

## Dancing the Black Atlantic: Katherine Dunham's Research-to-Performance Method

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Dancer-anthropologist Katherine Dunham was the first to research Caribbean dances and their socio-cultural contexts. From her seminal mid-1930s fieldwork she re-created specific Afro-Caribbean dances into creative ballets on western stages, thus creating a dynamic confluence between anthropology and dance. As one of the few African American anthropologists of that period,<sup>1</sup> Dunham's choreographic method and her published ethnographies reveal an erudite artist-scholar who was very aware that she was breaking new ground. Summarily, Dunham created performance ethnographies of the Caribbean on the world's greatest stages, privileged the voices of her informants in her ethnographies, and created staged visions of cross-cultural communication. In the process, she clearly envisioned the African diaspora—the Black Atlantic—long before that nomenclature was ever used. Although Paul Gilroy conceptualized the Black Atlantic as an “...intercultural and transnational formation...” in the 1990s,<sup>2</sup> Dunham implicitly understood and utilized this formation as both geographical and cultural in the 1930s, sixty years earlier. Her intellectual prescience illuminated crucial links between movement styles of African descendant peoples in the Americas and their overarching societies, revealing a legacy of creolized African culture in the Caribbean, the expressive dances and rhythms of which she wanted to dignify as important contributions to world culture.

Dunham accomplished these firsts through a seminal methodology—research-to-performance—establishing a unique translation of anthropological fieldwork that privileged the body and its expressive potential to both reflect and constitute culture. Caribbeanist scholar VèVè A. Clark first analyzed Dunham's methodology in her “Performing the Memory of Difference in Afro-Caribbean Dance: Katherine Dunham's Choreography, 1938-87” in the *History and Memory in African-American Culture* text, which evolved from a crucial Harvard think tank on the subject. Clark reminds us that, “When the dance steps, music, and other cultural forms were transformed for stage representations, they became *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), reworkings and restatements of historical danced events whose memory Dunham had also preserved in writing and on film.”<sup>3</sup> The actual stages on which Dunham's researched ballets were performed, in other words, were turned into physical venues for each culture's own danced memory of their African, European, and Native American experiences. In this way, Dunham's artistic license for the concert stage that she took in works like *Shango* (1945), a ballet based on a Haitian, Cuban, and Trinidadian cultural material that I analyze later, might be viewed as a microcosm of larger socio-cultural transformations in the Americas.

Clark not only recontextualized French historian Pierre Nora's concept of *lieu de mémoire*, but also *milieux de mémoire* (environments of memory) that form the larger social context in which specific sites of memory are situated. In the example of Dunham, she allowed another vision of how dance, music, and their social contexts retained and re-envisioned cultural environments of memory, as well as specific sites such as the Haitian Vodou<sup>1</sup> ceremony. She cognized that Caribbean performance re-created historical memory of Africa, as well as represented long-fought battles of

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding the "Vodou" vs. "Voodoo" spelling, I have always used "Vodou" because the other spelling has stereotypic connotations in the general media that have been exploited by Hollywood. Most contemporary scholars prefer "Vodou." A colleague, Dr. Susheel Bibbs, suggests: “Scholars prefer Vodou due to the pejorative connotations and associations of the voodoo spelling. Haitians don't care. The Vodou spelling also connects better with African Coding origins. Both Marie Laveaux biographers Fandrich and Long write about this.”

I employ the Vodou spelling because of the issue of stereotyping. People should know that there are alternative perspectives to the discourse with which we have been programmed about African-based religions.

survival in the Americas and methods of cross-cultural interaction, all of which created discrete contributions to world culture. Dunham understood Caribbean performance as such, and used it, along with her African American material that she called Americana, in the service of her agenda to create intercultural communication on the concert stage. In so doing, I argue that Dunham danced the Black Atlantic as we have come to conceptualize that historical cross-fertilization construct.

In what follows, I offer a synopsis of Dunham's accomplishments as a dancer and anthropologist in historical and social context, and then further explicate Vèvè Clark's research-to-performance conceptualization of Dunham's method that aids in understanding her theatrical intent of intercultural communication. Expounding upon Clark's paradigm, I explore specific Dunham staged works that exemplify her research-to-performance method, rendering a complex model of dancing the Black Atlantic.

### **Dunham's Artistic & Academic Background**

In the dance world, Dunham set out to create a dialogue within the Caribbean, as well as between the Caribbean and the U.S. In the United States, during the late 1930s, her timing was impeccable: a Negro renaissance in Harlem had already been inaugurated in the 1920s in literature and painting. Yet, the great Harlem Renaissance itself is sandwiched into a series of *lieux de mémoires* that have informed the *vernacular* loci of historic black performances. Consider New Orleans' slavery-era Congo Square and its District Storyville of the 1910s; Harlem's Savoy Ballroom of the 20s, 30s and 40s during Dunham's beginning era, and later the Hevalo Club and the Roxy Ballroom in the early days of hip-hop in the Bronx. During Dunham's early years, there were previous, if inchoate, attempts in dance to illuminate a non-stereotypic modernism, such as the 1931 "First Negro Dance Recital in America" that Hemsley Winfield and Edna Guy had organized.<sup>4</sup> But a disconnection from African use of specific rhythms and rituals, in a traditional sense, limited African American dancers and choreographers in the United States. As anthropologist Joyce Aschenbrenner notes, a few black American dance artists, such as Dunham, were "determined to bring before the world evidence of the richness and strength of their Afro-American cultural heritage. These efforts attacked the 'inept' comic stereotype as well as the exotic, primitive savage image; they also aimed at the abolishment of the 'natural endowment' view that was a modification of the other two stereotypes that developed in the 1930s and 1940s."<sup>5</sup>

