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Katherine Dunham's *Southland* and the Archival Quality of Black Dance

TAYANA L. HARDIN

This is the story of no actual lynching in the southern states of America and still it is the story of every one of them ...

Katherine Dunham, 1951

This essay dwells on the imbrication of bodies and stories through a close reading of *Southland*, a two-act lynching ballet created and directed by African American choreographer Katherine Dunham (1909–2006). By the Katherine Dunham Dance Company's December 9, 1950 premiere of *Southland* at the Teatro Municipal in Santiago, Chile,¹ the practice of lynching, identified in a 2005 Senate Resolution as the "ultimate expression of racism in the United States following Reconstruction," had been documented in all but four states.² Having reached a fever pitch in the postbellum and interwar years, lynching was acknowledged as a ritual that created, reified, and maintained the racial narratives protecting white supremacy and justifying African American subjugation. Varied and far-reaching anti-lynching efforts became a righteous cause among civil rights workers, the American Communist Party, and celebrities and artists, including music hall performer Josephine Baker, author Richard Wright, and actor Paul Robeson.

By the 1950s, lynching had been in steady decline for several years. However, Katherine Dunham, touring abroad with her company

throughout the 1940s, was not impervious to the continued harm it imposed upon black communities in the United States, particularly in the American South. After receiving news that a black youth had been lynched, and that Willie McGhee and the Martinsville Seven were awaiting their death sentences for allegedly raping a white woman,³ Dunham was compelled to respond in a manner "surpass[ing] purely theatrical and artistic aspirations."⁴ *Southland* thus became Dunham's refusal to dismiss the perpetual destruction of black lives meted out through judicial and extrajudicial means. Despite the criticism it drew from the US Department of State, the ballet demonstrated her commitment to social justice, situating her in the company of numerous black artists and writers who privileged art as a powerful intervention into the fraught sociopolitical discourse surrounding lynching.⁵ Dunham's contribution to this conversation is the topic of this essay, and is read through the relationship between bodies and stories that emerges in close reading a handful of documents from Dunham's *Southland* archive.

Southland dramatizes the events preceding, during, and following the lynching of Richard, a young black field hand.⁶ The ballet opens on the sweeping landscape of an antebellum Southern mansion, which soon gives way to a beautiful magnolia tree. A Greek-style chorus conveys the "earth-dignity of the Negro" by way of pantomime and the distinctive sounds of Negro spirituals, work songs, and revival hymns. As the story unfolds, Richard (played by Ricardo Avoles) shamelessly courts Lucy (Lucille Ellis), a young black woman fieldworker, while Julie

(Julie Robinson Belafonte), a young white woman, is left unconscious under the magnolia tree after being physically assaulted by her lover, Lenwood (Lenwood Morris). When Richard and a group of field hands discover Julie, he rushes to help her against the advice of his friends and the chorus. Awaking and seeing him, Julie cries the hated word “Nigger!”—the only spoken word in the entire production. She accuses Richard of rape, and, through impassioned pantomime and dance, sows her lie in the ear of an (invisible) avenging white mob; soon after, Richard is lynched.

It is only when Richard’s lynched body swings toward her in full view that Julie realizes her crime’s impact. Overwhelmed yet fascinated by his broken body, she rips a piece of his clothing as a souvenir of her own terror, triumph, and guilt. Her bravado falters momentarily upon encountering Richard’s sweetheart, Lucy. Although Julie moves on, Lucy grieves. The chorus grieves, too, as they gather and leave with the young man’s body. In Act II, the chorus bears Richard’s lynched body in a funeral cortege, symbolically witnessed by patrons of a Basin Street cafe; although they do not see the procession, they *sense* Richard’s ghostly presence as they dance and weep in a “spirit of frenzied cynicism.” As the ballet closes, a blind beggar sees the “true fact” of the patron’s distress and seeks “the answer, which all of us who love humanity seek more than ever at this moment.”

