

# ILLEGIBLE Representations, Collaborative Protests

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## Abstract

One month after the police killed Alfred Olango, members of his family gathered at San Diego City College for a performance of *Illegible* by the performance collective bkSOUL. Like any project, this feature-length performance explored the movement, verse, and sound of hip hop. However, in this work, the collective grounded their production in Mark Anthony Neal's book, *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities*, to sonically, lyrically, and corporally embody Neal's reading of legible and illegible bodies. In this paper, members of bkSOUL reflect on the show *Illegible* and the specific performance for Mr. Olango's family and explores the role of artists in transforming critical scholarship and social protests into social justice advocacy, particularly around issues of representation, inequality, systemic racism, and police violence. In exploring the creative processes and impact of this performance, *Illegible* offers lyrics, movement, and music as representative of distinct and collaborative protests against anti-Black racism.

KEYWORDS: dance, poetry, protest, illegible

## Introduction

A helicopter circles a strip mall in the darkness of night. Below, a crowd of people gather in a complex web of anger, fatigue, restlessness, excitement, and support for one another. By now, the grainy video clip of a distraught Alfred Olango cornered by two police officers

and the 911 call from Lucy Olango requesting psychological help for her brother have become a national story. This is the third consecutive night of protest. From the sky, police declare this gathering an unlawful assembly for the third and, what they emphasize, a final time. Most in the crowd heed this warning, fully aware that standing in the taco shop parking lot is now a crime, justifying use of less than lethal force. From the dispersing crowd, a forceful voice emerges, “So that’s it? You’re just going to leave?”

In the following days, a series of rallies, rebellions, and demonstrations push El Cajon and the greater San Diego region into an emerging national movement for Black lives punctuated by #BlackLivesMatter. Politicians and community leaders assume positions behind podiums at news conferences. Community organizers meet with stakeholders, legislators, and assure the public that things will change. Others take to social media platforms to grieve, support, critique, and share stories of their own victimization. For the San Diego-based performance collective bkSOUL, there existed an underlying frustration about Olango’s death, given the company had spent the previous three years developing and performing *Illegible*, a show about the nature of systemic and symbolic racism in police violence. While the group had taken a break and looked forward to creating a new performance with a more joyous and celebratory theme, they quickly decided to perform *Illegible* again but this time as a fundraiser for the Olango family.

This article examines *Illegible* as a form of protest against police violence and anti-Black racism. Through a process of collaborative autoethnography between us as authors and performers, and conversations with other bkSOUL performers, we consider the role of artists in transforming critical theory, research, and scholarship into social justice advocacy by challenging issues of representation, inequality, and police violence as they affect Black men. While this article contributes to the discourse about the humanities role in resistance and social change, as set forth by scholars like George Lipsitz and Doris Sommer, this article is ultimately an assurance to the forceful voice that leaving the site of a protest does not mean folks have left the protest.

This article implements a mixed-methods approach to explore the role of performance, art, and activism. In many ways, the movement between research methods reflects the back and forth between different layers of consciousness that musicians and artists use to create and interpret artistic works (Bartleet and Ellis 2009: 9). Just as bkSOUL weaves together dance, poetry, and music, this article weaves together autoethnography, conversations, and performance analysis. This research is ultimately conducted as a collaborative autoethnography as “researchers work in a community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data” (Chang et al. 2016: 24). The collaborative approach to autoethnography allows insights to be gleaned from a series of conversations between the authors, rather than the individual memory or reflection of either author (Blalock 2018: 89). For this research, the collaborative autoethnography involved a series of conversations between the authors over the course of three months. At times, these conversations shifted between in-situ interviews, debates, and sharing archival materials from various performances of *Illegible*.

