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Katherine Dunham's *Southland:* Protest in the Face of Repression

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> The man who truly loves his country is the man who is able to see it in the bad as well as the good and seeing the bad declaim it, at the cost of liberty or life.
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> *Katherine Dunham, prologue to* Southland

In 1951, at the dawning of a decade that would be known for its suffocating conformity and political intolerance, Katherine Dunham created *Southland,* a dramatic ballet Americana about what was by then the century-long practice of lynching. In the program notes to the ballet, which premiered at the Opera House in Santiago de Chile, Dunham wrote, "This is the story of no actual lynching in the southern states of America, and still it is the story of every one of them."[1] She spoke the prologue on stage, in Spanish:

> Though I have not smelled the smell of burning flesh, and have never seen a black body swaying from a southern tree, I have felt these things in spirit. . . . Through the creative artist comes the need to show this thing to the world, hoping that by exposing the ill, the conscience of the many will protest."[2]

Southland, a protest as much against lynching as against the destructive powers of hatred, was created before the Selma march of 1965, the Freedom rides, the student sit-ins; before the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955; and before the lynching of Emmett Till. Unlike the 1960s, artistic expression in the late 1940s and 1950s provoked suspicion and outright repression. It was a time

when dissent itself seemed illegitimate, subversive, un-American. The story of *Southland* tells of the consequences of social protest in the 1950s, the decade once described as "the happiest, most stable, most rational period the Western world has known since 1914."[3] But it also reveals the temperament and perhaps the very soul of protest expression rooted in the African American political struggle, an expression that was for Dunham both a public act and private *rite de passage,* affirming how dancing is a healing process as well as a political act.

THE 1940s

In the postwar years, Dunham was at the height of a stage and film career that had been launched on Broadway with *Cabin in the Sky* in 1940. Fame seemed limitless for the woman most remembered as "decked out in singular hats and dresses, daring to wear feathers, bright colors, soft fabrics,"[4] though the woman who was making brilliant-textured transformations of indigenous Caribbean dances was still limited by racial discrimination. There was the ongoing critical debate as to whether she was a serious artist or a popularizer, whether comment and integrity in her work were "sacrificed to conform to what Broadway expected the Negro dance to be."[5] There was Dunham's perennial double-image, in which she was simultaneously viewed as "the hottest thing" on Broadway and "an intelligent anthropologist of note."[6] Perpetual intimations of a split personality appeared in such headlines as "Schoolmarm Turned Siren," "Torridity to Anthropology," "Cool Scientist or Sultry Performer?" and "High Priestess of Jive."[7] However, the clever phrases invented to cheapen her talent and tarnish her beauty diminished neither her popularity nor her creative output. The Katherine Dunham School of Dance and Theatre opened in New York in 1944, and throughout the 1940s—from club work at Ciro's in Hollywood and the Martinique Club in New York to musicals in Chicago and performances in Mexico City, London, Paris, and Rome—Dunham and her company of singers, dancers, and musicians were on what seemed a perpetual tour across America and around the world.

Touring did not keep Dunham out of touch but instead only

heightened her awareness of America where, simultaneous with the optimism of postwar prosperity, there was the ever-presence of Jim Crow in transportation, education, and public accommodation. Though lynching was rampant and went without condemnation in the South during the 1930s, it declined in the 1940s. However, violence continued against blacks, countless and perpetual acts of violence that were part of an overall pattern of retaliation against postwar egalitarianism.[8] From 1936 to 1946, forty-three lynchings of mostly Southern blacks were reported, though the lynchings went unprosecuted. The most notorious lynchings were the 1944 drowning of a fifteen-year-old black youth in the Suwannee River, an act that the boy's father was forced to witness, and the quadruple killing in 1946 of two black men and two black women in Monroe, Georgia.[9]

America's fight against Nazism and Fascism abroad highlighted the hypocrisy of racism at home and provided a catalyst for African Americans, whose long-suppressed anger and outrage sought new expressions of protest. In dance, for the most part, social protest was accepted. About her 1943 solo *Strange Fruit,* an interpretation of the Lewis Allan poem that presented the residual emotions of a woman who witnessed a lynching, Pearl Primus recalls, "In the forties you could protest, in fact, I was most encouraged."[10] Primus openly stated at that time that the " 'Negro problem,' so-called, in reality was a problem of democracy" and asserted that as people in other countries fought against Hitler's suppression of minorities, so they needed to fight against fascist ideas in the United States.[11] Talley Beatty, whose 1947 *Southern Landscape* dealt with the terrorization of black and white sharecroppers in the South during the Reconstruction, confirms, "I thought everybody back then was doing protest dances."[12] Nor was Dunham a stranger to political activism during the 1930s and 1940s. Touring in a segregated society such as America's presented problems she faced head on, from curtain speeches to segregated audiences to a staunch insistence on finding decent housing for her company. "There comes a time when every human being must protest in order to retain human dignity," Dunham announced to a segregated audience in Louisville in 1944, ex-

plaining she would not return but that she hoped the war abroad for tolerance and democracy would change things in America.[13] Sometimes there were outrageous confrontations, such as the story company members tell about how Dunham, in a segregated theater in the South, turned around and showed her rear end to the audience, saying, "Until people like me can sit with people like you," the company could not and would not perform.[14]

However, by the late 1940s the times were changing, as overt expressions of dissent were suddenly construed as being politically incorrect. The political climate was chilling with the Cold War and a new Red Scare so powerful that many social causes identified with liberal principles could be tarred with the fatal brush of being called subversive. The politics of anticommunism exerted such a cooling effect on all progressive causes that even blacks in government who actively opposed segregation were accused of disloyalty.[15] In 1949, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) continued to investigate members of the movie industry and then escalated its assault against Paul Robeson, who in bold counterattack challenged HUAC's "ominous silence" in the face of the continued lynchings of black citizens.[16] Katherine Dunham was abroad with her company at the time, but she was neither safe from nor immune to the onslaught of news from America that both haunted and assaulted her.

