

POV Community Engagement & Education

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Unapologetic
a film by Ashley O'Shay

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UNAPOLOGETIC

After two police killings, Black millennial organizers challenge a Chicago administration complicit in state violence against its Black residents. Told through the lens of Janaé and Bella, two fierce abolitionist leaders, *Unapologetic* is a deep look into the Movement for Black Lives, from the police murder of Rekia Boyd to the election of Mayor Lori Lightfoot.

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This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Unapologetic* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities in conversations about racial justice, community organizing, feminism, and justice beyond punishment and imprisonment. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

HELPFUL CONCEPTS & DEFINITIONS

Helpful Concepts & Definitions:

- **Abolition:** a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment.
- **Accountability:** people thinking about the ways they may have contributed to violence, recognizing their roles, acknowledging the ways they may need to make amends for their actions, and making changes toward ensuring that violence does not continue and that healthy alternatives can take its place.
- **Black Queer Feminist Lens:** a political praxis (practice and theory) based in Black feminist and LGBTQ traditions and knowledge, through which people and groups are able to bring their full selves into the process of dismantling all systems of oppression. This lens supports individuals and communities in creating alternative modes for living and being rooted in their lived experiences. By refusing to be governed by oppressive systems and historically racist and patriarchal structures, those being led by a Black Queer Feminist Lens effectively prioritize problems and solutions that center (and are led by) historically marginalized people in communities. It is an aspirational and liberatory politics that acts on the basic notion that none of us will be free unless all of us are free.
- **Community accountability:** a process in which community members such as family, friends, neighbors, or co-workers work together to transform harmful situations and how the community responds when harm is caused. This can also describe a process in which the community recognizes that violence has an impact on it, even in situations where the violence is primarily between individuals, and those individuals may have participated in allowing the violence to happen or even causing the violence and the community is responsible for resolving the violence.
- **Community organizing:** a process in which people come together into a group that acts in their collective interests to address specific problems through long-term strategies.
- **Femme:** a descriptor for a queer person who presents and acts in a traditionally feminine manner. All femmes hit upon two key aesthetic and identity-related traits: being feminine and falling somewhere on the LGBTQ spectrum.

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- **Gender-based violence:** any act that is perpetrated against a person's will and is based on gender norms and unequal power relationships. This encompasses threats of violence and coercion. It can be physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual in nature, and can take the form of a denial of resources or access to services.
- **Genderqueer/gender fluid or nonbinary:** terms that may be used by people who identify as neither exclusively male nor exclusively female, as a gender other than male or female, as more than one gender, as no gender at all, or whose gender changes over time.
- **Intersectionality:** concept that describes the ways in which systems of inequality based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class, and other forms of discrimination "intersect" to create unique dynamics and effects.
- **Misogynoir:** term coined by queer Black feminist Moya Bailey to denote, in her words, "both an historical anti-Black misogyny and a problematic intraracial gender dynamic that had wider implications in popular culture. Misogynoir can come from Black men white men and women, and even other Black women."
- **Prison Industrial Complex:** term used to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social, and political problems.
- **Queer:** according to Jennifer Patterson writing in *Queering Sexual Violence*, "a radical position within the larger mainstream LGBT community; a commitment to exposing the systems that criminalize rather than serve. It's a space to dream up new systems that do serve us. For me, it is a rejection of mainstream ideas around sexuality and gender and the home to critical thought organized through radical love and compassion. It's also an umbrella term that offers more flexibility than something a bit more fixed like gay or lesbian."
- **State violence:** direct harm and abuse perpetrated by people in positions of authority within institutions that people are required to engage with or depend on, as well as the structural harm resulting from neoliberal public policy, rules, and regulations.

HELPFUL CONCEPTS & DEFINITIONS

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Synopsis & Participants

Unapologetic captures a tense and polarizing moment in Chicago’s fight for the livelihood of its Black residents. The film follows Janaé Bonsu and Bella Bahhs, two young abolitionist organizers, as they work within Chicago’s Movement for Black Lives to seek justice for Rekia Boyd and Laquan McDonald, two young Black people killed by Chicago police. They work toward two major aims: radical transformation of the criminal legal system, and to elevate leadership by women and femmes.

