*Essay*

# Dance as a Language of Liberation and Activism: Katherine Dunham's Foundational Contributions to the Discipline of Black Studies[1]

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*Abstract*

Ms. Katherine Dunham was a Black dancer, scholar, Anthropologist, director, film star, historian, choreographer, actress, and activist, and despite this, she is not often included in the discipline of Black Studies. Is it because most Black Studies scholars do not recognize African/Black Dance as a Body of Knowledge? Is it because most people only view Ms. Dunham as a dancer and negate her dual role as a scholar/activist? Is it because she conducted most of her research and staged most of her choreography before Black Studies originated as an academic discipline in the

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university 1968? Is it because Katherine Dunham is a Black woman and Black Studies still tends to emphasize the African/Black man? Or, did her activism and her actions of resistance across the African World make her an enemy of the state and erase her legacy as it had been done with fellow activists W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, and Richard Wright? It is important for scholars in Black Studies to answer these questions and, in the process, reclaim all African/Black people throughout history who have conducted Black Studies research. This is because no other discipline can properly interpret, analyze, understand, or respect, in a holistic and African Centered way, the intricate, complex, and, sometimes, contradictory lives and legacies of African/Black people. No matter what other disciplines may claim about Katherine Dunham, she truly conducted Black Studies research through her scholarship, activism, and choreography, and needs to be acknowledged for her contributions.

*Keywords*
Katherine Dunham, Africana/Black Studies, Black dance, activism, dancer

## Introduction

"L'Ag'Ya," "Rara Tonga," "Shaka Zulu," "Woman with a Cigar," "Rites de Passage," "Octoroon Ball," and "Southland:" dances she choreographed telling stories about the lives of African people throughout the world. Haiti, Jamaica, Cuba, Trinidad, Martinique, and Senegal: areas in the African world where she conducted fieldwork and found inspiration for her dances. The Federal Writers Project and Federal Theatre Project: where she conducted research on the Nation of Islam and Father Divine, and produced her first dance program inspired by her research in the West Indies. *Carnival of Rhythm, Stormy Weather, Star Spangled Rhythm,* and *Pardon My Sarong*: films she choreographed and starred in with the dancers from her company. *Cabin in the Sky* and *Aida:* the Broadway show she starred in and the Metropolitan Opera she choreographed. *Island Possessed*, *A Touch of Innocence*, *Dances of Haiti*, and *Journey to Accompong*: texts she wrote discussing her life, her research, and her dancing. Talley Beatty; Arthur Mitchell; Eartha Kitt; George Balanchine; James Dean;

Marlon Brando; and Julie Robinson Belafonte: a few of the dancers she worked with, members of her company, and/or individuals who trained at her schools. Paul Robeson; Alaine Locke; Langston Hughes; Josephine Baker; Leopold Senghor; Richmond Barthe; Charles Johnson; Canada Lee; Frank Yerby; Henry Dumas; Arna Bontemps; Eugene Redmond; St. Clair Drake; and Horace Cayton: all close associates of this African woman. History, Anthropology, and Dance: disciplines she utilized while pursuing her undergraduate and graduate work at the University of Chicago. The University of Southern California; Spelman College; MacMurray College; Chicago State University; Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville; and Harvard University: a few of the approximately 18 universities that awarded her an honorary doctorate degree in Human Letters, Literature, Fine Arts, or Law (Sherrill 432). The Rosenwald Fellowship; Rockefeller Foundation Grant; Albert Schweitzer Music Award; Kennedy Center Honors Award; Black Heritage Commemorative Stamp from the United States Postal Service; and countless awards from Brazil, Haiti, and Trinidad and Tobago: fellowships and honors she received throughout her lifetime. The African woman who accomplished all of this in her 96 years as a dancer, Anthropologist, scholar, director, film star, historian, teacher, choreographer, actress, activist, and Black Studies scholar is Ms. Katherine Dunham.

Despite Katherine Dunham's monumental contributions to disciplines such as Dance and Anthropology, she remains almost absent from Black Studies. Although Ms. Dunham is mentioned in introductory Black Studies textbooks such as *The Introduction to African American Studies: Transdisciplinary Approaches and Implications* by Talmadge Anderson and James Stewart (326 and 336) and *The African American Studies Reader* edited by Nathaniel Norment, Jr. (Harding, Jr. 791); there is no mention of Katherine Dunham, or even Black Dance, in *The Introduction of Black Studies* by Maulana Karenga or the *Intro to Afro-American Studies: A People's College Primer* by Abdul Akailimat. Is this because most Black Studies scholars do not recognize African/Black Dance as a legitimate Body of Knowledge within the discipline of Black Studies? Is it because most Black Studies scholars cannot and do not interpret African/Black Dance; therefore, negating its importance to the discipline? Is being a dancer not worthy of discussion because it is not seen as academic? If

African/Black Dance is such an intricate part of African life and culture, how is it possible that Ms. Dunham's work and legacy has been excluded from Black Studies?

It is important for scholars in Black Studies to answer these questions and, in the process, reclaim all African/Black people throughout history who have conducted Black Studies research, including individuals like Katherine Dunham. Any African/Black person who helped to lay the foundation for the discipline of Black Studies before its official inception in the university in 1968 and/or helped to further the discipline after its establishment in the academy needs to be discussed in Black Studies. This is because no other discipline can properly interpret, analyze, understand, or respect, in a holistic and African Centered way, the intricate, complex, and, sometimes, contradictory lives and legacies of African/Black people. Katherine Dunham's fieldwork, scholarship, activism, community service, and chorography demonstrate that she is a Black Studies scholar/activist who helped to build a strong foundation for Black Studies to stand on before and after its inception; she left a legacy for Black Studies scholar/activists to follow today; and, consequently, must be acknowledged for her contributions.

## Defining the Discipline of Black Studies

Before Ms. Dunham's contributions to Black Studies can be discussed, Black Studies must first be defined. Therefore, Black Studies can be defined as the examination, analysis, and investigation of African culture, heritage, and traditions focusing on African people in America, but also including the experiences of African people throughout the African world (Glocke, "The Path Towards Literary Liberation" 197). This examination and analysis must be from an African Centered perspective, meaning that African people must not just be placed at the center of the discussion. Instead, African culture and the African Worldview must be the primary lens used for examination (Glocke, "The Path Towards Literary Liberation" 197). We must acknowledge the ancestors who came before us by making connections back to Ancient African Civilizations and to the African continent in order to fully understand the foundations laid for us to build upon today (Glocke, "The Path Towards Literary Liberation" 197). This discussion must also be brought forward to find the relevance and application of any and all discussions to the African/Black community both inside and outside the academy (Glocke, "The Path Towards

Literary Liberation" 197). The central thrust of Black Studies is to ensure that all research conducted can be used to aid in the spiritual, mental, physical, psychological, etc. liberation of African/Black people (Glocke, "The Path Towards Literary Liberation" 197). Therefore, Black Studies is inherently political; must always forge some type of social change; and must positively impact the African/Black community by increasing the life chances of African/Black people.

