Anthropology as Choreography: Katherine Dunham's Creolized Approach to Choreography

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In 1936, Katherine Dunham traveled to Haiti to study traditional Afro-Caribbean dances as a part of study as an anthropology student at the University of Chicago. Before she could access the villages outside the capital, however, she first had to win over the respectable citizens in Port au Prince. Her excursions into the more rural villages of the island disturbed influential leaders, and needing the support of these citizens, so Dunham set to work to win them over. She rented the city's largest theater and announced a dance concert for Port au Prince's most influential residents. Her audience came expecting to see her represent the shocking Voodoo ceremonies she was intent on studying through dance. Instead she "included only numbers which were traditional ballet or aesthetic interpretations." [1] Clad in white tulle and performing classical ballet to Debussy, she had won over the Haitian ruling class [2].

Later on upon her return to the United States, Dunham premiered *L'Ag'Ya,* a ballet based on the dance traditions she recorded while in Martinique but infused them with ballet. She articulated the interaction between classical ballet and Afro-Caribbean movement in her choreography, and yet a critic overlooked the impressive ambition of Dunham's choreography, suggesting that Dunham integrated ballet to prove to the audience that she knew how to point her foot [3].

Both of these instances show the variety of ways with which classical ballet was used by Dunham and interpreted by different audiences, either granting her entry into a social world or castigating her for her use of it. Dunham's use of classical ballet was critiqued even while she had trained extensively in it, but then in Haiti her white tulle and pointed feet granted her

[1] Bock Pierre, Dorathi. "A Talk with Katherine Dunham." In Kaiso! Writings By and About Katherine Dunham, edited by Vèvè A. Clark and Sarah E. Johnson, 249
[2] "Katherine Dunham," London Observer, 12 September 1948. Copyright 1948 by Guardian Newspapers, Ltd.
[3] Valis Hill, Constance. "Collaborating with Balanchine on *Cabin in the Sky*: Interviews with Katherine Dunham" In Kaiso! Writings By and About Katherine Dunham, edited by Vèvè A. Clark and Sarah E. Johnson, 244

acceptance. The confusion whether to let her use of ballet be diminishing as opposed to empowering and creative presented a burden, a bind that was felt by many Black artists in the twentieth century. However, instead of allowing prevailing societal expectations to bind her creative expression to one culture, Dunham found that thinking across cultures allowed her to liberate herself from this bind. I argue that through using an anthropological perspective, Dunham introduced classical ballet to Afro-Caribbean movement to create a dynamic, modern choreographic body of work. Classical ballet became not an oppositional form but an empowering technique for Dunham. Through thinking across and with cultures, Dunham created choreography that represented a creolized approach to dance, reflecting her training in anthropology and her personal experiences.

In order to understand Katherine Dunham's choreography as a form of anthropology, one must first situate her within an intellectual and artistic milieu that was calling for a radical re-thinking of the relationship between race and culture. Katherine Dunham's work was situated in the larger context of *The New Negro Movement,* a brief but important credo of the Harlem Renassaince that shaped the larger cultural conversations about Black advancement through the arts from roughly 1914-1920 [4]. One of the leading philosophers during this time was Alain Locke, and his thinking in his essay *The New Negro* laid the groundwork for a "racial uplift campaign," one where adopting all kinds of art was thought to be the key to Black liberation. According to Locke, this newness could only be realized if "artists were free to develop their own black aesthetics and not simply direct their efforts toward achieving incorporation within dominant white culture." [5] Locke encouraged Black artists to "search for the roots that made

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[4] Manuel, Carme. "Mule Bone: Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston's Dream Deferred of an African-American Theatre of the Black Word." *African American Review* 35, no. 1 (2001): 77–92.
[5] Manuel, "Mule Bone," 78

their cultural inheritance unique,"[6] and thus artists like Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Katherine Dunham and more turned to their African heritage to influence their work. Through representing a unique cultural heritage, Black artists during this time period were charged with creating work that was entirely new for an American stage yet based in Black traditions. To Locke, having to fit art within a dominant white culture was futile, while representing a unique cultural heritage would create a separate sphere of excellence. As an African American woman from Chicago, Dunham was familiar and fascinated with her larger heritage in the diaspora, but also had to consider the American culture that her family was a part of, balancing the conversations between an African American diaspora, a dominant white culture, and what she was personally interested in. Faced with this larger cultural conversation, Dunham was forced into this wider question of how one might embody this idea of *The New Negro* and achieve Black liberation through dance.

In order to engage with these larger ideas, I argue that Dunham turned to anthropology as a liberating force. Dunham was a student of Melville Herskovits at the University of Chicago, head of the anthropology department at Northwestern University and well-known for his work *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), As such, Dunham would have been familiar with his idea of acculturation, "a word he used to describe how two cultures…transmitted elements to each other, creating new creolized forms."[7] The assumption that African traditions had been eliminated in the United States and the larger diaspora through contact with European traditions under colonialism was prevalent at the time, and Herskovits' theory refuted this social-Darwinist idea of complete elimination of cultural traditions when in interaction with a supposed dominant,

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[6] Manuel, "Mule Bone," 78

[7] Das, Dee Joanna. *Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora*. Oxford University Press, 2017, 31.