Dunham's choice of the Caribbean as *milieux de mémoire* was crucial to her conscious decision to find and articulate the fundamental nature of African-derived dances remaining in the Americas. She chose Trinidad, Martinique, Jamaica, and Haiti as islands where African descendants retained and re-invented important dance material that carried historical memory of the Americas. Dunham revealed her underlying motives around 1938 at the same time that she began to choreograph from her researched material she found in the Caribbean. "Realizing that the amalgamation of the Negro into white America has in a large measure brought about a complete lack of contact with those things which were racially his. I have recently begun an intensive study of the Negro under other less absorbing cultural contacts; in the West Indies, the French, Spanish, and English influence have been of far less importance than that of the American in preserving the dance forms which are truly Negro."<sup>6</sup> Here, Dunham clearly privileges the Caribbean as the geographic area that provides a significant retention of the *milieux de mémoire* necessary for her intentions to rediscover and re-envision that which is "truly Negro," or African, in the Americas as a part of her anthropological graduate studies at the University of Chicago. Her use of the term "racial," as Aschenbrenner explains, was synonymous with "cultural" today.

This cultural orientation followed from her mentor, the Africanist Melville Herskovits at nearby Northwestern University. He was soon to publish his seminal *Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) that systematically proved that even black Americans had retained many "Africanisms," and that a more unbiased view of African cultures was needed. He also argued there had been a cultural recreation process throughout the Americas, where similar value orientations could be linked across

the Atlantic. The retention and recreation process would reveal considerable similarities between Africans and African Americans in the New World. Herskovits would have given this orientation to the young Dunham in her six-months of study with him at Northwestern in preparation for her Caribbean fieldwork. His conceptualization of African American culture retaining Africanisms, of course, contradicted sociologists such as E. Franklin Frazier who foregrounded the assimilationist stance that blacks had lost all African traits. Further, her need to rectify how black Americans had lacked “contact with those things which were racially his” was partially verified, as we shall see, in how Haitians viewed her as part of the “lost tribe of North America.” Hence, Dunham’s efforts in her Caribbean fieldwork, and her subsequent choreographic projects for her dance company awakened a cultural memory through dance that in the U.S. had been lying dormant, misunderstood at best and used as stereotypical minstrel fodder at worst.

Dunham was a prolific writer, publishing several scholarly memoirs on her academic fieldwork and her lifelong love of the Caribbean. Her research yielded two ethnographies, *Journey to Accompong*, with an introduction by anthropologist Ralph Linton in 1946, about the Maroon Society of the Jamaican Blue Mountains, and *Island Possessed* in 1969, the story of her intense relationship with Haiti that included her initiation into the Vodou religion. Her master’s thesis, *The Dances of Haiti*, was a major ethnological treatise in the structural-functionalist school popular at the time at the University of Chicago. It was published in Spanish in 1947, in French with a foreword by Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1957, and belatedly in English in 1983 by UCLA’s Center for Afro-American Studies. Dunham’s crucial training period in Chicago in both anthropology and dance, preceding her Caribbean fieldwork, provided her with both academic and creative encouragement that nurtured the anthropological and artistic iconoclast that Dunham was eventually to become, as well as laid the groundwork for her research-to-performance method.

Chicago also provided seminal dance teachers and performance doyens, who offered Dunham an all-important gestation period for creative development away from the jaded gaze of the larger New York dance scene. When Dunham was not allowed as a young black dancer to take regular studio classes, segregated America ironically provided her the benefits of private lessons with ballet mistress Ludmila Speranzeva, a former member of Diaghilev’s Ballet Russe. Dunham’s evolving dance technique and her charismatic persona won her featured stage opportunities with modern dance pioneers Ruth Page and Mark Turnbyfill at the Chicago Opera Company in productions such as the 1934 *La Guiblessé*. Her own early dance company, *Ballet Negre* (later to be renamed the Negro Dance Company), was formed during these pre-Caribbean times. After her return from the Caribbean fieldwork, between 1938 to 1965 she would go on to create close to one hundred ballets and revues with the internationally-acclaimed Katherine Dunham Dance Company.

