

UNAPOLOGETIC

a film by Ashley O'Shay



Photo Credit: Chan C. Smith

2020 Official Selection
BLACKSTAR
Film Festival

"This is Black history that we are making! Even if we don't, our stories gon' make it!"

USA, 86 minutes

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UNAPOLOGETIC | SYNOPSIS



Photo Credit: Tom Callahan

LOGLINE: After two Black Chicagoans are killed, millennial organizers challenge an administration complicit in state violence against its 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.

Synopsis: *Unapologetic* captures a tense and polarizing moment in Chicago's fight for the livelihood of its Black residents. The film follows Janaé and Bella, two young abolitionist organizers, as they work within the Movement for Black Lives to seek justice for Rekia Boyd and Laquan McDonald, two young Black people killed by Chicago police. They aim to elevate a progressive platform for criminal justice to a police board led by Lori Lightfoot and a complicit city administration, while also elevating leadership by women and femmes.

JANAÉ BONSU, 24, moves from South Carolina to Chicago committed to pursuing her PHD in social work. However, in the midst of all of the trauma surrounding state and intra-community violence, the movement calls her for a higher purpose. 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 knee deep into the Movement, eventually rising the ranks to national policy chair. However, her enthusiasm to organize 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 while still fighting the good fight.

Meanwhile, in the heart of the city, a loudspeaker closely follows Chicago-native BELLA BAHHS, 22, at a protest as she proclaims, "this is Black history that we are making! Even if we don't, our stories gon' make it!" The crowd erupts. Soon after, a video of this performance goes viral, changing her presence both within and outside her Chicago community. She is thrust to the forefront of the Movement as an artist-activist. Internally, however, Bella grapples with the recent death of her grandmother, 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, they were the community leaders that gave kids school supplies and made sure the block was fed. So, when Bella powerfully leads the chant: "Protect and serve, we are the police! We're taking back our community!," it's inspired by the grassroots leadership of the street warriors that 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 and coverup of Laquan McDonald, Mayor Rahm Emanuel fires Police Superintendent Garry McCarthy. While seen as a win for the organizing community, our characters 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 justice system. Furthermore, discord within the organizing community moves 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 well being?

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 BYP 100 and officially becoming a PhD candidate; in an emotional scene, she triumphantly defends her dissertation proposal.

UNAPOLOGETIC | **FESTIVALS**

2020 Blackstar Film Festival (World Premiere)
2020 Inside Out Toronto LGBT Film Fest (International Premiere)
2020 American Black Film Festival
2020 Black Harvest Film Festival
2020 Chagrin Documentary Film Festival
2020 CinemAfrica Film Festival
2020 Cucalorus Film Festival
2020 DOC NYC
2020 DocYard Film Series
2020 Frameline44
2020 Heartland Film Festival
2020 IDA Screening Series
2020 image+nation, Montreal LGBTQ Film Festival
2020 Indie Memphis Film Festival
2020 Melanin Pride Festival
2020 Montclair Film Festival
2020 Milwaukee Film Festival
2020 New Orleans Film Festival
2020 St. John's International Women's Film Festival
2020 St. Louis International Film Festival
2020 Unorthodox

UNAPOLOGETIC | **ARTISTIC STATEMENT**

In the winter of 2012, Rekia Boyd was just getting started in life. Her friends describe her as someone prone to smiles and laughter. She dotted her i's with hearts, was a big Drake fan, and expressed herself freely on Facebook while trying to figure out her relationship status.

In the winter of 2012, I was also just getting started. I was in my first year at Northwestern University's film program and was one of less than ten Black people in my class. A slew of racist campus events caused me to feel further isolated and pushed me to begin speaking out about how racism affected my everyday. Slowly but surely, I began integrating these realizations into my art.

In March of that same year, Rekia was hanging out with her friends near her home when she was killed by a stray bullet. It took three years for the police officer who

shot her to be brought to court, and after years of waiting for justice, it was deemed a mistrial. It seemed that he would walk away without being held accountable.

Three years later, people of all ages from neighborhoods throughout Chicago came together to organize around their frustration. With nothing but a borrowed camera and monopod in hand, I joined the hundreds descending upon Chicago Police Headquarters to demand justice. The energy was electrifying. Black women on bullhorns stood in front of crowds leading the space. For the first time, I experienced a different narrative unfolding in the enduring struggle for Black freedom - one led by Black feminist voices. I couldn't help but see myself in them.