European one [8]. When completing her fieldwork under the Rosenwald Grant to study dance forms in the Caribbean, Dunham was able to see this idea of acculturation in play. As descendants in the African diaspora, dancers in Martinique or Haiti, for example, could have abandoned their African dance traditions for those of a 'dominant,' colonial French force. Yet instead, the dances that she observed were the product of a French post-colonial, and African style of dancing that was unique to the island it was produced in. A whitening of diasporic dance forms was not occurring, and Dunham was able to see the types of cross-cultural blending that were possible with dance. Taking these dance forms back with her to the United States, Dunham decided to create another level of interaction, by introducing those forms to the movements of classical ballet. Thus Dunham approached her choreography with an anthropological theory, creating her own creolized form of dance that showed the conversation between Afro-Caribbean movement and classical ballet.

By modeling her choreography after this anthropological theory of acculturation, this also allowed Dunham to liberate herself in part from the "double bind" that Black artists were faced with. Vèvè A. Clark, a diaspora scholar, points to the "double bind" that Black artists had to negotiate in her work *Katherine Dunham's Tropical Revue,* where if they operated within a "limited artistic scope, failing to expand their ideas and skills, they were not taken seriously." But if they attempted to venture out beyond the boundaries of their accepted "place," "they were criticized for inappropriate expression." [9] Because Dunham attempted to combine multiple dance forms and not merely cling to those within her "accepted place," she was able to build a creolized dance form that challenged the notions of the confines of her race. While Dunham did face criticism from outside forces arguing that she should represent dance forms more closely

[8] Das, "Katherine Dunham," 31
[9] Clark, Vèvè A. "Katherine Dunham's Tropical Revue." *Black American Literature Forum* 16, no. 4 (1982), 148

aligned with what was expected of her as a Black artist, the influences of classical ballet and Afro-Caribbean movement she chose to draw from in her choreography showed a personal disregard for the restrictions placed on her. Including the movement of classical ballet in order to communicate Afro-Caribbean dance meant engaging directly with this "double-bind" to the point of liberating herself from it on a personal level.

Building upon scholars like Joanna Dee Das' work that has tackled Dunham's contributions to the dance world in highlighting Afro-Caribbean movement, I argue that Dunham's interest in classical ballet was essential to her understanding as an anthropologist to see how cultures interact. While there are more sophisticated models now to show how cultures interact, Dunham's application of acculturation and creolization shows the time in which she was a student of anthropology, and allowed her to create an entirely unique choreographic body. To Dunham, ballet did not have to represent only white colonialism, as she chose to integrate it with Afro-Caribbean movement, wedding it and acculturating it to represent her own experiences. This dynamic, cross-cultural conversation that Dunham engaged in worked to liberate Black dance from the double bind. By using classical ballet in her choreography, Katherine Dunham in effect used an anthropological framework to enliven and acculturate multiple dance forms.

With such an interest in anthropology, it was important that Dunham conduct her own fieldwork, to "document the traditions she studied and to arrive at some understanding of their importance," [10] and to perhaps see this concept of acculturation in action. Dunham articulated her interest in the dance forms of the African diaspora when forming her school in Chicago, shortly after beginning to train in classical ballet. She saw the two as compatible, but wanted to complete fieldwork in the Caribbean to further corroborate and contextualize her interest in 'primitive'

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[10] E. Johnson, Sarah. "Diamonds on the Toes of her Feet." In Kaiso! Writings By and About Katherine Dunham, edited by Vèvè A. Clark and Sarah E. Johnson, 5

dance. In 1935, Dunham received a grant from the Julius Rosenwald Fund to study the dances of the West Indies [11]. After taking a course with Melville Herskovits, she embarked for the Caribbean with letters of introduction written by Herskovits to Haitian anthropologist Dr. Jean Price-Mars, Colonel Simon Rowe of the Maroon people of Jamaica, President Stenio Vincent of Haiti, and other government officials and scholars in Haiti [12]. With the goal of documenting 'primitive' dance forms, Dunham arrived first in Whitehall, Jamaica, using it as a launching point as she traveled into the small mountain village of Acompong. She then traveled to Martinique, Trinidad, and Haiti, the island where she found an especial sense of identification with the place and people [13]. While there, she practiced participant-observation style of ethnographic fieldwork, one where the ethnographer partakes in the activities of those she is observing, a technique discouraged by the very anthropologist that sent her there.

