UNTIL THE FLOOD

By Dael Orlandersmith
Directed by Neel Keller

School Matinee Series Study Guide
Until the Flood
Written and Performed by DAEL ORLANDERSMITH
Directed by NEEL KELLER

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“Until the Flood” was originally commissioned and produced by Seattle Repertory Theatre and subsequently produced in the United States and the U.K. with the same performer, director, and creative team.
An Introduction to the *Until the Flood* Study Guide
By WILLA J. TAYLOR

It is Martin Luther King Jr. Day as I write this. January 18th, 2021.

Had he lived, he would be ninety-two. I wonder what he would make of this time.

It is fifty-three years since his assassination. Thirty-eight years since President Ronald Reagan declared the third Monday of January a federal holiday in his honor, but only twenty-one years since all fifty states recognized it. Up until then, in Virginia it was celebrated as Lee-King-Jackson day, sandwiching his memory between celebrating two generals of the Confederate armies during the American Civil War.

It is sixty-one years since Ruby Bridges, a small, pig-tailed six-year-old Black girl, surrounded by U.S. Marshals, walked up the steps of William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans and integrated it.

It is two days before the swearing-in of Kamala Harris as Vice President of the United States, momentous in so many ways. The first woman. The first Black woman. The first woman of Indian descent.

It is also twelve days after the insurrection. Tens of thousands of National Guardsmen are encamped at the U.S. Capitol, the first time since the Civil War, to protect against the white supremacist terrorism that has been planned for the Inauguration both in Washington, DC and at state capitols around the country.

I think about all of this today as I craft this introduction for the study guide for *Until the Flood*. In Dael Orlandersmith’s searing quasi-documentary performance about the aftermath of the murder of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson in 2014, she digs deep into eight characters whom she spent months interviewing, researching, and compositing. It is a performance – and a play – that wrestles with difficult questions of race, class, and white supremacy. And even within its difficult portraits, there is something that seeds hope for unity.

That same message – hope and unity – is now the mantra after the Capitol riots this month. It is the mantra of...
the incoming Biden-Harris administration.

But is unity possible without a reckoning on race, racism, and white supremacy? Is it even credible to think that we can seriously find our way back to “one Nation, under God” when the reality is, we have always lived in a divided country? Can we restore trust in our civic institutions when justice has always been unequal and inequitable? How do we confront the racist history of police and policing when they are rarely held accountable?

The videotaped murder of George Floyd this summer spurred hundreds of protests around the country and calls to defund the police. But between Michael Brown and George Floyd, there are hundreds of murdered Black and Brown people – Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Stephon Clark, Botham Jean, Ezell Ford, Michelle Shirley, Kenny Watkins, Laquan McDonald, Eric Garner, Tony McDade, Daniel Prude, Mike Ramos, William Green, John Neville, Atatiana Jefferson, Elijah McClain, Breonna Taylor, Korryn Gaines, Chad Robertson, Deborah Danner, Ronald Greene, Javier Ambler, Sterling Higgins, Terrence Sterling, Jordan Edwards, to name a few. All killed since Michael Brown. Only officers in the murder of Walter Scott and Laquan McDonald have been prosecuted or charged. In two days, there will be a new administration. There will be a Black woman Vice President, and a Cabinet that is more representative of the diversity of America. As we remember MLK today, as we look (perhaps with a mustard seed of hope) towards a brighter tomorrow, we must remember that we must continue to demand justice. As we watch Until the Flood and reckon with the history of policing from its roots as slave patrols, we must remember that the fight for equality and against white supremacy has never ended; it has only morphed, transformed, and transmuted for 2021.

In 1964, delivering a baccalaureate sermon at commencement for Wesleyan University in Connecticut, Dr. King closed by quoting the 19th-century minister Theodore Parker:

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

I believe this is so, but it will not bend unless you and I push and shape it.
The performance that you are about to watch was not designed for the screen.

Unlike the writers behind your favorite TV show, Dael Orlandersmith, the performer and playwright of Until the Flood, did not imagine you watching her play from your home. In all likelihood, she was more concerned with the audience in the room on the night of this recording than with her future viewers. Just as the blurry videos of a concert posted to social media will never compare to the live event, a recording of a piece of theatre will never be quite the same as the real thing.

Which is a roundabout way of saying: you are about to watch something imperfect.

With this in mind, here are some steps we recommend you take to give yourself a more fulfilling theatrical experience:

**Before You Begin:**

- **Imagine the space.** The Rattlestick Playwrights Theater, where this production was filmed, is an intimate 104-seat venue located at the heart of the West Village in New York. On the night of a performance it would have been full of bustling audience members sitting together in the dark. If you can, dim the lights in your space.

