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Saintly Victim(s), Savage Assailants: Race, Rape and, Media Portrayals of the Central Park Jogger Case

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Saintly Victim(s), Savage Assailants:
Race, Rape and, Media Portrayals of the Central Park Jogger Case

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Introduction

On April 19th 1989, Trisha Meili was assaulted, raped and sodomized while jogging on one of Central Park's northern running paths between 9 and 10 pm. Meili, a 28-year-old investment banker, went for a run on her usual path before being knocked down and dragged nearly 300 feet into the heavily wooded area, north of the 103rd street transverse, where she was brutally beaten and raped. Meili survived the attack and after twelve days in a coma, she awoke in a city that had been turned on its head by the media frenzy that had emerged in the days following her assault. Considering Meili was a white woman raised in an upper class suburb of Pittsburgh who, at the time of the assault, resided on east 83rd street between York Avenue and East end Avenue on the Upper East side of Manhattan; the case garnered an unprecedented level of media attention and according to the *New York Times* the attack was "one of the most widely publicized crimes of the 1980s". While Meili was the ideal tabloid victim for a 1980's New York City that was defined by the burgeoning financial sector downtown and the racial unrest uptown, the assault of the woman that the *New York Daily News* dubbed "The Central Park Jogger" was lacking an 'ideal tabloid assailant'.

The process by which the *Daily News* crafted narratives that contributed to the wrongful incarceration of five Harlem-raised black and Hispanic adolescent males was entirely dictated by a reliance on antiquated stereotypes of black men and white women. Eager to cover the scintillating story from the onset, both the *Daily News* and *The New York Post* rapidly began printing front-page headlines that preyed on the fear expressed by white-Manhattanites who identified with the affluent jogger and felt their own safety was in jeopardy following the attack. These aforementioned white Manhattanites make up the mainstream target audience that the

New York City tabloid media intended to reach with their fear-inducing articles. While the concept of who makes up the mainstream audience is somewhat vague, *Savage Portrayals* author Natalie Byfield presents a working definition of mainstream:

“I see the mainstream as a site for corralling support for the dominant forces in our world. As an instrumental entity, the mainstream includes and excludes categories of people, cultural symbols, forms of meaning making, forms of expression, and forms of interaction in society based on the needs of the dominant groups.”¹

These media crafted narratives were so effective in their manipulation of the racial unrest in Manhattan that soon after their publishing, the city was divided along lines of black and white. While the tabloid media outlets were creating their own manipulated version of the white woman's assault that took place in the park on April 19th, 1989, the lives of five non-white youths were hanging in the balance. The five young men vilified and put on trial were demonized for their ethnic background and the ‘dangerous’ minority culture that the white readers of the New York Tabloids feared they represented.

The narrative of the Central Park jogger is the story of the constructed positions that white women and men of color are forced to play in America. The pervasive notion of the black male as a sexually deviant predatory being has existed since emancipation and has defined the manner in which the white mainstream masses view interracial interactions between black men and white women. While black men in America have long been defined by the suspicion of their perceived lustful desire to sexually ‘defile’ white women, the role of the Caucasian female has also been defined by white male dominion. As the wife and child bearer to white men, the white woman has long been positioned in the role of mediator of white male power and sexuality in American society. In the culturally transgressive act of engaging in intimate relationships with

¹ Natalie P. Byfield, *Savage Portrayals: Race, Media, and the Central Park Jogger Story* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2014) 53.

black men the white woman redefines her subordinate role as the white man's property and wields an elusive power associated with sexual independence. The white fear that black men possess an ever-burning desire to defile white woman is felt most acutely when men of color are accused of raping Caucasian females. When mainstream media tabloids like *The New York Post* began covering the Central Park jogger case with pointed angle towards demonizing the accused, they utilized vocabulary like “savage” and “wolf pack” that highlighted the bestial nature that had long been associated with black men in America. The propensity of these media crafted notions to seep into public consciousness cannot be understated. Within the first week of media coverage following the rape of the Central Park jogger, the residents of New York City had pronounced the accused teenagers public enemies, who posed a direct threat to public safety in Manhattan.

I. Media Construction of the Young Black Man as Sexually Deviant Beast

Antron McCray, Korey Wise, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, and Sheldon Richardson woke up in Harlem on April 19th 1989 as high school freshman, students and sons experiencing what would become the last day of their childhood and adolescence. Spring had already begun waking New York City up from this yearly hibernation and as the piragua carts and squeegee men once again took to the streets of Spanish Harlem, the joggers dusted off their sneakers and resumed running the Upper West and Upper East Side jogging paths that had been rendered unusable by the snow since mid-November. It goes without saying that seasonal awakening takes different forms depending on the location of the neighborhood and the income level of the residents. When the buds on the Sweet gum trees in Manhattan's Central Park begin to bloom and outside activity once again resumes in the city's public spaces after the winter months that kept New Yorkers indoors, all are eager to engage in the outdoor activities made possible by the warmth. When Solomon Brothers partner and Upper East Side resident Trisha Meili resumed her Central Park jogging regimen for the season, she entered a communal space where upper class and low income Manhattanites shared the park and its amenities, despite operating in disparate spheres of the divided city. This divide was amplified and exacerbated in the late 1980's when the crack epidemic ravaged low-income neighborhoods and the financial market boomed. While minority neighborhoods in upper Manhattan like Harlem, Washington Heights and Inwood were devastated socially and ransacked financially, the Upper West Side, Upper East Side and Lower Manhattan became home for the young upper class programmers and investment bankers who found work on flourishing Wall Street. These two clashing cultures rarely overlapped as a majority of white Manhattanites got off of the uptown 2 train at 96th street or earlier, while the rest of the borough road up through Spanish Harlem and into the heights.

With such a stark color line dividing the city, concepts of the two stereotypical extremes became grossly magnified. Young minorities living in low-income neighborhoods had their images conflated with those of crack peddlers, crack addicts and criminals. Young white professionals were viewed as a new breed of aggressively overachieving yuppie that worked jobs that previous generations spent their whole lives climbing the corporate ladder trying to attain. As young whites began holding high power positions in the financial world in their twenties, young blacks and Latinos became super predators in the eyes of the mainstream. While the status of white young people rose astronomically in the late 80's, blacks and Latinos of the same age were pigeonholed into corrosive stereotypes that were played out in the media. When Trisha Meili was raped in Central Park and the New York City tabloid newspapers announced that a group of black and Latino teenage boys were responsible, it was as if the two disparate ways of life in the city clashed together in one horrific moment of savage sexual assault. In this collision, both black and white stereotypes were satisfied and the public sentiment that New York City's best and brightest white minds were under attack from savage bestial minorities grew with every news headline.

The path that Antron McCray, Korey Wise, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana and Sheldon Richardson took to and within the park would become the subject of intense police and media speculation for months to come, following April 19th. However, on the evening of that fateful date, the decision to enter the park was not pointed with any purpose nor entirely their own. With a holiday weekend coming up and school being cancelled on the following Thursday as a result, an otherwise mundane Wednesday night in April was suddenly considered an opportunity for late night socializing and hanging out with friends. Hanging out in the blocks immediately surrounding the 110th street and Fifth avenue Schomburg Plaza Housing Project,

where the accused adolescent assailants lived with their families, provided very little social activity other than playing basketball in the project playground. In response to this lack of structured and safe recreational activity, Raymond Santana's father, Raymond Santana Sr., two decades later recalled advising his son to avoid hanging out on the block: "I told him, you know, ah, too much trouble in the corner. Um, go to the park. I sent him to the park that night. So, I feel guilt, too."² Guilt and hindsight aside, Raymond Santana's Sr.'s decision to send his son and company to the park was informed by the knowledge that after dark the streets of East Harlem can be a perilous place for young men of color. The level of police scrutiny that minority individuals socializing on the sidewalk were subjected to was egregiously amplified in low-income neighborhoods like East Harlem. The sad irony of Raymond Santana Sr.'s words of cautionary advice to his son is, that despite being a supposedly shared communal space, Central Park was in fact a perilous location to be a young man of color after dark. While spaces and neighborhoods that are considered minority inhabited are always kept under the watchful eye of New York Police Department surveillance, the sense of obligatory police protection of primarily white spaces is amplified. The same police that survey East Harlem in search of crack dealers and criminals to incarcerate, patrol Central Park in an effort to protect citizens from the supposed minority threats mentioned above. When Raymond Santana, Antron McCray, Corey Wise, Yusef Salaam, and Sheldon Richardson entered the park to avoid being seen 'as on the corner' drug dealers by the police, they ended up being arrested as a "savage wolf pack" of gang-rapists. Despite being from the same Schomburg Plaza Housing Project and East Harlem neighborhood, four of the five young boys aged fourteen to seventeen who would come to be known as the Central Park Five were not familiar with each other beyond the level of acquaintance (Corey

² The Central Park Five, dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon, perf. Raymond Santana Sr., Web, Sundance Selects, 2012

Wise and Yusef Salaam were friends) nor did they enter the park together. However unlikely it may be that a group of teenagers would meet for the first time and within a few hours orchestrate one of the most brutal and savage rapes and beatings in the history of New York City, the Central Park Five would be escorted from the park by law enforcement entrenched in criminal notoriety and media scrutiny.

In Ken and Sarah Burns 2012 documentary, *The Central Park Five*, the father-daughter filmmaker duo set out to deconstruct the process by which the residents of New York City turned against Antron McCray, Korey Wise, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, and Sheldon Richardson. Examining the stereotype-driven reportage that was published in the days following the assault of the woman who at the time was known only as the Central Park jogger proves illuminating however, the testimony that the accused offer, provides crucial insight into the process by which law enforcement interrogators coerce innocent individuals into submitting false confessions. Understanding how five innocent boys aged fourteen to seventeen could give false accounts of committing a savage gang rape that they had nothing to do with, takes a certain kind of manipulation and coercion on the part of law enforcement that is very rarely brought to light. The collectively narrativized false confessions that the five minority adolescents told the police was the product of fatigue, youthful ignorance, a desire to end the interrogation and go home and on some level, a sense of guilt that came from being present when a group of teenage boys engaged in a night of criminal mischief in Central Park on the evening that Trisha Meili was raped and beaten within an inch of her life by Matias Reyes.

The aforementioned group of teenage boys who took to Central Park on the night of April 19th, 1989 was composed of young minority high school students who met up by chance while walking toward the park, according to Yusuf Salaam. The twenty-five young boys, who Salaam

describes entering the park that night, engaged in behavior that could be considered criminal mischief befitting of young boys going through puberty: throwing rocks at cars, harassing a couple riding a tandem bike by trying to pull them off, and taking food from and beating up a homeless man. While beating up a homeless man is certainly a violent and cruel action, not all twenty-five boys participated in these attacks and there is no conclusive evidence pointing Antron McCray, Korey Wise, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana and Sheldon Richardson to that assault. Despite being members of a group that committed crimes that run the gambit from childish to cruel, the five black and Latino boys, who comprised the Central Park Five, provide testimonials in *The Central Park Five* documentary, stating that they were bystanders to the actual violent acts of mischief that took place while the large group moved through the park. Whether or not one believes the members of the Central Park Five when they say they had nothing to do with the mugging of the homeless man or the throwing of rocks is irrelevant. Not all of the boys in the group were involved in all three attacks and according to Antron McCray “the only crime [I] committed that night was hopping the turnstile.”³

Merely by being members of this group of teenagers, the police were able to position the Central Park Five’s activities in the park in such a way that law enforcement officials could do what *New York Times* journalist Jim Dwyer refers to as “climbing some ladder of facts.”⁴ The ‘ladder of facts’ that Jim Dwyer refers to is the process by which the New York Police Department detectives connect the minor crimes that the large group committed to the ghastly rape and brutal assault of the Central Park jogger. When the detectives, assigned to interrogating the adolescents, began piecing together a timeline for the group's location in the park, law

³ *The Central Park Five*, dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon, perf. Antron McCray

⁴ *The Central Park Five*, dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon, perf. Jim Dwyer

enforcement deduced that the large group entered the park at 8:55 PM at the northeastern most entrance and walked the path surrounding the Harlem Meer until they reached the east drive, one of the two largest roads in the entire park. According to the police timeline, constructed to satisfy the ‘Ladder of Facts’, the initial three acts of aforementioned criminal mischief took place between 9:05 PM and 9:12 PM walking south along the Eastern Drive. While the slim seven-minute window in which these three acts of violent criminal mischief took place is questionable in its own regard, the New York Police Department’s timeline took a much more calamitous and damaging liberty when a call came in over the police radio at 1:30 in the morning.

