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Katherine Dunham's Mark on Jazz Dance

Saroya Corbett

Katherine Dunham (1909–2006) is revered as one of the great pillars of American dance history. Her world-renowned modern dance company exposed audiences to the diversity of dance, and her schools brought dance training and education to a variety of populations sharing her passion and commitment to dance as a medium of cultural communication. Often recognized for her research in the Caribbean and on African dance traditions, Dunham's research also extended to black dance traditions of America. Her research in American black dance traditions unearthed and contributed to the foundations of jazz dance and black vernacular movement vocabularies.

Anthropological Approach to Dance

The foundation for Katherine Dunham's work and inquiry is her anthropological studies. Dunham received her degree in anthropology from the University of Chicago in 1936 during a time when the anthropology department was new, fresh, and on the cutting edge of research. Her professors and mentors were critical to the development of anthropology: Robert Redfield, Melville Herskovits, Edward Spair, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Bronislaw Malinowski, and W. Lloyd Warner.[1] It was during her time at the University of Chicago that Dunham developed an interest in the dances of the Caribbean, which had been mostly ignored by anthropologists up until this time.[2] Within this environment, Dunham went on to receive a Julius Rosenwald

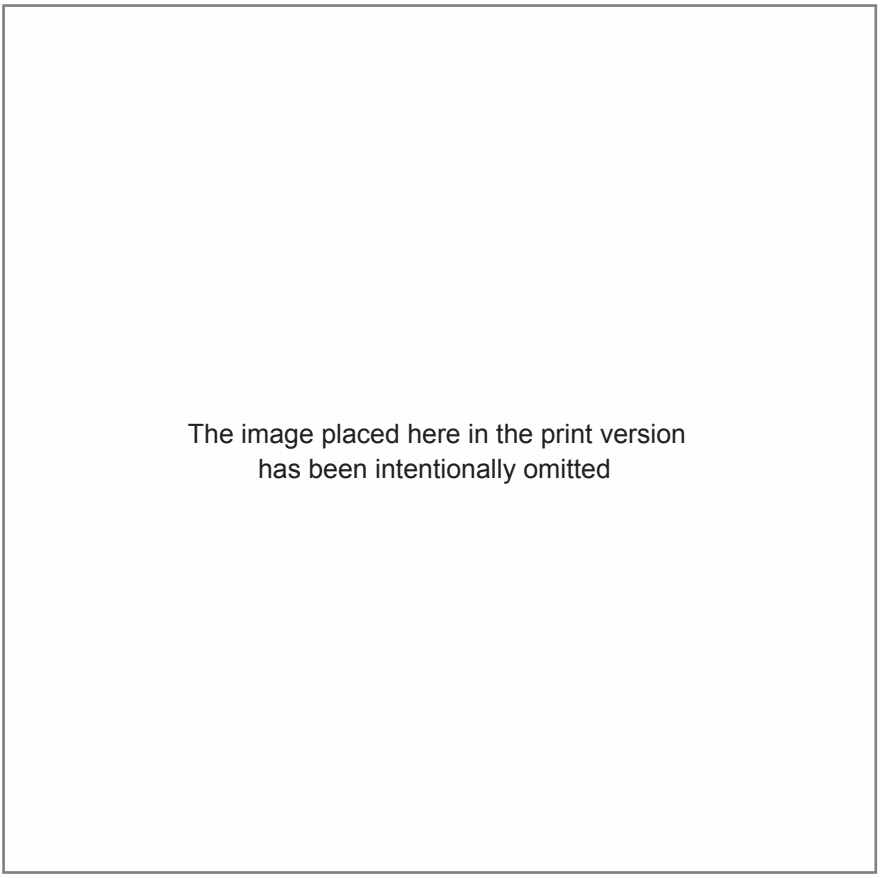

Figure 12.1. Katherine Dunham and Vanoye Aikens in Katherine Dunham's *L'Ag'ya*. Photo by Roger Wood, 1952. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations. © 1952 ROH/ Roger Wood.