- **Set aside any distractions.** Theatre often expects its audience’s full attention. Unlike TV shows, which you can pause and return to, plays build tension by asking audiences to lean in and listen closely. If you’re able to, go to a space where you can watch alone, use headphones if you have any, and silence your phone for a moment so you can focus on the performance.
As You Watch:

• **Consider what you’re missing.** As you watch the videos provided, think about what aspects of the performance you cannot access through the screen. What might lie just outside the camera frame that you cannot see? Are there sounds, smells, sensations that you would experience if you were in the space?

• **Listen to the audience.** At times during the recording you’ll hear the audience react to what’s happening on stage. Rather than let that distract you, think of it as a part of the theatrical experience.

After You Watch:

• **Reflect on your experience.** Did you enjoy what you watched?

  If you did, amazing! What moments would you have enjoyed seeing live?

  If not, what moments or aspects of the performance did you find off-putting? Would seeing the performance live have impacted your experience?

Theatre, at least prior to March 2020, was always meant to be experienced in-person. Right now, the theatre community is figuring out what it means to exist in a virtual space. For many of us, this is a brand new experience. As we navigate this uncertainty, we look forward to the day when audiences will be able to join us in-person again.

Until then, thank you for being a part of this journey with us.

The truth is that this is a new world for us as well.

If you have any advice you’d like to share about watching theatre through a screen, email us your thoughts at SchoolMatineeSeries@GoodmanTheatre.org and we may include them in our next study guide!
The following questions were written to help students reflect on “Until the Flood” in its entirety. You may find them particularly useful in Social Studies and Theatre classrooms. Click here to watch the whole play now.

1. Most plays have multiple actors and tell a story with a clear beginning, middle, and end. However, Until the Flood is composed as a series of monologues from many characters expressing how one event has affected their lives in a variety of ways.

   How does this structure of storytelling affect how you respond to the points of view depicted in the play? Have you seen any other plays or movies with a similar structure?

2. To create Until the Flood, Orlandersmith interviewed community members in Ferguson, Missouri. Rather than playing the real people she interviewed and quoting them directly, Orlander used her interviews as inspiration to create “composite characters”.

   Do you feel that this makes the play any more or less realistic? What responsibility do you think a playwright has to tell the truth when their play is based on real events? Are there multiple ways to tell the truth?

3. Throughout the play, playwright and performer Dael Orlandersmith transforms herself into many different characters. Pick two characters from the play and compare and contrast them by answering the following questions:
   a. What information are we given about this character at the beginning of the monologue?
   b. What additional facts do we learn about this character, their experiences, and their identity?
c. What do you notice about this character’s physicality? How much space do they take up? Do they move around the stage or remain stationary? Are they slow or fast? Are their movements heavy or light? What kind of gestures does this character use?
d. What do you notice about this character’s voice? Do they speak with a higher or lower voice? Do they speak quickly or slowly? Loudly or softly?
e. What costumes or props does this character use? What information do we get about this character from these choices?

4. Identify a character from Until the Flood that you share a point of view with. How is this character similar to you? In what ways are they different from you?

5. This 2020 New York Times article invokes playwright August Wilson who “called not for colorblind casting, but for institutions that invite art by and for people of color, to tell their own stories and not simply ones adapted for them. He doesn’t call for blindness, but visibility: people of color seen on stages and behind the curtains.”

How do you see this quote’s relevance in Until the Flood, which sees its playwright and actor Dael Orlandersmith playing characters who are both Black and white? What significance is there in her playing white people? How does theatre as a medium and this play in particular allow for a Black woman to play white characters? In contrast, what examples have you seen of cross-racial casting that you feel are ineffective or offensive to people of color?

6. Throughout the play, Orlandersmith explores the harmful expectations put upon young men in America. Do you feel that young men are allowed to be vulnerable in American culture? What potential consequences do men face for expressing vulnerability or emotional pain? How do these expectations specifically hurt Black men?

7. In her final poetic monologue, Orlandersmith closes the play with the following:

```
Boy
Man
Boy
Man
Black
White
Gun
Shoot
Black boy –down
White man- shoot
Both  down
Both are down
Both are done
Done
gone
They are BOTH gone
```

In what ways do you agree or disagree with this conclusion? Does this message concluding the play as a whole change how you view the monologues that precede it?
1. Over the course of this excerpt, Hassan shares three anecdotes about his life in Ferguson: an encounter with the police, a drive through wealthy white neighborhoods, and a conversation with his history teacher.

   How are these three moments connected? Why do you think Hassan is choosing to tell the audience about these moments in particular?