Janaé Bonsu, 24 (at the start of filming), moves to Chicago committed to pursuing her PhD in social work. She is a community organizer and PhD candidate in social work whose activism and scholarship centers Black women, trans, and gender nonconforming people’s experiences of interpersonal and state-sanctioned violence and safety. She joins the Chicago chapter of Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100), a young activist organization committed to progressive change in Black communities through policy and direct action. Janaé ventures beyond the ivory towers of her university and becomes knee-deep in the movement, eventually rising through the ranks to national policy chair and, later, national co-director. However, her enthusiasm for organizing wanes as challenges and controversy strike the organization, forcing her to grapple with the physical and mental toll of leadership. With her academics faltering, she questions whether she has the stamina to achieve her personal goals in the midst of challenging state and intra-community violence.

Ambrell “Bella BAHHS” Gambrell, 22 (at the start of filming), is a “rap-tivist” from the West Side of Chicago whose artistry and activism seek to heal women harmed by the intergenerational effects of incarceration. As a Chicago native, she is thrust to the forefront of the movement after a video of her protest leadership goes viral. The video changes her presence both within and outside her Chicago community. Internally, however, Bella grapples with the recent death of her grandmother, who was her primary caretaker while her parents were incarcerated. Only after Bella attends a picnic for a historic local gang do we uncover her grandmother’s roots as a respected gang leader. But “gang” means something different to Bella; to her, gang members were community leaders who gave kids school supplies and made sure the block was fed. So, when Bella powerfully leads a chant (*Protect and serve, we are the police! We’re taking back our community!*), the words are inspired by the grassroots leadership of the street warriors who raised her.

Throughout the film, we see how movement actions play out in the landscape of Chicago's city politics. After a slew of protests in response to the murder of Laquan McDonald and the ensuing coverup, mayor Rahm Emanuel fires police superintendent Garry McCarthy. While this seems like a win for the organizing community, the subjects of the film continue fighting deep, personal battles. After failing an assignment and risking her doctoral career, Janaé realizes the ways in which organizing can cause her to overextend herself. For Bella, the stakes are even higher. Her brother is sentenced to fifty years in prison, leaving her to balance her true purpose in movement work while her family struggles to survive within the criminal legal system. Furthermore, discord within the organizing community spurs Janaé and Bella to reconsider the impact of their multi-year efforts. They find themselves unable to separate the movement from their personal lives and begin to ask, in a Trump-era America, what does a sustainable lifestyle look like for both their community and their own wellbeing?

After winning a Soros Justice Fellowship to pursue work in criminal justice reform, Bella makes the courageous decision to create the Sister Survivor Network, an organization that aims to help heal women impacted by America's prison system. Janaé overcomes the challenges of balancing organizing work and her PhD program by being elevated to the national co-director of BYP100 and officially becoming a PhD candidate; in an emotional scene, she triumphantly defends her dissertation proposal. Both subjects push through various trials and triumphs alike in their full personhood—saying what needs to be said and doing what needs to be done—without apology.

KEY ISSUES

Unapologetic is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Activism
- Familial incarceration
- Gender-based violence
- Police/state violence
- Police accountability
- Prison industrial complex abolition
- Queerness

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Justice for Rekia Boyd and the Launch of #SayHerName

On March 21, 2012, 22-year-old Black woman Rekia Boyd was hanging out with a group of friends near Douglas Park in the West Side neighborhood of Chicago. The group got into an argument with off-duty Chicago police detective Dante Servin, and allegedly a member of the group pointed a cell phone at Servin. Servin responded by firing shots at the group from his car, fatally shooting Rekia Boyd in the back of the head.

Nearly two years after Boyd's killing, in November 2013, the state's attorney's office filed involuntary manslaughter against Servin. It took an additional year for the trial to begin. The trial itself was an anomaly, as Chicago police officers are seldom criminally charged for killing civilians. Nonetheless, three years after the shooting, in a bench trial (meaning there was no jury) Cook County judge Dennis Porter acquitted Servin of all charges—including involuntary manslaughter, reckless conduct, and reckless discharge of a firearm. Porter noted that the state's attorney's office undercharged Servin, because his intentional actions rose to the level of murder, not involuntary manslaughter. Moreover, double jeopardy protections prevent Servin from being retried on the appropriate murder charge.

