

Welcome to A Deep Dive I'm Reggie.

In this episode, the anatomy of a scandal.

In the digital age how much has scandal changed? Why are we so drawn to them?

What if anything does scandals tell about who we are and the times we're in.

Thanks for joining me for Notes on a Scandal.

There were two recent events that got me thinking about the nature of scandal. The first involved a YouTube beauty influencer that resulted in the loss of millions of subscribers in a matter of days.

The other is the family separation policy of the current administration that has led to hundreds of children being taken from their parents at the southern border of the United States.

The beauty influencer drama cleared up almost as quickly as it began. The child separation policy caused a fair amount of real-world political action but the focus on it disappeared from trending social media and the front pages of newspapers almost as quickly as the YouTube dust-up.

I guess you could put that lessening of interest in an ongoing human crisis down to compassion fatigue but surely the other part of it is our penchant for judging the behavior

The word scandal derives from the Greek skandalon, which originally meant to trap or ensnare an enemy. In some version of the Greek bibles, skandalon describes a person, object, word or image that leads to corruption and the hostile reaction to that corruption.

The other powerful purpose of scandal is its use as catharsis. Aristotle wrote about the need for an audience to feel as though there was a collective acknowledgment of something gone followed by an act of purification, usually arrived at by an act of violence.

I know, with Aristotle it might seem like we're in what my grandmother would call pretty high cotton but hear me out. Today, instead of stoning people who have transgressed in the public square they are pilloried on social media often with real-world consequences like job loss and public harassment.

Social media allows us all to collectively comment, demand action even retribution. Catharsis and relief in real-time.

One of the most popular forms of scandals is hypocrisy, licentiousness, and maleficence. I would add one other and my personal favorite, schadenfreude.

The first scandal I can recall was the Watergate episode. My mother worked in the Watergate building at the time of the break-in, I remember her telling us that something had happened in the building it would take a while to find out what. Watergate was the moment as a young person I realized just how nutty politics could be.

The schadenfreude comes in with scandals that reveal hypocrisy. The best illustration of what I mean involves congressmen (I think, I can't remember his name) from Va who was virulently homophobic and dogmatically religious. As the newspaper told it he was stopped on suspicion of drunk driving and in his apparent haste or drunkenness when he came to an abrupt stop all of the gay male porn magazines stored under the front seat of his car now decorate the floor greeting the officer who stopped him. He resigned from his seat.

In researching the history and nature of scandal I discovered the story of Alice Beatrice Jones and Leonard Rhinelander. Their story and subsequent scandal seemed so peculiarly American that I thought I'd use it to explore some of my questions about the nature and use of scandal.

When Alice Beatrice Jones and Leonard Rhinelander met in the fall of 1921 and secretly married in the fall of 1924 they couldn't possibly have known that only three weeks into their married life their union would become the subject of a nationwide and then international scandal supplying newspapers with blockbusters headlines full the tensions that crackled in the Jazz Age.

The lawyers for Leonard Rhinelander would claim the fraud committed by Miss Jones could be found on the marriage license itself. Under racial designation, Jones wrote as her husband had that she was white. Today a biracial woman choosing her racial designation on a marriage form would hardly be an attention grabber but in 1924 it and the Rhinelander family name made it the stuff of scandal.

Today, you'll often hear how social media can have a pile on effect in the wake of a scandal but minus the speed that's exactly what has always gone on.

As in the Rhinelander case, when it came to race or anything vaguely sexual most of the commonly held values weren't participially forgiving or kind. Often in reporting scandals newspaper outlets stuffed their stories with scenarios that exploited reader's fears and phobias to sell newspapers with few if any intervening voices suggesting a rush to justice or intemperance in the tone of reporting.

When the serial killer dubbed the Yorkshire Ripper was murdering women in Yorkshire England 1980s his victims were neatly divided into two types of victims, slatternly women, those women thought to be working as prostitutes, and women of virtue, who it was clear from how they were written about at the time were the real victims. As it turns out Peter Sutcliffe, the murderer was murdering women full stop.

In the case of the Central Park Five accused of raping and battering a female jogger in Central Park in Manhattan, the tabloids lead the way with howls of condemnation before a single concrete fact was established. The New York Post's front-page headline read, "Wolf Pack's prey. Female jogger near death after savage attack by a roving gang."

The New York Post's Pete Hamill wrote an opinion piece that summed up the general feelings about this crime and the racial and class divide in Manhattan at the time.