Until that point, the two members of the Central Park Five, who were being questioned in the 86th street Central Park Precinct, were Kevin Richardson and Raymond Santana. According to *The Central Park Five* documentary, Richardson and Santana were just to be released with tickets for family court concerning the three low level East Drive offenses, when the call came into the station about a woman who had been discovered unconscious and nearly beaten to death on the 102nd street cross drive. Considering the East Drive connects to the 102nd Street Cross Drive at 104th street, the police felt there might be a connection between the brutally beaten woman and the actions of the large group of teenage boys on the East Drive. Per the request of the officers calling in from the scene of the rape at 102nd street, the detectives at the 86th street Central Park precinct held onto Santana and Richardson in an effort to interrogate them regarding the rape. As put by a *New York Times* journalist in *The Central Park Five* documentary: “From that moment forward, everything plowed toward [the five accused adolescents].”⁵ In an effort to round up and interrogate the young black and Latino adolescents who were part of the group of twenty-five who entered the park from the northeastern most

⁵ *The Central Park Five*, dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon, perf. Jim Dwyer

entrance, detectives dispatched to the Schomburg Plaza Housing Project in search of other adolescents who may have been involved. In the ensuing hours of investigation and interrogation, the actions of the New York Police Department would be entirely dictated by the assumption that the group of teenage boys who were reported to have been responsible for the criminal mischief on East Drive were equally culpable for the rape of the woman who would come to be known as the Central Park jogger.

After compiling a list of possible suspects who resided in the Schomburg Plaza Housing Project, located a block from the entrance of the park used by the group of minority adolescents, New York Police Department detectives went looking for Yusef Salaam. Salaam had left Central Park that night with a sixteen year old with a developmental disability and deafness in one ear named Korey Wise. When Salaam and Wise returned to the former's parent's apartment, two officers were waiting by the door with a list of potential members of the group that were among the twenty five adolescents who entered the park. In the retelling that Salaam offers to Ken Burns and his daughter Sarah, the officers explained that he would have to come down to precinct to discuss his role in the events in the park because his name was on a list with other adolescents who were potentially involved. After registering that Salaam had arrived home from the park with another young man of color, the detective's explain to Wise that he will have to come down to the precinct as well: "Your name's not on the list, ah, but you can come down. Come down with your buddy, you'll be right back."⁶ The detective's promise Wise that he would be able to return home shortly after visiting the precinct. However, this false promise came to be a defining aspect of the investigators relationship with the accused teenagers. Following this first lie, came countless other deceptions regarding what the Central Park Five should

⁶ The Central Park Five, dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon, perf. Yusef Salaam

say in order to exonerate themselves. When Salaam grimly reflects on his decision to allow the detectives to coerce him into leaving the housing project for the precinct, he makes a heavy observation regarding what he and Wise lost by obeying the detectives orders: “We went to the precinct, and I came home seven years later, [Korey] came home thirteen years later.”⁷ These stolen years can be attributed to the police interrogation practices that detectives employed while the young men were held for fourteen to thirty hours. New York Police Department detective John Hartigan interrogated and manipulated 16-year-old Wise’s emotional immaturity in order to coerce a false confession. Wise left the safety of his home under the false pretense that he would “be right back”. Sitting in an interrogation room for approximately a day, Wise reiterated the way in which the detective, John Hartigan’s faux-consolatory molded his exhausted sixteen year old self into viewing a false confession as his only way out of the Central Park precinct interrogation room: “Korey you look very tired man, very tired, exhausted and you want to go home; but you're not gonna go home until you give up, say a story.”⁸ Detective Hartigan’s emphasis on Wise’s fatigued mental state and the correlation drawn between going home and giving a statement are the key factors that resulted in Wise placing himself and others as the perpetrators at the 102nd street loch where the jogger was brutally raped and nearly beaten to death. In an opposite interrogation room, Salaam was convinced by detectives that they had discovered his fingerprints on the pants of the Central Park jogger. These lies contributed to the already fragile and brittle mental state of the exhausted children. John Jay University Psychologist and Criminologist Saul Kassin describes the state that these adolescent minds find themselves in while confessing to crimes they never committed: “They were under degrees of interrogation for a range of fourteen to thirty hours. And when you are stressed, when you are

⁷ The Central Park Five, dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon, perf. Yusef Salaam

⁸ The Central Park Five, dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon, perf. Korey Wise

tired, when you are a juvenile and not fully mature and developed you're thinking right now I just want this to stop.”⁹ The detectives manipulated this desire for “this to stop”, as the interrogation dragged on into double-digit hours. With a submitted story being the only key the detectives would offer him to unlock the interrogation room door, Wise racked his mind for a story, which he believed the detectives wanted to hear; the story of how he and other boys in the larger group raped and beat Trisha Meili within an inch of her life. Once he had delivered the testament he hoped would send him home, Wise was arrested and sent to Riker's Island; because at sixteen years old he was the oldest of the boys, the rest of whom were all sent to Spofford Juvenile Detention Center. In the case of Wise’s interrogation, Saul Kassin’s comments regarding a not fully developed mental state are particularly appropriate because Wise was developmentally delayed and after the fourteen-hour plus interrogation his ability to defend himself from the detectives verbal onslaught was largely diminished. Exhausted, scared and confused as to why he was being accused, Wise conceded and told a story that was not true and never happened: “I gave a written statement just to satisfy them, just to get them out of my face with it and trying to be on my way out of their building.”¹⁰ By the following morning, detectives at the 86th street precinct had delivered a press conference briefing the rape of the jogger to the media. In the hours following the New York Police Department press briefing, the New York City tabloid media were hard at work churning out front-page headlines and cover stories that declared the accused adolescent minorities as the perpetrators responsible for the rape of the Central Park jogger.

The headlines and investigative reports that hit the newsstands the morning after the rape of the Central Park jogger were remarkably willing to embrace the racial stereotypes that defined

⁹ The Central Park Five, dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon, perf. Saul Kassin

¹⁰ The Central Park Five, dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon, perf. Corey Wise

America's relationship with interracial sexual assault. More specifically the mainstream media played upon the constructed images of black men and white woman that define any sexual interaction between the two of them consensual or otherwise. The black adolescents, who came to be known as the Central Park Five, were viewed through the hateful lens that has always defined black men who associate with white women. The white mainstream have always held a strong resentment for black men who enjoy the company of white women. Long considered the property of the white male establishment, white women who choose to be romantically involved with black men were not only considered loose women but also accessories to a force that threatened Caucasian dominated society. This archetype of the black man who seeks to undermine the country's social structure through his romantic and sexual relationships with white women has existed since emancipation.

In the early eighteenth century boxer Jack Johnson grew to considerable fame and notoriety by defeating white reigning world champions and taking the title for himself. As a black man in an era where many sports leagues were still segregated, Jack Johnson rose to prominence as a polarizing figure whose fights were always entrenched in racial tension. After defeating Canadian Caucasian world heavyweight champion Tommy Burns and taking the title, Jack Johnson found himself fighting a series of white challengers all dubbed 'the Great White Hope' who the weight mainstream audience cheered on hoping they would wrestle the title back from the black champion and return it to white hands. While beating high profile white boxers in a mainstream white sport would certainly earn Jack Johnson the disdain of the white community, engaging in romantic relationships with white women put him under intense media scrutiny and the large news outlets attempted to vilify him to the highest degree. As an addendum to Ken Burns' 2004 documentary *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, Dr.

Gerald Early published a short piece titled *Rebel of the Progressive Era* that placed Jack Johnson's experiences as a black celebrity in a relevant historical context. In the text, Gerald Early highlights the public response that Jack Johnson received as a black celebrity who unapologetically associated with white women:

What most bothered whites about Johnson was that he openly had affairs with white women—and even married them—at a time when miscegenation of this sort was not only illegal but was positively dangerous. Johnson did not seem to care what whites thought of him, and this bothered most whites a great deal. He was not humble or diffident with whites. He gloated about his victories and often taunted his opponents in the ring. (This behavior was not unique to him as a champion boxer. Many boxers, notably John L. Sullivan, acted this way. It was unique for a black public figure.) He also did not care what blacks thought of him, as some were critical of his sex life. His preference for white women seemed an embarrassment and something that would bring the wrath of whites down on the heads of every black person.¹¹

The impact that Jack Johnson's preference for white women had on the black community, as a whole cannot be understated. The “wrath of whites” that Dr. Gerald Early references is a powerful force of Caucasian hatred that targets black men who are seen as a threat to the purity of white woman and white establishment. Not only did Jack Johnson's victories over white world champions challenge the notion that white Americans were superior, his knockouts and ring triumphs were unapologetic, making no efforts to hide or downplay his emotions. The white sentiment that black men should contain their emotions or act bashful in the face of their own success was directly challenged by the manner in which Jack Johnson carried himself romantically and in the ring. As a black athlete who took the title from Caucasian boxers and in the eyes of white men took white women away from white homes, Jack Johnson became associated with the stereotype of the black brute who undermined white society by sexually defiling young attractive white women. The lingering affects of this white rage are felt

¹¹ Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson, dir. Ken Burns perf. Dr. Gerald Early, Web, PBS, 2004

throughout 20th century white sentiments toward interracial couples and most acutely when cases of black men raping white women are prominently featured in the media. The legacy of Jack Johnson and other black men who were portrayed as savage beasts is fully understood only when examining the manner in which young accused men of color are characterized in the media. Following Wise and other members of the Central Park Five being coerced and manipulated into submitting false testimony to the New York Police Department, the New York City tabloid media responded by amplifying the pre-existing stereotypes of savage black men and the sanctified pure white women they defile sexually.

When Detective Hartigan had successfully convinced Wise and the other members of the Central Park five to confess to gang-raping Trisha Meili, the New York Police Department were suddenly in a position of having to disclose to the New York City media outlets what evidence and information they had unearthed in the first twelve hours following the attack. The police addressed members of the media early the following morning and pulled no punches when it came to describing the young black and Latino teenagers as the primary suspects and culprits:

Last night a woman jogger was found unconscious and partially clothed in Central Park about two hundred feet north of the 102nd street cross drive. What we... we believe happened was is the following: the victim was jogging across the 102nd street cross drive when she was attacked by a dozen young males; she was dragged down the bushes near what is called "the loch" where she was beaten and sexually assaulted. Five youths were arrested at 96th street and the west Bridal Path. We believe these youths and others were responsible for two or three other incidents that occurred in the park that night, assaults on joggers and pedestrians. And we are currently looking for others we believe to be involved.¹²

Drawing a direct link between the acts of criminal mischief that the large group took part in and the brutal rape that none partook in is the moment that the New York Police Department threw caution and reasonable doubt into the wind, pushing full steam ahead with the notion that the

¹² The Central Park Five, dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon.

group of adolescents could be the only people responsible. This thought process perfectly encapsulates what *New York Times* reporter Jim Dwyer refers to as building “the ladder of facts”. Believing that children responsible for the petty crime committed along the East Drive were so deranged and dangerous that they could also commit a near-fatal gang rape speaks to the mistrust that the New York Police Department felt toward teenagers of color. Viewing the harassment of bikers as a crime somehow in-line with a dozen teenagers taking turns beating and raping a woman is the kind of stretch of imagination that is only made possible if the suspects are of a demographic that law enforcement feel possess the potential for horrific violence. If white children were discovered to be throwing rocks in Central Park after hours, there would be no police officer or member of the media who believed that those Caucasian rock-throwers could also violently gang rape a woman who happened to run past them. This kind of assumption is exclusively made about people of color because the post-reconstruction Caucasian belief that black men possess a deep-seated bestial desire to sexually dominate and defile white women remains in the collective Caucasian consciousness. How else could the officers and detectives at the 86th street Central Park Precinct believe that “a dozen young [black and Latino] males” could come together and without any pre-meditation brutally rape and nearly murder a woman who happened to run across them on a jogging path. No one in the New York Police department nor in the mainstream media questioned how unlikely it would be that twelve children could all collectively decide that raping and brutalizing a woman would be a good way to conclude their Wednesday night in the park. Unless mainstream white New York City believed that all young black and Latino teenagers desperately desired to rape and defile white female flesh, how could such a spontaneous gang rape occur involving perfect strangers? How could an attack so violently personal occur between a large group of acquaintances and an older woman none of

them had ever met nor seen before? Considering that so many mainstream white readers believed that black and Latino teens who grew up in neighborhoods like East Harlem were predisposed to commit this kind of violent sexual assault toward white women, it would be remarkably easy for tabloid media outlets like the *New York Daily News* to sell the Central Park Five as the children responsible for raping and beating Trisha Meili within an inch of her young white life.

