

Jogging our Memory

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Review of Savage Portrayals: Race, Media and the Central Park Jogger Story

By Natalie Byfield

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It was April 19, 1989. A 28-year-old white woman who lived on the Upper East Side and worked as a Wall Street investment banker was raped, beaten and left for dead while jogging that evening in northern Central Park. Within hours the police arrested four black and one Hispanic teen in what is still known as “the Central Park Jogger Case.”

Confessions, illicitly procured, were ruled admissible at trial by a judge picked out of order precisely because he was known to favor prosecutors. No other credible evidence was introduced. A cooperative media vilified the children, ages 14 and 15, who were found guilty in 1991 and sentenced to prison. The case itself became a national template for trying teenagers as adults.

Ten years later a career criminal — one who raped women just days before in the same section of the same park — confessed to the assault. DNA evidence showed he was the perpetrator. The young men, now adults and out of prison, are still fighting the city for a financial settlement, something the Bloomberg administration resisted mightily and which Mayor de Blasio has not weighed in on yet.

At the time of the attack, Natalie Byfield was a young scribbler at the *New York Daily News*, assigned to the Harlem hospital treating the comatose jogger. She’s followed the case ever since, from reporter to journalism professor to St. John’s University sociologist. Her study, *Savage Portrayals: Race, Media and the Central Park Jogger Story* is both a history of the case and a damning indictment of police-media collusion in framing a story.

“To me,” she writes, “the story was then, as it is now, a classical case study in how news — and consequently reality — is constructed by media. It is also a great example of how language operates: how, as a system of knowledge, language reflects as well as reproduces that stratification and disparities in any society.”

What language? Ritually referring to the attackers as “savage,” “animalistic,” “wilding,” “a wolfpack,” and “mutant” only reinforces the notion of attackers as “the other.”

Doing content analysis of two years of coverage, including her own, Byfield shows how the story was slanted, “not contextualized as a story about the rape culture in our society ... [but] of a white woman brutalized by ‘savage black and Latino boys.’”

Readers who might be troubled by the media’s use of crude racial stereotypes were urged not to waste their sympathy on the defendants even by an African-American liberal such as Bob Herbert. Then a columnist for the *Daily News*, Herbert mocked the boys’ appearance at a 1990 pre-trial hearing.

“Some grown-ups had tried to dress them like divinity students or something, but it didn't work,” Herbert intoned before going on to describe one of the defendants as a “wimpish pipsqueak” and another as being “tall and awkward” and whose pretense of youthful innocence and appropriate

dress “fell apart as soon as you looked at his ankles. His socks were the color of pistachio ice cream.”

Against all that, the kids never had a chance.

So why did this happen? Part of it is a codependent relationship the media have with institutional sources — and sources are at the heart of what passes for objectivity. The police are a news-savvy source and crime is a major feature of the “if it bleeds, it leads” news world. Unless there is definitive proof that the police are implicated in malfeasance, they get a pass. Sources with contradictory information, such as social workers, religious or black community leaders or defense lawyers, are seen as less reliable.

Conversely, the police, as holders of a monopoly on legitimate violence, need to maintain a good image. Says Byfield, “that image could determine the resources they receive. The police agencies need to effectively use producers of cultural products to articulate their own significance in society.”

Then there are class, race and gender issues. Byfield notes that whereas community newspapers run a police blotter column outlining a range of law-breaking in the paper’s catchment area, the large commercial media focus on the lurid and atypical, and attacks by men of color on white women, though rare, is a centuries-old trope. It’s “the other” attacking the fair heart of civilization that becomes the news.

As Byfield writes, “The story: White woman jogging in black section of park raped and nearly beaten to death by black and Latino boys on a rampage” is a twofer, “that is, while women crossing racial boundaries are in grave danger [northern Central Park, before the gentrification of Harlem, was considered a no-go zone for whites in the public imagination], blacks have a propensity to rape white women.” She calls the coverage, filed long before the trial or any objective look at real evidence, “a modern-day cautionary tale based on an old cultural narrative from the days of traditional racism.”

The book demonstrates press critic A.J. Liebling’s apt observation that “people everywhere confuse what they read in newspapers with news.” We are the poorer for that confusion.

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