## Katherine Dunham's Academic Training

Although Katherine Dunham, born in Chicago in 1909, is most well known for her dancing and choreography, Ms. Dunham was also a formally trained academic scholar. At the time Katherine Dunham was pursuing her undergraduate studies at the University of Chicago in 1929, Black Studies was not yet a formal discipline in the academy. Those who were beginning to lay the foundation for Black Studies to emerge as a discipline in the future (i.e. W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, etc.) were forced to operate in Eurocentric disciplines such as History, Philosophy, Sociology, Anthropology, etc. Joyce Aschenbrenner, author of *Katherine Dunham: Dancing a Life,* states, "…the curriculum [at the University of Chicago] in the Division of Social Sciences was interdisciplinary, and ethnic and racial studies were promoted" (33). Although Ethnic and Racial Studies were promoted at the University of Chicago, this did not negate the racism Ms. Dunham encountered while attending the university and conducting her research. Because Black Studies had yet to be formally established, Katherine Dunham was forced to work within several Eurocentric disciplines that were, overall, anti-Black. Ms. Dunham's unique approach to researching African/Black life and culture demonstrated the need for an academic space that focused on African/Black people and was devoid of racism and white supremacy. Had Black Studies been an official discipline in the academy at this time, Ms. Dunham would have been able to conduct her research in a more conducive and nurturing environment and space.

During Ms. Dunham's tenure at the University of Chicago, the Department of Anthropology was one of the strongest in the nation. The new president of the university, Robert Maynard Hutchins, approached the academy, at the time, in an unconventional way by supporting interdisciplinary studies; encouraging students to conduct independent research projects; and emphasizing a worldwide perspective to

both research and learning (Aschenbrenner 28). Because Ms. Dunham embraced a holistic approach to life, she saw this university and this department, more specifically, as a place where she could research African phenomena in a holistic, interdisciplinary, and participatory way. This new approach allowed the Department of Anthropology to work in conjunction with other departments and disciplines, such as Dance, History, Sociology, etc., and allowed a space for Ms. Dunham to incorporate and utilize these disciplines in her own research. In fact, Ms. Dunham was able to create her own field of study through merging together the disciplines of Dance, History, and Anthropology into what "…she would later call Dance Anthropology" (Aschenbrenner 31). Truly understanding why Ms. Dunham chose the University of Chicago to pursue her academic studies allows additional insight into why other Black Studies' scholars, such as Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, St. Clair Drake, Horace Cayton, etc., also chose to be associated with this same university around the same time.

## Katherine Dunham's African Centered Perspective

Katherine Dunham also ensured that her research and choreography used an African cultural lens and/or used African culture as its foundation. In fact, Ms. Dunham believed that dance was a manifestation or a representation of culture. This meant that in order to understand the movement or dance, one had to understand the culture where it originated. Katherine Dunham wrote in the article entitled "Notes on the Dance" that "…because the dance seeks continuously to capture moments of life in a fusion of time, space, and motion, the dance is at a given moment the most accurate chronicler of culture patterns…dance become a communication as clear as though it were written or spoken in a universal language" (Clark and Johnson 519). Ms. Dunham would research a group of people throughout the African world and learn their dances by living with them and experiencing their culture firsthand. In "A Talk with Katherine Dunham" by Dorathi Bock Pierre, Dunham states, "I am not interested in dance routines. I am only interested in dance as an education, a means of knowing people…" (Clark and Johnson 250). By studying and participating in not only the dances, but also their everyday life, Ms. Dunham was able to get to know those she lived with well enough to later choreograph dances inspired by their culture and life.

Through her use of an African cultural lens, Ms. Dunham also began to understand and see for herself the close cultural connections all African people have throughout the world, despite any separation over time and space. The more fieldwork she conducted, the more she realized that African people, in places such as Jamaica, Senegal, Haiti, and America, have more commonalities in culture than differences as represented through the dance. Millicent Hodson, in her article "How She Began Her Beguine: Dunham's Dance Literacy" states, "Katherine Dunham, reaching through her own historical past, found the model in Africa-as it had survived through her ancestors in the Americas" (Clark and Johnson 499). The one commonality that all Africans have throughout the world is they all share a common origin in Africa and, therefore, at their root, all have the same cultural foundation. Tyler Barnett, in "Katherine Dunham: Matriarch of Black Dance," quotes Ms. Dunham stating, "No matter how hard we try, we can never break our ties to Africa…" (11).

Katherine Dunham's belief in Pan-Africanism, a philosophy that connects African people together throughout the African world through a common history and culture, can be seen though her close relationship with individuals such as Leopold Senghor, the President of Senegal and a leading voice in the Negritude Movement. In 1966, Ms. Dunham attended the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. Kate Mattingly, in "Katherine the Great," states, "A few years later, she moved to Senegal for a year and trained dancers in the Senegalese National Ballet. The U.S. Department named her the U.S. representative to the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, and she also served as cultural advisor to the country's president, Leopold Senghor" (56). Ms. Dunham also believed that all Asian, African, Latino/a, Chicano/a, and American Indian people throughout the world had a cultural and experiential connection to one another, as demonstrated by Wendy Perron, in her article entitled "Katherine Dunham: One-Woman Revolution," who states, "Her influence is global. She helped to train the Senegalese National Ballet, and her performances inspired the start of many national groups, such as Ballet Folklorico de Mexico" (Clark and Johnson 628).

Since most of her dances and choreography were inspired by her fieldwork, Ms. Dunham ensured that the dancers who performed her choreography were culturally grounded and understood the purpose of each movement. She also made

sure that the dancers understood the serious responsibility they had to portray both the people and the culture accurately through her choreography. An example of this can be seen when Alvin Ailey, one of her past students, chose to have his dance company, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, perform Ms. Dunham's choreography in 1987-1988 in a show entitled the "Magic of Katherine Dunham." Ailey stated in an interview with Alan M. Kriegsman in "Dance's Dynamic Duo: Alvin Ailey in Collaboration with Katherine Dunham" that "We'd rehearse five hours a day and we had a merry old time, and then Katherine would give us these lectures. Let me tell you, we knew about every rock and leaf in the Caribbean by now" (Clark and Johnson 592). This is also evident in the film, *The Magic of Katherine Dunham,* which chronicles Ms. Dunham teaching the Alvin Ailey dancers not only how to perform her technique and choreography, but the motivation and history behind each step.

## Katherine Dunham's Connection to Ancient Africa

Black Studies scholars also emphasize the importance of Africa and/or Ancient African Civilizations or, more specifically, Ancient Kmt (Ancient Egypt) as a beginning point of reference for all discussions regarding African/Black people because it was one of the first African civilizations and cultural spaces independent from whites. Ms. Dunham also agreed and acknowledged the importance of Ancient Kmt to the present-day life and legacy of African/Black people throughout the world. In fact, Katherine Dunham states in an interview with Kate Mattingly that:

> We had [at the Dunham school] a few lectures or a course in introductory philosophy. A number of students followed my particular interest in ancient Egyptian social life. We can extract a good deal of information from their drawings about their movements and dances, singly and in groups. Archaeology is like anthropology, except you learn about people from their artifacts, remains and art (56).

