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the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

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Kristin Heavey and Kessey Jemmott

The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/ La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes Editor-in-Chief: Robert Mizzi Special Edition Editors: Kathy Mantas and Carole Roy www.cjsae-rceea.ca

> 32,2 October/octobre 2020, 103–119 ISSN1925-993X (online)

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CINDERS: A DUOETHNOGRAPHY ON RACE, GROWTH, AND TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

This auto-ethnographic poetic inquiry is fashioned as a dialogue between Kristin Heavey and Kessey Jemmott, on topics of race and embodiment. Heavey is a white mother of a bi-racial daughter in the United States of America; Jemmott is a Black Trinbagonian, living in Canada. These vignettes emerged from a collaborative performance piece, drawing from their backgrounds in theatre and dance. As a white mother and a black daughter, we interrogated each other's embodied experiences. We listened to the other's fears, memories, and family histories. We engaged in discourse surrounding the politics of blackness and the way white racial grievance seemed to overwhelm gender solidarity in the 2016 US election. This inquiry attempts to bring personal stories together, to find intersections where an intimate, felt experience of race can find significance and resonance—to find oneself in another's story and to hear its call for action and transformation.

Résumé

Cette interrogation poétique autoethnographique est conçue comme dialogue entre Kristin Heavey et Kessey Jemmott sur la race et sur l'incorporéité. Heavey est mère blanche d'une fille biraciale vivant aux Etats-Unis; Jemmott est une Trinbagonienne noire vivant au Canada. Ces vignettes ont émergé d'un projet de spectacle collaboratif inspiré par nos parcours dans les milieux du théâtre et de la danse. En tant que mère blanche et fille noire, nous avons examiné les expériences incorporées de l'une et de l'autre. Nous avons écouté les peurs, les souvenirs et les histoires de famille de l'autre. Nous avons dialogué sur les politiques de la négritude et sur la manière dont les griefs raciaux des personnes blanches semblaient engloutir la solidarité de genre à l'occasion des élections de 2016 aux États-Unis. Cette interrogation cherche à rassembler les récits personnels, à découvrir les intersections où une expérience vécue et intime peut trouver sa signification et sa résonance et à se situer dans le récit d'une autre personne afin d'entendre son appel à l'action et à la transformation.

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Introduction

The title does double duty. It is taken from Cinderella, whose foot must fit into a slipper to marry a prince, and cinders, or ash—what remains as evidence of a fire. Both ideas are significant to this discussion on race, identity and resilience. Kristin Heavey, as a white woman, must wrestle with her complicity in white systems as she raises a Black child in the United States. Kessey Jemmott, a Black (1) woman who, upon moving to Canada, is no longer surrounded by Black people, is for the first time examining what it really means to be Black by exploring her relationship with her hair. The separate strands of these experiences are braided together, in dialogue, as we examine our roles as mother or daughter and look at what it means to be white and Black in a time of escalating white supremacy. White women voted for Trump, their privilege weaponized—rendering it unsafe for Black people, like Kristin's daughter, to exist. Coming from Trinidad and Tobago, Kessey had not had the unfortunate opportunity of existing in a space that is increasingly dangerous for Black people. Now, living in North America, she is forced to acknowledge that possibility. We are both teachers and PhD students in Arts Education; the writing grew out of an Arts-Based Research seminar course. Arts-based research is described as the use of the creative arts as "methodological tools used by researchers across the disciplines during any or all phases of research, including problem generation, data or content generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation" (Leavy, 2018, p. 4).

Hence the poetic discussion of whiteness and Blackness. As we researched different forms of inquiry in the course, we were encouraged to also pursue an individual artistic practice. Kristin engaged with dance improvisation practice and Kessey with gardening. This embodied practice was crucial—as Celeste Snowber and Sean Wiebe elucidate, our bodies are not only sites of representation but of investigation and deep knowing (Snowber, 2018; Snowber & Wiebe, 2011). As we explored different arts-based methodologies, our intersecting interests in whiteness/Blackness led us to the duoethnographic approach. Per Norman Denzin (2018), duoethnography is

[A] collaborative research methodology in which two or more researchers juxtapose their life histories in order to provide multiple understandings of a social phenomenon. Duoethnographers use their own biographies as sites of inquiry and engage in dialogic narrative, often realized in collaborative writing and collaborative autoethnography. (p. 8)