At the same time that she was in a locus of the developing modernist dance aesthetic, Dunham was also located in the crucible of anthropology’s evolution at the University of Chicago. Besides studying with Herskovitz, she worked on her master’s degree with the seminal architects of anthropology theory, such as A. Radcliffe-Brown, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Robert Redfield. The post-Boasian 1930s provided an open-ended theoretical landscape for her anthropology professors to explore their newfound discipline. They were, therefore, receptive to myriad forms of human behavior, including expressive culture like dance, ritual, and performance. As Dunham has revealed, “Social anthropology offered the best possible solution for joining my wish to be an anthropologist, and the great physical urge to be a dancer.”<sup>7</sup> Through the theories of her anthropology professors she was able to help forge a new field that would become known as dance anthropology: “Dunham’s cross-cultural approach through choreography rested on the functionalist anthropological theory of form and function, where manifestations of a particular cultural trait were directly connected to their functioning within the theorized integrated cultural pattern and social structure of a people.”<sup>8</sup>

Dunham’s artist-scholar’s approach to choreography, which Clark explores as “performed ethnography” rested on the old functionalist school of anthropology. Functionalism theorized that

various manifestations of a particular cultural trait were directly connected to their functioning within the integrated cultural patterns and social structure of a people. Thus, a people's kinship system, the economic structure, and annual festivals might all constitute and be constitutive of a cultural value of extended families and the interconnections of the community. Dunham adapted this functionalist construct and developed her theory of Form and Function in dance. In the Dunham dance technique, the student learns that the actual movements and body orientation of a particular dance directly relates to the function of that dance in the social sphere. Thus, the *yamvalu* dance for Damballa within a Vodou ceremony is prayerful, low-to-the ground, and reverently undulating. It potentially induces a trance-like state and engenders a sense of the sacred in the observer; while the flirtatious hips of *danse congo* that circle and punctuate the drum rhythms, derives from its function as a playful, sensual dance meant for mate selection at a social event. As dance educator Albirda Rose points out, Dunham's adaptation of Form and Function was to demonstrate "how dance relates to particular cultural patterns and belief systems."<sup>9</sup> Dunham dance technique grew directly from her fieldwork by applying anthropological theory to the dance itself. In the dance and music-based cultures of the Caribbean, Dunham's research-to-performance methodology was not only appropriate, but also absolutely necessary for our understanding the Black Atlantic.

Both theories—Intercultural Communication and Form and Function—dynamically merge in her third theoretical frame, Socialization Through the Arts. This third theory is where dance, music, festival, and ritual are viewed as socializing tools for productive and effective functioning in the societies, with which Dunham interacted during her fieldwork, subsequent company tours, and personal trips. Typical of Dunham's functionalist approach, she adapted Socialization Through the Arts to enrich the poor, predominantly black city of East St. Louis, Illinois, where she resided part of each year after disbanding her company in 1965. From 1967 until her death in May 2006, Dunham implemented these theoretical concepts in the East St. Louis-based Performing Arts Training Center for youth under the auspices of her non-profit organization, the Katherine Centers for Arts & Humanities.

Her immersion research methodology that went far beyond just "being there," along with her thorough and meticulous survey of each society's social systems in relation to its dances, yielded not only Geertzian "thick description," but also a probing of the motives of the fieldworker herself in relation to her entire agenda in the field.<sup>10</sup> Her awareness of her positionality as a black female yielded a continual negotiation simultaneously of race, gender, and culture: "The negative aspects of being a woman field worker were often counterbalanced by the positive elements of racial affinity. In the handling of the sacred instruments I found this especially true. The ritual drums were never touched by a woman, even the highest of the mambos. Many liberties were permitted me because of unofficial position as emissary of the lost black peoples from Nan Guinnin (North American blacks who did not know their African heritage)."<sup>11</sup> This quote represents her self-examination about her Haitian experience that intensified in *Island Possessed*, written while living in Senegal in the late 60s after the first "World Festival of Negro Arts" in Dakar.<sup>12</sup> In *Island Possessed* she self-reflexively places herself at the center of her ethnographic narrative. "So here I was, a wanderer returned about a year and a half after the first drive into the dusty plains with Price-Mars to pay homage to ancestors I didn't know, the day before the last night of three days and nights of secret rites and purifications. Damballa had his bride for the price of new night clothes (his bride who wore no nightclothes even in Chicago winters), the new ceremonial dress, the necklace of blue and white trade beads with snake vertebrae interspersed for the ason garniture, the cocks, Florida water, Havana influence, no doubt."<sup>13</sup>

Dunham expressed an anthropological *postmodern* sensibility—self-reflexivity and a privileging of the subjective along with the objective—long before it was even theoretically cognized, let alone articulated. Her total immersion field methods in Haiti, as her last island, personally allowed all of her other Caribbean experiences to solidify into the black Atlantic connections that she was to make

clear on stage. Simultaneously an artist and social scientist in one, Dunham reached international iconic stature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Jamaican Research: Uncovering Danced Memory**

Katherine Dunham's earliest written ethnography provides ample proof of her prescience as a fieldworker and scholar in uncovering an ancient African dance surviving in the Caribbean on the island of Jamaica. In her fieldwork represented in *Journey to Accompong*, she utilized a functionalist theoretical frame by recording the various social institutions in relationship to each other in the village of Accompong. Kinship, ownership patterns, religion, work group organizations, clothing and material culture, age, gender (unusual for her time), and social interaction were the sequential subject matters of her chapters. Yet, as she reveals, she had come there "to study and take part in the dances." Accompong was and is one of the maroon villages in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica, having been established by run-a-way slaves from the Spanish as early as 1650 and later the English rulers in the 1690s. "Of these maroons the Coromantees, an Akan group from the West African Gold Coast (today's Ghana) made up the largest ethnic group. They fought many battles with the British and were finally given their independence by England in a treaty signed in 1738."<sup>14</sup> Thus, as a nation within a nation, the maroons of the cockpit region of the Blue Mountains had sufficiently maintained their ways of life for two centuries by the time that Katherine Dunham had arrived to study their dances and ways of life.

