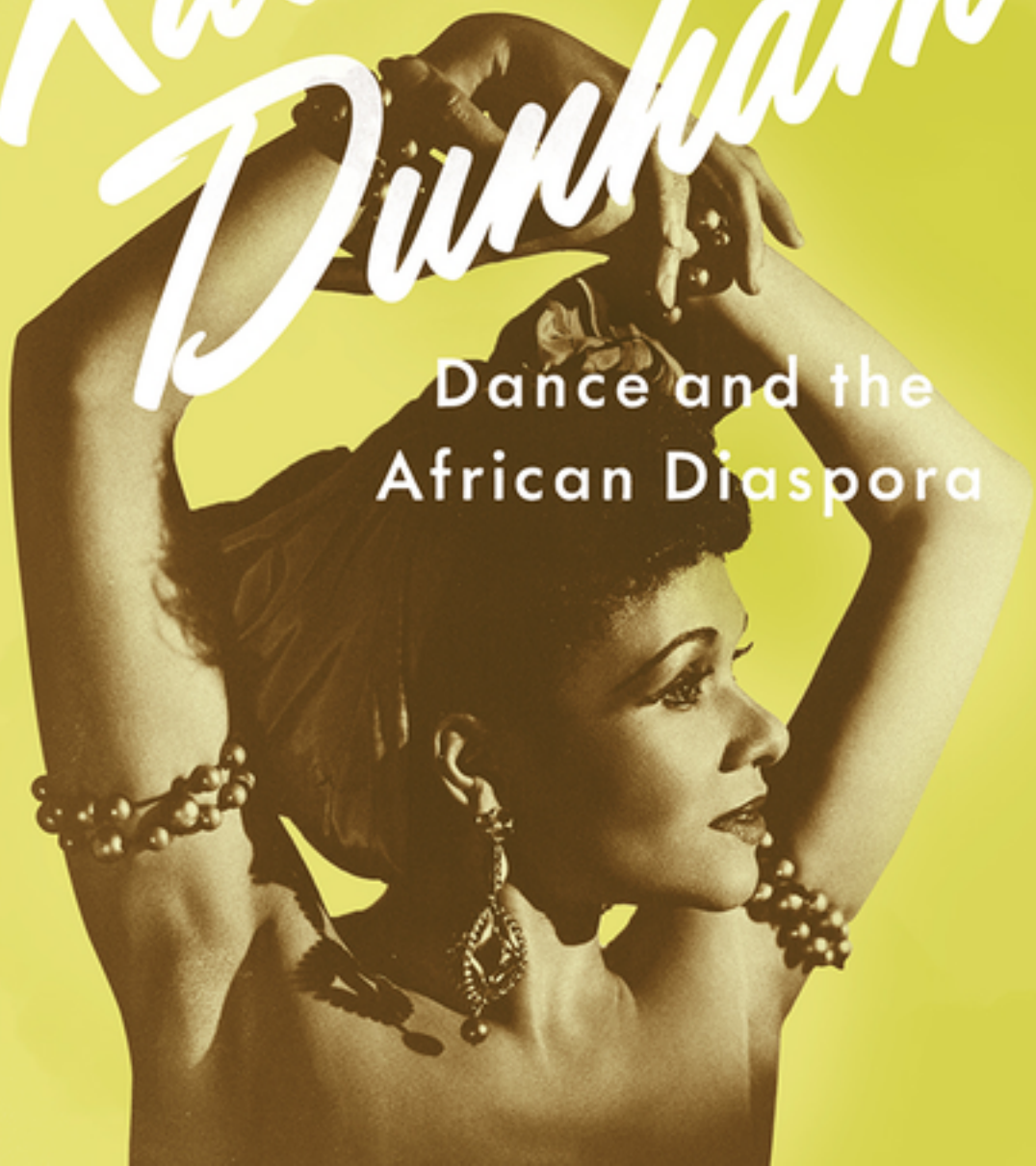


JOANNA DEE DAS

Katherine Dunkham

Dance and the
African Diaspora



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KATHERINE DUNHAM

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I never met Katherine Dunham, but she shaped the course of my life. At age nine, I began to take jazz dance at the Center of Creative Arts (COCA), a community arts center in University City, an “inner ring” suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. I had only a vague awareness that my teacher, Lee Nolting, doubled as the ballet mistress for the Katherine Dunham Children’s Workshop across the river in East St. Louis. After taking a Dunham Technique class at age twelve with Lee’s husband, Darryl Braddix, I realized that many aspects of my jazz dance training, including our arm positions during warm-ups and our body-part isolations, came from Dunham Technique. Even more influentially, Lee based the COCA dance program on Dunham’s philosophy of intercultural communication through the arts. Lee insisted that COCA offer scholarship programs that drew black students from the north side of St. Louis and white students from rural areas in Missouri and Illinois.¹ I was part of an organization with a mission to create community and challenge racial segregation.

When I arrived in New York City, at age eighteen, I discovered a different dance world. My ballet and modern dance classes at college were almost exclusively white, and Dunham Technique was not a part of the curriculum. It was similarly absent from most dance studios and university dance departments across the country. I also learned that Dunham was not on the syllabi in other academic departments, even though her career was relevant to anthropology, American history, African American/Africana Studies, postcolonial studies, and cultural theory. *Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora* began as a dissertation based on the premise that Dunham’s life helps us understand artists as agents of social change. Since then, it has expanded to consider Dunham as an intellectual who shaped the field of possibilities for transnational political activism, particularly in the African diaspora.

Dunham wrote and spoke about herself prolifically, and the existing biographies depend primarily on interviews with her and materials in which she had already crafted a smooth narrative. I wanted a broader picture of her as an artist, thinker, activist, and human being. Not only did this lead me to her archive at Southern Illinois University and to the collections at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts and the Library of Congress, but also

back to my hometown. In 2009, I processed the Katherine Dunham Papers at the Missouri Historical Society, which allowed that collection to become available to the public. It contains a wealth of valuable material on Dunham's life and work after 1965. I went further afield to more than a dozen archives, including the National Archives in Maryland, the Bernard Berenson papers in Italy, and the Langston Hughes papers at Yale University, to understand the reach of her influence.

