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# Caribbean Traditions in Modern Choreographies: Articulation and Construction of Black Diaspora Identity in L'Ag'Ya by Katherine Dunham

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Caribbean Traditions in Modern Choreographies:  
Articulation and Construction of Black Diaspora Identity in *L'Ag'Ya* by Katherine Dunham

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in American Studies  
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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved husband, Tamás, for his endless love, patience, and support, and also to my family in Budapest who have always been with me even when we are separated by the Atlantic Ocean.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I am grateful for my professors, Dr. Daniel Belgrad, Dr. Sara Dykins Callahan, Dr. Ying Zhu, and Michael Foley for the inspiration for writing this thesis, for their wonderful classes, and for advising and directing me in the thesis writing process. Without their devoted professional and personal support this work could not have been done.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The interdisciplinary field of Dance Studies as a separate arena focusing on the social, political, cultural, and aesthetic aspects of human movement and dance emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Dance criticism integrated Dance Studies into the academy as critics addressed the social and cultural significance of dance. In particular, Jane Desmond created an integrated approach engaging dance history and cultural studies; in the framework of her findings, dance is read as a primary social text. She emphasizes that movement style is an important mode of distinction between social groups, serving as a marker for the production of gender, racial, ethnic, and national identities.

In my work, I examined the ways in which the African American identity articulates and constructs itself through dance. Norman Bryson, an art historian, suggests that approaches from art history, film and comparative literature are as well applicable to the field of dance research. Therefore, as my main critical lens and a theoretical foundation, I adopt the analytical approach developed by Erwin Panofsky, an art historian and a proponent of integrated critical approach, much like the one suggested by Bryson; specifically, his three-tiered method of analysis (iconology). I demonstrate that Erwin Panofsky's iconology, when applied as a research method, can make valuable contributions to the field of Dance Studies. This method was originally developed as a tool to analyze static art pieces; I explore to which extent this method

is applicable to doing a close reading of dance by testing the method as an instrument and discovering its limitations.

As primary sources, I used Katherine Dunham's original recordings of diaspora dances of the Caribbean and her modern dance choreography titled *L'Ag'Ya* to look for evidence for the paradigm shift from "primitive" to "diaspora" in representation of Black identity in dance also with the aim of detecting the elements that produce cultural difference in dance.

## INTRODUCTION

Those who have ever performed on stage can never forget their first time, as it is memorable for varied and numerous reasons, regardless of its being a successful or an embarrassing experience. However, for me, as a former dancer, the most memorable and powerful moment occurred before the actual on-stage performance. This moment happened when I first entered the rehearsal room full of girls and boys of my age, all sharing the same feeling of excitement and anticipation of something new and compelling. From this very first instance, when our instructor made us sit in a circle on the floor to teach us a beautiful song from the hundreds-of-years old Hungarian village of *Méra*<sup>1</sup> to ease the tension and comfort us with his soft and calming voice, I knew that this was the group I belonged to with my whole heart. The steps, the motifs, and the other elements of movement we started to learn later that night, along with the traditional folk music accompaniment, made this feeling even deeper, and I knew that this room with the old wooden floor and the mirrors all around would be my second home. From that night on, I have always felt that without the knowledge of this ethnic tradition in music and dance and the actual practicing of it, my 'Hungarianness' would not be round. Besides our unique language that can hardly be related to any other language in the world, this heritage makes me feel truly Hungarian.

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<sup>1</sup> situated originally in Transylvania, now part of present-day Romania due to the Peace Treaty of Trianon after WWI

I was drawn to this present project by my personal experience and interest in the ways in which the ethnic identity of cultural groups other than mine are articulated and formed through the preservation and recreation of traditional movement patterns. This paper is also inspired by the fascination I feel about dance, let it be ethnic, modern, concert, folk, or classic. In addition, dances that combine elements from different genres, thereby representing various human categories, always bring great awe and provide the richest field of research in historic, social, and aesthetic sense, and this is another reason why I chose to research into how Black tradition in dance—African and Afro-Caribbean—contributed to the formation of African-American ethnic identity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The universality dance has long been recognized by scholars and artists; however, for long dance was only considered from a theatrical and entertainment point of view. Comparative analysis of dance's different forms and the acknowledgement of their historical, sociological, biological, and psychological significance only emerged in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century when dance became a subject of interest to anthropologists, ethnologists, and psychologists. This essay wishes to contribute to the field of dance research within the discipline of cultural studies by pointing to the social and artistic significance of dancer-anthropologist Katherine Dunham's Caribbean research.

Both the original recordings of Dunham's fieldwork and her choreographies demonstrate the ways in which the elements of movement patterns produce cultural differences that contribute to the articulation and construction of Black "diaspora" identity in dance. On the one hand, these dance pieces represent her fieldwork findings as a trained

anthropologist and the preservation of a rich heritage; on the other hand, they are fascinating pieces of visual art by which, along with her own dance technique, she contributed to the Modern Dance idiom in the United States. Besides Katherine Dunham's talent as an outstanding dancer and choreographer, her work seems to be the perfect choice to serve as the primary source for my research because between 1937 and 1945 Dunham established a "research-to-performance" method in which her dance company was involved. By this method of scholarly inquiry she intended to recreate the memory of Caribbean dances among her dancers and audiences all around the world.<sup>2</sup>

As Anthea Kraut asserts, Dunham's work helps to illustrate how dancing bodies participate in historical change. It has widely been accepted that the body is the primary locus for construction of identity; thus, dance studies has become a highly valued academic discipline. Placing dance forms and practices at the center of investigation of changing formulations of racial identity "has historicized dance as a cultural practice".<sup>3</sup>

In this thesis, I read the Caribbean bodily movements and the choreographic pieces as social text to understand how social identities are negotiated through dance. My approach is based on Jane Desmond's theory on movement style as an important mode of distinction between social groups.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Clark, V  v   A. "Clark, Performing the Memory of Difference in Afro-Caribbean Dance: Katherine Dunham's Choreography, 1938-1987". *Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2005. 321.

<sup>3</sup> Kraut, Anthea. "Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham." *Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham* 55.3 (2003): 436.

<sup>4</sup> Desmond, Jane C. "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies." *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*. Ed. Jane C. Desmond. Durham: Duke University, 1997. 51.

In the first chapter I give a brief overview of the history of Dance Studies as a separate arena along with its main approaches and research methodology. I will argue that this palette can be extended to different methods that were established to serve analysis in Cultural Studies. I will indicate to what extent Erwin Panofsky's three-tiered analysis is appropriate to close read dance even though his approach was originally developed to analyze paintings.

Chapter two discusses the problem of African American dance in the framework of expressing black identity. Based on Desmond's claim that movement and performance styles denote social/ethnic relations by tracing the history of dance styles and their spread from one group to another, we can uncover ideologies attached to movement patterns.

Chapter three will put the theory in chapter one into practice. I will look at Katherine Dunham's choreography, *L'Ag'Ya*, to isolate elements of black tradition—African and Afro-Caribbean—and to explore how Black "diaspora" identity is articulated through this choreography based on the Caribbean tradition. I adopt the analytical approach developed by Erwin Panofsky; specifically, his three-tiered method of analysis (iconology), in order to understand how certain movement patterns negotiate and construct African American ethnic identity in *L'Ag'Ya*.

The first stage is the "pre-iconographic" interpretation, which is the perception of the work's pure form without any added cultural knowledge. The secondary or "iconographical" interpretation connects artistic motifs or groups of motifs identified generically in the pre-iconographic analysis with traditional themes and concepts. Finally, the tertiary level or "iconological" interpretation considers social and cultural history. Knowing cultural history and background of different social groups and their distinctions is crucial for understanding the

dance expression. I look at this piece not as isolated incidents but as evidence of a historical, cultural environment.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Panofsky, Erwin. *Studies of Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press. 1972.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### DANCE RESEARCH FROM ANTHROPOLOGY TO DANCE STUDIES

Dance research, as well as human movement studies, contributes to better understanding of how social identities are marked and formed through bodily movement. We can analyze how social, ethnic, and national identities are codified in performance styles and the use of the body in dance. Dance transmits complex cultural codes, while studies of dance history locate the theory, practice, and reception of body movements in the context of problems, events, and ideologies beyond the field of dance as art.<sup>6</sup>

To be able to identify the social significance of movement forms and the ways dance patterns and occasions are attached to the social production of a certain identity that is the primary purpose of present thesis, we need special tools. In the early 1990s, Jane Desmond, cultural studies scholar, argued that if scholars have spent numerous years developing analytic skills to read and understand verbal forms of communication it is equally required that cultural critics become “movement literate”, to be able to analyze visual, rhythmic, and gestural forms.<sup>7</sup> This chapter of my thesis on one hand outlines the research tools and methodologies that have been developed by dance scholars since the early 1990s in order to understand the ways in which the body and movement negotiate social meaning.

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<sup>6</sup> Desmond, 52.

<sup>7</sup> Morris, Gay, ed. *Moving Words. Rewriting Dance*. New York: Routledge, 1996. 3.

On the other hand, I wish to demonstrate that Erwin Panofsky's iconology, when applied as a research method in dance research, can make valuable contributions to dance analysis. However, my methodological proposition may serve a twofold purpose: to satisfy the growing need for interdisciplinarity in dance research and, at the same time, to point out that dance or human movement studies claim a part in the arena of cultural studies.

I propose to study dance through a Cultural Studies approach that was originally developed to analyze paintings; this intervention reflects Norman Bryson's theory articulated in his essay, *Cultural Studies and Dance History*. Bryson believes that dance scholars could find "eminently useful working concepts by transferring to their own domain procedures and approaches already well elaborated in art history, film theory, and comparative literature."<sup>8</sup> Panofsky's *Iconology* was originally developed as a tool to analyze static art pieces; I explore to which extent and how this method is applicable to doing a close reading of dance. I intend to test this instrument and to discover its limitations.

Anthropologists played a prominent role in dance scholarship that emerged in the 1980s when scholars from a number of academic fields turned their attention to dance forms. Scholarly inquiry in human movement actually started within the field of anthropology. This growing interest in dance contributed to the elevation of the interdisciplinary field of dance studies that focuses on the social, political, cultural, and aesthetic aspects of human movement and dance. Anthropologists were the first who recognized that a study and understanding of movement and dance might actually lead to critical analysis of the structure of a society along

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<sup>8</sup> Bryson, Norman. "Cultural Studies and Dance History." *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*. Ed. Jane C. Desmond. Durham: Duke University, 1997. 75.

with providing new insights into understanding other parts of culture. For instance, Franz Boas, the “Father of American Anthropology,” who was also an influential figure of the development of “folklore” as a discipline, started to examine dance and responses to it in terms of one’s own culture instead of understanding it as a universal language in the 1920s.<sup>9</sup>

Dance research, embedded in other disciplines such as history and anthropology, besides borrowing these fields’ methodologies, developed its own theories and methods to analyze the human body in motion. Although dance research has long been devoted to more than analyzing “ballet,” it is only approximately three decades ago when dance scholars started to study movement in many aspects of human life, thus pushing far beyond traditional Western definitions of theatre dance. Since the late 1980s and the early 1990s, a radical shift occurred in American dance scholarship; before this period there were only a handful of researches who examined human movement in their cultural environment. Cultural critique with its focus on ethnicity, gender, and class has permeated the academy, and dance historians have turned to social and cultural issues. Since the scope of research has been extended, scholars started re-evaluating the ways in which dance should be analyzed and interpreted. Now there are a range of theories, methods, and case studies that address the cultural status of dance and human movement in society that is also reflected in the names of subfields of dance research: “dance ethnography,” “ethnochoreology,” “dance anthropology,” or “performance studies.” Dance research has tended to move in an interdisciplinary direction.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Kaepler, Adrienne L. "Dance in Anthropological Perspective." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7 (1978): 31-49.

