

# SHOW GUIDE

 **MCC  
THEATER**

new play

# soft



**DONJA R. LOVE**



**WHITNEY WHITE**

Donja R. Love's *soft* drops the viewer into Mr. Isaiah's classroom, located in a youth correctional facility. Six young people wrestle with their interpersonal dynamics while reckoning with the people and the situations that got them there in the first place. The system may see them as a threat, but when Mr. Isaiah looks at them, he sees potential.

What is taught in the classroom is a springboard for lifelong learning. We have crafted our own classroom syllabus to deepen your understanding of the themes of the play.

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## MR. ISAIAH'S CLASSROOM

### RECOMMENDED READING AND VIEWING

You will not be tested on the reading or films, but awareness about the stories and topics are beneficial to your success in the classroom.

#### Literature

1. [The New Jim Crow](#) by Michelle Alexander
2. *We Real Cool* by bell hooks
3. *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison
4. *We Will Not Cancel Us and other Forms of Transformative Justice* by Adrienne Maree brown
5. *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women That a Movement Forgot* by Mikki Kendall
6. *Brother to Brother*, conceived by Joseph Beam, edited by Essex Hemphill
7. *The Tradition*; a collection of poetry by Jericho Brown
8. *Don't Call Us Dead*; a collection of poetry by Danez Smith

#### Film/TV

1. *Time: The Kalief Browder Story* (documentary)
2. [13th](#) (documentary)
3. [Free Meek](#) (docu-series)
4. [A Man Named Scott](#) (documentary)
5. *Music Box: DMX: Don't Try to Understand* (documentary)
6. [Check It](#) (documentary)
7. *Moonlight* (film)
8. [The Last Black Man of San Francisco](#) (film)
9. *Random Acts of Flyness*; Season One, Episode Two (series)
10. [Dangerous Minds](#) (film, an examination of the white savior complex)

Photo courtesy of NAACP: <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/origins-modern-day-policing>



## LESSON 1: THE SYSTEM

*Vocab provided by Merriam Webster Dictionary*

- **Incarcerated:** past tense verb—confinement in a jail or prison.
- **Juvenile Court:** noun—a court that has special jurisdiction over delinquent and dependent children usually up to the age of 18
- **Delinquent:** noun—a usually young person who regularly performs illegal or immoral acts
- **Dependent:** noun—relying on another for support
- **Youth (1) Detention (2) Center (3) ; noun**
  1. the early period of existence, growth, or development
  2. the state of being detained
  3. a facility providing a place for a particular activity or service

### THE ORIGINS OF POLICING IN AMERICA

Policing in America evolved primarily in two different ways. The northern states adopted a structure predicated on the UK system which was grounded in formal and informal groups of people establishing a “watch”. Night watches were formed in New York City, Philadelphia and Boston in the late 1600s. There are varying accounts as to whether New York or Boston created the first municipal police departments, but both were established in the early 1800s to mid-1800s.<sup>12</sup>

In the south, policing evolved out of “slave patrols” which were in action during the early 1700s in the Carolinas. After the Civil War, slave patrols were replaced by militia style groups who were “empowered to control and deny access to equal rights to freed slaves.”<sup>3</sup>

### POLICING OF BLACK AND BROWN COMMUNITIES—DISPARITY IN TREATMENT AND ARRESTS

“The crisis in policing is the culmination of a thousand other failures—failures of education, social services, public health, gun regulation, criminal justice, and economic development.” —The New Yorker, July 13, 2020

#### Language around assailants of color vs white assailants

- Black youth, who are often painted as “thugs and delinquents,” were often sent to correctional facilities rather than white youth, who were painted as “troubled teens” and were sent to mental health/psychiatric hospitals.<sup>4</sup>

#### School policing, or as the ACLU recently named it “Bullies in Blue”

- The ACLU reports that in one year alone, schools referred over 223,000 students to law enforcement. This report also points to how white students are often dealt with through traditional school administration while black and brown students are often pushed through law enforcement.<sup>5</sup>

## STATISTICS

5000 police officers work in New York City Schools compared to 3000 guidance counselors and 1500 social workers.