This essay’s focus on the relationship between bodies and stories takes its directive from a comment Dunham makes in her program notes and from two key moments

in the *Southland* narrative. The first directive arises in the program for the 1950 Chilean premiere, in which Dunham writes boldly that *Southland* “is the story of no actual lynching in the southern states of America and still it is the story of every one of them.”⁷ This progression from *no actual story* into *the story of every one of them* might be read as an assertion of the power of embodied fictions to convey social truths. It might also be read, as I do here, as an assertion of the generative, reproductive quality of black dance and its capacity to narrate—to conjure and restore previous acts through story—and subsequently become both the one and the many. Together, these assertions situate *Southland* between the “excitement of breath” and moving body, on one hand, and the ideological terrain of story and symbol on the other.⁸

Aligning with the disciplinary imperatives of dance history, the task of examining the excitement of breath and moving body might be undertaken most obviously through close attention to the stylized, physical labor (i.e., the execution of choreography) performed by the company’s dancing bodies. However, the long-disappeared status of the *Southland* ballet renders this task improbable if not impossible by Western conceptions of historical preservation, especially in the absence of archival documents or footage that would reproduce—out of time, despite the passage of time—the visual imprint of its bygone enactment.⁹ This absence of the bodies—real, celluloid, or otherwise inscribed—as they danced *Southland* ostensibly shores up a prevailing conceptualization of performance as an at risk mode of enactment that dwells on the brink of

disappearance and traffics in ephemerality rather than remains.

Such challenges to restoring a past performance as it unfolded at the site and moment of its enactment represent a methodological dilemma often encountered in historical reconstructions of dance. But at this impasse, the tools of literary interpretation can contribute to the study of black dance, a mode of performance that, as Dunham's notes remind us, operates not only on a corporeal register, but also in the abstraction of story and figuration. Although literary methods offer limited insights into dance as an embodied practice and rely upon textual ephemera that may not be entirely consonant with the events that actually transpired, these methods can further elaborate a locus of inquiry that is of signal importance to scholars of black dance: the black dancing body. Engaging extant *Southland* documents as historical sources and literary texts acknowledges the dancing body's power while explicating the ways its textual representations intervene in multiple discourses.

In fact, applying close reading methods to Dunham's claim that *Southland* tells the story of every lynching that occurred in the United States allows for a reading of the black body that nuances disciplinary discourses of performance and the archive. This is evident in two key moments in the story: Julie's encounter with Richard's body and the funeral procession of his corpse through the café. As close readings will demonstrate, Richard's lynched body enables the transfiguration of "no actual lynching" into "the story of every one of them," and reveals black dance as a site of reproduction and preservation: his remains

exhibit the qualities of preservation typically attributed to the archive.

Therefore, my own use of the term "remains" not only calls to mind Richard's lynched body—his corpse and its inevitable decay—but the manner of *staying* expected of artifacts—such as archived, textual ephemera—that are called to stand in for long-past events. Elaborating remains in these distinct though interrelated ways revisits and revises the discourse of performance as an ephemeral act, and becomes the basis of what I am calling "the archival quality of black dance," a mode of historical preservation and reconstruction that privileges black dance as a means of doing history and disrupts the status of the archive as the exemplar of historical knowledge.

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Speaking in Spanish before an international audience at the Chilean premier, Katherine Dunham announces that she has not witnessed a lynching first hand. "And though I have not smelled the smell of burning flesh, and have never seen a black body swaying from a southern tree," she claims, "I have felt these things in spirit, and finally through the creative artist comes the need of the person to show this thing to the world."¹⁰ *Southland*, then, becomes a spiritual striving as much as a call to political action, the manifestation of a hope that "the conscience of the many [would] protest and save further destruction and humiliation."¹¹

Dunham's appeal to "the conscience of the many" is generally and rightly read in scholarly discourse as an open declaration of protest. But it also revisits and revises a discourse that can be traced through the recurring figure of the lynched body in postwar

African American literature, where it became the abiding literary symbol of racial hatred.¹² Exposed and broken, the hanging body of a lynching victim at once indicated a now past act of terror and served as a spectacular reminder of pain and suffering that extended beyond the remains themselves. The symbolic heft of this trope enabled black writers to grapple with questions of belonging and exclusion, as well as illustrate the peculiar sway that the practice and remains of lynching held in the projects of black, white, and national identity-making.