We questioned and listened to the other's experiences. Through duoethnography we "reconceptualized" our life narratives with meanings that we created, exposed and transformed (Sawyer & Norris, 2012). We wrote and danced together. Our practice was bolstered by the belief that your story changes when it is listened to. The expressive "voice" of the piece, discussing the issues of belonging, Blackness and accountability, seemed to find a natural home in poetic inquiry—investigation taking poetic form. We identify with the sense of "invitation" Wiebe described, when interviewed in an editorial for a poetic inquiry-themed issue of *in education*: "Poetic inquiry invites me into the in-between space between creative and critical scholarship. Such a space is reflexive and critical, aware of the nexus that is both self and other, both personal and public" (cited in Guiney Yallop et al., 2014, p. 3)

To frame our poetic dialogue and examine our respective positionalities, we represent gardening as nurturing. The growth and transformation we experience by the end of the discussion is a result of first having experienced the fire: hard but necessary conversations. Growth then becomes the metaphor for the transformation of our understanding of ourselves and each other. By cultivating the gardens of our minds and bodies, we come to a place of blooming. The poetic lens also serves to showcase the authors' voices and writing styles, which are as unique as their perspectives—Kessey writing with poetry's familiar line-breaks, Kristin writing a combination of poetry and poetically-inflected prose. The sections were inspired by the natural processes of destruction and renewal caused by forest fires, in the way pyrophytic plants in fire-prone areas have adapted to protect themselves through difficult times. Some of these plants have seeds that can only be activated by fire and will stay dormant for years until the fire awakens them. The ecosystem holds the fuel; lightning strikes and the resulting fire runs its course to cinders, germination, and bloom. Through the heat of uncomfortable dialogue, seeds of hope and accountability can be activated for healing and renewal to take place. We can both bloom in a place cleansed by fire. We hope that as the reader advances through each section they experience the same transformative journey that we both embarked on through this project. Each section is a necessary step in the process of transformation. We hope that they feel a burning that brings change in their lives and, most importantly, their classrooms. We presented the piece in our seminar course, with our cohort seated around us in a circle—we read out the words, and performed some of the actions described—and it created an opening for students to begin to discuss their own experiences around race and accountability.

Cinders, then, becomes evidence of that fire, opening space for others to talk about their own received frames around racial identity in a new way, as "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 1). What was previously unspoken becomes visible, felt and intimate. As Dirkx (1997) summarizes Robert Boyd's conception of extra-rational transformative education, "The wholeness of learners' lives—not just their heads—are brought into the circle, and the group itself comes into being as an entity" (p. 82). White supremacy is a story often shrouded in euphemism, code-words, and unacknowledged bias, so we are interested in how narratives of transformation can "restory" dominant cultural paradigms. As Cranton and Taylor (2012) write:

At the center of transformative learning theory is the notion that we uncritically assimilate our values, beliefs, and assumptions from our family, community, and culture. In other words, we adopt the dominant ideology as the normal and natural way to think and act. When we are able to recognize that these beliefs are oppressive and not in our best interests, we can enter into a transformative learning process. (p. 7)

Our poetry is our attempt to take those dormant, unchallenged ideologies, hold them to the fire, and let them burn to ash, making way for transformed understandings of the world and people's experiences.

Cinders

Kristin Heavey & Kessey Jemmott

I. Fuel

Exploring the early experiences necessary for transformation—Kessey as a child in Trinidad, and the first few years Kristin spent raising her adoptive daughter.

Canerows

My hair is a prisoner taking daily exercise. Freshly-washed, it balloons In four big plaits. Black plastic comb in hand, I walk from one cousin's house to the next. This is the only time my hair is free.

I wonder if today will be one of those rare days When she is not home and my mother will have to do my hair, two buns on either side of my head, white ribbons tied in a bow around each bun, two ribbons I could untie at the end of the school day to trail towards the small of my back, tickling my face and neck, creating the illusion of two long plaits swaying behind me as I move. In a window seat of a maxi, the violent breeze coming through the moving vehicle would make my majestic mane twirl and dance around my head. In that window I would be at my most beautiful, ribbon-haired Rapunzel awaiting her prince, The wind caressing my face, A carefree black girl with white-girl hair.