Having done pre-fieldwork research, Dunham went to Jamaica on a mission: to verify if a particular Coromantee dance still existed. Being a trained dancer of African descent she easily learned the dances of the Jamaican maroons, immediately participating in their acculturated European set dances that were accompanied by fiddles and hand clapping. However, Dunham was not satisfied with these creole dance gems; she had come to observe the West African-based "Koromantee war dance most of all." Through patience and some conniving to remove the repressive Colonel (chief of the settlement), she finally achieved her goal toward the end of her short six-week stay in Jamaica: "I pleaded with Ba' Weeyums for a Koromantee war dance, and he finally consents. The few young people who are here, however, do not join in the traditional dances. They are ashamed, and I am sure that I shock them greatly; on the other hand, I feel that they watch us rather wistfully, wishing that they had the courage to give themselves for a movement to their traditions."<sup>15</sup> Here we witness the changing values among the younger generation as well as the seed of that change in the leader of the village's unwillingness to enact the dances directly linked to Africa. Enslavement and colonialism had taken its toll even among those so long separated from European influence. But Dunham was determined to unearth a vital expressive part of their successful victory and independence against the British. She would soon discover this same phenomenon among the *petwo* dances among the Vodou practitioners in Haiti against their French captors.<sup>16</sup>

Through her intense engagement of the participatory insider role with the dancing maroons, she gained historical insights that were embedded within the dancing act itself:

The war dances are danced by men and women... their songs are in lusty Koromantee, and from somewhere a woman has procured a rattle and shakes this in accompaniment to Ba' Weeyums [the drummer]. Some of the men wave sticks in the air, and the women tear off their handkerchiefs and wave them on high as they dance. A few of these turns, and we are separated in a melee of leaping, shouting warriors; a moment later we are "bush fighting," crouching down and advancing in line to attack an imaginary enemy with many feints, swerves and much pantomime. At one stage of the dance Miss Ma'y and I are face to face, she no longer is a duppy, but a maroon woman of old days, working the men up to a pitch where they will descend into the cockpit and exterminate one of his majesty's red-coated platoons.<sup>17</sup>

Afro-Jamaican dances, such as the Coromantee war dance, represent in a direct way the concept of dance itself as having rhetorical voice. As Judith Hamera explains, "...all performance, including dance, is enmeshed in language, in reading, writing, rhetoric, and in voice."<sup>18</sup> Dunham implicitly understood the movement rhetoric of the Coromantee dance and the relationship between its performance and the writing of her ethnographic experience in Jamaica.

Dunham's willingness to engage the maroon dances on the culture's own terms, treating dance as another social system, allowed her a unique view into the role of the nearly forgotten Koromantee dance as a part of the maroons' hard won battle for independence from the British. This is a prime example of dance's unique rhetorical voice—what dance anthropologist Yvonne Daniel calls *embodied knowledge*: "Community members are in an open classroom with dance and music behavior.... These sorts of 'knowledges' are on display as community instruction for social cohesion and cosmic balance. Participants learn from observation, witnessing, modeling and active participation."<sup>19</sup> Dunham's implicit understanding of this embodied knowledge established her philosophical foundation that would serve her use of dance and the body, according to Clark, as a "repository of memory." Moreover, she trusted her choreographic acumen to represent her understanding of her research, which in the Jamaican case, had been unearthed and cajoled from the continuing, yet reluctant, *milieux de mémoire* lingering in Accompong.

In her active participation, Dunham was, thus, one of the first to demonstrate the continuity of specific West African dances that served enslaved Africans with similar purposes in the colonial New World. It is significant that this discovery was cognized in the act of dancing, through corporeal immersion in the communal dances of the people. We realize from today's contemporary scholarship the importance of Dunham's early trans-Atlantic performance connections. Africanist anthropologist Margaret Drewal revealed in the 1990s that African-based performance, "...is a primary site for the production of knowledge, where philosophy is enacted, and where multiple and often simultaneous discourses are employed."<sup>20</sup> As I have said elsewhere, dance, for African peoples, whether on the continent or in the diaspora, is a means of enacting immediate social context, history, and indeed philosophical worldview.<sup>21</sup> Dunham understood these multiple strategies embedded within Africanist performance, such as in her treasured Koromantee war dance.

### **Dunham's Research-to-Performance Method**

Armed with these researched dances of the black Atlantic and an understanding of their functional social contexts, Dunham's dance theater became a prime laboratory where Afro-Caribbean cultures could "migrate" through the performance of her choreography and through the personalities of her individual dancers in the act of performing the Dunham *oeuvre*. This process was, in fact, a remaking of memory through performance. As Hamera reinforces, the practice of "[t]he social work of aesthetics is especially communal and corporeal, and where corporeality and sociality are remade as surely as formal event is produced."<sup>22</sup> In this sense, Afro-Caribbean culture and "sociality" voyaged across the Atlantic to the rest of the Americas, Europe, and Asian—wherever The Katherine Dunham Dance Company performed. Performed imagined migration is underpinned by her specific artistic intent and projected audience reception.

