



SURJ DISCUSSION GUIDE: WHEN THEY SEE US

Dear SURJ Members,

The Netflix series, *When They See Us* by filmmaker Ava DuVernay debuted on May 31st and the next day was steaming at number 1. It has been the most watch series of the year and tells the story of the Central Park Five, a group of Black and Latino boys who were wrongfully accused of sexually assaulting a white woman jogger in Central Park in 1989. In 2002, their cases were vacated after their innocence was proven and eventually New York settled a lawsuit with them for \$41 million in 2014.

By telling the story of the now *Exonerated 5*, the series provides a provocative and emotional look into our justice system and the need to address the biases and corruption plaguing police departments and courts across the US if we want to protect Black and Latino children. The four-part series delves into key aspects of our justice system: police interaction and interrogation; the court system and trial process; juvenile incarceration; and life after release.

This movie is impactful for many reasons, and has Beyond the impact it has had, it has also hit a nerve in the conscience of white people in the US, who are waking up to the horrors of the injustice in our criminal “justice” system. While some white people have a direct relationship to the injustice of the prison industrial complex, primarily due to economic oppression, the majority of white people have not experienced the tragedy that is highlighted by the series. These young kids were brutalized and betrayed by the police, the courts, the jails, the prosecutors, the prisons, and the media, and it only points to this type of state violence that happens every day in a myriad of ways.

We are calling on SURJ chapters to engage in this moment to learn from this powerful series and to move into action by pushing for changes to stop similar injustices from continuing.

Here is a call to action from author, artist, organizer and co-founder of Black Lives Matter
Pattrisse Khan-Cullors

“When They See Us is such an important film for white allies in particular. I think it shows what happens when white folks do not check their racist imagination. I think it's a good example of what was seen as a liberal city, New York City, that ended up turning it's back and betraying an entire community by convicting 5 innocent Black boys of one of the most heinous crimes. I want

to call on SURJ Chapters specifically to watch this as part of both training, organizing and development, but also as a talking tool on the role of prosecutors and police departments have in brutalizing, harming, and impacting our communities.”

SURJ chapters around the country are currently, and have been, part of campaigns to stop the building of new jails, get cops out of schools, elect new sheriffs, push racist DA's out of office, and get ICE out of the courts, jails, and police departments. In the coming year, SURJ plans to work more closely with local struggles such as these. This series can be used to help deepen your local work on important issues in many ways. One chapter used a similar video to help build their base as part of a process to take on criminalization and violence in their community; you can do the same. This is a piece of art and culture that gets deep into the viewers emotions and commands that we take action for a better tomorrow. Taking on the police, the system of mass incarceration, and prosecutors such as Linda Fairstein--who was behind the framing of these men--is central to any fight for collective liberation rooted in racial and economic justice.

[Color Of Change has put out an incredible toolkit](#) that we would like to lift up and encourage SURJ chapters to use. There are a powerful list of action steps that people can take to push for changes in the system that continues to tear apart the lives of people of color and poor people.

We have also created an additional set of options that relate particularly to SURJ which you can find below. This includes questions targeted specifically to engage white audiences, such as linking to Anne Braden's "[Letter to Southern White Women](#)" in which she addresses the ways that Black men and boys have been framed for and wrongfully accused of sexual violence against white women since the birth of this country. This accusal led to the jailing and lynching of thousands of Black men. There is a sample agenda, and suggestions for continued action and organizing that chapters can do.

The prison industrial complex has deeply scarred our sense of humanity in this country; from mass incarceration to mass detention of immigrants, and corporations benefiting from the caging of human beings. The struggle is intertwined. As a network focused on bringing in more white people to undermine white supremacy, we hope that you will use this opportunity to basebuild with white people committed to throwing down for justice.

Let this be a time that we show up to our fullest capacity.



Dahlia, SURJ Leadership Team &
White People for Black Lives Co-Founder
and Z!, SURJ Chapter Support Co-Coordinator

www.showingupforracialjustice.org



HOST A SCREENING AND DISCUSSION

Here is an agenda for SURJ chapters to use. Please feel free to adjust and adapt for your needs.