While the media landscape of the New York City in the late 1980's was oversaturated with stories of criminal activity like beatings, muggings and, rapes; all other news items paled in comparison to the front-page attention and public frenzy that the rape of the Central Park jogger received. *Times* reporter Jim Dwyer commented on the state of crime coverage in the city in the Burn's documentary, noting that despite the frequency of violent assault that took place in the late 1980's the rape of the Central Park jogger stood alone: "In those days, there were probably six murders a day. In the newsroom people didn't always pay attention to whatever grisly event of the day had happened."¹³ However the frenzy of in depth coverage of the attack began almost immediately following the police briefing was made up of exclusively front-page headlines describing the brutal nature of the attack and the 'savage' assailants who the media believed were responsible based off of what the police told them.

Within the first 24 hours following the attack, the five black and Latino teenagers who raped the Central Park jogger was the primary story on every major news network in addition to the front-page of every newspaper. *The New York Times*, a storied publication with a long history of respectable journalism also committed the same injustices that defined tabloid outlets

¹³ [The Central Park Five](#), dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon, perf. Jim Dwyer

like the *New York Daily News* and *The New York Post*. In the week following the attack the *Times* reported that:

The youths who raped and savagely beat a young investment banker as she jogged in Central Park Wednesday night were part of a loosely organized gang of 32 schoolboys whose random, motiveless assaults terrorized at least eight other people over nearly two hours, senior police investigators said yesterday.” And: “she was raped by at least 4 of the 12 boys, Chief Colangelo said.¹⁴

Despite being a prestigious publication, the *Times* utilized racially coded vocabulary like “savage” to characterize the accused teenagers. When used to describe black men charged with the rape of a white woman, the term “savage” will never escape the racist connotations that have been attached to it since the Reconstruction era. The characterization of the alleged assault as being “random and motiveless” play into the notion that black men are prone to engage in shockingly violent and sexually transgressive behavior at any given time with a moment's notice. News items fueled the idea that black and Latino teenagers were ‘ticking time-bombs’ who could explode and assault white women with no rationale or provocation. Pete Hamill’s *New York Post* piece titled “A Savage Disease Called New York” attempted to describe the mindset of these allegedly volatile and murderous minority youths in an effort to explain to white readers what could have been going through the minds of the teenagers who gang-raped Trisha Meili:

These kids came into Central Park from the north on Wednesday evening and according to the cops, they had a loose plan of battle to go “wilding” against the rich. The details didn’t matter because there was no script. But they were coming downtown from a world of crack, welfare, guns, knives indifference and ignorance. They were coming from a land with no fathers. They were coming from schools where cops must guard the doors. 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,

¹⁴ Amy Davidson, “Donald Trump and the Central Park Five” *New Yorker Magazine*, Web, 23 June 2014.

rape. The enemies were rich. The enemies were white. The enemies own things. The enemies were other people.¹⁵

The story that Hamill is selling to the audience is one of a rabid, angry group of at-risk youth leaving the fatherless wasteland that he imagines East Harlem to be and descending into the white sanctuary of Central Park, in an effort to brutalize white people who have all that the teenagers desire. It was not hard to sell racial violence as a battle between the haves and have-not's in late 1980's New York City. According to the *New York Post* journalist, the police that Hamill describes, "guarding" the classroom, are the sentinels of white order who attempt to contain and control the black anger and "savage disease" that escaped in the form of "wilding" on that fateful April night. Following the rape of the Central Park jogger 'investigative journalism' emerged that not only promoted an image of black and Latino teenagers as rapists, but also presented this as being both typical and commonplace in low income New York City neighborhoods.

This image of the poor, deranged black teenagers on trial for a gang rape they surely committed was promoted in the newspapers next to words like 'sociopath' and in one case "teenage mutant".¹⁶ The derelict and deeply disturbed portrait of the Central Park Five that emerged in the media was the collaborative product of twisted fiction on the part of the reporters and willingness on the behalf on the white mainstream public to embrace the image of the children as sociopathic killers and rapists. Bob Herbert's *New York Daily News* piece titled "Park Rape Scene Is Still Jarring" depicted the Central Park Five as they awaited trial and literally dressed down the physical appearance, clothing and demeanor of the children in court. Antron McCray was the victim of considerable slander from Herbert, who described the accused

¹⁵ Pete Hamill, "A Savage Disease Called New York," *New York Post*, April 23, 1989.

¹⁶ Pete Hamill, "A Savage Disease Called New York," *New York Post*, April 23, 1989.

sixteen year old as a “little, a tiny-headed, frightened, wimpish pipsqueak who looked for all the world like a black Joey Fama.”¹⁷ Comparing McCray to Joey Fama, a convicted murderer who shot and murdered Yusef Hawkins in a Bensonhurst hate crime in the same year, was a pointed decision on Bob Herbert’s part. Aligning members of the Central Park Five with other racially charged acts of violence painted a portrait of the teenagers as murderers who attacked Trisha Meili because they were black and she was white.

One of the most racially pointed aspects of the television news coverage that the Central Park jogger case received was the manner in which hip-hop culture and the violent connotations that rap music held had influenced the brutal rape the children allegedly committed. One word in particular found itself as the subject of multiple investigative reports and splashed across countless front-page headlines: “Wilding”. Many New Yorkers were introduced to the term during the following excerpted broadcast: “Some of the young men told the police they were just out ‘wilding’. ‘Wilding’ is a word you won’t find in Webster’s [Dictionary]. ‘Wilding’, New York police say that’s new teenage slang for rampaging in wolf packs, attacking people just for the fun of it.”¹⁸ The conflation of “wilding” as an ‘urban youth’ term for senseless violence is a blatant case of the media’s ignorance regarding black and Latino culture leading to corrosive misrepresentation. Joan Didion addresses the violent implications that the New York City mainstream media attached to hip hop language like ‘Wilding’ in “Sentimental Journeys”. In her January 1991 text, Didion speaks to the manner in which the accused teenagers behavior in their holding cell was portrayed in the media as proof that minority youth culture informed by rap music was sexually violent and deviant by nature:

¹⁷ Bob Herbert, “Park Rape Scene is Still Jarring,” *Daily News*, June 26, 1990, 4.

¹⁸ The Central Park Five, dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon.

NIGHTMARE IN Central Park, the headlines and display type read. *Teen Wolfpack Beats and Rapes Wall Street Exec on Jogging Path. Central Park Horror. Wolf Pack's Prey. Female Jogger Near Death After Savage Attack by Roving Gang. Rape Rampage. Park Marauders Call It 'Wilding,' Street Slang for Going Berserk. Rape Suspect: 'It Was Fun.'* *Rape Suspect's Jailhouse Boast: 'She Wasn't Nothing.'* *The teenagers were back in the holding cell, the confessions gory and complete. One shouted, "hit the beat" and they all started rapping to "Wild Thing."* *The Jogger and the Wolf Pack. An Outrage And A Prayer.* And, on the Monday morning after the attack, on the front page of *The New York Post*, with a photograph of Governor Mario Cuomo and the headline NONE OF US IS SAFE, this italic text: "A visibly shaken Governor Cuomo spoke out yesterday on the vicious Central Park rape: The people are angry and frightened—my mother is, my family is. To me, as a person who's lived in this city all of his life, this is the ultimate shriek of alarm."¹⁹

The alleged rapping to Tone Loc's popular 1989 hit "Wild Thing" reads as the kind of media constructed fallacy that plays right in the hands of people who believed that rap music was damaging and promoted recklessly violent behavior among the young people who listened to it. The notion that the five young men who were facing charges as serious as rape in the first degree and assault with a deadly weapon (tree branch) would be dancing, rapping and declaring "she wasn't nothing" and "it was fun" is only digestible and believable to a demographic who considers black and Latino children capable of such frighteningly callous violence by virtue of their nature. With the prevalent image of the accused teenagers emerging as one defined by violent ambivalence, the public sentiment toward the alleged rapists was growing more and more hostile by the day. A *New York Daily News* article written by Lizette Alvarez titled "Cold Blooded Story" illustrated the indifferent nature of Raymond Santana when describing his behavior on a coerced video confession presented to assistant district attorneys Elizabeth Leder and Linda Fairstein. In the article Alvarez describes "nonchalant Raymond Santana confess on videotape yesterday that he grabbed the joggers breasts and watched a companion viciously beat

¹⁹ Joan Didion, "Sentimental Journeys," *After Henry* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992) 255.

her with a brick.”²⁰ Describing scared, confused and misled Raymond Santana as “nonchalant” heavily plays into the aforementioned notion that “she wasn’t nothing” was a sentiment widely held by the accused teenagers. Misrepresenting Santana's demeanor was a crucial part of reshaping scared teenagers into cold, callous, conscious-less rapists. While Alvarez’s article largely operates as a piece of journalistic slander intended to portray Santana as a stone-faced rapist capable of unimaginable cruelty, the journalist unintentionally undermined her portrait by including that “Santana is the only youth who says a brick, not a pipe was used to smash the joggers head” revealing that the children provided inconsistent accounts of a rape they were being pressured into lying about. The manipulation and abuse of police authority that motivated the Central Park five to fabricate entire narratives regarding a rape they had nothing to do with began to seep through the cracks of the tabloid media’s efforts to bury the teenagers under dirt in the court of public opinion.

Powerful white members of the political establishment echoed the indignant disposition of the mainstream white audience. In addition to Mario Cuomo, the Governor of New York at the time, addressing white New York with his comments that for himself and his Italian-immigrant family the assault of the white Central Park jogger “was the ultimate shriek of alarm”. Governor Mario Cuomo ushered a warning to white New Yorkers that silently acknowledged that the “alarm” was intended to reach white ears, alerting the mainstream to the fact that they were no longer safe from minority violence. On the less subtle end of the spectrum Mayor Ed Koch spoke directly into the camera during an on the sidewalk network news interview, addressing the rising tide of anger by issuing fiery statements that attacked the five accused teenagers and the moral fiber of their families as well: “When parents or grandmothers of some

²⁰ Lizette Alvarez, “Cold Blooded Story,” *New York Daily News*, June 28, 1990.

of these alleged perpetrators... We always have to say alleged because that's the requirement. [Looks away in disgust] When those Grand mothers say 'But he's a good boy. He never did anything. Don't you believe it! Don't you believe it!'"²¹ The certainty that Koch expresses regarding the guilty status of the Antron McCray, Korey Wise, Sheldon Richardson, Yusef Salaam and Raymond Santana speaks to the influence that the biased and racially coded news coverage had over the major influencers in the city. Other major players in New York City were even less veiled about how they viewed the accused black and Latino adolescents.