Dunham's professors were taken aback at the fervor with which she participated in dance, especially while in Haiti. During the period when Dunham was undertaking the second level of initiation into Vodun, the *canzo* ceremony, a 1936 letter from Herskovits reflected his worries about the participant-observation method [14]:

> "Once again, I am disturbed at the amount you are trying to do, this time principally because of your health. I hope you haven't contracted malaria, but whatever it is, you owe it to yourself not to try to do quite as much as you are. I am a little disturbed also at the prospect of your going through *canzo* ceremony, and I am wondering if it would not be possible for you to attend merely as a witness. Of course, as you know, the trial by fire is an integral part of this initiation, but I wouldn't like to see you suffer burns as a result of going through it. However, you know best in such matters. / am not surprised that the natives are amazed at the way you pick up the dances, and that it induces them to believe

[11] "Katherine Dunham Timeline: Articles and Essays: Selections from the Katherine Dunham Collection: Digital Collections: Library of Congress." The Library of Congress. Accessed November 25, 2022.
[12] Library of Congress, "Katherine Dunham Timeline".
[13] Library of Congress, "Katherine Dunham Timeline".
[14] Osumare, Halifu. "Katherine Dunham, a Pioneer of Postmodern Anthropology."In Kaiso! Writings By and About Katherine Dunham, edited by Vèvè A. Clark and Sarah E. Johnson, 617

> that you probably have inherited loa [a spiritual force] that makes this possible." (Herskovits qtd. in Kaiso 617).

Dunham documented the dances she had learned on film, as well as with great detail in pen and paper. This yielded not only a Geertzian "thick description" but also a probing of the notices of the fieldworker herself in relation to her entire agenda in the field [15]. Upon her return to the US, Dunham translated the ceremonial and social dances she learned into choreography for the stage. In doing so, she combined the movements she observed in the Caribbean with those that she had trained in, namely classical ballet.

While Dunham was faced with the negotiation of the tensions of combining multiple dance forms as an emerging choreographer, her fusion of Afro-Caribbean, modern and classical ballet movements laid the groundwork for much of the work in dance that is done today. Instead of agreeing to a Pavlova style of ballet that seemed intolerant of Black expression, Dunham took control of the movement body and formed a choreographic repertoire that represented her interest in creolized forms, and that represented her own upbringing that did not conform to these larger racial prejudices and binds. While she is known for her interest in Afro-Caribbean dance, Dunham took a keen interest in classical ballet. Classical ballet was rising in popularity in America during the turn of the twentieth century, with Dunham beginning her early training and professional career in ballet. Before she traveled to the Caribbean to study the movement that would shape her later choreography, Dunham was a dedicated and gifted student in ballet, showing the multitude of dance styles she was introduced to, excelled in, and used in her choreography.

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[15] Osumare, "Katherine Dunham," 618

While Dunham was introduced to dance while in high school in Chicago, her entry into classical ballet was under Ludmilla Speranzeva in 1928 while studying anthropology at the University of Chicago [16]. Citing Speranzeva as an influential figure in her formative training, Dunham had the opportunity to work with a unique figure in classical ballet. Speranzeva was one of the first ballet teachers to accept Black dancers as students, having come to the United States with a Franco-Russian vaudeville troupe known as *Chavre-Souris.* Dunham also studied with Ruth Page, American Ballet Dance and choreographer, and Vera Mirova, who exposed Dunham to East Indian, Javanese, and Balinese dance forms [17]. In these formative years of Dunham's training in dance, the people who she was exposed to showed her that ballet could be complimentary with other forms of dance, as well as the theatrical nature that ballet can take on.

After only two years training in these dance forms, Dunham quickly articulated the need for a Black ballet company with the help of Mark Turbyfill, an influential Chicago artist. Together they formed *Ballet Negre,* giving their debut performance at the annual Beaux Arts Ball in Chicago [18]. Dunham's attention to the perfection associated with classical ballet can be seen in Figure 1, with a high *releve*, winged foot, open chest and hyper-extended knees, all qualities prized in classical ballet technique.

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[16] Library of Congress, "Katherine Dunham Timeline."
[17] Library of Congress, "Katherine Dunham Timeline."
[18] "1931 - Katherine Dunham Forms Ballet Négre." MOBBallet.org. Accessed December 6, 2022.

Fig 1. Katherine Dunham performs an *attitude devant* with the help of her partner (Photo from website of Mobballet, https://mobballet.org/index.php/2017/07/21/1931-katherine-dunham-forms-les-ballet-negres/, accessed on December 6, 2022).

While no engagements followed, the group's formation marked an important milestone for ballet in America. While Arthur Mitchell is credited with forming the first Black ballet company in the United States in 1969, Katherine Dunham's company was formed in 1930, almost forty years prior to Mitchell's. While Dunham's early *Ballet Negre* did not enjoy the same long term success that Mitchell's *Dance Theatre of Harlem* did, the company does emphasize the early involvement of Black artists in classical ballet, an involvement that is often overlooked. The formation of *Ballet Negre* was bolstered by Mark Turbyfill's support, writing articles for publications like *Abbott's Monthly* and *The Chicago Bee* explaining the need and calling for the formation of an all-Black ballet company under Katherine Dunham's direction to educated, elite audiences of all racial makeups in Chicago. Mark Turbyfill did insert himself as leader of an all-Black space, but seemingly helped to cultivate a love of ballet for Dunham while recognizing the importance of highlighting African American dancers in the art form. Fig II exhibits this

tension, with the soon to be pioneer of Black dance stands performing a *tendu derriere* with the arm in high fifth along with others interested in forming an all-Black ballet company in Chicago (Fig II). Turbyfill stands in the center of the room in traditional black ballet tights and a white shirt, with his students in everything from shorts to pearls.

