

J E W E L L E T A Y L O R G I B B S

race and justice

RODNEY KING AND
O.J. SIMPSON IN
A HOUSE DIVIDED

FOREWORD BY CORNEL WEST, AUTHOR OF *RACE MATTERS*

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AND O. J. SIMPSON
IN A HOUSE DIVIDED**

JEWELLE TAYLOR GIBBS

Foreword by Cornel West



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Foreword

Race remains America's most explosive issue and the rawest nerve as we approach the twenty-first century. Race also continues to be the most difficult and most delicate matter to discuss. More than ever, we need candid and critical voices to help us confront our shortcomings, expose our blind spots, and strengthen our better selves. Jewelle Taylor Gibbs's powerful book is such a voice in our time.

In stark contrast to the sensational stories and superficial analyses of the Rodney King and O. J. Simpson trials and verdicts, Gibbs takes us on a poignant journey of painstaking facts and subtle interpretations of these two nation-shaking events in our recent past. For the first time since our media-saturated treatments of these events, we get a detailed examination of what happened in light of a sophisticated framework that discloses the meaning of these happenings for the country. In short, Gibbs has written the first major work on the most radically divisive trials at the close of our century—in the spirit of honest truth-telling and courageous nation-healing.

From the founding of the City of Los Angeles by a group of African, Indian, and Spanish settlers in 1781 to the most diverse urban metropolis of 1996, Gibbs provides a rich historical narrative of invasion, immigration, segregation, subordination, resistance, and hope for substantive cooperation. This narrative revolves around the central themes of race and justice. She allows the common folk of Los Angeles to speak even as she solicits the great voices of

W.E.B. Du Bois, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr. She grounds her narrative in the everyday realities of black Los Angeles alongside the institutional and structural dynamics of white supremacy in sunny Southern California. She demystifies the myth of racial harmony in the city's past and demands that we wrestle with the racism of its present. And she leaves no critical stone unturned—race, gender, and class are intertwined so as to illuminate the night side of L.A.'s bright lights.

Gibbs scrutinizes perceptions and practices on both sides of the color curtain, in both the black world and the white. We learn much about ourselves as a nation and Los Angeles as a city in regard to the color of justice. We are also forced to grapple with the depths of black disillusionment with this "justice."

Yet Gibbs refuses to succumb to any form of debilitating bitterness or paralyzing cynicism, even as she reveals a heart of darkness in Southern California. She provides great wisdom and insight for healing our painful wounds and restoring our precious dreams. In the great tradition of passionate democrats like Fanny Lou Hamer and Ella Baker, she calls for substantive accountability by our police departments, mass media, criminal justice system, and economy if our divided house is to be united. But this national unity must be rooted in a deep sense of justice—a sense of justice that confronts and overcomes the paranoia and poverty produced largely by the role of race in our past and present. Let us hope that America harkens to her prophetic voice!

Cambridge, Massachusetts
July 1996

Cornel West

Preface

On April 30, 1992, the acquittal of white police officers accused of beating black motorist Rodney King set off four days of civil disorder in South Central Los Angeles. As a social scientist, I wondered about the impact of that civil disorder on the lives of young African-Americans in the area. I designed, and in September 1993 launched, an ethnographic study that would enable me to develop a multilayered understanding of the effects of those traumatic events on the attitudes, experiences, and aspirations of black youth in the fifteen-to-thirty age range living in South Central.

As a scholar whose research had always focused on the psychosocial adaptation of minority youth to a majority society, I viewed this as an opportunity to gain some valuable insights into the responses of these black youth to the inequities in the criminal justice system, the realities of racism, and the social and economic problems they faced in their inner-city community. As a mental health professional, I was particularly interested in assessing their capacities to develop healthy personalities and realistic goals in the midst of a distressed community, to maintain positive identities in the face of negative social forces, and to cope with daily challenges in overcoming barriers and boundaries to their self-realization.

During the ten months of interviewing for the study, I seized every opportunity to familiarize myself with the community, to observe its dynamics, to engage in informal interactions with its

people, to worship in its churches, and to absorb its ambience through participating in a range of social, cultural, and political activities. My role as an observer-participant in these activities served to sharpen my sensibilities about the feelings and attitudes of a broad cross section of African-Americans about race and justice in Los Angeles. This dual role also helped me understand the shock and anger experienced in the community when it was learned in June 1994, shortly after the brutal murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman, that O. J. Simpson, Nicole's former husband and black celebrity sportscaster, was the leading suspect. I did not realize immediately how that event would alter the course of my study.

On June 17, 1994, I was driving south on the 405 freeway to the Los Angeles airport after completing my final interview for the study when a bulletin interrupted the regular news program to announce that the police had spotted O. J. Simpson's white Ford Bronco on the San Diego Freeway, apparently trying to evade arrest. Like so many millions of other Americans, I could not wait to arrive home to turn on my television set and watch the climax of the chase and the arrest. Somehow, the timing seemed strangely coincidental to the conclusion of my study, but O. J.'s arrest also resonated with many of the issues about black males in the criminal justice system that had provoked so much anger and hostility in the focus group discussions and my interviews with young and old alike in South Central.