Ms. Dunham used the physical movements captured in the pictographs of Mdw Ntr (hieroglyphics) to gain a better understanding of Kemetian (Egyptian) social and cultural life. How one moves and how one dances offers phenomenal insight into one's culture if one knows how to interpret it.

Ms. Dunham's belief in the importance of Ancient Kmt to the African/Black community can also be seen in the Broadway show, *Cabin in the Sky,* that Dunham choreographed with George Balanchine. This show ran on Broadway and toured the United States from 1940-1941, and included an Egyptian Ballet performed by her company during the song "In My Old Virginia Home (on the River Nile)." The song title, choreography, and costumes specifically demonstrated to those who attended the Broadway show that not only were Ancient Kemetians dark skinned Black people, but also that African people in America are direct descendants of Ancient Kemetians.

Ms. Dunham also choreographed the opera, *Aida,* in 1963 for the Metropolitan Opera. Dunham's article "Notes on Dances for *Aida,"* discusses not only the opera's main story line of a love affair between an Egyptian Prince and Nubian Princess, but also include an in-depth discussion of Kemetic life, culture, and cosmology (Clark and Johnson 388-391). Ms. Dunham used her extensive knowledge and understanding of Kemetic history to choreograph and stage this opera as authentically and accurately as possible. Millicent Hodson states:

> How Dunham must have startled the Metropolitan Opera by the authenticity of her 1963 production, in which the Ethiopian princess as a black performer and the Egyptian army was composed of Somalians, Nubians, and other groups which archeology identifies as the population of black Africa at the time of ancient Egypt. Dunham insisted on authenticity not only in the characterization but also in plot. She saw the priestess scene as a secret rite of women's mysteries, changing the scene from an exotic showpiece to the crux of the transformation ritual she saw the whole opera to be (Clark and Johnson 500).

## Katherine Dunham's Academic Work Throughout the African World

Unlike Eurocentric disciplines where the researcher objectively separates themselves from whom and what they are studying, those in the discipline of Black Studies

believe objectivity does not exist. In fact, Black Studies scholars have a personal investment and commitment to the Black people they are researching because they, too, are a member of the African/Black community. It is truly a gift from the ancestors to have the opportunity to bring your experiences and your identity to what you are studying. Moreover, not only must the Black Studies scholar/activist understand the experience and the struggle of the African/Black community both inside and outside the academy, but they are also responsible for identifying any problems or issues and making positive change through the application of feasible solutions. If the research is not going to positively contribute to the lives of African/Black people and lead towards liberation, then why conduct it in the first place?

During Ms. Dunham's academic career, most scholars had adopted a Eurocentric, observational approach to research by studying cultures solely by watching. Dunham, however, strongly disagreed. She believed that to truly understand the cultural rituals, customs, and dances of the people in Jamaica, Haiti, and other regions where she conducted fieldwork, she needed to actively participate and experience them firsthand. Dunham states, in the article entitled "The Anthropological Approach to the Dance," that "In each community [Jamaica, Martinique, and Trinidad] I would rent a native hut and take up residence more or less on the same basis as the natives themselves, and patiently await an occasion to dance, or to find out what to expect in the way of dances" (Clark and Johnson 511).

While in Haiti, Katherine Dunham informed her advisor, Melville Herskovitz, of her decision to undergo initiation into the first and second stages of Vodun. Herskovitz, like most Anthropologists of the time, attempted to dissuade her, urging her to remain an observer instead. What he did not understand is that no spectators were allowed; therefore, if she really wanted to see the importance of dance to Vodun, she would have to become initiated and witness it for herself. In Halifu Osumare's article entitled "Katherine Dunham, a Pioneer of Postmodern Anthropology," she published excerpts of this letter sent to Ms. Dunham by Melville Herskovitz in 1936 stating:

> I am a little disturbed also at the prospect of your going through canzo ceremony, and I am wondering if it would not be possible for you to attend merely as a witness. Of course, as you know, the trial by fire is an integral part

> of this initiation, but I wouldn't like to see you suffer burns as a result of going through it. However, you know best in such matters (Clark and Johnson 617).

Despite these warnings from her advisor and the pressure from the discipline of Anthropology to observe rather than participate, Katherine Dunham completes all of the requirements for her initiation into the first and second stages of Vodun.

Although Dunham actively participated in the dances and activities she studied, her role as a scholar/activist required her, like other Black Studies scholars, to navigate both immersion and detachment by engaging fully in the experience while simultaneously maintaining the perspective needed to document and analyze it later. In *Island Possessed,* she states, "Each moment lived in participation was real; still, without arranging this expressly, without conscious doing or planning or thinking I stayed outside the experience while being totally immersed in it" (228). Katherine Dunham even commented how, in certain circumstances, she became too wrapped up in trying to analyze what she was doing instead of living in the moment and leaving the analysis for later. Ms. Dunham states, "For a long time I was merely a happy participant in every dance that I could manage to get to for miles around. Then my academic training got the better of me, and I began to get seriously into the question of the choreographic form, psychological and sociological significance, organization and function of what I was seeing and participating in" (Clark and Johnson 512).

## Katherine Dunham's Research in Jamaica

Ms. Dunham's African Centered approach to research and her emphasis on participation in the community she was studying can be seen in her first fieldwork experience with the Maroons in Accompong (a village in Jamaica) around 1936. When she began this project, she was studying at the University of Chicago and was awarded the Rosenwald Fellowship to study the Koromantee war dances. Ms. Dunham states, in an interview with Tyler Barnett, that the reason for her to conduct research in places such as Accompong was:

> At the time the fascinating this was how they danced, why they danced, the form of it, and I was beginning to be vitally interested in form and function. Now those are the things that seemed to have preoccupied me the most when

> I lived among the people and joined them in their rituals and ceremonies and so forth. Later in life I have drawn from all of these places and people and things the things that I needed for the moment… (10-11).