She remembers hearing about the lynching of an American Southern black youth and, during an airplane ride over the Nile River, she wrote, "The mud that turns in the Mississippi, is it able to cover those black bodies, or would any river do?"[17] In a bar in Genoa, company members were threatened and insulted with racial slurs by American sailors in an incident that brought them late to a cocktail party given by Ambassador Pell. And in the summer of 1950 in Brazil, Dunham was denied entry into one of the better hotels because she was black, a bitter reminder of the pervasiveness of color prejudice.[18] It was the fall of 1950, the aftermath of the Eighty-first Congress, which became the graveyard for the NAACP's thirty-two-year fight for federal anti-lynching legislation. In response to this travesty, Langston Hughes's character Simple, expressing the reactions of the black community, declared

the federal government could find the means to pass espionage and security legislation, "yet cannot and will not and won't pass no bill to keep me from getting lynched if I ever look cross-eyed at a white man when I go down south."[19] It was amidst hearing news about the trials of the Martinsville Seven and Willie McGhee, in which black youths in Virginia and Mississippi convicted of raping a white woman were sentenced to death,[20] that Dunham's response to America from afar took shape in *Southland*.

THE MAKING OF A PROTEST DANCE

Commissioned by the Symphony of Chile, and with a premiere in Santiago set for January 1951, *Southland* was researched, composed, choreographed, designed, and rehearsed in the last months of 1950 in Buenos Aires.[21] The musical score by Dino di Stefano, a Jesuit priest based in Argentina, was an orchestral arrangement of African American spirituals, blues music, and popular American songs. Designed by John Pratt, Dunham's husband and artistic collaborator, the set's centerpiece was a sprawling magnolia tree in full bloom that evoked the warm and sunny American South. However, while Dunham, speaking the prologue, praised America for its youthfulness, she probed its dark underside:

> There is a deep stain, a mark of blood and shame which spreads from under the magnolia trees of the southland area and mingles with the perfume of the flowers. This is not all of America. It is not all of the south, but it is a living, present part.[22]

The curtain opens on a chorus standing before the portals of an antebellum Southern mansion.[23] "Is it true what they say about Dixie? Does the sun really shine all the time?" they sing, and the mock nostalgia of "Swanee River" and "Carry Me Back to Old Virginia" contrasts with the ecstatic force of the spirituals "Steal Away" and "Dry Bones."[24] The Southern mansion gives way to the magnolia tree where fieldhands on their way to work dance a suite of plantation dances, leaving behind a pair of lovers, Lucy and Richard. Their tender pas de deux, in which he reaches up into the tree to pluck a magnolia blossom, combined dramatic gesture with dance movement. What Dunham described as "a mix-

ture of mime and motion" in her dance drama was an ingenious mixing of fact and fiction. She meticulously researched the history of lynching in the United States by consulting the records on file at the Tuskegee Institute. She then wrote a detailed scenario and working script, complete with dialogue written in Southern dialect, as the following segment from the "Love Scene" for Lucy and Richard demonstrates:

> HE: Lucy.
> SHE: Huh?
> HE: Come ova heah, Lucy.
> SHE: (small cry of joy as she dances to him) Oh.
> HE: Love ain't a big enough word for what I has for you, gal. (When she is in his arms) De whol' worl' ain't big enough to hol' it. (When she reaches for flowers) Here, gal, let a big fella help wid dat. (Carries her to flowers).[25]