Dunham's motive of dignifying Black Atlantic expressive arts was completely justified given the survival mechanism that performance assumed early on in African diasporic cultures of the Americas. Dunham's performance agenda illuminates Gilroy's discussion of the historical Black Atlantic where

cultural productions and reception [that] operate... wholly different from those which define the public sphere of the slaveholders. In this severely restricted space, sacred, or profane, art became the backbone of the slaves' political cultures and of their

cultural history. It remains the means through which cultural activists even now engage in “rescuing critiques” of the present by both mobilizing memories of the past and inventing an imaginary past-ness that can fuel their utopian hopes.<sup>23</sup>

As Gilroy muses over the meaning of performance under slave culture, Dunham’s dances, as repositories of memory, obviously mobilized recollections of the past as “rescuing critiques,” and at the same time served as educational tools for international audiences. Although her performed ethnographies may allude to what has been called “salvage anthropology,” ethnographies that are enacted and embodied live in a way that can never be duplicated in written texts. The process that Clark calls the “memory of difference” clarifies what informed, engaged performance actualizes: Dunham dancers re-created *milieux de mémoire* through their own personal Black Atlantic experiences and Dunham’s meticulous research, taking the creative enactment of ethnography beyond a mere salvaging of the past.

Katherine Dunham purposely augmented the transformative potential of the multiple strategies contained in Afro-Caribbean dance for the concert stage. According to Clark, by recreating her researched dances as “repositories of memory” for the theatrical stage, Dunham developed a “memory of difference” in the re-contextualization process. Dunham’s research-to-performance method placed many Caribbean dances in dialogue with each other, and simultaneously under Dunham’s tutelage the Afro-Caribbean and African American dancers in the Katherine Dunham Dance Company re-interpreted the Caribbean dances, bringing their own Afro-diasporic perspectives to the process. In this way performed memory lives through the obvious differences in interpretation of that lived history.

Clark explains her concepts in the example of *L’Ag’Ya*, Dunham’s first full-length ballet in 1938 choreographed for Chicago’s WPA Federal Theater Project. Although *L’Ag’Ya* is based on her research of a danced martial art in Martinique, the ballet also contains other Caribbean dances as well.

The memory of forgotten dances appears cross-culturally in *L’Ag’Ya* (1938), through sequences combining ballet, modern, and Caribbean dances such as the habañera (Cuba), majumba (Brazil), mazouk, beguine and ag’ya (Martinique). “Contextualization” was indeed, the means by which Katherine Dunham taught three generations of performers from 1940 through 1965 to internalize dances as they were known in the contemporary Caribbean or in African America during the 1920s. In a sense, her dancers became repositories of memory.<sup>24</sup>

Clark allows us to cognize two important aspects of Dunham’s contributions to our understanding of Caribbean performance in the United States: 1) the relationships of the dances and their contexts across national boundaries, and 2) the use of her research-to-performance methodology that created knowledgeable performers equipped to transmit theirs and Dunham’s understandings of these Caribbean cultures, particularly to U.S. and European audiences.

Dunham used dances that were already storehouses of black Atlantic history and inculcated this entrenched memory during the rehearsal process. This is a different process than mere stylizations of danced museum pieces, as had been the model of so many dance companies before her such as Ballet Russe and the “orientalist” choreography of Ruth St. Denis. Dunham created choreography that, according to Clark, became “performed ethnographies.” If ethnography is the narrative recording of one’s fieldwork experience, sharing with outside “readers” some level of cultural literacy about a particular people, then many of Dunham’s ballets were ethnographies in the textbook definition. Given the time period during which Dunham’s research-to-performance model developed, her performed ethnographies offered the theater-going public a new vision of what dance theater could be, providing an artistic approach that was unique for the times and that won

over most critics and international audiences alike. Her method was also “critical ethnography” in Soyini Madison’s sense of it beginning “with an ethical responsibility to address processes of fairness or injustice within a particular lived domain.”<sup>25</sup> Dunham’s establishment of a health clinic for poor Haitians at Habitation le Clerc was a prime example of her centralizing ethics in her methodology.

Simultaneously, Dunham’s performed ethnographies, with her dances and their cultural functions, interacted with audiences of other cultures internationally. The “repository of memory” contained in these New World African and creole dances, in their re-staged social contexts, allowed centuries of history to act upon audiences, thereby creating a danced “diaspora literacy” that Clark also explores. Embodied literacy–historical interactions of African, Europeans, and Indians in the black Atlantic–acts upon the consciousness of audiences not only on the cognitive level, but also on the visceral, affective level, touching mind, body, and spirit, a holistic synergy to which Dunham was consciously dedicated.