<sup>10</sup> Deidre Sklar. Reprise: *On Dance Ethnography*. *Dance Research Journal* Vol. 32, No. 1 (Summer, 2000), pp. 70-77  
Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1478278>

Franz Boas' anthropological argument that each culture has a "unique configuration of dance characteristics for movement patterns, styles, dynamics, value and *raison d'être* (reason for existence) of dance which distinguished when comparing dances from one culture with those of another",<sup>11</sup> is evident in the work of another American anthropologist, Melville J. Herskovits. He examined the relationships of African music and the music of Black Americans. Herskovits argues that African cultural elements remain in New World descendants throughout the diaspora, and links African-American linguistics, music, dance and folklore to African cultures as evidence in his thesis.<sup>12</sup>

Joann Kealiinohomoku, dancer/anthropologist, also made a significant contribution on diaspora dance research with her Master's thesis that compared African and African American dance, among other motor behaviors of European performing artists. She, similarly to Herskovits, concluded that there is a high degree of correlation between the movement patterns of African and United States blacks and also asserts that analyzing dance motor behavior is a useful tool in cultural-anthropological research.<sup>13</sup>

The first step in the field of dance research towards a modern approach based on the Boasian tradition was, however, made by Anya Peterson Royce in her book, *The Anthropology of Dance*. Royce sees dance as inseparable from its social and cultural context, and she investigates dance as an indicator of social class and identity.<sup>14</sup> In 1967, she began her research of the culture of the Zapotec of the Isthmus of Juchitan, Mexico. Royce studied the transition of

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<sup>11</sup> Kaepler, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Kaepler, 34.

<sup>13</sup> Kaepler, 34-35.

<sup>14</sup> Peterson Royce, Anya. *The Anthropology of Dance*. Bloomington and London: Indiana UP, 1982. 36.

dance from village to theatre, in order to understand the power of the celebration of music and dance as an insight into the identity and culture of the Zapotec. She explored the themes of ethnic and class identity among the group, and she continued her field research in the areas of dance, ethnicity, nationalism, music, and the role of the intellectual and published her findings in her book in 1982.

Gertrude Kurath, a dancer with degrees in art history, music, and drama, is considered to be the parent of dance ethnology. She has collaborated with some of the leading anthropologists to analyze the content of dance by relating it to its cultural background. Kurath's "choreology" involved the breaking down of "an observed pattern in order to perceive the structure" and the synthetic process of choreosocial relationships.<sup>15</sup> Her system of glyph notation was originally meant to record dance movements; however, it turned out to be very useful to Kealiinohomoku who used it to demonstrate similarities between African dance and the dance of American blacks and to show the differences between these dance traditions and those of Scotland and Ireland.<sup>16</sup>

Dance ethnography as a method originates in anthropology. A key aspect of such research is that ethnographers themselves take part in the dance practice, which generates some special knowledge based on bodily practice. Dance ethnographers are often former modern or classical dancers, and some keep on dancing, or choreographing. This concept reveals how ethnographic studies might consolidate felt kinetic knowledge to address the cultural meaning of dance. Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham, whose field work and artistic

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<sup>15</sup> Kaepler, 36.

<sup>16</sup> Kaepler, 37.

activity incorporated their findings of the African and Caribbean dance heritage into American Modern Dance, thereby enriching it, are considered to be the founders of dance ethnography.

Ethnographic case studies appear in the first anthropological researches from the late 19th century and are included in descriptions of religious and dance rituals. Dance ethnographers include both Western and non-Western dance forms in their study, ranging from ritual and folk dance through social dance to concert dance. With the expansion of the multidisciplinary critical dance studies in the 1980s, dance scholars were trained not only in anthropology but applied methodologies and critical lenses of other disciplines such as sociology, history, ethnology, folklore, cultural studies, or performance studies. Dance ethnographers address topics such as ethnicity and nationalism; postcolonialism; race; gender and sexuality; body, mind, and movement; globalization; and combinations of these.<sup>17</sup>

Alan Lomax, folklorist and musicologist, applied an ethnographic method in order to prove that each language of movement carries messages from the society it is inherent. Together with Irmgard Bartenieff and Forrestine Paulay, he launched *Choreometrics*<sup>18</sup> and studied dance as formalized, culturally conditioned communicative behavior. Lomax and his assistants “compared dance to everyday movements in order to verify the hypothesis that danced movement is patterned reinforcement of the habitual movement patterns of each culture or culture area”.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Sklar, 71.

<sup>18</sup> Alan Lomax, Irmgard Bartenieff, Forrestine Paulay. “Choreometrics: A Method for the Study of Cross Cultural Pattern in Film,” *Congress on Research in Dance: Research Annual VI* (1972): 193-212.

<sup>19</sup> Kaepler, 43.

Cynthia Novack, dancer and anthropologist, was also an active participant in the research for her book, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. Besides summarizing the history of Contact Improvisation in the United States, Novack sets this dance style into the cultural-political environment of the 1960s and 1970s America. She examined a small group of practicing and performing contact improvisers within the American dance world. As Novack says, “understanding dance in America requires an understanding of the intertwining of social life and aesthetic concepts.”<sup>20</sup> She concludes that Contact Improvisation signifies the struggles of the sixties and demonstrates that it began as a protest against the system of the dance world that mirrored the social-political situation of the United States in the sixties.

June Adler Vail’s research, which I will discuss in Chapter two, was carried out as a member of the dance group Borovčani a decade after as Novack’s. This study is the basis of her essay “Balkan Tradition, American Alternative: Dance, Community and the People of the Pines”. As a participant, she asks how dance created culture for a group of Americans who formed a Balkan dance troupe in Maine in the late 1970s. She claims that Borovčani is a perfect example how a community of dancers reinvented ethnic dances (Balkan in this case) for its own purposes, representing an American “cast of mind” and creating its own subculture. The group’s staged choreographies and social processes seem to illuminate facets of America’s fragmented society in the late seventies and early eighties.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Novack, Cynthia J. *Sharing the Dance. Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990. 232.

<sup>21</sup> Adler Vail, June. “Balkan Tradition, American Alternative: Dance, Community, and the People of the Pines.” *Moving Words. Rewriting Dance*. Ed. Gay Morris. New York: Routledge, 1996. 306.

Besides ethnography there are other long-established models that inspire dance research. Marcia B. Siegel's formalist approach uses Laban's Movement Analysis<sup>22</sup> as a lexical foundation for analysis of many different kinds of dance. Her essay, "Visible Secrets: Style Analysis and Dance Literacy", is an example of how she employs this methodology. Siegel examines Paul Taylor's *Speaking in Tongues* by observing the structure of the work and of individual dances, and by looking at the piece in the context of Taylor's previous work.<sup>23</sup>

Dance could also be interpreted as a means of communication. Both Mark Franko, choreographer and scholar; and Susan Foster, dancer and theorist, have been interested in how dance is related to language. Franko examines the communication between dance and viewer in Paul Sanasardo and Donya Feuer's piece, *Laughter After All*, and he suggests that only when experience is mediated, or "attached to the net of social relations",<sup>24</sup> is it given life. Franko's essay centers on how this dance piece could be "re-vented" through memory, interviews with both the choreographer and the dancers, photographs and his own experience as a dancer.

Susan Foster creates a theory of dance analysis based on semiological models in her 1986 book, *Reading Dance: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*. She suggests that dancing can be understood as an organized semantic structure and read as other cultural texts. Thus, the dancer's body becomes a sign within a system of representation that varies between choreographers and historical periods.

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<sup>22</sup> Rudolph Laban's analyses focuses on the positions of the body parts, the temporal and extensile qualities of the movement/dance, and how the body moves in space. His notation system (Labanotation) records the body's changes in position and the timing.

<sup>23</sup> Morris, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Morris, 5.

Researching dance as cultural text promoted the adoption of interdisciplinary methodologies developing within the field of cultural studies, particularly when these touched on questions of gender and ethnicity.<sup>25</sup> In the 1990s, both dance scholars and scholars of cultural studies called for cooperation and interdisciplinarity between the two fields. Jane Desmond in 1993 called for cultural studies to put dance on its agenda arguing that dance research could contribute to understanding “of how social identities are signaled, formed, and negotiated through bodily movement”.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, dance could profit from cultural studies by utilizing many of the tools developed in art, literary, film, feminist theory, and many more that focus on the ideological foundations of aesthetic practices. Applying critical theory enables dance scholars to produce more sophisticated analysis of dance as social text particularly in the sphere of embodiment, identity and representation. In 1991 Jane Desmond suggested that if the “body” is included in the humanities as text then scholars should also include bodies in motion of which dance represents one of the most widespread, “highly codified and intensely affective dimensions”.<sup>27</sup>

Like Desmond, Amy Koritz argued in “Re/Moving Boundaries: From Dance History to Cultural Studies” that cultural studies would benefit from including dance in its horizon. According to her dance scholars should apply a broader scope and speak more than one disciplinary language.<sup>28</sup> Another call for dance to partner itself with cultural studies, thus apply and interdisciplinary approach was made by art historian Norman Bryson. He says that dance as

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<sup>25</sup> Ramsey, Burt. "The Specter of Interdisciplinarity." *Dance Research Journal* 41.1 (2009): 3-4.

<sup>26</sup> Desmond, 34.

<sup>27</sup> Desmond, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Koritz, Amy. "Re/Moving Boundaries: From Dance History to Cultural Studies." *Moving Words. Rewriting Dance*. Ed. Gay Morris. New York: Routledge, 1996. 88-106.

an element of culture could be shown to have close ties with historical power and social change. This partnership in turn could make a valuable addition of dance to cultural studies departments. At the same time, it could lead dance scholars to broaden their intellectual horizons, not only incorporating elements of critical theory into their work, but also reexamining the whole idea of what dance might be. Instead of conceptualizing dance as a high-art theatrical form, Bryson would substitute the definition of dance with “socially constructed movement.”<sup>29</sup>

Susan Manning discussed dance studies formation in relation to interdisciplinarity in the “Letter from the President,” that appeared in the newsletter of the *Society of Dance History Scholars* in 2006.<sup>30</sup> Describing the shift in usage from “dance history” to “dance studies,” she referred to interdisciplinarity as a key element in the new designation. According to her, the term “studies” reflects “the blurring of boundaries between the previously distinct subfields and a heightened exchange between dance and other field of scholarly inquiry.”<sup>31</sup>

There are a number of publications in the 2000s that discuss dance forms (typically ethnic dances) within socio-historical and socio-political frameworks, thus automatically fulfilling the demand for interdisciplinarity in dance research. *Worlding Dance*, edited by Susan Leigh Foster and published in 2009, is a collection of eight essays, five of them focusing on specific world dance forms and discussing them in relation to the culture in which they are practiced. Three studies adopt a more general perspective and discuss themes relating to the

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<sup>29</sup> Bryson, Norman. "Cultural Studies and Dance History." *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*. Ed. Jane C. Desmond. Durham: Duke University, 1997. 56-77.