He wrote, "They were coming downtown from a world of crack, welfare, guns, knives, indifference, and ignorance. They were coming from a land of no fathers. They were coming from the anarchic province of the poor. And driven by a collective fury, brimming with the rippling energies of youth, their minds teeming with the violent images of the streets and the movies. They had only one goal, to smash, hurt, rob, stomp, rape. The enemies were rich, the enemies were white." None of this proved to be true by the way, the young men convicted of the crime were found to be not guilty after having served 7 to 13 years in prison.

I wonder what the discourse around the guilt or innocence of the central park five would have been in the digital age. Inaccuracies and outright lies certainly would have been a feature but those things attended the coverage, the crime and the conviction of five innocent young people. I'm not sure how it gets worse than that.

Music

Despite the Rhinelander family's wealth and power, despite his father's vehement objection to their relationship including once having his son physically removed from the hotel room he and Alice had retreated to for privacy, Alice and Leonard maintained a three-year courtship. The 18-year-old Leonard or Kip as he was called and the 22-year-old Alice's secret rendezvous including hundreds of letters and their subsequent secret marriage would come to a rather abrupt end when in Nov of 1924 the marriage was made public when The Standard-Star printed "Rhinelanders' Son Marries the Daughter of a Colored Man."

The disclosure ushered in a torrent of racially inflected columns framing Alice as a fortune hunter so craven she would betray her race to secure a place in the cosseted world of the ultrarich.

Rhinelander's lawyers choose to use deception as the means of annulling the marriage but how could Leonard have been deceived. To avoid his father Leonard lived with Alice's family and by all accounts, he was quite fond of her parents and they of him. Rhinelander knew Alice's two sisters, one was married to a black man the other, as one newspaper put it, "had been lucky enough to at least snag an Italian." So where was the deception?

The answer could be found in the one-drop rule and other tactics created to define the otherness of black people.

The one-drop rule was one of the many racist instruments invented to ensure white racial purity in the United States in the years after slavery.

Coined in the southern United States and practiced to varying degrees across the U.S. the one-drop rule decreed if you have one blood of black blood you were black.

This rule meant bi-racial people like Alice Beatrice Jones whose mother was a white English woman and father possibly of West Indies extraction would be considered black.

This obsession with white racial purity which had been ratified by the Supreme Court in 1857 with the Dred Scott decision, declared black people "are not included, and were not intended to be included, under the word 'citizens' in the Constitution, and can, therefore, claim none of the rights and privileges which that instrument provides for and secures to citizens of the United States."

41 years later in Plessy vs. Ferguson. The supreme court rejected the plaintiff's argument that separate but equal was on its face racist. Homer Plessy, a bi-racial man, was arrested under the Louisiana Separate Car Act of 1890 for sitting in a white's only car on a train. This supreme court decision stayed in place for the next 66 years until the civil rights act was passed in 1964.

Music

The 1920s ushered in what F. Scott Fitzgerald coined as the jazz age. Fitzgerald described the times like this: "It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire."

Fact is the 1920s ushered in all sorts of anxiety-producing changes for those devoted to the status quo. The popularity of jazz considered the devil's music by religious whites and blacks, meant black jazz musicians gained national prominence amongst young jazz enthusiasts across the races. Whites began purchasing race records which were made by and for black artists for a market of black music lovers. Yes, even music was segregated.

In 1920 black women finally got the right to vote and immediately began running and serving in public office. In addition to these President Harding, who had been rumored since childhood to be a mixed-race person, had gone to the deep south to give a speech about the need to more fully integrate black people into the civic life of the United States. Even though he was clear that he wasn't suggested social integration his small call for equality was meant with approval from black civil rights leaders including Marcus Garvey but the response was completely different from white leaders in and out of congress.

By the end of the 20s this new sense of freedom and liberation would all come crashing down in a fury of murderous rage on the part of white supremacists and average citizens leading to the annihilation of successful black communities from Tulsa, Oklahoma to Rosewood, Florida

resulting the deaths of black men, women, children and some of the whites who lived amongst them.

Implicit in the coverage and in the trial itself was the notion that Alice Beatrice Jones a working-class black woman couldn't possibly have been the object of affection of a young white man from one of the wealthiest families in America, so the facts of the story had to be adjusted to conform with the moral standards of the average white reader.

Images of the sexually capricious and morally bankrupt negro were in every form of media from journalism to advertising in the 1920s right through to the 1950s. Much of this iconography, including blackface, was invented and then weaponized during the Jim Crow era as a means of defining the moral character and the need for segregation of black people.

These tropes were then deployed as shorthand "facts" in stories like the Rhinelander scandal reinforcing the views of many readers and the ire of others who would express themselves in more violent ways.

Once the press got hold of the Rhinelander marriage the papers were teeming with speculation. First, the players had to be defined. Leonard Rhinelander was described as youthful, gullible. Many people knew of the Rhinelander fortune. The newspapers constantly reminded readers that the Rhinelander's had been rich and powerful when the Vanderbilt's were still farming in Staten Island, New York.