### **Dunham’s Staged Caribbean Dances of the Black Atlantic**

Dunham perceived her form of dance-theater as intercultural communication. For example, when international audiences viewed her 1948 ballet *Nāningo*, she was allowing non-Cubans to interact with one of the ritualized ways in which male Afro-Cubans had retained their cosmological secret rituals perpetuated from the Ejagham people of today’s Cross-River area of Nigeria. *Nāningo*, as an all-male ballet was a fusion of balletic athleticism, Dunham technique (particularly rhythmic torso isolations and the use of the pelvis as the source for extending the legs), and a recontextualization of the movements of the Cuban male secret society called *Abakua*. Through program notes, the exuberant virtuosity of the dance, and the cryptic Abakua symbolic movements, she transported European audiences to secret enclaves in Cuba that only initiated Abakua members could have previously viewed. She also cast one of her Cuban dancers in the role of a traditional Abakua figure that drums upstage center throughout the entire ballet, as an “authentic” gaze watching over her appropriated fusion style. As the curtain closes, after all the Dunham technique dancers have left, the ballet ends with that figure moving across the stage in enigmatic movement phrases representative of the symbolic language of the Abakua Cuban male society. Secret society rituals, restaged in a secular theatrical setting is not a substitute for “being there,” but it does transmit an underlying social strategy of male survivors of the Atlantic slave trade, as well as a vision of sacred danced symbolism in that survival strategy. The Dunham company performed *Nāningo* for people internationally who had no idea that the Abakua society even existed. In the adept hands of knowledgeable researchers like Katherine Dunham, performance becomes another mode of bridging the cultural gaps that make cross-cultural understanding such a difficult goal to reach.

During Dunham’s sixteen-month research trip, Haiti was, by far, the island where she intensified her participatory approach, penetrating to the deep structure of Haitian thought exemplified in the Vodou religion. Although the cultural relativist, participant-observation technique was the theorized anthropological methodology since the founding of American anthropology by Franz Boas, her professors were clearly taken aback at the fervor in which she employed participatory fieldwork techniques in the Vodou rituals, where dance and music were absolutely crucial. During the period when Dunham was undertaking the second level of initiation into the Vodou the *canzò* ceremony, a 1936 letter from Herskovits, explored previously by Clark, reflected the limits of anthropology’s participant-observation methodology and Dunham’s courage to transcend those attempted imposed boundaries.<sup>26</sup> Dunham thus broke academic tradition by going far beyond the prudent level of participation, particularly when she decided to become initiated into the Vodou herself.

She literally dances into uncharted territory in the late 1930s when merely “being there” with pen and paper was deemed enough participation. Herskovits mentions in his correspondence to Dunham that the Haitians seemed to be in amazement at how well she learned the dances and her willingness to participate in the ritual context in which they were embedded. In this correspondence,



he further comments about what lead Haitian Vodou practitioners to think she probably had “inherited loa.” In dance-based African religions, it is believed that each person is born with a particular spirit, or *lwa* (current creole spelling for “loa”), on his/her head. For the Haitians, Dunham’s receptivity to the energy of lwa dances to move through her body meant that she was open to the Vodou spirits, and her active participation in the dance-music complex of the ceremonies was aiding her in realizing her own personal connection to the spirits. In fact, Dunham did receive *Damballa*, the ancient Fon snake deity of fertility and wellness that heads the pantheon in the rada sect of the Vodou inherited from *Nan Guinée* or Africa. What *probably* won over the Haitian Vodou practitioners was Dunham’s ability to *dance* the reverent, sensual, and undulating movements of the yanvalu dance for Damballa, or the cutting, aggressive staccato movements of Ogou, the deity of war and iron. Her sincerity of intent and facility with the dances and rhythms were responsible for her eventual undertaking of the highest Vodou initiation for females, *manbo aseque*.

It became Dunham’s challenge to translate this new level of experiential knowledge into choreography for the stage. She did so with *Shango* (1945), one of her most ritualistic works that attempts to capture the sacred protocol and hierarchy of Afro-Caribbean ceremony, as well as how the drumming, singing, and dancing induce the ecstatic state of trance, thereby transforming the community. In the version of *Shango* performed by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1987, as a part of the historic “Magic of Katherine Dunham” that Ailey produced before his death, Dunham showed a new generation of dance enthusiasts her fearlessness in representing the essence of the Afro-Caribbean religious ceremony.

What follows is a description of how she accomplished this ritual theatrically. As the ballet begins and the lights fade up, there is a shrine or alter looming upstage center. The High Priest ceremonially carries a prop that looks like a white chicken in a basket across downstage center. This processional path is accompanied by presumably a “traditional” Afro-Caribbean song with strong accents, the last of which brings the knife of the Priest’s attendant symbolically down to kill the chicken. The role of High Priest (like the *ougan* who officiated the Haitian ceremonies she witnessed and participated in) was played by the Cuban drummer, Joe Sirca, who had participated in *santeria* ceremonies in his homeland of Cuba. Thus Dunham starts the ballet with the sacred nexus of life and death that animal sacrifice in African-based religions represents, giving the Western audience an immediate sense of African religion that was prevalent in Haiti and other Caribbean islands during her fieldwork.

The sacrifice starts the faster rhythm that continues throughout the remainder of the ballet. The drums build to a fever pitch, driving the undulating dancer-hounsi, barely being contained by the two wooden benches framing the ritual space. The stage setting, from the beginning of the ballet, defines ritual space and establishes the High Priest in charge, revealing to the audience its worse “nightmare,” animal sacrifice. *Shango* is one of Dunham’s most daring ballets, exposing African-based religions in the Americas as concert stage material during a time when the last of the old blackface minstrelsy was just waning.