My work was not solely archival. I traveled to Haiti to gain a deeper understanding of her connections to that nation; I interviewed dozens of former Dunham dancers and students from all stages of her life, ranging from those who had danced in her company in the 1940s to those who trained with her at the Children's Workshop in the 1990s. Some who spoke with me, including Vanoye Aikens and Darryl Braddix, have since passed away, and I am deeply grateful that I had the chance to hear their stories. I also began to dance Dunham Technique again. Since 2010, I have attended the Dunham Technique Seminars held annually in the St. Louis region. In 2014, I was invited to join the certification process and have since become involved in planning the annual symposium for the Institute for Dunham Technique Certification.

My connection to the Dunham community thus began before this book and will continue long after its publication, but I never experienced what it was like to be in her presence. I hover on the border between insider and outsider. At the Certification Workshop, when we pray to Dunham and speak of her technique as one does of a religion, I both join in and mentally step away, fully in support of carrying on her important legacy but unaccustomed to a cultural tradition of ancestor veneration. I recall Dunham's own words about her experiences with Haitian Vodou: "I am there to believe or not believe, but willing to understand and to believe in the sincerity of other people in their beliefs, willing to be shown, to participate, and where the participant begins and the scientist ends, I surely could not say."² And while Dunham always proclaimed that her technique was for everyone, I see myself as a guest in an African diasporic cultural practice. Her importance to black dancers carries a different valence, and her aesthetic belongs within the "circle that permits and protects" of black culture—even if the boundaries of black culture are always contested and fluid.³

There are many people who let me into their circles so that I could do this research. I thank all of the people I interviewed, who are listed in the bibliography, as well as the dozens of people I spoke to in casual conversations. Several librarians also gave helpful assistance, including Elizabeth Aldrich at the Library of Congress, Jaime Bourassa, Molly Kodner, and Dennis Northcott at the Missouri Historical Society, and Pam Hackbart-Dean at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. I also received financial support for this work. In my earliest stages of research, I benefited from a Jacob K. Javits Fellowship from the US government. At Columbia University, I received funding from the

Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race, and the Center for American Studies. Stanford University and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation supported a postdoctoral fellowship during the year I began to transform the dissertation into a book. Williams College provided much-needed funds for a research trip to Haiti. Participating in the Manuscript Review Program at the Oakley Center for the Humanities and Social Sciences at Williams provided the unparalleled opportunity to have four senior scholars read and critique the manuscript at a crucial stage.

Indeed, the book would not be possible without the people who read versions of this material. Elizabeth Blackmar, Melissa Borja, Julia Foulkes, Hilary Hallett, Ana Keilson, Tamara Mann, Minkah Makalani, Michael Neuss, Paul Scolieri, Tim Shenk, Jude Webre, and Andy Whitford commented on dissertation chapters. Casey Blake, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Natasha Lightfoot read the entire dissertation. Eric Foner and Lynn Garafola were my mentors and guides throughout, offering feedback on multiple drafts. When making the transition to a book, Davarian Baldwin, Laurent Dubois, Kate Ramsey, Janice Ross, Elizabeth Schwall, and anonymous readers commented on individual chapters. Participants at multiple Mellon seminars and conferences also gave input. Jessica Ray Herzogenrath read over half the manuscript and kept me on a writing schedule. Leslie Brown, Sandra Burton, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Susan Manning, and an anonymous reviewer read the entire manuscript and offered invaluable suggestions. Lynn Garafola continued to be a mentor throughout, and Norm Hirschy at Oxford has been an incredible editor.

Several others made this book possible. I formed writing groups with Rashida Braggs, Corinna Campbell, Carrie Gaiser Casey, Arthi Devarajan, VaNatta Ford, Charlotte Jacobs, Mariska Kappmeier, Alexis Schaitkin, Frances Peace Sullivan, and Mason Williams. Emily Flanders provided assistance in Washington, DC, and Joshua Cohen graciously shared notes from his research in Paris. Victoria Phillips deserves a special thank you for her generosity in sharing archival materials and her home. Rebecca Alaly, Om Arora and Kavita Das, Sarah Bush and David Cormode, Divya Cherian, Kamala and Kiron Das, Stacey and Gabi Gillett, Ellie Kusner, and Matt Swagler provided housing, food, and good company. A special thank you goes to Kathy Neely and the Neely-Streit family for housing me in Carbondale during my research at Southern Illinois University. Most of all, I thank my parents, Susan and Jeffrey Dee, and my spouse, Koushik Das, for their unwavering support.

Finally, I dedicate *Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora* to three organizations that have kept Dunham's legacy going. The Fondasyon konesans ak libète (FOKAL) in Haiti, Katherine Dunham Centers for Arts and Humanities (KDCAH) in East St. Louis, and Institute for Dunham Technique Certification (IDTC) are working to ensure that future generations learn not only about Dunham's approach to dance, but also about her dreams for a better world. Thank you.