Before he was a republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump was a powerful real estate mogul with a strong public presence and significant influence as one of New York City's celebrity elite. In response to the rape of the Central Park jogger, Donald Trump took matters into his own hands by taking out a full-page advertisement in the *New York Daily News* in an effort to share his opinions on the city's most talked about criminal case. The full-page feature began with an underlined and emboldened headline reading: BRING BACK THE DEATH PENALTY. BRING BACK OUR POLICE! A public figure of Donald Trump's social standing and notoriety literally calling for the heads of young children would be considered beyond grotesque and barbaric in almost any other time and setting. However, in April and May of 1989 following the press coverage that the Central Park jogger case had garnered, Trump's cry for minority execution and increased police intervention could be considered tame by the standards of racist vitriol that the primary New York City tabloid's were printing. His advertisement read as something of a call to arms to the white mainstream who felt the most damaged and threatened after the assault on the Central Park jogger: "How can our great society tolerate the continued brutalization of its citizens by crazed misfits? Criminals must be told that their CIVIL

²¹ The Central Park Five, dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon, perf. Ed Koch

LIBERTIES END WHEN AN ATTACK ON OUR SAFETY BEGINS!” Donald Trump drew a distinction between ‘us’/ “our safety” and the “crazed misfits”, where ‘us’ is the white upper and middle classes and the ‘crazed misfits’ are the ‘undesirable’ minorities who live in the low-income neighborhoods that exists as “darker enclaves” in the margins of civilized white society. Trump was not alone in his decision to draw a line between black and white in the pages of the mainstream newspapers. Other columnists like conservative Pat Buchanan of *The New York Post* wrote columns detailing his capital punishment fantasies regarding the Central Park Five, describing the manner in which he would like to have each of them physically punished for raping Trisha Meili. In addition, the accused aged fifteen and younger (Antron McCray, Sheldon Richardson, Yusef Salaam and Raymond Santana) should be “horse-whipped and beaten”, Pat Buchanan also wrote in his personal *Post* column that “If... the eldest of that wolf pack... were to be tried, convicted and hanged in Central Park... the park might soon be safe again for women.”²² The imagery that Pat Buchanan paints of Korey Wise hanging from a noose in Central Park is such an unapologetic reference to lynching that one can’t help but think of the manner in which the Klu Klux Klan responded to cases of intimacy between black men and white women. While the rape of Trisha Meili was certainly an act of vicious sexual assault and far from an act of intimacy, the fact that Buchanan is comfortable invoking images of lynching speaks to the level of comfort that the mainstream white audience held regarding aspirations of violence toward the accused. Readers were so convinced that the children were guilty that they were more than happy reading a *New York Post* column where an aging white conservative expressed his desire to beat, whip and lynch a group of high school freshman and sophomores.

²² The Central Park Five, dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon.

II. Media Construction of Trisha Meili as the Ideal Mainstream Victim.

In the opening paragraph of her 1991 essay “Sentimental Journeys” Joan Didion illustrates the process by which Trisha Meili’s identity was manipulated and molded to satisfy the racially driven narrative that New York City tabloid media outlets aggressively promulgated in the days immediately following the attack. While lying comatose and clinging to her life at East Harlem’s Metropolitan Hospital, Trisha Meili began a transformation that would reshape her civilian status into that of a sacrificial emblem. While 21 skull fractures and severe hemorrhagic shock left her incapacitated and in an unconscious state for twelve days, Trisha Meili did not have to speak to reporters or law enforcement in order to play an active role in the media frenzy that swept up New York City in the days following her violent assault. In fact, lying suspended between life and death in an East Harlem hospital bed allowed Trisha Meili to become far more valuable and malleable for the *New York Post* and *New York Daily News* who published several weeks worth of front-page stories that featured her front and center as a martyr.

While 3,254 other rape victims were reported to law enforcement in 1989, Trisha Meili achieved the rare status of martyr because her position on the highest rung of New York City’s social ladder allowed her image to be manipulated into what Joan Didion referred to as: “New York’s ideal sister, daughter, Bacharach bride: a young woman of conventional middle-class privilege and promise.”²³ Joan Didion highlights the notion that Trisha Meili could be considered a promising young sister or daughter to the city of New York because that was precisely the manner in which she was sold to the tabloid reading public as ‘one of us’, where “us” is a term synonymous with the white upper middle class population who felt personally unsafe following the news of the assault. The phrase Bacharach Bride brings to mind a multiplicity of white and Jewish connotations, however, the most persuasive interpretation of

²³ Didion 258.

Didion's characterization of the Central Park jogger is provided by *The New Yorker* and McSweeney's Contributor, Tracy Daugherty in her 2015 text, *The Last Love Song: A Biography of Joan Didion*: ““She was a “Bacharach bride,” Didion said: Hardworking, middle-class, and ethical-- that is, virginal (metaphorically speaking) in contrast to the dark beasts who went after her on the path that night.”²⁴ The virginal status of the Central Park jogger remains relevant because removed from the adjectives, sexual connotations are the implications that Trisha Meili possessed an untainted wholesomeness and Caucasian purity that was irrevocably destroyed when “dark beasts” supposedly made her the target of a vicious rape and gang beating. Not only was the Central Park jogger presented by the mainstream media as a beacon of white feminine purity, she also became a much larger emblem as a victim of an assault allegedly perpetrated by a group of adolescent minorities. She was imagined as a best case scenario of a middle class white woman working hard, excelling academically, and achieving a high ranking position with an investment firm that catapulted her into the upper class. The story of an honest climb up the corporate and socio-economic ladders of competitive 1980's New York City halted by a vicious sexual assault allegedly perpetrated by minorities made her an individual who mainstream white audiences were eager to empathize with, mourn, and relate to.

Terms like “New York's ideal sister, daughter” are used by Joan Didion to reinforce the notion that white New Yorkers of a certain social stature share a kinship and experience the same exclusive upscale side of New York City, while attempting to avoid what Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson and Raymond Santana's lawyer, Michael Warren refers to as “the darker enclaves in

²⁴ Tracy Daugherty, *The Last Love Song: A Biography of Joan Didion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015)

this city.”²⁵ Michael Warren uses the term “darker enclaves” as a general placeholder for the minority neighborhoods whose residents are not invited to participate in the affluent Caucasian kinship of brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers who share the same New York experience and try their hardest to avoid the black and Latino neighborhoods where they feel as though their physical safety is in danger. Joan Didion’s use of the term “ideal” cuts right to the heart of this racial divide between the shared experience of white Upper East Siders and Upper West Siders and the black and Latino residents of “darker enclaves” like Bedford-Stuyvesant and Harlem. Simply put, white upper class residents of New York City are “ideal” subjects for tabloid attention and the lives of those who reside in low income minority neighborhoods fall somewhere in between ‘far from ideal’ and ‘irrelevant’. While one would like to imagine that in a metropolis that has been diverse for as long as New York City has, all human life, living or dead, can be weighed equally. However, the gross disparity in police involvement and media attention concerning cases of white casualties versus those featuring minority cadavers tells the whole story about whose lives matter and whose deaths are noteworthy.

Natalie Byfield begins her 2014 work, *Savage Portrayals*, by inviting readers into the early stages of her career working for the *New York Daily News* in the late 1980’s. In 1987, two years before the Central Park jogger case broke, Natalie Byfield joined a New York City tabloid that was currently in the midst of a racial discrimination lawsuit filed by a group of African-American journalists employed by the paper. With a bachelor’s degree from Princeton University and a master’s degree from Stanford University, Natalie Byfield was certainly qualified for a position at a mainstream media outlet like the *New York Daily News*. Despite her prestigious educational pedigree, Natalie Byfield expresses a concern in the second chapter of

²⁵ The Central Park Five, dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon, perf. Michael Warren.

Savage Portrayals that her eventual hiring at the *Daily News* had less to do with her valid credentials and instead was largely the product of what she describes as “a flurry of hiring of black journalists at the paper- in preparation for a lawsuit brought by four of its African American Journalists.”²⁶ Entering into an employment opportunity with a sense of skepticism regarding her position as a black woman in a primarily Caucasian newsroom, Natalie Byfield begins to unpack the various layers of racial discrimination that would dictate life at the *Daily News*. While the Editor-in-Chief at the time of her application interview, Gil Spencer, did make a point of touching upon the racial politics that dictated coworker interactions in the paper’s midtown office: “The newsroom is divided down the middle by a racial discrimination suit. You think you can handle that?”²⁷ These interpersonal conflicts paled in comparison to the layers of racial discrimination that Byfield would unearth while working at the city desk. The city desk found the *Savage Portrayals* author in the unique position of looking through “the sheets” at One Police Plaza and deciding which occurrences of criminal activity were worth reporting on. She was entrusted with the responsibility of sifting through these police reports, “cull[ing] the relevant information for my editors” and discarding those occurrences, which were not deemed newsworthy. As one of two major tabloid newspapers, the *Daily News* has a sizeable responsibility to report on the city’s pressing occurrences to its massive readership every morning. Unfortunately for subscribers and frequent readers, the tabloid does not consider all crimes as equally worth coverage. Natalie Byfield captures this sentiment among journalists and police reporters by illustrating a conversation that took place at One Police Plaza with a veteran police reporter regarding what constitutes a newsworthy story:

“You just go through it. Then call the stories in the to the city desk,” he said

²⁶ Byfield 32.

²⁷ Byfield 32.

“How do you determine which story to call in?” I asked him.

“Well, if you think the editors will be interested in it you give them that one.... You know,” he chuckled, “they don’t want some cheap murder.”

I decided not to ask him to define “cheap murder.” I was afraid I would appear stupid and inexperienced. But I was beginning to get the picture. This was all about one’s “news” judgment. That unidentified body of the twenty-year-old black male would be seen as “run of the mill”--no real story there, maybe at best relegated to a “small box”-sized story secreted in a corner of the paper that needed filling.²⁸

The distinction being made between “cheap murder” and stories worth calling in, underscores the tabloid newspaper mode of thinking that directly contributed to the racial lines that were drawn during the Central Park jogger case. Byfield recognizes the implicit racist subtext of the phrase “cheap murder” in its implication that the value of human life is dictated by socio-economic standing, occupation, and race. Following the unnamed veteran police reporters claim that the *Daily News* editors are only interested in the lives of city-dwellers whose lives could not be considered “cheap”, Byfield remarks to her readers that the line between “cheap” and important is merely thinly veiled vocabulary referring to the seismic fissure that runs along the sidewalks that divide Caucasian neighborhoods like Park Slope and “darker enclaves” like Brownsville. The New Yorkers of color who live and die in the margins of the city are considered inconsequential in the eyes of tabloid news giant like the *New York Daily News*. The manner in which the newspaper processed and evaluated the various potential stories that ran across the editor's desk speaks volumes to the type of lives and events that the mainstream media deemed unfit to print as a front-page headline.

Considering the types of individuals whose lives are featured in the front-page headlines in tabloid newspapers, the New York City stories worth telling are those that involve mainstream white victims who reside in racially homogenous high-income neighborhoods. Joan Didion

²⁸ Byfield 40.

examines the nature of this racially biased tabloid reportage concerning the victims of violent sexual assault and the bigoted process by which media outlets decide whose cases are worth publishing articles about and which victims are inconsequential. Toward the end of the first section of “Sentimental Journeys”, Didion discusses two other instances of violent rape that occurred within the same twelve-month span as the rape of Trisha Meili:

Later it would be recalled that 3,254 other rapes were reported that year, including one the following week involving the near decapitation of a black woman in Fort Tryon Park and one two weeks later involving a black woman in Brooklyn who was robbed, raped, sodomized, and thrown down the air shaft of a four-story building, but the point was rhetorical, since crimes are universally understood to be news to the extent that they offer, however erroneously, a story, a lesson, a high concept.²⁹

One would imagine that the sodomization, decapitation and rapes of New York City women would be noteworthy events warranting media coverage. However, while the brutality of the attacks Didion mentions above are certainly as horrid and alarming as the rape of the Central Park jogger, the vast disparity in newspaper attention that these assaults received when compared to the Central Park case highlight the underlying bias that shapes the basis for why some stories become nationally recognized atrocities and others are relegated to the status of “cheap death”, forced into the “corner of the paper that needs filling” Natalie Byfield referred to. Fort Tryon Park sits in upper Manhattan encircled by the neighborhoods of Washington Heights, Hudson Heights and Inwood. According to census data black, Hispanic and Caribbean residents largely populate these neighborhoods. Didion makes a note of the location in which this rape took place because, like the Central Park jogger case, a woman was beaten, brutalized and sexually assaulted in a public park that serves as a shared communal space for multiple neighborhoods and ethnic communities. In the case of the Central Park jogger, the three neighborhoods that

²⁹ Didion 255.

border the park are the Upper West Side, Harlem and the Upper East Side. While Harlem is and remains to this day a diverse neighborhood that houses a collection of minority communities, the Upper West Side and Upper East Side are two high-income neighborhoods that are predominantly occupied by affluent white residents. Both the rape case Didion mentions and the assault of the Central Park jogger presented the idea that women were endangered and under attack in the shared communal parks where multiple neighborhoods interact with one another and share the same public space.