In *Journey to Accompong* (published in 1946), Ms. Dunham writes about being told that she was the only person (up to that point in time) to stay with the Maroons for longer than a day (8). Despite Zora Neale Hurston's criticism that her stay was not long enough, not even Melville Herskovitz (her professor who set up this opportunity for her) had spent as much time in the Maroon community as Ms. Dunham (Hurston 272). Katherine Dunham states, "But for a stranger to come into Maroon-town and settle is practically unknown to Maroon History" (124). In the chapter entitled "The Twelfth Day: Footnote on Going Native," Dunham discusses how she had been in Accompong for almost two weeks and had begun the process of releasing herself of her Western habits and becoming part of the Maroon community (51). At first, she walked around the path where the donkeys rode; she boiled the water before she drank it; she watched how the dishes were cooked before she ate them; she put on make-up when she woke up in the morning; she wore a big hat to shield herself from the sun; and she went to bed too late and was not up early enough (51-52). But, on the Twelfth Day, she states, "Now I follow the path like the rest, brush aside the tiny fish when I dip fresh spring water to drink, wind a bright band around my head in lieu of a kerchief, eat heartily whatever Mai brings me, and sleep with only a rough sheet between my sunburned skin and the hard mat of river rushes" (51). She continues:

> I have learned to rub coconut oil into my skin to counteract the burn and to take the place of cosmetics, to go to bed not long after the sudden dusk except on special occasions, and then to be prepared to stay up until dawn without a murmur and to rise when the warm sun reaches my open shutters. I even contemplate taking off my shoes, I have long since done away with stockings, and exchanging my linen sport dresses for loose, knee-length gowns tied at the middle with a rope…have learned to listen well, talk little, and enjoy a humorous situation even if the joke is on me. I drink white rum in preference to red, and have practiced, though disastrously, mounting the ravine from the

> spring with a small tin of water on my head....I wonder if this is what anthropologists call 'going native' (52).

Disappointed by the absence of the Koromantee war dances she had hoped to study, Dunham unexpectedly came across an informal gathering of people dancing while on her way to pick up her "goombay" drum days before her departure. This is when Ms. Dunham realized she had not encountered these dances during her stay because the community had been forbidden to perform them by the Colonel, one of the community leaders. She states, "Ba'Teddy explained further that all this was strictly forbidden by the Colonel, that he had cautioned them against doing these dances while I was there (my suspicions of hypocrisy were well founded)" (130). Under the agreement that she would forget the Koromantee war dances after seeing them, the members of the Maroon community performed the dances for her.

Even though she went to Accompong to specifically study their dances, she left knowing more about Maroon culture than anticipated. In *Journey to Accompong,* she documents how she learned that the Maroons believe in the importance of the earth; they respect their elders; they tell "Nansi" or "Nonse" stories for fun and enjoyment; they incorporate dance into every ceremony; the children are disciplined by anyone in the community; they believe no one owns the earth or the land; they believe that public shaming by the community is the most severe form of punishment; they are in tune with the earth and know when events are going to happen, such as when it is going to rain; they embrace the practice of having more than one wife by the men in the community (but the first wife chooses the second wife); no land is ever bought or sold in the community; they believe in the spirit of the ancestors; they believe that ancestors play a role in the destiny of the world; they embrace matriarchy; they believe in burying the afterbirth and the umbilical cord under a tree to honor the birth of a child; and they name members of the community after the day of the week they were born. She also realizes that many Maroon customs can be traced back to West Africa, and, more specifically, to the Ashanti in West Africa. Dunham states, "Today I became acquainted with a vestige of that social organization which is so vital to West Africa-the work group" (33). She also states, "In like manner, true to an old Ashanti custom, lone palm trees were pointed out to me as owned by one man but in another man's field" (19). These are aspects of African life and culture that she will continue to see, and connections she will

continue to make, as she traveled to various other African countries throughout the world.

Dunham also became very interested in what the Maroons call Obi (or more often known as Obeah), a traditional form of African spirituality. A few days before her departure, Katherine Dunham expressed her concerns about not being able to leave on the day she was scheduled to depart because the boat was overbooked. If she did not leave on that day, the next opportunity for her to leave would be two months away. Ms. Dunham asked her friends in Accompong, "Wasn't there a fortuneteller who could help me?" (143). What she was really asking for was a spiritual adviser who could counsel her. Unfortunately, any practice of Obi was truly prohibited by both British law and by the Colonel (even though the Colonel, himself, believed in the power of Obi). She soon would find out that Ba' Weeyums, someone she had known for her entire stay in the Maroon community, practiced Obi, and was willing to advise her. In secret, Ba'Teddy and Ba' Weeyums called on the spirit of Old Galleo to help her on her journey. She became so intrigued with the process that even though she was leaving in a day, she still wanted to learn as much as she could about Obi in her time remaining. Therefore, Ms. Dunham states, "Tomorrow I leave, and there is still much to do to complete even the first step of my initiation…We closed both doors and shutters, and talked in whispers. All this gave emphasis to the mystery of our secret, and to the intimacy that was so important if I was to be admitted into the cult of obi" (149). She is told:

> This business of obi is a lifetime training, Ba' Weeyums explained. He himself had always had an intimate contact with the spirit world. Certain it is that life does not end with the planting of the corpse in the earth. Oh, no. That is really just the beginning. One's ancestors are very important in controlling the destiny of the world. As for Christianity-well, it was all right. But the people who turned from obi, who refused to recognize the importance of the spirit world, the ancestors, and the powers concealed in nature for man to use, were in error. Things were getting worse and worse in the world. More unhappiness, more strife, more discontent (150).

Ms. Dunham believed that Obi is not commonly practiced in Maroon society because the Black men in the village are forced to be ashamed of these rituals;

therefore, they hide this knowledge and talk to the ancestors in secret (150). Ms. Dunham states, "Had he known at first that I, too, had faith in these things of nature he would taken me into his confidence sooner" (150). She continues, "As it was, he would take me again to the graveyard tonight, wash me in rum and exhort the spirit of Galleo to go with me always. I could use it for my own. I would be better, of course, when I returned home to go the graveyard of my own ancestors and procure the aid of one of them, but until then he would give me Galleo" (150-152). Ba' Weeyums poured rum on the ground; spoke in Koromantee, Creole, and other African languages; beat his stick on the ground; and sacrificed two chickens in order communicate with the spirit of Galleo and have him guide her on her journey (157-158). For her initiation, Katherine Dunham stripped down to her waist and up to her knees, and was rubbed down with rum and jonkra weed or obi weed (157). Afterwards, Ms. Dunham states:

> …had brought me back obi weed, snake root, and death weed. I must sleep with the snake root under my pillow always, and put the obi weed and death weed in separate bottles of rum. Frequently I must bathe the back of my neck and head with this, and pour a little on the earth to appease Old Galleo's spirit which would most certainly travel with me until I procured one of my own ancestors in his stead (159).

## Katherine Dunham's Research in Haiti

Soon after her experiences in Jamaica, Katherine Dunham traveled to Haiti to continue her research on African dance also through the Rosenwald Fellowship. She chose Haiti because she felt that Haitian culture was more authentically African than some of the cultural groups on the continent. Because Haiti had been untouched by outsiders and colonialism, this helped to illuminate its direct cultural connections to West Africa. Ms. Dunham believes, in her article entitled "Form and Function in Primitive Dance," that:

> …Haiti presented a particularly fertile field for the study of primitive dance. On the one hand, it had not been greatly industrialized and in isolated sections of the island original African forms and rituals were preserved almost intact. Furthermore, the French had never been as merciless in their cultural

> domination of colonies as had the British, and thus again the preservation of authentic and original forms was more characteristic of Haiti than of other islands of the West Indies. In other words, the authentic context within which the interrelation of the forms and functions of the dances would most spontaneously manifest themselves was available to me (Clark and Johnson 502-503).