<sup>30</sup> Manning, Susan. "Letter from the President." *Society of Dance History Scholars Newsletter* 16.2 (2006): 1-2.

<sup>31</sup> Manning, 1-2.

institutionalization of the term “choreography” in both modern dance practices and “world dance” traditions thus pushing the boundaries of dance studies to have it correspond with the age of globalization. The anthology centers on the concerns arose around the term “world dance” that replaced “ethnic dance” and was meant to eliminate “the colonial legacy of racialized and class-based hierarchizations of the arts”.<sup>32</sup> The anthology also broadens the spectrum through which various dance practices are valued.

*The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories* by Jacqueline Shea Murphy, published in 2007, is another work that focuses on how dance, among other performance practices, shapes human society and history. Murphy’s book discusses the relationship between Native dance and modern dance in North America through American Indian stage productions. She paid attention “not to what looks Indian, but more so to the stories the dancing tells, the theories of embodiment and enactment the dance work investigates, the familial and tribal connections, processes, dedication and intention with which the dancing is made.”<sup>33</sup> Due to the work’s interdisciplinary approach, it has come into the intersection of dance, performance, and Native American studies.

Priya Srinivasan’s book, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor*, published in 2012, offers an alternative view on the modern dance canon of the US by suggesting that travelling Indian dancers’ contribution to early modern dance in America is far greater than previously believed. Her book connects the diverse histories of Indian and Indian diaspora dancers from the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to our days. Srinivasan’s research is not only significant

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<sup>32</sup> Foster, Susan Leigh, ed. *Worlding Dance*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Shea Murphy, Jacqueline. *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota, 2007. 7.

because it reveals the center role of subaltern figures in a transnational exchange but suggests a re-examination of US race relations and their connection to the emerging modern dance in the early-twentieth century.

Throughout my discussion of methodologies and research tactics, I mean interdisciplinarity both in terms of the dance field adding methods and theories from other fields of scholarship, and that dance as a socially significant cultural text becoming of a research field of cultural studies. These two aspects led me to test how and to what extent a research methodology borrowed from visual arts could contribute to the ways dance as indicator of cultural difference can be analyzed and interpreted since “dance can be seen as the stylization of the physical culture of society.”<sup>34</sup>

The common phenomenon of different disciplines borrowing useful ideas, methods, and concepts to address problems within the discipline of humanities makes the boundaries of arenas fluid. However, as Ramsey Burt states in his essay, “The Specter of Interdisciplinarity,” published in the *Dance Research Journal* in 2009, Anglo-American Dance Scholarship is concerned the “theoretical turn” that has led some dance scholars develop interdisciplinary methodologies has proved controversial. Burt argues that “Interdisciplinarity is in danger of becoming a specter haunting dance scholarship.”<sup>35</sup> Considering that dance is still a relatively new discipline and how hard it was for dance scholarship to gain recognition in academia might lead us to understand this protective attitude about the specificity of dance. This thesis does not intend to prove the opposite; it is to test to what extent a research tool borrowed from art

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<sup>34</sup> Carter, Alexandra, ed. *The Routledge Dance Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1998. 121.

<sup>35</sup> Burt, 1.

history, but slightly altered to study movement, could contribute to the applied dance research methodologies in order to analyze dance as socio-cultural text.

I adopt the analytical approach developed by Erwin Panofsky, specifically, his three-tiered method of analysis (iconology), in order to understand how certain movement patterns negotiate and construct African-American ethnic identity in Katherine Dunham's choreographies. The first stage is the "pre-iconographic" interpretation, which is the perception of the work's pure form without any added cultural knowledge. This phase includes observation on movement elements, broken down to the smallest possible components: the dancing bodies, clothing, tempo, instruments, and any other category that contributes to the appearance of the dance. I will "perceive" these components and isolate them from any added cultural relevance. I will look at the dances to find factual and the expressional meaning. The factual meaning is captured by identifying certain visible forms and the change in their relations with certain actions or events. These forms and events naturally produce certain reactions or feelings within the viewer. Expressional meaning involves these psychological nuances, and it is recognized not only by simple identification, but by "empathy."

The secondary or "iconographical" interpretation connects those artistic patterns we identify in the pre-iconographic stage of analysis with traditional themes and concepts. This is the stage when we try to find the symbolism of certain patterns. For example, the undulating movements of the torso or the fluid motions throughout the spine, is the movement concept that is the same of a snake's, an essential element of dances in Vodoun tradition. Different movement patterns, spatial arrangements, or formations will be connected to different dance

types, for example social ball dancing, couple dancing like *pas de deux*, or dance styles such as ballet, modern dance, or the Vodoun tradition.

Finally, the tertiary level or “iconological” interpretation considers social and cultural history. Knowing cultural history and background of different social groups and their distinctions is crucial for understanding the dance expression. I look at these pieces not as isolated incidents but as evidence of a historical, cultural, or ethnic environment.<sup>36</sup> To stay with the above-mentioned example of the undulation of the spine, when analyzing it, one would strive to understand why this snake-like movement element is present in a dance. We find its origin in the Caribbean, where Katherine Dunham “imported” it from; in particular, from the *yonvalou dance*,<sup>37</sup> which is a religious dance that honors *Damballa*, snake-god in Vodoun tradition. We can research what the presence of this element/style in her choreography tells us in terms of (African) American culture and the paradigm shift from “primitive” to “diaspora” in representation of African American identity in dance that occurred in the 1930s.

This research methodology seems to be appropriate for my analysis purposes as it focuses on the meaning of works of art, its socio-cultural significance as opposed to solely their form. The way Katherine Dunham used the movements she had examined in the West Indies in her American Modern Dance pieces could certainly not be exactly as they were danced in the Caribbean due to multiple socio-cultural reasons. They conveyed the essence of their original meaning upon the common history and heritage of Black Americans and that of the peoples of African diaspora. This analytic approach enables the researcher to explore cultural morphology

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<sup>36</sup> Panofsky, Erwin. *Studies of Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press. 1972.

<sup>37</sup> Aschenbrenner, Joyce. “Dunham Technique Seminars.” *Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham*. Eds. Vévé A. Clark, Sara E. Johnson. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2005. 485.

of various aesthetic elements that appear in more than one historical era, geopolitical community, or social environment, which in the case of this research project are the Afro-Caribbean and the United States in the 1930s and 1940s.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY FORMATION IN DANCE

We seem to be seeking an identity throughout our entire life. This is an individual undertaking on one hand, a search to find out who we really are as people, what makes us unique. On the other hand, we desire to know what we have in common with others, such as what values, beliefs, character traits we share that make us belong to a certain group, which is our quest for a cultural identity.

The South African Xhosa people say "I am because we are ..." This saying ties one's personal identity to a larger body than the self. It also indicates that in order to understand the self, to identify the self, the group from which one emerges must have an identity as well.<sup>38</sup> In this chapter, I will introduce the problem of Black Dance and how African-American cultural identity articulates itself through arts, particularly in dance in the twentieth-century United States.

According to Thomas F. DeFrantz when studying African-American dance history we have to face numerous challenges, from the limited number of specialized collections on African-American dance performance in libraries with limited reliable documentation of dance

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<sup>38</sup> *What's in a Name: Defining Black Identity in 21st Century America* by Ewuare Osayande December 12, 2004 at a panel discussion "What's in a Name" at Temple University

events before mid-twentieth century, through racist voices and misreadings in early writings of African diaspora culture in America to the “painful lack” of focused research and criticism in African-American dance, not to mention the problem of the use of the terms “Negro Dance,” “Black Dance,” and “African-American Dance.”<sup>39</sup> Moving away from the terms, what they cover seems to be problematic to define as well. What is “black dance”? What does it have to do with race? Is it different from African American dance? If there can be “black dance,” why is there no category of “white dance?”<sup>40</sup> DeFrantz suggests that these questions could at least be partly answered by the Black Arts movement of the 1960s that attempted to define a “black aesthetic” and through which “black dance” became a category of performance. By the mid-1970s “black dance” came to be defined by its artists as work that was explicitly engaged in the act of black self-identification.<sup>41</sup> However, according to Brenda Dixon Gottschild, the author of the *Black Dancing Body: a geography from coon to cool*, the issue of black dance has resurfaced in every decade since the 1960s, and as Zita Allan explains “the phrase was not coined by the black community or choreographers of African descent but was a means of distinguishing them from the white concert dance mainstream.”<sup>42</sup> Dixon Gottschild believes that this media phrase must have been developed by white dance writers of the 60s, who for the first time recognized distinctive tendencies among African American concert dance choreographers such as Alvin Ailey, Eleo Pomare, and Dianne McIntyre. This, of course, does not mean that black people had only started to choreograph at this time, rather that the mainstream press had just begun to notice and, as with the advancement of civil rights, white writers suddenly became aware of

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<sup>39</sup> DeFrantz, Thomas, ed. *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African-American Dance*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2001. 3.

<sup>40</sup> DeFrantz, 5.

<sup>41</sup> DeFrantz, 11.

<sup>42</sup> Allan, Zita. *The Great American Black Dance Mystery*. *Freedomways* 20, no. 4 (1980): 283-290.

dance pieces made by black artists. Throughout this thesis, I opted for using “African American dance,” not only because it seems to be a less problematic term, but also because it is more concerned with African diaspora dances and diasporic forms, as opposed to “black dance” that is most commonly defined by its racial opposite “white”; or “negro” that is often associated with “primitive.”

In order to be able to talk about the relation of African American dance to African American identity, we need to take a look at the general cultural-historical origins and development of Black identity in America. Throughout most of their history, African-Americans have experienced negative propaganda regarding their ethnic image, and discriminatory laws, and customs. Slavery, cultural imperialism, assimilation, and racism have all attempted to convince Blacks that there is something inherently inferior about their ethnicity, lifestyles, and traditions. This reality resulted African Americans assimilating through the years, trying to escape this negative image and to gain acceptance into the society that ignored their history and their rich culture.

Participating in the discourse of fine arts has been one way of gaining acceptance into American society that could be continuously experienced in the twentieth century on the part of African American artists who wished to break out from the role of “the entertainer of the white” and prove their place in fine arts. In the years between the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and the cultural revival and nationalism movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the eternal challenge to Black artists, regardless of the movement they find themselves,

was how to be at once Black and artist, African-American and American, Afrocentric, and expressing an individual vision.

