

WHEN THEY SEE US



DISCUSSION GUIDE



**WOVEN
TEACHING**
A PROGRAM OF THE BYLO CHACON FOUNDATION

WHO WE ARE

Woven Teaching is the human rights education practice of the Bylo Chacon Foundation. Through a combination of original programming and grantmaking, Woven Teaching advances the foundation's focus on long-term change towards a widespread acceptance of basic human rights for all.

Our programmatic work is dedicated to supporting classroom teachers with practical help for ethical and effective instruction. We believe that by weaving **human rights education** into the curriculum, we can help educators create socially responsible global citizens.

Woven Teaching envisions a world in which every student's education includes:

- A sense of historical perspective;
- The development of critical thinking skills;
- A feeling of global citizenship;
- The ability to spot bigotry, the understanding of its negative effects on both individuals and society, and the analytical tools to combat it.

CONTACT



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Do you have feedback on this lesson or want to share how you implemented it in your classroom? We'd love to hear from you! Please take our short evaluation at bit.ly/WT-eval or scan the QR code to the left.

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INTRODUCTION

Ava DuVernay’s limited series for Netflix, *When They See Us* (*WTSU*), explores systemic and institutional racism in the U.S. through the real story of the Central Park Five. This dramatization of the story reexamines the facts of this case. The Central Park Five were five Black and Latinx youth who were falsely accused, tried, and imprisoned for the brutal assault and rape of a white female jogger. Their case dominated the headlines and highlighted many of central issues in American society—race, socioeconomic class, sexual violence, and media manipulation. *WTSU* looks back on this chapter and shows the role of racial prejudice in society and how this is both reflected and shaped by media coverage; it also highlights the biases and prejudice against Black and Brown people that continue to taint many of our policies and systems.

When They See Us is a powerful and painful drama. The brutality that the film exposes can make it difficult to watch, and educators should prepare for the strong emotions that the series may bring up for students. Teachers should allow time to process the feelings elicited by the series. Descriptions of sexual violence, strong language, depictions of police brutality, and an examination of the vastly unequal treatment of people of color in the justice system and beyond are difficult topics and students may react with strong emotions.

Consider the implications of using this powerful drama in your classroom and how it might impact your students. *WTSU* is best suited for groups that have built a community of care and respect and which have a strong foundation in examinations of race and racial identity.

James Baldwin wrote, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” With this in mind, we hope that you will consider bringing *When They See Us* into your classroom.

GRADE LEVELS:

9 - 12

TIME:

Approx. 7 hours (including viewing)

MATERIALS & TECHNOLOGY:

- Computer, projector, speakers
- Netflix.com account
- Student packet with synopsis, discussion questions, and key terms

COMMON CORE STANDARDS:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- How is racial bias expressed in the U.S. justice system?
- What rights does a person have when they are interrogated by police?
- How does incarceration impact individuals, families, and communities?
- In what ways does the justice system operate differently for different people, based on their race or class?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Describe the key facts and events of the Central Park Jogger case
- Examine how media can bias the public and influence the outcome of legal cases
- Analyze the role of racism and racial bias in U.S. justice system
- Understand some of the difficulties faced by the formerly incarcerated after their release from prison

CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING ETHICALLY AND EFFECTIVELY