Katherine Dunham states in *Island Possessed,* "These are the official Arada-Dahomy drums, scarcely changed in form since they were brought to the New World by the first slaves, and, like some of the songs and ritual practices, show less sign of acculturation changes than their counterparts found in urban centers of Africa today" (122). Haiti's direct West African connections are due to the Trans-Atlantic kidnapping and stealing of human beings from Africa to the West Indies, the Caribbean, and the Americas for free labor. Ms. Dunham states, "The three major sources of slave origin in Africa terminating in Haiti were Dahomey, the Congo, and Nigeria" (107).

Just as Ms. Dunham had done in Jamaica, Katherine Dunham continued to take an African Centered and participatory approach to her research in Haiti. Aschenbrenner also states, "Rather than treat Haitians and *voudun* as exotic 'others,' Dunham exhibited respect for Haitians and their belief systems in her openness to their ritual and *loa*" (92). She realized that in order to understand the dance and movement of African people, one has to also examine the interconnectedness of African spirituality and religion. Dorathi Bock Pierre quotes Ms. Dunham stating, "First they should know what people are, and what dance is. They should study religion in its relationship to dance, and have a course in religious dance to overcome prejudice against dance in communities where it exists" (Clark and Johnson 250).

More specifically, Katherine Dunham knew that to truly understand the religion and dances of Vodun from the perspective of the Haitian people, she needed to become initiated into Vodun herself. Gwen Mazer quotes Dunham in the article "Katherine Dunham" stating, "I soon realized that the dances and the rituals of Vodun were one" (Clark and Johnson 423). Therefore, Dunham not only learns and participates in the everyday secular dances, but she also decides to become initiated into the first and second levels of Vodun. Aschenbrenner elaborates stating, "The primary social functions of dances in the *voudun* were religious: preparing disciples

for the reception of the gods, petitioning the *loa*, clearing the air of the unwanted spirits, providing relief ('breaks') to participants in periods of intensity, and indicating possession by *mystere*" (82). Because Vodun is a religion emphasizing the importance of dance and movement in its practice, Ms. Dunham's knowledge as a trained dancer allowed her to experience, firsthand, these Haitian cultural and religious ceremonies and rituals in a way other scholars who do not dance, such as Zora Neale Hurston, could not.

Becoming an initiate into Vodun was not only about research for Ms. Dunham since she also received many personal benefits from this experience. Not only did her initiation forge a lifelong union and marriage between her and the loa, Damballa; but, her initiation also helped Ms. Dunham develop a stronger connection, as an African American, to her African roots and heritage. Haitian people believed Katherine Dunham (like many other African Americans) had lost touch with her African culture and heritage when her relatives were forcibly stolen and taken against their will to America to be enslaved. Ms. Dunham states in *Island Possessed*:

> That I would come into their midst, able to worship these gods in dance, and knowing, if fragmentarily, the essences of the religion which had meant for them spiritual and, in periods of their history, physical survival, confirming to them that segments of family, relatives known to have been separated from them and carried to some land vaguely north, others vaguely south, seemed to be of utmost importance to the cult itself-as it was important that I carry the meaning of the true vaudun to my people in that other country (106-107).

Throughout Katherine Dunham's research in Haiti, she became initiated into Vodun; participated in sacred and secular dances; developed close relationships with governmental leaders and politicians; and explored aspects of the metaphysical through what Ms. Dunham called "spiritual possession," including her direct participation in an "exorcism." Katherine Dunham states, "Then I would busy myself with the other life of the community-going out in boats with the fishermen, to market with the women, and sitting around the charcoal fields at night listening to gossip and improving my Creole" (Clark and Johnson 511). These experiences brought Ms. Dunham so close to the Haitian people that in 1950, she decided to buy

a home in Haiti, named Habitation Leclerc, where she lived periodically throughout her life. In fact, Habitation Leclerc was "…originally the home of Pauline Bonaparte Leclerc, Napoleon's sister" (Clark and Johnson 424). For Ms. Dunham, Haiti becomes more than just research because the Haitian people had become her family. What she learns from the people of Haiti became a part of Ms. Dunham for the rest of her life. Aschenbrenner quotes Katherine Dunham stating that Haiti and the Haitian people allowed her a "wonderful feeling of belonging...I felt I was finally at home" (11-12).

Her experiences as a partial initiate into Obi in Jamaica and as an official initiate into Vodun in Haiti enabled Ms. Dunham to enter the spiritual world of many other African societies later in life in places like Senegal and Nigeria. In the future, Ms. Dunham will have some regrets about becoming intricately involved in so many different African spiritual systems all at the same time. Gwen Mazer quotes Katherine Dunham stating, "This has left me with many gods to serve" (Clark and Johnson 424). More specifically, Ms. Dunham states in "Survival: Chicago after the Caribbean" that the loa she was connected to through her initiation into Vodun, Damballa, "…is a very jealous god and had no reason to aid or abet his competitors [the other gods she also praised]" (Clark and Johnson 112). She believed the gods she embraced from these various African cultural groups became jealous of one another, and this jealousy led to some unforeseen chaos in her life. Ms. Dunham states, in *Island Possessed,* "My Haitian gods continue [to be] jealous of my Brazilian ones and vice versa, my Cuban gods of both, and the animist genii of Senegal and Ogun and Yemenja of Nigeria figure somewhere in this ill-chosen assembly" (205).

## Katherine Dunham's Activism in the Dance Studio and on the Concert Stage

Black Studies, as a discipline, also emphasizes the idea that all art and research should be political, and should be constructed to invoke some type of social change. Ms. Dunham's experience both in conducting research and choreographing dances in an African Centered way taught her that everything must have purpose and function since nothing can exist without it. Ms. Dunham always told a story through her movements, and she knew that the stage was an opportunity for her and her dancers to make a political statement. In the article "Katherine Dunham, Dance

Pioneer, Dies at 96" by the Associated Press, she is quoted as stating "We [the dancers in my dance company] weren't pushing 'Black is Beautiful,' we just showed it." The existence of Ms. Dunham's predominately Black dance company, the Katherine Dunham Dance Company, and her emergence of a new dance technique steeped in African/Black culture, the Katherine Dunham Method and Technique, was, in and of itself, a political statement even without discussing the many dances they performed protesting the injustices against African/Black people around the globe.

Although Ms. Dunham did not set out to establish her own dance technique and style, it evolved naturally and organically from her fieldwork experience throughout the African world. Her Haitian influences and experiences are very visible in dances such as "Shango" where the dancers are dressed in white; a chicken is sacrificed on stage; and one of the dancer's becomes consumed by the loa, Damballa (*Dance Black America*). In the film, *African/Haitian Dance with Ruth Beckford*, the audience is taken through a Dunham technique class with movements entitled "Damballa," "Oshun," and "Legba," all named after Vodun loa. The emergence of Ms. Dunham's own technique and style of dance was also a protest itself against what else was going on within the world of dance at the time. In an interview with Kate Mattingly, Katherine Dunham states, "I just knew that I was not totally satisfied with classical ballet or modern or one or another folk dance…I knew that there was something missing, and what I felt was missing was a kind of understanding of one's body, along with the movement. I think that is terribly important" (56). Ms. Dunham also had many goals for her dance technique. In fact, Frederick L. Orme, in the article "The Negro in the Dance, as Katherine Dunham Sees Him" states that the goals for her dance technique were:

> To establish a well-trained ballet group. To develop a technique that will be as important to the white man as to the Negro. To attain a status in the dance world that would give the Negro dance-student the courage really to study, and a reason to do so. And to take our dance out of the burlesque and make it a more dignified art" (Clark and Johnson 194).