Agenda:

Total time: 2.5 hours (screening 1 hour)

Audience size: 4 and over

- Host Welcome (5 min)
 - Name, pronoun, why is this event important?
- Introductions (10 min)
 - Have folks introduce themselves and say a few words on why they came tonight and/or any questions they are coming with. (do a pair and share if over 10 people)
- Introduce the film by saying: (5 min):

We are hosting this as a response to a call to action from Black Lives Matter co-founder, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, who is urging white folks from across the country to witness this story as only one example of the interplay of how multiple forms of racism--institutional, interpersonal, cultural--conspired to result in the social death and imprisonment of young innocent Black boys. We are here to reflect on this legacy and present day reality in our country, and its implications for us, as white people, and work together to bring about structural change.

- Watch Episode 1 (1:05)
- Body and Heart Check In (20)
 - Ask the audience to take a moment and care for their bodies (restroom break, food, water, tea, stretch) (10 mins)
 - Pair Share (10):
 - What is happening in your body right now?
 - What are the big feelings that emerged after watching the episode?
 - What questions are you wrestling with?
- Large Group Discussion (20 min):

- For white audiences:
 - What is the historical role of the criminalization of the Black body as a means to protect the sanctity of white womanhood? Where else has this shown up? How does that history connect to this case? (*Distribute Anne Braden's [Letter to Southern White Women](#) at closing*)
 - Do you think this would have been different if the victim was Black and the alleged perpetrators were white? Why? Why not?
 - How have white people been taught about how the criminal justice system functions? How does that differ based on class? What is the truth of how it functions?
 - (*Select 3-5 additional questions from the [Color of Change discussion guide](#) to prompt further discussion*)
- Next Steps (15)
 - Sign the petition in the [Color Of Change Discussion Guide](#) (*Distribute the calls to action in the guide*)
 - What other local work does this relate to? Can we plug in? Is there a campaign that we can start or collaborate on?
 - Audience Commitments:
 - Who will host another screening?
 - What family member or friend are you going to talk to about this series and encourage to watch? By when?
 - Who will host political education about a local issue related to the film?
 - The District Attorney was pivotal in continuing to make a case against the boys, when none seemed to exist. Who is committed to learning more about your local DA? (*Inform the audience about the ACLU's campaign <https://meetyourda.org/>*)
- Fundraising ask (5 min)
 - We are going to be giving a donation to _____. It is crucial that we support this work because it relates to the movie in this way _____. Please give what you can as this is crucial to our ongoing work for racial justice. We all have different levels of access to money so give what feels meaningful to you.
- Close (5)
 - Choose a ritual to close the space. It could be a poem, song or a check in about how everyone is feeling at the end of the night.

Additional Resources

Oprah Winfrey Presents When They See Us Now - Streaming on Netflix. Here is a preview and synopsis.
<https://ew.com/tv/2019/06/10/oprah-winfrey-presents-when-they-see-us-now-clip/>

Central Park Five Tragedy Reframed in Netflix Series When They See Us
<https://www.innocenceproject.org/central-park-five-tragedy-reframed-in-netflix-series-when-they-see-us/>

Ava DuVernay - Revisiting the Central Park Jogger Case with "When They See Us" | The Daily Show
<https://youtu.be/uTzVOvgH7-U> (interview on video)

Dear White People: Make Your White Friends Watch 'When They See Us'
<https://newsone.com/3853906/why-white-people-must-watch-when-they-see-us/>

The Central Park 5 were victims of dangerous white feminism
<https://nylon.com/central-park-5-white-feminism?fbclid=IwAR0ZgZj4BWN5Lo4klpXRIw52Q4SstFxDqTCMqvcquOg2KTvOGuRb0DeLKQ>

An Open Letter to My Sister, Ava DuVernay
<https://medium.com/@SonofBaldwin/an-open-letter-to-my-sister-ava-duvernay-11f57293618d>

Anne Braden, Letter to White Southern Women
<http://www.newsreel.org/guides/Anne-Braden-A-Letter-to-White-Southern-Women.pdf>

(Thanks to SURJ Central VT for contributing some of these additional resources)