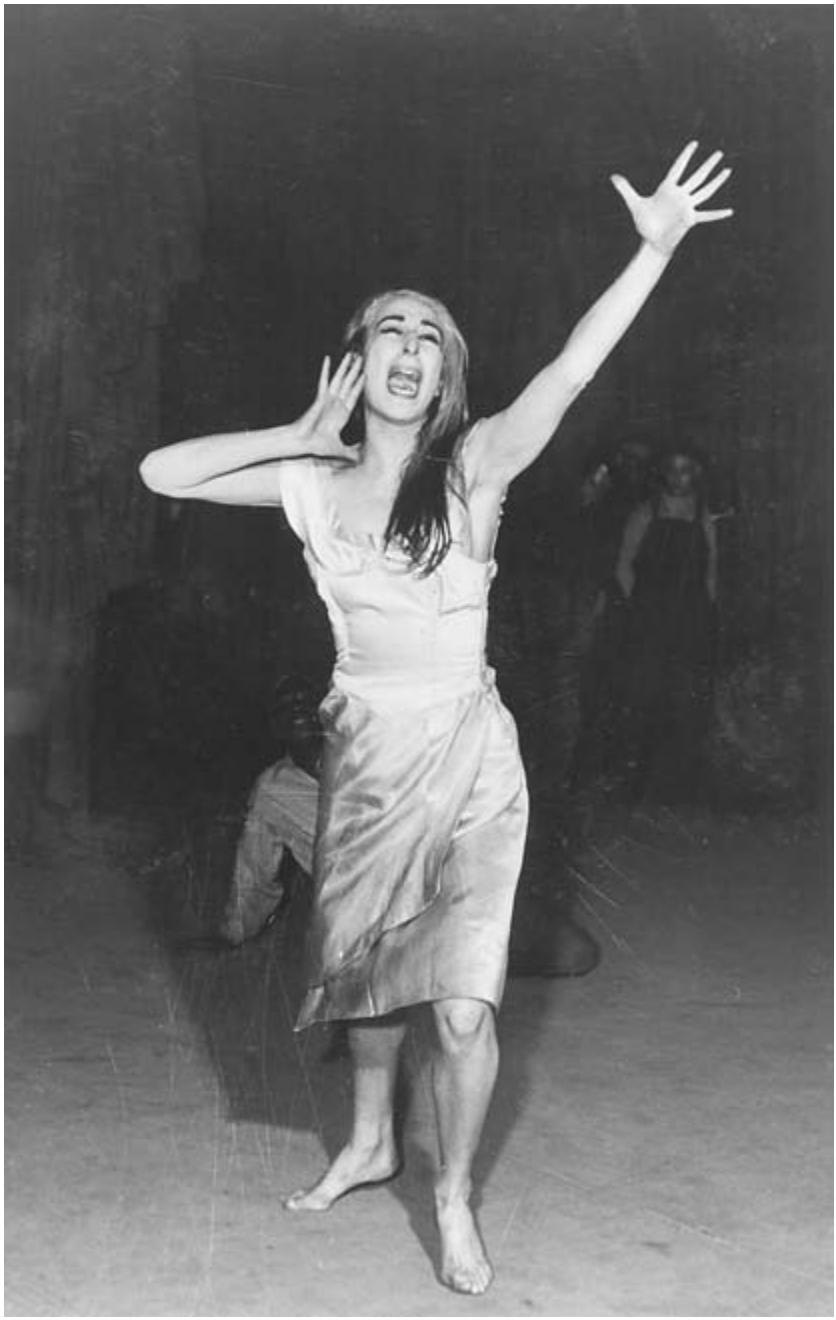
The script was used by dancers for rehearsal and discarded when the dialogue was replaced with motivated action. The names of the characters in the script were the actual names of the dancers playing them—the characters of Lucy and Richard, for example, played by company members Lucille Ellis and Ricardo Avales. The dance movement was created through a collaborative rehearsal process in which Dunham worked with dancers onstage while di Stefano composed at the piano. Newly choreographed scenes were supplemented with well-known dances from the company repertory. The square dances and patting jubas in the opening plantation scene, for example, were long-standing numbers from Dunham's *Americana* suite from the 1930s and 1940s. Dunham's dance drama, then, recontextualized historical "facts" and dancers' biographies, new dramatic choreography and old musical numbers, thereby enabling dancers to more truthfully internalize, or embody, the materials. To borrow dance scholar VèVè Clark's term, it was a kind of "method dancing" that motivated a complete transformation into the world of "the play,"[26] a play that was a thinly disguised exposé of truth.

After the "Love Scene," Lucy and Richard separate, and a white couple, Julie and Lenwood, tumbles out from behind the magno-

Julie and Lenwood struggle. Julie Robinson Belafonte and Lenwood Morris in Katherine Dunham's *Southland,* Paris production, 1953. (From the archive of Julie Robinson Belafonte; reproduced with permission)

Julie teases Lenwood. Julie Robinson Belafonte and Lenwood Morris in Katherine Dunham's *Southland,* Paris production, 1953. (From the archive of Julie Robinson Belafonte; reproduced with permission)

Julie accuses Richard of raping her. Julie Robinson Belafonte and Richard Avales in Katherine Dunham's *Southland,* Paris production, 1953. (From the archive of Julie Robinson Belafonte; reproduced with permission)



Julie screams for help after accusing Richard of rape. Julie Robinson Belafonte in Katherine Dunham's *Southland,* Paris production, 1953. (From the archive of Julie Robinson Belafonte; reproduced with permission)

Julie demands the lynching of Richard. Julie Robinson Belafonte in Katherine Dunham's *Southland*, Paris production, 1953. (From the archive of Julie Robinson Belafonte; reproduced with permission)

lia tree. The role of Julie was played by the only white dancer in the company, Julie Robinson Belafonte, with a bleached-blonde streak down her long brown hair to represent Southern white society; the role of her boyfriend Lenwood was played by Lenwood Morris, wearing a red wig and whitened makeup. Julie and Lenwood are drunk, and he takes her teasing as a sexual insult. Chasing her around the tree, he catches her by the hair and in the ensuing *apache*-styled duet, he beats her viciously, strutting away like a proud cock to leave her unconscious. Julie is discovered by the fieldhands who flee in fear, though Richard remains. He lifts her head, and she opens her eyes to see his face. In that moment, between feeling the humiliation of being discovered in that state and recognizing the opportunity to capitalize on it, Julie decides to make him the perpetrator of her attack. Pointing an accusing finger, she cries out the word "Nigger!" and skillfully draws in an imaginary crowd, inciting them to believe she's been raped. Dancing a *habanera,* she strips her blouse, whips her hair, and then twists it around her neck to advocate his lynching. Trapped by this imaginary crowd-turned-lynch-mob, Richard cowers on the ground in complete animal fear. He mimes being kicked offstage by the white mob, moving into an offstage pool of red light. Onstage, Julie dances herself into a fury born of hatred, fear, and guilt as, offstage, the pool of flaming red light intensifies as the mob hangs and burns the black man. It is only when Richard's body, swinging by his neck from a branch of the magnolia tree,[27] swoops toward her in full view that Julie feels the full impact of her lie. Fascinated by what she sees of herself in the disfigured body, she rips off a piece of Richard's charred shirt and, on her exit, she meets Lucy face-to-face: one woman clutches the burnt cloth, the other holds the magnolia blossom. The chorus, turning into a cortège of mourners, gathers up the remains of the body as Lucy dances a searing adagio solo that is filled with backspiraling descents to the floor and recovers. Ellis recalls that Dunham, coaching her, said, "Lucille, feel you are that child again and you just lost something you had, come out completely limp and innocent."[28] Lucy dances and weeps; and in her final descent, she wraps herself around the legs of Claudia McNeil, who sings:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood at the leaves and blood at the root.
Black bodies swaying in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eye and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