When it came to Alice's family her mother Elizabeth Brown Holloway Jones was born in Lincolnshire, England her father George Jones was born in Liverpool, England to a white mother and a father who was born in one of the British colonies, perhaps the West Indies. The parents met while working as members of staff on an estate in Bradford, England moving to the United States in 1891.

At first, the New York papers soft-pedaled the racial angle focusing on the class difference, son of Philip Rhinelander marries a colored cab driver's daughter. George Jones had started out as a cab driver but by the time of this scandal, he was retired having purchased several real estate properties which provided a more than comfortable life for him and his family. Despite these easily attainable facts news outlet referred to him only as a colored cab driver as a way of driving home the assault on class and race. As more details became available including interviews with the Jones' neighbors the tone soon move on to the race of the family. Racist gems like this one referring to Alice's wedding ring and other jewelry given to her by Leonard Rhinelander began to appear in newspapers:

'A huge emerald ring and two diamond solitaires, also identifiable in the Rhinelander gallery of portraits of generations of pale-face brides, now decorate the dark digits of Mrs. Leonard.

It is understood-able that the Rhinelander's would give pints of blue blood to retrieve the heirlooms from their present fate."

Newspapers like New York's Yiddish language Jewish Daily Forward printed a picture of Alice in the paper with the caption, "Does she look like a negro to you?" Several newspapers ran the same pictures of Alice occasionally darkening them to emphasize the racial angle of the scandal. Leonard remained hold-up at the Jones' home at the start of the scandal but as news outlets reported that Alice and her father may not be white crowds began to grow outside the family home. When a letter arrived from the Klan threatening to kill them all Leonard and Alice fled the family home together and went into hiding with mutual friends in Mount Vernon, NY shortly after they did Leonard told Alice he had to leave her but would return as soon as he was able. He never returned instead he went to see his father, signed papers his father had drafted to have the marriage annulled without giving Alice any warning. Alice and her parent found out about the annulment by reading it in one of the local papers.

When Alice was served with annulment papers they came with a note from Leonard that she was not permitted to read or keep. In the note read to Alice by Rhinelanders' lawyer, Leonard directed Alice to get an attorney and to fight the annulment, prove that she was white so that they might remain together. I guess you could call this a combination of naivete, privilege, and immaturity.

The newspapers treated the news of an annulment as confirmation that things would soon return to their natural order.

As an aside, there is a great picture of Alice's father George elegantly dressed on the lawn of his home throwing rocks at a phalanx of reporters. If it didn't deter them it sure must have felt good. So, why would Leonard Rhinelanders suddenly turn his back on Alice? The trial would reveal some of his motives along with a very clear view of what jurisprudence thought of Alice Beatrice Rhinelanders.

Music I won't go through the entire trial but I will tell you about two incidences that may have changed the course of the trial and public opinion and one image that haunts me still.

Right out of the gate the Rhinelanders' lawyers set out to prove that Alice withheld her black ancestry to ensnare Rhinelanders. They further claimed that Alice used love letters to maintain her power over Leonard while they were apart.

On the second day of the trial, Jones' lawyer announced that they would withdraw their denial and admitted that Alice was bi-racial also stating Leonard knew of her status all along. In doing this Alice's lawyer took away 90% of the case for deception but the two most shocking moments in court were yet to come.

Under cross-examine Alice's lawyer Mr. Davis got Leonard to admit that though he had promised Alice time and time again that he would guard the letters they had exchanged over the three years of their courtship yet they had been read aloud in court. Here's part of the

exchange that began to shift public opinion: Davis began by asking if Rhinelander was a man of his word?

This quiet yes was echo throughout the press and something unexpected started to happen. One article and then another began to turn their empathies towards Alice. Some even speculated that maybe it was Leonard who was the manipulator convincing Alice's parent to allow her to travel alone with him. The outcome of the trial no longer seemed inevitable making Alice's defense team's next move bewildering and heartbreaking.

Attorney Davis informed the ensemble that Alice would disrobe. Over shouts of objection from Rhinelander's side, Davis explained that having Alice disrobe would make it clear to the jury and leave little if any doubt that Leonard Rhinelander had to have known that Alice Jones was not a white woman.

Yup, you got it. Her lawyers thought he would settle the matter of deception by performing a stunt for the all-white-all-male jury that would not only sexually objectify his own client by replicating the image of black women inspected naked and sold on the auction block. The level of consent on Alice's part is lost to time, it was her case and on some level, she had to agree to do this but was she aware of the impact that this along with all of the other betrayals and disclosure she had endured would have on her mental state? At 22 how could she possibly know? And yes, her husband remained in court for the examination sitting alongside the attorneys and jury as everyone gaped at his naked to the waist wife.