2. In his 1979 opinion piece, "If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?", writer and activist James Baldwin wrote that “language is...a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identify: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity.”

Baldwin was engaging in a contemporary debate about the significance of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), the distinct vocabulary, grammatical structures, and pronunciation used by many Black Americans in the United States (sometimes referred to as Ebonics).
In her 1988 article “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You And the Future Life of Willie Jordan,” writer, teacher, and activist June Jordan added:

“I know that standard forms of English for Black people in this country do not copy that of Whites. And, in fact, the structural differences between these two kinds of English have intensified, becoming more Black, or less White, despite the expected homogenizing effects of television and other mass media. Nonetheless, White standards of English persist, supreme and unquestioned, in these United States. ...compulsory education in America compels accommodation to exclusively White forms of ‘English.’ ‘White English, in America, is ‘Standard English.’”

Why do you think schools in the United States require students to learn “Standard” English grammar? Do you think AAVE’s unique grammar and vocabulary should be taught in English and Language Arts classrooms in the United States?

What is the significance of Hassan’s use of AAVE in Until the Flood?

3. A metaphor is “a figure of speech that describes an object or action in a way that isn’t literally true, but helps explain an idea or make a comparison.”

Where do you see Dael Orlandersmith use metaphor in this excerpt? How does her use of metaphor impact your understanding of Hassan and the world he lives in?

4. Hassan often repeats words and phrases two or three times within the space of a single sentence. What effect does this repetition have on your experience as an audience member?

5. Throughout this excerpt Hassan repeatedly uses the N-word. Why do you think the playwright chose to use this word in this monologue and throughout Until the Flood? If you watched the entire play, did you feel differently about the use of this word depending on which character was using it? Why or why not?
Discussion Questions for Video Excerpt #2 “Connie” | Social Studies

By SAM MAUCERI

The following questions were written to accompany “Connie Hamm, white, 35, high school teacher”. You may find them particularly useful in Social Studies classrooms. Click here to watch the monologue now.

1. How would you describe Connie’s economic class? What clues does the play give you about her class status? How do you think her class and racial identity impact the way she talks about the Michael Brown case?

2. Many people in Connie’s community did not believe that her ex-husband abused her because he is white and “well-to-do”. What stereotypes does that assumption rely on?

3. Connie says, “…and maybe I sound naive, but race affects everyone.” What do you think she means by this? Do you agree with Connie’s point? Does race affect people of different identities and experience in different ways? What about racism?

4. Connie loses a meaningful friendship with Margaret when Connie describes the lives of both Darren Wilson and Michael Brown as “tragic”. When watching this scene, did you find yourself agreeing more with Connie’s point of view or Margaret’s? Could you understand the perspective of the character you didn’t agree with? Do you think their perspective was fair? Why or why not?

5. Connie mentions her desire to have her program include Black history in her school’s curriculum. What effect does the exclusion of Black history have on how students view historical events? Can schools teach history effectively without teaching Black history?

   Does your school teach Black history in a way that you find satisfactory? What changes would you like to see in your school’s history curriculum?
Dael Orlandersmith at the Goodman

By ROBERT FALLS

Originally published in Onstage+ and NEXT, the Goodman’s monthly newsletter.

Solo performances have been a staple of the Goodman’s programming for decades. Spalding Gray, Regina Taylor, John Leguizamo, David Cale, and others have showcased their singular viewpoints and unique performance styles on our stages. For the past 11 years, we have been honored to collaborate with Dael Orlandersmith, a writer-performer with an uncanny ability to portray characters who differ from her not only in age, gender, and race, but also in worldview. Using her one body and one voice, Dael amplifies many voices that we might not otherwise hear.

Dael’s productions with us include her one-person shows Stoop Stories (2009), Black n Blue Boys/Broken Men (2012), and Until the Flood (2018), as well as Lady in Denmark (2018): a solo show written by Dael and performed by actor Linda Gehringer. Since 2016 she has served as a member of our Artistic Collective—a group of artists with whom the Goodman works closely and who strongly influence our programming choices—and as an Alice Center Resident Artist, which has enabled her to work with our Education and Engagement programs.

Until the Flood, based on interviews Dael conducted with Missouri residents in the aftermath of the 2014 shooting of unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, provides a snapshot of the Black Lives Matter movement at that time and gives a voice to a patchwork of community members. This summer, protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement—and against police brutality—swelled across the world, echoing the sorrow and rightful anger of protesters in Ferguson in 2014. Because of this, Dael and director Neel Keller were eager to make the play widely available, especially during this time when theaters’ doors are closed. Fortunately, the production was expertly captured on video during its run at Rattlestick Playwrights Theater. Because of this, the Goodman—in collaboration with seven other theaters—is able to present it for viewing free of charge and on demand.