Fig II. Mark Turbyfill shows first steps towards the prospective first Negro Ballet. 57th Street Art Colony studio. Chicago 1930. Katherine Dunham last person on left line (Newberry Library Chicago, Turbyfill Collections).

While Dunham would go on to create an important body of work highlighting the movement of classical ballet in her career to come, Dunham's use of ballet in her early years was largely connected to her training and collaborations with Mark Turbyfill. Born in 1896, Turbyfill came to Chicago in 1911 from Oklahoma City and quickly entered the Chicago arts scene. An accomplished artist, he was a published poet while still in his teens, and began his professional dance career in 1919 when he was invited to join the Pavley-Oukrainsky corps de ballet with the Chicago Grand Opera Company. He later became principal dancer under Adolph Bolm with the

Chicago Allied Arts and partnered Chicago dancer and choreographer Ruth Page, continuing to dance through the 1920s and 1930s [19].

As one of Dunham's early ballet teachers, Turbyfill took an interest in Katherine Dunham and with her articulated the need for a Black ballet company. Writing for *The Chicago Bee* and *Abbott's Monthly,* Turbyfill wrote for the public about Dunham's current prowess and potential in creating a Black ballet company for Chicago with his support. In fact, the earliest written expression of Dunham's artistic philosophy was in Turbyfill's article *Shall We Present to the World a New Ballet?* set to be published by Turbyfill for *Abbott's Monthly*, a publication that "successfully engaged readers with a cosmopolitan feel that featured unknown contemporary authors who addressed African American news." [20] Turbyfill's article for the publication in the inaugural issue of *Abbott's Monthly* was denied publication for reasons unknown - perhaps for its possibility of being construed as Eurocentric, perhaps a personal issue [21] - but the original article remains importance because Dunham was quoted at length and it contains Dunham's first written record of her artistic and choreographic vision, one the blends an argument situated in the ideals professed in *The New Negro Movement* and addresses her interest in blending multiple movement forms.

While Dunham had trained with those from the romantic ballet tradition of the Ballet Russe, the avant-garde ballet company helmed by Sergei Diaghilev, she knew that there was no need to confine herself to the template of ballet that had been shown by someone like Anna Pavlova. According to Turbyfill's quotes in his article, Dunham wanted to express her own individuality and the "genius of her race" by fusing elements of classical ballet and African

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[19] Turbyfill, Mark. "Modern Manuscripts & Archives at the Newberry." Return to Modern Manuscripts & Archives at the Newberry. Accessed November 25, 2022.
[20] "Abbott's Monthly Vol. II No. 1." Abbott's Monthly Vol. II No. 1 | Smithsonian Digital Volunteers. Accessed November 25, 2022.
[21] Das, "Katherine Dunham," 23

cultural traditions to create something entirely unique, something essentially creolized. Following a racial-uplift campaign like Alain Locke's, she laid out an argument for how ballet would help African-Americans create a "classic" art, one where "ballet was a template, a "geometric design" that would enable African Americans to Transform their cultural practices into a theatrical form." [22] Dunham separated the form of ballet from its history here, appreciating the "geometric design" and technique of it but leaving the ideology of hierarchy surrounding it. When Locke also explained in his essay how self-consciousness was a key to forward progress and upward mobility amongst Black Americans [23], Dunham would go on to echo Locke's ideas about a "self-conscious race" when speaking about her use of ballet in her choreography, arguing that ballet was in fact a way to express Black modernity [24]. Even while modern audiences now might think of ballet as a form of antiquity, Dunham used the geometric form of ballet in order to express Black modernity [25], and saw the technique as a form with which to propel her dance into a theatrical form. Showing the conversation between classical ballet and Afro-Caribbean movement is a sign of modernity to Dunham, a conversation only possible through the mobility afforded by modern times. Thus Dunham here makes it clear that she wants to separate ballet from its history, its antiquity, using the geometric form and technique of it to help express a new vision for what dance could look like, one that included Black dancers in "classic" forms.

While being a voice for African American artists, Dunham also introduced this tension between the use of ballet and her own structures of hierarchy embedded in her analysis of other dance forms. A champion of traditional dance forms of the Caribbean, Dunham wanted to showcase them to American audiences to heighten their appreciation of them. However, she

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[22] Turbyfill, Mark. "Shall We Present to the World a New Ballet?" in *Abbott's Monthly,* ed. Robert Sengstacke Abbott, (November 1930), 64

[23] Locke, Alain. "The New Negro." Portland: Mint Editions 2021

[24] Das, "Katherine Dunham," 23

[25] Das, "Katherine Dunham," 23

recognized a clear difference between the two forms, articulating that: "civilization draws a sharp distinction between an uncurbed, purely racial expression, governed solely by rhythm and emotion, and the crystalline symphony of traditional ballet." [26] Rhythm and emotion were important to Afro-Caribbean movement, but the balance of the "crystalline symphony" that classical ballet offered apparently offered a glamorized alternative. Dunham here recognizes that it is civilization that draws such a stark line between the two forms, but it seems that she recognizes ballet as something absent of emotion, only to be appreciated for its aesthetic value to sharpen a dance form "governed by rhythm and emotion." Dunham draws a distinction between a dance form governed by music and the feelings generated from it and this geometric form of traditional ballet, eventually showing that the two might compliment each other in their differences. Ballet was a way to express modernity to Dunham, and so even while professing equality she fell in line with her contemporaries by calling Afro-Caribbean dance 'primitive.' However, it is through the combination of these two forms that Dunham aimed to create something completely unique to represent the "genius of her race," a choreographic body modeled in the cultural transmission process.