In the month following Servin's acquittal, [BYP100](#) issued a national call to action for state violence against Black women, girls, and femmes that provoked action in at least 19 cities. This aligned with the [African American Policy Forum's #SayHerName report](#), and the local campaign for Boyd was subsumed under that banner. In Chicago, #SayHerName served as a catalyst for a campaign to fire Dante Servin for killing Rekia Boyd with impunity. Every month after that initial call to action, several Chicago-based organizations and collectives, such as [Assata's Daughters](#); [Black Lives Matter Chicago](#); the [Let Us Breathe Collective](#); and Women's All Points Bulletin, organized people to attend police board meetings at Chicago police headquarters in order to demand that Servin be fired without a pension. Organizers gave testimony at the first board meeting and strategized on how to use disruptive power to speak up and out for Boyd, primarily by shutting down board meetings and claiming that the board was illegitimate as an accountability body for police who murder Black people. But the matter would not go before the board for several months—not until an internal investigation recommended Servin be fired and a review by the superintendent endorsed the recommendation.

The Chicago campaign to fire Dante Servin was unprecedented in that no other killing by a police officer in the city of Chicago had resulted in a termination recommendation from both the police department's investigative body *and* the police superintendent. Although Servin formally resigned two days before the evidentiary board hearing that would have terminated his position, it is likely that his resignation was influenced by the

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relentless organizing and direct pressure on Servin, the Chicago Police Department, and the oversight body. Servin was only the second police officer the Independent Police Review Authority (IPRA) recommended firing for a shooting since its inception in 2007. Servin's decision to resign not only saved him the indignity of termination, but also saved his ability to collect his pension once he turned 50 years old in July 2018. His salary, as of December 31, 2015, was 97,044 dollars.

The relentless pressure from Rekia Boyd's family, activists, and organizers contributed not only to Servin's resignation, but also to the firing of then Chicago police superintendent Garry McCarthy and the defeat of then Cook County state's attorney Anita Alvarez. Nationally, this campaign provided a banner for local work that highlights the impact of violence on women, girls, and femmes. The political education provided through the campaign via teach-ins and social media on the ways in which Black women, girls, and femmes experience state-sanctioned, intra-community, and intimate partner violence was invaluable. The direct action for the police murder of Rekia Boyd followed a long history of demands for police accountability in Chicago. From Citizens Alert to reparations for survivors of police torture, Chicago's social movements have long resisted police violence and surveillance by refusing to let it go unchecked. This was the tip of the iceberg for major reckonings the city would face regarding police accountability.

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The Killing of Laquan McDonald and the Coverup

On October 20, 2014, Black 17-year-old Laquan McDonald was fatally shot 16 times in a span of 15 seconds by former Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke. The Chicago Police Department alleged that McDonald was a threat and that the shooting was justified. A deputy chief in the department at the time said, “Officer Van Dyke fired his weapon in fear of his life when the offender, while armed with a knife, continued to approach and refused all verbal direction.” However, dash camera video contradicted this statement, documenting that Van Dyke was unprovoked and that McDonald was walking away as Van Dyke unloaded his gun into him. The false statement was one of many indications of a larger coverup by the Chicago Police Department and city leadership. In addition to the false statements made by Van Dyke and 10 other officers exaggerating the threat posed by McDonald, city administration, under the leadership of then-mayor, Rahm Emanuel, fought to conceal the dash cam footage of the murder. The City Council voted to approve a 5 million-dollar settlement to McDonald’s family, which included a confidentiality agreement to prevent the family from having the video released. However, activist William Calloway and journalist Brandon Smith used the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to access the video footage. A judge eventually ordered the city to release the police dash-cam video by November 24, 2015.

Hours before the release of the now-infamous dash-cam video—more than 400 days after the shooting—Cook County state’s attorney Anita Alvarez brought first-degree murder charges against Van Dyke. Once released, the footage elicited massive protests across the city of Chicago where “16 shots” became a rallying cry. Ultimately, the cover up had significant political ramifications, including the firing of superintendent Garry McCarthy; the failed re-election campaign of Anita Alvarez; Rahm Emanuel’s decision not to run for re-election; and a federal investigation of the Chicago Police Department.

In January 2019, Van Dyke was sentenced to six years and nine months in prison following his conviction on second-degree murder and 16 counts of aggravated battery with a firearm—one count for every bullet fired into Laquan McDonald’s body. Van Dyke was released on February 3, 2022, after serving less than half of his sentence.

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Abolitionist Futures: Beyond Cages and Accountability

Racist institutions in the United States, like the carceral system, are historically rooted in the oppression of Black people. The prison industrial complex can have lasting effects on not just incarcerated individuals, but on their families and communities as well. As Bella says in the film, “When people are serving time, their families are serving that time with them... That’s where my fight [for] abolition comes from.” Janaé similarly discusses how the incarceration of her uncle and other family members shaped her analysis of the criminal legal system and has been foundational to her abolitionist view.

