

UP Stages Presents:

*Inside the Zoom: Two Online One Acts Series*

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# "Black and Blue"

By Niccole Nero Gaines

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## Study Guide

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Pitt Stages

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## **Synopsis:**

After Mr. Bryan's son, Keith, is shot in the back by a White police officer who was breaking up a fight between two young men, Keith becomes paralyzed and protests ensue. The police officer that shot Keith, Officer O'Reilly, is arrested and convicted but is yet to be sentenced. Before the sentencing occurs, a Zoom call is set up between the ADA (Assistant District Attorney), Mr. and Mrs. Bryan, the family's lawyer, and the shooting officer's partner, representing the shooting officer. On the Zoom call, Mr. Bryan stands up for justice for his paralyzed son. The conversations of their Zoom call explore the realities surrounding police brutality, justice, and the Black community in the United States.

## **Characters:**

**Mr. Bryan**, a Black male in his mid 60's; the father of Keith, his unarmed Black son that became paralyzed after being shot in the back by police officers breaking up a fight between two young men.

**Mr. Frank Thomas**, a Black male in his mid 30's; lawyer for the Bryan Family.

**ADA Connors**, a middle-aged White male; Assistant District Attorney for the State.

**Office McLeary**, a White male in his mid 20's-30's; partner of Officer O'Reilly who is the cop that shot Keith.

## **Off-stage Characters:**

**Keith**, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Bryan; unarmed young Black male with no criminal history or violent affiliations who was shot by Officer O'Reilly.

**Mrs. Bryan**, Keith's mother and Mr. Bryan's wife; a religious woman who hugged Officer O'Reilly in the courtroom as a sign of forgiveness.

**Ex-Officer Jim O'Reilly**, the White male officer who shot Keith; was arrested and convicted but is yet to be sentenced.



*Photo of*

*Nicole Nero Gaines from: <http://4loveproductions.com/about>*

### **About the Playwright:**

Ms. Nicole Nero Gaines is an acclaimed and prolific writer in several genres and mediums. She was born and raised in New York and whilst growing up she split her time between her father's home in Hollis, Queens and her mother's home in Long Island. She is a graduate of Morgan State University where she earned a B.A. in Theatre Arts. Ms. Gaines has written for the stage, television, and film with other writing credits including the staged productions, *Last Dance*, *Brownstone Blues*, and *From The Heart of Hollis*'. She was recognized with the Arthur C. Lamb Playwriting Award for *From the Heart of Hollis*. Outside of the stage, Ms. Gaines is known for her writing work on the web series, 'SexTea Ladies', and her ongoing children book series, [Emene the Elephant and Friends](#).

## **Themes and Concepts**

### **Racism**

*Racism- the prejudice, discrimination, and hostility directed against a person or people on the basis of their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group (Oxford Languages).*

Though Officer McCleary tries to convince him otherwise, Mr. Bryan frequently brings up race as his son was the 4th unarmed Black man to be shot that year and the only one to survive out of those four. Mr. Bryan makes his views quite clear when he tells Officer McCleary that he must “stop protecting White communities and punishing Black ones!” Race plays a major role in *Black and Blue* since Kieth is tragically one of many Black individuals who have been subject to police violence. Mr. Bryan’s lines such as “racism is the subconscious of America” and “you [cops] walk around with deadly weapons that harm and kill Black and Brown lives with impunity” bring the issue of racism to the front and center of *Black and Blue*. Racism has longed played a large role in shaping US history and it manifests in smaller, everyday interactions as well as in larger, systemic, institutional interactions.

### **Police Brutality/Police Violence**

Mr. Bryan makes a mention of the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) which is a social movement in protest of racially motivated violence against Black individuals. The movement garnered far-reaching global attention and support during the summer of 2020 as a result of the protests following the murder of George Floyd, a 46-year old Black male who was killed at the hands of Derek Chauvin, a White police officer in the Mineapolis Police Department. The Zoom format of the play reminds the audience that this play takes place in contemporary times where a number of Black individuals have been subject to police violence and police murder. Recent Black victims of police violence include Jonathan Price, Jacob Blake, Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, and many others.

## **Religion/Faith**

Mr. Bryan mentions that his family has been attending the same church for over 20 years and that his wife is a Missionary and that he is a Deacon. He states that they believe in “forgiving others the same way God forgave us for our sins” and cites a verse from the Bible. Mr. Bryan refers to his wife as a highly religious “God-fearing” woman who “only needs to listen to God” and “starts everything off with a prayer.” Religion surfaces throughout the play and serves as a motivation for characters which is demonstrated by Mrs. Bryan hugging Officer O’Reilly in court. Mr. Bryan explains that his wife did not know she was going to do that but the “spirit of the Lord so moved her.” Despite our increasingly secular society, religion still plays a large role in shaping the feelings, behaviors, and responses of humans in tremendously difficult situations such as the loss of a loved one. The characters in this play look to religion to help them navigate complicated emotions and difficult situations in their lives.