But the canerows keep me in my place.
Black hair has no business blowing in the wind.
That privilege is reserved for light-skinned girls with hair that grows down, not out,
And the sooner I learn my place—my limitations—the better.

The red-dirt yard snaps me from my daydream. Her older sister shouts Look, Kee-zee reach! Steups.

I shuffle into the kitchen, say good afternoon, grab the short wooden stool from beneath the table. Siddong outside, ah comin just now.

I have a few more minutes to enjoy my hair not tight against my scalp.

She appears at the door.

I sit between her legs.

She works fast.

She starts by detangling my hair,

Ends to roots,

The comb threatening to pull my hair out.

Then she separates the hair into sections for whatever style she's chosen.

I'm never consulted.

Then her hands weave the strands together.

Under then over.

Under then over.

Under then over.

A meticulous, well-practiced choreography of fingers,

A master weaver, a cultural historian,

A griot telling the story of my ancestors through hair:

beauty, pride and resilience in each row.

She hands me the comb,

she's down to the last canerow,

ten horizontal rows on either side of my head,

connected to make the black-girl equivalent of a french braid.

I'd have to stretch the shrunken end

to show the true length of my hair.

I am too young to appreciate the art of canerows.

The craftsmanship of patterns in my hair.

I walk around every week with a masterpiece on my head.

I am art and I don't even know it.

Canerowing hair comes from a tradition of resilience,

An expression of creativity and freedom, not oppression.

I only associate canerows with hair too picky to be left untamed.

Children with good hair don't need canerows.

Their hair doesn't need to be braided into submission.

Theirs is effortless, windswept, carefree,

And can be brushed 100 times a day, uninterrupted by coily tangles.

Hair that doesn't need ribbons to blow in the wind.

Tomorrow, my mother will tie the white ribbon.

In the maxi, I will still be Rapunzel at her window.

A Place to Grow

Born on a stormy night coaxed out by midwives and your heroic birth mother we brought you home.

Elegant long hands—head tilted, listening.

Garden freshly rained and hailed upon.

It was spring, roses and irises blooming.

You—replete in being. Thick black hair bright blue eyes cocoa skin.

You loved the heartbeat and abhorred being flat on your back.

We lived in the west, family and community a braided mix—the way things are going—the constant reimaging of humanity, there was a place to grow in America.

At 5 realizing Obama would not be President—broken heart—you said: We aren't going to be black anymore it's not the Obama flag?

The senator yelling liar—
First Lady Michelle compared to an ape.
Pathetic white supremacist southern strategy senators—
toxin of the past
that we thought would be diluted with time.

II. Fire

Speaking to anger and truth-telling, a dialogue between the expressed and repressed.

She could not protect me / I do not tell her

She could not protect my teenage heart from the truth: my father had a wife who wasn't her. Other children who called him "daddy".

I do not tell her that her body will be criminalized but not mine.

She could not protect me from the doubt and worthlessness I felt seeing my dreams dismantled by people who were supposed to help.

I do not tell her about the white supremacist photographed screaming hate on the front lines of Charlottesville (2), who has the right to study at the University where she attends kindergarten.

She could not protect me from being preyed upon by men whose advances I excused as par for the course of being female.

I do not tell her that I fear for her becoming a teenager.

She could not protect me from the accusatory stares of black people who think I have disowned my kind, because I dare to hold hands with my white husband.

I do not tell her that she has cousins who voted for Trump, ensuring that she faces a more racially violent world.

She could not protect me from the heartbreak of leaving the safety of my homeland, where my blackness is centered.

I do not tell her that epilepsy kills more people than house fires.

She could not protect me from the terror that fills me whenever I stand in line to cross the border into America.

I do not tell her about the river of brown and black bodied people gunned down by the people who were sworn to protect them.

She could not protect me from needing the sanctuary of my white husband, my proximity to whiteness allowing me the privilege of appearing less threatening.

I do not tell her about the genocidal and torturous racial history of our country in its most violent real terms.

She could not protect me from being called *nigger* on the platform at a SkyTrain station.

I do not tell her that some people will make assumptions because she is black and adopted, for instance that she must have been drug-exposed.

She could not protect me from the white man who thought I was the cleaner and not the teacher he had hired.

I do not tell her that institutions are not created with her in mind.

