

The Word on “Wilding”

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Digital reference works—databases that search thousands of academic reference works simultaneously and produce results within seconds—have become a common tool for undergraduates. The encyclopedia entries represent a synthesis of current research and summarize the consensus on the topic. We trust the information is accurate, reliable, and free of bias and interpretation, just as earlier generations trusted *World Book* and *Collier's*.

But should we?

On April 19, 1989, a twenty-eight-year-old investment banker was jogging through Central Park in New York City, when she was brutally attacked, raped, and beaten. Trisha Meili lost so much blood that she was not expected to live. When she awoke from a coma twelve days later she had no memory of the attack. Five black and Hispanic teenagers were arrested and convicted at trial. In 2002, a convicted murderer and serial rapist confessed that he and he alone had attacked the woman; based on his unverified statements the convictions were vacated.

Articles about what came to be called the “Central Park jogger” case found through Gale EBooks, one of the most common such databases, present an amalgam of previously published works that accept interpretation as fact and view the case as emblematic of deeper social justice issues rather than a shocking crime in and of itself. Academics view the incident as a lens through which to examine racism, class biases, and other social ills.

The case was laden with symbolism and controversy from the start. “Wilding” came to occupy a prominent place in academic discourse, for it seemed to both dehumanize the perpetrators of the crime and emblemize the idea that whites held a deep-seated fear of blacks. In her book *The Central Park Five* and subsequent documentary, Sarah Burns asserts that the term did not actually exist among urban youth but was a creation of the police and the media. An article in the *Columbia Journalism Review* states that the term “came to define

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the inhumanity of these kids. But it was never clear where it came from—the kids, the police, or the media ozone.” The police bureau chief for the *Daily News* at the time, David Krajicek, said, “The word seemed to come out of the ether. It took on a life of its own.” Further, wilding “fit the phenomenon of moral panic.” Academics suggested that the word had contributed to the climate which led to the convictions.¹

During the long campaign to diminish the criminality of the boys that night arose claims that it was not the boys who used the term, but that the police misheard, or that it meant something else entirely which the police could not understand. In *Encyclopedia of Street Crime in America*, Aaron Winter smoothly slides from a factual encyclopedia entry to a discourse on racism. “Nothing encapsulated the racist response to this case more than the term *wilding*,” he writes, “which the police and media used to describe the youths and their activities that night. Although the police attributed the term to the suspects, they are widely believed to have said ‘doing the wild thing.’” Associating it with deep-seated racial fears, he suggests that wilding is a link “to racist colonial discourses about black people being primitive, uncivilized, and aggressive, and historical fears of black male crime, violence, and sexuality as a threat to white society and particularly to white women.” As for the city, he finds “a fear and a political theme that the city was being overtaken by a black underclass extending out and threatening that beyond the confines of the ghetto.”² This is simply social justice rhetoric presented as fact.

In the *Encyclopedia of Race and Crime*, Monica Erling states that “the origins of the term are somewhat murky.” It “refers to random crime sprees by urban youth for recreational purposes” and is generally “employed with distinct racial and ethnic overtones and applied to particular kinds of crimes.” The term “promoted public fear of crime and contributed to racial tension in New York City during the early 1990s.” She believes it probably first appeared in a *New York Times* article that quoted

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- 1 Sarah Burns, *The Central Park Five: A Chronicle of a City Wilding* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 69-70; Gregg Stratton, “Transforming the Central Park jogger into the Central Park Five: Shifting narratives of innocence and changing media discourse in the attack on the Central Park jogger, 1989-2014,” *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal*, first published November 23, 2015; Lynnell Hancock, “Wolf pack: the press and the Central Park jogger,” *Columbia Journalism Review* 41, no. 5 (2003): 38+.
 - 2 Aaron Winter, “Central Park Jogger Incident” in *Encyclopedia of Street Crime in America*, edited by Jeffrey Ian Ross (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Reference, 2013), 58-61. Winter also claims the five retracted their confessions; neither during the trials nor the appeals did they do so.

a detective who reported that some of the youths brought in for questioning in the case had said the attack, and other lesser crimes in the park that night, were part of a pastime called 'wilding.' Others have attributed the term to a misunderstanding between a tabloid reporter and a teenager from the same neighborhood as the accused, arguing that the youth had actually been referring to the Tone Loc song "Wild Thing." When asked what his peers were doing that night in the park, he allegedly said they were out 'going wild thing,' referring to either having fun or looking for consensual sex. The reporter may have misheard this and come up with the term *wilding*, in reference to the crime.

Erling then gratuitously offers that "others have argued that the term was purely a deliberate invention of the police and the media." Her point is that "the term never had any basis in actual youth culture or behavior and existed solely in the realm of the media and public consciousness."³ At the same time, she accepts "going wild thing" as a legitimate, and innocent, expression to describe legitimate, innocent activities.