Over the next year, as I analyzed the data from my study and began writing a book about the impact of the Rodney King beating and its aftermath on the black youth in South Central, the O. J. Simpson case was never far from my consciousness. As the media began to transform the story into a daily soap opera, they also began to transform O. J.'s image from the quintessential "crossover" sports superhero to the sinister black superstud. From profiles of O. J.'s early years in San Francisco and his teenage scrapes with the law, it also became clear that there were surprising parallels in the backgrounds

of O. J. Simpson and Rodney King. By the time the trial began on September 26, 1994, I was more than an interested observer; I had become a critical analyst trying to look beneath the surface reports of the legal gamesmanship and the media circus to the subtexts of racial tensions, class conflicts, and gender antagonisms.

In late May, my editor, Alan Rinzler, called me to suggest that I abandon my original plan for a book on general issues facing black youth in South Central and radically shift the focus to black males in the criminal justice system, illustrated by the cases of Rodney King and O. J. Simpson. Although initially reluctant to take on such a daunting task, it took only a few days for me to realize that these two men really represented two sides of the same coin of the black male experience in America. Rodney King, the blue-collar high school dropout and ex-felon versus O. J. Simpson, the self-made celebrity businessman and sports superstar. Despite their superficial differences in lifestyle, success, and status, O. J. Simpson and Rodney King were treated as immediate suspects by the police, reduced to stereotyped symbols in the press, and manipulated by powerful interest groups in the community to advance their own agendas.

As the Simpson case progressed, it became increasingly clear that much of the media had abandoned their neutrality and the presumption of innocence for O. J. and that the trial had spawned a mini-industry of legal analysts, celebrity commentators, and creative entrepreneurs. The trial had also polarized blacks and whites, who had very different perspectives on the case and attitudes about O. J.'s possible complicity in the crime.

Less obvious but also interesting were three other patterns that emerged in this case: the complex relationship between the prosecutors and the police; the equally complex relationship among the prosecutors, the defense lawyers, and the judge; and the relationship between both teams of lawyers, the judge, and the press. The mass media played a significant role, not only in reporting the case, but also in becoming a central actor in the case itself, as well as

manipulating public opinion about the case with an orchestrated series of negative stories about O. J. Simpson and his private life.

The major goal of this book is to compare and contrast the King and Simpson cases in terms of the involvement of two black males in the criminal justice system. Their experiences with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and the justice system are analyzed in the context of the recent history of black males in the criminal justice system in Los Angeles and the broader sociopolitical history of race relations in American society. Through the use of documentary evidence, case histories, and social protest activities, the very different experiences of blacks and whites with the police and the criminal justice system are delineated—from the decades of hundreds of unsolved lynchings to the killings of scores of civil rights workers, the repression of radical protest groups, and the criminalization of young black males in late twentieth-century America.

The “not guilty” jury decisions in the Simi Valley trial for three of the four white officers charged in the King beating and for O. J. Simpson on double murder charges in the downtown Los Angeles trial are analyzed to illustrate how the very different life experiences and perspectives of a predominantly white and a predominantly black jury shaped the way they perceived and processed the evidence in the cases and ultimately led to decisions that were quite logical and consistent based on their worldview, their evaluation of the evidence, and their predisposition to believe or disbelieve police testimony.

The intense responses of blacks and whites to both of these cases have reignited the long-smoldering debate about race and class in America, particularly since the ultimate decisions in both of these cases may have been significantly influenced by relative access to legal counsel and other resources. Three other cases that were related to the original Rodney King beating trial—the civil rights trial of the four officers accused of using excessive force, King’s civil rights trial against the LAPD, and the trial of the black assailants

of white truck driver Reginald Denny during the riots—are discussed briefly to highlight the pervasive influence of the race of both defendants and victims on jury decisions and judicial actions.

Ironically, all of these cases have played themselves out in a city founded by a multiracial, multicultural band of settlers and celebrated for its tolerance of racial and cultural diversity. Within that very contradiction lies the disillusionment and despair of African-Americans that their hope for equality and justice in the Golden West has not materialized in Los Angeles. While this book focuses on the impact of the criminal justice system on the African-American community in Los Angeles, many of these issues are equally problematic for other communities of color, particularly recent immigrants and refugees who are coping with their own issues of acculturation, discrimination, and economic opportunities. The proposed remedies for improving the relations between blacks and the police are also relevant to other oppressed minority groups in Los Angeles.

The Prologue of the book is a very brief account of the founding of Los Angeles in 1781 by a group of racially mixed soldiers, farmers, and laborers, invoking an author's license to interpret their vision of a multiracial, multicultural community with equal opportunity and justice for all of its citizens.