- Before sharing this lesson to your students, consider your personal thoughts and opinions about racism in America, as well as your own biases. How will your experiences inform the way that you present this lesson?
- Before viewing, remind students that racism is not only about individual actions; it is something that is ingrained in American culture. Encourage students to move past the idea of racism only as individual acts and examine how racism works on a systemic level.
- Our identities and personal experiences inform our responses. Keep in mind that students of color and white students may have very different reactions to *WTSU* and the class discussion. Where differences arise, address them openly with your students.
- Discussions about race can make students feel vulnerable and uncomfortable. Allow time to process the strong emotions that the film and discussion might elicit from your students. Additionally, tell students that they can expect to feel some discomfort. Sitting with and working through discomfort is critical to dismantling racism.
- Acknowledge that each of us has biases and prejudices that inform our beliefs and actions; these biases may be implicit or explicit. Most people do not want to consider themselves bigoted or racist, so honestly examining prejudices can be difficult and painful.
- When confronted with discussions of race, white people often state that they “don’t see color.” If students bring this up, engage your students in a discussion of how this point of view ignores the lived realities and experiences of many people of color.
- Caution students against making assumptions about each other based on their race, gender, or any other characteristic. No community is a monolith and members of the same group or ethnicity may have wildly different opinions about the issues raised in the series.
- Acknowledge that *WTSU* may be challenging to watch. Let students know that they can take a break from viewing the series and from the discussion, or opt out if needed. The purpose of showing and discussing the film is to illuminate and examine systems of oppression, not (re)traumatize.

FILM DISCUSSION GUIDE

RELEASE DATE: May 31, 2019
GENRE: Biography, Drama, History
DIRECTED BY: Ava DuVernay
PRODUCED BY: Harpo Films, Tribeca Productions, ARRAY, Participant Media
STARRING: Asante Blackk, Caleel Harris, Ethan Herisse, Marquis Rodriguez, Jharrel Jerome, Jovan Adepo, Chris Chalk, Justin Cunningham, Freddy Miyares
LENGTH: 4 hours, 56 minutes (4 episodes)
RATING: TV-MA
AVAILABLE ON: Netflix



SYNOPSIS

When They See Us (WTSU) is a powerful dramatic series by award-winning director Ava DuVernay. It tells the true story of the group known as the Central Park Five: five Black and Latinx teenagers who,

in 1989, were falsely accused of the brutal rape and assault of a white woman in New York City's Central Park. Despite the lack of DNA or other physical evidence, the teens were convicted and spent the rest of their childhoods in prison. All five were exonerated in 2002, after the actual culprit's confession was verified by DNA evidence. The Central Park Five is now known as the Exonerated Five.

The film is split into four chapters and follows the journey of the accused:

ANTRON MCCRAY (15)



YUSEF SALAAM (15)



KOREY WISE (16)



KEVIN RICHARDSON (14)



RAYMOND SANTANA JR. (14)

Part One focuses on the boys' arrests, the police investigation, and the aggressive interrogation of the children. During this episode, the viewer sees the lengths at which that the New York Police Department (NYPD) and the Manhattan District Attorney's office were willing to go in order to coerce false confessions from the boys.



Design by Woven Teaching. Original image: Susabi Nishijima/Oetlix

1. The police officers use many dehumanizing words to describe the boys in custody (e.g. “animals”). What are some other examples, and what does this language tell us about their attitudes toward the boys?
2. Linda Fairstein, head of the sex crimes unit of the Manhattan District Attorney's office, says that she wants “an army of blue up in Harlem.” What is the significance of using a word like “army” to describe the police?
3. The boys do not know that they should ask for a lawyer before speaking to the police, or that they should not give a statement until their parents are present. Why is it important for people to know their rights before being interrogated? What are those rights (known as Miranda rights)?
4. Police officers are legally allowed to provoke or mislead suspects. They are also allowed to withhold food, water, and sleep during interrogations. Do you think that this should be allowed? Why or why not?
5. After the boys have been interrogated, Kevin asks, “Why are they doing us like this?” and Raymond responds by saying, “What other way they ever do us?” What does Raymond mean?



TAKE ACTION: KNOW YOUR RIGHTS!

Interactions with law enforcement can be stressful, but knowing your

rights can help you navigate a scary situation. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is a great resource – it even provides “magic words” that will help you during interactions with police. Check out the ACLU's “Know Your Rights” guide at bit.ly/aclu-kyr.

After you have read the guide, practice with a friend. What should you say if a police officer stops you for questioning? What shouldn't you say? Repetition is the key to memorization, so practice often.

NOTES:

END OF PREVIEW

To download the full guide (including discussion questions for Parts 2-4 and a Key Terms appendix), please [create a free account](#).