During the Harlem Renaissance, African-American culture gained its first public recognition in the United States. In the 1920s and 1930s, African-American music such as jazz, swing, blues became popular genres, while writings of Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen, and poems of Langston Hughes and Claude McKay enriched American literature.

Despite the general feeling of disillusionment in post-World War I America, the spirit of emancipation, innovation, and novelty created the “New Negro,” who would be more aggressive in politics and who would educate himself to promote just race relations.<sup>43</sup> This new approach, according to Alain Locke, a professor of philosophy at Howard University, had to do with the “New Negro’s” freeing himself from the fictions of his past and the rediscovery of himself”. Locke also believed that this new consciousness was promising in two ways: “It made the New Negro the advance-guard of the African peoples in their contact with the Twentieth Century civilization and it also provided the sense of a mission of rehabilitating the race in world esteem.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, the “New Negro” had to discover and define his culture and the ways he could contribute to what had formerly been considered a white civilization, which was to be through a cultural awakening.

The search for identity for the “New Negro” brought the need for the rediscovery of a cultural heritage that was to serve the new image. So, much effort was made to explain the Negro’s folk traditions in America as well as to interpret African civilization. In order to do this,

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<sup>43</sup> Huggins, Nathan Irvin. *Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford UP, 1971. 58.

<sup>44</sup> Huggins, 59.

Blacks began to recover their folk traditions. Zora Neale Hurston, a trained anthropologist from Columbia University, went beyond collecting Negro folk materials; her stories and tales became her assessment of a common Negro character type, who was robust and passionate with uncomplicated mind, who lived in the constant presence of ghosts and supernatural powers.<sup>45</sup> Her ability to transform non-literary folk traditions to literary forms as well as her embracing of the African-American vernacular culture of the rural south has received much scholarly attention.

The capturing of the black Americans' everyday experience in various art forms, such as literature, music, and dance became prevalent in the attempt to "build a race and define a culture"<sup>46</sup> as a "cultural struggle." Africa had an essential role in this culture-building enterprise, because when the "New Negro" wanted to find his roots and attempted to define this racial culture, he would always find himself in Africa. Many of the black artists and intellectuals of this period supported a "return" to Africa to solve the Negro's problem in America. The *Négritude* movement, originating in France, was also an influential milestone in the reclamation of Africa and African diasporic identity and dignity. *Négritude* contributed to the re-acknowledgment of African cultural history, as well as to the re-establishment of fraternity among people of Africa and people of African descent. *Négritude* was influenced by the Harlem Renaissance and the "salon" in Paris hosted by sisters from Martinique, Jane, Paulette, and Andrée Nardal, invited many Black American writers, such as Langston Hughes or Claude McKay. Harlem Renaissance

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<sup>45</sup> Huggins, 75.

<sup>46</sup> Huggins, 78.

and *Négritude* hand in hand found the ways how to restore black pride and how to raise consciousness of Black culture.<sup>47</sup>

The early 1900s was an era that categorized blacks as entertainers and inauthentic practices in minstrelsy formed attitudes towards them. The Negro dancer was considered to be a natural-born entertainer, whose “natural gifts and effectiveness on stage” would be diminished by training.<sup>48</sup> This image made dance as an art form little acknowledged and discredited among Harlem Renaissance intellectuals because it worked against the ideal image of the “New Negro”. However, the Depression and less interest in black musicals as well as the aesthetic influence of the Harlem Renaissance and the appearance of dance anthropologists among black dancers along with their research materials on stage influenced the beginning of a black aesthetic in dance.

The Harlem Renaissance embraced folk materials, whether authentic or not, should be understood as a prominent watershed in the Negro intellectual’s gaining self-consciousness. The term “authenticity” may refer to the extent to which creative works of a given genre, such as dance, employ the same tools, techniques, and styles as were traditionally used.<sup>49</sup> June Adler Vail in her essay, “Balkan Tradition, American Alternative: Dance, Community and the People of the Pines,” claims that Borovčani, a group of Americans who formed a Balkan dance troupe in Maine in the late 1970s, is a perfect example of how a community of dancers reinvented ethnic dances (Balkan in this case) for its own purposes, representing an American “cast of mind” and

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<sup>47</sup> Vaillant, J., 1990, *Black, French, and African. A Life of Léopold Sédar Senghor*, Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press. 93-94.

<sup>48</sup> Free to Dance

<sup>49</sup> Henderson, Madeleine, and Liane Gabora. "The Recognizability of Authenticity." *Mindmodelling*. Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia, n.d. Web. 23 Jan. 2014. <<http://mindmodeling.org/cogsci2013/papers/0457/paper0457.pdf>>.

creating its own subculture. Adler Vail states that the choreographies of Borovčani and its social processes represent aspects of America's fragmented society in the late seventies and early eighties.<sup>50</sup>

Theatrical representations that do not intend to recover traditional practices on the stage or as social events can also be understood as authentic in the sense that they incorporate elements of traditional dance practices of a certain ethnic culture for inspiration; to negotiate one's ethnic/cultural identity; or to find their roots, in this sense dance is a vehicle. In such cases it is up to the choreographer or dancer, just like Zora Neale Hurston or Katherine Dunham, what elements they select to propose a vision of what describes their ethnic/racial qualities. They do not try to reproduce, they use elements of a traditional culture to create something new that best represents the black experience.

Zora Neale Hurston's contribution to the field of American dance has remained almost unnoticed even though, as Anthea Kraut claims, Hurston's staged performances of folksongs, dances, and pantomime that directly arose from her anthropological research in the south of the United States and the Bahamas desired to communicate black cultural forms to the public, and thus should be recognized as a crucial episode in American dance history.<sup>51</sup> First of all, because her theatrical representations of black vernacular idioms helped to move away from the racist legacy of minstrelsy and toward an understanding of how African derived West Indian dance practices exist on American soil, Hurston's contribution to the paradigm shift from

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<sup>50</sup> Adler Veil, 306.

<sup>51</sup> Kraut, 434.

“primitivism” to “diaspora” in dance in the 1920s is significant. “Primitivism” assumed a hierarchical relationship between Western civilization and the savage, the “racialized Other.”<sup>52</sup>

Anthropologists, like Boas, Herskovits, Hurston, and Dunham working in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, challenged this view by documenting the survival of African cultural traditions in the New World and theorizing of a black “diaspora” as a link because of the shared cultural features among African descent groups throughout the world. Kraut situates Zora Neale Hurston in this shift between Josephine Baker, the Jazz Age entertainer, and Katherine Dunham, the pioneer of black concert dance movement. Hurston’s representations of African American culture sought to re-situate it in relation to both the material conditions of a Southern rural folk community and to African diasporic roots.<sup>53</sup> Katherine Dunham espoused Modern Dance with African derived movement elements and tradition. Her ambition was “take our [Black] dance out of the burlesque—to make it a more dignified art.”<sup>54</sup>

Josephine Baker’s dance was, however considered something other than African American. “Wearing her now-infamous banana skirt, she appeared as the young savage Fatou in an African jungle setting replete with palm trees, a sleeping white explorer, and several semi-nude black male drummers.”<sup>55</sup> She communicated the message of herself as “natural”. By the 1930s her Americanness along her jazz dancing background faded and she mastered a pastiche-like dance style representing herself as “Inuit, Indochinese, African, Arab and Caribbean” that

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<sup>52</sup> Kraut, 435.

<sup>53</sup> Kraut, 433-440.

<sup>54</sup> Manning, Susan. *Negro Dance, Modern Dance: Race in Motion*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota, 2004. xiv.

<sup>55</sup> Kraut, 439.

made her not only “symbol of the black woman, but of all colonized women.”<sup>56</sup> Representations of blackness like Baker’s that perceived as Africanist were considered by critics as “natural performers” or “primitivist” rather than “creative artists”. These staged performances, what Susan Manning calls “methaphorical minstrelsy,” were not uncommon among white dancers, Helen Tamiris’ *Negro Spirituals* (1928) or Martha Graham’s *Primitive Mysteries* (1931) fell to this category carrying multiple meanings: generalized moods of jubilation and lament, historically and culturally specific experiences of oppression and liberation.<sup>57</sup>

The Harlem Renaissance as a turning point meant the beginning of black aesthetic on the dance stage. Artistic statements started to be made in movement, as had been made in spirituals, literature, and art. The aesthetic manifesto of the Harlem Renaissance provided a philosophical foundation for "the new Negro dance." Pioneer dancers and choreographers like Hemsley Winfield, Edna Guy, Alma Sutton, Lavinia Williams, Asadata Dafora, Charles Williams, Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus expressed their aspirations, ideals, and understanding of the struggles of being black in dance. Their quest for a home base for blacks and black heritage was carried out through both their anthropological research in Africa and the African diaspora and through their stage performances as their interpretation of the link between blacks in Africa and the diaspora. They were facing the challenge how to create an aesthetic art form based on the African and West Indian diaspora heritage.<sup>58</sup>

The dances of Pearl Primus, dancer/anthropologist, are outstanding examples of this representation of traditional idioms. Starting in the 1940s, she collected and preserved African

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<sup>56</sup> Fatimah Tobing Rony in Kraut, p. 439.

<sup>57</sup> Manning, *Negro Dance, Modern Dance: Race in Motion*, p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> Free to dance

and Afro-Caribbean dance material by creating choreographies based on the African and Caribbean dances she had studied throughout her fieldwork. As John Perpener concludes in *African-American Concert Dance*, “Pearl Primus did create modern dances that captured the contemporaneous concerns of African Americans. She created West Indian dances that reflected another aspect of her heritage, and she created dances that were ultimately informed by her deep and loving involvement with the people of Africa.”<sup>59</sup>

Authentication can work as a process when artists legitimize their performance style. In 1931, Hemsley Winfield and Edna Guy produced the First Negro Dance Recital in America by which they made a similar statement that the preceding tradition of jazz dancing could not be considered as “Negro Dance.” Also, during the thirties other dancers like Asadata Dafora, a native African, brought Africa’s rich cultural heritage to America and actively disseminated its elements to the American public.

Beside artists in the 1920s and 1930s, anthropologist such as Melville Herskovits, Franz Boaz, Pearl Primus, and Katherine Dunham also turned their attention to Africa and the African diaspora to conduct ethnographic studies, in dance among other cultural forms, in order to get a better understanding of Blackness in America, to change racial perceptions, and challenge the way people of the early 1920s think about racial identity.