In addition to the collaborative autoethnography, this study draws on conversations with the primary writers and producers of *Illegible*. Given the spirit of bkSOUL’s collectivists

foundations, incorporating their voices, reflections, and memory into the collaborative autoethnography fits the ideology of these researchers in the production and exploration of knowledge. Like the collaborative autoethnography, the interview-style conversation allows for a more in-depth understanding of *Illegible's* role in transforming ideas into action. Rather than incorporating the findings from the conversations into the ethnographic voice of the article, the findings from the post-performance conversations are presented as evidence for explanation, information, and analysis. As the discussions became conversational, we, as researchers, embraced the dialogic production of knowledge and offered our own reflections as evidence. In this article, the use of either author's ideas, reflections, or memory that came from that conversation is attributed by name to that author.

Lastly, the content of *Illegible* is presented and contextualized for analysis. This method is most present in analyzing the poetry of *Illegible* and is especially useful in explaining the dance movement that occurs on stage. As researchers, we recognize the limitations of this mixed-methods approach. The use of autoethnography has "the potential for narcissism and self-indulgence," even when done collaboratively (Roy and Uekusa 2020). We try to mitigate this criticism by avoiding value-judgement to the choices, intentions, and the performances related to *Illegible*. While we present those claims by the interlocutors, our analysis deemphasizes self-congratulatory evidence and instead highlights those aspects that most relate to our research inquiry.

## bkSOUL and Collective Purpose

Established in 2002, bkSOUL was born to serve as the creative home for choreographer and performer grace shinhae jun. It was the space where grace's movement of hip hop and modern dance styles were integrated and where she questioned, reimagined, and activated concepts of race and gender into short pieces and evening length performances. Collective Purpose, co-founded by spoken word and slam poet Ant Black, formed in 2005. They hosted San Diego's most prolific open mic night, Elevated. Through this weekly gathering, Collective Purpose would form and sponsor the San Diego Poetry Slam Team to compete annually at the National Poetry Slam.

In 2005, Sushi Performance & Visual Art's Artist Advisory Board Showcase series brought us together (1). Through the process of this developing advisor-artist relationship, we began to connect and dialogue on our shared values, commitment to education, and aesthetics, all which was grounded in our love for hip hop culture. This chance encounter between us as choreographer and poet ignited an artistic, scholarly, and familial relationship that continues our performative collaborations to protest the injustices of systemic oppression. We felt like we were onto something fresh. While there were several performances between dancers and poets already occurring in San Diego, we were the generation that grew up listening and witnessing the growth of hip hop culture. We were the products of the golden era of hip hop, *Beat Street*, *In Living Color*, *Boyz in the Hood*, and *Do The Right Thing*. And because of artists like Public Enemy, Arrested Development, Outkast, and TLC, we began to bridge our marginalized experiences to an external expression through poetry and movement. Our voices and our bodies had power.

These duets expanded into a larger collaboration of bkSOUL and Collective Purpose. Bringing on two more Collective Purpose founders and poets: Kendrick Dial and Rudy Francisco, and the dancers of bkSOUL: Lauren Dockweiler, Amir Khastoo, Jacqui Lang, Lavina Rich, and Miša Suiter, in 2007 we self-produced *The Movement*. This evening length performance was the precursor to what would follow. In 2009, we were commissioned by Sushi Performance & Visual Art to develop and perform *Hip Hop Saved My Life*. This collaboration of bkSOUL and Collective Purpose affirmed our initial connection. We celebrated, interrogated, and innovated our roots in hip hop culture. Blessed with a piece by graffiti artist Pose 2, one of Ant's poetry pieces honored the life of the fictional character Ramo who represented so many young people caught in a system where their lives were disposable and did not matter. DJ Krazy Kut provided fresh tracks as the intermission, which turned into an audience participatory cypher that expanded each night of the performance. And guitarist Jesse Mills and cellist Loren Dempster created original tracks that synthesized our signature style of dance, poetry, and live music. Hip hop's themes of resistance, protest, and community were at the heart of our art making and scholarship as we understood that "[c]horeography, movement and gesture are not peripheral but central to the politics of protest." (Kedhar 2014). In honoring and remembering our ancestors, we knew where the work would guide us. bkSOUL and Collective Purpose would protest through our poetry, our music, and our dance (2).