Whether you saw the production live on the Owen stage in 2018, or are experiencing it with fresh eyes, I invite you to experience the power of Dael’s riveting, tour-de-force performance.
Navigating the Waters: A Conversation with Dael Orlandersmith

By SARAH BRANDT

Originally published by Repertory Theatre of St. Louis’ Associate Director of Education Sarah Brandt for “Until the Flood”‘s 2016 world premiere in St. Louis.

In Until the Flood, Dael Orlandersmith explores the social unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, following the shooting of teenager Michael Brown. Drawing from her extensive interviews with Ferguson residents, Orlandersmith crafts an extraordinary theatrical experience in which she embodies eight residents of the town as they try to come to terms with the complex events that shook the nation. Below, Orlandersmith recalls her artistic process for bringing the voices of Ferguson to life on stage.

Sarah Brandt: Why did you want to write this play?

Dael Orlandersmith: Well, actually, the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis first came to me [about writing the piece]. I said yes because I think it’s important. I want to tell a story. I want to go beyond what’s right, who’s right, who’s wrong. How does this shooting affect people? In terms of race, how far have we come? Those are the questions that have come to mind. What does it invoke, provoke in you? What kind of thought?

SB: What sort of preparation did you do?

DO: [Repertory Theatre of St. Louis Artistic Director] Seth Gordon and I met with Michael Brown, Sr. and a few other people, a lot of political activists and people who are just generally in town. I wanted to look at that because, you know, race is obviously a very... it’s high voltage. It’s a high voltage situation. I wanted to see exactly how far we’ve come, which is interesting to me, in terms of, say, from the 1940s on. And also, what does it mean to the individual? What does race mean to an individual? How does it affect individuals, and how far has St. Louis come? What does it mean to be a part of this? And then again, for me as a New Yorker. I find that a lot of people in St. Louis feel
this is nothing new to them. A lot of them just want to put this down. And a lot of other people have said it’s just an everyday occurrence. So it’s about showing those perspectives.

SB: The people we meet in the play—are these people you met?

DO: They are composite figures. Because I made it very clear to everyone that I spoke with—I don’t have a right to invade your life that way. I have a right as a playwright to tell a story. But I don’t have a right to dig into someone’s life like that. Because that’s no longer about theater; that’s perverse voyeurism. A word that I use heavily is “boundary.” The role of certain types of theater, we are supposed to be mental and emotional travelers, but having said that, if I write about someone’s life directly, that makes me responsible for them in certain ways that I don’t feel comfortable with. And given where that person is within their life, it can invoke and provoke a lot of stuff that they just won’t be able to deal with. I’m not a therapist. And I actually said that to everyone I spoke with.

SB: You’ve written in many formats—poetry, plays, solo performance—what made you choose the solo performance format for this play?

DO: It’s an interesting format. I want to look at how one person, not just myself—if the play goes on, I want other people to do it—how one person can embody a kind of humanity. Aspects of humanity. I think that’s interesting, because it does start with one person. How does one person take in the world? We always see the collective, but the collective starts with the individual. Individuals form a collective, right? So how does one individual take in the world?

SB: You’re the writer of this play, and you’re also the solo performer, but also are working with a director. Tell us how that works. As you’re the one who’s created this, what does the director give to you?

DO: Neel Keller is a great director. He can tell me what is overwritten, what we can cut, what we can emphasize. It’s a third eye. I find that very few people can direct themselves. What sound bites do we need? How does a character need to be fleshed more? Both on the page and on the stage. In terms of technique—how to bring it alive on the stage. And then we combine these ideas. And as an actor, I can overact, so he’s there to yank me in. We don’t want to beat the audience over the head with this, and I can tend to do that as an actor.

SB: When you’ve finished a performance and the lights go down, is there anything in particular that you’re hoping the audience takes away?

DO: Did I give them permission to feel both comfortable and uncomfortable? That’s what interests me, because I don’t speak for people, I speak to people. Because when you start speaking for people, you get on a political tirade and I know this situation goes beyond the political. It extends itself into personal stories and the emotional and how we live on a day-to-day basis. What are our personal narratives? And how do we feel about this, knowing this could have happened with these young men?
This article was originally published in 2019 in the Goodman Theatre School Matinee Series study guide for “Sweat” by Lynn Nottage.

While many plays are created in entirely fictional worlds with characters spawned from the playwright’s imagination, others are created directly from real-life events and people. Theatre which uses documentary materials, such as interviews, newspapers, journals, letters, and reports is often called documentary theatre. Documentary theatre techniques have been used over the past century to respond to pressing items in the news and to explore social issues from often unheard perspectives.