After his ethnographic studies, Herskovits argued that African cultural elements remained in New World descendants throughout the diaspora. In *Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), he argues that Europeans tried to destroy African cultural contributions to the

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<sup>59</sup> Perpener, John O. *African American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*. Chicago: University of Illinois, 2001. 175.

formation of global culture and that African cultural traits were preserved in the African-American culture; what is more, these traits were acculturated into Anglo-Americans as well. As evidence in his thesis Herskovits linked African-American linguistics, music, dance, and folklore to African cultures. According to him, these African traits were more common in Brazil and the Caribbean because of their relative isolation from Europeans; similarly, the coastal islands of Georgia and South Carolina retained the highest African traits in the United States.<sup>60</sup>

Music, as well as dance, is integral to many aspects of African community life. Music serves multiple functions and performed by individuals and groups in both formal and informal settings. The fundamental concept in performing music in African-derived cultures is that music making unites people into a group and for a common purpose. According to Portia K. Maultsby in *Africanisms in African American Music*, music-making as a participatory group activity also appears in the way Black Americans prepare for musical performances as does the unification of song and dance that characterizes gospel traditions and popular music.<sup>61</sup> Maultsby also believes that the sound that governs African-American music is also unmistakably grounded in the African past, such as in blues, an African American musical idiom with West African roots. Its influence on other musical genre like jazz, rock, funk, rap and hip-hop makes blues historically significant. According to Clyde Woods, blues is more than a simple musical art; it is a symbolic resource for unifying oppressed blacks and a direct means of consciousness-raising for the black community.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Kaepler, 34.

<sup>61</sup> Holloway, Joseph E., ed. *Africanisms in American Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2005. 326.

<sup>62</sup> Davis Gatchet, Roger. " 'I've Got Some Antique in Me': The Discourse of Authenticity and Identity in the African American Blues Community in Austin, Texas." *The Oral History Review* 39.2 (2012): 211.

Similarly, the dance tradition within communities of African descent in America proved to be a vital bond that lived on in the New World despite of the harsh conditions and segregation Black people were suffering from throughout the centuries of slavery and after that. As Lee Warren writes, “Dance is intermeshed in every aspect of day-to-day traditional African life.”<sup>63</sup> Within the African communities, every important experience in life was negotiated through dance, from the celebration of birth to marriage, from initiating the young into adulthood, to help the deceased move to the world of spirits, as well as the prayers for better crop harvest; all were occasions for dance, as were the portrayals of spiritual power in the form of rituals of masked dancers. This phenomenon also existed in America because dance had the power to bind slaves together through a link to their African past and could “serve as a release and escape from oppression”,<sup>64</sup> the major reason why American blacks kept their dancing tradition alive.

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States, the influence of African origin dance vocabulary and movement patterns became prevalent and started to shape theatrical dance in multiple genres. The uniquely American dance genre, Modern Dance, enriched by African-American dancers, elements and motifs of Black Dance; and major influence of African-American, Afro-Caribbean, and African vocabulary and movement patterns in concert dance, could be evidenced since the Harlem Renaissance. In addition, social dances that are considered to be representatively American, such as Charleston, Shimmy, Lindy Hop, and many of the rock ‘n’ roll dances of the 1950s and 1960s came from the Black community and are of African-based dance

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<sup>63</sup> Warren, Lee. *The Dance of Africa: An Introduction*. Engelwood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972. 2.

<sup>64</sup> Glass, Barbara S. *African American Dance: An Illustrated History*. London: McFarland and, 2007. 6.

movements. Key characteristics of African derived dance came to play major role in shaping American vernacular dance, also contributed to its unique appeal.<sup>65</sup> African movement vocabulary is still a powerful influence on African-American dance, incorporated into both social and concert dance.

According to Alan Lomax, anthropologist, African dance moves all parts of the body, as opposed to many European forms that are based mostly on arm and leg movement. Undulation and fluid torso, shoulder, hip, and pelvis movements, along with the isolated movements of the different body parts and vigorous skips, are basic characteristics of African-derived dances. Isolation of body parts is the way how the dancing body and African polyrhythmic music communicate with each other. Lomax explains that the ritual dance drama, *Dogon*, is an excellent example of this relationship: “Dogon dancing displays an orchestral use of the body where the upper and lower halves develop different supporting but complementary rhythms. It is with this polyrhythmic handling of the body, combined with dramatic bursts of strength and speed, that the African dancers produce an effect.”<sup>66</sup> This rhythmic complexity can be found in many American musical styles, such as jazz and bebop. The polyrhythmic drumming of the Congo Square is one of the most important aspects of African drumming in jazz, more specifically how improvisation is organized. There is a high rhythm (bell rhythm), a lower rhythm, and a middle rhythm; this is where the musician can really improvise.<sup>67</sup> The first bebop

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<sup>65</sup> Glass, 3.

<sup>66</sup> Lomax, Alan. *Folk Song Style and Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1994. 258.

<sup>67</sup> Wynston Marsalis: History of Jazz – African Rhythms  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5nU82xdMjA>

musician who returned to African-based polyrhythms was the drummer Kenny Clarke, who played in Teddy Hill's big band between 1938 and 1942.<sup>68</sup>

Besides polyrhythm, Leroi Jones in *Blues People* identified other "Africanisms" in African American music: antiphony and prosodic tone. He saw the "talking drums" of African music and the ideophones of African languages in African American musical prosody.<sup>69</sup> "Call-and-response," the alternation between leader and chorus, is also a defining characteristic of African music and became an important element of African American music. This element involves the audience and eliminates the Western style separation of audience and performers because the music is participatory in nature. There is another striking difference between European and African music that is the choice of where to place melodic elements over the underlying beats. In most European music, the music falls right on the beats. Whereas playing off the beats, syncopation, another African element in Black American music is simply the shifting of accents to unaccented beats.<sup>70</sup>

Besides rhythm, posture of dance is also radically different in African tradition compared to the upright stance of European dances. The African dancer bends slightly toward the ground with flexible knees and loose arms. African dances and dance occasions are also significantly more improvisatory than European practices and rely on the individual interpretation of the

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<sup>68</sup> Belgrad, Daniel. *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998. 189.

<sup>69</sup> Leroi Jones in Belgrad, 193

<sup>70</sup> The Influence of Africa <http://northbysouth.kenyon.edu/1998/music/rhythm/rhythm.htm>

dancer and thus it continuously reshapes itself as the dancer brings in new insights and individual elements into old forms.<sup>71</sup>

Pearl Primus, dancer, anthropologist as previously discussed, did a symbolic return to Africa through her dances and believed that African culture in movement was retained in America. As Richard C. Green concludes in *(Up)Staging the Primitive: Pearl Primus and "the Negro Problem" in American Dance*, in her dances, "Primus drew upon and reaffirmed her diasporic cultural heritage and tradition, using Negro Spirituals, Caribbean themes or African music to inform and authenticate her theatrical 're-presentations' .... Primus affirmed the 'depth' of the Negro's soul and provided hope that 'the Negro problem' would not last forever."<sup>72</sup>

Primus became keenly interested in Africa as a child and later in and after her college years did extensive research on African culture with special regard to dance traditions. To gather material for her piece, *African Ceremonial*, she consulted books, looked at photographs and visited museums. She also authenticated her movements with African students who studied at Columbia University. Additionally, she relied upon expert advice of two percussionists, Norman Coker, who had performed with Asadata Dafora, and Alphonse Cimber, a Haitian artist who accompanied classes at the New Dance Group.<sup>73</sup>

Primus spent the summer of 1944 in the American south living among rural Blacks, where she found rhythmic patterns, songs, and movements that she believed were related to

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<sup>71</sup> Glass, 18.

<sup>72</sup> DeFrantz, 125.

<sup>73</sup> Perpener, 165.

their African ancestors. She also noted in the dozens of small churches around Georgia, Alabama and South Carolina she had visited cultural retention from Africa was very much alive. Her findings affected her and her dance making deeply, also added new dimensions to works like *Strange Fruit* and *Hard Time Blues*.<sup>74</sup>

In December 1948 Primus began her journey in Nigeria, Liberia, Senegal, Angola, the Gold Coast, the Belgian Congo, and French Equatorial Africa. She studied the dances of more than thirty ethnic groups and, when she was allowed, took part in the tribal dances and studied with experts in the countries she visited. The Africans she met, talked with, and danced with were amazed at the similarities between her dancing and their own; they believed her to be an ancestral spirit. Primus was eager to convey her impressions of Africa to people back home. When she returned to America, her activities such as teaching and conducting lecture-demonstrations were to share her rich experiences. In lecture-demonstrations such as *Dark Rhythms*, she used a small ensemble of performers to present Caribbean and African dances, gave informative talks about the cultures they represented, and spoke of the cultural continuum of the black diaspora. Through her artistic style, Primus created modern dances that captured the existing concerns of African Americans.<sup>75</sup>

Besides Primus there were artists who had recovered their African and Caribbean dance roots either through research or by studying with Africans and West Indians who were in the United States. Katherine Dunham and Primus explored their African and diasporic roots by immersing themselves in the cultures where the dance traditions were still living. So did

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<sup>74</sup> Perpener, 166.

<sup>75</sup> Perpener, 170-172.

Hemsley Winfield and Edna Guy, mentioned earlier in this chapter, in 1931 when they produced the *First Negro Dance Recital* in America by which they redefined “Negro Dance”, thus moving towards the “diaspora” discourse. Other dancers, like Asadata Dafora, brought the Black continent’s rich cultural heritage to America and actively disseminated its elements to the American public. Charles Williams and Katherine Dunham shared Guy’s and Winfield’s attempt to espouse Modern Dance with African derived movement elements and tradition. Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham became the founders of a tradition that integrates the black vernacular into concert dance. Talley Beatty, Donald McKayle, and Alvin Ailey then extend the tradition, and later choreographers like Jawole Zollar, Garth Fagan, and Bill T. Jones continue to spin the tradition in new ways. From mid-century to the present, African-American concert dance grows to “multifaceted lineage”.<sup>76</sup>

All the artists discussed previously, Guy, Winfield, Primus, and Dunham contributed to the recognition of black dance as serious art by the mid-1940s. However, critical and audience reactions based on stereotypes of black dancers were still strong, like Euro-American concert dancers, black choreographers/performers could also prepare the way for new perceptions of dance. In addition to it all the artists, and among one of the first of them, Dunham mobilized cultural identities through the act of choreographing. Although this valuable contribution of African American artists to American modern dance is now acknowledged, according to many dance/cultural studies scholars more extensive discussion of African-American choreographers and dancers who have had significant impact on the American dance scene would be necessary. There is further need to document African-American contributions to theatrical dance, even

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<sup>76</sup> Manning, xxi

though in the last two decades a growing number of scholars have taken important steps “to create a more inclusive picture of the history of dance in America”.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Perpener, 223.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### “BLACK DIASPORA” IDENTITY IN KATHERINE DUNHAM’S *L’AG’YA*

#### Introducing Katherine Dunham

Katherine Dunham’s dancer/choreographer/anthropologist significance in American culture lies in her studying the connections between dance and other cultural phenomena and her translation of her findings into theatrical art. Her movement studies went even further than that of the white pioneers of modern dance in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who studied how the relationship between psychological and emotional impulses and expressive movement could be interpreted in dance performance. Her researches beginning in the 1930s as a trained anthropologist and dancer took place in various black cultures in the Americas and these settings became her laboratory where she studied traditional dance forms and rituals.<sup>78</sup>

Dunham intended to explore cultural links between Caribbean and US dance forms. Along with folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, she was one of the first African Americans who conducted anthropological fieldwork. Although anthropologists, such as Herskovits, had already started to study the cultural significance of dance practices, Dunham was the first fieldworker

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<sup>78</sup> Perpener, 129.

who made dance the primary focus of her research.<sup>79</sup> This activity provided valuable contribution to American culture in three different aspects of equal importance.