Fund Fellowship in 1935 to conduct dance research in the Caribbean, focusing her studies on Haiti, Jamaica, Martinique, and Trinidad.[3]

During Dunham's fellowship, she focused her field research on the participant-observer model, in which the researcher both observes and participates in the group of individuals being studied. Dunham used the participant-observer model to immerse herself in the cultures she researched. In Haiti, Dunham pushed boundaries by focusing more on participation than observation. Melville Herskovits, Dunham's field advisor, wrote to Dunham and warned against her activities after learning she was going to be initiated into the Haitian spiritual practice, Voudun. Dunham continued with her initiation plans and believed her in-depth understanding of the cultures would only come through her full participation.

The Rosenwald fellowship solidified Dunham's lifelong focus on the role and functionality of dance in culture. Her research and choreographic interests intersected, establishing the research-to-performance method of her work. Dunham's research material was the basis for her choreography, as she inserted her artistic sensibilities to expand beyond just producing folk art. The African diaspora was a major theme in her work throughout her choreographic career, and as scholar VèVè Clark adds, Dunham was the "repository of black dance of both North America and the Caribbean."[4]

As ethnography is a researcher's written account of his or her field experiences, Dunham's performances were firsthand accounts of her research. Her "performed ethnographies" were designed to educate her audiences about diverse cultures with the intentions of interrogating pejorative assumptions labeling these cultures as uncivilized and inferior.[5] In her performances, a cultural memory was enacted onstage, exposing centuries of history for audiences to witness. In Clark's article "Performing the Memory of Difference in Afro-Caribbean Dance," she employs *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) from French revolutionary scholarship to explain Dunham's use of cultural memory. Clark explains, "Dunham's research became the basis for character dances and ballets, all of which demonstrated her extensive knowledge of dance forms re-created from African diaspora memory. When the dance steps, music, and other cultural forms were transformed for stage representations, they became *lieux de mémoire*, reworkings and restatements of historical danced events whose memory Dunham had also preserved in writing or on film."[6]

Forging Racial Understandings and Navigating Discrimination

The Dunham Company performed and toured for twenty years before the social movements of the 1960s. Racism and racial discrimination were an accepted social policy, and Dunham confronted racism on and off stage. By Dunham's own account, her audiences were nine-tenths white and one-tenth black. The visibility of her performed ethnographies exposed her majority white audiences to these cultural dance memories. A cross-viewing was enacted as audiences were exposed to cultural memories and social identities different from their own cultural and social understanding.[7]

Additionally, racism followed Dunham and her company through their travels. They were frequently denied hotel accommodations, restaurant service, and rehearsal space and were forced to live in unsuitable conditions. The Dunham company often endured performances to segregated audiences.[8] After a performance at a Louisville, Kentucky, theater in 1944, Dunham came out and informed the audience that her company would not return until the

audience was racially integrated.[9] This same conviction continued as Dunham produced the work *Southland* in 1951, which protested the lynching of black men in the South. Dunham proceeded with performing *Southland* in Chile after being instructed by U.S. officials not to perform the dance.[10] Dunham's defiance and resistance to prejudice and discrimination along with her will to educate defined her character and the impetus of her work.

Providing Context and Exposing Early Jazz Dance Vocabularies

After returning from the Caribbean, Dunham's research continued in the United States with the vernacular movement of African-Americans. The connections between African-Americans and the black cultures of the Caribbean were obvious to Dunham, and she felt obliged to continue her research in her own backyard. Dunham explains her interest in black American vernacular dance as she states, "My feeling was how on earth could I go, as I had always done, to the West Indies and spend practically a year going off to the islands, looking for their root material in the performing arts, and not realize that there was this richness right here in our country."[11] Dunham added, "So I developed those things in jazz."[12]

During the late 1930s, Dunham began to perform and create choreography documenting black American dance forms. Dunham researched the then current social scene of black America and interviewed previously enslaved African-Americans to uncover vernacular dance history. The Shimmy, Falling off the Log, Black Bottom, Shorty George, Palmer House, and other dance steps were taken to audiences all over the world in her choreographic works such as *Le Jazz Hot* and the *Americana Suite*.[13] Although Vanoye Aikens, company member and Dunham's dance partner, candidly acknowledges that the Dunham Company performed jazz movement but was not a jazz dance company, the exposure she gave to early jazz vocabulary contributed to a mainstream understanding and acceptance of jazz dance.[14]

Dance historian Susan Manning's case study, "Watching Dunham's Dances, 1937–1945," historicizes how Dunham's choreography was viewed in the 1930s and 1940s. Manning recognizes that in the 1930s, critics "relied on assumptions about the generalizing power of white bodies that created a critical conundrum for black dancing bodies."[15] In the critical conundrum, black dancers were defined as "natural performers" instead of "creative artists" when performing Africanist-themed material, and they were considered "derivative" when they were performing Eurocentric themes rather than "original artists."[16] She further analyzes the gradual change in the 1940s as "new meanings" began to surface regarding the black dancing body. Throughout the case study, Manning works to unearth how the diaspora

influences were read in Dunham's work. Consequently, she is also examining the readability of Dunham's performed ethnography.