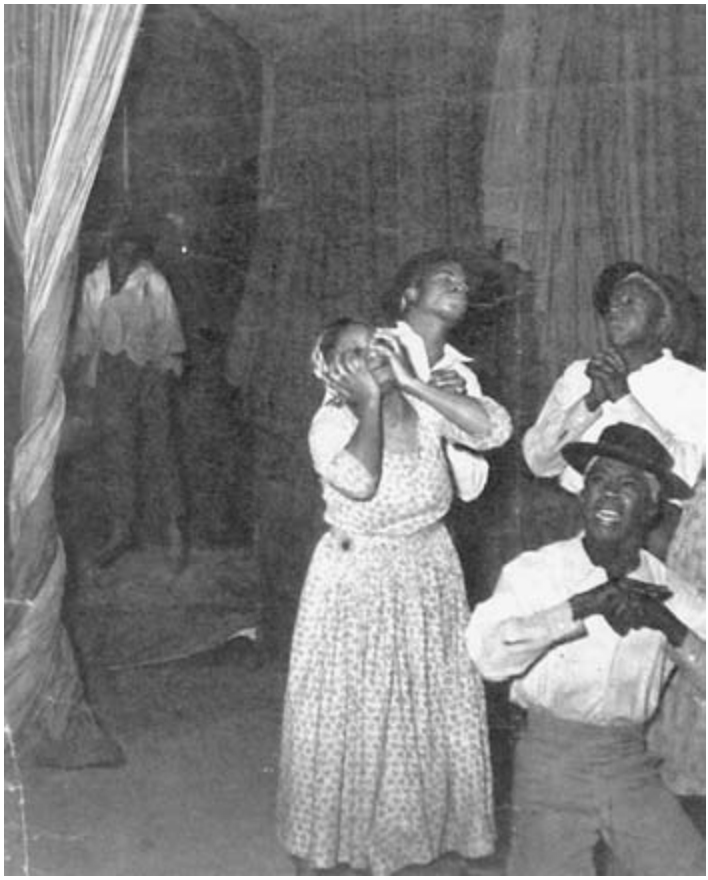
Here is a fruit for the wind to suck
For the rain to gather for the crows to pluck
for the sun to rot for the trees to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop.[29]

The second scene opens with the "Basin Street Blues" and takes place, writes Dunham in the scenario, on "any street where, because of color, creed or forced inferiority, people are relegated to the frenzied cynicism that substitutes for the deprivations of their daily lives."[30] In a smoky cafe inhabited by couples dancing, men gambling, and a blind man begging,[31] the funeral cortège passes bearing the body of the lynched man. Singing a funeral dirge, the chorus moves across the stage dragging Lucy, whose arms are wrapped around the legs of the bass singer. For a moment, everyone is motionless. Then cards fall from the hands of a gambler; a woman weeps silently, and couples tighten their embrace to grind slowly and disjointedly, like somnambulists, while a man opens his knife and continues to plunge it into the floor, retrieve it, and plunge it again.[32] The blind man suddenly stands straight up. "Seeing" what the others feel but cannot define, he follows the funeral procession, "seeking the answer which all of us who love humanity seek more than ever at this moment."[33]

THE PUBLIC RESPONSE

It was not only the graphic depiction of a black man swinging by his neck from the end of a rope that made *Southland* so shocking; as Dunham says, "It was the whole thing."[34] She remembers on opening night that some in the audience wept, while others, members of the diplomatic corps, sat rigid. If the ballet ended on a

Backstage view just before the lynching of Richard. Katherine Dunham's *Southland,* Paris production, 1953. (From the archive of Julie Robinson Belafonte; reproduced with permission)



Chorus sings after the lynching scene. Katherine Dunham's *Southland,* Paris production, 1953. (From the archive of Julie Robinson Belafonte; reproduced with permission)

Cortege of mourners carry Richard's body. Katherine Dunham's *Southland,* Paris production, 1953. (From the archive of Julie Robinson Belafonte; reproduced with permission)

note of mournful resignation, with the fieldhands carrying off the body, would Dunham have gotten the response she was delivered the next morning? A reporter from the Communist newspaper in Santiago, who asked to secretly meet her in the hotel garden, told her that the review that he wrote of *Southland* was the only review she would receive in Santiago. Every newspaper in Chile depended on America for newsprint, he explained, and members of the press were "informed" that all newsprint would be withdrawn if anyone dared to write about *Southland*. It wasn't only the explicit violence of the first scene that was intimidating, but also the implicit threat of violence in the second scene. Dunham remarks about the last scene in *Southland:*

> If you were at all sensitive, you would pick up this thread of violence. The guy with the knife—a 1960s type—and the crap players, they were mean; they wouldn't take it very long. And we do get the feeling of something going to happen, not the feeling it's hopeless. I should think that any white person, whether they belonged in that setting or not, would feel particularly uneasy."[35]

It was January 1951, ten months after Senator Joseph McCarthy had claimed there were 205 known Communists in the State Department.[36] That an American artist, a black woman in a foreign country known for its strong Communist base and anti-American sentiment, had dared to expose America's darkest side, was a flagrant betrayal of her country. This action appeared totally out of character for the Katherine Dunham so often perceived as the glamorous entertainer. She recalls, "People who thought I was having such a success as a figurehead goddess, whatever that was, couldn't understand how I could do a thing like that onstage."

The paranoia aroused at the American embassy in Chile—which was under the ambassadorship of Claude G. Bowers, whose 1929 book *The Tragic Era* justified the Ku Klux Klan as being organized "for the protection of women, property, civilization itself"[37]—can only be imagined. While reprisal on the part of the State Department was indeed insidious, it was at first invisible. *Southland* was immediately suppressed in Santiago: the company

was forced to leave within days. There were no more reviews; nothing more was written, and nothing was publicly said; what followed was a cold and sustained silence. Dunham had been warned, after all, by officials who attended rehearsals in Santiago to remove "the lynching scene." Since she insisted on presenting the ballet as conceived and rehearsed, there would be no more calls or invitations from the members of the embassy who had wined and dined her. The intention of the ensuing silence was to pretend that *Southland* had never happened. Nevertheless, word about the ballet traveled quickly over the Andes. When the company returned to Argentina, there was also a cold silence from the embassy in Buenos Aires, and it was a silence Dunham clearly understood. In the company's second command performance in Buenos Aires for Eva Perón, *Southland* was not performed, nor was it performed in the rest of 1951 during the company's tour through South America, nor in all of 1952. "Dunham's whim," as her impresarios deemed it, was a financial hazard that was to be avoided.

