

2020

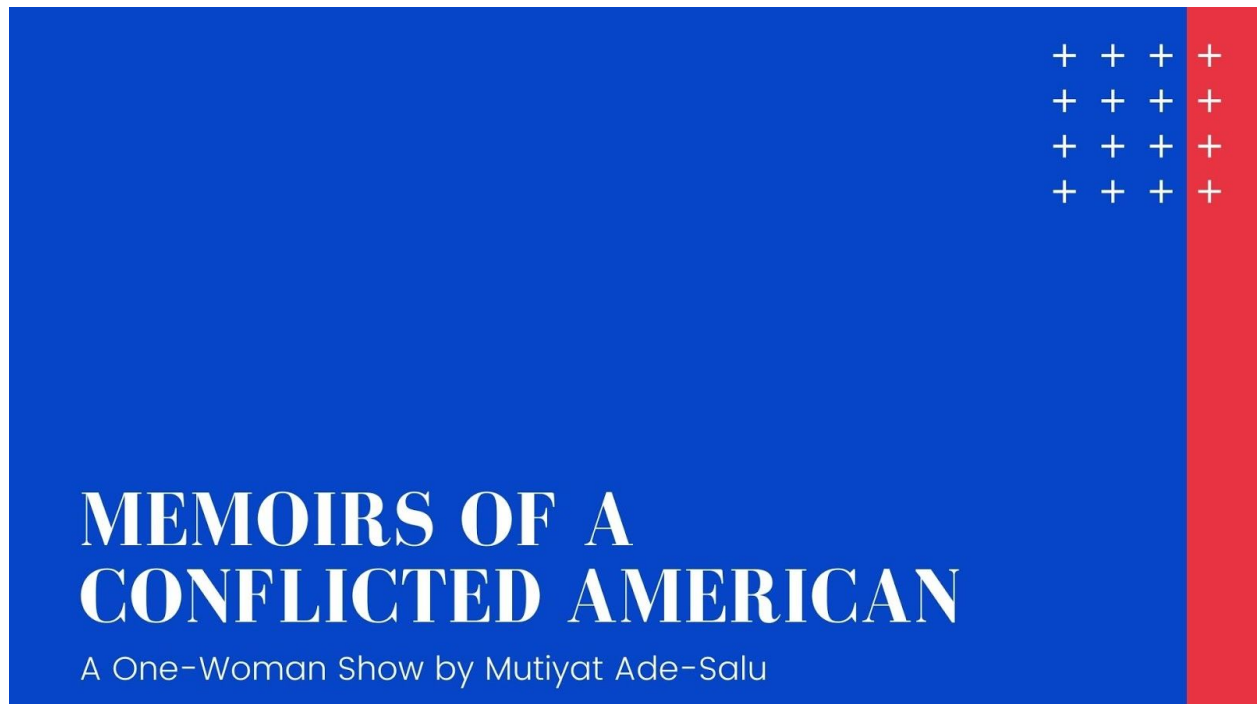
# STUDY GUIDE FOR YOUNG STUDENTS

## Memoirs of A Conflicted American

Produced in partnership with the

Southwest Mississippi Multiplex for Early Innovative Intervention Studies

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## Introduction

### About the Playwright

Playright and performer Mutiyat Ade-Salu was born in 1985 in the northeastern part of the United States in the city of Newark, New Jersey, however her parents are immigrants from the country of Nigeria in the northwestern part of the continent of Africa. She grew up most of her life in New York City where she identified as African and American, absorbing both the cultures of her Nigerian parents and the African-American friends, neighbors, and classmates who made up her community.

Her first one-woman show *Memoirs of A Conflicted American* is a contribution to the Black Lives Matter movement that has now spread globally. As a Black female who identifies as both African and American, the playwright attended her first protest march in New York City at Union Square in 2012, shortly after the killing of Trayvon Martin. Then, in 2016, she marched the streets of downtown Seattle, Washington in a protest organized by a chapter of the Black Lives Matter organization (now known as the Black Lives Matter Global Network).

