

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Antoinette-Coward Gilmore

A Celebration of Philadelphia's Rich Tapestry of Dance

by Rachel DeForrest Repinz

Amid [Danse4Nia](#)'s bustling 2023 season of performances, educational residencies, and weekly classes, board member and author Cathy Finley-Hensford released the local performing arts organization's inaugural children's book, *Nia Asks... What is Real Dancing?* Created to advocate for and affirm Black and Brown children interested in the performing arts, the vibrant story, brought to life by illustrator Kelly Wong, follows a young girl's journey of curiosity about dance, culture, and joy. Shortly after its initial release, Danse4Nia donated copies to 185 School District of Philadelphia elementary and middle schools.

The story begins with Nia, a young Black Philly girl who just can't help but dance! Nia knows dance brings her happiness, but like any young child, she is filled with questions about it: *What is that old-school dance her grandparents do in the living room? What about the teenagers in her mom's weekly dance class?* Nia dances with her family during a backyard barbeque, alone in her bedroom mirror, in the studio with the oh-so-cool teen dancers, and at home with her mom, but still she wonders, "What kind of dancing is the *real* kind?"

I first came to know Antoinette Coward-Gilmore, the Founder and Artistic Director of Danse4Nia, as a colleague in our Texas-based doctoral program. However, we quickly discovered our parallel histories in Philadelphia and kept our connection as Philly girls ever since, sharing stories and reminiscing about our experiences in the vibrant Philadelphia dance community.

In book scenes that resonate as distinctly Philadelphian, Nia explores a rich cultural tapestry of local and global dance forms. From a classic Philly-style row home, to a North Philadelphia Baptist church and beyond, Nia and her mom pay tribute to the forms, people, and cultures that enrich their city. The story is a love letter to the city of brotherly love and, in particular, its Black dance community. With an abundance of local references and odes to the many folks who inhabit the city, *Nia Asks...* embraces diversity in its quest to uplift dance as a powerful tool in building and sustaining community. With a cast of primarily Black characters, the book is an affirmation to young Black children from anywhere that not only is their curiosity valued, it is encouraged.

In their generous donation to local Philadelphia public schools, Danse4Nia stands on [their commitment](#) to use dance to “foster personal, cultural, and social change.” *Nia Asks...* embraces dance in all its forms, celebrating *all dance as real dance*.

Cathy Finley-Hensford, [Nia Asks... What is Real Dancing?](#). 2023. 16 pp.

Homepage image: A hand-painted image of the protagonist, Nia, depicts the young Black girl in three dance poses. From left to right: the first image features Nia in blue overalls and red sneakers, stretching her left arm above her head, leaning towards her right side with her hand on her hip; the second image features Nia in a blue dress, balancing on her right leg with her arms out to the side; the third image shows the back of Nia, who wears a pink frilly dress and braids, with her left foot stretched out behind her.

Article image: Danse4Nia staff and board members stand on stage at William D.Kelley Public School to receive a ceremonial document acknowledging their book donation to 185 School District of Philadelphia schools. A banner to the left of them reads, “A Kelley Scholar is... Always Ready, Always Respectful, Always Responsible.”

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