However, by the end of 1952, in preparation for the company's Paris season, rehearsals for *Southland* started again in Genoa, Italy. Anticipating criticism and possible repression, Dunham sent John Pratt ahead to inform the American embassy in Paris that she intended to perform the ballet. Arriving in Paris with the company, Dunham was besieged by members of the press who wanted to know more about her "lynching ballet." They knew she had been heavily criticized and ousted in Santiago, and they asked Dunham what she thought the Americans might do if she performed *Southland* in Paris. A few days before the opening, Dunham tried to see American ambassador James Clement Dunn, but he was supposedly out of town. She spoke instead with his cultural attaché, who reportedly told Dunham, "We trust you and your personal good taste, and we know that you wouldn't do anything to upset the American position in the rest of the world." Pressing for a definitive answer as to whether or not she should present *Southland,* Dunham says, "He wouldn't go any farther. So I did it."

Southland opened at the Palais de Chaillot on 9 January 1953 to a swarm of radically bipartisan reactions. There were praises in

the French Communist newspaper *L'Humanité* for the ballet's remarkable powers of expression and its contribution to "the emancipation of the blacks by rising against the racist assassins," and complaints in the conservative *Le Monde* that "Katherine Dunham had changed since those wonderful evenings in Paris. . . . What has happened to the anthropologist we once admired?"[38] A *Paris Presse* review refused even to acknowledge Dunham's creation of *Southland*.

The critical responses, as she later wrote, sounded to Dunham like "the repeated rhythm of an out-of-gear piece of machinery" and ranged from pronouncements such as "cerebralism," "Sorbonnism," and "betraying racial origins in emphasizing the orchestra instead of the tam-tam" to "beauty," "unforgettable theatre," "courage," and "going beyond the folkloric and anecdotal into the realm of classicism."[39] While *Southland* marshaled criticism from radio commentators, who advised Dunham not to show blacks hanging on the stage, several of the Communist newspapers felt she had not gone far enough to show her anger and wanted to see the burning of the body on stage.

There were as many congratulations as criticisms for Dunham's breaking away from the limiting categories that had been placed on her by the French. However, she was deeply grieved by the criticism, especially from her friend, the noted art historian and critic Bernard Berenson, who saw the production in Paris. Berenson's rejection of *Southland* symbolized the American response: "I know and respect all of your feeling towards the State, many of which I have," Dunham wrote in a response to Berenson after the Paris opening:

> But I have not been approached by either communists or the communist press who I believe do not see anything, either in the ballet or in the material, for anti-American usage. . . . In my heart of hearts . . . I know this has done more good for the American government than perhaps even they know. It has proven to the world that the thing of which they are being accused every day, due to the acts of such people as Senator McCarthy, has not yet become a fact and that freedom of speech still remains one of our basic principles."[40]

Southland was never again performed after the Paris production. Dunham says, "I didn't do it after Paris. I was personally spent. I didn't have the spiritual strength, because it takes that." She was burned out, not only from battling critics but from fighting her own company which, she discovered, had never wanted to perform *Southland:* "I was surprised at their reaction because they didn't want me to do it at all. Their idea in leaving America was to lose any feelings of racial difference, to try to forget what the whole thing was about. And when I first mentioned it, they asked why was I doing it. They had never really known me, I discovered." Dunham remembers talking to the company, for days that seemed like an eternity, about a situation to which they had shut their eyes. She explains: "It's not easy to take a company who had defended themselves all their lives, and then been protected because of the constant touring, from the indignities of their color. They felt they were untouchable and were afraid of losing that. And this took them down to the very bottom, to a reality they felt they had never known."[41]

However, members of the company had a different perspective. "Why bother getting into something so deep when everything was fine, the ballets we were doing were expressive enough," says Lucille Ellis, who joined Dunham's company in 1938. "We were not ready to go into anything that was racial because it was back to a history we wanted to rest. Paris had accepted us, we weren't going to change the world."[42] Ellis remembers that when Dunham explained to the company who the principals were, how the characters would react to each other, and that Julie was going to play a white girl, "all of a sudden, some members of the company realized that Julie was white—they never thought about that before."[43]

Says Julie Robinson Belafonte about creating the role of the "white trash" girl, "The only way I could do it, because I almost didn't, was to analyze it as an acting problem and transpose my hatred of this person I'm playing into the character."[44] It was the word "nigger"—the only word spoken in the ballet, and by Julie—that triggered hostility and confusion within the company. At a midnight rehearsal, which the entire company witnessed,

Belafonte remembers how Dunham, directing the moment when Julie opens her eyes and sees Richard, said:

> All right, open your eyes and you're in shock. All of a sudden, you could be somebody. And you start to think how you could use this situation. You've got it, you're going to accuse him of rape and tell everybody a lie. Yes. Now with all your everything, and in an accusing way, scream out "Nigger."[45]

There was no way Julie could say the word out loud; weeping, she begged Dunham to let her find a way to get the word across without speaking it. "When the word finally came out, I couldn't believe it was coming from my own body," says Belafonte. It was only when she overheard a dancer remark, "Do you hear the way she says 'Nigga'? Nobody would say it that way if they didn't really mean it,"[46] that she realized how *Southland* forced members of the company into an awareness of their own color prejudices and fears.