Introduction

On October 19, 1944, Katherine Dunham was backstage preparing for the opening number of her show *Tropical Revue* when someone told her the news: her impresario Sol Hurok had once again broken his promise not to book her into any segregated venues. Inside Louisville's Memorial Auditorium the black section overflowed, while the white section contained empty seats. Outside on the sidewalk, hundreds of black Kentuckians clamored to see the glamorous dancer, who had performed there in February to much acclaim. Dunham summoned the house manager to her dressing room and threatened to cancel the performance if he did not immediately allow black patrons into the white section. In turn, the manager threatened to call the police if she did not fulfill her contract. The auditorium buzzed with nervous energy as the standard five-minute delay extended to ten, then twenty, then thirty minutes. Finally, the curtains rose to reveal women in bandeau tops and bare-chested men sitting cross-legged on the stage. The music for *Rara Tonga* began, and the performers began to undulate their arms in Dunham's interpretation of Melanesian dance. The show would go on.¹

The decision to perform, however, was not the end of the battle. Over the course of the evening, as her company members danced their way across an imaginary landscape of the African diaspora that included North Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the United States, as well as a detour to the South Pacific, Dunham hatched a plan. Unlike at her recent show at a segregated theater in Kansas City, where she had danced for a small, unresponsive crowd, the patrons in Louisville roared with enthusiasm after each number. In Kansas City, Dunham had pragmatically accepted the segregated system for the evening, then moved on to the next tour stop. In Louisville, she emerged at the end of the performance wearing a sign that a company member had stolen from a segregated train car saying "For Whites Only" attached to her

backside. After bowing, she turned upstage and danced a triplet step, moving her feet quickly from side to side, causing the sign to swing back and forth from her hips for all to view.² When the bows finished, she read a speech in which she announced that she would not return to the theater until it integrated. Her words made national headlines, and she received fan letters from across the country applauding her stance.³ In the meantime, she and her dancers moved on to Baltimore, where they again played to a segregated audience. This time, she raised no protest. She explained to a friend that unlike in Louisville, she had never performed in Baltimore before, and that “it is important to be known and have received your status before making any moves.”⁴ Furthermore, she argued, the show itself, which featured talented black dancers performing sophisticated choreography rooted in an Africanist aesthetic, made a political impact by challenging racial stereotypes. She said, with a hint of frustration, “The Negro peoples, themselves, have no conception of this magnitude of the minor battles which we continually win through our artistic attractiveness.”⁵

This October 1944 moment during the *Tropical Revue* tour was neither the first nor the last time that the dancer, choreographer, anthropologist, writer, and educator Katherine Dunham would have to make difficult strategic choices about how to fight racism. As an African American celebrity whose life spanned almost the entirety of the twentieth century (1909–2006), Dunham consistently faced the expectation that she contribute to the cause of racial equality, an imperative she embraced—but on her own terms. While scholars recognize her achievements in dance and anthropology, her influence on the black freedom movement both in the United States and abroad is less well known.⁶ Dunham was a cultural worker in the struggle for racial justice in the twentieth century. She contributed to its intellectual framework by stressing an international perspective and by bringing dance into the conversation about how to build a sustainable cultural foundation for political activism. Her theories did not remain in the abstract because first and foremost, she danced them. Dance does not distinguish between ideas and action; in dance, ideas *are* action.⁷ She also built and ran institutions, published books and articles, and attempted to live her ideals, because for Dunham, the life and the work were one. Over several decades, from the New Negro Movement to the Popular Front to the “classic” phase of the Civil Rights Movement to the Black Power Movement, she continued to refine her ideas and practices.

Though Dunham’s worldview was broadly humanistic, she articulated it through what I call a *politics of diaspora*. Diaspora has become an increasingly popular framework for understanding how people build cultural and political communities across national boundaries. The term “African diaspora” only came into use in the late 1950s, but the project of diaspora among people of African descent began decades earlier.⁸ In its classic definition, a diaspora is the scattering of a people from a real or imagined homeland, often under

conditions of duress. The term typically connotes feelings of exile, nostalgia, longing, and a sense of in-betweenness, as one does not feel fully at home, either in the place of origin or in one's current geographic location. Dunham was a part of a generation of intellectuals who reconceptualized diaspora as a way to forge transnational unity among people of African descent for purposes of liberation from racism and colonialism. A politics of diaspora emphasizes cultural ties but recognizes and allows space for difference. While many theorists have invoked long-standing, historical, or even blood-memory cultural connections to Africa as the foundation for diaspora, a politics of diaspora also involves the conscious refashioning of existing cultural forms and even the creation of new ones. It also resists notions of cultural purity, recognizing that identity is always shifting and subject to multiple influences.⁹

Dunham played an important role in this intellectual milieu because she challenged what Michelle M. Wright calls the "inherently masculinist and nationalist constructions of the Black subject" created by W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Aimé Césaire, and the litany of other men typically invoked in the lineage of the black intellectual tradition.¹⁰ Dunham swung the needle away from nationalism and toward diaspora as the ideological framework for black liberation. For much of her life, she also thought of Haiti, not Africa, as the center of the diaspora. She theorized Haiti as the birthplace of a new humanism, one borne from the Haitian Revolution and the dynamism of cultural exchange between France and West Africa. Her theory had its problems—one scholar calls any conception of the African diaspora without Africa at the center as "fundamentally flawed"—but its intercultural foundation reflected her belief that the project of diaspora was ultimately a project for all of humanity.¹¹

Dunham furthered the project of diaspora through dance. She was not the only African American who came of age in the 1920s to use dance as a weapon in the fight for racial equality, but her training in anthropology at the University of Chicago gave her additional intellectual ammunition.¹² Historically, people of African descent have used many cultural forms, including music and poetry, to express a politics of transnational liberation. Because of the "pernicious metaphysical dualism that identifies blacks with the body and whites with the mind," however, scholars have not always recognized dance as an equal part of that cultural matrix, seeing it as too close to stereotypes about hypersexuality and primitivism to be of political use.¹³ Instead of fighting against the association of blackness (and women) with the body, Dunham seized that association and turned it on its head. She argued that dance was *particularly* important to the African diasporic experience. Until the twentieth century, scholars had declared that African-descended peoples in the Americas had no history. While enslaved Africans had indeed crossed the Atlantic Ocean without physical objects from home, Dunham argued that they arrived with history and memory embedded in their bodies. In the