However, the Central Park jogger rape exploded in the New York tabloid media because a wealthy young white professional woman from one of the affluent neighborhoods was allegedly assaulted by a collection of black and Latino adolescents who entered the park from Harlem, a black and Latino neighborhood, that may as well been a world away from the Upper East Side entrance that Trisha Meili entered the park from. Didion made a note of a rape case where a black woman was raped in a public park that served black, Latino and Caribbean communities and as a result her assault would be considered by the police, reporters, and tabloid media to be a “cheap murder”. Crimes in which minority victims are assaulted by what the police suspect to be minority assailants will never reach the vaunted levels of media frenzy that the Central Park jogger case reached. These crimes matter less to the police and media outlets like the *Daily News* because in marginalized minority neighborhoods populated by low-income residents this brand of violence is anticipated and accepted by the white mainstream. Affluent Caucasian lawyers and bankers do not move to neighborhoods like upper Manhattan's Inwood or Brooklyn's Bed Stuy because they associate those neighborhoods with the kind of violent assault Didion mentions. Instead these young white urban professionals move to neighborhoods like the Upper West Side and the Upper East Side where violence is not anticipated and when an assault

does occur it is not only highly abnormal, it is also a city wide news story and crisis. When a woman of color is raped in a public space primarily frequented by other minority individuals, the assumption that she had been assaulted by a non-white resident of one of the low income neighborhoods that bordered Fort Tryon Park (Washington Heights, Hudson Heights and Inwood). ‘Black on black’ or ‘Latino on Latino’ sexual assault carries significantly less weight for the white mainstream audience whose politics and preferences dictate what stories end up being published by the mainstream media. In the eyes of mainstream white audiences such an instance of sexual assault is not only to be expected, they view it as a commonplace occurrence in minority neighborhoods. Living in wealthy enclaves like Tribeca and the Upper East Side gives high income white New Yorkers the false sense of security that all the crime and violence that takes place in the city occurs far outside the jurisdictions of their affluent “safe” neighborhoods. A crucial aspect of what made the Central Park jogger case a front-page fixation for so many weeks was that the life of a wealthy white investment banker who lived on the Upper East Side was suddenly in jeopardy after being victimized by the type of violent sexual assault that the white mainstream felt only took place in minority neighborhoods. Considering that the pervasive narrative that defined the public's initial reaction to the brutal rape was one in which a “wolf pack” of black and Latino teenagers from a minority neighborhood like Harlem were responsible for the violation of a white woman’s safety, the immediate frenzy that began the morning after the attack should have come as no surprise.

For well to do white readers of the *New York Daily News* their ‘bubble had popped’, so to speak. They could no longer comfort themselves with the false notion that violent sexual assault and other brutal crimes did not happen to members of the upper class. The reality that a member of the aforementioned kinship of affluent whiteness could become the victim of what they

considered to be a ‘non-white’ crime in a park where affluent young white professionals walk their dogs, go for jogs and throw birthday parties for their toddlers. Central Park ‘belonged’ to the young white professionals who had long felt as though the park was a safe public space. The notion that a group of black and Latino adolescents had infiltrated this sacred public park was both terrible and alarming for white New Yorkers because for many of them it signified the moment when the barrier between affluent white New York City and low-income minority New York City was breached by the kinds of dangerous criminals that threaten the safety that had so long been associated with wealth and whiteness. When the New York City Governor at the time, Mario Cuomo declared the assault of the Central Park jogger: “The ultimate shriek of alarm”, he was not referring to an alarm that rang out in the hallways of housing projects and public schools; instead he was referring to an alarm that clanged along the corridors of Upper West Side apartment buildings and wall street investment firms. The alarm’s message was loud and clear: “Because this happened to her, and because she is ‘one of us’, this could happen to you.”³⁰ The notion that an entire community's sense of safety and security was irrevocably damaged following the assault is best understood through the manner in which newspapers characterized the jogger. After describing the manner in which the accused were portrayed using racial prejudices predicated upon a limited white understanding of late 1980’s hip hop culture, Joan Didion moves away from the accused attackers to shed light on the manner in which the *New York Times* amplified the notion that an elite member of New York City’s upper crust (potentially a reader of the *Times* who shared a sense of Caucasian kinship with the papers other readers) is the life currently hanging in the balance at Metropolitan Hospital in East Harlem:

The victim, by contrast, was a leader, part of what the *Times* would describe as “the wave of young professionals who took over New York in the 1980’s,” one of those who were

³⁰ Didion 255.

“handsome and pretty and educated and white,” who, according to the *Times*, not only “believed they owned the world” but “had reason to.” She was from a Pittsburgh suburb, Upper St. Clair, the daughter of a retired Westinghouse senior manager. She had been Phi Beta Kappa at Wellesley, a graduate of the Yale School of Management, a Congressional intern, nominated for a Rhodes Scholarship, remembered by the chairman of her department at Wellesley as “probably one of the top four or five students of the decade.” She was reported to be a vegetarian, and “fun-loving,” although only “when time permitted,” and also to have had (these were the *Times*’ details) “concerns about the ethics of the American business world.”³¹

As is evident in the paragraph above, the Central Park jogger was lauded and championed for her financial successes and workplace achievements, after she was attacked. A “pretty and educated and white” Ivy League Upper East sider who worked at a downtown investment firm lived a far from ‘cheap life’ and her brutal rape and beating were anything but a “cheap death”. The notion that the Central Park jogger was an elite member of all the communities she operated in as a Rhodes scholar who attended both Wellesley College and the Yale School of Management meant that she had maintained an upper class value as a beacon of success throughout her adult life. The sense that she made positive contributions to every elite institution she attended, played a powerful role in the media construction of Trisha Meili as the ideal victim. For readers of the *Times* and the *Daily News* it was easy to imagine that her life ‘mattered’ and her existence had held a tremendous amount of weight and promise before it was brutally snatched from her on April 19th, 1989.

Trisha Meili clinging to her life meant so much more to the New York tabloid media than just about any other rape victim because, as a white woman from a predominantly white neighborhood working a high profile position at a Wall Street investment firm, her story could be sold to the public as a harrowing tale of a promising young New Yorker whose brilliance, beauty

³¹ Didion 257-258.

and potential were viciously robbed from her. Joan Didion attempts to touch upon the vaunted socio-economic heights that Meili achieved in an effort to highlight the manner in which the New York City tabloid media utilized her white wealthy victimhood to sell newspapers.

The notion that a rape victim would be characterized in the media by her dietary restrictions, “vegetarian” and her after work recreational activities, “‘fun-loving,’ although only ‘when time permitted’” speaks to the values that mainstream white readers of the New York tabloids held in high regard. In a rape-culture where countless victims are blamed and shamed for behavior that the delusional public deems promiscuous or somehow inviting sexual assault, the illustration of the Central Park jogger as a woman who only had fun “when time permitted” exonerates and liberates Meili from any of the blame that typically falls upon the victims of sexual assault. Had Meili been a woman of color dancing in an uptown nightclub or walking down a dimly lit side street in a minority neighborhood when she was the target of sexual assault; the general public's response to her attack could very well have been defined by a mistrust of the victim's behavior. The factors that dictate the public's reaction to a woman being raped and their feelings regarding the credibility of her story extend far beyond the primarily major mechanisms of race and status. While of slightly less significance, the location of the sexual assault can dictate the public perception of the rape in a manner that ultimately defines the credibility and character of the victim. One would like to imagine that a woman who is the victim of sexual assault can be believed and treated appropriately as a victim, regardless of where the attack takes place and who the victim is. However, the reality is that the general public are inclined to evaluate the validity of a victim's claims based on the supposed lifestyle she maintains and the locations and environments she frequents. The front-page headlines that alert readers to the most noteworthy crimes and current events play a major role in shaping

contemporary racial representations in America. In the same manner in which the media contorted the nature of the alleged gang rape to fit into their constructed notion of interracial violence, the life of Meili was morphed and molded well before she was ever identified as such and was still known as the Central Park jogger. In Chapter 3 “The Position of the Black Male in the Cult of White Womanhood” of Natalie Byfield’s *Savage Portrayals*, the author describes the *New York Daily News*’s characterization of the victim while she lay unconscious in the days following her attack:

As the jogger remained comatose, her survival in doubt, I along with many New Yorkers read with interest those early stories about her life before New York City. One of the first stories in the *Daily News* captured the image that would be nurtured throughout the coverage. Reported Mark Kriegel (1989) summed her up as follows:

Lived a Dream Life

...The young woman whose life was jeopardized by marauding teenagers lived the way most us dream. She grew up in Upper St. Clair, Pa., an affluent suburb of doctors, lawyers and professionals, 10 miles south of Pittsburg, far from the steel mills. Her mother is a member of the school board and former Republican committeewoman. One brother was said to be a lawyer in Hartford, another an assistant district attorney in Dallas. After graduating from high school, in 1978 she, she headed east for Wellesley College, an exclusive women’s college near Boston. She majored in economics and graduated Phi Beta Kappa. She was much more than a brain. In her yearbook photo she appears as a pretty blond in a turtleneck sweater with an engaging smile and eyes gleaming with promise. By September 1983, when she attended her first graduate class at Yale, she had worked for the State Department in Zimbabwe, for Braxton Associates and former Rep. James Shannon, who went on to become attorney general of Massachusetts... She was headed for the big time: New York, Salomon Brothers, Wall Street.³²

This complete and concise background was formulated without the knowledge or consent of “the young woman”. She was unidentified, unconscious and dead to the world and yet, her identity was being immaculately formulated based on the background information that Mark Kriegel could cull from her friends and family who were willing to talk to the media. The “dream life”

³² Byfield 49.

that began in the white enclave of Upper St. Clair, Pennsylvania had charted a trajectory that was destined to end in personal triumph and financial success.

Mark Kriegel's decision to formulate a portrait or profile that is primarily predicated on the affluent and promising thresholds through which she traveled to arrive at the vaunted heights of working as a partner at Solomon Brothers, speaks to the manner in which contemporary racial representations are crafted by the media. Whiteness has always gone hand in hand with wealth and success; Kriegel did not create the correlation between Caucasians and financial success. However, by aligning victimhood and the desecration of that which New York City values with "the young woman" or "the jogger", Mark Kriegel and the *Daily News* drew a distinction between this attack and all those that came before it. The rape that took place on April 19th, 1989 was more than just the rape of a single woman; it was the desecration of an Upper East Side ideal, the defilement of an affluent lifestyle and the debasement of a city. The Central Park jogger was an allegory for the foundation of affluent white society in New York far before she was Trisha Meili. Just as the white woman had always been considered the jewel and prize of Southern society, the Central Park jogger stood for everything that mainstream white society considered good and holy. When the news broke that this beacon of New York City goodness and feminine holiness was dragged from her elevated platform by a group of black and Latino teenagers, far more was at play than a single woman and a group of kids. An ideal of Caucasian whiteness was under siege by all of that which the white half of New York City hopes to ignore: the masses of minority teenagers who live in the darker margins of the five boroughs. The same teenagers who would never attend a university as intellectually prestigious as Wellesley College, who would never major in economics or graduate Phi Beta Kappa. In the eyes of the mainstream white masses, Antron McCray, Korey Wise, Sheldon Richardson, Yusef Salaam, and Raymond

Santana would never even sniff graduate school, let alone at a university as esteemed and reputable as Yale. Considering that white New York City felt that the five accused youths would sooner be on the corner than be working for Braxton Associates and for former Representative, James Shannon, they would certainly never find themselves working for the State Department in Zimbabwe. Harlem-raised adolescents never make it to Zimbabwe as far as the members of mainstream white society are concerned, and such hoodlums have no place in state affairs, even if they did make all the way to southern Africa. Last and least likely of all, the minority adolescents that became known as the Central Park five would never find work in the financial sector, not on Wall Street and certainly not at Solomon Brothers.