## Skin

Commissioned by San Diego Dance Theater for their annual *Trolley Dances 2014* (3), "Skin" was performed in the outdoor amphitheater space of Market Creek Plaza in Southeast San Diego (4). In creating this site-specific piece, we reflected and ruminated on the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Jordan Davis, and the looming "facts of inequality and death hang[ing] over us all like a toxic haze" (Chang 2016: 4). Knowing we would be performing for a primarily white audience and in a Black and Brown neighborhood in the Diamond District, we framed the work around the principles of the Black Lives Matter movement and circled around the questions of how much and how deep we should dive into these issues. How were we to create something in a space where access required reservations and a high price? How could we emphasize that Black bodies have historically and violently been excluded from public spaces?

The dancers are scattered on the steps of the amphitheater space, as guitarist Jesse Mills begins to strum a muted and melancholy tune, creating the ambiance of floating underwater. Everyone is still and movement only comes when initiated by the movement of the water. Stirred by the calling of Ant's poetry, the bodies begin to shift and awaken. Some bodies move with hesitation while others move with urgency. The poetry comes in waves, each line holding the residue of the prior and increasing in layers and intensity. The bodies, the dancers spill down the steps towards the audience, removing outer layers of clothing to examine their bodies and their skin, asking the audience to take notice and to see as they are trying to see. Ant recites:

This body no longer feels like home...  
no longer feels like a safe place...

even in my own body I feel alone...  
 always responsible for those who have existed in this skin before me...  
 this body feels like the death of me...  
 I see the threat that you see...

Literally and metaphorically awake, the dancers continue sequencing together bounded gestures amongst fluid ripples of full body movement as DJ Shammy Dee's 808 beats drop in. Hands up. Don't shoot. The bodies find momentary solace in partnerships only to be separated by space and the score. Moving through various smaller groupings and group unison, some of the bodies struggle to find themselves within the group. The outward extension of bodies conveys the attempts to leave, only to feel the weight of the legs pulling them to the floor and rolling them back into the group. There are brief moments of rest before being folded back into the group and propelled into obscured gestures of capitulation, hands up, and defeat.



FIGURE 1. 'Skin' in *Trolley Dances* 2014. Photo courtesy of Manuel Rotenberg.

While the hope for a resolution is desired, it never comes in the final section of the piece. The sound score shifts to a more intense, driving, and steady beat as Jesse's bluesy guitar solo flurries throughout. Ant's poetry cuts deep into the realities of being Black in this country as the dancers begin to encroach towards the audience.

For us  
 The line between life and death is written in the melanin of our skin

Simply speaking is a threat to social order  
 We carry institution like venom in our bloodstream  
 Breathe toxins in our history  
 A generation drowning in purple haze of blue and red lights  
 Blue and red stripes  
 Blue and stars white  
 I, too sing America  
 But the tune is not right

The bass line shouldn't be bodies lying on the concrete  
 Size 808 black boots to the mid-section on the kick-drum  
 The melody shouldn't be mother's screaming  
 Treble, shouldn't be a man who fits the description  
 Like trouble, shouldn't be an ill-tempered officer who's having a bad day

Police brutality in this country is becoming a pop song  
 I mean we, are the victims of pop-pop songs  
 Ever since they stole the power from our drums  
 Through the powder of guns  
 We've been exploited for our rhythm and subject to arrest by their blues

So whenever we hear the bass drop we rock with both hands in the air  
 Surrender has never been more dangerous  
 The tempo changes us  
 And this skin has completely lost distinction between the feelings of pain and rage  
 There are days  
 When I barely recognize the sound of America whistling against the trees  
 There are moments  
 When I'm a foreigner walking along the same earth I was conceived of  
 I dream love  
 And wake up to anchors grounded in an ideology entertainment and hate

They say you're nobody until somebody kills you  
 So we Black — Dead men walking  
 Ready for someone else to make a name for us  
 So we Black — zombies with beating hearts and stretched arms  
 Become target practice for the masses  
 We black stars in midnight sky  
 Violent in our combustion  
 Wreckless in our chaos against structure of gravity  
 Fading into the invisible  
 Waiting for someone to wish they may  
 Wish they might  
 Wish their way for a Black boy to fly. (5)