"It meant that color came into play, shades of color," Lucille Ellis explains, "because some dancers were white and some were lighter than others."

> And then Julie and I had to stay apart in rehearsals to acclimate to our roles because we weren't those same people. And she was afraid to hurt my feelings and I was afraid to hurt hers. We were all walking on eggs.[47]

Most difficult was that right after performing *Southland,* the company on the same program had to turn around and perform a lighter piece from the repertory, like *Minuet* or *Cakewalk*. Ellis remembers, "Out of the depths of hell, we were coming back to 'Oh, fine,' and the transition of personal emotions was very difficult."[48] *Southland* put a strain on the entire company. They worried about whether they could do it, whether or not they were doing the right thing, whether it would ruin the company's reputation, whether it would ruin Dunham. Says Ellis:

> *Southland* took our security blanket away. If we were run out of the country, where would we be? We were in limbo. Until finally, we

said we can fight it—we can do what we want to do, because this is what it's all about. And that's how we all came together."[49]

THE AFTERMATH

Though she was never called before the House Un-American Activities Committee, Dunham was not spared the most devastating of reprisals from the State Department. In the 1950s, when the U.S. State Department began sending representative American artists abroad as cultural diplomats—a policy that was, ironically, a direct outgrowth of the Cold War—Dunham was continually denied both support and subsidy and was never chosen to officially represent the United States.

In 1954 the José Limón Dance Company was chosen as the first State Department–sponsored dance touring company to perform in South America. In Montevideo, the Limón company's opening was booked on the same evening as Dunham's opening. It was a seeming surprise to the embassy, which hosted a cocktail party for Limón to which Dunham was not invited and insisted that Dunham's impresario attend the Limón premiere and forego Dunham's. In Greece, with an engagement next in Lebanon, Dunham learned that the State Department almost succeeded in getting the theater owner in Lebanon to say the theater was occupied, which would have made the company sit for days in Greece at their own expense until the day before the Lebanon performance.[50]

In San Francisco in 1955, from the high cost of keeping the company going and the dancers decently housed to the exorbitant fees that had to be paid to the theater and musicians' unions, Dunham faced the company's greatest financial crisis. "I have been closer these days than ever to complete annihilation," she wrote to Berenson. "When we arrive in New York, I shall put my case before the proper authorities and try to obtain some sort of government aid."[51] Still battling segregation, she began a lawsuit against the landlords who leased an apartment to Dunham and Pratt and then changed their minds after discovering they were an interracial couple "disgracing their respective races."[52] Dunham changed her mind on the lawsuit, thinking it petty compared to

the recent lynching in Mississippi of Emmett Till, which, along with the other difficulties encountered in San Francisco, had led her to believe that very little had changed since *Southland:* "I am thoroughly discouraged by and about America and what is happening here,"[53] she wrote.

In Australia in 1956, a representative of the Chinese Opera invited Dunham to visit the People's Republic of China. The invitation was an honor as well as a breakthrough in cultural relations, while also providing a convenient travel stop for the company, which had subsequent engagements in Manila and Tokyo. Dunham's request to go to China was obstinately refused by the U.S. embassy, which told her she could go if she was willing to give up her passport and pay a $10,000 fine for each company member. Dunham reasons, "I think it was because they would not want anything as attractive as a black company, as we were, to go. It would give us too much prestige." It was not until the late 1960s that American contact with China resumed. By then, it was claimed that a United States ping-pong team had made the first breakthrough in communication with Red China.

In the 1960s, the State Department continued to give Dunham the excuse that the company was too large and therefore too expensive to sponsor. Dunham, to no avail, offered to send as few as five dancers and two pianos abroad, despite the fact that Alvin Ailey's company of dancers, singers, and musicians toured the Far East and Australia for thirteen weeks in 1962. Duke Ellington's Orchestra was treated to an extravagant State Department–sponsored tour through Europe and the Middle East in 1963.[54] For Dunham, these inconsistent policies, embarrassing oversights, and reports that she was under secret investigation by the F.B.I. indicated an intentional blackballing. "I had fallen from grace. I never had aid from the State Department. I had all sorts of encouragement and cocktail parties wherever we went, but never financial aid."[55] Physically exhausted and financially bankrupt, the Katherine Dunham Dance Company gave its last performance at New York's Apollo Theatre in 1965.

PROTEST AS A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

Artistic confrontation and struggle is a way of life; it is neither a badge pinned on and taken off, nor a placard carried and put down. Dunham's commitment "to expose the ill so that the conscience of the many will protest" is a deep one, as she wrote to Berenson about *Southland:* "Somewhere in me are roots stronger than I am based more on intuition than reason, and which walk hand-in-hand with my own will and judgment so that I seldom falter in an act, and if I do I am almost always regretting and ashamed."[56] Not to confront, not to respond to the social injustices of her people was to sin: it was a lesson Dunham learned early in childhood, when in a courtroom she unwittingly abetted in the loss of a custody suit between members of her family and bitterly learned that: "There is no absolution in innocence and even unwilling collaboration was at least stupidity, which has no place in uprightness; and that betrayal of the trust of others and pride of self is more guilt-engendering than just plain, willful sinning."[57]

Propelled by a search for truth, *Southland* is rooted in the African American struggle for self-definition in a society that has often refused to acknowledge its humanity. From the innocent Lucy to the trusting fieldhand Richard; from the gospel-like chorus to the "seeing" blind man searching for answers; from the Basin Street Blues people, who absorb the tragic lynching through the sheer power of their dancing, and the knife-thrower who fiercely refutes it, to the chorus that in the end is practically triumphant, the characters in *Southland* struggle to confront and transcend their historical restrictions in an attempt to affirm meaning in their lives. They refuse to allow the racist perception of black humanity to be reduced to the sum total of their brutalization.[58] They are what makes *Southland* such a powerful protest expression.