Ms. Dunham continues that her students, "…have a firmly established body, mind and spirit approach,' and that they 'know that movement is worthless unless it has

all three of these elements behind it" (Mattingly 56). Katherine Dunham approached her fieldwork and her scholarship in the same holistic way she approached her dancing and choreography.

One of the dances choreographed by Ms. Dunham and performed by her company around 1937 was entitled "Scenes from the Spanish Earth" or "Tableaux of Spanish Earth." This dance was inherently political because it supported the Abraham Lincoln Battalion and the Black people from America who fought in the Spanish Civil War. This dance was also to honor the innocent victims and the soldiers who died in the Spanish Civil War. Ashenbrenner quotes Ms. Dunham saying she choreographed this dance because "I was angry about the war" (25). One of the ways for Katherine Dunham to voice her feelings of anger and frustration about the Spanish Civil War was through movement.

Not only did she choreograph and perform this dance with her company, but Ms. Dunham also stated that "We [Dunham's dance company] had become very popular doing benefits for the Lincoln Brigade" (Clark and Johnson 106). Edward Barry, in the article entitled "Miss Dunham is Sensation in Haitian Dances," discusses her dedication to fundraising for those affected negatively by the war when he states, "Frances Allis, Katherine Dunham, Diana Huebert, and Marian Van Tuyl had pooled their resources for an elaborate program sponsored by the medical bureau of the American Friends of Spanish Democracy and designed to raise badly needed funds for the child victims of the civil war" (Clark and Johnson 189). She even refused to perform in Spain "…as my own private protest, until impresarios and well-wishing citizens convinced me that nothing would be gained for the cause by my depriving the Spanish people, those who needed the nourishment of the outside world, of our art form" (Clark and Johnson 105).

"Southland" was a ballet also choreographed by Ms. Dunham protesting the lynching of Black men in America and performed by her company beginning in 1951. Constance Valis Hill, in the article "Katherine Dunham's *Southland*: Protest in the Face of Repression," states, "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, that Dunham's response to America from afar took shape in *Southland*" (Clark and Johnson 348). Ms. Dunham choreographed this dance not only to educate people all

over the world on the reality of America's racism and brutality, but also to protest the American Government's refusal to prosecute those who were responsible for the murders of these innocent Black men. Dunham vowed to have her company continue performing this dance until lynching ended in America, and the white people who were responsible for these murders were prosecuted for their crimes. The ballet even included a pivotal scene where the white woman (who was responsible for the lynching of the Black man), "…approaches the body, rips a piece of cloth from it as a souvenir of her moment of triumph and in a deeper sense as a reminder of her guilt" (Clark and Johnson 343). Ms. Dunham always began the dance with this statement:

> And 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, and finally through the creative artist comes the need of the person to show this thing to the world, hoping that by so exposing the ill the conscience of the many will protest and save further destruction and humiliation. This is not all of America, it is not all of the South, but it is a living, present part (Clark and Johnson 341-342).

"Southland" was performed for the first time in Santiago, Chile. The United States Government and the State Department did not approve of this dance and were upset with Katherine Dunham for bringing attention to America's racism abroad, especially in a country that contained both "…communist and anti-American activity" (Aschenbrenner 150). Constance Valis Hill states:

> A reporter from the Communist newspaper, who asked to secretly meet her [Dunham] 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* (Clark and Johnson 352).

After Ms. Dunham's company performed this ballet in Santiago, the dance was suppressed; the American Government cancelled the company's visas; and the company was forced to leave the country. In an interview with Julie Robinson

Belafonte entitled "An Anthropological Band of Beings: An Interview with Julie Robinson Belafonte," she told Veve Clark that, "At that time we were being wined and dined by the American embassy, and we were in Buenos Aires, Argentina, for three months, and then we did one performance of this in Santiago, Chile. And the American embassy asked Dunham not to do it, so she said she was going to do it anyway. Then when we went back to Argentina, our friends weren't inviting us anymore" (Clark and Johnson 380). After this dance was added to the company's repertoire, J. Edgar Hoover and the State Department took notice and launched "…a campaign to undermine her [Dunham's] career" (Aschenbrenner 151). Ms. Dunham and her company were constantly denied funding, and as Hill states, "…Dunham was continually denied both support and subsidy and never chosen to officially represent the United States" (Clark and Johnson 356).

Hill also discusses other problems Katherine Dunham and her company had in other countries such as, "In Greece, with an engagement next in Lebanon. Dunham learned that the State Department had 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" (Clark and Johnson 356). Ms. Dunham was also repeatedly denied taking her company to China in 1956 by the United States embassy who, "…told her she could go if she was willing to give up her passport and pay $10,000 fine for each company member" (Clark and Johnson 357). Hill explains, "For Dunham, these inconsistent policies, embarrassing oversights, and reports that she was under a secret investigation by the F.B.I. indicated an intentional blackballing." (Clark and Johnson 357). Dunham wrote, "I am thoroughly discouraged by and about America and what is happing here" (Clark and Johnson 357). Like W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Richard Wright, and many others, the State Department maintained surveillance and restricted Katherine Dunham's international movement which deeply contributed to her deletion from society and the erasing of her life and legacy from history.

Additional dances of political protest that Ms. Dunham choreographed for her company included: "Tropic Death," "Negro Songs of Protest," and "Ode to Taylor Jones." Susan Manning, in "Watching Dunham's Dances, 1937-1945," states:

> Dunham's *Tropic Death*, which cast Talley Beatty as the fugitive from a lynch mob, and a collectively choreographed work titled *Negro Songs of Protest*. Set to lyrics collected by Lawrence Gellert, the final work moved from a collective lament against injustice ('How Long, Brethren?') to a daring threat of violent resistance ('Cause I'm a Nigger') to a specific protest against the fate of the Scottsboro Boys. A photograph from the *Daily Worker* shows three male dancers in the final 'Scottsboro.' Displaying the separation of torso and pelvic characteristic of West African dance, the dancers performed social protest with an Africanist accent" (Clark and Johnson 258).

