

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Aidan Un

When Dance Has a Voice

by **Ellen Chenoweth (right hand) and Gregory King (left hand)**

On December 13th, I stood next to a white person dancing next to a black person in protest of the grand jury's decision not to indict Officer Daniel Pantaleo in the killing of Eric Garner. I saw no discomfort, only dialogue. Dressed in black, red, and white, dancers moved together demanding justice for Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, and so many others.

It was a cold and clear December afternoon, but not too cold.

We marched up to City Hall, traveling north on the thoroughfare of Broad Street.

150 people of various races gathered at Headlong;
many were dancers or affiliated with the dance community.

It's been three weeks since the announcement not to indict Officer Pantaleo, and in an attempt to join thousands of protesters worldwide, the dance community of Philadelphia descended upon City Hall to acknowledge the humanness that unites us without dismissing the injustices that divide.

To say we marched is not accurate.

We traveled as much as possible in a sequence of steps:

8 counts with our hands up, 8 counts holding parts of the body as if wounded,

8 counts hunched over with our hands behind our backs,

the final 8 counts bringing our hands to our chests.

The deaths of unarmed black men and women have sparked days of racial tension and unrest in Ferguson, New York, Chicago, Miami, Washington D.C., Los Angeles, Philadelphia and other U.S. cities. Signs reading "Stop Killing Us," "I Can't Breathe," and "Our History Does Not Have To Be Our Future," were among those held by the crowd.

At Headlong Studios in South Philly, before we began, event organizer Lela Aisha Jones led the group in a brief but powerful exercise involving breathing together. We took a moment to remember what our purpose was, why we had assembled together. We were there to mourn.

Jones went over the route, landmarks for moments of stillness, gestures we would perform, and words we would sing. Police liaisons provided some comfort when they went over worst-case scenarios in the event of an arrest. Jumata Poé demonstrated the dirge step that would accompany our song as we made our way through the streets of Philadelphia towards City Hall.

8 counts with hands up, 8 as if wounded,
8 counts hunched over with hands at our backs,
and the final 8 counts in heartbeat.

A dirge is song of grief intended to accompany a funeral, and as we mourned the lives of people of color who have been gunned down senselessly, we stepped from side to side with hands raised above our heads. The music guided us as our hands made contact with our bodies until they were behind our backs. This unison action physicalized the despair of seeing innocent lives disregarded. On the downbeat of the drums that accompanied us the entire length of the march, we moved our hands from our chests defiantly, sending the energy towards the heavens. These 32 counts were repeated on and off from Federal Street to City Hall.

I reveled in the energy of executing Juma's score surrounded by others doing the same movements. We love unison on-stage, and it works on the street.

- march participant, Germaine Ingram

In the middle of the route, an older white couple suddenly appeared at the back of the march. They had seen us passing by. "More people should be doing this!" the woman said. We passed an older black woman dancing joyously on the sidewalk, cheering us on, shaking her cane.

Led by Poé, the marchers sang—

*I still hear my brother crying, "I can't breathe"
Now I'm in the struggle saying, "I can't leave"
Calling out the violence of these racist police
We ain't gonna stop till our people are free
We ain't gonna stop till our people are free*

I felt a gnawing feeling in my stomach knowing this reality: that the morbid past of African American history will never be erased with the bumping of fists, shaking of hands, or holding of signs.

...I did need a space to let out some of the anger and despair that I have inside.

-march participant, Saroya Corbett

The fact is, it will take more than protests to affect perceptions of racial inequality, identity, and inclusion. But this—our bodies moving together in mourning and in protest—this is a start.

The organizers of color decided to have the whole group

embody the same movements. I'm a white woman, and as I lay down in front of the steps at University of the Arts, I let myself sink into the ground, and felt the deaths of murdered black citizens with my whole body in a visceral, powerful way. I understand other decisions, but was glad I was able to participate in this expression at this particular action. Sensitive to critiques like [this one](#), I never put my hands up during a previous march. I appreciated that it was clear here that everyone was expected to take part in the set choreography—including this gesture—and that this was a decision made by leaders of color.

Upon arriving at City Hall, we made three concentric circles (an Adinkra symbol for leadership organized by Jeannine Osayande) on the lawn at City Hall, and Jones called out the names of seventy victims whose lives have been taken by those who were meant to protect us. After she called each name we responded, "Your life matters, rest in peace!"

I saw my own tears reflected on many other faces in the circle. My own voice kept faltering, unable to speak through the emotion, and yet collectively we were able to keep going—and then there was a "shedding," a time for free movement, individuals entering the center of the circle to dance, or to simply breathe. Finally we all laid down in the grass, silent and still for seven minutes, representing the seven minutes during which Eric Garner was choked to death.

As we dispersed, I reflected on the promise that we are vessels of triumph, choosing to embrace each other's struggles, knowing the country has come a long way but we still have further to go. Protesters everywhere are signals of hope, humming the hymn of redemption, singing alongside multitudes of ethnic groups in harmony.

*Reflecting on this collective embodiment, I think about bodily transformation...
how change at the level of the body might lead to social change.*
-march participant, Julie Johnson

Dancers are natural leaders for any kind of social movement. We know about healing and ritual. We know how to move together. We know how to work with very little, how to create something out of nothing. As we continue to respond to the ongoing national tragedy of institutional racism and state-sanctioned killing—dance can make a powerful contribution.

Dance entertains but dance also mirrors the imbalances in society.
Politics danced as we organized our bodies to encircle freedom.
Freedom danced as we worked to change the landscape of hate.
Moving within a movement, our choreographed bodies broke through the restrictions of tyranny as we boldly cried out for justice.
The power of the moving body can serve as a vehicle for social change.
Change that uses differences to highlight commonality.
We danced for justice. We danced for equality.
We danced for our ancestors and our children.

I saw friends embracing before and after the event.
There were plenty I didn't know in the group, but I knew
that there was no more than one degree of separation between us.

What happens in moments like the one created in Philadelphia on December 13th, 2014 may not immediately achieve the eradication of inequality, but by dancing—moving—to raise awareness, maybe, just maybe, we can start a new conversation.

Let it not end here.

A selection of photographs by Aidan Un documenting the Dancers for Justice event with captions by Gregory King are [here](#).

By Gregory King
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