Western Hemisphere, they used kinesthetic memory to reconstitute community and create dance practices that blended past and present, reflecting both traditions passed down as well as innovations developed in response to new conditions. Melville Herskovits, Jean Price-Mars, and Arturo Schomburg had begun to discuss ideas of “Africanist” retentions and “acculturation” years before her work appeared, but Dunham was the most compelling intellectual to articulate dance’s role in those processes.¹⁴

Dunham was an activist as well as an intellectual. To gain the broadest sense of her influence, this book analyzes three interrelated spheres of action: her performances, her institutions, and her personal life. Performance has been the most-studied aspect of her career. Dunham founded the first black dance company in the United States to gain national and international artistic recognition.¹⁵ With this company, she performed on Broadway, appeared in Hollywood films, and toured six continents from the 1930s through the 1960s. On occasion, she engaged in a strategy of explicit protest dance, most notably her Popular Front dances, staged in the late 1930s, and her anti-lynching dance drama *Southland* (1950), performed in the early 1950s. Dunham’s carefully theorized choreography revealed how capitalism, imperialism, and global racism intersected to create conditions of inequality and violence. The reach of this work, however, was limited. She abandoned her Popular Front choreography in 1940 when her company gained national recognition, and her company never performed *Southland* in the United States.

Instead, during her performing career Dunham primarily engaged in a strategy of what I call *aesthetics as politics*. Decisions about thematic content, movement vocabulary, dancers’ body types, the arrangement of said dancers in space, and performance venues express a choreographer’s commentary on the relations of power governing society.¹⁶ Dunham’s formal aesthetic choices revealed a black feminist political stance. The plotlines of many of her dances normalized black lives instead of reproducing the stereotypes of the minstrel tradition that were still prevalent during the early twentieth century. She drew upon the erotic as a source of performative power, understanding from her anthropological training that sexuality was a central component of the human experience, integral to all facets of life, including religion.¹⁷ She was unafraid to delve into Vodou, Shango, and other Afro-Caribbean religious practices onstage. She wove together ballet, modern dance, Afro-Caribbean forms, African American vernacular traditions, and Asian movement vocabularies in her choreography, challenging high/low, modern/ethnic cultural hierarchies. The Dunham company appeared in a variety of venues ranging from nightclubs to opera houses, which similarly confounded standard assignments of cultural value. Overall, her choreography expressed freedom—the freedom to engage in Africanist, black folk aesthetics in concert dance; the freedom to embrace spirituality and divine possession in performance; the freedom to be sexual, sensual, serious, glamorous, or whatever else the plot called for;

the freedom to express joy, sorrow, and laughter in a naturalistic rather than exaggerated manner; in essence, the freedom to embrace a full humanity. Her choreography thus embodied what dance scholar André Lepecki argues is one of the central understandings of the word *political*—"the movement of freedom."¹⁸

African American political activists did not always see Dunham's performances as "positive representation" of the race. Her expressions of sexuality, embrace of vernacular dances, and performed rites of possession did not accord with black respectability politics of the mid-twentieth century. I adopt the approach of scholar bell hooks to move beyond "good" and "bad" ideas about racial representation.¹⁹ In broadening the field of representation for people of African descent, particularly women, Dunham's choreography was its own form of social protest.

The building of a diasporic consciousness was another political outcome of Dunham's aesthetic choices. Her audiences were approximately 90 percent white, but she paid particular attention to the 10 percent who were people of color.²⁰ She offered those audiences a way to view their place in the world, not as members of an oppressed minority within a colonial nation-state (whether the United States or another), but rather as a part of a diverse global majority. Her shows followed a revue format, meaning that she strung together multiple short dance numbers that shared no consistent plot. She set her pieces in Haiti, Martinique, Trinidad, Cuba, Brazil, Northern Africa, and the United States, showcasing the variety and richness of black culture. She developed a dance technique that gave her shows an aesthetic coherence, a vision of horizontal overlap that rejected the chronological out-of-Africa model of the black revues of previous decades. She visually offered solidarity across the black world, rather than relegate certain groups to a distant or near past.²¹ Her technique mirrored the creolization she witnessed in the Caribbean. It challenged notions of racial and cultural purity, instead asking dancers to embrace diaspora within their bodies.

Diaspora does not fit perfectly as a way to theorize Dunham's aesthetic. Because her career began decades before the "African diaspora" became a recognized term, she used an alternate one: *primitive*.²² Dunham trained at the University of Chicago anthropology department in the 1930s and adopted her mentors' language. Like them, she insisted that she did not take primitive to mean inferior or unsophisticated. Instead, she valorized primitive culture as closer to nature and freed of what she considered the "restrictions of civilization," which she understood as the industrialized nations of Western Europe and the United States.²³ This thinking reinforced the perception that a distinction existed between primitive and civilized. She argued that primitive societies could reveal "universal and fundamental truths" about human nature, and thus her aesthetic, rooted in her ethnographic investigations of what she called "primitives" in the Caribbean, had universal applicability in

modern dance.²⁴ The supposedly underlying connections among “primitive peoples” gave her the legitimacy to present dances on stage from places she had never been. Although Dunham was an anthropologist, the vast majority of her dances were not set in the locations of her ethnographic research.²⁵ Other black artists and intellectuals had abandoned the concept of primitivism by the mid-twentieth century, but she insisted on using it her entire life to describe her aesthetic.²⁶

When judged from a twenty-first century perspective, Dunham’s embrace of the primitive comes across as a major blind spot in her politics. She romanticized the term and refused to see how it rendered groups of people as inferior, even if that was not her intention. At the same time, the trope of the primitive liberated her creative voice, as it did for other modern artists of the early twentieth century.²⁷ She attempted to elevate the primitive, show it as modern, and use it as her tool to create diaspora on the stage.