In the process of developing Sweat, Lynn Nottage interviewed 100 residents of Reading, Pennsylvania between 2012 and 2014. She then used these stories as inspiration for many of the characters and circumstances in the play, transforming real-life inspiration into a fictional work.

Here are some other examples of notable plays which present the facts on stage using a variety of documentary theatre techniques.

**Zoot Suit (1979) – Luis Valdez**

In 1942, the LAPD arrested 17 young Mexican-American men for the murder of Jose Diaz, known as the Sleepy Lagoon Murder. The men were convicted despite minimal evidence to prove their guilt and little attention paid to due process. These unjust convictions highlighted the preexisting racial tensions between white and Mexican-American citizens of LA and the schism in how each group interpreted such events. This ongoing demonization of Chicano youth led to what is now known as the Zoot Suit Riots. In a week-long series of attacks in 1943, white American servicemen and civilians in LA attacked “zoot suiters”, young primarily Mexican-American men who wore a style of oversized suit derived from working-class Black communities. The white servicemen and civilians physically attacked the zoot suiters and publicly stripped them of their suits.

Reflecting on these injustices, Luis Valdez drew from letters written by the defendants from prison as well as court transcripts to create a loosely fictionalized theatrical account of the trial and subsequent riots. The resulting musical, Zoot Suit, was the first Chicano musical to be performed on Broadway and received a New York revival in 2017.
Anna DeVeare Smith, the playwright of “Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992” performs a scene from her play “Let Me Down Easy.” “Playwright Anna Deveare Smith performs at NIH” by National Institutes of Health (NIH) is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

**Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992** (1994) – Anna DeVeare Smith

Anna DeVeare Smith is an American actor and playwright who you may recognize from her role as Bo’s mother on Black-ish. Through her wide array of solo performance pieces, Smith pioneered **verbatim theatre**, a genre in which plays are constructed from the exact words of real people. In verbatim theatre, some playwrights may choose to use solely text gathered from real people throughout the play, while other playwrights may juxtapose text taken verbatim with imagined scenes.

In *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, Smith **portrays dozens of real people** reflecting on the aftermath of the **Rodney King trial**, in which 4 LAPD officers were acquitted for the beating of unarmed citizen, Rodney King, despite the attack being caught entirely on video. The acquittal caused national outrage and, along with mounting distrust of the LAPD and the judicial system amongst Black communities, was the catalyst for the 1992 Los Angeles Riots. Smith created *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* using the exact words of community members from over 300 interviews she conducted around the events.

**The Laramie Project** (2000) – Moises Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Project

*The Laramie Project* is another example of high-profile verbatim theatre. In 1998, 21-year-old **Matthew Shepard was murdered in Laramie, Wyoming** in a violent, homophobic hate crime that captured national attention. In the wake of this devastating crime, Moises Kaufman and his theatre ensemble, **the Tectonic Theatre Project**, conducted hundreds of interviews with citizens of Laramie, which they compiled, arranged, and performed verbatim. The play notably includes the direct text from the testimony of one of the two perpetrators and the moving statement made in court by Matthew’s father, Dennis Shepard. *The Laramie Project* has been performed worldwide, won multiple awards, and has since become **the first in a two-play cycle** created by Tectonic, the second being *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*.

**Until the Flood** (2016) – Dael Orlandersmith

Playwright **Dael Orlandersmith**, who also wrote *Lady in Denmark*, which premiered at the Goodman in the fall of 2018 and was part of the School Matinee Series, is most known for her documentary one-woman plays, which she often performs herself. In 2016, **Orlandersmith created *Until the Flood***, a one-woman show set in Ferguson, Missouri after the murder of unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown, based on interviews she conducted in Ferguson. Throughout the play, Orlandersmith portrays eight different characters, created from composites of real people she interviewed in and around Ferguson. Orlandersmith performed *Until the Flood at the Goodman* in spring 2018.
Learn the basic facts about Michael Brown’s death at the hands of police officer Darren Wilson and the protests that followed in this two-minute explainer video from Vox.

In this on-the-ground video piece, the New York Times captures the aggressive police response to a protest led by Black community members in Ferguson.