Dunham wrote to Berenson, "I have turned every possible searchlight and inner eye on *Southland* and I must say I feel absolutely innocent. It was a thing to me of great beauty, an expression

of the passion in me. I grieved the unkind remarks, but I would have more deeply grieved had I betrayed myself."[59] The act of creating *Southland* was absolutely crucial to Dunham's well-being, just as the act of performing it was to her dancers, however painful it was. Dunham believes that "a person who dances should know why they dance, and to do so, they must have an historical background."[60] Dancing is a way to knowing, hence it is an affirmation of self and of one's culture. The "fiction" of *Southland,* the artwork itself, becomes the healing agent for the more brutal "fact" of it. As Lucille Ellis confirms for the company, "*Southland* was the beginning of knowing the quality of life and the human element. It made us all respect life and people. It made you feel you must do something. And in the doing, you finally begin to find yourself."

Southland was silenced, though Dunham was not. Nor were those she touched. "She was my Toussaint L'Ouverture," Talley Beatty says about the woman who made him a dancer and gave him the courage to choreograph from the center of his own experience. Though *Southland* was suppressed, and never even performed in the United States, its fierce spirit and bold theatrical form prefigured such black protest expressions of the late 1950s and 1960s as Beatty's *Road of the Phoebe Snow,* Donald McKayle's *Rainbow 'round My Shoulder,* Eleo Pomare's *Blues for the Jungle,* and Alvin Ailey's *Masekela Langage*. These protest expressions by African American artists followed Dunham's conviction: "Your daring has to backed up with a willingness to lose that point. To make a bigger point, you might have to lose one. I like to avoid confrontations if I can. But if I cannot, I want to be totally prepared to solve them or eliminate them, one way or another."[61]

Although *Southland* instigated the dissolution of Dunham's company, it laid the moral groundwork for subsequent expressions of affirmation and dissent and will forever embolden all those who dare to protest in the face of repression.

NOTES

This chapter was originally published in *Dance Research Journal* 26, no. 2 (fall 1994): 1–10. Minor changes have been made for consistency.

1. Katherine Dunham, "Program: *Southland* in Santiago de Chile, World Premiere, January 1951," in *Kaiso! Katherine Dunham: An Anthology of Writings,* ed. VèVè A. Clark and Margaret Wilkerson, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 118.

2. Ibid.

3. Quoted by Leon F. Litwack, "The Nifty Fifties," in *Advancing American Art: Painting, Politics and Cultural Confrontation at Mid-Century,* ed. Taylor D. Littleton and Maltby Sykes (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 2. Litwack does not identify the writer except to say that his observation was published in *Commentary.*

4. VèVè A. Clark and Margaret Wilkerson, eds., "Dunham the Woman: Perspectives," in *Kaiso!* 5.

5. John Martin, "The Dance: Tropical Review," *New York Times,* 26 September 1943, sec. 2, 2.

6. Katherine Dunham, "Thesis Turned Broadway," in *Kaiso!* 55.

7. John Martin, "Schoolmarm Turned Siren or Vice Versa in *Bal Nègre* at the Belasco," *New York Times,* 17 November 1946, sec. 2, 9; "Torridity to Anthropology," *Newsweek* (27 January 1941): 62; Dorathi Bock Pierre, "Cool Scientist or Sultry Performer?" *Dance Magazine* (May 1947): 11; "High Priestess of Jive," in Katherine Dunham, *Scrapbooks: Clippings, Programs and Photographs,* vol. 5, *1937–49,* Dance Collection, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

8. Howard Smead, *Blood Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), xii. The Tuskegee Institute conservatively reports that between 1937 and 1946, 200 blacks were rescued from threatened lynchings, 21 blacks alone in 1946; see *Crimes against Lynching: Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948), 50.

9. The January 1944 lynching of an unnamed fifteen-year-old Negro youth in the Suwannee River, and the quadruple lynching of Roger Malcolm, Malcolm's wife, George Dorsey, and Dorsey's wife in Monroe, Georgia, on 20 July 1946 are cited in *Crimes against Lynching,* 10, 50.

10. Pearl Primus, telephone interview with the author, 23 March 1993.

11. Primus, in 1944, quoted by Bragiotti and cited in Beverly Hillman Barber, "Pearl Primus: Rebuilding America's Cultural Infrastructure," in *African American Genius in Modern Dance,* ed. Gerald E. Myers (Durham, N.C.: American Dance Festival, 1993), 10.

12. Talley Beatty, telephone interview with the author, 2 July 1992. Beatty was one of the nine original dancers in Dunham's dance company; *Southern Landscape* was created after Beatty left Dunham to form his own group.

13. "Miss Dunham's Comment to the Louisville Audience at Memorial Autorium, October 19, 1944," in *Kaiso!* 88.

14. Julie Robinson Belafonte, interview with the author, 14 April 1993, New York City. "People forget," writes Agnes DeMille about Dunham: "Now people can go anywhere, stay anywhere, but in the thirties and early forties, it was terrible for blacks, particularly on tour . . . every city she went to posed the same problem: how should she house and protect her company and keep

them out of dreadful rooming houses and filthy hotels. . . . The dimensions of this persistent problem and the amount of trouble it caused her have never been discussed, but they were significant" (*Portrait Gallery* [New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1990], 45).

15. William H. Chafe writes that any program that deviated from a 100 percent conservative Americanism might have been attacked as reflecting a Moscow party line: "If you believed in civil rights, you were critical of America's racial customs and therefore an ally of those who, from abroad, also criticized American racism" (*The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], 108).

16. Martin Duberman's *Paul Robeson* (New York: Knopf, 1988) provides a detailed account of Robeson and the 1949 Peekskill riots.