Dunham capitalizes upon the symbolic labor afforded by such representations of lynched remains. In the moments following the offstage lynching, Julie, who has used it as an “opportunity to escape from the sordidness of her own life” and as compensation for the shame she feels after her assault, feels powerful and relevant.¹³ During her confrontation with Richard’s body, his disfigurement confirms both her subjecthood and influence as a white Southern woman, as well as Richard’s transformation from a subject to an object heralding the extralegal rule of white supremacy. His object status is confirmed again when she takes a piece of his shirt to memorialize his death and, crucially, her guilt-laden triumph.¹⁵ These confirmations rely on a mode of displacement explicable through Frantz Fanon’s rumination on “the fact of blackness.” In the oft-cited chapter of the same name, Fanon describes an occasion “when [he] had to meet the white man’s eyes,”¹⁶ an occasion that scripted blackness not as a fact in itself, but as a notion perceptible only through its relation to whiteness. Blackness, then, is not a dermic, corporeal fact, but a concoction of “a thousand details,

anecdotes, stories” created by and through whiteness as a means of disciplining the black body (111). The gap between concoction and dermic fact represents the “real dialectic between [the black] body and the world” (111), the cavernous divide that compels him to “[make himself] an object” (112). Under the pressures of a world designed to operate in racial terms, the corporeal fact of Fanon’s black skin must yield to the “racial epidermal schema” that demands this phenomenal displacement (112).

Whereas Fanon delineates the racial epidermal schema in order to theorize racial subjectivity, I am compelled to apply his delineation of phenomenal displacement to the moment of encounter between Julie (as proxy for the white world) and Richard (whose remains are the site of displacement). By the time Julie rips Richard’s shirt for a souvenir, Richard’s subjecthood—dislocated by Julie’s accusation and the fulfillment of the lynching—has fled his body. His dislocated subjecthood unmakes Richard’s body into flesh, vulnerable to the larger goals of Dunham’s project: literally empty, Richard’s flesh awaits its moment of being filled with the next ready discourse, populated by other lynch victims and their stories.¹⁷ As a synecdochical representation of every story of lynching, Richard’s corpse—his remains—catalyze the transfiguration of no actual lynching into the story of every one of them, and become a reservoir for the continuous circulation of stories and phenomenal bodies.

Stories of a bygone era amass and abound at the site of Richard’s remains. His corpse, the site of inevitable decay—or disappearance—continues to labor even in death,

becoming the story of every lynching that has occurred in the United States. His remains, while ostensibly typifying a notion of performance as subject to impermanence and decomposition, paradoxically acquire archival power through the perpetual circulation and reproduction of previous lynching stories. His bones will inevitably pronounce the disappearance of his flesh, but the stories will remain indefinitely, unchanged. In the tumult of bodily decay, these stories become precious, in part, because they *stay*—rendered intelligible and perceptible by the logic of the archive, where remains matter. These stories thus act like the material traces—the ephemera, documents, artifacts—that remain in the wake of human lives and events. Under Dunham’s command and imagination, the corporeal remains of a young field hand posit black dance as a mode of preservation, marking the *archival quality of black dance*. Called to participate in the process of saving, Richard’s remains, by way of the restored behavior of performance, thus intervene *once, twice, again* into the storied terrain of American historiography.

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The US embassy in Chile was furious that Dunham, a black woman “in a foreign country known for its strong Communist base and anti-American sentiment, had dared to expose America’s darkest side.”¹⁸ The US State Department had even advised Dunham during rehearsals in Santiago to “remove the lynching scene.”¹⁹ In response, she insisted that “it must be done. If you don’t want it done, you must assure me that this sort of thing is ended in the United States.”²⁰ Needless to say, the show went on. Following the premiere, local reporters

in Santiago were informed that “all newsprint [in Chile] would be withdrawn if anyone dared to write about *Southland*.”²¹ The impact of this threat still reverberates in the archive. The striking, even spectacular absence of press clippings and relative paucity of other *Southland* ephemera remind us, as does Richard’s lynched body, of hegemonic power’s demands and reach.