After *Ballet Negre* disbanded and Turbyfill and Dunham's collaborations drew to a close, Dunham went on to open her first dance school, *The Negro Dance Group* in 1933 in Chicago [27]. Dunham's idea was to open a school for young Black dancers where she could teach them about their African heritage, while also incorporating classical ballet into the curriculum. Despite Speranzeva's advice to forgo ballet and to focus on modern dance where she could develop her own style [28], Dunham saw that she could use ballet to help her accomplish her choreographic goals and introduce it to other forms of dance, as had her teachers Ruth Page and Vera Mirova.

[26] Turbyfill, "Shall We Present," 64
[27] Library of Congress, "Katherine Dunham Timeline."
[28] Library of Congress, "Katherine Dunham Timeline."

She continued with the school, including ballet classes. With Speranzeva's help, the school survived a difficult start and Dunham's subsequent absences when she was engaged in anthropological fieldwork [29]. The formation of this school marked Dunham's commitment to ballet in her educational endeavors, as the school was supported by an influential Russian-American ballet dancer.

Finally, in 1934, Dunham made her professional debut in Ruth Page's *La Guiablesse (The Devil Woman)* [30]. Based on a Martinican legend, the ballet featured an all-Black cast with Dunham as the lead. *La Guiablesse* was the story of a "she-devil" from the island of Martinique who lures a young lover away from his beloved, pushes him over a cliff, and disappears in a puff of smoke [31]. Its plot is dramatic and sensual, using the movements of ballet to communicate traditional Martinican legends. Dancing the leading role, assisting Ruth Page as ballet director, and choreographing the *Spanish Dance* and *Fantasie Negre* [32], Dunham would go on to model her professional career after this experience. Many elite Chicagoans viewed the performance, familiar with the theater but having never seen a performance quite like Page's, and Dunham was thrust into the public sphere. The ballet served as a model for Dunham's later work to follow, *L'Ag'Ya,* also based in Martinican influences but with more emphasis on the theatricalization of traditional Martinican dance forms. Later, the English critic Arnold Haskell would write of *L'Ag'ya* as the "Tropical Giselle," with young lovers and witchcraft and a tragic ending analogous to both ballets [33] and furthering this connection to Dunham and the repertoire of

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[29] Library of Congress, "Katherine Dunham Timeline."
[30] Library of Congress, "Katherine Dunham Timeline."
[31] Olson, Liesl. "What Did a 1930s Ballet Say about Cultural Appropriation in Modernist Chicago?" Chicago Reader, August 18, 2021.
[32] Library of Congress, "Katherine Dunham Timeline."
[33] Dunham, Katherine. "Survival: Chicago after the Caribbean: Excerpt from "Minefields."" In Kaiso! Writings By and About Katherine Dunham, edited by Vèvè A. Clark and Sarah E. Johnson, 97

classical ballet. Dunham gained the confidence to revive her company, *Ballet Negre,* with students from her school, a precursor for her *Dunham Company* to follow.

In Dunham's *L'Ag'Ya,* she blended the elements of the "geometric form" of classical ballet that she so expressly appreciated with the movements she observed in the Caribbean. In her first full-length ballet *L'Ag'Ya,* Dunham used many of the themes that had become familiar to her through dancing in Ruth Page's production of *La Gubliese. L'Ag'Ya* incorporated a love triangle easily recognizable in a western canon as its basis, as well as the mixture of traditional Caribbean and ballet forms that Page experimented with in her work. As a "tropical Giselle," *L'Ag'Ya* featured the types of Matinican dance that Dunham observed in her fieldwork - the *mazouk, beguine, majumba* and *l'ag'ya* - but strategically used classical ballet movements in sections to best communicate her choreography. Set in a fictional fishing village, Vauclin, in eighteenth-century Martinique, male-hero and love interest Alcide must compete with a jealous Julot to win Katherine Dunham's character, Loulouse's love. After Julot attempts to win over Loulouse's love with the *cambois,* a love potion, and almost succeeds in seducing her, Alcide comes to her rescue and challenges Julot to a fight. The *l'ag'ya* ensues, resulting in Alcide tragically dying [34].

Dunham cited *L'Ag'Ya* as her most creative use of ballet [35], but her strictest adherence to the technique can be seen in the *pas de deux* section. Dancing the lead, Dunham partners with Julot as he tries to woo her. As she leans on her partner, Dunham swings her leg into a front attitude [36], leaning her head into her partner's chest and then quickly releasing her leg into a *rond de jambe* to move away from him. Just after, she chugs in an arabesque towards the upstage

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[34] Dunham, "Survival," 97
[35] Hill, "Interview," 244
[36] *Pas de Deux* from "L'Ag'Ya." Video (0:55).

corner, invoking the imagery of a Willi in the ballet *Giselle* [37]. Arabesques are used for Dunham to look as if she is searching, opening her arms across her face as if she is pulling a curtain across a window [38]. It is hard to escape the Giselle imagery in this particular scene, but Dunham uses romantic poses such as the *attitude devant* in order to communicate an entirely modern choreographic work, one that blends elements of classical ballet and Afro-Caribbean movements.