A 2019 ACLU report titled, “Cops and No Counselors: How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff is Harming Students”, using data collected by the Department of Education found that referrals, suspensions, detentions and arrests disproportionately affect students of color and disabled students. It found that in some states disabled students were 10 times more likely to be arrested, while Latino students were arrested at a rate 1.3 times that of white students. Meanwhile, Black students were arrested at a rate 3 times that of white students, rising as high as 8 times in some states.<sup>6</sup>

- According to the Prison Policy Initiative 2022 - Whole Pie report, there are 49,000 young people currently in jail or prison in the United States. In 2018 Juvenile Court Statistics published by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, showed that “more than half (62%) of juvenile status offense cases were for truancy. 10% were for running away, 9% were for being “ungovernable,” 9% were for underage liquor law violations, and 4% were for breaking curfew (the remaining 6% were petitioned for “miscellaneous” offenses).”<sup>7</sup>

### 2019 Prison Policy Institute report<sup>8</sup>

- 1/5 of the population of incarcerated youth is detained for the lowest level of charges, technical violations, or status offense
  - Technical violation: failure to comply with all terms of probation
  - Status Offense: Behavior such as truancy, running away, curfew
- Another 20% of the incarcerated youth are put in facilities, have yet to be found guilty, and are placed before a trial is set.

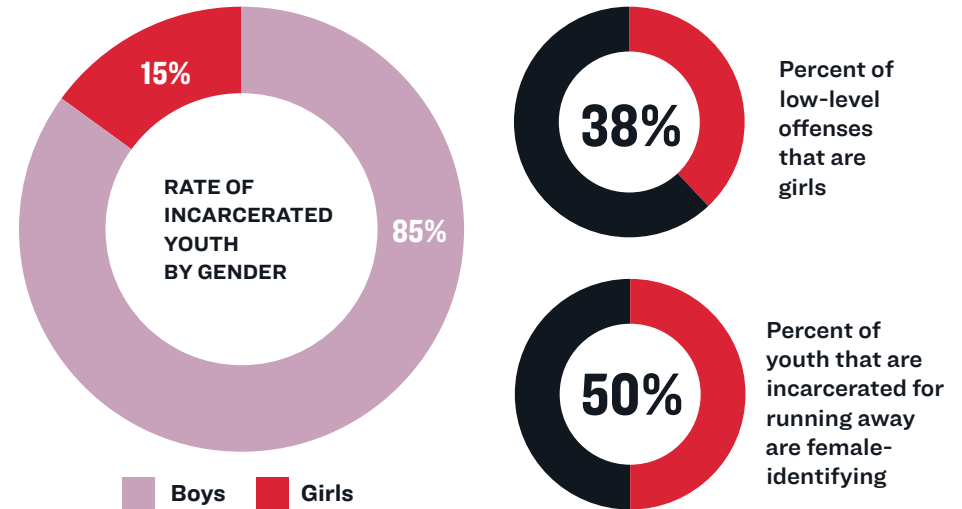
## HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

Write a short essay describing the difference between a jail and a prison and how one's socio-economic status impacts both.

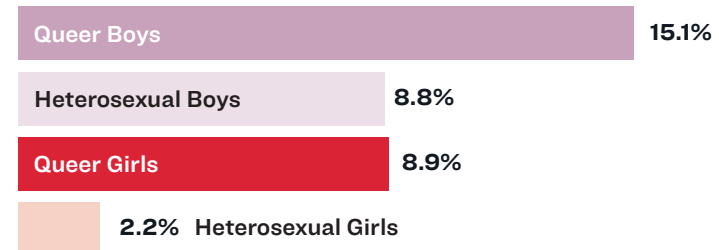
Kalief Browder was 16 years old when he was arrested in 2010 for allegedly stealing a backpack, a crime he said he did not commit. He spent three years at Rikers, 17 months of them spent in solitary confinement, often enduring abuse from fellow inmates and prison officers.