The book is then organized into major sections to reflect the impact of these two highly publicized cases on the Los Angeles community and, ultimately, on the nation. The five chapters in Part One begin with a brief history of African-Americans in Los Angeles, focusing on the period between the Watts riots in 1965 and the South Central riots in 1992 (Chapter One), followed by three chapters about the police beating of Rodney King (Chapter Two), the first trial of the four white police officers (Chapter Three), and the community's violent response to the acquittal of the officers (Chapter Four). The last chapter in Part One reports the findings of the two commissions that investigated the LAPD and the uprising and describes the three subsequent trials that resulted from the King

beating and the postverdict riots: the civil rights trial of the four police officers, Rodney King's civil suit against the LAPD, and the trial of the assailants of Reginald Denny (Chapter Five).

Part Two contains five chapters describing the background of O. J. Simpson, his career, and his two marriages (Chapter Six), the murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman (Chapter Seven), and the lengthy trial of O. J. Simpson for the crime (Chapters Eight, Nine, and Ten). The first of the two chapters in Part Three, Chapter Eleven presents an analysis of the power of conspiracy theories in the African-American community, particularly those that impugn the motives of the government or its official representatives (such as the police, the FBI, and the CIA). Chapter Twelve proposes strategies for healing the painful wounds of racial prejudice and paranoia and restoring the dream of equal opportunity and justice for all Americans.

Following Chapter Twelve is the Epilogue, which presents an updated account of the activities and current whereabouts of the principal figures involved in both the Rodney King and O. J. Simpson cases.

There are two appendixes. Appendix A is a research note describing the author's research design and methodology for her study after the 1992 civil disturbances in Los Angeles following the acquittals of the police officers in the beating of Rodney King and her research methods on the Simpson case. Appendix B lists the participants in the community study conducted after the King-related incidents.

It is my fervent hope that this book will help illuminate the dark abyss of racial misunderstanding and mistrust and that it will also make a significant contribution to the healing of the racial wounds in Los Angeles and to the dialogue about race in America.

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To John Burris, Oakland civil rights attorney and co-counsel in Rodney King's civil case against the City of Los Angeles, for sharing his insider perspective and valuable insights about the implications of the case and its symbolic significance.

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Berkeley, California
July 1996

Jewelle Taylor Gibbs

Prologue

At sundown on September 4, 1781, a group of eleven settlers and their families, recruited from Sinaloa, Mexico, established a pueblo on the banks of the Porciuncula River and named it El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora de la Reina de los Angeles, the Pueblo of Our Lady, the Queen of the Angels. Having arrived at Mission San Gabriel in mid August after an arduous journey by land and sea from Loreto, this tired and dispirited band of pioneers had been held in quarantine until several of their children recovered from smallpox, which had already claimed one of their original members. This unremarkable group had responded to an invitation from Don Felipe de Neve, the first Spanish governor to establish his headquarters at Monterey in Alta California, to found a farming town at this site in order to supply the growing presidios of Santa Barbara and San Diego.

As they finally approached the selected site and stood on the banks of the narrow river, looking over the fertile plains, these settlers must have shared a vision of building a new community, the promise of a prosperous future, and a dream of racial harmony and justice for all their descendants. These *pobladores*, the founders of this "pueblo of the angels," were eleven male settlers with Spanish surnames, but one historian notes that these "first citizens were mainly of Indian and African blood, with only a moderate admixture of Spanish." In fact, these male settlers included two Spaniards,

two blacks, two mulattos, one mestizo, and four Indians. By March 21, 1782, three of this original group had been dropped from the founder's list, for unclear reasons, leaving the remaining eight male settlers, along with their families, to be recorded as a total population of thirty-two official founders of the City of Los Angeles.

This multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual group managed to get along so well that by 1784, three years after the town's founding, "this motley band of colonists had replaced their first rude huts with adobe houses and laid the foundations for a church and other public buildings. Two years afterwards, when land titles were finally issued them, each Angeleno affixed his cross to the documents; apparently not one of Los Angeles' first citizens could write his name." For the Spanish governor, these founders deserved equal treatment in the granting of land titles. For these early settlers, justice was not determined by the color of their skin, their racial heritage, or the level of their literacy.

More than two hundred years later, after the City of Angels had been torn asunder in 1992 by racial conflict and violence, a young black man named Rodney King, the major symbol of that upheaval, plaintively asked, "Can we all get along?" Three years later, in 1995, Los Angeles would again be polarized by racial divisions over the acquittal of a black man named O. J. Simpson in the murder of his former wife and her male friend, both of whom were white.

Perhaps Rodney King and O. J. Simpson had never heard the story of the founding of Los Angeles. But as the twentieth century drew to a close, these two black males had become symbols of the social, political, and cultural conflicts dominating American society, where race was a primary factor in the distribution of justice. And it is ironic that these two black men had once shared the hopes for justice and the dreams of racial harmony of the Spaniards, blacks, mestizos, and Indians who had founded the pueblo on the banks of the Porciuncula River at sundown on that hot autumn day in 1781.

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