The ballet continues with its exposure of the inner workings of African ritual through the inducement of possession. One of the key dance roles in the ballet is called Boy Possessed. As the High Priest circles the congregation symbolically sharing with each a bit of the blood of the sacrificed “bird,” he ends by sprinkling “blood” on the head of the last male dancer, Boy Possessed, who is downstage left, and closest to the audience. The ritual participant slowly begins to shake and writhe, assisted by the nearby ritual participants. His shirt is removed as he obviously goes into the trance state. As he rises from the bench by some invisible force, he moves in supple, sinewy yanvalu, indicating that Damballa is present (the lwa for which Dunham herself was initiated). The Boy Possessed adeptly moves into the yanvalu *do-bas*, a variation that is low to the earth, and eventually descends to the floor serpent-like. He moves like a snake as if he is spineless. We have entered another time and space informed by the sacred realm of a non-Western cosmology.

In an actual possession that was recorded by PBS-TV in the 1983 document “Divine Drum Beats: Katherine Dunham and Her People,” which took place in Dunham’s real-life *peristil* (Vodou public ceremonial space) at Habitation Le Clerc, one witnesses Damballa as the serpent deity. There is little difference between the videoed actual possession and the staged version in the *Shango* ballet. Dunham was able to translate the smooth, subtle undulating quality of the deity’s movements into her choreography for the *Boy Possessed*. One can imagine what American and European audiences must have thought in the mid-1940s at this ballet’s premiere. *Shango* was a bold portrayal of a completely different worldview with provocative movements unknown to the majority of the theater-going public of the late 1940s. As the ballet progresses into more ensemble dancing, the Dunham technique with Caribbean folk movement becomes more of the choreographic pattern, but always the form serves the function of the ritual being portrayed. The curtain lowers with a frenzy of movement happening throughout the stage, with no traditional Western theatrical resolution—the beat goes on. *Shango* becomes a quintessential example of Dunham’s research-to-performance choreographic model that was extremely effective, the staging and choreography of which was directly affected by the social structure, cultural values, and specific dance systems she observed and participated in during her fieldwork research.

Yet *Shango* is not without its controversy. The ballet is actually an amalgam of rituals from several islands Haiti, Cuba, and Trinidad. The term “Shango” is not only the ubiquitous name for the warrior Thunder deity of the Yoruba of West Africa, but also the term associated with the Shango Baptist religion of Trinidad. The use of yanvalu movements and the earthy dance of Damballa are obvious Haitian allusions, while the general ceremony could be Haitian Vodou or Cuban santeria. The fact that Joe Sirca from Cuba was so adeptly able to play the role of the High Priest in the Ailey company revival is indicative of the ubiquity of the ceremonial elements of the *Shango* ballet. The *pastiche* effect of Dunham’s *oeuvre* has offended some people from the islands, causing accusations of her work not being completely true to any *one* tradition. Inappropriate cultural appropriation is a potential criticism of any artist’s work involved in research-to-performance methodology. However, the mitigating factor is the degree to which Dunham immersed herself in the cultures that she utilized as her choreographic sources. Her intimate experience with the religion of Haiti and her subsequent study of other islands’ religions, such as Cuba, allowed her the knowledge-based to work with the *essence* of these similar, but discrete, ceremonial traditions that she attempted to synthesize in *Shango*.

Interestingly enough, Dunham never actually manifested the ultimate “proof” of being chosen by lwa—becoming possessed or going into trance. In a 1989 interview, at the historic Stanford University Residency in May of that year, she revealed to me that after all of the ceremonies in which she had both officiated and participated, she had never been possessed by spirit.<sup>27</sup> Her revelation had no tinge of regret, but rather was stated matter-of-factly, almost as proof that the ultimate state of African religious manifestation was not altogether necessary for inclusion in the community. One understands this in observing the “Divine Drumbeats” documentary, where Miss Dunham sits on a raised dais in her Haitian *peristil*. In the film she wields her priestly *ason* (sacred rattle) with aplomb, and the *oungans* (male priests) and *hounsi* (initiated practitioners) all perform the highly choreographed turns and curtsies to her, as the officiating priest, in the traditional show of respect as ceremonial protocol. Over the span of her career, Dunham became an iconic representation of the Haitian Vodou itself; as such, she brought a dignity to the much-maligned religion often stereotyped in Hollywood movies.

In summary, Dunham used researched Caribbean dance, music, ritual, and festival, as well as their social contexts, forging a research-to-performance methodology that helped to develop diaspora literacy through dancing the Black Atlantic. Long before our current era of an African diaspora theory and corpus, she was one of the first to make the connections between African-derived, if creolized, Caribbean cultures and African American culture in the United States. Furthermore, Dunham’s performed ethnographies helped to realize the goals of anthropology as a

discipline by demonstrating a total immersion approach to “the study of mankind.” At the same time, she envisioned and performed a completely new sense of modernism in black dance by using her creative choreographic and staging abilities to re-contextualize her researched material into works of art. Clark’s conceptualizations of *lieu de mémoire* and *milieux de mémoire* serve to enhance our understanding of Dunham’s recontextualizations for the stage by allowing us to see the socio-cultural process of memory transfer across time and space, and how performance allows that transference to be relived through a memory of difference by knowledgeable performers. Her staged dances as *lieu de mémoire* became a repository of memory that, at best, served Dunham’s intent of intercultural communication. Taken as a whole, Katherine Dunham’s legacy of research-to-performance is one to which Caribbeanists, anthropologists, and choreographers alike are indebted.