Shortly after, I began to document two of these voices: JANAÉ BONSU, a 24-year-old pursuing her PhD in social work while also rising the ranks of a national activist organization; and BELLA BAHHS, a 22-year-old "rap-tivist" from the Westside of Chicago whose artistry and activism seek to heal women harmed by intergenerational effects of incarceration - women like herself. Over the course of two and a half years, we watch as these women grapple not only with what it means to lead a mass movement, but also to enter early adulthood as Black, queer women.

I have been a filmmaker for nine years now; *Unapologetic* is my feature film directorial debut. Five years after beginning production, we have completed the film. While this documentation was certainly important at the time of filming, it proves even more essential now, especially in light of the recent killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020. As Lori Lightfoot has become the first Black, openly-queer mayor of Chicago, mainstream media has championed her as a symbol of progressive growth. However, the current reality in the city counters that. After years of intentional work, organizers are working to educate the community around abolishing and divesting from policing, despite a new mayor bolstered by representative politics. *Unapologetic* intentionally centers the narratives of the Black queer feminist organizers who brought forth the progressive platform that set the stage for Chicago's historic shift in leadership.

I have always known and felt the presence of Black resistance in my life. However, the strong feminine leadership in the Chicago movement caused me to question where my history had been placed. How might my world have been different if I saw a young PhD student or a rapper that looked like me organizing a mass movement? *Unapologetic* has given me an opportunity to discover more about myself through this legacy of resistance, and take a more active role in it.

What does one usually require of a Black movement leader? Certainly not femme. Certainly not queer. Certainly not flawed, or quick to anger, or overly opinionated. By focusing on this refreshing counter narrative within the Movement for Black Lives, I wanted to recognize this heroic and thankless work, catalyzing empathy, understanding, and hope in all viewers at such a critical time for Black lives.

— Ashley O'Shay

Unapologetic | FILMMAKING TEAM



Ashley O'Shay (Director/Producer) is a DP and documentarian based in Chicago, IL, whose work focuses on illuminating marginalized voices. She has produced work for national brands, including Lifetime, Ford Motor Company, Boost Mobile, KQED, and Dr. Martens. Most recently, she filmed the final episode of Dr. Martens' "Tough As You" series, starring the band Phony Ppl, accruing over 65K views on social and web. In 2019, she co-produced the Chicago episode of KQED's award-winning series "If Cities Could Dance," which became one of their most viewed episodes to date. Her work also appeared in the

critically-acclaimed Lifetime docuseries *Surviving R. Kelly*. Although she has crafted many short films, *Unapologetic* is her first venture into the feature world. Several experiences have elevated the project's status in the industry, as Ashley was previously a fellow with Firelight Media, the Bay Area Video Coalition, Film Independent, Kartemquin's Diverse Voices in Docs, Hedgebrook, Cucalorus Film Festival, and UC Berkeley's Investigative Reporting Program. She is currently an associate with Kartemquin Films.



Morgan Elise Johnson (Producer) is an independent filmmaker and publisher. Her documentary career was born at Northwestern University, and nurtured by Kartemquin Films' internship program. She grew to become a staff producer with Milwaukee-based 371 Productions. There she produced and co-directed the PBS/WORLD CHANNEL documentary *There Are Jews Here*, which premiered at the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival in 2015 and then toured for two years before its national PBS/World Channel broadcast. She also associate produced a Virtual Reality documentary about abortion clinic harassment called *Across the Line* which premiered at Sundance Film Festival's New Frontiers exhibit. Her life and career evolved

when she left 371 in 2016 and co-created The TRIIBE (thetriibe.com), a digital publication and production company dedicated to reshaping the narrative of Black

Chicago, which has earned Morgan a spot on Forbes' 30 Under 30 Media Class of 2019 and NewCity's Film 50 list.



Rubin Daniels (Editor) is a freelance editor based in Chicago. Most recently, Rubin worked with Kartemquin Films as an additional editor on CITY SO REAL (Sundance 2020), and associate editor on AMERICA TO ME (Sundance 2018), both directed by Steve James. Soon after, AMERICA TO ME was acquired by the Starz network. He served as assistant editor for "Standing On Common Ground," a film reflecting on communities 10 years after Hurricane Katrina. The short won a 2016 Midwest Emmy for Outstanding Achievement in Documentary Programs. Rubin also worked as an additional editor at the 2017 Sundance Documentary Lab.