Ant's voice, cadence, and the score drive the dancers in step. Their movement is repetitive and constant. Recycling variations of a phrase, edging closer and closer with each restart to mimic the rat race and the game of our racist and capitalist system. One dancer falls out,

saved and held up by another. They practice a form of mutual aid, but the system eventually overpowers the people and drags them back in line. There is no more space to move forward, the boundary of the audience serves as a wall, a stop, a reminder that liberation is not easily attained. The dancers fade into the invisible and the piece ends with the dancers retreating back to the upstage spaces of the auditorium, spaces that are fleeting in refuge. They stumble, reach out to each other, and eventually spill out on the ground. There is no flight, only a return to the earth.

## Illegible

Addressing the questions of how and why is a crucial first step toward individual and communal recovery. (Cahill-Booth 2013: 93)

To be illegible is to have qualities that make it difficult to be read, comprehended, and understood by others. Black bodies are illegible when they are not complicit in their role of the public imagination. To be illegible is to fully embrace the complexity of Blackness in a country that does more forgetting than remembering what we have done to Black bodies. (*Illegible* Program Notes 2015)

Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, Atatiana Jefferson, Botham Jean, and George Floyd, names that cycled and proliferated news reels and social media posts. Names that sparked protests, gatherings, and demands for accountability in 2020. Despite the solidarity statements and increase in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion trainings, these names remind us that we have been here before. Before Taylor and Floyd, there was Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Alton Sterling, Stephon Clark, and Philando Castile. Names too many to list reverberating as America's soundtrack on repeat. In 2014, while we created and performed "Skin", Michael Brown and Eric Garner were murdered by the police officers in Ferguson and New York. We were already immersed in the questions of how and why Black bodies continued to be subjected to state-sanctioned violence. We had deliberated through scholarly discussions, but needed an artistic and embodied process to work through our questions. Thus we conceived *Illegible*.

The title *Illegible* comes from Mark Anthony Neal's book, *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (2013). In the book, Neal explores the rendering of Black male bodies as either 'legible' or 'illegible' in popular culture. He writes, "the 'legible' black male body is continually recycled to serve the historical fictions of American culture" and is thus subject to criminalization, policing, and containment (2013: 4). In contrast, those representations of Black male bodies that do not easily fit into stereotypes, especially those tropes of criminality, are seen as unfamiliar, ambiguous, and appropriately described as illegible. For Neal, the exploration of illegible Black bodies, such as Avery Brooks' character Hawk in television series *Spenser for Higher*, Gene Anthony Ray's character Leroy Johnson of the television and film *Fame*, and hip hop artist and entrepreneur Jay-Z, highlights the complexities of Black masculinities. At the same time, *Looking for Leroy* illustrates the complicitness of popular culture mediums in rendering Black bodies as legible to the public imagination.



Our performance of *Illegible*, then, calls attention to the consequences of legible Black bodies in the public imagination, namely, the treatment of Black men and Black people as problems to be contained rather than as people. Neal describes this as a phenomenon that,

plays out in every institutional arena from public education, the labor force, and health care (particularly mental health) to, most tragically, the criminal justice system, something that many were reminded of with the shooting death of Trayvon Martin in February 2012. As such, black men are seemingly bound to and bound by their legibility (2013: 5-6).

For bkSOUL, the performance of *Illegible* pushed against this legibility by calling attention to the institutional and systemic violence that binds Black men to this legibility. The performance delves deep into the emotional violence that entire families, communities, and Black people experience as a consequence of being bound to legible representations.