What is special about *L'Ag'Ya,* however, is the way that Dunham pairs a classical ballet influenced *pas de deux* alongside a traditional Martinican fighting dance. When conducting fieldwork in Martinique under her Rosenwald grant to study dances of the West Indies, Dunham found a much richer dance scene on the island than she expected. When she first sought dances in Martinique, she was told that there was "only the béguine, the national dance." [39] She soon realized the pervasiveness of the *l'ag'ya,* a fighting dance, as it was danced in every hamlet or village at some time during the year. An improvisational form that is a mix of martial arts and dance, Dunham pointed to its origins with the Nigerian wrestling match. Scholar Joanna Dee Das compares its aesthetics to that of the *capoeira,* "the Brazilian martial arts dance," [40] pointing to the possibility of a common origin as Dunham did. Set to the rhythms of the *bélé* drum and the *'ti bwa,* or two wooden sticks [41], the *l'ag'ya* could be compared to a chess game, where one must wait for their opponent to make a move before they strike. While Dunham points to the dance being based upon rivalry, the form also helped to "release pent-up aggression, settle grievances, and forge social bonds" [42] for the Martinican men that participated in it. Once the preliminary teasing and jesting has taken place between the two male dancers beforehand, they then face

[37] *Pas de Deux* from "L'Ag'Ya." Video (1:05).
[38] *Pas de Deux* from "L'Ag'Ya." Video (1:14).
[39] Dunham, Katherine writing as Dunn, Kaye. "L'Ag'Ya of Martinique" In Kaiso! Writings By and About Katherine Dunham, edited by Vèvè A. Clark and Sarah E. Johnson, 201
[40] Das, "Katherine Dunham," 61
[41] Das, "Katherine Dunham," 61
[42] Das, "Katherine Dunham," 61

each other, about ten feet apart with their arms in the gesture of boxing, and begin a "slow rocking motion on half-bent knees, legs wide apart." [43] This is the foundational movement of the *l'ag'ya,* and the base to which they return in their pantomime cockfight. The balance is broken by shifting like chess pieces forward and across, back again, with their shoulders keeping the rhythm of the beat. As the dance gradually becomes "less pantomime, less play, and more a serious struggle," [44] the dance seems less about overcoming the other opponent than about overcoming the urgent beating of the drums.

In Katherine Dunham's interpretation of the *l'ag'ya,* Alcide and Julot, danced by Vanoye Aikens and Tommy Gomez, reflect the shift from pantomime to struggle. The two men enter with eyes locked on each other, reflecting the rhythm of the drums in their hips, remaining in the low, wide position so characteristic of the original dance [45]. As the dance goes on, sweeps of the leg where the other man deftly avoids them turns into actual embracing, with one man throwing the other off into the crowd [46]. The dance is physical and combative, leaning more towards the aggressive side than the traditional Martinican version. However, the inclusion of this dance in the ballet is important because it reflects Dunham's anthropological work for the stage. The choreography closely follows her fieldnotes and recordings from Martinique, an expression of Dunham's commitment to the people whose dance she was reflecting.

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[43] Dunham, "L'Ag'Ya," 205
[44] Dunham, "L'Ag'Ya," 206
[45] Ag'Ya Fight from "L'Ag'Ya." Video (0:07).
[46] Ag'Ya Fight from "L'Ag'Ya." Video (0:29).

Fig III. 26th June 1948: American dancer, choreographer and stage producer Katherine Dunham dances with her lover, played by Vanoye Aikens, in a scene from her ballet 'L'Ag'ya' at the Prince of Wales Theatre in London (Getty Images).

By placing the *ag'ya* and *pas de deux* side by side, one can see Dunham's commitment to introducing classical ballet and Afro-Caribbean dance to one another in the same ballet. In fact, one can analyze this *attitude devant* as a symbol of her anthropological approach to choreography. In Figure III, we see Dunham with her upstage leg extended into an attitude position, careful enough for Alcide to admire her pointed foot in his hands. She is bare-legged, a strict departure from the pink tights of classical ballet but appropriate for an Afro-Caribbean expression. Alcide is positioned below her, with Loulouse exerting her power and sensuality over him with this exposed leg in his view, her gaze cast down over him. With her foot carefully pointed into this *attitude devant* position, she exhibits a position virtually absent from Afro-Caribbean dance. Yet she uses this position so important to classical ballet in order to communicate a story rooted in a Martinican legend, and a performance often evaluated only for its representations of Afro-Caribbean movement. She is bare-legged and fixed into a ballet position, showing her interest in putting two techniques from seemingly opposite sides of the

world together into conversation, and reflecting how these forms might interact in her choreography to create a unique, creolized form of dance representative of her values.