The story that Mark Kriegel chooses to tell is one of the denigration of pristine Caucasian promise. This story was engineered to resonate with the *Daily News* readers who valued and admired the level of academic and professional prestige that Meili achieved in a short amount of time. The Caucasian mothers and fathers who would typically pick up a copy of the *Daily News* on their morning commute to work would not have to look beyond the front-page headline to feel as though the safety of their family was in serious jeopardy. Affluent families that resided in predominantly white neighborhoods would be accustomed to seeing this kind of academic and occupational success among their children and their children's classmates. It goes without saying that not every child that grows up in an affluent Upper West or Upper East Side household goes on to become a partner at Solomon Brothers. However, the Caucasian demographics who have the privilege to attend elite private high schools and universities are among the most likely to obtain such a lucrative and high-ranking position in New York City's booming financial sector. The sense of hysteria among affluent white readers following the rape came from the sense that their lifestyle and the lives of successful upper class individuals were

under siege from the sexually deviant forces of low-income minorities. Mark Kriegel's portrait of the unconscious jogger transformed Meili into a unifying ideal that young Caucasian professionals could aspire to and white parents could feel protective of. The tabloid media deftly magnified the patriarchal value of 'the white woman' in the 'greed is good' era of New York City, when the financial sector was rapidly expanding and women were working in high positions at powerful firms. While 'the white woman' has long been situated as a mediator of power and sexuality in American society, the notion that she could harness and wield some of that elusive power herself was a redefinition of her role. This reinvention of the white woman as not only a unifying ideal but also an individual who could brandish and exert her own professional and financial autonomy was a burgeoning transformation that the mainstream media portrayed as being under assault. Fear selling newspapers has long been established, however the notion that the city itself was under assault would require a serious conflation of New York City and Meili on the part of the tabloid media outlets.

The notion that the pristine ideal of the white woman operates as a stand in for civilized American society and Caucasian culture has long existed in the American literary tradition. While literature does not always function as evidence for the racist practices of a society, it does provide an indicator as to what racially bigoted notions are commonly held by enough readers to proliferate through the bookstands. Following the end of the Civil War, plantation culture and Southern identity began to present itself as a society under attack from newly empowered non-white forces. Long before the white mainstream occupied itself with fears of Central Park roving 'savage wolf packs', other minority groups like emancipated slaves and American Indians were considered a threat to the purity and safety of white women, and sexually posed a tremendous menace to white society. In her 1996 text, *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of*

American Literature, 1890-1912, Sandra Gunning articulates the conflation of the white race's domestic survival with the delicate purity of "endangered white womanhood" as it is read in Thomas Nelson Page's 1898 novel *Red Rock: A Chronicle of Reconstruction*. In her initial chapter, titled *Re-Membering Blackness After Reconstruction*, Gunning describes the manner in which southern literature conflated the now-interwoven stereotypes of the savage black rapist and the pure white woman with the discretion of post-Reconstruction era plantation society. While recently freed black slaves undoubtedly exist as the biggest threat to the Southern establishment, American Indians have occupied a similar position and a sexually transgressive non-white force that seek to defile the pristine purity of white womanhood. Sandra Gunning breaks down the manner in which Thomas Nelson Page seeks to present the battle to regain control of the post-Reconstruction Era south as a war that white men must wage over the ownership of white women in the domestic setting at home, in addition to the ever present battle between white men and the non-white forces who seek to establish their own autonomy:

Red Rock's elaborate narrative features dispossessed white men who struggle to regain control of their homes, a struggle symbolized by the novel's very title: the "red rock" is in fact a blood-stained crag on which the white hero's colonial ancestor established his claim on American soil, by killing the American Indian who had murdered (after presumably raping) his wife. Thus the imagined assault on white women expands to become a figuration of the struggles of white nation-building in the face of an uncivilized Other's racial threat; as a result, violent white male retaliation can be writ manageably as the protective concern for domestic spaces.³³

The parallels drawn between post-Reconstruction era lynching of black men and the white hero ancestor's violence toward the American Indian who presumably sexually assaulted and murdered his wife illuminate the notion that white women and the white way of life are

³³ Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996) 23-24.

intertwined. Page's efforts to lionize the white men who violently murder black men on the grounds that they are defending their domestic spaces and Southern way of life echo in vengeful reaction to the rape of the Central Park Jogger/ The normalized violence of white males is portrayed by Thomas Nelson Page as a rational retaliation to violent sexual transgressions committed against "endangered white womanhood" which, in so many words, acts as a stand in for the claim that white males stake to their culture and society. Just as killing the American Indian is considered a necessary and patriotic act of rebellion in the eyes of the Southern plantation owning population who Page speaks for, the tabloid media's persecution of the five black and Latino adolescents who were accused of raping Trisha Meili was considered justified because it was a retaliation against the supposed siege that they had subjected New York City to. Page expounds the God-given right that he feels white men possess, to defend women and country in a manner that pits them against the "uncivilized Other". In the post-reconstruction-era south and in 1980's New York City the purity of the "endangered white woman" and the savage sexuality of the "uncivilized Other" are stereotypical foils who play into one another's identity as they exist in relationship to the fearful white men who define these roles. The "uncivilized Other" is a role that can be satisfied by black men, Latino men, American Indian men and any other non-white force who threatens the stability of the white man's dominance over his idealized treasure: the "endangered white woman". These minority groups are viewed as posing a significant threat in act of their societal integration because their freedom to dictate their own autonomous domestic lives is a manner of passive rebellion. When black freedmen were emancipated, they were thrust into the unique position of possessing domestic autonomy and capitalist rights in a Southern plantation system that had been built off the gains that white males were afforded when slaves had neither. The financial control that white slave owners enjoyed

throughout the country's slave-owning history was due in large part to the economic production that slave labor provided their plantations and their families. When the black man's identity as a financial tool and an owned object shifted to that of an autonomous man with individual financial interests and the capacity to engage in interracial relationships, he became the largest threat imaginable in the eyes of Southern writers like Thomas Nelson Page and the prolific demagogue Thomas Dixon.

Eighteenth century Southern writers like Thomas Dixon were able to accumulate a massive readership by regurgitating the racist and xenophobic sentiments that ran rampant throughout the south during the post- Reconstruction Era. Following the end of slavery in the mid 1860's, the white pathological fear was that the oppressed black masses would rise up and take their vengeance against their white plantation-owning tyrants. Crafting narratives that portray newly emancipated black Americans as a threat to the Southern plantation establishment placed Dixon in the unique position as a prominent mouthpiece for the demographics in the southern states who were concerned that the oppressive foundation of their world was about to be irrevocably flipped. The widely held sentiment that emancipated black society would harbor resentment to the white Southerners who had enslaved the entire population is hardly far fetched. However, the white fear went far beyond the suspicion of pique, and morphed into the speculation that this tension would be expressed through sexual aggression and violent assault toward white women. As the highest standard of Western beauty and the idealized representation of all that is pure and desirable within Southern antebellum society, the white woman could be considered the treasure locked away in a metaphorical plantation kingdom, hidden and protected from the "savage" emancipated black men who sought to break down the doors and defile the sacred Caucasian jewel within.

Dixon's ideal of the white marriage and same-race relationships extended far beyond sexual insecurity and a fear of black sexuality, in the eyes of the author, playwright and Southern Baptist minister, white men marrying white women and giving birth to white children is the perpetuation of the master race whose elevated stature stabilized Southern society. In his vision of the southern states, the power structure can only be maintained and sustained when blacks operate in a subordinated slave position. The post-Reconstruction era represented a departure from the slave-master power structure that had kept black men away from white woman and positioned the white male as the lone autonomous force who could sleep with or rape white women and black women. As the sexual being with the most authority, white males controlled domestic life in addition to dictating the political sphere in the plantation system. According to the portrait of American race relations that Dixon paints in *The Clansmen* and *The Leopard's Spots*, the stabilizing dominance that white male Southerners enjoyed in Southern society was disrupted when the post-Reconstruction era began and the authors imagined savage black population shook the country's foundation.

The legacy of Thomas Dixon's 1905 novel, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Klu Klux Klan* is by and large defined by D. W. Griffith's 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation*, whose sentiment and narrative were founded upon the aforementioned novel. As the first 12-reel film shot and shown in America, *The Birth of a Nation* was a major cultural event that had unprecedented exposure as the first piece of recorded visual media that the country had access to on a nationwide scale. In addition to being the first film that Americans watched, D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* painted a portrait of the country as it moved through Reconstruction and faced the prospect of what an integrated United States would look like. *The Birth of a Nation* became a nationwide cultural sensation by depicting post-Civil War race

relations in a manner that calls to mind the efforts of the New York City tabloid media to present the Central Park jogger case as a polarized tale of noble educated white New Yorkers under assault from savage black adolescents. While the twentieth century version of this binary struggle between white and black was not being sold to the mainstream white public as the morning news, *The Birth of a Nation* portrayed black men as unintelligent and uncivilized brutes whose defining characteristics are their predatory sexual aggression toward pure and sanctified white women. It must be noted that no actual actors of color were featured in the film; the roles of every black character was played by a white actor wearing blackface.

On the opposite side of the racial polarity presented in *The Birth of a Nation*, the white men who sought to protect their wives were presented as a heroic force that were the country's only hope for maintaining order in post Reconstruction-era America. Selling film tickets and rising to national acclaim in the process positioned Dixon as more than just a mouthpiece for negrophobe white men, he became a vocal traveling minister who was frequently given an opportunity to speak his vitriol hatred while traveling and touring with the theatrical stage adaptation of his novel *The Clansman*. In the first chapter, *Re-Membering Blackness After Reconstruction* of Sandra Gunning's 1996 text, *Race, Rape, and Lynching* the author describes the press coverage of Dixon following the publication of *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Klu Klux Klan*, paying close attention to the manner in which he utilized the emotions drummed up by his novel to perpetuate his notion of sexually predatory and savagely brutal black men. In addition to presenting this bestial portrait of black men post integration, Dixon's mistrust extends to the white women who find themselves involved with black men, forever tainting their own image, desecrating their own Caucasian purity through interracial intimate relations. His hateful rhetoric directed toward impure white women references the interracial

transgressions that he feels white women have begun committing following emancipation; a change that transpired within the women once they ceased to be the passive sexual property exclusively belonging to white men. According to Sandra Gunning, Dixon expounded the notion that interracial relationships were somehow the result of newfound sexual aggression on the part of white women and the animalistic, insatiable hunger for white flesh that dictated the behavior of free black men. In the onset of the first chapter, Sandra Gunning provides an anecdote regarding a 1905 *Atlanta Constitution* interview that ran alongside a piece written about an alleged rapist who happened to be a black male railroad worker. It should come as a surprise to no one that these two pieces of journalism ran side-by-side because the story concerning the black railroad worker rapist on the run corroborates the stereotypes that Dixon sought to promote with *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Klu Klux Klan* and the subsequent interview. When describing a couple he witnessed in New York City, Dixon invokes the transformation from the white male's sexual property to a loose woman who threatens white domestic life that has taken place in post Reconstruction Era white women:

I have lived in New York sixteen years. It is only within the past twelve months that I have seen big buck negroes parading up and down Broadway with white girls hanging on their arms. The day before I left for Atlanta I saw a coal black negro of about thirty years of age walking on Broadway with a white girl of sixteen, clinging to him-- a girl of radiant beauty, a perfect blond with golden hair and soft childlike blue eyes. Twenty years from today such a thing will not be permitted in New York if our race is preserved from the degradation of mulatto mongrelism.³⁴

While Dixon's comments regarding interracial relationships are far from surprising, the most illuminating aspect of his hate speech is the manner in which he describes the "coal dark negro" and his relationship with the "perfect blond". While the act of pursuing a black man for a sexual relationship certainly positions the "perfect blonde" as an aggressive threat to white male

³⁴ Gunning 33.