Additionally, the case study provides evidence that the Dunham Company's jazz-based choreography presented a cultural context for jazz. When commenting on Dunham's 1940 program of Latin American, Caribbean, and jazz material, Manning reveals, "Although she did not script an extended program note, most white dance critics perceived her performances of diaspora. Not that they changed their preconceptions overnight, but it is clear that watching Dunham's dances in 1940 altered white critics' perceptions of black dancing bodies."[17] The reading of Dunham's diaspora influences or her performed ethnography began to alter the critical conundrum used to define black dancing bodies by critics. In this process, critics were developing a framework to understand and eventually interpret jazz dance.

Educating a Jazz Generation

Throughout her career, Dunham opened several schools. One of her best known educational establishments was the Dunham School of Dance and Theater in New York City.[18] (The name eventually changed to Katherine Dunham School of Arts and Research.) The school opened in 1945 and was more than a school of dance. The Dunham School offered courses in social sciences and the humanities ranging from eukinetics (a theory focused on expression developed by Rudolf von Laban) and dance notation to psychology, language, and philosophy.[19] Faculty and guest instructors included Syvilla Fort, Archie Savage, Talley Beatty, José Limon, Lee and Susan Strasberg, Herbert Berghof, Margaret Mead, and Antony Tudor. Additionally, Dunham recruited graduates from the universities of Fordham, Columbia, and Cambridge to instruct social science courses. The quality of education at the Dunham School was highly regarded. Both Columbia University and the GI Bill accepted credits from the school. The Dunham School was sustained by income generated by the Dunham Company. Dunham worked hard to maintain the school but was forced financially to close it in 1955.[20]

The training and experience offered at the Dunham School was significant in the training of a generation of theater artists, including Marlon Brando, Geoffrey Holder, Ava Gardner, James Dean, Doris Duke, Eartha Kitt, Chita Rivera, and Arthur Mitchell. The education Dunham provided in dance training was also significant in the lives of several major jazz dance artists. Choreographer Peter Gennaro used his GI Bill to attend the Dunham School. He was known for exposing television audiences to jazz movement through his involvement in weekly television shows. Also, Gennaro went on to choreograph parts of *West Side Story* and several other prominent jazz

dance productions.[21] Jazz dance choreographer and educator Gus Giordano attended the Dunham School in New York. In addition to creating his Chicago-based jazz dance company, Giordano was considered one of the first individuals to codify jazz dance technique, and he wrote one of the first texts dedicated to teaching jazz dance.[22]

In the process of conducting research, creating performed ethnography, and training students, Katherine Dunham synthesized her experience and work into the codified Dunham Technique. Although Dunham Technique progressed and developed over Dunham's lifetime, the schools she created during the first half of her career were early centers for spreading the technique. As Dunham influenced a generation of artists, Dunham Technique was also influenced by the dance trends and styles of the time. Dunham Technique emerged as a codified method to physically interpret the movement of diverse cultural experiences, especially the African diaspora. With jazz dance rooted in black vernacular movement, Dunham Technique provided a systematic approach easily applied to jazz dance.