Sam Trump (Composer) is a multi-instrumentalist recording artist and producer from Houston, TX, and has been a student of music from first picking up the trumpet at age 7. Since moving to Chicago in 2009 to obtain his fine arts degree in music, he has become a household-name in the city's live music scene, and is widely known as a band leader, mentor, & music curator. Sam Trump's debut album, PURPLE SKIES (Jan '18) explores topics of love & romance, family, inspiration, societal interdependence and the Black American plight. Notable career collaborations include SheaMoisture, The Curtis Mayfield Foundation, and BAMSfest. Sam Trump has opened up for international acts such as Al Jarreau, Muhsinah, Jose James, Phonte, Kindred The Family Soul, The Wild Belle, and The War & Treaty. Sam Trump is also Co-Founder of two Chicago-born performance arts organizations - 'ChiBrations' & 'Production: COLORS'.

Yvonne Welbon (Executive Producer) is a Senior Creative Consultant at Chicken & Egg Pictures. She is an award-winning filmmaker and founder of the Chicago-based non-profit Sisters in Cinema. She has produced and distributed over 20 films including LIVING WITH PRIDE: RUTH ELLIS @ 100, winner of ten best documentary awards and SISTERS IN CINEMA, a documentary on the history of black women feature film directors. Her work has been broadcast on PBS, Starz/Encore, TV-ONE, IFC, Bravo, the Sundance Channel, BET, HBO, Netflix, iTunes and screened in over one hundred film festivals around the world. She is currently working on a trans-media project, Sisters in the Life which includes a book (Duke University Press), documentary in-progress and online curriculum. Projects in development include THE SPIES WHO LOVES ME, a thrilling exposé on surveillance which focuses on the six-years she lived in Taipei, Taiwan and AMERICAN PRIDE, a Black lesbian series set

on the south-side of Chicago. She has taught at University of Chicago, Northwestern University and chaired the Journalism & Media Studies Department at Bennett College. Raised in an Afro-Latinx Honduran household on the Southside of Chicago, Welbon holds a B.A from Vassar College, a MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, a Ph.D. from Northwestern University, and is a graduate of the American Film Institute's Directing Workshop for Women.

Gordon Quinn (Executive Producer) is the Artistic Director and co-founder of Kartemquin Films, where over the past 50 years he has helped hundreds of documentary filmmakers advance their projects forward and been a leading champion of the rights of all documentary filmmakers. He is the 2015 recipient of the International Documentary Association Career Achievement Award and was a key leader in creating the Documentary Filmmakers Statement of Best Practices in Fair Use. His credits as director and producer include films as diverse and essential as *Inquiring Nuns* (1966), *Golub* (1988), and *A Good Man* (2011), and as executive producer include Academy-Award nominated *Hoop Dreams* (1994), and the Emmy Award-winning *The Interrupters* (2011), *The Trials of Muhammad Ali* (2013), *The Homestretch* (2014), and *Life Itself* (2014), and the acclaimed limited series *The New Americans* (2003), *Hard Earned* (2015), and *America to Me* (2018).

Jolene Pinder - Executive Producer is the Executive Director of Kartemquin Films. She is a documentary producer and arts administrator with 15 years of experience in the independent film space. Prior to joining Kartemquin, she helped launch and served as the inaugural executive director of #CreateLouisiana, a grantmaking and mentorship non-profit designed to champion Louisiana talent in film. Prior to this role, Jolene helmed the New Orleans Film Society (NOFS)—the producer of the Oscar-qualifying New Orleans Film Festival (NOFF)—for six years during a period of unprecedented growth. She recently produced the documentary short, *All Skinfolk Ain't Kinfolk* (dir. Angela Tucker), which premiered at DOC NYC last fall. She currently serves on the board of Court 13 Arts, was a founding member of the Film Festival Alliance and the Alliance for Louisiana Filmmakers, an inaugural fellow in the UnionDocs Collaborative Studio, and has juried film festivals across the country (including Cleveland, Sidewalk, Ashland, and Dallas).



About Kartemquin Films

Sparking democracy through documentary since 1966, Kartemquin is a collaborative center empowering filmmakers who create documentaries that foster a more engaged and just society. The organization's films have received four Academy Award ® nominations and won several major prizes, including six Emmys, four

Peabody Awards, multiple Independent Spirit, IDA, PGA and DGA awards, and duPont-Columbia and Robert F. Kennedy journalism awards. Kartemquin is recognized as a leading advocate for independent public media, and has helped hundreds of artists via its filmmaker development programs that help further grow the field, such as KTQ Labs, Diverse Voices in Docs, and the acclaimed KTQ Internship. www.kartemquin.com

UNAPOLOGETIC | PRESS COVERAGE



Photo Credit: Ashley O'Shay

"[The film] allows O'Shay to carve out a place for their voices, including her own, in the broader media firmament, using the expansive canvas of the big screen to question why in social movements meant to elevate the historically marginalized, certain voices are still more privileged than others as it celebrates what these women bring to the table."