Whether to call Dunham’s aesthetic and technique “black dance” raises another set of questions about the politics of her performances. In 2015, the instructor of the history class at the Dunham Certification Workshop told participants that Dunham Technique was not black dance, but rather a universal technique that drew upon several different forms, including East Asian martial arts, Indian classical dance, and yoga.²⁸ The instructor had plenty of quotations to back up her characterization. In 1943, Dunham objected to publicity that called her shows Negro dance, asserting that “my own artistic accomplishments can and do cover a much broader field.”²⁹ In the 1970s in East St. Louis, Dunham refused to make her Performing Arts Training Center a part of the African American Studies department at Southern Illinois University. As her administrator Ruth Ann Taylor wrote in a terse letter to the university president, “One has to assume that the underlying concept and philosophy of the Training Center have been misunderstood or disregarded. . . . The concept is not intended for a specific group; it transcends racial groupings.”³⁰ Finally, at a 2003 ceremony in her honor in New York, Dunham said, “There is one thing I would like to say; I am so tired of being considered a leader of black dance. . . . This is going to cause me a lot of trouble in the so-called black world. But I don’t mind.”³¹

Despite Dunham’s statements, she is to this day called the “matriarch” of black dance and invoked as a divine ancestor in African American dance communities.³² In a 2014 discussion about Dunham’s stated desire to become the next Isadora Duncan (a white American often considered the founder of modern dance), some participants insisted that such a comparison was wrong—even if Dunham herself made it—because she belonged in a black aesthetic tradition.³³ Given what Brenda Dixon Gottschild has called the “invisibilization” of Africanist contributions to American concert dance, there is a sense that emphasizing Dunham’s fusion sensibility or universalism runs the risk of reinforcing that invisibilization.³⁴ Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez

argue that black performance exists “without deference to overlapping historical trajectories or perceived differences in cultural capital from an elusive Europeanist norm . . . black performance derives from its own style and sensibilities that undergird its production.”³⁵ In an ideal world, acknowledging the European-American influences on Dunham and her broad aspirations would not make the Africanist influence deferential or subordinate. Rather, it would reaffirm that a diasporic sensibility is one that rejects purist ideas of culture.

But in a world in which an individual white male is still the presumed vessel of universalism, and racial inequality still exists, calling Dunham’s work black dance is essential. Building on Carole Johnson, Takiyah Nur Amin writes, “Even the varied cultural influences that Black people have assimilated which reveal themselves in movement can be understood as Black Dance because they are filtered and distilled through the varied particular and specific racialized experiences of Black people.”³⁶ While I do not want to make culture static, and I affirm that all of our genre categories in dance have overlapping influences, we must put down stakes somewhere. I place Dunham’s in black dance, and I do so with critical awareness that she felt conflicted about such a categorization.

In addition to her performing career, Dunham built institutions, a key component of her legacy that has received less attention.³⁷ Institutionalization has negative connotations of fixity and conservatism, but institutions also defy cultural erasure. They make claims to historical importance, durability, and relevance. The most important institution was the Dunham company itself, which provided employment to dozens of African Americans at a time when jobs for black dancers were scarce. She trained multiple generations of black choreographers and performers. Well-known alumni of her company include Talley Beatty, Julie (Robinson) Belafonte, Janet Collins, Eartha Kitt, Claude Marchant, Charles Moore, Archie Savage, and Glory Van Scott. In 1944, she defied the segregation of the New York dance world by opening the Katherine Dunham School of Dance, not in Harlem, but in the heart of Manhattan’s Broadway theater district. For a decade, it was the “in” place for New York’s dancers and actors to take class. In 1967 she opened another school, the Performing Arts Training Center, in East St. Louis, Illinois. Both schools promoted cross-cultural education centered on the cultures of the African diaspora as the way to prepare students to face the “problems of living” and develop what she called “socialization and humanization through the arts.”³⁸ In East St. Louis, Dunham also established the Institute for Intercultural Communication, a museum, and a children’s workshop. She ran the East St. Louis institutions for over thirty years, only moving back to New York for health reasons in her tenth decade of life.

In addition to examining her performances and institutions, this book focuses on how Dunham attempted to *live* diaspora. Her choices reflected a

politics of liberation from fixed identities. At the University of Chicago in the 1920s, she “rigidly avoided sororities and club memberships of all sorts . . . I had always prided myself on thinking only of ‘man’ in the broadest, most inclusive usage of the term.”³⁹ During her ethnographic research trip to Haiti in 1935–36, she took advantage of being “unplaceable” in Haiti’s complex color hierarchy.⁴⁰ During her performance career, she refused to be put into specific boxes, confounding critics who could not decide if she was a “cool scientist” or a “sultry performer.”⁴¹ She was publicly heterosexual, but had multiple relationships with women. Her class politics presented a contradiction. She celebrated what she called folk culture, but spoke of herself as part of an international, intellectual elite that ought to be given latitude to shape that culture.

Most importantly, she rejected a static national identity. Through her own peripatetic lifestyle, she created connections among people around the world. In the 1930s, her ethnographic research in the Caribbean gave her a new diasporic consciousness. From the late 1940s to the 1960s, she toured the globe with her dance company, maintaining no permanent US address and instead finding a sense of home abroad. In the 1960s and 1970s, she brought drummers from Senegal to East St. Louis and students from East St. Louis to Haiti. She saw herself as a cosmopolitan—in its literal meaning of “citizen of the world”—attuned in particular to what she called “noir” sensibilities, invoking interculturalism with her choice to use the French term.⁴² She believed that living in the space of diaspora, in between-ness, was the way to achieve wholeness.