One recognizable connection between Dunham Technique and jazz dance is the use of body isolations. Isolations, defined as moving one part of the body at a time, are a canonical feature in jazz dance training. While isolations are used in other dance forms, the vigorous and syncopated character of jazz dance isolations calls upon jazz dance's roots in African-derived movement. Yet isolations function as a method to warm up the body and build complex movement patterns. Dunham's observation of isolations as a part of communal movement during her field research in the Caribbean resulted in her early development of isolations in Dunham Technique. Through her additional study of East Indian dance with Uday Shankar and Vera Mirova, she further developed isolations into a pattern of movements and choreography used as a staple of Dunham Technique.[23]

In an interview with certified Dunham Technique instructor Keith Tyrone Williams, Williams mentioned the use of isolations, polyrhythms, the fluid spine, the fluid torso, and the pelvic area as fundamental components of jazz dance. He further identified Dunham's pioneering efforts in utilizing these elements. Williams commented directly on Dunham's development of isolations acknowledging, "It's not that isolations had not been done before, but I don't think that it had been studied, broken down, and then brought to the concert stage and mainstream America like Dunham did, you know, and integrated into a codified technique."[24] This statement recognizes that Dunham was not the only individual to use isolations. Yet her research, anthropological approach, and codified technique brought a particular type of clarity to movement not previously realized. Dunham's acclaimed success

further inculcated the environment of the time with her innovation, leaving her mark on jazz dance and the performance world.

Dunham Touches Jazz Music

Katherine Dunham's influence on jazz does not end with her contributions to jazz dance. Dunham was also connected to the development of Latin jazz music in the United States. She understood the importance of Latin rhythms in African-derived religions and provided a cultural context for them through her performed ethnographies. A part of Dunham's process to create performed ethnographies was to incorporate actual references from the cultures represented. Including performers from the cultures displayed onstage often created this connection to the cultures. Chano Pozo along with Tito Puente familiarized Americans with Cuban rhythms. Pozo, who played for the Dunham Company, went on to introduce Latin beats to jazz music as a member of Dizzy Gillespie's band. Pozo and Gillespie, along with Mario Bauzá, founder of the Afro-Cuban Orchestra, popularized Afro-Cuban music.[25]

Notably, since Dunham's primary focus was on the role and functionality of dance in culture, her research brought works of performed ethnography to the concert and commercial stage. Dunham's anthropological and creative investment in and her emphasis on African diasporic culture and traditions positioned her as an antecedent for the emergence of many dance and music traditions in jazz dance. The development of Katherine Dunham's codified technique and her role as an educator further extended her influence in the development of jazz dance. Dunham never considered herself a jazz artist, yet the mere existence of her artistic work positioned her as a pioneering force in the evolution of jazz.

Notes

1. Joyce Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham: Dancing a Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 29.

2. Vèvè A. Clark, "Performing the Memory of Difference in Afro-Caribbean Dance: Katherine Dunham's Choreography, 1938-1987," *in Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham*, ed. Vèvè A. Clark and Sara E. Johnson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 323.

3. Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 45.

4. Clark, "Performing the Memory," 323.

5. Halifu Osumare, "Dancing the Black Atlantic: Katherine Dunham's Research-to-Performance Method," AmeriQuests (2010): 7.

6. Clark, "Performing the Memory," 323.

7. Susan Manning, "Watching Dunham's Dancing, 1937–1945," in *Kaiso!* 257.

8. Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life,* 132–35.

9. Katherine Dunham, "Comment to a Louisville Audience," in *Kaiso!* 255.

10. Constance Valis Hill, "Katherine Dunham's *Southland:* Protest in the Face of Repression." In *Kaiso!* 348, 352–53.

11. Constance Valis Hill, "Collaborating with Balanchine on *Cabin in the Sky,*" in *Kaiso!* 243.

12. Wendy Perron, "Katherine Dunham: One-Woman Revolution," in *Kaiso!* 625.

13. Ibid.

14. Keith Tyrone Williams interview, October 19, 2011.

15. Manning, "Watching Dunham's Dancing, 1937–1945," 256.

16. Ibid., 259.

17. Ibid., 260.

18. "Chronology," in *Kaiso!* xviii.

19. Vera Maletic, "Katherine Dunham School of Arts and Research: Brochure 1946-1947," in *Kaiso!* 472-78; VèVè Clark, "Performing the Memory," 261.

20. Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 136–39.

21. Rachel Straus, "Peter Gennaro," *Dance Teacher Magazine* (2010): 58–60.

22. Courtney Rae Allen and Bob Boross, "Gus Giordano," *Dance Teacher Now* 31, no. 4 (2009): 63–65.

23. Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 201.

24. Williams interview.

25. Marta Moreno Vega, "The Yoruba Orisha Tradition Comes to New York City," in *Kaiso!* 605.