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Zora Neale Hurston, as a student of Franz Boas, was the only other. It is also significant that the two most prominent black anthropologists of that early era were women.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), ix.

<sup>3</sup> Vèvè A. Clark, “Performing the Memory of Difference in Afro-Caribbean Dance: Katherine Dunham’s Choreography, 1938-87,” in eds. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally, *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 190.

<sup>4</sup> See Joe Nash, “Pioneers in Negro Concert dance: 1931-1937,” in Gerald E. Myers, ed., *The Black Tradition in American Modern Dance (Durham, NC: American Dance Festival)*, 11-14.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce Aschenbrenner, “Katherine Dunham: Reflections on the Social and Political Contexts of Afro-American Dance,” *Dance Research Journal Annual XI* (Congress on Research in Dance, 1980), 44.

<sup>6</sup> Aschenbrenner, 45, quoting from Katherine Dunham, “The Future of the Negro Dance,” *Dance Herald*, 1938, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Dunham, “Lecture Demonstration of the Anthropological Approach to Dance,” in Vèvè A. Clark and Margaret Wilkerson, eds., *Kaiso! Katherine Dunham: An Anthology of Writings*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Berkeley: Institute for the Study of Social Change, 1978) 200.

<sup>8</sup> Halifu Osumare, “Katherine Dunham: A Pioneer of Postmodern Anthropology,” Vèvè A. Clark and Margaret Wilkerson, eds., *Kaiso! Katherine Dunham: Writings by and about Katherine Dunham* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005) 621.

<sup>9</sup> Albirda Rose, *Dunham Technique: a Way of Life* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing company, 1990) 20.

<sup>10</sup> “Being there” is a term coined by Clifford Geertz’ in *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), and the term “thick description” is a famous ethnographic term used in his development of symbolic anthropology in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973).

<sup>11</sup> Katherine Dunham, *Dances of Haiti* (Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Afro-American Studies, 1983), 15.

<sup>12</sup> Leopold Senghor, a personal friend of Dunham’s who had witnessed the Katherine Dunham Dance Company while he was a student in Paris, hosted this seminal convocation of black world leaders in arts and culture.

<sup>13</sup> Katherine Dunham, *Island Possessed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, Doubleday, 1969), 75.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Evans, “History of Accompong Maroons,” Jamaican Overview retrieved December 18, 2007, <http://www.jamaicans.com/info/maroons.htm>. Also, for a well-written biography of Miss Dunham in the context of her Accompong research, see Rebecca Tortello, “Katherine Dunham: Matriarch of Modern Dance,” *Pieces of the Past, The Gleaner Company Ltd., Kingston, Jamaica*, Retrieved December 19, 2007, <http://www.jamaica-gleaner.com/pages/history/story0043.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Katherine Dunham, *Journey to Accompong* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1946), 12.

<sup>16</sup> The dances and drumming of the Petwo rites of the Vodou helped the Haitians to win their war against France and the Napoleon navy. Dance anthropologist Yvonne Daniel says, “The Petwo rite of Vodou intrudes a different character of dance material and new lwa [deities]. Both were identified with the hard-fought revolution on the island of Haiti. Petwo dances represent the blood that was spilled on Haitian land and new lwas who support a historic, independent black republic and the religious rites within a constantly developing Vodou belief system,” *Dancing Wisdom; Embodies Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Babian Candomblé*. (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 113-14.

<sup>17</sup> Dunham, *Journey to Accompong*, 135-6.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Hamera, *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference and Connection in the Global City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 5.

<sup>19</sup> Daniels, *Dancing Wisdom*, 265.

<sup>20</sup> Margaret Drewal, "The State of Research on Performance in Africa," *African Studies Review* 34, no. 3 (1991): 8.

<sup>21</sup> See where I more fully explored this concept in Halifu Osumare, "Aesthetic of the Cool Revisited: The Ancestral Dance Link in the African Diaspora," *UCLA Journal of Dance Ethnology* 17, 1993, 1-17.

<sup>22</sup> Hamera, *Dancing Communities*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 57.

<sup>24</sup> VèVè A. Clark, "Katherine Dunham: Method Dancing or Memory of Difference," *African American Genius in Modern Dance* (Durham, NC: American dance Festival, 1992), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 5.

<sup>26</sup> VèVè A. Clark discovered this correspondence between Herskovits and Dunham in the Herskovits archives at the Africana Library of Northwestern University. Clark first presented her discovery in her original paper "Performing the Memory of Difference in Afro-Caribbean Dance: Katherine Dunham's Choreography, 1938-1987," presented at the Katherine Dunham Symposium, Stanford University, May 12, 1989. This became the initial study that eventually was published in the *History & Memory in African-American Culture* (1994) text. The fields of dance and anthropology owe a great debt to her discovery and research of this important historical document.

<sup>27</sup> The Stanford Dunham Residency in 1989 consisted of classes in the anthropology department and the Dance Division, a public talk by Miss Dunham and demonstration of the Dunham of the Dunham Technique by the San Francisco State University's Dance Department under the directorship of Dr. Albirida Rose, an exhibit of the Dunham's books and stage costumes, and community dance classes in the nearby community of East Palo Alto. I was the Project Coordinator for the entire project in my capacity of Program Coordinator for Stanford's Committee on Black Performing Arts.