While Dunham approached her choreography with a theory of anthropology, Dunham clearly appreciated the movement of classical ballet, used it extensively in her choreography and had particular feelings about its importance in introducing it to her body of work. When conducting a series of interviews with Katherine Dunham about choreographic work in *Cabin in the Sky,* a theatrical production created alongside George Balanchine, dance scholar Constance Valis Hill got at the importance of the ballet technique to Dunham. When asked why ballet style and the technique fit so well with what she was doing in the 1940s, Dunham immediately cited her respect for and close relationship with Ludmilla Speranzeva, Dunham's first ballet teacher [47]. Her formative training in classical ballet and close relationship with her teacher had granted her with an immense amount of respect for the artform that she would capitalize on throughout her choreographic career. She then mentioned that she "appreciated ballet because there was no technique for any other kind of dancing that we did." [48] Here Dunham points to ballet technique as being something that she could rely on, a codified set of accepted movements that could be a defined set that she could fall back on if the vocabulary from the Afro-Caribbean movements failed her. This makes ballet seem like a comfort zone for Dunham, a set of movements that she knows exactly how to execute and reproduce.

When speaking about the influence of ballet in her work with Hill, she also emphasized *L'Ag'Ya* as being the most exemplary form of her use of ballet. Upon receiving her first bits of feedback from critics, however, Dunham was faced with the binds put upon her as an artist. Dunham mentioned that a critic had argued that when Dunham pointed her foot, that she was

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[47] Hill, "Interview," 243

[48] Hill, "Interview," 244

"very eager to show that [she] knew classical ballet." [49] Even though Dunham immediately refuted this explanation as her motive, it is important to note this double bind that surfaced for her again as being an African American woman using ballet in her choreography. It did not matter to the critic that Dunham had trained for years in the art of classical ballet and was very comfortable with the technique, for to the critic it looked like she was trying to be something that she was not. And while Dunham did have extremely high arches and would be justified in showing them off, she was criticized for using her facility whereas other artists might have been complimented for it. To Dunham, a pointed foot made sense to her in the *pas de deux:* she argued that, "there are times when [classical ballet] just simply fit, if you know it well." [50] It was not simply thrown in there because "somebody had seen a ballet or something," [51] as Dunham derisively put it, but because she felt that the delicateness of curtain positions in ballet communicated a love story in her eyes. Perhaps it was this connection with *Giselle* that her and her audiences felt, but using the movements of ballet seemed to fit this romance that Dunham sought to put onstage.

Fig. IV. Dunham, Katherine - Dancer, USA with her dance company performing *L'Ag'Ya* in Berlin (Getty Images).

[49] Hill, "Interview," 244
[50] Hill, "Interview," 244
[51] Hill, "Interview," 244

When speaking with Hill, Katherine Dunham was asked about the number of ballet classes she offered at her school when it first opened in New York City. For a school meant to educate the world's next generation of dancers from a leader in Black dance, the emphasis on classical ballet seemed like an intentional choice. Dunham emphasized:

> "Oh, yes, there was ballet. I always have it. I think it's a wonderful thing to get you acquainted with the strict kinds of things your body can do. With music, much of it is so much better expressed in the classical ballet than it might be in others. I wouldn't have a school that didn't have some form of classical ballet, because of what it does for your body. There's a real difference." (Dunham qtd. in Kaiso 244)

This particular quote crystalizes the multiple arguments for ballet Dunham made throughout her lifetime. To Dunham, classical ballet technique was strict, and that type of rigor was extremely important in forming dancers. As she expressed earlier about valuing the technique of ballet, it was clear what was correct and what was not, and teaching students to adhere to that type of rigidity was important to her. Discipline was key, especially with how it pertained to the training of the physical body itself. It is also interesting that between two comments about the rigor of ballet technique, Dunham mentions the rhythm and music associated with ballet. It is hard to know whether Dunham sincerely believed that classical ballet went better with much music, or that she simply felt comfortable with it, but this is one of the few moments where Dunham's ideas on ballet stray slightly. If classical ballet is the obverse of dance governed by rhythm and emotion, then the movements of ballet must have been a rhythm-less comfort zone for Dunham where the technique could speak for itself. It might not be that the movements expressed music better than other dance styles, but simply that she could use

an *attitude devant* to strike an attractive pose and communicate a theme while not necessarily paying attention to the music.

When strictly speaking about the influence of ballet in her work, Dunham ended with her further emphasis on the value she placed on ballet technique. Her first statement, while meant to be celebratory, points to the internalized hierarchies that she might have felt associated with ballet. She argued that, "ballet is not a thing you can just do, or that you can do with a few lessons, like some of the things we do in the primitive Dunham technique." [52] To Dunham, the elitism and inability for common people to attain ballet is what draws her to it. Just as she struggled for much of her life to be taken seriously as an academic, choreographer and dancer, Dunham here gravitates towards the technique that she might believe is the pinnacle of discipline, something to attain that can further prove to herself and others that she was an accomplished dancer. Even though she added many elements of classical ballet to the Dunham technique, because it had traditional Afro-Caribbean movements it was deemed as 'primitive' even by herself. She was an extremely progressive thinker in anthropology, dance, and matters of race, but still had remnants of hierarchy built into her thinking about dance. While she might have used ballet as part of a racial-uplift campaign, emphasizing her infatuation with ballet showed these tensions that she had to engage with.