## **Justice**

*Justice-the maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or the assignment of merited rewards or punishments (Merriam-Webster).*

Mr. Bryan’s primary desire or goal throughout this play is justice for his son, Keith. He does not want Officer O’Reilly to get away with “a slap on the wrist” as Mr. Thomas puts it but rather a proper sentence deserving of the hurt Officer O’Reilly caused the Bryan family. Officer O’Reilly is said to be convicted of aggravated assault. Aggravated assault is often associated with bodily injury to another person using a deadly weapon.

- In Pennsylvania, as a first-degree felony it can result in 10-20 years of prison and a fine of up to \$25,000. Second degree felonies can result in 5-10 years of prison and fine of up to \$25,000.
- The difference between first and second degree aggravated assault lies in the seriousness of the bodily injury. If the bodily injury is very serious, the assault is classified as a first degree aggravated assault and the assaulter may face 10-20 years as opposed to 5-10 years.

- To classify an attack as attempted murder as opposed to aggravated assault, concrete intentions to murder must be established. If these concrete intentions are established, a first degree attempted murder charge where serious bodily injury results could result in a maximum of 40 years in prison whereas a second degree charge where the bodily injury is not as serious could result in a maximum of 20 years in prison.
- It should be noted that the above information is for the state of Pennsylvania. Mr. Thomas proposes 5-10 years for the assault which McCleary immediately declines citing the damage already caused to Officer O'Reilly's career.

## **Family**

Family is a major thematic focus of *Black and Blue* given that Mr. Bryan's family will never be the same again as a result of the shooting. Keith will spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. This is a tremendously difficult challenge for an individual to face as he and his family must learn to navigate a completely new set of obstacles. The hurt the Bryan family will face is not ephemeral and thus the Bryan family can never be the same again. Mr. Bryan mentions at multiple points that they were a strong familial unit that went to church together for twenty years. On the other side, Officer McCleary seems to repeatedly emphasize that Ex-Officer O'Reilly's family will never be the same either. Officer McCleary states to Mr. Bryan that "before all this he [O'Reilly] was a decorated cop, from a family of cops" and ADA Connors states "in this case, Officer, I'm sorry, Mr. O'Reilly will never be an officer of the law ever again; his life, his whole family will never be the same again." Again, we see the theme of familial disruption being emphasized. *Black and Blue* communicates that an individual's actions can have profound impacts on their close loved ones.

## Parallels/Real Events:

### Victim's Family Member Hugging and Forgiving Police Officer in Courtroom

Quite similarly to Mrs. Bryan hugging Ex-Officer O'Reilly in the courtroom, Brandt Jean, the brother of Bothem Jean, who was shot and killed by a Dallas police officer as he was watching TV and eating ice cream in his own home, hugged his brother's murderer in the courtroom. Amber Guyger, the killer cop, mistook Bothem Jean for a burglar and quickly fired two fatal shots at Bothem. Brandt's decision provoked a wide array of responses from glowing praise and approval to criticism. Brandt, 18 at the time, stated in his victim impact statement that his chief desire was not to send Guyger to jail but rather for her to "give the rest of her life to Christ." Mrs. Bryan's actions closely parallel Brandt's as their faith was highly critical in guiding their actions. Brandt's tremendous display of forgiveness sparked a national discussion on justice and mercy which *Black and Blue* explores further.



*Brandt Jean, brother of Bothem Jean, hugs Amber Guyger, the police officer who shot and killed his brother.*

Links to articles:

[Amber Guyger hugs Botham Jean's brother, Judge Tammy Kemp after murder trial sentencing](#)

<https://www.npr.org/2019/10/03/766866875/brandt-jeans-act-of-grace-toward-his-brother-s-killer-sparks-a-debate-over-forgi>

## Jacob Blake Is Paralyzed From Waist Down After Police Shooting in Kenosha

On August 23, 2020, Jacob S. Blake, a 29 year old Black man, was shot eight times by police officer Rusten Sheskey while his three sons were in the backseat of the car. According to witnesses on the site, Blake pulled up next to two women arguing attempting to break up a fight. Sheskey shot Blake believing he was attempting to kidnap the child of the backseat of the vehicle he was entering. Once Blake made a movement towards Sheskey's body, Sheskey interpreted that as an attempted attack and shot Blake several times. Blake's father announced on August 25th that Blake was paralyzed from the waist down and physicians were still trying to figure out whether it would be permanent. This parallels the incident involving Keith in *Black and Blue* since Keith is also shot and paralyzed by police officers. As with Jacob Blake's father, Mr. Bryan speaks to the press and with attorneys regarding his son's situation.