She could not protect me from the thought that every negative encounter with a white person is a result of my daring to exist.

I do not tell her that the earth may not be able to sustain human life in her lifetime.

51 Percent Part 1

The 51 percent decided second place was good enough. Enduring a pussy grab and cultivating their daughters' bodies as gameboard pieces. Got to be "better than"—one step ahead. Reimagining a white utopia—as if it had ever existed.

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I look at the white girls in pink tights, their mothers looking at their iPhones. Yes, there are many brown and black girls—but I do not study their mother's faces.

No, I look to see who is a traitor—who decided their precious flower needed a leg up in this meritocracy in a rapidly stratified culture—their mediocre husband who can't win without stepping on the necks of others—if a woman won, it would be the final nail in his coffin.

Teaching our little ones to plié, to visually please, to wear the prescribed colour and shoes. I am a long way from San Francisco and the postmodern dance scene (where the misogyny and racism take another form, but still stick like old gum).

Little girls bred to contort their bodies for another. The lure of the music, the joy of a stretched leg hanging on air—little girls learning the price of the joy and freedom. You look at your iPhone like you don't have a care—while you voted for my girl with a Balanchine look (3) to be gunned down by modern day slave patrols—so your princess can stay in a gilded cage where the predator can unlock the door.

51 Percent Part 2

I am white, and I cannot read the faces clearly. My projections, my shame—after all my daughter has the high bun with a pound of gel—not a style in sync with her curls. Balanchine wanted his dance company to be integrated when immigrating to the US from Europe—his technique influenced by dance forms of African Americans, dancing in Europe. But he was shut down by the force of white supremacy, the contributions of black Americans erased—if you look at his work it is evident (Gottschild, 1996, pp. 59–79). As Martha Graham (4) says: "Movement never lies" (Graham, 1991, p. 4). Bill T. Jones (5) has to videotape his dances, he can't remember his body's symbolic system without this aid. He records the signs and has others learn from tape—then he can read and shape the message (Quinn & Hercules, 2011).

What signs can't I read as a white mother to a black girl? I scan the room. I want my daughter to inherit my privilege—skiing, dance lessons, and private school—they are the semiotics of white supremacy—the way my mother says she "summers" in New England. I attend a Black Lives Matter demonstration, my daughter's face concentrating to understand the semiotics of black rage. Casino security wouldn't let her in to hear the girl band playing down the street from the demonstration while she was holding a "black lives matter" sign—she wasn't used to being denied. My mother bought and sold real-estate. She trespasses onto yards with a "for sale" sign like she owns the place. This is a bad idea for my daughter.

After the election I was asked—why do you think 51 percent of you voted for Trump? I bumbled in shame about access to power and privilege—returning her gaze, her jaw clenched. We need to see how we were choreographed, we need a new dance form, a new imaginary.

Untitled while listening to Janelle Monae after Morgan Parker (2017)

You wore your fro out to school
Before it was cool
You had finally learned that it was okay to have kinky hair
Your teacher called you the madwoman in the attic
You didn't mind
You stood out

When you shaved your head
He called you ugly
They laughed in your face
The guy at the club said that he didn't usually like girls with short hair
But you were cute

I mean, have they even seen your mama? Her skin a soft blue glow in the Caribbean moonlight The melodies in her walk She sprinkled that magic on you

Now you walk into a school and no other teacher looks like you You are a mirror for all the little black girls Who were told they were insignificant You are magic and so are they

When the mansplainer said that a woman's hair is her beauty
That you shouldn't have done what you did
Tried to make you feel like you didn't belong
You shouldn't have felt that pit in your stomach grow
A resurgence of the insecurities you left behind
You shouldn't have swallowed the words trying to fight their way out

You are no snowflake: you incinerate
Society's expectations. You are cinders.
You don't need his shoe to fit.
You should have told him to mind his fucking business
And ride his stupid bike all the way to
I
Don't
Give
A fuck

III. Cinders

What's left after anger?

Hair

It finds a way to grow through it all: pressed, fried, stressed, dyed, shedding.

Your bald spot on the back of your head curly puffs on either side—seeing the girl with the perfect cornrows makes me feel lacking.

I wished you didn't farm out the hair grooming to others. I wanted to spend more time with you, even if it meant enduring imperfect hairstyles.