As two instantiations of remains, Richard’s corpse and the textual ephemera of the archive rehearse a conversation about the capacity of performance to save and be saved. Dunham’s insistence that *Southland* tells the story of every one of them participates in that discussion, calling our attention to the sedimentary quality of black concert dance—the ephemeral attributes of performance as nonetheless burdened with something, a history, that stubbornly stays, that takes shape along the contours of the black performing body. Such a reading of *Southland* not only revises critical literature positing performance as an ephemeral act, but also disrupts the conception of the archive as the paragon of immutable preservation.

Dunham choreographs this disruption most vividly as *Southland* transitions between Acts I and II. After the mob lynches Richard in the first act’s final moments, Lucy dances her grief to the mournful strains of “Strange Fruit,” while the chorus gathers his body and takes him offstage. The second act opens in an urban cafe, where patrons dance and enjoy what “substitutes they may find for the deprivations of their daily lives.” Whereas the first scene establishes what Dunham calls “the [simple] earth-dignity of the Negro,” the comedies of cafe life now pulse with menace and threat. At the height

of the tragicomic diversions, the chorus-turned-funeral cortege bears Richard's lynched body through the café. The procession is "purely symbolic"; the café patrons do not see but, instead, *sense* the funeral procession, for, as Dunham reasoned, "it is inconceivable that the essential tragedy of a people could escape them, even in the midst of pleasure." The blues music that had been playing suddenly stops as the cortege makes its way through the café. The dancers freeze. And then there is that "profound moment of realization of [their] tragic situation."²² A young boy drops his cards, a girl cries. The music starts again, but in a minor key that draws the dancers into a "sad, slow yet menacing dance."²³ A young man plunges a knife into the floor again and again. A couple "bury themselves in the sexual embrace of a slow dance movement," while "another couple dance disjointedly, heedlessly."²⁴

At first glance, this scene seemingly bears witness to an idea both fundamental and familiar to black studies scholars: the pains of the past are not beholden to temporal, spatial, or geographic borders and, therefore, are never truly past or circumvented. The sudden halt of the music and dancers registers the "tragic situation" in which they find themselves, and the profound realization of its abiding, unrelenting impact on their daily lives. Richard's remains become more than a revolving door for stories of lynchings in the United States: through their archival capacity to conserve and restore, his remains become a symbol for perpetual pain.

It might seem, then, that the archival quality of black dance fixes black dance, and black performance writ large, within a never-ending, traumatic loop of despair and

tragedy, with no recourse to joy or change. The innumerable plunges of the knife into the floor and the young girl's cries provide one case in point. But a closer consideration of the couples' dancing further nuances the archival quality of black dance while unhooking it from the notions of indefinite, unchanging preservation typically attributed to the archive. As the cortege bears Richard's body through the café, the symbolic magnitude of his remains infuse hyperbole and disjointedness into the patrons' dancing. These dancing bodies, each with their own movement signature, respond individually to the presence of Richard's corpse and its attendant stories, creating multiple iterations of heedless dancing that allow for the continual reinterpretation of old material. The couples' movements seem to veer from the unending monotony of the indefinite and the unchanging. The jaggedness—the breaks—in their movement signal a turn from the familiar and the expected toward something different, something fresh; maybe even something new. The archival quality of black dance unlocks new possibilities for conceptions of performance and the archive, while reminding us of the many ways the black dancing body lends itself to the ongoing story of what remains.

Notes

1. During a presentation on Dunham at the Collegium for African Diaspora Dance's 2014 "Dancing the African Diaspora" conference, dance scholar Joanna Dee Das presented new archival findings that documented December 9, 1950 as the premiere of *Southland*, rather than

January 1951, the date listed on archival documents referred to in this essay.

2. See US Senate Resolution 39 (S. Res. 39), 109th Congress, 1st Session, "Apologizing to the victims of lynching and the descendants of those victims for the failure of the Senate to enact anti-lynching legislation," February 7, 2005.

3. Constance Valis Hill, "Katherine Dunham's *Southland*: Protest in the Face of Repression," in *Kaiso!: Writings by and about Katherine Dunham*, eds. VèVè A. Clark and Sara E. Johnson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 345–63. Hill writes, "it was amidst hearing news about the trials of the Martinsville Seven and Willie McGhee, in which black youths in Virginia and Mississippi convicted of raping a white woman were sentenced to death, that Dunham's response to America from afar took shape in *Southland*" (348).