*Jacob Blake posing with his son.*

Links:

<https://chicago.suntimes.com/2020/8/25/21400481/jacob-blake-kenosha-police-shooting-riots-evanston>

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/07/us/jacob-blake-assault-charges/index.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/article/jacob-blake-shooting-kenosha.html>

Jonathan Price is Shot and Murdered by Texas Police Officer Shaun Lucas



*CNN photograph of Jonathan Price.*

Jonathan Price, a 31 year old Black man, was shot and killed on October 3rd, 2020 by a White police officer named Shaun Lucas. The incident took place at a gas station in Wolfe City, Texas. The entire incident was recorded on body camera footage and depicted Price asking the police officer if he was “doing good” and Price repeatedly extended his hand for a handshake gesture. The cop had a documented history of antagonizing other Texas residents. Price noticed a man and a woman engaged in a fight at the gas station and when the man was about to strike the woman, Price intervened to try and break up the situation at which point Officer Lucas arrived. Price’s lawyer firmly states that the entire situation had already been resolved by the time Officer Lucas arrived. Lucas quickly used his Taser and then fatally shot Price. Keith, also shot in the midst of a fight and also unarmed during the encounter, closely parallels the tragic story of Jonathan Price.

Links:

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/07/us/jonathan-price-police-shooting-texas-report/index.html>

<https://abcnews.go.com/US/bodycam-footage-suggests-jonathan-price-shooting-unwarranted-affidavit/story?id=73484654>

<https://abc13.com/jonathan-price-wolfe-city-officer-charged-shaun-lucas-texas-police-shooting/6849893/>

**Further Reading and Research Materials:**

(The following will serve as a resource bank of articles, vlogs, podcasts, academic papers, websites, books, lectures, films, etc. that pertain to the relevant themes present in *Black and Blue*)

### Police Brutality

<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01846-z>

(academic paper from an extremely respected source!)

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Police-Brutality-in-the-United-States-2064580>

(Britannica definition on the history and background of police brutality)

<https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>

(a highly interactive map of of police violence in the United States; great for visual information)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RYdItBluOU>

(Vox video which summarized the history of police violence in the US and summarizes police conviction rates)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtQU-x-vQ6k>

(Video from *Black and Blue*'s very own Mr. Wali Jamal explaining the Fugitive Slave Law and its relation to modern police organizations in the United States)

### Anti-Black Racism

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtQU-x-vQ6k>

(Short and simple animated video clearly explaining systemic racism in the United States; great for beginners)

[https://www.ted.com/talks/baratunde\\_thurston\\_how\\_to\\_deconstruct\\_racism\\_one\\_headline\\_at\\_a\\_time](https://www.ted.com/talks/baratunde_thurston_how_to_deconstruct_racism_one_headline_at_a_time)

(TED Talk about deconstructing the inherent racism present in many journalistic headlines and how to solve this problem)

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/6Wj7YW9Nr2oktjzZaJtXuP>

(Spotify podcast episode featuring the Head of Inclusion at Netflix on the topic of addressing anti-Black racism and promoting allyship in the workplace)

<https://mrc.ucsf.edu/racial-equity-anti-black-racism>

(A quick sheet or online page to refer to for important definitions and concepts regarding anti-Black racism)

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14427591.2020.1810111>

(Recent scholarly article on anti-Black racism and justice in the United States)

### Black Lives Matter Movement

<https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2020/know-their-names/index.html>

(Visual infographic that clearly displays recent victims of police shootings to recognize and remember their murders)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=js6ERFDsQv4>

(CBS Kids video that describes the goals, history, and motivations behind the Black Lives Matter Movement)

[https://www.ted.com/talks/d\\_1\\_stewart\\_scenes\\_from\\_a\\_black\\_trans\\_life](https://www.ted.com/talks/d_1_stewart_scenes_from_a_black_trans_life)

(TED Talk from a Black transgender individual regarding the Black trans experience in the United States)

[https://www.ted.com/talks/alicia\\_garza\\_patrisse\\_cullors\\_and\\_opal\\_tometi\\_an\\_interview\\_with\\_the\\_founders\\_of\\_black\\_lives\\_matter](https://www.ted.com/talks/alicia_garza_patrisse_cullors_and_opal_tometi_an_interview_with_the_founders_of_black_lives_matter)

(TED Talk from the women that sparked the Black Lives Matter social media movement)

<https://www.ibramxkendi.com/how-to-be-an-antiracist-1>

(Link to website and information about “How to Be an Antiracist” by Dr. Ibram X Kendi)

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>

(New York Times article describing the impact and scope of the BLM Movement)

### **Discussion Questions:**

- 1. Did you have any strong feelings or reactions to anything that any character in *Black and Blue* said during the Zoom call?**
- 2. What was your interpretation of Mr. Bryan leaving Mrs. Bryan out of the call?**
- 3. Was Officer McCleary justified in arguing against the conventional sentencing of 5 to 10 years for his partner?**
- 4. What is the role of “family” in *Black and Blue*? How does this concept contribute to the tension present in the play?**
- 5. What can we do as a community to prevent incidents such as the ones discussed in *Black and Blue*?**