Dunham’s remarkable capacity for reinvention was key to her survival, but it meant that she could not always fulfill her social justice aspirations. She abandoned many projects, jumping from one realm of activity to another, such as starting a health clinic in Haiti in 1959, only to dissolve it a few months later to re-launch her performing career in Europe. Although she often used her celebrity to take public stances against racism and discrimination, her participation in more recognizable political actions, such as marches or boycotts, was limited, and she sometimes insisted that she had no interest in politics. Most biographies of Dunham shy away from addressing her record of unevenness. For example, in the other versions of this chapter’s opening anecdote about the Louisville protest, there is no mention of her choices not to protest in Kansas City, Baltimore, or previously in Louisville.⁴³ Acknowledging the complex nature of Dunham’s political engagement raises intriguing questions: How did she make her choices, and why? What do her struggles to balance artistic success, personal desires, financial stability, and social justice commitments reveal about how other African American performing artists navigated similar dilemmas?

One aspect of Dunham's complex personality did not change: her indomitable will. This trait was both the very reason for the success of her pioneering efforts and the cause of problems institutionally and interpersonally. Given the United States' historic lack of support for artists, and for black artists more specifically, Dunham had to finance her shows on her own. Her refusal to give up when faced with monetary distress kept the company afloat at a time when many other dance companies failed. Her refusal to bow to racism or sexism meant that she achieved far more than anyone thought possible. She is a prime example of how we need artists to envision futures that do not yet exist.

Artists often desire to have total control over that vision, a trait that can have its downsides. Dunham ruled over her company members with an iron fist, which bred resentment. During the 1950s, she took to calling her dancers "the insatiabables." She blamed the declining morale in the company on what she considered their greed, ingratitude, and jealousy, but her unwillingness to relinquish the spotlight to younger female dancers and her controlling attitude also caused conflict.⁴⁴ Contrary to popular belief, the "Katherine Dunham Company" never officially existed. Instead, programs and advertisements billed Dunham as an individual first, putting her name in a bigger font, and then her group. Sometimes, the company was not even billed at all.⁴⁵ For the sake of simplicity, this book will use the shorthand "Dunham company" to represent the group of dancers, musicians, and singers who performed with her for thirty years.

Dunham also refused to relinquish business decisions to a qualified manager or impresario (save the four years under Sol Hurok). This need for absolute control exacerbated financial problems that led, ultimately, to the collapse of her company and her New York school. It also led to administrative dysfunction at her institutions. Instead of finding qualified personnel, she cultivated an entourage of devotees. This attribute is hardly uncommon among prominent leaders of dance companies. Serge Diaghilev, Martha Graham, and George Balanchine demanded, and received, similar adulation. Exploring this aspect of Dunham's personality helps us better understand the kind of strength it took for her to defy the odds. In a cultural context that discounted dance as a legitimate art form, women as leaders, and African Americans as intelligent or artistic, Dunham's steely resolve and faith in her own genius lay at the heart of her success.

Because the personal is always political, Dunham's relationships also enter into the story. Her husband John Pratt, who was white, created the sets and designed the costumes for her company. Pratt and Dunham inverted the normative power dynamic of the United States, in which white men stand in the foreground as the figures with power and prestige, bolstered by the labor of women in the background, particularly the labor of black women. Dunham

never diminished Pratt's work, but he remained the less visible partner.⁴⁶ She carried on multiple affairs during their marriage for both emotional and pragmatic reasons. Gifts of money and jewelry from romantic partners often kept her multiple institutions afloat. In an era before the existence of non-profit foundations for the arts or major federal subsidies to artists, she used all resources available to her, including her beauty and charm.

Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora looks at Dunham's life and work as it unfolded chronologically over the course of the twentieth century. Chapter 1, "Becoming a New Negro in Chicago," focuses on her young adulthood in Chicago, from 1928 to 1935. During this period, Dunham embraced a racial uplift ideology. In 1930, she proposed the creation of a black ballet company—something virtually unheard of at the time—and distanced herself from existing African American dance styles. She separated content from form, arguing that the substance of black experience deserved representation on the concert dance stage, but presented through European-American aesthetics. She articulated a place for dance in the New Negro Movement, expanding the movement's intellectual frameworks, and brought an African American voice to both ballet and modern dance, challenging those genres' deep racism.

Dunham's ten-month research trip to the Caribbean in 1935–36 brought about a radical transformation in her approach. Chapter 2, "Finding a Politics of Diaspora in the Caribbean," examines the process by which she came to embrace Africanist aesthetics, not only as the basis for a new art form, but also as a part of a political project. With a deeper understanding of dances from Jamaica, Martinique, Trinidad, and Haiti, she argued for the artistic merit of Afro-Caribbean dance on its own terms. She also developed a new understanding of herself in relation to others of African descent that was simultaneously cultural and political. Instead of feeling the pressure of Du Boisian "double consciousness," of always viewing oneself as both black and American and struggling to reconcile the two,⁴⁷ she instead came to appreciate identity as fluid and relational. She began to believe that liberation from racial oppression was inextricably intertwined with defining oneself as part of a global majority of people of color.

Chapter 3, "Aesthetics as Politics," discusses how and why Dunham landed on the theory of aesthetics as politics as a way to harmonize her concerns for individual artistic recognition, financial stability, and social justice. It takes into account the many factors, including the struggle to make a living during the Great Depression, the pressures she faced to represent black people, and the fact that she lived in a racist and sexist society, that shaped how she developed her voice in the four years after her return from the Caribbean in 1936. I analyze her ballet *L'Ag'Ya* (1938) and revue *Tropics and Le Jazz "Hot"* (1940) to illustrate what she achieved and what remained illegible to her audiences.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine how Dunham adopted various strategies to achieve her goals during the years in which she became a national celebrity. Chapter 4, “Race and Representation during World War II,” focuses on debates about Dunham’s artistic choices at a historical moment when racial representation on stage and screen took on heightened political importance. It also analyzes her offstage activism. Chapter 5, “Rehearsal for Revolution: The Dunham School,” looks at the Dunham School in New York, operational from 1944 to 1954, and breaks with strict chronology in order to tell a more complete thematic story. It offers the argument that Dunham was better able to further her social justice goals through education than through performance. Although the Dunham School fell short in fulfilling some of her artistic dreams, it succeeded in desegregating the space of dance in New York and in promoting diaspora as a model for a peaceful postwar global order.