"Ode to Taylor Jones," was another dance choreographed by Katherine Dunham honoring the life and legacy of Taylor Jones, a Black political activist from East Saint Louis. Eugene Redmond (the future editor of the Black Arts Movement text, *Drumvoices*) states in his article entitled "Cultural Fusion and Spiritual Unity" that this dance was "…a Dunham-produced ballet-tribute to Taylor Jones III, an East Saint Louis black activist killed in an automobile accident in 1967. *Ode*, partially written by Eugene Redmond, who shared the lead role in the production, had successful tours of the midwestern, southern, and eastern United States during 1968-1970" (Clark and Johnson 560). Ms. Dunham was dedicated to making all of her choreography purposeful, political, resistant to injustice, and grounded in the culture and experience of African/Black people.

## Katherine Dunham's Activism Beyond the Stage

Like all individuals in Black Studies who are both activists and scholars simultaneously, Katherine Dunham also follows this tradition. Her activism did not end at the stage door since Ms. Dunham and her dancers led many worldwide protests against inequality, white supremacy, and racism. When her company toured the United States during a period of both de jure and de facto segregation, Ms. Dunham protested their unfair treatment. Although her company was primarily Black, there were always a few white dancers in the company, such as Julie Robinson Belafonte. In fact, Belafonte recalls how Katherine Dunham did not care what her dancers looked like as long as they could dance and understand the cultural context of the movement (Clark and Johnson 365). But, having both white and Black dancers in her company, along with being married to a white man, John Pratt, caused many

problems because in the eyes of white society, they were violating the laws of segregation. Most hotels, restaurants, rehearsal spaces, and theatres refused to accommodate Katherine Dunham and her dancers despite her being so well known. This demonstrates that no amount of prestige would allow this Black dance company to transcend Jim Crow in the north or the south.

Additionally, Wendy Perron, in "Katherine Dunham: One-Women Revolution" states that, "In 1944, while touring in segregated Louisville, Kentucky, she [Dunham] found a 'For Blacks Only' sign on a bus and pinned it to her dress on stage. Afterward, she declared to the audience that she wouldn't come back to a place that forbade blacks to sit next to whites" (Clark and Johnson 626). Constance Valis Hill discusses the same event and states, "Sometimes there were outrageous confrontations, such as the story the 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" (Clark and Johnson 347). Katherine Dunham's actual statement made to the audience in Louisville was published in *Dance Teacher* magazine. Ms. Dunham states:

> I must protest because I have discovered that your management will not allow people like you to sit next to people like us. I hope that time and the unhappiness of this war for tolerance and democracy, which I am sure we will win, will change some of these things-perhaps then we can return. Until then, God bless you, for you will need it (Mattingly 54).

Ms. Dunham's activism did not stop at the American border, and she also continued to protest racial injustices abroad. While her company was in Sao Paulo, Brazil, Ms. Dunham protested being asked to leave a hotel where they were staying. This was an example of American racism transplanted abroad since the owner of the hotel was a Texas businessman who continued to embrace America's segregationist policies while living outside of the country. After recruiting help from some of the local politicians in Rio de Janeiro and pushing for the publicity of this event, Katherine Dunham and her dancers helped the first public accommodation law to be passed in Brazil. Aschenbrenner states, "Nevertheless, Dunham and her company

were breaking new ground, and wherever they went, the impact of their presence reverberated in the community" (136).

Katherine Dunham also launched many personal protests of her own outside of her dancing. In fact, Ms. Dunham was jailed in 1967 while a professor at East St. Louis University after she confronted the police about one her students who was unjustly accused and arrested for a crime he did not commit. In the article "Dunham Jailed Following Protest," the Associated Press states, "Katherine Dunham, Negro dancer and artist in residence at Southern Illinois University, was charged with disorderly conduct last night when she objected to the booking of one of her students as a suspect in recent racial disorders here" (Clark and Johnson 418).

In 1992, the United States Coast Guard captured a large number of Haitian refugees, treated them inhumanly, and then sent them back to Haiti without any care for their safety or well-being. Katherine Dunham lodged a protest to bring attention to "…the plight of the refugees who were fleeing political repression by the army and being repatriated or incarcerated by a U.S. government indifferent to their suffering" (Aschenbrenner 98-99). Ms. Dunham refused food for 47 days in honor of the Haitian refugees who were not physically strong enough to fast for themselves. She protested the treatment of the Haitian refugees by the American Government, as well as America's attitudes of apathy towards the people Ms. Dunham had come to call her family. During her fasting, Katherine Dunham is quoted by the Associated Press, in "Katherine Dunham, Dance Pioneer, Dies at 96," saying "It's embarrassing to be an American."

Martha Sherrill, in her article entitled "The Dance with Death," also discusses how Ms. Dunham recruited support from her friends Louis Farrakhan; Danny Glover; Harry Belafonte; Jonathan Demme; Dick Gregory; David Dinkins; Reverend Jesse Jackson; and organizations such as the NAACP, the American Jewish Committee, the American Bar Association, and the AFL-CIO (Clark and Johnson 433). Ms. Dunham continued to protest even though she knew she was putting her health at risk. Sherill continues to state that "In protest, Katherine Dunham is ready to die" (Clark and Johnson 431). During her fast, Katherine Dunham was hospitalized and as, "Her health was permanently damaged by the fast; she has not regained her ability to walk and now uses a wheelchair" (Aschenbrenner 99). In this

protest, Ms. Dunham gave up her freedom to move, the most important aspect of life for a dancer, to protest the treatment of the people from a place she called home.

## Katherine Dunham's Dedication to Liberatory Education

Katherine Dunham also believed in culturally centered education and not only established her own dance schools, but also opened performing arts schools in both New York and East St. Louis. Ms. Dunham's first school opened in 1945 with two students, and eventually, grew into the prestigious Dunham School of Culture and the Arts in New York. Aschenbrenner states, "A certificate from the Dunham School of Culture and the Arts, as it was then called, lists, in addition to dance, courses on dance theory and history, drama, theater, history, stage management and makeup, and cultural studies, including anthropology, psychology, philosophy, language, and music appreciation classes" (137). Katherine Dunham, in an interview by Gwen Mazer, states that she was highly criticized for her holistic curriculum. She states "When I founded the Dunham School, the curriculum was often criticized. Why the teaching of humanities, philosophy, languages, aesthetics, as well as the Dunham Technique? I believe these things are necessary for the complete person, and so to be a complete dancer I could not simply teach dancing" (Clark and Johnson 421-422). Many famous artists served on the faculty such as Anthony Tudor; Jose Limon; Margaret Mead; Archie Savage; and Talley Beatty. The school also had many famous students in attendance such as Arthur Mitchell, Eartha Kitt, Jose Ferrer, and Ava Gardner. The school was supported by Dunham Company's performances and was run by Ms. Dunham's husband, John Pratt, and Syvilla Fort while she was on tour. Katherine Dunham was forced to close the school in 1955 when the overseas exchange rates drastically dropped, and her company's tour abroad could no longer financially support the school.