4. From a simple typewritten, paginated document titled "Concerning the ballet SOUTHLAND," dated January, 1953, Palais de Chaillot, Paris. This document is an English translation of another document titled "A propos du ballet 'Southland,'" which, I presume, was distributed in the program notes during the Paris run of *Southland*. I will refer exclusively to the English translation. All *Southland* primary documents cited in this article are archived in the "Misc. Manuscripts, 1950–1954" folder of the Katherine Dunham Papers, 1906–2006, Southern Illinois University Special Collections Research Center.

5. Many examples of Dunham's commitment to social justice causes abound. However, *Southland* continues what seems to be a special passion and dedication that Dunham had for the anti-lynching cause. In her New York debut at the 1937 "Negro Dance Evening," which was held at the Ninety-second Street Young Men's Hebrew Association, Dunham and her company presented *Tropic Death*, which cast Talley Beatty as a fugitive from a lynch mob. For more on the reception of

Dunham's early work, see Susan Manning's "Modern Dance, Negro Dance, and Katherine Dunham," in *Kaiso!*, 256–66.

6. The following précis is summarized from "Concerning the ballet *Southland*." Phrases taken directly from the document are enclosed in quotation marks.

7. Dunham Papers, "Program Notes, Chile."

8. I am inspired here by the introduction to *Black Performance Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014) by editors Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez. DeFrantz parses "performance" as a conscious, corporeal act pushed by the "excitement of breath" in the creation of "subject and subjectivity" (6), while Gonzalez explains performance as a mode of human "enactment, re-creation, or storytelling" using "metaphoric or symbolic content to communicate perspectives about life" (6). In Dunham's statement that *Southland* is the story of every single lynching in the United States, I believe she points toward black dance as operating at the level of the corporeal *and* the symbolic, as the editors seem to claim about black performance.

9. Certainly, archival (or archivable) artifacts such as choreographic notes and video footage are not the only means of reproducing *Southland* choreography, as the revival of *Southland* by Denver-based choreographer Cleo Parker Robinson demonstrates. The Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble restaged Dunham's ballet in September 2012 with grant support from the National Endowment for the Arts. The content of the ballet was re-created using the same documents examined here and the memory of Julie Robinson Belafonte, who played the role of Julie in the 1950 Chilean and 1953 Parisian productions. Belafonte's memory, along with artist interviews conducted over the years, play a significant role in the *Southland* archive, yet remind me that human memory, like physical artifacts, is incomplete and not always wholly forthcoming. The fallibility of

remains points here toward the tumultuous relationship between performance and the archive. For more on Parker Robinson's *Southland* revival, see Donna Bryson's "A Lost Protest: Reviving Katherine Dunham's Controversial *Southland*," *Dance Magazine* 86, no. 12 (2012): 63–8.

10. Dunham Papers, "Santiago Prologue," 2.

11. *Ibid.*, 2.

12. Writers William Wells Brown, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin have dealt extensively with the impact of lynching on black communities. See also Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

13. Dunham Papers, "Concerning the ballet *Southland*," 2.

14. *Ibid.*, 2.

15. Performance studies scholar Harvey Young makes a particularly relevant case for reading the lynched body as a souvenir. See *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 167–208.

16. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 110. Subsequent page citations of this work are given in the text.

17. I am inspired here by Hortense J. Spillers' explanation of the flesh as scripted into a body through discourse. Spillers defines flesh as "a primary narrative," that "zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography" (67). For more, see "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 65–81.

18. Hill, "Protest in the Face of Repression," 352.

19. *Ibid.*, 352–3.

20. Beckford, *Katherine Dunham*, 72.

21. Hill, "Protest in the Face of Repression," 352.

22. All quotations in this paragraph are from "Concerning the ballet *Southland*," 3.

23. Beckford, *Katherine Dunham*, 72.

24. Dunham Papers, "Concerning the ballet *Southland*," 3.

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