Chapter 6, “The Unofficial Ambassador of Diaspora: Performing Abroad,” examines how Dunham disseminated her ideas to an international audience. Between 1947 and 1960, Dunham took her company on tour to Europe, Asia, Australia, Latin America, and Africa. Though she was denied the opportunity to be an official US cultural ambassador, in large part because of her anti-lynching ballet *Southland*, she served as an unofficial ambassador of the African diaspora. This chapter argues that in so doing, she made important contributions to the global decolonization movement. She exposed international audiences to an aesthetic of modernity rooted in Africanist cultures and forged relationships with leading black intellectuals, politicians, and artists in the countries she visited. Through actions both onstage and off, Dunham helped lay the cultural foundations of post–World War II diasporic politics.

Chapters 7 and 8 consider the question of finding home. Chapter 7, “Living Diaspora in Haiti and Senegal,” overlaps chronologically with the chapters that precede and follow it. It analyzes the years Dunham spent living in those two nations as an investigation into fashioning a diasporic life. Dunham ultimately found home in the state of her birth, Illinois. In 1967, she settled in East St. Louis, where she reinvented herself as a black power activist and educator. Chapter 8, “The Radical Humanist Meets the Black Power Revolution: Dunham in East St. Louis,” discusses how Dunham was an important figure in the Black Arts Movement. She founded multiple institutions in East St. Louis to put into practice her ideas about African diasporic arts education as a means of community and individual empowerment. She also created networks of artists and intellectuals to promote her philosophy on a national scale.

The epilogue examines Dunham’s legacy. Her contribution to the dance world is enormous; both modern dance and jazz dance would not look the same today without her. Beyond that, however, she also demonstrated how dance could be a force for social justice. Many artists who came of age during the

1930s shared her faith in the political potential of dance, but Dunham stood apart because of her longevity in the field, her intellectual rigor, and her global, multifaceted approach. By drawing upon a vast and largely unexamined archival record to analyze the multiple spheres of her influence, *Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora* offers an expansive portrait of Dunham as an intellectual, artist, political activist, and human being. Her story deepens our understanding of the relationship between art and politics, the dancing body as a vehicle for social change, and the African diaspora as a project to reimagine our future.

CHAPTER 1

Becoming a New Negro in Chicago

How did a quiet child from a predominantly white Chicago suburb become the New Negro Movement's leading voice on dance by the mid-1930s? Most of what we know about Dunham's early years comes from her memoir *A Touch of Innocence*. She wrote the book in 1958 during a distressing period in her life. She had just disbanded her dance company because of financial difficulties and was living in a tiny attic in Tokyo. With her husband and daughter thousands of miles away in Haiti and no performance opportunities on the near horizon, Dunham turned to writing. Her agent suggested a tell-all tale about her glamorous life as an international touring star, of hobnobbing with Evita Perón in Argentina and of riding camels with heiress Doris Duke in Egypt.¹ Dunham chose, instead, to recount the story of her childhood. She painted such a vivid portrait of loneliness and abuse in *A Touch of Innocence* that Langston Hughes commented that she had "a gift for physical detail sometimes too real for comfort."² The book reveals how dance became one of Dunham's tools for survival, a personal narrative that she would then theorize and apply to people of African descent more broadly.

Dunham's first major trauma was the death of her birth mother, Fanny June Williams Taylor Dunham. Fanny was somewhere between twelve and twenty years senior to her second husband, Albert Millard Dunham.³ When they met in Chicago, Fanny was a well-educated, musically gifted divorcée and mother of five who owned property and held a prestigious job as a school principal. She was also light skinned and could pass for white, whereas Albert, a tailor, had darker skin and came from a working-class family in Tennessee. Albert fell hard for Fanny, despite their age, educational, and color differences, and they married around 1905. A son, Albert Jr., was born in 1906. Using the income from Fanny's properties, they moved out of the city to the suburb of Glen Ellyn. A daughter, Katherine, was born three years later.⁴ When Fanny

began to waste away from a mysterious illness soon after, the young toddler could not understand why her mother was shut off from her. Fanny's children from her previous marriage, along with their spouses and children, stayed in the house for extended periods of time, causing overcrowding and tension. Dunham became a quiet and introspective child, expressing herself verbally only to her brother.⁵ Then, when she was just three-and-a-half years old, Fanny died from stomach cancer.⁶ Dunham's faint memories of her mother would be supplemented over the course of her childhood by her father's stories, in which his cultured and well-spoken first wife attained the status of an ideal that Dunham sought to emulate.⁷

Albert Sr. felt unable to raise the children on his own, so he sent them to live with his sister Lulu on the South Side of Chicago. The South Side, a working-class black neighborhood, was an entirely different world from the white, middle-class suburb of Glen Ellyn. Shortly after inheriting the care of the two small children, Aunt Lulu, who had had enjoyed a steady living as a beautician, was denied a renewal of her parlor lease in a downtown department store. In her memoir, Dunham blamed her aunt's troubles on the Great Migration, the influx of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North that had caused skittish white Chicagoans to enact stricter segregation policies. To save money, Lulu and the children moved into the apartment of another relative, Clara Dunham, who had recently come to the city to make a career in theater.⁸

Despite the hardship the move represented, meeting Clara's branch of the family was an important catalyst in Dunham's life. Still too young to be in school, she spent her days watching, wide-eyed, as her aunts and uncles rehearsed for a vaudeville show, *Minnehaha*, about a half-black, half-Indian woman, based on a character from Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson's hit musical comedy, *The Red Moon* (1909). The feathers and fringe of the Indian costumes entranced Dunham, as did the full-throated singing of her Aunt Clara and the vigor of the dancing. She practiced the steps to show to her brother when he got home from school. Another relative took Dunham to matinees at the Grand and Monogram Theaters, where she soaked up what she called the "residuum of the minstrel era" of "bawdy" songs, "raucous" laughter, and "the guttural rasp of the blues."⁹ This period of immersion in the world of black vaudeville lasted only a few months, but it made a profound impression on the motherless four-year-old. She saw the magical world of the theater as an escape from the disorienting confusion of daily life. Even as the choreography faded from her memory, the emotional resonance of performance never left her.¹⁰