First of all, she founded and directed the first self-supporting African American dance company and introduced African and Caribbean dance and culture to US and international audiences, thus disseminating cultural forms that had earlier been considered “primitive” and elevated them to the category of “high art.” In 1945, she opened the *Katherine Dunham School of Dance and Theatre* near Times Square in New York City. A year later the school was renamed the *Katherine Dunham School of Arts and Research*, and it included the Dunham School of Dance and Theatre, the Departments of Cultural Studies, and the Institute for Caribbean Research.<sup>80</sup>

Secondly, her dance technique as combination of African-based movement, ballet, and modern dance, and her liberation of the knees and the pelvis fundamentally changed American dance.<sup>81</sup> Through her national recognition as a concert artist and through the establishment of her school and her technique, Dunham brought to audiences, other artists, and students a collection of movement possibilities and the culture that bears them that had not been seen or used before in modern dance.

Lastly, her anthropological researches and fieldworks in the Caribbean also contributed to the elevation of the “New Negro” by articulating the shared diaspora identity of blacks in the New World. Dunham’s mixture of cultural references is a very insightful portrayal of both

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<sup>79</sup> Hannah Durkin. “Dance Anthropology and the Impact of 1930s Haiti on Kathrine Dunham’s Scientific and Artistic Consciousness”. *International Journal of Francophone Studies*. Vol. 14. Numbers 1 and 2. 2011. 124-125.

<sup>80</sup> Perpener, 154

<sup>81</sup> Aschenbrenner, Joyce. *Katherine Dunham: Dancing a Life*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2002. Print. 1.

Caribbean society of the 1930s and the contemporary racial awakening of blacks in the United States and in the diaspora. This time Caribbean culture was entering a second phase of creolization through emigration on the one hand and cross-cultural communication among intellectuals associated with the *Harlem Renaissance*, and *Négritude* movements I discussed in detail in the first chapter of this thesis. Some of these intellectuals would share their coming into consciousness in the salons of Paris or meeting halls of New York City and also through presenting the findings of their extensive anthropological research in search for the common folk elements, the roots of the shared past and tradition of Blacks in Africa, and the African diaspora.

Dunham did not only incorporate elements and dance styles from the Caribbean but many pieces from her repertory, for example *Le Jazz Hot* presented black American social dances like “Cake Walk” or the “Juba”. Her dances represented the theatrical journey from the tropical islands of the West Indies to blacks-inhabited urban areas in the United States thereby the cultural connections along with ongoing processes of black culture. Her realistic representation of socio-racial issues in the United States resulted in little to no government funding, however she was able to keep her company going by performing in elegant nightclubs, her troupe appeared on Broadway, had many international tours, and between 1941 and 1959 she appeared in many Hollywood movies such as *Stormy Weather*, *Carnival of Rhythm*, *Casbah* and *Mambo*, as well as in foreign films.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Free to Dance

This thesis concerns itself with the ethnographic aspect of Katherine Dunham`s dance making and one of her pieces that is based on the findings of her Caribbean fieldtrip, a result of Dunham`s “research-to-performance” method, that resituates a traditional black cultural (Afro-Caribbean) heritage in a New World setting, the American concert dance stage.

### **Research-to-performance method, fieldwork**

Dunham was one of the first anthropologists who studied dance forms in their cultural environment. To study dance forms in relation to the society in which they came to life, a researcher might have to look for cultures where dance has a central role. Both in the United States and abroad scholars and artists turned their attention to folklore, indigenous and rural cultures.

The University of Chicago, where Dunham studied anthropology and taught that much of black culture in modern America had begun in Africa, supported field research in the Boasian tradition, which made it possible for Dunham to immerse herself in her chosen area, the West Indies.<sup>83</sup> In 1935, Dunham was awarded travel fellowships from the Julius Rosenwald and Guggenheim foundations to conduct ethnographic study of the culture and dance forms of the Caribbean, especially as manifested in the Vodoun of Haiti.

Due to the relatively untouched terrain of a rich cultural fusion, and the idea that the African sources of African-American culture could be pursued in the Caribbean, the region became a magnet in the 1930s and 1940s for other scholars and ethnographers such as Alan

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<sup>83</sup> Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham: Dancing a Life*, 43.

Lomax, anthropologist Melville Herskovits, who claimed the much of African culture survived in the New World, author and dancer Zora Neale Hurston, and several other researchers, including George Simpson and Harold Courlander.<sup>84</sup> Dunham's research was part of the process of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when ethnology gradually replaced both colonial historiography and alleged scientific theories of race that prevailed in the colonies and in France during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ethnologists became present day historians whose studies in West Africa and in the Caribbean reflected "memories" of the shared past of blacks,<sup>85</sup> the "*milieux de mémoire*", the real natural environment of memory survived in the Caribbean. I borrowed Pierre Nora's concepts of "*milieux de mémoire*" and "*lieux de mémoire*"<sup>86</sup>, because this notion excellently describes Dunham's intention and actual activity to recreate the common memory of blacks, she found alive in the Caribbean, on the American modern dance stage thereby creating a new setting to it.

Dunham found the Caribbean an excellent source of "*milieux de mémoire*," and on the basis of the African rhythms and movement survived throughout the New World she claimed the existence of "cultural resonances" between Africans and African Americans, which she explains like this: "The African Negro is habituated to a certain kind of musical technique in which rhythm is basic. In America and the Islands we harbor an appreciation of this rhythm...

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<sup>84</sup> Whiter, Norman E., Jr., and John F. Szwed, eds. *Afro-American Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives*. New York: Free, 1970. 4-5

<sup>85</sup> Clark, 321.

<sup>86</sup> Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire". In *Representations*, No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory. (Spring, 1989), pp. 7-24.

Read online: [http://www.timeandspace.lviv.ua/files/session/Nora\\_105.pdf](http://www.timeandspace.lviv.ua/files/session/Nora_105.pdf)

but this appreciation is not based on any physical difference, nor is it psychological; we are sociologically conditioned by our constant contact with it.”<sup>87</sup>

Between 1937 and 1945, Dunham established a “research-to-performance” method to recreate the memory of regional dances she found in Caribbean cultures. This method established a unique interpretation of anthropological fieldwork. VèVè A. Clark analyzed Dunham’s methodology in her “Performing the Memory of Difference in Afro- Caribbean Dance: Katherine Dunham’s Choreography, 1938-87” and argues, “when the dance steps, music, and other cultural forms were transformed for stage representations, they became ‘*lieux de mémoire*’ (sites of memory), reworkings and restatements of historical danced events whose memory Dunham had also preserved in writing and on film.”<sup>88</sup> The actual stages on which Dunham’s researched choreographies were performed were turned into physical venues (“*lieux de mémoire*”) for the Caribbean cultures’ own danced memory of their blended African, European, and Native American experiences. Dunham chose the Caribbean as “*milieux de mémoire*” to rediscover what is “truly Negro,” the fundamental nature of African-derived dances that remained in the Americas. She went to Trinidad, Martinique, Jamaica, and Haiti where African descendants retained and re-invented important dance material that carried historical memory of the Americas. Dunham’s dance theater became the means by which Afro-Caribbean cultures could be remembranced through her choreographies and through the act of performing. This process was a remaking of memory through performance.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Dunham in Aschenbrenner, 48.

<sup>88</sup> Clark, 323.

<sup>89</sup> Clark, 324.

## Thesis statement

Dunham's pieces and technique negotiate black cultural identity in its "transnationalist" sense, the idea that Paul Gilroy much later in the 1990s established in his book the *Black Atlantic*. I will argue that Dunham's choreographies that are based on the material she collected in the Caribbean articulates "transnationalism" of black identity, that focuses not only on African roots and cultural continuities, but also on the routes and cross-cultural exchanges that are equally constitutive of the black diaspora.<sup>90</sup> Katherine Dunham's dances, that are based on the findings of her Caribbean field work, among them the first, *L'Ag'Ya*, her seminal work in particular, articulate this shared diverse African American identity, that is the result of a paradigm shift of representations of blacks from "primitive" to "diaspora".

According to the historian Vévé Clark in "Performing the Memory of Difference in Afro-Caribbean Dance", there are a number of reasons why *L'Ag'Ya*, this Caribbean movement based choreography, is of special significance in the Dunham repertoire. It was her first full-length ballet based on material gathered from her trip to the Caribbean. It was also Dunham's favorite work, which remained in her repertoire for two decades and became a centerpiece for revues such as *Tropical Revue* (1944), *Bal Nègre* (1946), and *Caribbean Rhapsody* (1950).<sup>91</sup>

I will analyze her 1938 ballet, *L'Ag'Ya* utilizing a three-tier research tool adopted from Erwin Panofsky. Throughout my analysis I looked at four excerpts of the piece, *L'Ag'ya*: the *Pas De Deux*, the *Mazouk*, the *Charm Dance*, and the *Ag'ya*. These pieces are accessible online through the Library of Congress website in the Katherine Dunham Collection. So are the

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<sup>90</sup> Tina Campt, The Crowded Space of Diaspora: Intercultural Address and the Tensions of Diasporic Relation, *Radical History Review* (83) (2002): 94-11.

<sup>91</sup> Clark, 326.

fieldwork recordings Dunham took throughout the Caribbean in 1936 and 1937. The ballet and all the fieldwork videos were recorded without sound that made me concentrate on the movement patterns and the dance forms by themselves, which was originally my intention with this project since relating dance movements to their accompanying music would require a more extensive research in Caribbean musical forms, and this project does not intend to undertake such a study. However, we have to acknowledge that music in Afro-Caribbean cultural traditions has had a central role.

On the first level, I will break this piece down to specific movement elements, and I will observe who dance, clothing, tempo, instruments, and any other category that contribute to the appearance of the dance. This stage, as I said, is only observation. I will only “perceive” these components and isolate them from any added cultural connotation. I will differentiate between the factual and the expressional meaning. The factual meaning is apprehended by simply identifying certain visible forms and the change in their relations with certain actions or events. These forms and events naturally produce certain reactions or feelings within the viewer. These psychological differences lead to a further meaning which Panofsky calls expressional. Expressional differs from the factual meaning in that it is apprehended not by simple identification, but by “empathy.” To understand it, we need certain sensitivity, but this sensitivity is still part of our practical experience, that is, of our every-day familiarity with objects and events.<sup>92</sup>

To begin my study, I looked at the clips of the ballet to observe the aspects related to the “appearance” of the dance. I sought answers for the following questions: Who are dancing,

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<sup>92</sup> Panofsky, 27.

women or men? How many people are dancing? Is it a solo, a couple or a group dance? How is the dance organized? If it is a group dance, do the performers form a certain geometrical shape, such as lines, single or two facing each other, a square or a circle? What is the spatial orientation of the dance, for example center to the stage? How do the dancers relate to each other; do they hold hands, make eye contact? What is the pace of the dance? How are the dancers dressed? Do they wear every day clothes or formal apparel? If there are more dancers, are they dressed the same way? How is the stage set, designed? Do the dancers use any equipment when they dance?