In recent years, the equipment and tools used in policing have transformed dramatically. For a more detailed look at police militarization and how it factored into the murder of Michael Brown, check out this comedic, investigative piece from Last Week Tonight.
Protests, Battles, Riots, Strikes: The Civil Unrest that Shaped Chicago History
by LIAM COLLIER

Too often, history is boiled down to the achievements of individuals: presidents, kings, and “people of the year” whose actions supposedly shaped the world we live in. But is focusing on individuals the best way to understand history? In his 1980 book *A People’s History of the United States*, Howard Zinn wrote:

> The history of any country, presented as the history of a family, conceals fierce conflicts of interest (sometimes exploding, most often repressed) between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex. And in such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people, as Albert Camus suggested, not to be on the side of the executioners.

According to Zinn, history that aligns itself with powerful individuals overlooks the vast majority of people and implies that only the exceptional among us can change the world. In reality, the turning points of history have overwhelmingly been dictated by mass movements of everyday people demanding change.

The timeline below covers ten moments of civil unrest that shaped Chicago, moments when, for better or worse, masses of people took history into their own hands.

As you read, consider the similarities and differences between these moments of civil unrest. Which actions do you agree with? Which do you oppose? What protests do you feel are missing from this abbreviated history?

*Click the image below to begin.*

> “Non-violent resistance during the No NATO protests, Chicago, May 20, 2012” by Bartosz Brzezinski is licensed under CC BY 2.0. This image has been cropped and edited to include a timeline.

*For a printable version of this timeline, [click here.](#)*
Goodman Theatre’s Associate Director of Education and Engagement Quenna L. Barrett interviewed Asha Ransby-Sporn, organizer with the Black Abolitionist Network and the Dissenters. Here, they discuss the history of abolition organizing in Chicago and how young people can get involved in organizing.

Want to learn more about abolition and where to get involved in Chicago? Check out the study guide article “‘We’re on the Freedom Side’: the Movement to Abolish the Chicago Police Department” by Sam Mauceri.
Police reform has been an issue in the American public consciousness for quite some time, and has only intensified after decades of police brutality caught on camera. Today, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis in May 2020, which was videotaped by several bystanders, the national conversation around policing in America has shifted from one primarily focused on reform to a deeper conversation on defunding the police and abolishing police altogether.

What is police abolition?

You may have heard the word abolitionist used to refer to people who fought to abolish slavery in the United States during the 19th century. Although slavery in Confederate states was formally ended by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, today many activists use the word abolition to refer to the movement and political philosophy to end the system of policing and incarceration, known as the prison-industrial complex (PIC).

Chicago-based playwright and organizer Tanuja Jagernauth says, “Abolition is emptying cages and shutting down prisons, dismantling the systems that created them, and creating community-based processes for preventing, intervening in, transforming, and repairing after harm.”

Abolition as we know it today emerged from the Black feminist tradition, and is centered on imagining possibilities for a future which eliminates racist systems that harm Black and brown people at disproportionate rates, and restores resources and power to marginalized communities. Abolitionist and author Angela Davis further illuminates the growing calls for police abolition in the interview below with Democracy Now:

“Freedom Is a Constant Struggle"
As Davis explains, abolition focuses on addressing the root causes of crime, namely by shifting the massive amounts of city budgets away from policing and towards resources that directly support communities. By shifting our priorities, abolitionists believe that we can create a radically different world focused on community well-being and mutual care.

It can be difficult to imagine a world that looks so dramatically different from the one we live in right now. In a 2020 NPR interview, abolitionist and organizer Mariame Kaba remembers a friend asking her, “Why do you assume that prisons are a natural thing?” And I really didn’t understand it. And they’re like, “Prisons are unnatural — somebody made them, and everything that’s made can be unmade.” ...And then a couple of years later, I was in a restorative justice training and somebody said, “There are a million ways to handle harm. Why did we choose this one?” I was like, “Oh my God.”

In 2020, 40% of Chicago’s entire budget was allotted to the Chicago Police Department. That’s $1.6 billion. If we didn’t spend that money on policing, where would you like to see those resources go instead? What would you spend that money on to better support the lives of the people in your community?

What is police reform?

Abolitionists’ emphasis on dismantling policing and imprisonment systems stands in contrast with the more familiar strategy of police and prison reform. Reformist policies maintain the existing structure of policing and incarceration while aiming to make interactions with police less violent and harmful to civilians. Common police reforms in the U.S. include measures like requiring officers to wear body cameras, implicit bias training for officers, and banning brutal practices like chokeholds. In June 2020, the #8CantWait campaign, led by police reform project Campaign Zero, called for these and other reformist policies, an initiative that was supported by numerous high-profile celebrities.

While these sound like positive changes, reforms have been shown to be ineffective at reducing police brutality and expensive to implement. In fact, many of the eight policies proposed by #8CantWait have already been implemented in the police departments of major American cities. Chokeholds were already illegal in New York when NYPD Officer Daniel Pantaleo used one on unarmed Black man Eric Garner in 2014. This reform did not prevent Eric Garner from dying at the hands of
police, just months after the murder of Michael Brown, nor did it result in timely accountability for Officer Pantaleo, who was finally fired in 2019.