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## About the Show

In the styles of both choreopoem and verbatim theatre, *Memoirs of A Conflicted American* is a series of monologues based on the playwright's personal observations and collected news stories regarding multiple cases of White police brutality against Black Americans in the 2010s. With 10 monologues interspersed with familiar and adapted anthems, *Memoirs* captures the pain and confusion of a variety of characters ranging from an optimistic 4-year old girl to a raging 48-year old man to a skeptical 88-year old woman. Traveling on a risky journey, this short play imagines the theme of "family vs. self" on personal, racial, and national levels.

## QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. The idea of the "choreopoem" was created by the late African-American playwright Ntozake Shange. According to director Leah C. Gardiner, a choreopoem "is a combination of all forms of theater storytelling." A term created by Derek Paget, "verbatim theatre" is a way of performing drama based on the real words of people recorded on tape or video. The playwright recorded herself improvising each of the monologues in *Memoirs* before typing them into a script and performing them on video.
  - a. How many different ways do you see a story being told in this show?
  - b. In what way does each character speak as a "real-life" person?

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## About #BlackLivesMatter

The popular social media hashtag “Black Lives Matter” was created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, and Opal Tometi . These women also made up the core of the Black Lives Matter movement.

According to the organization:

“Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Blackfolks’ humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression...Ferguson helped to catalyze a movement to which we’ve all helped give life. Organizers who call this network home have ousted anti-Black politicians, won critical legislation to benefit Black lives, and changed the terms of conversations around Blackness globally. Through movement and relationship building, we have also helped catalyze other movements and shifted culture with an eye toward the dangerous impacts of anti-Blackness.”<sup>1</sup>

Although the movement began building in 2013, the organization became officially recognized four years ago in 2016. While some Americans prefer to state, “All lives matter,” the Black Lives Matter Global Network is dedicated to exposing the unequal treatment Black people face when encountering the police and legal system in America.

[Click to read the BLM Toolkits and more about their 4-year Anniversary](#)

or visit [www.blacklivesmatter.com](http://www.blacklivesmatter.com)

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<sup>1</sup> “Celebrating Four Years of Organizing to Protect Black Lives.” Black Lives Matter Resource. Authors Shanelle Matthews and Miski Noor.

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# The Monologues

## Little Girl

This character is a 7-year-old Black girl who usually has friendly encounters with police officers in her neighborhood. The playwright wrote her monologue in remembrance of the good things she was taught about police officers when she was a schoolgirl. In middle school, the playwright learned about the local chapter of the Police Athletic League, a community organization in her neighborhood of Bensonhurst in Brooklyn, New York. The PAL held weekly and monthly activities to form bonds with the community's children and they even served as mentors.

### QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. Are there any organizations in your neighborhood that help to form bonds of friendship between the police and local citizens?
  - a. If so, how do they plan to end police brutality against Black lives?
  - b. If not, who can you talk to to help form such an organization?
  
2. Read the statement from the National Police Athletic League in the chapter titled "[Sources](#)" at the end of this document. What are your thoughts on the League's response to what happened to George Floyd, a Black man killed by a police officer this year?

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## Sandra

On July 10, 2015, Sandra Bland, a 28-year old African-American woman, was assaulted and arrested after being stopped by the Texas state trooper Brian Encinia. The event was recorded on a video cam after more law enforcement units were required to record arrests since the death of Trayvon Martin. This was to make officials accountable for their actions. On July 13, three days later, Sandra Bland was found dead in her jail cell. Although an autopsy determined that she had committed suicide, many people questioned why and how a woman who had already been assaulted would take away her own life.

This monologue is told from what might have been the view of Sandra Bland. Prior to her death, Sandra Bland was also a video blogger who spoke frequently about how Black people were treated in America. The name of her social media channel was “Sandy Speaks”.

### QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. Watch the video of Sandra Bland’s arrest in the chapter titled “[Sources](#)”. Then, read the CNN article, “Who Was Sandra Bland?” What does “resisting” arrest mean to you? Was the trooper respectful in the way he handled the arrest? **Warning: This video contains strong language and physical assault.**
2. In “[Sources](#)”, watch some of the videos created by Sandra Bland in “Sandy Speaks”. What does it mean to be a “social media activist?” Do you think activism on social media helps to educate people and stop police brutality?

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## The Talk

In this monologue, the character is a 38-year old African-American woman with a son who is about to turn 14. In many households across America, Black parents have a tradition of holding private conversations with their sons about what to expect from American police officers and how they should behave when they meet them. This conversation is often called “The Talk”. In the beginning of the monologue, it seems as though the character is warning her son of other “crazy” people in the neighborhood but then she says “police officers”.

### QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. Watch the video of the ABC news special on The Talk in [“Sources”](#). Who spoke about receiving “the talk” more: the Black male news anchors or females?
  - a. Why might “the talk” be given more to Black boys than Black girls?
  - b. Have you received “the talk” from a family member? If so, how did it make you feel about being an American?

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## No Charges

The same character performs this monologue after hearing that the police officer who killed her son will not be charged. She is upset that her son was killed even though he did not resist arrest. The monologue shows the playwright's biggest fear about having "the talk": it won't stop an officer from killing an innocent Black person. There is a lack of police officers being charged after killing a Black person. If they are punished, they are often asked to "resign" or "retire" and they continue to receive money leaving the police force. A history of police officers not being charged or found guilty of committing a crime makes some people wonder if the "the talk" works. It also looks at the pain of learning about a loved one's death through social media.

### QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT:

1. Do you feel it is okay to learn about a loved one's death through social media? How might that make someone else feel?
2. In "[Sources](#)", read the recent news article about the issue of police officers and charges. Why do you think the justice system does not often find officers guilty?
  - a. Does the American justice system judge citizens and police officers the same way?
  - b. How should a family member react if their loved one's death is not punished?
3. Do you think "the talk" helps? How or how not?
4. What does it mean to "resign"? What does it mean to "retire"?
  - a. Do you think it's fair for a police officer to receive money after killing an innocent person? Why or why not?

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## In My Country/ Not My Son

In the 21st century, some African-Americans are immigrants or the children of immigrants from Africa. The playwright is a first generation African-American. In the monologue “In My Country”, the character is a 58 year-old woman who moved to America from the country of Nigeria then became a naturalized citizen. She compares the idea of justice in America to that of her native country and considers returning. In the monologue “Not My Son”, she is surprised that she has been affected by police violence towards her own family. These monologues show the difference between *hearing* about violence towards someone else and *experiencing* it yourself.

### QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. What is a “naturalized citizen”?
  - a. How much might an immigrant or naturalized citizen know about American history compared to people born in America?
  - b. What sources might they get their information on American history or culture from?
2. In the 2020 United States Census, there was a new space added for African-Americans to describe their person’s race by national origin. After reading the explanation under “[Sources](#)”, do you think there is a difference between of African-Americans whose families were born and raised in America and those whose were not?
3. Read the article on being African and American under “[Sources](#)” then watch the documentary *Am I*.
  - a. What does it mean to be “conflicted”?
  - b. Have you ever felt “conflicted” about being Black and American or African and American? How or how not?
  - c. How do African immigrants and African-Americans share experiences with each other in your community?

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## Don't Gimme Dat

All of the characters before this monologue are females. The character in this monologue is a 48 year-old man returning from a protest at night. When he is questioned by a news reporter he refuses to answer, but then changes his mind and grabs the microphone. One night, while watching the news the playwright remembers listening to a man who looked directly into the camera after grabbing the microphone to take control over his own story. It also reminded her of the power of a camera. 30 years ago, most people could not use their own cameras to prove that something had happened and many innocent people were not protected because of it. Today, innocent people still suffer but have a better chance of others speaking up for them when they see a video.

### QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. How old was the character in the year 1990? What might be the importance of his age then and now?
2. How many people might have been hurt by police in the character's family? Has anyone in your family been mistreated by the law or the police?
3. Under "[Sources](#)", read the article about the anniversary of the night Rodney King was attacked by the police in 1991. How important do you think cameras are in stopping police brutality?
  - a. In the year 2020, how important was the cameraphone in the police attack on George Floyd?
  - b. Does recording a police attack make the owner of the cellphone an activist? Why or why not?
4. What do you think of how stories are told about Black people on the news? Are they told in the same way Black people tell their own stories?

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## Black Love

This next character is a 34 year-old Black woman who is also “first-generation African-American”. Like the playwright, this means she was born in America while her parents came from another country. Inspired by the activism of one of the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement who was also a first-generation African-American, the playwright wanted to look at the role of Black women in the fight for Black lives. She also wanted to show the pain that Black women feel when they don’t see Black men fight for them. 52 years ago, the musician James Brown created a popular saying: “Say it loud! I’m Black and I’m proud!” With the same strength and courage, the character wants to hear Black men say the names of Black women who have been treated badly by the police.

### QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. Listen to the song Say It Loud by James Brown under “[Sources](#)”. Why do you think James Brown created this song? What do the words mean to you?
2. Under “[Sources](#)” read the statement from the African American Policy Forum about #SayHerName, the social media movement that began around the time Sandra Bland died.
  - a. Who do you think is victimized by the police more: Black females or males? Does it matter? Why or why not?
3. Watch the video of actor John Boyega’s speech at a protest in London, England under “[Sources](#)”. **Warning: This video contains some strong language.**
  - b. Why did you think he asked Black men to protect Black women?
  - c. In your community, how many Black men have started protests for Black women? Does it matter? Why or why not?

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## Hope

When an American military soldier or officer dies, their spouse normally receives a flag folded into the shape of a triangle at their funeral. In this monologue, after the death of her husband, a 44 year-old Black woman has received the same flag as a symbol of “hope”. She laughs and asks what she’s supposed to do with it. She also mentions her ancestors --- some who “built the land for free”, some who “stole the land”, and some who “are the real Americans” --- then gives a final warning. The playwright wrote this monologue after the announcement by the mayor of the City of New York that the statue of former president Theodore Roosevelt in front of the American Museum of Natural History would be taken down. On her way to an annual Kwanzaa celebration at the museum, she noticed the statue and felt “conflicted” about the image of the people in it.

### QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. What is the meaning of hope?
  - a. How do people use hope?
  - b. Have you ever felt like hope was gone?
2. Read the document about the folding of the flag at a military funeral under “[Sources](#)”. What might be similar between the death of a soldier in battle and the death of a Black person in an arrest? What might be different?
3. Under “[Sources](#)”, watch the video on the history of the Roosevelt statue at the American Museum of Natural History. How many people do you see in the statue?
  - a. Of the people you see, who do you think “built the country for free”?
  - b. Who do you think “stole the land”?
  - c. Who do you think is the “real” American? Why or why not?

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## They Might Overcome

In the final monologue of the show, an 88 year-old Black woman, who was a former activist, thinks about her grandchildren and sings a different version of the famous tune “We Shall Overcome”. Instead she repeats, “We might overcome” and “I try to believe”. After the death of Breonna Taylor by police officers in Louisville, Kentucky (where the playwright was just finishing graduate school), she felt the pain of injustice happening over and over again - even after protesting.

### QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. Under “[Sources](#)”, read the news story on the history of the song “We Shall Overcome”, made known by Guy Carawan. What do the words mean to you?
  - a. Why do you think the character sings “We Might Overcome” instead?
  - b. When do you think the battle for justice for Black people will end? Who do you think is responsible for the battle?
  - c. What do the photos at the end of this monologue mean to you? Why might there be children smiling or not smiling?

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### FINAL QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. What were each of the characters in the show “given” and how did it make them feel? What do you feel America has “given” you?
2. What does an American “family” look like? What does a Black “family” look like? How do any of the characters speak about their “families”? How do they speak about themselves? How might they feel “conflicted”?

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## Sources

### [Little Girl](#)

[Statement from National Police Athletic League](#)

[Official Website for the National Police Athletic League](#)

### [Sandra](#)

[Who Was Sandra Bland?](#)

[Sandy Speaks](#)

### [The Talk](#)

[ABC News: Raising Black Children in America](#)

### [No Charges](#)

[CNN: Why Is It So Rare for Officers to Face Legal Consequences?](#)

### [In My Country/ Not My Son](#)

[Explanation of 2020 U.S. Census](#)

[Am I: Too African to Be American or Too American to Be African?](#)

### [Don't Gimme Dat](#)

[National Public Radio: A Look Back at the Rodney King Riots](#)

### [Black Love](#)

["Say It Loud" by James Brown](#)

[#SayHerName Campaign](#)

[John Boyega Speech](#)

*(continued on next page)*

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## Sources Continued

### [Hope](#)

[Meaning of the Folding of the Flag](#)

[Addressing the Statue](#)

### [They Might Overcome](#)

[National Public Radio: The Force of We Shall of Overcome](#)

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Thank you for reading and discussing this guide on ***Memoirs of A Conflicted American***.