Further, bkSOUL's performance plays on the idea of legibility by using the illegible aesthetics of hip hop culture. Instead of rap, breaking, and a DJ, the collective blends spoken word, various styles of dance, and one live instrumentalist. This aesthetic choice is, on one hand, a rebellion against the commercialization of rap music, breaking, and hip hop dance without a rejection of the forms altogether nor the spirit of artistic interconnectedness. When discussing the commercialization of hip hop, Bakari Kitwana asks, "Why should hip-hop generationers continue to participate in and support a multibillion dollar industry if it fails to in any way address the critical problems facing our generation?" (2002: 350). bkSOUL reflects an engagement with Kitwana's critique of commercialism, by reimagining the performative elements of rap, breaking, and DJing as words, movement, and sound. These more universal concepts of culture avoid the familiar commercialization of hip hop aesthetics while still engaging with culture, community, and creativity of hip hop.

Bringing *Illegible* from concept to performance followed a rather remarkable period of reflection, revision, and self-interrogation. In exploring the legibility of Black bodies, the experience of *Illegible* is ultimately the pain that Black people endure as a consequence of being bound by their legibility. Christopher Rice-Wilson, who serves as a managing member of bkSOUL, explains, "It brought the pain of the past, it brought the pain of the moment, and it brought people who have shared in that pain for large parts of their life into the same room to witness the expression of pain, the expression of resilience, and the expression of rebellion" (C Rice-Wilson 2021, personal communication, 24 June). Kendrick Dial, a poet and composer, shares a similar view regarding the audience's experience coming into the performance. He recounts in our conversation, "the audience's pain or connection to the pain and their tears became another piece of it. There was an expectation that if you are truly a part of this journey with right now, you're going to go there and release some tears" (K Dial 2021, personal communication, 24 June). As noted in *Black Masculinities and Matter of Vulnerability*, "any critical engagement with Black masculinity and vulnerability must attend to the interior lives of Black masculine subjects and grapple with intimate, invisible, and quiet forms of violence" (Bost et al. 2019: 1). For bkSOUL, this meant exploring the emotional violence and pain of living through the nationwide awakening of police violence, institutional racism, and the collective trauma witnessing the violence against Black bodies on screens.



In the performance for Alfred Olango's family, the performers expressed a keen awareness of the effect the family's presence had on the emotionality of that particular show. Rather than the pressure or desire to have a perfect show, the performers were encouraged to connect deeply with the audience. This meant connecting deeply with the emotional, corporeal, and historical pain of police violence. Ant recalls, "I didn't want to say certain lines that would bring back those memories. I would say, 'police brutality in this country is a pop song/we are the victims of pop-pop songs' and my mind would replay the video of [Olango] being shot by police. I didn't want people and his family to relive that, but then again, I wanted them to know that we all saw that." While already difficult to write into the intimacy of emotional violence, bringing memory back to the family of Alfred Olango might subject the family to an entirely new pain of revictimization. Although hesitant, Ant leans into the lyric and into the performance as a way of bearing witness to police violence. Rather than avoiding the painful memory, bkSOUL works through those memories and the discomfort.

Similarly, the poet Miesha Rice-Wilson describes the heaviness of performing her poem "The Pride's Power" in front of Alfred Olango's family. The poem, which centers her experiences in motherhood, begins:

There's not enough imagination  
to fathom the feeling  
of losing a child  
The fruit of your own  
six feet in a grave,  
rotting instead of flourishing,  
decaying instead of maturing,  
ceasing instead of moving,  
their breath becoming forever absent from the present.  
I can't imagine it...  
The media won't let me forget  
All the anger and frustration.  
The fear and sadness.

In reflecting upon performing this piece at the Olango fundraiser, Miesha recounts:

Being a mother of Black children, there was a pain of just trying to put myself in Alfred Olango's mother's perspective. I think that really weighed on me during that particular performance, because she was sitting right there, his family was right there. And then I am just consuming and projecting back out that pain in a way that everyone else could heal too. I did feel like that one particular performance was heavier than usual. (M Rice-Wilson 2021, personal communication, 24 June)

Miesha's reflection as a grieving mother on the page and on the microphone further demonstrates bkSOUL's commitment towards exploring the intimate and invisible violence of lethal police violence and deadly encounters of legibility. Her performance demonstrates a double-pain of exploring the emotionality of her own writing and also doing this in the presence of Alfred Olango's mother, Pamela Benge.