❖ **Moveable Fest | [Ashley O'Shay on Moving Forward Without Leaving Anyone Behind in Unapologetic](#)**

"[A] tribute to the Black women who have been the bedrock of their families and communities, and its debut at film festivals is a landmark moment to cherish and celebrate."

❖ **Silver Screen Capture | [Movie Review: UNAPOLOGETIC](#)**

"I started talking to my first character, Janae, and seeing the ways in which she and her comrades commanded space, and commanded space for their narratives. It encouraged me to do the same"

❖ **The Academy | [An Academy Grant in Action](#)**

"My film is about a movement that is very much so living and ongoing...I don't want people in this moment to forget about black women and forget about trans voices and gender non-conforming voices and people [who] are even further on the margins than black men themselves."

❖ **Chicago Sun-Times | [During protests, documentary makers film, despite dangers of violence and virus](#)**

UNAPOLOGETIC | CONTACT INFORMATION

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To schedule a screening, please fill out the screening request form
[found here](#).



Photo Credit: Tom Callahan

UNAPOLOGETIC | CREDITS

Directed by

Ashley O'Shay

Produced by

Morgan Elise Johnson

Ashley O'Shay

Executive Producers

Jolene Pinder

Gordon Quinn

Yvonne Welbon

Edited by

Rubin Daniels Jr.

Cinematography by

Ashley O'Shay

Music Composed by

Sam Trump

In Order of Appearance

Janaé Bonsu
Ambrell "Bella BAHHS" Gambrell
E'mon Lauren
Damon Williams
Dr. Beth Richie
LaCreshia Birts
Martinez Sutton
Michelle Nance
Alexis Pegues
Charlene Carruthers
Page May
Kristiana Rae-Colon
Paris Fresh
LaSaia Wade
Kush Thompson
Veronica Morris-Moore
Jasmine "Tweak" Harris
Jhatayn "Jay" Travis
Timuel Black
Stacey Olden
Briana Johnson
Nell Chambers
Dr. Henrika McCoy
Spellman
Tazjaye Carpenter
Ahri La'Shawn
Mi'angel Cody
Jasmine Barber
Tiffany Walden
Rachel Williams
Cherisse Jackson
Trina Reynolds-Tyler
Johnaé Strong
Camesha Jones

Co-Executive Producers

Niema Jordan
Don Thompson
Diana Takata
Melissa Wilson

Writers

Rubin Daniels Jr.
Ashley O'Shay

Associate Producers

Ethan Senser
Natalie Frazier

Assistant Editors

Amber Love
Tom Callahan

Additional Editors

Ashley O'Shay

Post-Production Facility

Third Beacon

Location Sound Recordists

Nick Clemente

Additional Cinematography

Tom Callahan
Chan C. Smith
Dakota Sillyman
Hannie Lee

Production Assistants

C'airra Cortez

Story Consultants

Alexandria Bombach
Olivia Peace

Audio Post-Production

BAM Studios

Post Sound Mixer

Sidney Jones

Color Post-Production

Framestore

Colorist

Clark Griffiths

Music Soundtrack Recording Studio

Superlative Muzak Inc

Musicians

Sam Trump

Jeff Swanson

Joshua Griffin

Kedgrick Pullums Jr.

Motion Graphics and Animation

Hala Hassan

Additional Footage Courtesy of

Tom Callahan

Nastaya Popov

Courtney Kang

Hangda Zhang

Jacob Klippenstein

Additional Materials Courtesy of

Black Youth Project 100

Bob Simpson

Charlene Carruthers

Orel Chollette

Sarah Ji, Love & Struggle Photos

Spoken Word Segment**Director** Olivia Peace**Producer** Morgan Elise Johnson**Talent** E'mon Lauren**Cinematography** Ashley O'Shay

Chan Smith

Sound Emily Strong

Baili Martin

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Nate B. Bartlett

Catering Lou Malnati's**Locations** Douglas Park, Chicago

The Breathing Room

South Side Community Arts Center

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 South Side Home Movie Project
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Archival Researcher

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 Peter Jaszi

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 Performed by Bella BAHHS
 Courtesy of Ambrell Gambrell
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“Blk Girl Soldier”

Written by Jamila Woods
 Performed by Jamila Woods
 Courtesy of Jagjaguwar
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“O.G.”

Written by Bella BAHHS
Performed by Bella BAHHS
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