authority, Dixon's characterization of her physical appearance seems to underlie a desire on his part for white women to present themselves as young, disarmed, and submissive. While her age, "sixteen" and appearance, "a girl of radiant beauty, a perfect blond with golden hair and soft childlike blue eyes" suggest an innocence and a sense of victimhood that seems to imply that Dixon feels as though the "coal black negro" has somehow duped or taken advantage of her, the author's anger and vitriol imply a struggle to decide which stereotype she satisfies "the whore [or] the frail child."³⁵ The frail child requires the white man to protect her from the sexually deviant and savage behavior of black men, whereas the whore has already made the decision to sleep with black men and therefore she is now impure and barely worthy of the title of white women. At the point where she is willfully engaging in a relationship with a man of color, what Dixon refers to with disgust as "such a thing", this white woman no longer has the privilege of being the best that civilized white life has to offer. The white women, who are seen as rejecting white men in their act of interracial relationships with black men, are rejecting more than just sex with a white man in the eyes of Dixon and like-minded Americans. They are not just rejecting the white phallus or the possibility of bearing white children, these women are rejecting white society as a whole, and as a result they are to be considered morally bankrupt and beyond saving, according to Dixon. In the eyes of many men in the post-Reconstruction era south the decision to sleep with a black man as opposed to a white man was an act of rebellion that signified a break or a succession from white society as a whole. Rejecting the plantation style homes that white men inherited and the domestic life that white men could afford to pay for was an insult to the white male establishment. Most insulting of all, in the eyes of the white southern males, was the fact that sacrificing the luxury and domestic comfort that white life afforded was somehow worth

³⁵ Gunning 33.

it for the white woman turned 'whore' because of how satisfying and sexually stimulating an intimate relationship with a man of color is. White male sexual insecurity plays an integral role in the stereotype of black men as a sexually insatiable and bestial figure. The notion that black people were somehow more primitive and closer biologically to animals than white people has existed since before slavery. The afterglow of these ludicrous schools of racially charged pseudo-science still exists today in the form of arguments that black people possess some athletic advantage that other races do not (jump higher, run faster, etc.). The prevalent notion of the black man as a bestial and savage figure is immediately tied up in his relationship with white women. His sexuality possesses the power to transform the public image of respectable white wives into 'whore' pariahs who have no place in white society. However, when the advances or the sexual interest of a black man toward a white woman are not reciprocated, the public revelation is that he is a rapist and that she is all the more pure and pristine by virtue of being the very emblem of white civility that black emancipation and integration threatens. In the act of rejecting his advances the white woman affirms the black man's status as a sexually transgressive beast and elevates her own position as a noble white woman. White women who are the victims of sexual assault at the hands of black men reaffirm the Southern plantation notion that black men are savage beasts and they are applauded for the victimhood in the face of deviant black sexuality. Ultimately, it is up to the mainstream white public to decide if a white woman seen with a black man is a whore or a frail child-like victim of sexual assault. The notion that white women of a certain class and upbringing would always be under assault from the pursuit of sexually savage black men has taken many forms throughout American history. However, the sense of victimhood and desecrated purity has remained consistent. While the decision to depict Trisha Meili as a victim of black sexual violence was very easy for the

mainstream media, due to the nature of her injuries and her socio-economic status within the Manhattan community, it cannot be understated the role that America's history with interracial intimacy played in crafting the stereotypical archetypes that came to define the press coverage of the Central Park Jogger case. Meili walked into Central Park that night as a white female New Yorker and after being savagely raped and brutalized by an alleged group of black and Latino teenagers, she was transported out as a hero for Caucasian New York, a hero who survived the onslaught of blackness that the white mainstream felt as though they were suffering from.

III. Beyond Pure White Women and Bestial Black Men

In Chapter five of *Savage Portrayals* “A Participant Observes How Content Emerges”, Byfield offers readers a series of anecdotes from her time working at the *New York Daily News* that illuminate the selection process and reveal the types of individuals and subject matter that the editor's value the most. The media frenzy and series of front-page headlines that Natalie Byfield refers to as the “Jogger Universe” could be understood as the portions of tabloid publication that feature articles surrounding the rape of the Central Park jogger. Eager to cover aspects of the case that were not defined by the racial tropes and framed portrayals of white women and men of color, Byfield attempted to seek out stories revolving around the case that did not feature such negative representations of minorities and minority communities. Considering that the mainstream general public had already fully bought into the notion that the violent assault that took place in the park had been committed by a roving gang of black and Latino youths, it is not hard to imagine that the portrayals of low income neighborhoods had taken a significant hit in the months following the rape of Trisha Meili. In an effort to rectify the image of the minority populations and maligned neighborhoods, who were being portrayed as criminal and sexually deviant, Byfield attempted to research and publish a piece that did not satisfy the savage depiction of Harlem’s black youths. As a black woman working in a primarily white tabloid media outlet, Byfield existed as a rare mouthpiece for a minority community that is misrepresented by the white journalists and editors that spread bias and bigotry through the New York City media outlets. A collection of young black residents of upper Manhattan reached out to Byfield to attend a press conference that they were holding in an effort to address the manner in which black and Latino youths were being characterized in the mainstream media coverage of the case. Referring to the faxed press release that invited her to the press conference as “The Tip That Could Change The Framing”, Byfield attempts to bring media attention to the Youth Action

Program. Considering its proximity to the Schomburg Plaza Housing Projects, Youth Action Progress's response to the rape of the Central Park Jogger represented an alternative outcry removed from the white fear and panic that had consumed the wealthier enclaves of New York City:

The short, squat building housing YAP and a number of other youth programs was in the shadows of the Schomburg Towers. YAP's goal was to empower youth while providing them with job skills...There was only one other media person there, even though press releases had been sent to all of the major New York City television news outlets and newspapers. I was not surprised at the turnout. I had not expected that most of those journalists would see this as a news story, much less something worth sending a reporter to... A few words into the discussion it was clear that the black and Latino youths were unhappy about the coverage the jogger case had been receiving.³⁶

Byfield approached the press conference with the intention of documenting the response to the assault of the Central Park jogger from a neighborhood and community whose image had been demonized. The response that had garnered the most media coverage was that of scared and indignant white Manhattanites. When Byfield illustrates the lack of mainstream media presence at the Youth Action Progress press conference, she is depicting a general disinterest in the experiences and hardships of the community that was most affected and ignored: the black and Latino populations in Harlem. Byfield's notion concerning what community events are "worth sending a reporter to" speak volumes about whose opinions the mainstream television and print media viewed as worth documenting and reporting on. The subject matter of the press conference spoke to concerns regarding the manner in which the black and Latino communities were being vilified following the assault and the use of thinly coded racial language to describe the accused adolescents of color. Years before the think pieces and documentaries that would ultimately dissect and deconstruct the manner in which the mainstream media's intentionally

³⁶ Byfield 107.

biased and neglectful reportage would contribute to the defamation and wrongful indictment of the Central Park five, Youth Action Progress was already taking stock of the corrosive vocabulary that was undermining the efforts of the adolescent's defense attorneys. The members of the Harlem community who shared a kinship with Antron McCray, Korey Wise, Sheldon Richardson, Yusef Salaam and Raymond Santana acutely felt the pain of being abused and falsely accused by the corrupt New York Police Department. Community residents often view the presence of law enforcement in neighborhoods like Harlem as a threat, as opposed to a protective force. While the events contained within the "Central Park Jogger Universe" took place a few months before the official instatement of the New York Police Department's controversial "Stop and Frisk" policy, the effects of similar police procedures had ruined the black community's relationship with police after being relentlessly utilized to target young men of color. The years of abuse that New York City's low income communities suffered at the hands of law enforcement came to a head when the whole of Harlem was vilified and depicted as running rampant with the kind of murderous and sexually deviant adolescents who could commit a rape as violent and horrific as the rape of the Central Park jogger. Holding a press conference to address the media bias and implicit tabloid racism that was defining and dictating the public outcry to the assault. The vocabulary utilized demonstrated explicit intention on the part of the editors to play upon and target the emotional anger of white readers who felt that the accused adolescents were emblematic of a deviant and predatory sexuality that lies within men of color. In chapter five of *Savage Portrayals*, Natalie Byfield illustrates the reluctance on the part of the white mainstream media to publish stories that depict people of color in anything but a negative or desperate light. According to Byfield, the Youth Action Progress press conference

immediately sprung into a dissection of the terminology that depicts black teenagers as bestial predators:

“Is it really necessary to describe the suspects with words like ‘savage?’” The speaker challenged. “You all report the stories as if everyone in the community is responsible, as if we’re all bad people.” There are many positive things that young people like us do, he said, as his eyes surveyed the room. This very center was a prime example of those positive things. “If only the young people here knew how the media worked,” I thought. I wondered if they knew how many people in the mainstream viewed such tax-dollar-supported job-training and development programs. YAP appeared to be well established, but I had never heard of it; it was not exactly one of the sites in Harlem regularly highlighted by the mainstream media.³⁷

Byfield’s personal experience as a member of the media at the press conference inserts itself within her reiteration of the voices of minority discontent she heard while observing the events that took place in the Harlem community center. The massive power of racially coded vocabulary like “savage” is so damaging that it drags down the entire black race by association. When newspapers like the *Daily News* published narratives that denigrate the character of black and Latino adolescents, they do so under the impression that failing to print these headlines would be failing to bring their readership the pressing stories.

However, this obligation to bring the ‘truth’ to their readership is a corrosive and dangerous mechanism because of how easily the truth can be rushed, morphed and manipulated in the 24-hour news cycle. Considering the manner in which one night’s police reports become the next morning’s headlines, the New York Police Department and the first officer on the scene of the crime have an unprecedented amount of sway over what headline the public will read as the truth. When the police briefing following the assault implicated the Central Park five as the violent perpetrators, the story that the *Daily News* printed the following morning would not be

³⁷ Byfield 107.

one “alleged adolescent assailants” and instead the accused aged fourteen to sixteen would be introduced to the world on April twenty-first nineteen eighty nine in the following manner: “Central Park Horror; Wolf Pack’s Prey: Female Jogger Near Death After Savage Attack by Roving Gang.”³⁸ In the court of public opinion the accused teenagers had morphed into a “roving gang [or a] savage wolfpack” and with this manipulated image came the assumption that their guilt was indubitable. Any question regarding reasonable doubt or innocence until proven guilty was thrown out the moment that the citizens of New York City picked up the morning paper. This rapid, judgmental and damaging form of biased reportage perfectly exemplifies the manner in which the tabloid media outlets choose to characterize people of color when they appear at the centerpiece of major front-page news stories.

Headlines that depict minorities suffering or involved in anything other than crime hardly make the front pages because these characterizations do not line up with the mainstream white concept of what is considered typical minority behavior and activities. Youth Action Progress does not reflect the mainstream notion of black youth because rather than getting involved in violent behavior and committing crimes, the minority individuals at Youth Action Progress make significant strides toward making their own lives better through employment searching and academic improvement. The perception of black adolescents as ‘lazy’ or ‘unmotivated’ is directly opposed by the actions of Youth Action Progress and therefore a story focused on motivated and responsible minority young people will garner little to no media attention. Just as Byfield says “[YAP] was not exactly one of the sites in Harlem regularly highlighted by the mainstream media” because the sites regularly highlighted by the *Daily News* and other news outlets do not feature low income neighborhoods unless it is in a neighborhood to criminalize or

³⁸ “Central Park Horror; Wolf Pack’s Prey: Female Jogger Near Death After Savage Attack by Roving Gang,” *New York Daily News*, Apr. 21, 1989: front-page.

vilify the minority residents. Highlighting this inherent bias towards and disregard for the lives of minority individuals who live in the darker enclaves of the city, Byfield imagines what a news item or a periodical profile of Youth Action Progress would look like if a mainstream newspaper printed it:

I sat there thinking that even if YAP had been covered by the media, chances were it would have been a one-time story about the center's various programs. Even within the context of a so-called positive article about a black community, stories about places like YAP highlight negativity because the special programs provided by YAP to serve the community are often patronizingly cast: "We have to offer these programs for these people because they[Read Minority] need our[Read White] help, especially our tax dollars because they can't manage for themselves"³⁹