“As part of New York State’s 2017 Raise the Age law, 16- and 17-year-olds are no longer housed at Rikers, a change motivated in part by Kalief Browder’s three-year confinement there without trial and his subsequent 2015 death by suicide.”<sup>9</sup>

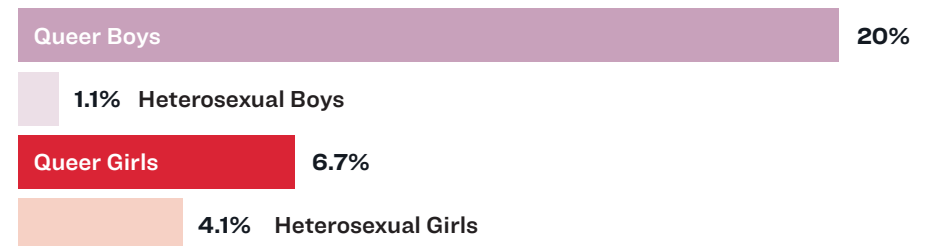
## Gender and sexuality through youth incarceration from No Kids in Prison & LGBTMAP.org<sup>10</sup>



### RATE OF YOUTH WHO HAVE REPORTED HAVING SEXUAL HARASSMENT, MISCONDUCT, AND ASSAULT FROM STAFF IN THEIR DETENTION CENTERS



### RATE OF YOUTH WHO HAVE REPORTED SEXUAL ABUSE FROM PEERS



As of 2017, over 40 states have no safety protocols for proper placement of trans-identified youth resulting in transgender girls being placed in boy's juvenile halls as well as transgender boys being placed in girl's juvenile halls.

Nigel Shelby was just 15 years old when he ended his young life in April 2019. Described by his mother as being someone who was “full of joy and full of light” he also dealt with depression and was subject to bullying at his school because he was gay. According to an NBC News article, the school administration was informed multiple times about the treatment Nigel was receiving from peers and the impact it was having on his mental health. A recent lawsuit filed by his family alleges that little or nothing was done to help him.

## LESSON 2: MENTAL HEALTH OVERCOMING THE STIGMA

There are a myriad of cases and historical references including the Tuskegee Airmen research and the U.S practice of eugenics on communities of color, that are grounds for skepticism of medical practitioners when it comes to physical and mental health in the black community.

The COVID pandemic has compounded already existing stressors in marginalized communities. With the expansion of affordable payment models and culturally responsive medical and health care practitioners, more options are available to Black and Brown communities who seek help.

### According to the Center for Disease Control's 2019 research <sup>11</sup>

- “More than 1 in 3 high school students had experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2019, a 40 percent increase since 2009.”
- In 2019, approximately 1 in 6 youth reported making a suicide plan in the past year, a 44% increase since 2009.
- ½ of all queer-identified and/or questioning students reported suicidal thoughts and action
- Black students saw a 50% increase in suicidal ideation and attempt
- “Many youth with mental disorders are typically referred to juvenile justice if they display of aggressive or disruptive behaviors without consideration of whether these are untreated mental health problems.” <sup>12</sup>

## REFLECTION

Sometimes what happens outside of class can affect how we function in class. Conversely, what happens in class can affect what happens in our social and personal lives as well. Practicing good mental health is for everyone. What are some ways in which you cope with stress? Conflict? Communication breakdown?

## OPTIONAL POST-SHOW ACTIVITIES: EXPLORING SOFTNESS

1. Write a **free verse poem** about when someone offered you softness or when you offered someone softness. *Free verse is defined as poetry that does not have to rhyme nor have a set structure or length.*
2. Turn your free verse poem into a **haiku**. *A haiku is defined as a Japanese poem that consists of seventeen syllables over three lines. The first line is five syllables, the second line is seven syllables, and the third line is five syllables.*

## EXTRA CREDIT

### Music

1. Man on the Moon: The End of Day - Kid Cudi

### Art

1. [A New Republic](#), Kehinde Wiley

### Other

1. [Why Teachers of Color Quit](#)
2. [Minority Teacher: Hard to Get and Hard to Keep](#)
3. [The Stoop Podcast—Season 1, Episode 2: Why Is It So Hard For Black Folks To Say I Love You](#)

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