Furthermore, reformist strategies cost a lot of money. It cost $8 million to equip every Chicago patrol officer with a body camera in 2017, but officers do not reliably wear or activate their cameras. This use of funds runs counter to the abolitionist aim of shifting resources away from police forces and into community-centered areas that provide security and prosperity for communities, like education, housing, and mental healthcare. Abolitionists argue that police reforms do not address the root causes of crime and community distress. If police reform is a band-aid, the aim of police abolition is to prevent the injury in the first place.

Who is fighting for abolition in Chicago?

Black Lives Matter Chicago
BLM Chicago is “an intersectional vehicle that values Black people and our right to self-determination. We fight for justice with families most impacted, while working to create just and equitable systems.” Among BLM Chicago’s 10 Demands released in 2020 are “No Cops in School”, “Accountability for Police Murder and Torture”, and “Defund the Police”.

Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression
Formed in 1973 as part of the movement to free Angela Davis and and other political prisoners, CAARPR “struggle[s] against white supremacy, the prison-industrial complex, and state violence. We demand community control of the police and full representation for Black people and other poor and oppressed people at all levels of government.”

Chicago Torture Justice Center
“The Chicago Torture Justice Center was born out of reparations for survivors of police torture... Today, with hundreds of survivors still incarcerated and the persistence of racialized police violence, that fight continues.” For more information on the organization’s formation through the 2015 Reparations Ordinance, check out the study guide article “Jon Burge and the Chicago Reparations Ordinance”.

Assata’s Daughters
Named for radical civil rights activist Assata Shakur, Assata’s Daughters is “an abolitionist organization led by Black women using a Black queer feminist lens and relationship-based tactics to organize bases of young Black people in divested-from areas of Chicago.”
Black Youth Project 100 Chicago
“Founded in 2013, BYP100 (Black Youth Project 100) is a member-based organization of Black youth activists creating justice and freedom for all Black people.” The Chicago chapter participated in protests around the #NoCopAcademy movement and “engaged in multiple actions and demonstrations for Laquan McDonald who was murdered by CPD’s Jason Van Dyke”.

Black Abolitionist Network
BAN is “a constellation of people & organizations collaborating to dismantle anti-Black and carceral systems and build systems that affirm and nurture Black lives.” Formed in 2020, they launched the #DefundCPD campaign, which aims to defund the Chicago Police Department and provides regular trainings for Chicagoans to learn more about police abolition.

Let Us Breathe Collective
“The #LetUsBreathe Collective is an alliance of artists and activists organizing through a creative lens to imagine a world without prisons and police... The Collective produces cultural events and direct actions that disrupt oppressive systems, amplify marginalized voices, and serve people and communities most directly harmed by mass incarceration, police violence, and systemic injustice.”

Students Strike Back
This “group of students who attend neighborhood high schools on the southwest side of Chicago” mobilizes around issues affecting CPS students, including demanding the removal of police officers from their schools. During summer 2020, they held multiple #CopsOutCPS virtual workshops to educate the public on the negative effects of having School Resource Officers (SROs) in their learning environment.

How can I learn more?
Do you have more questions about police abolition? The #DefundCPD Campaign has created “Yes, We Mean Abolish the Police!: Defund CPD Community Conversation Toolkit” to help answer your burning questions about a police-free future.

Click the image below to access the Toolkit!
Between 1972 and 1991, Chicago Police Department Commander Jon Burge and the “Midnight Crew” of officers under his command tortured over 120 people into false or illegally obtained confessions. Burge’s victims were mostly Black men, many of whom went on to serve decades behind bars for crimes that they did not commit.

In 2015, after years of activism spearheaded by the families of torture survivors, the Chicago City Council unanimously passed a Reparations Ordinance, which offered financial payments and free college tuition to survivors of Burge’s torture, funded the construction of the Chicago Torture Justice Center to “provide psychological counseling, health care services and vocational training to the torture survivors, their family members and others affected by law enforcement torture and abuse,” and required Chicago Public Schools to include Jon Burge’s crimes and the subsequent fight for reparations in high school history curriculum.

If you go to a public school in Chicago, you may have already studied Burge in your eighth or tenth grade history class. If not, the video below, first released in 2011, offers an introduction to this shameful moment in Chicago history.