Byfield asserts that the only manner in which YAP would appear as a mainstream news article that belittled and condescended to the members of the black and Latino communities who utilize such tax funded programs for employment opportunities. This patronizing view of black Americans as desperate for aid and government intervention acts as a spiritual successor to the prevalent notion that black people are bestial and inherently less intelligent than white people. The idea that white people can achieve financial autonomy and gainful employment on their own, whereas black people need considerable help from federal tax initiatives and government funded programs like Youth Action Progress willfully ignores the educational inequality that favors school zones located in white neighborhoods as opposed to those situated in low income minority neighborhoods. At the Youth Action Progress press conference, Byfield interacted with a young man who described an incident in which he and other minority adolescents were harassed by law enforcement while engaging in an Outward Bound program facilitated by YAP. While the individual remained unnamed and Byfield only referred to him as "the young man", his story undoubtedly speaks for a large population of minority adolescents who were vilified

³⁹ Byfield 107.

and kicked out of the park following the assault of the Central Park jogger and the racially coded press coverage that followed. According to the young man, being black in Central Park was viewed in a manner so sinister and suspicious following the assault that the New York Police Department had no qualms about threatening incarceration to a group of young people sitting in a garden taking part in a group wide free write reflecting on their experiences with the Outward Bound program they were taking part in:

“These [jogger] stories have made things so bad we can’t even use the park anymore, the police are kicking black and Latino kids out of the park. We went on an Outward Bound Center course in Central Park, as we were sitting in a group wrapping up our day the police came over and inquired what we were doing there. [Byfield:] Were you with adults? “Yes, we were sitting in the conservatory garden writing about our experience in the course. We told the cop we were in an Outward Bound course, but he demanded that we show him ID. He told us that if we couldn’t produce identification, we should leave the park. He also told us that if we didn’t leave, he could lock us up for 72 hours.”⁴⁰

The amplified police presence in Central Park following the assault of Trisha Meili was certainly reasonable. However, the manner in which the New York Police Department went about discriminatorily regulating who could be in the park and who could not is indicative of the racially prejudice mania that swept up the city following the case. While black teenagers have long been considered suspicious and potentially dangerous by the white public, the notion that teenagers who were taking part of a group writing exercise supervised by an adult could be considered a threat by officers trained to distinguish tangible threats from harmless group activity. The fact that a group of teenagers participating in a self-enrichment activity promoted by a Youth Action Program designed to provide employment opportunities for minority adolescents could be considered a threat to safety in the park speaks to the widespread influence that the racially biased and widely published “[jogger] stories” had on the way in which minority

⁴⁰ Byfield 108-109.

teenagers were viewed in public spaces. The presumption that adolescents of color can exist in a communal area like Central Park was extinguished when they began being depicted as “savage wolf packs” by the most widely read tabloid newspapers in New York City. The police response to the media constructed portrait of black adolescents was not surprisingly defined by an increased willingness to utilize force and threats of imprisonment. The specific threat that was posed by the police officer toward the young man featured in the Youth Action Progress anecdote was one of a three-day lockup at the precinct. This lockup period is the maximum amount of time that the police can hold an individual without pressing charges. Those 72 hours act as more than a threat, that specific period of time acts as a stand-in for the shadow that the New York Police Department’s presumption of guilt toward minority adolescents cast over the entire non-white population of Manhattan. All people of color who could be considered threatening by white law enforcement are forced to spend their lives working and building families under a dark cloud of potential imprisonment. The ease with which police officers can decide that a black child is behaving dangerously and hold them without any actual arrest or charge has always been a reality of being black in America. However following the rape of the Central Park jogger and the ensuing media coverage, this sense of oppressive suspicion that law enforcement harbored toward the black community was grossly amplified. After witnessing the manner in which biased reportage based off of hateful stereotypes has wounded young minorities, Byfield set out to write an article about Youth Action Progress and the black and Latino response to the racially coded manner in which the Central Park Jogger case was being covered.

When Natalie Byfield attempted to bring her Youth Action Progress story to her white editor at the *Daily News* she approached the tabloid publication with the hope that she would

take initiative as a black journalist in the act of presenting a portrait of the minority community that did not satisfy “savage” racial stereotypes. Byfield acknowledges that she is attempting to publish a positive representation of a demographic whose only position in the media of late had been as the super predator or the sexually violent deviant. For a community whose relationship with the police and the mainstream media has always been defined by abuse of power and criminal misrepresentation, Byfield’s effort to change the tone of the front-page headlines that had peddled racial hate was honorable and long overdue. Unaware that her story would be rebuffed by her editor, Byfield begins a segment of her fifth chapter with the header “Pitching the Story” in which the author describes knowing that as a black writer she was in a position to run a story that portrayed black and Latino adolescents in a positive light in a publication that to that point had only desecrated the minority communities: “It represented a reaction story in the universe of the jogger coverage, it was a response from members of the black community and the geographic community the suspects were from, and it was being advanced by black and Latino male teens.”⁴¹

When her editor rebuffed her pitch for the Youth Action Progress article, it was emblematic of the racialized priorities that defined the *Daily News*. His response “Nah, Why don't you try the suburban desk?”⁴² He was making the stark distinction between stories and lives that belong on the front pages of the Metropolitan (Manhattan) oriented section of the paper and the suburban (Queens, Brooklyn, The Bronx and Staten Island.) In the *Daily News*, the Metropolitan section runs at the front of the newspaper and concerns news items and articles that concern Manhattan, the suburban section runs stories in the subsequent sections contained deeper within the newspaper and further from the front page. The metropolitan or city desk editor

⁴¹ Byfield 109.

⁴² Byfield 109.

makes a distinction that lies at a heart of the divide between affluent white Manhattan and the outer boroughs predominantly populated minority communities. This divisive variance between the mainstream value of white lives and the disposability or lack of value that defines the manner in which the mainstream media considers the minorities, is a crucial aspect of why law enforcement and other mainstream white parties have such an easy time believing that black and Latinos are more prone to engage in violent behavior and whites are more likely to be the victims of these assaults. When the mainstream tabloid media display an explicit preference for front page news items that feature white residents of New York City and only includes minorities in the front page stories where they are playing the part of assailant or criminal, the mainstream will respond to and abide by these racially skewed portrayals. When the only stories that feature black and Latino teenagers are those in which they are described as mugging an old lady or brutally gang raping a jogger, the misconception that minorities are somehow predisposed toward bestial behavior and savagely violent actions is very believable and digestible for the white general public. Having to look deeper into the newspaper to find positive minority stories like Byfield's piece about Youth Action Progress's response to the Central Park Jogger case coverage puts mainstream readers in a position where they must search for civilized positive portrayals of minorities. Rather than search for stories that contradict their deep-seated conceptions of black and Latinos as criminally and sexually deviant, the white mainstream are more than content to not venture beyond the front page Manhattan-oriented metropolitan section of the paper and remain reading about a New York City where whites are victims of minorities who beat, steal and rape with reckless abandon.

Conclusion

The legacy of the slanted and racist tabloid media coverage that the Central Park jogger case received are the years that Antron McCray, Korey Wise, Sheldon Richardson, Yusef Salaam and Raymond Santana spent incarcerated. McCray, Salaam and Santana were the first to receive a verdict and all three were found guilty on seven counts, most notably the rape and assault of Trisha Meili and charges of assaulting the two men who were harassed on the East Drive of Central Park by the large group of adolescents. Charged and convicted as juveniles, all were ordered to serve the maximum sentence: five to ten years. Following the sentencing of McCray, Salaam and Santana, the final two members of the Central Park five went to trial two months later in October of 1990. Kevin Richardson and Korey Wise faced different charges and were not tried in unison. Richardson was sentenced to five to ten years in the Spofford Juvenile Facility after being found guilty of eight criminal counts, including rape, sodomy and the attempted murder of Trisha Meili. All of the accused with the exception of Korey Wise served seven years of jail time before being conditionally released and added to the sex offender registry. Wise's sentence was longer because as the oldest member of the Central Park five he was tried as an adult in criminal court.

Korey Wise was convicted of three counts: riot, abuse and, sexual assault, earning him a possible sentence of eight to twenty-six years at Auburn Correctional facility in upstate New York. After the other members of the Central Park Five had been released and forced to assimilate into everyday civilian life as registered sex offenders, Wise remained contained and incarcerated in a cell block hundreds of miles away from where he grew up in New York City. Having long ago stopped attending parole board hearings and all but given up hope, Wise's life took a tremendous turn following a chance encounter with a fellow inmate who in fact was responsible for the rape and near-murder of Trisha Meili that took place a dozen years earlier.

Matias Reyes had been attacking, stabbing and raping women on Manhattan's Upper East Side for years before being arrested and sent to Riker's Island. While at Riker's, Reyes was involved in a television room altercation that escalated to blows with Wise. When the two incarcerated men found themselves in Auburn Correctional Facility together, Reyes apologized to Wise for their television room scuffle years earlier and the latter responded "Matias, ain't about nothin' man. Ha! We're here, it's not gonna free neither one of us. Don't worry about it".⁴³ Wise's acceptance of Reyes' apology is a seemingly minor act. However the implication of Wise's good grace and understanding nature cannot be understated. Following this friendly interaction between the rapist and the man who went to prison for the former's crime, Reyes began speaking to people in the prison about Wise's innocence, admitting that he was responsible for the rape and beating of the Central Park jogger. Wise had no idea that Reyes had begun talking about the rape of Trisha Meili to other individuals in the prison. After word began traveling around the Auburn Correctional Facility about Reyes' guilt, a New York City investigator came up to take a statement that was sent down to the Manhattan District Attorney's office. Within a matter of months the case was fully open again and Wise was released from prison. The following admission of guilt on the part of Reyes became the only truthful testimony amidst the sea of coerced and false testimonies that the Central Park five had been manipulated into submitting to detectives at the Central Park precinct:

I showed them the top of the entrance, the direction she came by. I showed them where I picked up the tree branch and down the road where I dragged her in. I'm the one that did this. When I saw Korey Wise in Auburn, I saw in his eyes, you know, the suffering that he's been going through, to know that a man has suffered thirteen years of his life in jail for something that he has not done, to know that all these kids got arrested for something that they didn't do. You want to know something? I have done everything possible that I

⁴³ The Central Park Five, dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon, perf. Korey Wise

can come forward and admit the truth. I'm to the point where if people don't do something, or if they don't do what's right, then hey, there's nothing I else I can do.⁴⁴

To this point the entire legacy of the Central Park Jogger case had been defined by manipulated testimony and a blind belief in the false narratives that the tabloid media and the New York Police Department crafted. Despite the fact that the five defendants testimonies regarding how they gang-raped Trisha Meili were wildly inconsistent the press and the public embraced the notion that these children were brutally violent rapists and callous criminals who raped a white jogger. *New York Post* reporters like Pete Hamill convinced their readerships that the children gathered in a gang and colluded to rape and defile an emblem of white purity and success because they came from East Harlem and envied her Upper East Side lifestyle. The low income minority assault on successful and sanctified whiteness was sold to a Caucasian readership that need very little convincing that black and Latino teenagers were criminal and sexually deviant in nature. A story about black boys raping a white woman will always make the front page because it corroborates a deep seated post-Reconstruction era belief that black men posses a bestial sexuality. The story that ran thirteen years later about Matias Reyes' admission of guilt that shed a glaring light onto the racism and police cruelty was not such scintillating front-page story for the New York City tabloid newspapers. A story about journalistic negligence and a willingness to embrace antebellum notions about black men as fact will never fly off the newsstands the same way a harrowing tale of a 'savage wolf pack' who raped the blonde white female investment banker. The press was never forced to face the calamitous effects of their factually false journalism. The police and District Attorney's office never openly addressed the manner in which they ruined five lives. White women are still considered sacred

⁴⁴ The Central Park Five, dir. Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon, perf. Matias Reyes Recorded Testimony

property in the cult of the Caucasian household and interracial relationships are still viewed by many as an affront to decency and an assault on white society.

The legacy of the Central Park Jogger case and the subsequent wrongful imprisonment of the Central Park five is that minorities in low-income neighborhoods are still considered criminal by nature and second class citizens in major metropolitan cities. White parents still warn their daughters about ‘ghetto’ neighborhoods to be avoided. Black and Latino men are still accused of looking at white women ‘the wrong way’ and with illicitly sexual intentions. To this day, stereotypes of black men as savage rapists and white women as the purest emblem of white civilization continue to dictate the American mainstream media’s relationship with interracial crime.

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