Imprisonment, policing, and surveillance are all part of the prison industrial complex and comprise what is commonly understood as “public safety” within popular discourse. Abolition, though, sees the humanizing potential of creating safety networks outside of these historically racist systems. *Unapologetic* sheds light on the police abolition movement that aims to dismantle carceral systems and reframe what safety can look like when it is guided by and supported in the community. Throughout the film, we see both activists helping to generate a cultural shift and supporting education to help people reimagine our “justice” system. They ask a crucial question: Justice for whom? As Janaé says, “I really want my research grounded in how we can envision what safety looks like outside of [the racist prison] system.”

Abolitionist reforms chip away at policing and reduce its overall impact on communities of color. Campaigns to defund police, like Defund CPD, as well as moves like Minneapolis public schools severing ties with the Minneapolis Police Department and the subsequent City Council vote to completely disband its police force to invest in community-led public safety, are abolitionist strategies. Abolition is as much about dismantling what’s harmful as it is about building alternatives for addressing harm, violence, and punitive impulses in our everyday lives. Abolition is not only about restructuring society, but also about restructuring the ways we have all been trained to instinctively think about justice, punishment, and restorative possibilities for building healthy and sustainable communities.

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Queering Activism: Intersectionality in Collective Liberation

Activism is an accessible entry point for people joining movements in that anyone can—and should—take action on behalf of things they care about. Activism can take many different forms. Activists attend rallies, make phone calls, cook and deliver meals, write letters, and speak out against injustice. Organizing takes things a step further; organizers understand that true power lies in people, relationships, and long-term strategies. *Unapologetic* depicts organizers in a “leader-full” space rather than one that highlights a few select activist leaders. Collective leadership can inspire new generations to organize in their communities.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and the Black Power Movement of the 1960s in the United States established the foundations of Black American organizing of today. The legacy continues in the 21st century with movements to improve the wellbeing of Black communities as a whole and to be more intentional about centering further marginalized groups within Black communities. A Black Queer Feminist lens, as represented in the film, allows us to see that liberation for all Black people can only be realized by centering the voices and experiences of historically silenced and vulnerable groups *within* Black communities, emphasizing those who are queer, trans, femme, poor, disabled, and undocumented. In the words of BYP100 founding director Charlene Carruthers, “Organizing by using the Black queer feminist lens calls for us to be individuals and to work collectively, with neither being at the expense of the other.”

It is important to recognize intersectionality within movements. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, activists like Bayard Rustin and Marsha P. Johnson were pushed to the sidelines due to their sexuality. The Stonewall Riots, led by Black and brown trans women, started the LGBTQ+ rights movement we know today. The Combahee River Collective, an organization in the 1970s formed by queer Black feminists, highlighted the intersectional necessity within movements for racial justice led by people of color with the release of their “[Combahee River Collective Statement](#).” Movements are strongest when they are rooted in past teachings and in methods, stories, and solutions that center the leadership and experiences of those society deems most deviant and most undeserving of justice.



STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- If you were going to tell a friend about this film, what would you say?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly surprising, disturbing, or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?
- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, whom would you ask and what would you want to know?
- How do you interpret the film's title?
- What do you want to research or learn more about after watching this film?
- What does collective liberation look like for you?

Intersectional Organizing, Activism, and Protest

- Prior to viewing this film, what came to mind when you thought of an activist? Has that changed at all, and why?
- The Movement for Black Lives emerged in 2013 and has evolved over the years across many cities around the world. How have you personally seen it evolve since then? What has your experience been with the movement?
- Why do you think that Paris, a BYP100 organizer, says the Movement for Black Lives would not exist without gender nonconforming people, nonbinary people, and trans women?
- In the opening scene (timestamp: 00:16-2:10), we see a group of Black activists launch a protest at a restaurant during brunch. How did this challenge or support your own understanding of what a protest is or looks like? Who or what do you think a protest is for?
- How do you define a successful protest?
- Have you participated in a protest or demonstration? What was your experience like?
- There is a scene (timestamp 23:56-26:10) where Bella shares some challenges about dating as a queer woman. What are some of those challenges?
- Have there been aspects of your identity or experience that seem to challenge other parts?
- What do you think are some challenges that queer women face in activist work?
- How can allies support the queer community in activist organizations?
- Younger generations are more open about their sexuality, yet older LGBTQ+ members have key experience. What can we learn from older generations' struggles and successes?