With the help of the Equal Opportunity Commission (the EOC), Ms. Dunham opened the Performing Arts Training Center (PATC) in 1967 in East St. Louis (associated with Southern Illinois University). She chose East St. Louis because of its high Black population, and because it was in need for something more productive in the neighborhood because of its high rate of crime, drugs, and poverty. The Associated Press, in "How Katherine Dunham Revealed Black Dance to the World" states that, "Dunham also offered marital arts training in hopes of getting young,

angry males off the street. Her purpose, she said, was to steer the residents of East St. Louis "into something more constructive than genocide." Classes were offered in dance, photography, theatre, and martial arts. In "Katherine Dunham, Dance Pioneer, Dies at 96," the Associated Press continues, "Among the free classes offered were dance, African hair-braiding and woodcarving, conversational Creole, Spanish, French, and Swahili and more traditional subjects such as aesthetics and social science."

As Ms. Dunham traveled throughout the world, she called on old friends and new acquaintances to join the faculty at PATC. Among other faculty members, Katherine Dunham brought in Eusebio Da Silva from Brazil, who taught Capoeira, and Mor Thiam from Senegal, who taught drumming. Kate Mattingly quotes Ms. Dunham stating, "So sometimes I'd bring drummers back with me from wherever I had been. Some of my most wonderful drummers were from Cuba, Nigeria, and Senegal. Or I'd find them in the groups in Harlem" (56). Katherine Dunham writes that the mission of PATC was, "academic, community services, and performing companies" (Clark and Johnson 554). In 1982, Katherine Dunham retired from PATC and after she left, most of her instructors were fired due to a lack of funding and budget cuts. Even though the center continued, they chose not to use Ms. Dunham as a consultant for any future projects.

After Katherine Dunham stepped away from PATC, she continued to emphasize cultural centered education in a slightly different way. She opened the Katherine Dunham Museum in 1979 in East St. Louis; opened her own dance studio in 1980 on the museum grounds where she taught young children to dance in her children's workshops; and held the Dunham Technique Seminar, now entitled the Annual International Authentic Katherine Dunham Technique Seminar, still held in June in East St. Louis, St. Louis, and/or Chicago under the leadership of Ms. Ruby Streate (Aschenbrenner 234).

## Katherine Dunham's Inclusion in the Discipline of Black Studies

Overall, Katherine Dunham used an African Centered lens for her research and choreography, and always emphasized the close cultural connections all African people have throughout the world. She used an interdisciplinary, holistic, and participatory approach to her research and choreography, and developed deep

personal relationships with the African people she lived with while conducting her fieldwork. She embraced her dual role as a scholar/activist, and was deeply committed to the African/Black community everywhere, specifically focused on African/Black people in East St. Louis, New York City, and Haiti. She embraced the importance of Ancient Kmt to the legacy of African/Black people in America today, and applied this in her curriculum, choreography, and company performances. Ms. Dunham originated her own Black dance company in 1940, as well as formulated her own dance technique, in protest to what was currently happening in American dance at the time. She ensured that her choreography and scholarship always made a political statement and invoked some type of social change in the African/Black community. She fought to end segregation both in America and overseas, and fought for the rights of African/Black people throughout the world who were struggling for freedom and liberation. She was overtly critical of the American Government's racist politics, and spoke out against America's horrific treatment of African/Black people around the world. Even though there is not enough space here to give Ms. Dunham her due, hopefully, this is a start. This start forces us to ask one very important question: If Katherine Dunham was able to accomplish all of this throughout her lifetime, why is she rarely discussed in the discipline of Black Studies?

Katherine Dunham is excluded from the discipline of Black Studies for a combination of reasons. Her activism made her an enemy of the state and a target of government scrutiny; she is a Black woman in, yet still, a male centered discipline; and a dancer in a discipline that often disregards the significance of dance in the holistic understanding of African/Black people. Generally, the discipline of Dance reduces Ms. Dunham to a dancer who just happens to be Black, and the discipline of Women's Studies reduces her to a woman who just happens to be Black. The discipline of Anthropology reduces Katherine Dunham to an Anthropologist who just happened to be both Black and a woman, and the discipline of American Studies is so steeped in white supremacy that it does not know how to discuss her. But, despite the continued deletion of Katherine Dunham in Black Studies, it is without question that no other discipline can properly discuss Ms. Dunham without reducing her, disembodying her, and reinterpreting her life in an apolitical and a historical way.

Without examining Ms. Dunham's life in a holistic way, there is no way one can truly understand who she is, what she did, and see the impact she has had on the African/Black community throughout the world. Where else in the academy is there space to truthfully talk about how Katherine Dunham was an enemy of the state after she performed the ballet "Southland" abroad in 1951, and then, in 1966, became the American representative to the Negro Arts Festival in Senegal? Where can you discuss how Ms. Dunham fought against racism and segregation, but then agreed to star in various Hollywood films that portrayed African/Black people in stereotypical ways (i.e. *Pardon my Sarong*)? Or, where else can you discuss how she dedicated her life to the liberation of African/Black people and, despite this, became a well-known Hollywood and Broadway actress? Similar to W.E. B. Du Bois, Katherine Dunham lived for 96 years, making her transition in 2006, and within that time, you can see both her contradictions and her ideological shifts. But, this is what makes her human. This is also why Black Studies remains uniquely positioned within the academy to examine individuals, like Ms. Dunham, because we are free from the constraints of white supremacy and racism that shape other disciplines, and can engage with these figures in a way that honors their agency and experiences.

Thankfully, some progress has been made in the discipline of Black Studies around the inclusion of Black Dance, in general, and Katherine Dunham, more specifically. While visiting Ms. Dunham's office at the Katherine Dunham Museum in East St. Louis, Illinois, there is an award on her wall given to her by the National Council for Black Studies (NCBS), our premiere Black Studies organization, for her contributions to the discipline. Nathaniel Norment, Jr. recently included a chapter on Black Dance in his introductory textbook, *African American Studies: The Discipline and its Dimensions,* with in-depth information on Katherine Dunham. Additionally, Oberlin College in Ohio recently posted a job announcement in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* for a faculty position in Black Studies focused on African/Black Dance. However, much more progress must be made in Black Studies to establish African/Black Dance as a Body of Knowledge in Black Studies and to ensure that Katherine Dunham is included in every Body of Knowledge where she belongs.

Overall, Katherine Dunham fused her scholarship, choreography, and activism together to forge positive change throughout the African world. The reasons why Ms. Dunham is often excluded from Black Studies are the same reasons Black

Studies' scholars need to fight to keep her in this academic space. Without her many contributions to Black Studies before its official inception in the academy or her continued work during the discipline's early stages, Black Studies would not be what it is today. She left a path for us, in Black Studies, to follow, and a legacy for us to stand and dance upon today. Eugene Redmond reminds us that we should always embrace Katherine Dunham as:

> …An author (of poetry, fiction, fantasy, and articles), seen as the choreographer of several movies and ballets, appreciated as a re-shaper of a neo-African ethos through rigorous use of anthropology and folk materials, viewed as a philosopher and mystic and seer, loved as the mothering influence on Afro-American dance and the arts-examined in all these spheres, the Dunham World must then be given the breadth of space and place that we account a W.E.B. Du Bois or a Paul Robeson (Clark and Johnson 559).

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