised and polarizing.

It's what we've been doing with Simpson from the moment he took his first handoff as a University of Southern California running back more than a half-century ago. That was back in the late 1960s, when he could quiet the breathing of more than 70,000 spectators at the LA Coliseum (and millions more watching on television) by running through and around defenders for what seemed improbable gains in yardage. Those were years when he was nothing more or less than an artist sculpting intricate patterns on sod, relying on little more than amplified instinct.

Remember too that this was when the greatest Black athletes of the era were complex men unafraid of controversy, such as [*Jim Brown*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/19/sport/jim-brown-nfl-legend-actor-activist-dead-spt-intl/index.html), [*Muhammad Ali*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/24/opinions/muhammad-ali-ken-burns-documentary-glory-struggle-joseph/index.html) and [*Bill Russell*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/31/sport/bill-russell-nba-legend-dies-spt-intl/index.html). Simpson, it seemed at the time, had little to no interest in challenging the Establishment, which so many other college students at the same time seemed intent on doing. He was personable, charming and seemed as easygoing off the field as he was formidable on it. He [*wasn't about*](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/oj-simpson-race-black_n_575ee2d9e4b0e4fe51431080) ***politics*** or civil rights or Black pride. "I'm not Black," he once was famously [*quoted*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2024/04/11/oj-simpson-death/565e09ae-f814-11ee-9506-c8544e5c9d86_story.html) as saying. "I'm O.J.."

After becoming a professional athlete, Simpson would carry this bland-but-sunny magnetism into the marketplace the way he carried a football: with a blend of suppleness and strength. He [*could sell*](https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/celebrities/2024/04/11/o-j-simpsons-dead-pop-culture-moments/73288207007/) rental cars, cowboy boots, soft drinks, maybe even aluminum siding and reverse mortgages.

His most lucrative product may have been O.J. Simpson himself; he was somebody you wanted in your movie or TV show, not because he was especially gifted as an actor, but because he was [*famous*](https://fox2now.com/news/national/the-nfl-records-still-held-by-o-j-simpson/) for being the first pro runner to carry the ball for more than 2,000 yards in a season. No titles or rings, but he was still O.J., and that was enough for millions of Americans and many more beyond to project their wishes and dreams.

But who was he, really? Was he the happy-go-lucky kid from the streets of San Francisco who hit the lottery of Fame & Glory? Or was he a cunning hustler who always knew the right things to say to acclimate himself in every social situation in the upper reaches of show business and corporate boardrooms? Maybe both?

My guess is that in O.J., we have a working definition of the ultimate entitlement: the ability to be anything anybody else wanted you to be, and have everybody be OK with it.

Then came June, 1994 and the bloody murders of Simpson's ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ronald Goldman, and a succession of what still seem, in retrospect, surreal events beginning with the [*Night of the White Bronco*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2024/04/11/oj-simpson-death-bronco-chase-contd-orig-ht.cnn) and culminating with the [*Trial of the Century*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2024/04/11/oj-simpson-death-bronco-chase-contd-orig-ht.cnn) and its peculiar jolts and twists leading to the not-guilty verdict that astonished almost everybody.

You would think such a transfiguring event in the life of anyone would bring them into sharper focus, maybe filling in any number of blank, empty spaces. You would be wrong.

Because all the Goldman-Brown murders and their slow-motion aftermath did was provide another, even larger blank canvas onto which millions of onlookers projected their own fears, hostilities and reservations. From the night of the murders to the present, many people, including Simpson himself, have talked about wanting to find the truth about the murders. That truth still isn't determined. What we have instead are projections of people's feelings about a lot of things - and not just about O.J.

Domestic abuse, class privilege, racism and the vagaries of injustice - all these have been weaved into the miasma that was the [*People vs. O.J. Simpson*](https://www.fxnetworks.com/shows/american-crime-story/people-vs-oj-simpson). You could argue that the Black jurors who decided Simpson's fate in the case were projecting their own long-term grievances against the Los Angeles Police Department in general and the [*racist fulminations*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/lariots/stories/fuhrtapes.htm) of Detective Mark Fuhrman, a key witness in the case.

You could also argue that the same White people who once openly embraced Simpson as an amiable, glamorous, famous Black person who was welcome in their living rooms vented their outrage and sense of betrayal over the verdict to further justify their own superficial judgments against Black people in general. None of these issues matter - or at least none seem as consequential as they once did.

Now that Simpson has died, it doesn't seem to matter whether he was guilty or innocent. Nor does it matter that he faced subsequent travails connected with the [*1997 civil settlement*](https://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/11/us/jury-decides-simpson-must-pay-25-million-in-punitive-award.html) requiring him to pay more than $33 million in damages to the families of the deceased. Or that he [*served nine years in prison*](https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97843646) for a 2007 armed robbery of sports memorabilia.

Because to answer any questions connected with this case, whether of guilt or innocence, or accountability or truth, you'd have to first consider the primary one: Who, exactly, was O.J. Simpson?

And how can you submit such a question to a blank space?

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