In a related entry, Erling summarizes claims the media "contributed significantly to its framing in terms of racial conflict. The races of both the defendants and victim were mentioned frequently. . . . accounts also frequently described the defendants as 'animals,' 'feral beasts,' 'savages,' a 'wolf pack,' and a 'roving gang,' invoking negative racial stereotypes and fueling racial conflict."⁴ There was no denying the racial dimension of the crime. The victim was white and the attackers black and Hispanic, but it was the advocates for the arrested teens who repeatedly harped on the race question. Neither the police nor the prosecutors did so. And for those who believed them guilty, it was not about race; it was the nature of the crime the teens confessed to.

After repeating the confusion between "wilding" and "wild thing," sociologist Lynn Chancer suggests that "'wilding' may have been a media-generated rationale for coverage." The three daily tabloids—the *Daily News*, the *Post*, and *Newsday*—"colluded, if not expressly" in the use of "racially loaded language" like "wolf pack" and "wilding." Such "inflammatory animal imagery,

3 Monica Erling, "Wilding," in *Encyclopedia of Race and Crime*, edited by Helen Taylor Greene and Shaun L. Gabbidon 2 (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Reference, 2009), 902-903.

4 *Ibid.*

Darwinesque in its associations," fueled the atmosphere which led to the convictions. Reporters, she wrote,

could have hardly known at the time that the racial stereotypes used in their coverage would soon provoke anger and controversy from parties outside the media. Nor did they know that these reactions would swell the case into an even "bigger" story than predictable in advance. Yet without an outburst of public reactions, which journalists set in motion but did not have the power to control, it is unlikely that the "Central Park jogger" case would have grown into the most intensely covered crime story of 1989.⁵

Journalists printed and broadcast the story; the public responded with revulsion. Chancer suggests that the coverage spurred that revulsion, not the public's abhorrence of the crime and understandable condemnation of those who were responsible. Her analysis also trivializes the public's reaction. Theirs was not a genuine, spontaneous response stemming from strongly held values and a deep sense of moral offense. They were simply manipulated.

These academics assert that because the police and the media were so distant from street culture and constrained by their racial blinders, they essentially invented the word, and therefore their investigation should be entirely discredited.

Where did "wilding" originate? Stephen J. Mexal debunks the belief that it was a mishearing of "wild thing," and found earlier instances of wilding. The lyrics of Ice-T's 1988 song "Radio Suckers" went: "Crusin' down the street, what do I see? / Crash Task Force, L.A.P.D. / Gangs illin', wildin', and killin' / Hustlers on a roll, like they got a million." Mexal traces the contention that the police misheard "wild thing" to a piece by J. Anthony Lukas in the *New York Times* a month after the rape.⁶ The confusion between "wild thing" and "wilding" originated with the media in the aftermath of the crime. Later, that confusion would aid those reluctant to believe that the youths involved could have actually engaged in random violence for the thrill of it.

5 Lynn Chancer, *High-Profile Crimes: When Legal Cases Become Social Causes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 32, 42; Lynn Chancer, "Before and after the Central Park Jogger: When Legal Cases Become Social Causes," *Contexts* 4, no. 3 (2005): 38-42.

6 Stephen J. Mexal, "The Roots of 'Wilding': Black Literary Naturalism, the Language of Wilderness, and Hip Hop in the Central Park Jogger Rape," Special Issue: Hip Hop and the Literary *African American Review* 46, No. 1, (Spring 2013): 101-115; J. Anthony Lukas, "Wilding—as American as Tom Sawyer," *New York Times*, May 28, 1989.

Not content with his literary sleuthing, Mexal indulged in audacious post-modern analysis. "Properly understood," he writes, "wilding acts as a site of hermeneutic confluence, illuminating the degree to which both the historical language of wilderness and the contemporary cultural construction of postindustrial urban spaces inform American racist discourse." The word "seemed to radically reimagine the logic of crime, implying an irrational, fundamentally savage eruption of violence without motive." He concludes that "wilding is best understood as a strategic performance of wilderness . . . that becomes all the more fraught once contextualized with the performance of criminality undertaken" by the teens that night. He finds in the word a tradition of black resistance to the dominant white culture: "In its proper historical, racial, and cultural context, the word wilding contains an important, and long overlooked, critique of the hegemony of white, 'civilized' liberal selfhood and the social construction of wilderness."⁷ Not unlike Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm's "primitive rebels," perhaps. This literary imposition of postmodern analyses on an actual crime and its moment possibly makes internal sense in an academic setting, but strays far from the actual crime, removes any responsibility from those who practiced that "performance of criminality," and assuredly erases the victims.