17. Katherine Dunham, interview with the author, 29 January 1993, East St. Louis.

18. VèVè Clark, "Katherine Dunham: Method Dancing or the Memory of Difference," *African American Genius,* 8.

19. Langston Hughes in Robert Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 204.

20. On 2 February 1951, the seven black defendants known as the Martinsville Seven—Joe Henry Hampton, Howard Hairston, Booker Millner, Frank Hairston, John Taylor, James Hairston, and Francis Grayson—were executed at Richmond, Virginia, for allegedly having raped a white woman. On 8 May of the same year, Willie McGee was executed by the state of Mississippi, after having been convicted of raping a white woman, Mrs. Willamette Hawkins. Though evidence indicated Hawkins forced McGee into a relationship he later tried to sever, once the charge of rape had been raised, Mississippi was incapable of legitimizing the concept that a white woman sought a sexual relationship with a black male. The racist stereotype of the black rapist served to justify execution of black defendants who had been convicted in trials that mocked proper judicial procedures. Herbert Shapiro, in *White Violence and Black Response* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), documents the chilling details of McGee's trial and execution. Dunham remembers following the news of the trials, which lasted from 1949 to 1951. By March 1950 the seven youths, who were convicted in Virginia on 8 January 1949, were in the midst of applying for a change of venue, the details of which are documented in "Hampton v. Commonwealth," *58 South Eastern Reporter, 2d Series,* 290.

21. Dunham dancer Lucille Ellis recalls that *Southland* was produced by special arrangement with the Symphony of Chile and performed on the company's day off. Dunham arranged to have the theatre open, prepared a special concert of three premieres (*Southland* and two shorter dances), and had the audience invited through special invitation. "It was regal—the Embassy and all the dignitaries were there," Ellis recalled in a telephone interview with the author on 8 June 1993.

22. "Program: *Southland,*" in *Kaiso!* 117.

23. The singers in the chorus included Freddye Marshall, Gordon Simpson, Milton Grayson, Ural Wilson, Claudia McNeill, and Delores Harper and acted

as what Dunham described as a "Greek chorus" reflecting the action in song and mime.

24. The program, prologue, and scenario for *Southland* is reprinted in "Program: *Southland*" in *Kaiso!* 117–20. Details of the ballet were recounted during the author's interview with Katherine Dunham on 29 January 1993 in East St. Louis, at which time Ms. Dunham described the action of the ballet while playing a tape of di Stefano's musical score. Unless otherwise indicated, descriptions of the ballet come from the interview with Ms. Dunham.

25. Katherine Dunham, unpublished script for *Southland.*

26. "Method dancing" is aptly termed and elaborated on in VèVè Clark's "Katherine Dunham: Method Dancing or the Memory of Difference," in *African American Genius,* 5–8.

27. Ricardo was literally swung by the neck onto the stage; Dunham remembers on opening night, "He was dying for air and choking," because the stagehand forgot to put on his harness.

28. Ellis, telephone interview with the author, 8 June 1993.

29. Based on the 1943 poem by Lewis Allan, the song "Strange Fruit" was made popular by Billy Holliday; Lillian Smith's best-selling novel *Strange Fruit* (1944) dealt with the topic of interracial sex and romance, not rape, and caused quite a sensation.

30. Katherine Dunham, "Program: *Southland*" in *Kaiso!* 120.

31. The character of the blind man in the Santiago production was played by a Haitian priest by the name of Sisemone, who also drummed for Dunham's dance company.

32. After the chorus's dirge, the music changes back to jazz, but in a minor key. Dunham says, "It was never perfected, they should do what they're doing but with an understanding of the futility of their situation. It should have hatred in it, like the knife that showed it." Dunham, interview with the author, 29 January 1993.

33. Ibid. Julie Robinson Belafonte adds that "the character of the blind man is one of searching for answers." Belafonte, interview with the author, 14 April 1993.

34. Dunham, interview with the author, 29 January 1993.

35. Unless otherwise indicated, all remarks by Katherine Dunham in this section are from her interview with the author, 29 January 1993.

36. Athan Theoharis, *Seeds of Repression* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 16.

37. Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1929), 309. Bowers (1878–1958) was the United States ambassador to Chile from 1939 to 1953.

38. Gilbert Bloch, *L'Humanité,* 10 January 1953; Dinah Maggie, *Le Monde,* 12 January 1953.

39. Katherine Dunham, unpublished letter to Bernard Berenson, 1 February 1953.

40. Ibid.

41. Dunham, interview with the author, 29 January 1993.

42. Ellis, telephone interview with the author, 8 June 1993.
43. Ibid.
44. Belafonte, interview with the author, 14 April 1993.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Ellis, telephone interview with the author, 8 June 1993.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. The State Department incidents related by Dunham during her interview with the author are substantiated by Ruth Beckford in *Katherine Dunham, a Biography* (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1979), 58–62.
51. Dunham, unpublished letter to Bernard Berenson, 12 October 1955.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. See Duke Ellington's "Notes on the State Department Tour" in *Music Is My Mistress* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 305.
55. Dunham, interview with the author, 29 January 1993.
56. Dunham, unpublished letter to Bernard Berenson, 1 February 1953.
57. Katherine Dunham, *A Touch of Innocence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959), 66.
58. I am very much taken with James H. Cone's argument in his discussion of the blues that it is only through the "real" or "disclosed" in concrete human affairs that a community can attain authentic existence and that "insofar as the Blues affirm the somebodiness of black people, they are a transcendent reflection on black humanity," *The Spirituals and the Blues* (New York: Orbis, 1972), 113.
59. Dunham, unpublished letter to Bernard Berenson, 1 February 1953.
60. Katherine Dunham quoted in Joyce Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham: Reflections on the Social and Political Contexts of Afro-American Dance,* Dance Research Annual 12 (New York: Congress on Research in Dance, 1981), 7.
61. Katherine Dunham, in Brian Lanker, *I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1989), 28.