The secondary or “iconographical” interpretation, however, will connect the artistic motifs or groups of motifs identified generically at the first stage analysis with traditional themes and concepts. This is when I will try to find the symbolism of certain patterns including the influence of various styles of dance, which I can relate to the first level of the analysis. I will look at how certain movement patterns are in relation with either social or concert dance forms of both the United States and the Caribbean. I am also interested in how certain performance trends were present in this dance piece.

Finally, the third level or “iconological” interpretation examines the dance as an expression of cultural values. I consider the social and cultural contents of this piece. Knowing cultural history and background of different social groups and their distinctions is crucial for understanding the dance expression. On the third level, I look at this piece as evidence of a historical and cultural environment, also what the inheritance is for contemporary American society and culture. The components obtained as part of the deconstruction of the visual

analysis (forms, motifs, stories) reconnect, as incorporated into the extensive notion of context.<sup>93</sup>

### **Introducing L'Ag'Ya**

The ballet, *L'Ag'Ya*, named after the combat dance of Martinique. It is set in the 18<sup>th</sup> century fishing village of Vauclin. It tells the story of a young woman, Loulous, her lover, Alcide, and another man, Julot, whom Loulous rejected. Julot, full of jealousy, visits the King of the Zombies to get the "cambois," a powerful love charm, to paralyze Alcide and to make Loulous dance the majumba, a sacred dance of possession. Towards the end of her possessed dance, Julot is about to embrace her when Alcide breaks free from the spell and separates them. The villagers encourage the two men to settle their dispute by the combative dance, the ag'ya. In the fight Julot finally kills Alcide, and the piece ends with Loulous mourning over her lover's body.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Michael Ann Holly. *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*. Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1984. 41.

<sup>94</sup> Perpener, 141.

## First tier analysis

The *Pas De Deux*<sup>95</sup> scene is a beautiful couple dance of a black male dancer—in all the scenes I was looking at the dancers, African Americans - and Dunham herself. The dancers show up on the opposite ends of the stage then approach each other slowly to unite and start their dance together in the middle of the stage. Their couple dance gains pace, and it becomes upbeat. They do not touch at the beginning, although they stay close to each other. Throughout the less than one minute and a half excerpt, they separate and reunite again and again.

Dunham glides across the stage, shakes her bare shoulders, swishes her hips and flicks her skirt to revealing her thighs. They dance in close physical proximity by often touching each other and putting their arms around one another, they also face or look at each other in the eye almost all over the performance. However, they dance in separation as well with movements that are not always synchronized. There are upright movements with lifts and stretched limbs and skips on pointe, as well as fast-paced swaying and swinging elements with bent knees and fluid hip and spine movement, isolated foot movement, and also rolling on the floor

As regards the costumes, both dancers wear casual clothes. Dunham's short-sleeved, white dress ends above her knees and is folded up on one side. Both of them wear a bandana around their waist; the man is wearing one on the head too, whereas Dunham has a headgear on. The male dancer's shirt is opened so as it reveals his chest. They both dance barefoot, and the only equipment they use is a small drum they every now and then hand over to each other. The dancers use the whole stage; the performance is not positioned in the middle of the stage. All things considered about their proximity, touches, movement elements, gestures, postures

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<sup>95</sup> <http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200003809>

and clothing observing it on the expressional level we can establish that the dance has an intimate and sexual overtone.

*Mazouk*<sup>96</sup> is a highly organized group dance by five to six couples with very little to no space for improvisation. The dance starts off with five couples dancing in two concentric circles, with women moving by wide waltz-like steps clockwise in the outer circle and men skipping with their arms behind their back making no progress into the inner circle. After one round the women stop and their partners lift them to the middle of the circle. In the next scene, the circle dismisses to give way to a couple performance of Dunham and her partner center stage, while the rest of the dancers still in couples improvise. The concentric circles then resume, and the scene ends with the five original couples dancing in a circle, often with making progress in both directions either individually by switching positions or as couples.

The main geometrical shape the couples form is a circle, which is either concentric when men and women in their separate circles facing each other and dancing without holding hands or couples together with their arms around each other proceeding the same direction in the circle. Their movements include high balletic skips, lifts, and, deep and flexible spine bends, as well as vigorous sways of hips and shoulders, quick tiny steps forward and back, and fast spinning.

This couple dance negotiates intimate feelings, whereas the group formation and dance suggests some sort of a celebration, their moves reflect high mood, excitement that is the expressional meaning of this dance piece.

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<sup>96</sup> <http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200003810>

The dancers are all dressed up. The women wear white, long ruffled skirts/dresses, which they very often involve in their moves by lifting them up slightly or waving, and long pointy headgear (Dunham's is slightly different from the rest of the women), and they are also accessorized with a small fan. The men have white puffed-sleeved shirts on with knee-long, dark pants, bandanas on their waist, and soft shoes.

*Charm dance*<sup>97</sup> is the scene of the mesmerized heroine dancing in hypnosis. It is a solo dance of Dunham, although she is surrounded by the musicians, other female dancers, and a male dancer on the stage. She moves around the stage by fluid steps with bent knees, swaying, spinning, and moving her shoulders and chest vigorously while taking off layers of her white ruffled dress. Her facial expressions, often dancing with eyes closed, and as her movements are getting faster and faster all suggest her losing self-control and taken by some unknown power.

In *Ag'Ya*<sup>98</sup>, surrounded by the rest of the company dressed in formal looking outfits, two bare-chested male dancers with headbands and white knee-long pants face each other in the center of the stage with half bent knees, legs wide apart bouncing and weaving, kicking, boxing, and wrestling with vigorous arm and leg gestures along with acrobatic elements such as somersaults. On the expressional level of observation, these actions suggest that they are imitating a fight, which makes the whole scene seem extremely energetic, and the audience can easily sense the tension even without the drums that elevate the pressure. As opposed to the *Mazouk*, this form and movement style provides great space for improvisation which the dancers are apparently aware of and often use movements and space creatively.

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<sup>97</sup> <http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200003835>

<sup>98</sup> <http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200003836>

## Second tier analysis

Dance motifs from the Caribbean in *L'Ag'ya* showcase Dunham's intention to contextualize the dances of different traditions in her own choreography. Of the Caribbean dances, they include the *mazouk*, *beguine*, and *L'Ag'Ya* from Martinique. It is both related to the French *savate* and the Brazilian *capoeira*. As Clark says in her essay, "Katherine Dunham: Method Dancing or Memory of Difference", "the memory of forgotten dances from the Caribbean appears cross-culturally in *L'Ag'Ya* through sequences combining ballet, modern, and Caribbean dances."<sup>99</sup> Dunham mixed the already synthesized Caribbean dance forms (creole) with ballet and modern dance.

The circle dance of the *Mazouk* scene, for instance, is based on the *Creole Mazurka* originating from the Polish mazurka, which French colonists brought to the islands of the West Indies. Dunham used this dance to create the festival or ball in the scene. In contrast to this European-derived dance, which is basically a waltz, she used the "smooth bump and grind of the Martinician *béguine*"—an erotic dance of fecundity<sup>100</sup> in Dunham—and partner's solo in the middle of the scene.

The dancer's state what looks as hypnosis or "possession" in *Charm Dance* can be explained by the phenomenon of Vodoun dance. Vodoun cosmology is the amalgam of spiritual beliefs and practices that evolved in the West Indies, particularly in Haiti, from the forced fusion of many tribes that gave rise to the tradition of rhythms, dance, and healing and communal rites.

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<sup>99</sup> Clark, 330.

<sup>100</sup> Perpener, 141.

Two men facing each other in boxing position with half-bent knees, legs wide apart with balance on the hips is the basic movement of *Ag'Ya* dance in the scene bearing the same title. According to Dunham it is a competitive exhibition of strength and it may have its origin in the Nigerian wrestling match, which celebrated in the spring festival to the Earth Mother.<sup>101</sup>

Apart from entire dance styles, such as combat dance or *mazouk* in *L'Ag'Ya*, there are elements of other Caribbean dance traditions, as well. A flexible back and relaxed knees are characteristics of the Caribbean dance, *yonvalou*.<sup>102</sup> It is a religious dance that honors *Damballa*, the snake-god and accordingly the movement concept is the same as the snake's, undulating movements of the torso, the fluid motions move throughout the spine. The tempo of the movement is usually set by the drummers. Another great instance of Caribbean dance that occurs in this piece is *zépaules*, which is a perfect example of isolation and that became a major element of the Dunham technique. *Zépaules* uses rapid shoulder isolation with the shoulders moving in unison pushing downward. The movement of the feet accompanying the body is the same rapid tempo as the shoulders.<sup>103</sup>

Besides the Caribbean dance styles and movement patterns that are synthesis of European and African dance forms, Dunham built elements of ballet and modern dance into *L'Ag'Ya*. There are upright balletic movements with lifts and stretched limbs and skips on pointe along with powerful pelvic contractions and demanding floor work of modern dance techniques.

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<sup>101</sup> Dunham, Katherine. "L'Ag'Ya of Martinique". *Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham*. Eds. Vévé A. Clark, Sara E. Johnson. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2005. 201.

<sup>102</sup> Aschenbrenner, *The Dunham Technique Seminars*, 485.

<sup>103</sup> Aschenbrenner, *The Dunham Technique Seminars*, 486.

Dr. Albirda Rose, Director of the Dunham Technique Certification Board, notes that because Dunham studied ballet before beginning her exploration of Afro-Caribbean dance forms, her pieces and her technique contain elements of ballet, in terms of barre work and placement. “We work with the same length and line as in ballet,” Rose says. “We work with turnout.”<sup>104</sup> One of her dancers, Lavinia Williams, says that Dunham included a full ballet barre in her classes and encouraged her company members to study with ballet teachers such as Karel Shook in New York and Mme. Sprenskaya in Chicago. Williams notated barre exercises that were very different from the strictly classical exercises. Though these incorporated standard classical movements such as *tendus*, *developpés*, and *ronde de jambes*, they also stressed a non-balletic use of the body that emphasized Afro-Caribbean movements—pelvic contractions, hip isolations, and undulating back movements.<sup>105</sup>

Floor work in Dunham technique is based on the basic modern dance technique’s floor work, combined with breathing and flexing. From the descriptions of the modern dance exercises Lavinia Williams lists, it appears that they were Graham-based with “contraction and release,” and its percussive and angular movements that were quite different from the light, flowing designs of ballet.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> [http://www.dancespirit.com/2010/10/All\\_You\\_Need\\_to\\_Know\\_About\\_Dunham\\_Technique/#sthash.AoLKwJZN.dpuf](http://www.dancespirit.com/2010/10/All_You_Need_to_Know_About_Dunham_Technique/#sthash.AoLKwJZN.dpuf)

<sup>105</sup> Aschenbrenner, Joyce, (with notations of the Dunham Method and Technique by Lavinia Williams), *Katherine Dunham: Reflections on the Social and Political Contexts of Afro-American Dance*. 39.