The experience of painful feelings and emotion was not merely an engagement between the performers on stage and the audience. Off-stage, performers experienced the emotionality and feeling of pain simply from hearing the action on the stage. grace remembers:

There were moments where I'm like "I'm not listening to Ant do his piece about his father today. I just can't. I've got to turn it off," right? And then being [offstage] forgetting that I was shutting my brain off for a minute, hearing him, and then I'm spiraling back into that place. And all those moments, I would specifically be like, "I'm not listening to the poets. I'm just going to do my part as a dancer and just do my role, because today is too much. I'm just going to perform. I'm not going to live it."

grace's reluctance to listen during certain performances illustrates Kendrick's earlier point that to engage with the show was to connect emotionally to the feelings of pain. The only way for performers to avoid the emotionality was to consciously disengage. Given the absence of dressing rooms and similar back-stage amenities, the performers all acknowledged the difficulty of ever disengaging from the emotionality of the show. Speaking specifically about the Olango fundraiser, Kendrick explains, "You would see the rotation of who's going in and out for their piece. And then we get triggered in different ways. So that was its own character in this whole dynamic to the emotional processing that's happening even in the midst of the show" (K Dial 2021, personal communication, 24 June). Avoidance and attempts to withdraw from specific moments of the show only led to others opening fresh wounds or uncovering old ones that we thought had healed.

The proliferation of pain in the performance of *Illegible* reflects the emotional and psychological effects of police violence that exist by virtue of direct and even indirect exposure (Stagger-Hakim 2016; Obasogie and Newman 2017; and Bryant Davis et al. 2017). However, the exploration of this pain is viewed by bkSOUL as a necessary step toward achieving social justice. Mindful of Paulo Freire's poignant reflection, "Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle" (2014: 3), the heaviness and pain of *Illegible* serves as a precursor to positive social change. grace explains,

It's the epitome of pushing through pain, like we're losing it and we're crying, but we have to show some hope at the end of this. And that's literally every day of our lives. If we don't hope for something better, then we're just going to be stuck in the sadness of it. And if we approach the hope with tears, that's fine.

Like grace, Kendrick offers pain as a step towards hope. He describes how *Illegible* signals the importance of community organizing in effecting social change. He explains,

It's not only acknowledging the pain, but it's also leading towards the hope of what collective community comes together to rise above where we're at. You know? In these numbers, as we come together, we can create a dynamic that is impacting what we're experiencing to hopefully change that and get away from this being the norm. (K Dial 2021, personal communication, 24 June)

Throughout the conversation, performers commented on the safety with which they could express, feel, and reflect upon the nature of systemic racism and police violence against Black bodies. Miesha reveals,

It was the first time I could actually cry through a poem, like cry out loud. It was a space to be loud in my feelings, in my thoughts, in my anger, and I don't think the world gives us that. Even when the gun is in our face and we're standing over graves, they don't want us to be loud and angry and sad. (M Rice-Wilson 2021, personal communication, 24 June)

Although *Illegible* and the theoretical discussions from which *Illegible* most closely connects with addresses the illegibility of Black masculinities, Miesha's performances invite the audience to also render Black femininities as illegible. Specifically, the revelation that she could be "loud" and "cry" in her anger, challenges the binding of Black female bodies as angry Black women. Rather than dismissing or minimizing her pain, *Illegible* offers permission to bring complexity and humanity to Black femininities.



FIGURE 2. "Breathe" bkSOUL at Lawrence University 2018. Photo courtesy of Mariah Griffin.

As the most discussed performance throughout the collaborative auto-ethnography and conversations, "Breathe" best illustrates slowness, stillness, and heaviness as a way of representing police violence against Black bodies. "I always regretted not being able to see 'Breathe'" Jesse Mills, the sole musician for *Illegible*, expressed. "It was the specialness of being able to do literally nothing; well, I wouldn't describe it as doing nothing. It was this very defiant act of forcing visibility" (J Mills 2021, personal communication, 24 June). A dance-only piece, "Breathe" begins with an extended period of stillness, where performers

simply return the gaze of the audience. The title of the piece alludes to Eric Garner's ominous cry, "I can't breathe," but the extended period of stillness reflects Garner's plea with the New York police to be left alone and to be seen without being harassed.


