

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

'When They See Us' Transforms Its Victims Into Heroes

Ava DuVernay's mini-series depicts the excruciating toll that persecution and incarceration had on the teenage boys known as the Central Park Five.



By Salamishah Tillet

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I was 13, a mere year younger than Kevin Richardson and Raymond Santana, two of the boys who made up Central Park Five, when they were wrongfully convicted of beating and raping the white female jogger Trisha Meili in 1989.

I had just returned to the United States after living in my father's country of Trinidad and Tobago for three years, and the televised melodramas that would cement my coming-of-age as a black woman — Anita Hill testifying at Clarence Thomas's confirmation hearings, the videotape of Los Angeles police officers beating Rodney King, the O.J. Simpson Bronco chase — had yet to happen.

Back in 1989, I was still a novice to the rules and rituals of American racism. But, like so many other African-American and Latino kids who lived in the New York metropolitan area, I was about to get a primer: The Central Park jogger case.

Because of my proximity to that trial, I thought I'd be prepared to watch "When They See Us," Ava DuVernay's four-part Netflix mini-series, debuting Friday, that depicts the horrifying events surrounding the case, and the excruciating toll the public persecution and swift conviction had on these teenage boys and their families.

Instead, it took me two days to watch the first episode, and after each pause, I had to convince myself that I could sit through the next scene.

This is not because this show lacks beauty or depth. It is thoughtfully cast, well-paced and visually stunning, thanks to DuVernay's longtime collaborator, the cinematographer Bradford Young. In fact, "When They See Us" is DuVernay's strongest work to date. But what makes it so devastating is its relentless portrayal of a criminal justice system that locks up, scapegoats and brutalizes black and brown American children with ease and enthusiasm. Part dirge, part indictment, the series stands out because it insists that we see the boys as they once were and as they always saw themselves: innocent.

[Read an interview with the Central Park Five.]

"When They See Us" is not the first project to delve into this subject matter. In 2003, Meili published a memoir, "I Am the Central Park Jogger: A Story of Hope and Possibility," in which she publicly revealed her identity for the first time, recounted her ordeal, and said that she has no memory of her attack and has been told by doctors she never will.

But, as a television mini-series, DuVernay's project more directly benefits from the archival research found in the 2012 documentary "The Central Park Five," directed by Ken Burns, Sarah Burns and David McMahon. Debuting at the dawn of President Obama's second term, that film "positioned itself as something of a public pardon," Manohla Dargis wrote in her New York Times review. "Equal measures criminal investigation, cultural exhumation and a consideration of race in a presumptively postracial America, it seeks to set the record straight."

Seven years later, America looks very different. As a result, DuVernay's story eschews the measured tone of the documentary for an outrage more akin to Anthony Davis's forthcoming opera, "The Central Park Five," and Alexandra Bell's new series of prints, "No Humans Involved — After Sylvia Wynter." Appearing in this year's Whitney Biennial,

Bell's photolithographs critique the media's coverage of the Central Park jogger case — especially the New York Daily News and its racist headlines like “Park marauders call it ‘Wilding’” and “Wolf Pack's Prey” — and the publishing of Donald Trump's 1989 newspaper ad calling for the execution of these teenage boys.

And it is the horror of Trump's \$85,000 full-page demand, and the heedless, racist rush to demonize children that it exemplified, that backdrops this mini-series. (This week offered a striking contrast in the form of President Trump's Twitter response to Robert Mueller's findings: “There was insufficient evidence and therefore, in our Country, a person is innocent.”)

In the foreground, however, is a newer and even richer story: “When They See Us” restores the childhood innocence that the media, the police and prosecutors went to great lengths to deny and distort. It also grieves the years lost by the five victims, convicted as boys and released as men.



Asante Blackk as Kevin Richardson in “When They See Us.” Atsushi Nishijima/Netflix

Time is paramount here. Opening in medias res, the first episode does not begin in Central Park, but in the comfort and familiarity of the boys' residential neighborhood of Harlem. Their playful banter and adolescent restlessness, and the youthful appearances of the actors, underscore the naïveté and vulnerability that enables them to be exploited and coerced into confessions by police officers who held and interrogated them on and off for 14 to 30 hours, often without their parents present.

The second episode is even more harrowing because it follows the conspiracy — not the one boys are accused of, but the one mounted by the police and prosecutors who fudge timelines and overlook crucial evidence in order to expedite a guilty verdict. In the final two episodes, all but one of the boys is recast with an older actor, to mark how much they and the world have changed. (Korey Wise, the oldest of the boys, who was tried as an adult and sentenced to 5 to 15 years, is played throughout by a riveting Jharrel Jerome, known for “Moonlight.”)

[Read the history of the Central Park Five case.]

DuVernay has explored police brutality and mass incarceration before, in her film “Middle of Nowhere,” her Academy Award-nominated documentary “13th,” and her TV series “Queen Sugar.” But she uses time differently here, slowing it down enough for the viewer to feel the intensity of the boys' bewilderment at their setup by the cops and then speeding it up as we watch these men adjust back to society, forever tainted by their experiences.

The effect is a set of reversals in which DuVernay uses the conventions of the crime drama to upend our typical allegiances to police protagonists, and shift our gaze from the powerful to the targets of their institutional racism.

In fact, this case was solved not by any rigorous police investigation, but by a chance encounter and an unusual admission of guilt. Twelve years after the five were convicted, Matias Reyes, a murderer and serial rapist (with whom Wise had brief encounters in prison), confessed to prison officials that he was the one who attacked Meili. In 2002, after new DNA evidence corroborated Reyes’s version of the events, the Central Park Five’s convictions were vacated. And in 2014, they won a landmark \$41 million settlement from the city. “No amount of money could have given us our time back,” Yusef Salaam, who was 15 at the time of his conviction, recently said in an interview.

“When They See Us” does not pretend to make up for that lost time. Instead, it gives us something we haven’t yet fully seen: their humanity, and the intimacy these boys nurtured with their families and, over time, with each other in order to survive. By doing so, Kevin Richardson, Antron McCray, Raymond Santana, Korey Wise and Yusef Salaam emerge as the heroes of their own story — and if we pay heed to the series’ urgent message about criminal justice reform, ours too.

More on the Central Park Five

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The True Story of How a City in Fear Brutalized the Central Park Five May 30, 2019



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