Abolishing the Prison Industrial Complex

- What did you know about the abolition movement before watching the film? Did you learn anything new about abolition?
- In the film, Bella and her mother, a returning citizen, visit her brother, who is imprisoned (timestamp: 1:02:52-1:06:57). How do you think mass incarceration affects individuals? How does it affect their families and their communities?
- How do you think we can better support those in our own communities who have been affected by the carceral system?
- When you close your eyes and think about what makes you feel safe, what do you see?
- What could a future without prisons look like?
- What would it look like if community members were to care for one another and keep each other safe?
- What do you know about public safety models?
- How would you feel if you lived in a place without police?

Black Joy

- What do you see as the role of joy in protest, activism, and organizing?
- How did you see activists in the film taking time for self care and joy?
- How did Janaé and Bella spend their downtime? Why do you think the filmmaker included this in a film about activism?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Optional: Closing Question/Activity

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions:

- What did you learn from this film that you wish everyone knew? What would change if everyone knew it?
- If you could require one person (or one group) to view this film, who would it be? What would you hope their main takeaway would be?
- This story is important because _____.
- Complete this sentence: I am inspired by this film (or discussion) to _____.

Optional: Taking Action

If group members are having trouble generating their own ideas for next steps, these suggestions can help get things started:

- Find and join an organization or initiative that is aligned with your values and vision for the type of world you want to live in.

RESOURCES**Organizations**

- [Affinity Community Services](#) - A Black led, queer led organization on Chicago's South Side dedicated to social justice in Black LGBTQ+ communities.
- [Assata's Daughters](#) - A Black woman-led, young person-directed organization rooted in the Black radical tradition that organizes young Black people in Chicago through political education, leadership development, mentorship, and revolutionary services.
- [Black Lives Matter Chicago](#) (BLM Chi) - An intersectional vehicle that values Black people and their right to self-determination. BLM Chi fights for justice with families most impacted, while working to create just and equitable systems.
- [Brave Space Alliance](#) - The first Black-led, trans-led LGBTQ+ Center located on the South Side of Chicago, dedicated to creating and providing affirming, culturally competent resources, programming, and services for LGBTQ+ individuals on the South and West Sides of the city.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- [BYP100](#) - A national, member-based organization of Black 18- to 35-year-old activists and organizers, dedicated to creating justice and freedom for all Black people.
- [Good Kids, Mad City](#) - Develops young leaders to advocate for resources that will allow them to create sustainable, livable community conditions, as well as providing tools to address both mental and physical trauma.
- [Interrupting Criminalization](#) - An initiative led by researchers Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie that aims to interrupt and end the growing criminalization and incarceration of women and LGBTQ people of color.
- [A Long Walk Home](#) - A national art organization based in Chicago that empowers young people to end violence against girls and women.
- [MPD150](#) - A participatory, horizontally-organized effort by local organizers, researchers, artists, and activists to shift the discussion around police and policing in Minneapolis from one of procedural reforms to one of meaningful structural change.
- [Showing Up for Racial Justice](#) - A national organization that brings hundreds of thousands of white people into fights for racial and economic justice.
- [Southerners on New Ground](#) - A home for LGBTQ liberation across all lines of race, class, abilities, age, culture, gender, and sexuality in the South.

Recommended Reading & Materials

- [#AbolitionReadings: Selected Articles by MPD150](#)
- [BYP100: Agenda to Build Black Futures](#)
- [Defund CPD Community Conversation Toolkit](#) by Defund CPD Campaign
- [#DefundPolice Toolkit](#) by Interrupting Criminalization
- [Trans Wellness Resources](#) by Brave Space Alliance
- [What's Next? Safer and More Just Communities Without Policing](#) by Interrupting Criminalization

JANAÉ BONSU, PHD

Janaé Bonsu, PhD, is an activist, researcher, and licensed social worker from Columbia, South Carolina. Bonsu's activism and scholarship are grounded in her personal experiences as a survivor of violence and familial incarceration and her commitment to an abolitionist praxis that does not rely on the prison industrial complex for safety. Bonsu earned a PhD from the University of Illinois-Chicago. She is currently the director of research and advocacy at the National Black Women's Justice Institute.

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