Television and media scholar Herman Gray describes Black masculinity in the popular imagination as "the logical and legitimate object of surveillance and policing, containment and punishment" (1995: 402). In the dancers' intentional seeing of the audience, "Breathe" conflates the roles of witness and performance to the extent of curiosity, impatience, and ultimately discomfort for audience members. The silence and stillness carrying the weight of Miesha's "Pride's Power" performed immediately prior, serves as a reminder of how easily Black life is silenced and suppressed. "Breathe" begins the show's plummet into the darkest spaces. After what feels like an eternity, stillness is broken gradually. The movement begins with two dancers slowly and softly holding a choking position on two other dancers. As this happens, the performers continue to witness the audience watching. Even as one dancer falls, the delicateness of this movement stands in stark contrast to the frightening and oftentimes abrupt nature of witnessing deadly police violence. Considering Simon Frith's articulation of music listening as a bodily matter where "music gives us a real experience of what the ideal could be" (1996: 274), the absence of sound and words in this performance brings audiences into the tension of what surveillance and policing *is*. Thus, audiences must contemplate the role of witnessing as a performative act and the consequences of witnessing police violence on television, computer, tablets, and cellphone screens.



FIGURE 3. grace and Ant in "Keep Movin'" bkSOUL at Lawrence University 2018. Photo courtesy of Mariah Griffin.

Since 2014, we have performed several versions and excerpts of *Illegible*. Each performance was remixed or recreated, adding layers as we brought into focus another Black death and another life to mourn. In one of the performances, Ant specifically asked the audience to bring their own knowledge and feelings into viewing the performance reminding them that “tragedy after tragedy, as it related to Black bodies, Black bodies and police, Black bodies and institutionalization” (6) were at the forefront of the performance. Our audiences responded with an overflowing outpouring of emotion, from verbal shouts to silent tears, from complete stillness to bodies reflexively shaking from weeping. The heaviness and the realities of Black life and Black death hovered throughout the space. Audience member Diamond Brandon wrote:

I held off for a couple days but underneath my awe, excitement, and joy was this little corner of rage that was gnawing at my soul. I've been so angry and full of disappointment with this country and its lack of genuine goodness. I get sick with every new black name in a hashtag, I feel heavier with the weight of needing but not wanting to know who the current victim is. I feel like I'm suffocating everytime I press share and ashamed when I choose not to. I have been carrying this pocket of bitterness towards racist bigots, their army of blue, Conservative congress, and everyday idiot[s] for most of my life but even more so now. Today I got off a plane, stopped at the house for 20min and went downtown to witness #Illegible by Collective Purpose and BK Soul... I didn't make it to Sunday service but I felt Gods Presence and Authority over that show. I have been finding it hard to pray about black bodies being tased, clubbed, and shot to death without cause. I haven't let myself cry about it... I have brief conversations with Jesus about it but I hold onto my hurt, today after witnessing ILLEGIBLE I cried like I needed to. I shared my pain unashamed in a space full of friends and strangers because I needed to. I felt so free and so full at the s[a]me time. I felt healing moving throughout my soul... And fire in my belly. I found what God has been trying to give me each time I cut our conversation short. I am so grateful for the amazing artist who put this together...

You preached well and your message was received  if you haven't purchased your ticket you should go do that right now. #ThankYou #CollectivePurpose #BKSoul #FringeFestival #Illegible #SpokenWord #Dance #Music #Song #WhenIsTheTour #WhereIsTheDVD. (2015)

The feedback and responses to all our performances expressed the same rage, sadness, and release. People had the permission to feel the spectrum of emotions as they witnessed, listened, and immersed themselves into *Illegible*.