You still crave my substandard hair design and my attention. I cultivate your beauty to shield you from racism—or so I think.

You still look at me like I'm your trophy. You approve of my hair when it's big and wild and "funky". Are you proud of me because I exceeded your expectations?

You stretch my capacity for love—it makes me ache.

My blackness takes many forms. Sometimes it's too loud, too bold, too assertive. I have to be careful not to be too black around white people: they will look at me sideways or dismiss me as "sassy". I am walking a fine line. Am I black enough? Or too black?

You ask "am I sassy like you mom?" Yes, strong and smart. The singular black character in little girl animation is always sassy. I tell you to be nice fearing you will cross that line black girls walk.

I joke that I want to be a principal or school superintendent, because I want to be the boss of everyone. I want a black woman at the top instead of a white man. For once.

I want Kessey to be the boss of my daughter's school—she asked how old you were—she wanted to know what she would look like—she was pleased, I want her to bloom under your

Gardening

The three tomato plants next to the lavender are not growing as fast as the others—two feet shorter but just as many flowers. More than the hanging beefsteak which does not share space or light.

I forgot about the pumpkin planted in the flower bed, orange October surprise, sometimes leaving it alone brings fruit.

The downstairs pallet garden languishes. The radishes bolt and something voracious eats everything else we planted. I want to disown this part of the garden.

In growing a family through adoption, you cannot erase any of the story or it becomes toxic.

I am embarrassed by my family's homophobia, their double standard, the hellfire speech that says being gay is morally wrong but finds nutten wrong wit' a lil' horn. Transplanting from Caribbean soil, I evade their stifling proximity. Instead, I will teach my nephew to seek the sun.

Kessey teaches me to position my daughter towards sun, to nourish with stories of resilience and truth.

I don't know my father's family. I stalk his children on Facebook and wonder what it feels like to really know him. To have been rooted in his soil.

Her private school cultivates becoming an expert, the privilege to make things. She attends art openings, listens to the creators. She doesn't question her right to reimagine the world.

Growing up, there was no money for me to attend dance classes, swimming, or other extra-curriculars. There were no resources for this kind of fertilization. My mother's goal was survival, anything extra was gravy. I am the manifestation of her sweat and hope.

IV. Germination

How do you grow and thrive in a hostile environment?

Toxic Garden

February 26, 2012, Trayvon stalked and hunted down.
heart pain whenever I see Sybrina (6),
her face frozen in shock.
I'm enraged by the silence—
closing ranks in a conspiracy of muteness, a whiteout.
not guilty, the ubiquitous finding for the extrajudicial killing of black people
now featured in an endless stream
we have practiced a long time—
the epigenetics of whiteness

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You could kill a black child, Tamir Rice (7), the second you see him you feared for your life a game

I could not rely on white sympathy for the safety of children with your phenotype

It is a toxic nursery.

No urgency to take stock of the terror.

The killing of black and brown children and the systemic advantage of whiteness is unspeakable.

genocide and enslavement is in the soil,

My people silent,

How do I grow my garden—

You are afraid of the police?

bodily terror is felt.

You absorb my terror.

I can scoop old soil around our house—put it into garbage bags, like when the Painters were careless with the lead chips that can poison generations.

We spread the soil and compost,

But the wind blows toxins from the house next door—the rain falls, the climate changes, bringing summer in spring—the waters flooding the banks down from the snow pack, our only water source—a source dry in 20 years.

Your seeds always produce baby shoots, you sprinkle carrot seeds willy-nilly and somehow, they grow

You love to water and dig—

You miss your American soil

You will not surrender your garden where joy is planted.

You say you can't own land—it doesn't make sense—You, white people stole it.

You love books, your postmodern parents provide cultural representation willy-nilly strewn around our garden.

You love Russian films, Billie Holiday, James Baldwin, Moon Girl.

Studying and listening absorbing nutrients from our composting artist lives

You come from people who survived the worst that can happen and made the most beautiful art—America owes you.

Strapped into the booster the car radio blurts out

"The police are killing black people up in here." You sob, I tried to reassure, I could not lie.

The wind blows in, the rain comes down, the weather changes.