Dunham went on to further illustrate these tensions in her discussion of ballet's influence and importance to her. Citing the "couple hundred years of precedent" that ballet had that one must not "derange" or "upset," [53] Dunham pointed to the importance of history in ballet. Sidestepping the inferences one can draw from her taking ballet as a "geometric form" and separating it from its history when she used it in her work, Dunham still recognized ballet's

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[52] Hill, "Interview," 244
[53] Hill, "Interview," 244

historical significance and the years of codification that she must obey. The technique was established, and Dunham felt strongly about keeping to that tradition as much as possible, even if it was a relief to her in some ways. She liked the discipline in it, she liked that "this is the way an arabesque is, you know, and you can't let your own personality enter into any of it." [54] An arabesque was either correct or not, and it was not something that Dunham was able to decide. Despite emphasizing the rigor and discipline of ballet that she so admired, ballet also was this space that she could relax into because of the knowledge that it was codified. Just as Dunham lived in this tension between the use of ballet and Afro-Caribbean movement, in being a pioneer of Black dance while also upholding the standards of ballet, she also lived in the tension of ballet being an exercise in relief and one in discipline. In this way ballet was two-fold for Dunham, acting as a "relief from the drums" [55] and as a form that trained the body in rigidity. Thus ballet is an almost secular technique that Dunham can rely on to express her choreographic voice when she highlights Afro-Caribbean dance forms.

The ways in which Dunham used classical ballet as a means of accomplishing cross-cultural choreography were multi-faceted. Classical ballet was something to push Afro-Caribbean movement into the future and reflect a cross-cultural conversation of the diaspora. While Dunham was a pioneer of postmodern anthropology by showing the dynamic nature that Black dance could take on, her language of modernity and ballet also showed her internalized hierarchical viewpoints. To Dunham, Afro-Caribbean movement was something that was partly a vestige of the past, but through an introduction to ballet could be brought into a modern space. Even if not meant to communicate disrespect, Dunham deems Afro-Caribbean dance as 'primitive,' conducting her fieldwork in order to record dances that supposedly have not

[54] Hill, "Interview," 244
[55] Hill, "Interview," 244

changed since their inception. Thus Dunham exercised salvage anthropological practices as well as being ahead of her time, existing in two intellectual traditions at once.

Theory and lived experiences do not always match, as Dunham was a complicated individual. Even so, Katherine Dunham was an anthropologist and choreographer that was ahead of her time, "develop[ing] her own theoretical paradigms that directly resulted from her marriage of anthropology and dance." [56] Her theory of cross-cultural communication was not only due to her extensive training in anthropology, but reflective of her lived experiences as an African American dancer. This cultural fusion of classical ballet and Afro-Caribbean movement was applied anthropology in action, with Dunham not only collecting information on traditional dances but performing these ethnographies as well [57]. Not only was cultural fusion accomplished within the physicality of Dunham's choreography by the merging Caribbean folk movement with modern dance and ballet, but she also investigated intercultural communication also through her personal reflections [58]. She continuously reflected on how "her fusion dance form, as the foundation of her ballets, might affect audience members who knew little to nothing about the cultures from which her performed ethnographies were drawn." [59] Thus through her work to understand dance traditions of the Caribbean through performing and acculturating them, Dunham was able to educate a larger American audience on dance forms she had privileged knowledge of.

Through placing ballet alongside Afro-Caribbean movement and including elements from both in her choreography, Dunham modeled her choreography after the cross-cultural conversations and notion of creolization she studied as a student of anthropology. In doing this,

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[56] Osumare, Halifu. "Katherine Dunham, a Pioneer of Postmodern Anthropology." In Kaiso! Writings By and About Katherine Dunham, edited by Vèvè A. Clark and Sarah E. Johnson, 620
[57] Osumare, "Katherine Dunham," 620
[58] Osumare, "Katherine Dunham," 620
[59] Osumare, "Katherine Dunham," 620

Dunham reflected all of the styles that she was exposed to in her own training, demonstrating the exchange and interaction of cultures through anthropology and her own biography. Building upon scholars like Joanna Dee Das' work that has tackled Dunham's contributions to the dance world in highlighting Afro-Caribbean movement, I have argued that Dunham's interest in classical ballet was essential to her understanding as an anthropologist to see how cultures interact. While there are more sophisticated models now to show how cultures transmit elements to one another, Dunham's application of acculturation and creolization shows the time in which she was a student of anthropology. This allowed her to create an entirely unique choreographic body. Dunham chose to decide what ballet meant to her, integrating it with Afro-Caribbean movement, wedding it and acculturating it to represent her own experiences. This dynamic, cross-cultural conversation that Dunham engaged in worked to liberate Black dance from the double bind that Vèvè A. Clark points to, a burden put upon Black artists to constantly perform their Blackness for white audiences. Disregarding a supposed cultural domination, Dunham introduced classical ballet to Afro-Caribbean movement to show how cultures shifted and changed with global interaction. By using ballet in her choreography, Katherine Dunham in effect used an anthropological framework to enliven and acculturate multiple dance forms.

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