CONTENT WARNING: This video includes cursing, racial slurs, and descriptions of extreme violence against Black people.
Questions for Discussion

1. Under U.S. law, torture is defined as “an act committed by a person...specifically intended to inflict severe physical or mental pain or suffering (other than pain or suffering incidental to lawful sanctions) upon another person within his custody or physical control.” Do you agree with this definition of torture? Would you revise the legal definition in any way?

2. Can you identify any factors that might have allowed the torture to happen and to continue for an extended period of time?

3. What parallels do you see between the experiences of torture survivors in Chicago and the experiences of the characters in Until the Flood, especially Louisa, Hassan, and Paul? How are their circumstances similar and different?

4. When questioned in court about his repeated use of the N-word during questioning, Michael Kill, a white former police officer who was part of the Midnight Crew, implied that individuals who have not served as police officers should not criticize them:

   Trying to explain police work to you is like trying to explain physics to my grandson – who is three years old. You’re not there. You haven’t been there. You don’t understand it, OK? You have to live it.

   Does this attitude remind you of any of the characters from Until the Flood? When do you think it is appropriate to challenge figures of authority? Why do many believe it is unacceptable for white people to use the N-Word regardless of the surrounding circumstances?

5. How would you describe the work of individuals and groups who fought for years to bring about justice for Jon Burge’s victims? What strategies do you see them use in the clips provided to educate the public and confront those in power?

For more information about Jon Burge and the Chicago Reparations Ordinance visit www.chicagotorturejustice.org/
Explosive moments in history inspire art. In this conversation from December 11, 2020, Willa J. Taylor, Goodman Walter Director of Education and Engagement, speaks with artists whose careers in theatre have intertwined with activism. Sharing their thoughts are Goodman Artistic Associate Dael Orlandersmith (*Until the Flood*), Tony Award-winner David Henry Hwang (*M. Butterfly, Chinglish*), Joan Appell Lipkin (Dance the Vote Project) and Olivia Ridley (*Ghost Gun, #ENOUGH: Plays To End Gun Violence*).

In this first clip, Orlandersmith discusses her process for creating *Until the Flood*, in which she interviewed community members in Ferguson and created “composite characters” from her interviews.

What factors does Orlandersmith mention in choosing to create composite characters from many interviewees rather than playing real life people and quoting them directly? Do you feel that this makes the play any more or less realistic?

Orlandersmith also describes her desire to present a more vulnerable side of Black men than we typically see in media. What are some other examples in media that showcase this sense of vulnerability in Black men? In contrast, what are some examples in media of the more common stereotype of a hyper-masculine Black man?
In this clip, Olivia Ridley, the playwright of *Ghost Gun*, who is currently a senior in high school, describes her thoughts on art’s role in activism. Ridley makes a case for playwrights presenting multiple nuanced viewpoints on a political issue, rather than declaring to their audience what their own viewpoint is.

How does this show up in *Until the Flood*? Do you think presenting multiple viewpoints is an effective tool in theatre?

*To watch the full interview, click here.*
Artists have always responded critically to important and pressing social issues. Theatre is no different, as Dael Orlandersmith demonstrates in *Until the Flood*, which responds to the murder of Michael Brown by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson. Dael joins a long lineage of writers, filmmakers, poets, and visual artists who use their craft to go deeper into such issues, hoping to expose and uncover how we got to the issue in the first place.

The following is a list of films, limited TV series, and plays that explore police brutality and instances of systemic racism in the U.S., most often focused on real events, just as *Until the Flood* is. In no ways is this an exhaustive list, and be careful to take care of yourself, as some of the pieces may bring up strong emotional responses.

### Movies/Documentaries
- **Whose Streets?** – A documentary following the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement after Michael Brown’s murder.
- **Fruitvale Station** – A film starring Michael B. Jordan recounting the death of Oscar Grant at the hands of San Francisco transit police.
- **The Hate U Give** – A film based on a book by the same name in which a Black teen witnesses the fatal shooting of her best friend by cops.
- **13th** – A documentary by Ava DuVernay examining the implications of the 13th Amendment on Black lives.

### TV Series
- **When They See Us** – A limited series based on “the Central Park Five”, Black teens in Harlem who were wrongfully convicted of attacking a white woman in Central Park in 1989.

### Plays/Playwrights
- **Fires in the Mirror** and **Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992** by Anna DeVeare Smith.

Both one-woman plays performed by Smith follow real instances of violence caused by racial tensions in major American cities.

### Other lists
- [Curated Collections: 9 Netflix Series and Films on Racism & Police Brutality](#)
- [7 Movies About Police Brutality & Systemic Racism Directed by Black Filmmakers](#)
- [11 Shows and Documentaries to Help You Learn About Racial Justice and Police Brutality](#)
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