V. Bloom

How do you grow and thrive in a hostile environment?

i

My garden is full of life and goodness Onions, peppers, tomatoes Strawberries, garlic, potatoes Lavender of a Caribbean dawn Basil the green of my childhood home Lines of pots in various sizes And foliage growing everywhere, wild Orderly chaos Plants move out of each other's way Stretching themselves towards the light In the morning I check To see who has flowered If the peppers have new buds When can we finally harvest the potatoes? They are content, growing Rooting, sprouting, flowering The bees come, the blue-tailed dragon fly They have their work to do too

In the evening I come again to oversee The work in which I played no part The drooping kale signalling It's time for a nightcap

That feeling humans have
For things they don't actually have anything to do with
That feeling that parents, that teachers feel
For something that survived despite them

Fertilizing, weeding, harvesting I labour with love I witness creation Giving form to an intention

My garden is love in shades of green

ii

My hair is a garden Grown from seed Small coils unfurling from my scalp Nurtured with love, tenderness, fingers Fertilized with coconut oil Sucking up moisture My foliage is carefully coifed on Sundays Weeding the split ends to refocus the energy for growth I cultivate my hair. An act of self-care Tending to my leaves tends to my soul I shape and fertilize so it can grow Alongside other plants that will help it thrive I nurture my hair To inspire other gardeners I thrive I bloom I flower

iii

My hair is a myrtle

My mouth a scotch bonnet pepper

My legs pole beans stalking skyward

My arms birds of paradise Sprawling, long and elegant, Claiming space

Around what sustains me: My cactus heart

iv

Complex beings, humans and plants We need plants more than they need us They are rooted in place But ready to fight And if they lose they can still regenerate Humans can do that too
We can't grow new organs
but we survive great adversity
We are not so different
resilient
adequate
We withstand the trauma
Of attempts to erase our bodies

I want to live my life

Rooted

In place

In love

In who I am

In my blackness

Conclusion

Through the discourse of *Cinders*, we have felt the genuine power embedded in asking about, listening to, and braiding experience. We are, together, learning how to cultivate self-love, love of each other, and solidarity, within a toxic culture. As co-creators, making the piece was a transformative (and ongoing) act of fostering accountability and resilience. From the initial choice of doing this work together as two people from different racial and cultural backgrounds, to deciding whose name went first on this article, we followed a process of acknowledging privilege and harmful behaviours and working for the greater good of the overall message of the piece—white accountability and Black resilience. Having the difficult conversations on race in the spirit of love and learning facilitated opportunities for us to carve out space to bloom in a more hospitable place.

Shauna Butterwick and Carole Roy (2018) examine "how artistic and creative expression, thoughtfully carried out, can enliven adult learning, promote risk taking and empathy for others, and move toward relations of solidarity" (p. 3). Expanding on this idea, we wonder about the power of arts-based inquiry and duoethnography for use as an anti-racist intervention in and through transformative adult education. The dismantling of white supremacy requires witnessing, listening, and action. As educators and learners, action begins in our classrooms. It is in spaces of learning that we can open ourselves to being changed by the experiences of others. We can resolve to cultivate and participate in learning environments that ensure that education serves as a transgressive tool (hooks, 1994) to liberate us from the shackles of racism. We hope that our poetry invites the reader to meditate on the state of the world. We hope that our individual lenses converge in your mind to form a more diverse image of the necessity for change. We hope the images of

terror, shame, anger, inferiority, and resilience incite you to metamorphosis, wherever you are.

Notes

- 1. The captitalisation of Black and not white is our attempt to decentre whiteness within a colonised language.
- 2. Charlottesville, Virginia was the site of the "Unite the Right" rally in 2017, where white supremacists marched and rioted and a counter-protester was killed.
- 3. George Balanchine, founder of New York City Ballet, had a preferred body type for female dancers: very thin, long legs and neck, high arched feet, faces that have high cheekbones and full lips.
- 4. Martha Graham was a pioneer of American Modern Dance whose work featured strong female characters from history and literature.
- 5. Bill T. Jones is a Post-Modern Dance Choreographer and Director of the Bill T. Jones/ Arnie Zane Dance Company. He uses improvisation to invent choreography.
- Sybrina Fulton is the mother of Trayvon Martin and an outspoken advocate for gun regulation and anti-racism.
- 7. Tamir Rice was a 12-year-old Black child shot and killed by police in Cleveland, Ohio, while carrying a toy gun

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