It is said that Alice remained silent throughout this display save for quietly weeping as her body was entered as an exhibit in the trial.

Like Leonard's earlier disclosure about his father's hand in things, Alice's disrobing was the defining moment in the trial.

Several British papers called it a disgraceful spectacle.

Norms had collided. The well-worn trope of the sexually available mulatto had crashed into the almost cartoonish belief in the decorum that came with wealth and privilege, and of course, the unavoidable presence of sexism throughout now manifested itself in a public need to protect Alice's slightly besmirched virtue.

You could tell sympathies had turned as more and more newspapers referred to Alice as Mrs. Rhinelander but how would the jury see it?

Music

For its part the black press part in the scandal was interesting. At first, many black papers came to Alice's defense noting how stupid it was to judge ethnicity and race by the color of someone's skin. As the Jones family made it clear that they were not black some members of

the black press felt the case has nothing to do with them others feared the trial would further entrench whites in their fears of blacks wanting to marry their daughters and sons. Others were concerned that a loss for Alice meant even in a state like New York with no racial barriers to marriage would create a precedent that would further oppress black people fighting to expand their civil rights.

In an extraordinary turn up for the books when the verdict was read out in court Alice Beatrice Jones Rhinelanders was found not to have deceived her spouse.

The Rhinelanders' bid to have the marriage annulled was denied. Interviews with jury members and their wives proclaiming racism had nothing to do with their decision seems to have promoted newspapers to take a similar tone. Maybe they did it as a pallid cleanser considering the verdict didn't support the prior fervor. You know the old if can't beat em join em.

In the aftermath of the Rhinelanders trial there was a great deal of discussion about the use of race in this context and whether the trial let alone what had happened to Alice should be allowed to happen at all. this sort of discussion reminds me of what might happen today. Discourse and little real action or change.

You know it's funny, while I was writing this episode and thinking about the what contemporary breaks with social norms might happen today that would ignite an international scandal the entire Duke and Duchess of Sussex stepping back from royal life scandal broke out.

The temptation is to say oh who cares about entitled royals is real but the relentlessly negative treatment of Meghan Markle in the press and the split between some whites in the UK who don't see race playing any part all and UK blacks who see her treatment as similar to their own makes this scandal instructive.

What I find troubling is that scandals like the USA's child separation policy at the border or the intractable problem of homelessness or the fact that our time on the planet might be running out seems to some of the least compelling scandals on and offline.

Those scandals where we get to judge others and feel superior are the most satisfying scandals but these days when I feel myself being sucked into a scandal, checking social media for the occasional update I feel a tugging at my sleeve asking, "What are you ignoring by focusing on this?" If everything costs something what is the cost?

I don't have answers but lots of questions.

As for Alice and Leonard Rhinelanders.

Though they were still married there was no way they could be together even though they both expressed they still loved one another. In the end, they settle on a lifetime annuity for Alice of 3,800 a year, which would be \$55,829.56 a year in 2020 money. In doing so Alice relinquished

to all claims to the Rhinelander name and property she also agreed to never speak about the marriage or divorce.

These details are some of the last about either party except a note about Alice's father's death three years after the trial. Alice continued to live with her parent never remarrying.

In 1936 Leonard Rhinelander died of pneumonia in his father's house in Long Island, N.Y. Almost as soon as Leonard was buried his siblings went into court to stop the payments to Alice but once again they failed and Alice continued to receive the annuity Leonard had agreed to pay for the rest of her life.

Alice died on September 13th, 1989 at 89 years old. She had endured the scorn and ignorance of her age and while it's impossible to know the extent of any psychological harm to her, if any, what we do know is she had the last word.

If you're ever in the Beechwoods Cemetery in upstate NY you can see can her declaration for yourself. Here's a clue, if you search for her grave don't look for Alice Beatrice Jones because you won't find her there. You'll find her in the Rs.

As part of her last will and testament, she is instructed that she be buried with a tombstone inscribed Alice Beatrice Rhinelander.

She finally claimed for herself what race, class, scandal, not to mention the Rhinelander's would have denied her.

Alice had the last word just as it should have been.

If you'd like to see photos of Alice and the Jones family or if you'd like to hear some of the music that made the jazz age great. You can find them all at the Deep Dive website at www.reggiedeepdive.com

Thanks to Joshua Rich for allowing me to use his song Rain as the podcast's theme. Notes on a Scandal was researched and written by me, Reggie.

Thanks for joining me. See ya next time.