In the same ways that Lara Cahill-Booth identified and named choreographer Rex Nettleford with his work *Katrina* (2006) as “among the first responders who wished to intervene in the historical record of this event”, we strived to be first responders to the killing of Alfred Olango in El Cajon, CA. “whose aide has come in the form of shaping, or reshaping, the cultural memory of the event” (Cahill-Booth 2013: 93). We wanted to contest the damaging media recounting and representations of Olango. In discussing the relationship between *Illegible* and social activism, members viewed the performance as a compliment to the protests that followed Alfred Olango’s murder rather than the performance itself as a form of protest. Chris, who serves as an assistant director of a



community empowerment organization, describes the importance of *Illegible* in relation to the Olango protests:

I had been out on the streets in protest of Olango's death, like four or five nights and days in a row. I connected with the family and I connected with some of the activists in El Cajon. I connected with some people who, you know, helicoptered in from different places across the country. And the performance was important to me because it brought everything together. It addressed a long-held notion in San Diego that we were different somehow, like San Diego was different from St. Louis, San Diego is different from Cincinnati, San Diego is different from all the other places where Black men had been killed at the hands of police. It tied us to the national movement for justice. The performance spoke to that. (C Rice-Wilson 2021, personal communication, 24 June)

Considering members of bkSOUL participate and also organize civic engagement events and protests around a variety of social justice issues, members did not conflate the work they perform in the streets and on campuses with the work they perform on stage. Instead, *Illegible* and the specific performance of *Illegible* for Alfred Olango's family, contributes to what Jesse describes as a "nuanced and holistic understanding of protests." Rather than simply articulating anger and demanding action, *Illegible* humanizes the pain, mourning, and emotions that drive the anger and the demands.

## Conclusion

Nearly all bkSOUL performances end with the performers inviting members of the audience to dance on stage, cypher, and, in some cases, take the mic. With the Olango family in the audience, the usual hopeful ending of *Illegible* is a somber reminder of Alfred Olango's absence. In the midst of hugs, tears, condolences, and organizing, Alfred Olango's mother, Pamela Bengé, approaches the mic. There is an abrupt silence as she begins to speak, thanking everyone for the support and sharing her love for everyone. Bengé expresses her deep pain as a mother from a wound that stays with her forever. Yet not wanting her son's death to be in vain, she calls for peace, change, and unity.

If *Illegible* sought to explore the effects of rendering Black masculinities legible only as criminals and as bodies in need of containment, Pamela Bengé challenges the legibility of grieving Black mothers. As bkSOUL leans into intimate and invisible violence of police brutality, systemic inequality, and symbolic racism, Pamela Bengé leans into the deep pain of losing her son. Yet, this pain is for the purpose of peace, unity, and humanity. Her plea that no other mothers should endure this type of pain expresses the necessity for the performer to connect deeply with collective trauma of witnessing violence. Moreover, her simple request for change, a change in the system, encapsulates the barrage of words spoken and sung throughout the performance.

In the years following this performance, #BlackLivesMatter and the movement for Black lives has unquestionably moved into a new phase. The protests against police violence in the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd have not only been more widespread, but more nuanced in the critiques, demands, and articulation of systemic inequality in anti-Black racism. As such, artistic representations of this violence must also move into a new

and more nuanced exploration of such issues. Given popular culture's reliance on Black bodies as consumable and disposable profit-making entities, even the expression of pain is subject to appropriation and a dehumanizing legibility. By continuing to incorporate and dialogue with critical scholarship around issues of injustice and violence against Black communities, artists, performers, and creatives might effectively contribute to widespread efforts of social justice by taking the protests from the streets to the stage.

## Endnotes

- (1) The use of 'us' and 'we' refer to our collective voice as Ant and grace.
- (2) After 10 years of collaboration in 2016 we began performing solely as bkSOUL.
- (3) <https://sandiegostory.com/trolley-dances-16/> <https://www.courant.com/sdut-trolley-dances-16-years-jean-isaacs-2014sep19-htmlstory.html>
- (4) <https://www.jacobscenter.org/shopmcp/>
- (5) "Skin" by Ant Black.
- (6) *Illegible*, 2015. The third annual San Diego International Fringe Festival.

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