In "Moral Panic Over Youth Violence: Wilding and the Manufacture of Menace in the Media," sociologist Michael Welch and his co-authors conclude that "the invention of wilding feeds moral panic by drawing on racial stereotypes." The media was thus responsible for the public perception of rising crime, but the resulting climate of fear was "disproportionate" to any actual danger. For good measure, Welch applies a Marxist framework to the crime. The assault on the investment banker "seems to represent a symbolic attack on the political economy by the so-called dangerous class, particularly by Black (and Latino) males who, rather than benefiting from capitalism, are generally marginalized by social conditions created by market forces."⁸

Such analyses simply ignore the realities of crime in New York City. In *The Rise and Fall of Violent Crime in America*, Barry Latzer documents how violent crime in urban America rose dramatically in the 1960s and remained high through the 1980s. In New York, the homicide rate was 8.3 per 100,000 in the

7 Mexal, "The Roots of 'Wilding'."

8 Michael Welch, Eric A. Price, Nana Yankey. "Moral Panic Over Youth Violence: Wilding and the Manufacture of Menace in the Media." *Youth & Society* 34, no. 1 (September 2002): 3–30.

1960s, but between 1970 and 1985 the rate averaged 21.5 per 100,000. Homicides peaked at 2,262 in 1990 before beginning a precipitous decline. The number of rapes reported to the police peaked at 3,880 in 1985. The uncomfortable fact Latzer brings out is that the racial disparities in criminality were extreme.⁹ This was not media-driven sensationalism. Demands for law and order were not expressions of a racist majority, but a rational response to the breakdown of civil society. In *Black Silent Majority: the Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Politics of Punishment*, historian Michael Fortner reveals how black New Yorkers pressed for aggressive policing to combat rising crime.¹⁰

The context was thus not a "moral panic," an irrational, emotional response to a single horrific crime, but a reaction to the pervasive reality of crime in the streets. New Yorkers were not afraid because of media driven racial insecurities, but because the streets and parks and subways were in fact dangerous.

One might dismiss these writings as simply academic discourse, offerings in the marketplace of ideas where diverse viewpoints compete. But these are entries in reference works and in academic journals, and undergraduates encounter them not as one interpretation among several, but as *the* answer when they go to digital reference sites.

Despite such academic assertions, it was neither the police nor the media who invented "wilding." It came from the boys themselves. Chief of Detectives Robert Colangelo related that several youths said "the crime spree was the product of a pastime called 'wilding,'" adding, "it's not a term that we in the police had heard before." As the chief understood the word, "it implies that they were going to raise hell."¹¹ To suggest that the origins of the word were unclear or that it was an invention of the media is to misread the record.

Orlando Escobar told detectives he was in the park that night wilding. Dudley Riddick said that Raymond Santana told kids in school that they were going wilding that night. James Patrick Grace remembered that the group said, "Let's go wilding," as they headed out. Lawrence Bell equated wilding with "going crazy." Michael Briscoe said it was, "Whatever happens . . . Going around punching, hitting on people, things like that." For Antonio Montalvo it meant,

9 Barry Latzer, *The Rise and Fall of Violent Crime in America* (New York: Encounter Books, 2016), 149, 172, 182, 240-243; Robert W. Snyder, "Crime," in Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 329-330.

10 Michael Javen Fortner, *Black Silent Majority: The Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Politics of Punishment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015).

11 David E. Pitt, "Jogger's Attackers Terrorized at Least 9 in 2 Hours: Attackers Went on 2-Hour Rampage," *New York Times*, April 22, 1989.

"go out and just beat up people . . . just beat them up and just keep going." He added that he had gone wilding before, kicking out windows on a subway car. That night he joined the group because "I like to have some fun."¹²

Clearly, the term was not unfamiliar to the youths picked up by the police. And just as clearly, the facts of the case are unknown to the academics who wrote these articles. Focused on race and class, they overlook the actual crimes admitted to by the boys themselves. They have introduced falsehoods into the discussion with the result, if not the intention, of further discrediting police and prosecutors.

Detective Thomas McKenna worked on the case from the very beginning and came away with a different view altogether. "On the whole, these young men did not come from impoverished families," he wrote.

They had not lived in great prosperity, and most came from broken families, but generally they had had reasonably decent lives. They did not mug people for money to buy food. Nor did they do it to get money for drugs. They did it for the joy of beating people, then running on to another encounter and beating someone else. It was about power—mob power, face-in-the-crowd power, coward power. Their numbers gave them anonymity, they thought, and made it possible for them to do things they wouldn't have risked doing alone."¹³

That analysis appears nowhere in academic writing, and therefore neither in the syntheses presented on digital sites.

If this was merely about a random crime committed thirty years ago, such unfounded academic assertions would be of little matter. But the case remains very much alive, particularly after Ava DuVernay's 2019 Netflix series "When They See Us." That film fed the popular certainty that the boys were innocent and that the police and prosecutors coerced false confessions out of them to obtain convictions. The facts of the case belie such ill-informed certainties.

12 New York City Law Department, Central Park Jogger, Original Investigation and Prosecution, Statements, <http://www.nyc-cpj.org/Home/folder?container=original-investigation-and-prosecution&name=https://nyccpjstorage.blob.core.windows.net/original-investigation-and-prosecution/Statements/>; Transcript of Video Statement of Michael Briscoe, April 22, 1989 (NYCLD 074148).

13 Thomas McKenna, William Harrington, *Manhattan North Homicide* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 7.