Another anecdote in *A Touch of Innocence* describes the connection between such experiences and Dunham's racial consciousness. At age five, she and her brother moved back in with their father, who had remarried and set up a dry-cleaning business in the Chicago suburb of Joliet, which like Glen Ellyn was

almost exclusively white. Dunham grew accustomed to living in a cultural context in which her neighbors and classmates came from a different racial background. Around age twelve, however, she went on a road trip to St. Louis with her stepmother, Annette Pointdexter Dunham, and a family friend. As the trio drove down the city streets, Dunham marveled at the “poverty, ready money, moonshine, dice-rolling, poker-playing, laughter, razor melees, [and] bawdiness” of the black migrants from the South who crowded the sidewalks of Chouteau Avenue. The neighborhood residents laughed at the “foreigners” in the fancy Nash automobile who clearly did not belong.¹¹ Despite sharing a racial identification with the St. Louisans she encountered, Dunham described the experience as an outsider. After buying catfish from a street vendor, the Joliet women quickly left. Dunham later recalled:

The music that drifted out from every doorway as they drove away toward the bridge followed her and struck so far down into a substance that had never stirred or made itself known before that now, at this moment, began possession by the blues, a total immersion in the baptismal font of the Race. This music would sometime[s] be her only tie to these people.¹²

Dunham had certainly heard blues music during childhood visits to vaudeville theater, so her claim that the music she heard in St. Louis awakened a racial consciousness that had “never stirred or made itself known before” feels forced. Nevertheless, the anecdote establishes a recurring theme in Dunham’s life: the tension between racial identification and class distinction. Expressive culture, in this case music, had the power to create racial solidarity. At the same time, its connective threads were tenuous, as her dismissive phrase “these people” suggests. At the time she was writing *A Touch of Innocence*, Dunham saw herself as part of a global intellectual elite and wanted to ensure that her readers understood her as such. In interviews from that decade she named three white men—former University of Chicago president Robert Hutchins, psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, and art historian Bernard Berenson—as the three most important influences on her life.¹³ In another memoir, written in Senegal eleven years later, she would describe herself as being at home with all people of African descent, regardless of their class background.¹⁴ Dance became the medium through which she would navigate these contradictions of belonging and exclusion, of insider and outsider status.

Dunham did not get many opportunities to develop her love of dance in Joliet. She joined her high school’s Terpsichorean Club, a dance group that emphasized what Dunham called “free-style movement” based in the teachings of Austrian-born Émile Jacques-Dalcroze and the Hungarian-born Rudolf Laban.¹⁵ Although Dalcroze is best known for creating a system of teaching music through movement (eurythmics) and Laban for notating dance (Labanotation), both men also influenced 1920s dance pedagogy in the United

States. Dalcroze believed that the gesturing body was the best medium for expressing rhythm. He championed improvisation and, in contrast to the rote repetition model of his gymnastics-oriented peers, emphasized the harmony of mind and body, in which one mentally comprehended physical sensations in order to provide the fullest natural expressions of rhythm.¹⁶ Laban adopted a scientific approach to dance, examining how the body utilized space, time, and energy in motion. This scientific approach did not negate mysticism. To the contrary, Laban believed in dance as a spiritual force that connected the human body to a cosmic order through a dancer's ability to translate individual concrete experience into abstract expression.¹⁷ The teenager Dunham "waved her arms in a figure eight design to the chiming of a gong and the thumping of a tom-tom," which suggests that her teacher emphasized percussive rhythm. She also "practiced special techniques for sitting, falling, jumping, leaping, and stretching," which accorded with Dalcrozian/Laban ideas about dance as emerging from natural, everyday movement.¹⁸

These abstract exercises, however, bored Dunham. Instead, the "enchanted" world of ballet drew her attention and admiration. Ballet offered fantastical narratives of beautiful fairies, queens, and young maidens pursued by handsome, wealthy men; the ballerina aesthetic emphasized ethereality and grace. She also fell in love with the *hopak*, a Ukrainian folk dance that offered audiences visual thrills and displays of technical virtuosity, such as kicking one's legs out from a squat position with one's arms crossed. Both ballet and the *hopak* were performed at a Terpsichorean Club recital but never introduced into the classes. Dunham resigned herself to "reconstruct[ing] in her mind's eye the vision that had appeared at the recital" to fuel her desire to keep dancing. Soon, however, even the limited Terpsichorean Club lessons came to an end when her father insisted she start working in his dry-cleaning business after school.¹⁹

Dunham did get one opportunity to put her choreographic imagination to work: she decided to produce a cabaret evening as a fundraiser for the family's church. She recounted the story not only in her memoir, but also for journalists throughout her career. The show revealed Dunham's early fascination with adopting exotic foreign identities. Between various numbers based in her early memories of black vaudeville, she performed a *hopak* dressed as a "Russian princess," no doubt inspired by the Terpsichorean Club recital. She also choreographed an "Oriental" dance that she "reconstructed from a picture of a Turkish maiden on the cover of a pulp magazine and her recollections of Theda Bara [a silent film star] as Salome."²⁰ Dunham finding choreographic inspiration in a magazine illustration mirrors the apocryphal tale of modern dancer Ruth St. Denis finding choreographic inspiration in a cigarette advertisement featuring the Egyptian goddess Isis. For both black and white women of the early twentieth century, exotic performance was a means of liberation from restrictive gender and racial identities. Turning to Orientalist