<sup>106</sup> Williams in Joyce Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham: Reflections on the Social and Political Contexts of Afro-American Dance*, 123.

### Third tier analysis

African American cross-cultural identity is presented in Dunham's piece, *L'Ag'ya*, through a sequence combining ballet, modern dance and Caribbean dance. *L'Ag'ya* was Dunham's "Ballet des Antilles," the title she gave to the work in an early summary. She consolidated the various dance styles and performance techniques of her training and research efforts in an attempt to represent her vision of diaspora culture and the complexity of blackness that goes beyond nationalities.<sup>107</sup>

Artistic representations of Caribbean culture, like Dunham's choreographies, have shown how a culture transported from Africa onto American soil combined with European socio-cultural forms permeated into its new living environment and has proven capable of retaining its cohesive force among black people through the survival and vitality of its traditions and beliefs.<sup>108</sup>

Katherine Dunham as an African American researcher, dancer, and choreographer felt a personal connection to the culture of the diaspora and believed that its movement and traditions were relevant to American audiences that represent this cultural diversity of European, African and diasporic forms thus making it "American."

Dunham's acceptance into Vodoun by her Haitian hosts also suggests a perception that her ancestry connected to them. Dunham notes the special attention that she receives as a perceived descendent of 'Nan Guinée' whose cultural heritage has been forgotten and lost, but

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<sup>107</sup> Clark, 330-331.

<sup>108</sup> Lévi-Strauss, Claude. "Foreword to Katherine Dunham's *Dances of Haiti*". *Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham*. Eds. Vévé A. Clark, Sara E. Johnson. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2005. 382-383.

which can be regained through rituals and through contact with the ancestors via Vodoun. Dunham's immersion in Vodoun and her incorporation of its dance rituals in her pieces like *L'Ag'Ya* and *Shango* was therefore at least in part made possible by her hosts' understanding that she would communicate its spiritual and cultural significance to African Americans. Her participation in dance rituals, therefore, was imperative in this exchange.<sup>109</sup>

*Shango*, another choreography based on Caribbean material, for example, according to Dunham is a ballet based on the superstitions connected with an African god, a ritual which is based on West African religious practices in combination with Catholic elements (the word Shango means Saint John the Baptist). A particular "spirit" is invited which on "possessing" the body directs its movements. Dunham's choreography for *Shango*, such as *L'Ag'Ya*, also included elements from Caribbean cultures: the *Yoruba* cult of Trinidad, the *Rada-Dahomey* cult of Haiti, and *Santería* of Cuba. After a stylized introduction of dancing the work led into a ceremony of sacrifice to Shango, thunder god of the Yoruba people. While a white rooster is sacrificed (Shango likes poultry), the boy who kills it is suddenly possessed by *Damballa*, the snake god, and becomes a serpent, whose movement vocabulary is based on the *Damballa dance* discussed earlier. The priest controls him by ritual recitations and averts evil from the villagers. The boy stands with arms outstretched on the altar and is worshiped as a god is one of the most dramatic moments of the piece, he then faints and carried into the jungle. The dancing resumes, and five men on a giant drum carry the boy back onto the stage.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Durkin, 130.

<sup>110</sup> Notes on Shango – Library of Congress

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihis/html/dunham/dunham-notes-shango.html>  
and the actual choreography: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5ktKuTQ4Uc>

Presentations of this kind, Dunham claims, “not only help to explain the African people to us but they help to establish a bond of sympathy because the fears, aspirations, loves and reverences of the Africans are also common to us. Anything that will help explain one group of human beings to another will tend to dissipate the misunderstandings, fears and prejudices of one group of people for another.”<sup>111</sup>

Joan Dayan reads Vodoun religion and its dance rituals as a response to the horrors of slavery rather than as an expression of African survivals and suggests that “for the possessed, that dance is not a loss of identity but rather the surest way back to the self, to an identity lost, submerged, and denigrated. In the horrors of the New World, the ability to know the god in oneself meant survival, which is nothing other than the ability to keep expressing the self, and acceding, if only temporarily, to a form of power that defies compromise.”<sup>112</sup>

In 1937, Dunham received a nine-month assignment with the Federal Writers Project, where she organized several writers and anthropologists to undertake research showing the relationship between the stress of oppression and the growth of religious cults in urban environments. Her findings in this project further testified the cultural correspondence between people of the African diaspora. She recognized that similar to the Caribbean the ideology was Christian, but the patterns of religious behavior were purely African in many religious groups she studied<sup>113</sup>:

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<sup>111</sup> Waddington, Peter. “Katherine Dunham Raises Primitive Dance Art to New Heights of Sophistication.” *Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham*. Eds. Vève A. Clark, Sara E. Johnson. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2005. 303.

<sup>112</sup> Dayan, Joan. *Haiti, History and Gods*. Los Angeles: University of California, 1995. 74.

<sup>113</sup> Perpener, 140.

The rhythmic percussion-type handclapping and foot-stamping, the jumping and leaping, the 'Conversion' or 'confession' in unknown tongues which is a form of possession or ecstasy (included, in some cases, by a circle of 'saints' or 'angels' closing upon the person in rhythmic motion of dance), the frequent self-hypnosis by motor-activity of the shoulders—all the African forms are present.<sup>114</sup>

It was Dunham's intention to bring the cultural congruence she had observed to the attention of America in the form of her artistic choreographies. However, she had to face a particularly difficult problem in preparing her ethnologically based dance material for the stage:

In making use of field training to choreograph for my group, I found persistently recurring in the back of my mind in some form or another "function". ... The cultural and psychological framework, the "why" became increasingly important. ... As in the primitive community certain movement patterns ... were always related to certain functions, so in the modern theater there would be a correlation between a dance movement and the function of the dance within the theater framework. And certainly a broad and general knowledge of cultures and cultural patterns can be advantageously brought to bear upon the problems of relating form and function in the modern theater.<sup>115</sup>

She intended to combine African based movement vocabulary with the choreographic plan of the American modern school.

In his essay, "Ethnic and Modern Dance", Gerald E. Myers suggests the reasons why Dunham's work has not been seriously considered in terms of its contribution to the modern dance tradition in the late 1930s and 1940s. He says that her work had often been wrongly categorized as "ethnic" dance—dance closely associated with heritage of specific cultural groups—which had been separated from the nonconformist, rebellious modern dance

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<sup>114</sup> Dunham, Katherine. "The Negro Dance". *Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham*. Eds. Vève A. Clark, Sara E. Johnson. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2005. 220.

<sup>115</sup> Dunham in Perpener, 149.

tradition, with its characteristic rejection of theatrical dance precedents<sup>116</sup>. However, as Myers says, Dunham's work was not simply a "re-creation of dances whose origins lie in the past." It was an original contribution that expressed "in contemporary additions and subtractions the artist's rebellious respect for the inspiration that tradition supplies," thus making Dunham's contributions fall into the modern dance tradition. Her innovation lies in speaking "with and through tradition but with and through original voice." No matter how entrenched is an ethnic heritage, the modern dance choreographers adopt steps and gestures, rhythms and sounds, plots and themes from an inspiring heritage and incorporates them into their own movement vocabulary. This practice does not only reflect a cultural heritage but bears the artist's personal accent.<sup>117</sup>

Dunham states that black Americans were in a different situation than peoples of the Caribbean Speaking which affected the mechanisms through which black cultural elements are drawn in mainstream American culture. Historically, their links to African heritage had been less strong than in the more isolated cultures of the West Indies, however the cultural elements that did remain were much likely to be absorbed into the mainstream of American culture.<sup>118</sup> She states, "The inevitable assimilation of the Negro and his cultural traditions into American culture as such has given African tradition a place in a large cultural body which it enjoys nowhere else... The traditions are strengthened and re-emerge with new vigor."<sup>119</sup> Dunham herself strengthened these traditions by merging them into the modern dance

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<sup>116</sup> Perpener, 156.

<sup>117</sup> Myers, Gerald E., ed. *The Black Tradition in American Modern Dance*. Durham: American Dance Festival, 1988. 24-25.

<sup>118</sup> Perpener, 156.

<sup>119</sup> Dunham, *The Negro Dance*, 225.

tradition, also through her recognition as a concert artist, the establishment of her school, and the development of the Dunham technique.

Besides the dissemination of Afro-Caribbean culture into mainstream American culture, Dunham's dances also played a powerful role in the social and artistic change that occurred when black dancing started to gain new meanings as signs of diaspora. According to Susan Manning in "Watching Dunham's Dances 1937-1945", Dunham's pieces narrated the Black Atlantic through dance. Spectators learned to read the performance of diaspora in part through the experience of cross-viewing—"the possibility for spectators to catch glimpses of perspectives conditioned by subjectivities and social identities that differed from their own"—since through the war years Dunham's performances drew audiences that were nine-tenths white and one-tenth black.<sup>120</sup> The flyer of the 1937 *Negro Dance Evening* for which Dunham collaborated among others Edna Guy and Asadata Dafora clearly announced the artists' intent to narrate the Black Atlantic:

The program commences in Africa. This is to make immediately apparent to the audience the roots of the dancing in the Americas today. Then the scene goes across the ocean in slave ships to South and North America, and we see what becomes of the African in feast dances, war, religious and love dances. As generation succeeds generation of black folks, the memory of a free life based on hunting and farming becomes more and more vague. But the black builders of the New World must sing and dance in order to forget the awful misery of their new life which seems to hold no future. The third part of the program brings us to the present day. There is no more chattel slavery, but life is still difficult... And then comes the contribution of the contemporary Negro artist.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Manning, Susan. "Watching Dunham's Dances, 1937-1945." *Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham*. Eds. Vève A. Clark, Sara E. Johnson. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2005. 257.

<sup>121</sup> Publicity Flyer, "Negro Dance Evening", March 7<sup>th</sup> 1937 in Manning, *Watching Dunham's Dances, 1937-1945*, 258.

In accordance with the description of the flyer, the evening opened with Dafora's African choreographies, followed by West Indian dances choreographed by Dunham and ended with the part titled "Modern Trends" that included pieces of social protest. White critics then, however, failed to acknowledge the evening's prominent role in the paradigm shift of representation of blacks from "primitive" to "diaspora" which is evident from one reviewer's critique. Even though he recognized the intercultural fusion in Dunham's dances, he preferred Dafora's dances to Dunham's because "primitive as they were, they contained a natural design which sprang truly from the people's imagination".<sup>122</sup>

Although, Dunham's dances in the 1930s were not acknowledged as representations of the "New Negro," she understood and utilized African diaspora as a formation that goes beyond cultures and nationalities. She found the links in movement style between African descendant peoples in the Americas; moreover, as I earlier stated at the end of my previous chapter, Dunham could mobilize the memories of traditions, the shared experiences of the common past of black people in Africa and in the Americas, and revealed their cohesive, liberating and identity forming power.

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<sup>122</sup> Manning, *Watching Dunham's Dances, 1937-1945*, 259.

## CONCLUSION

Dancer-anthropologist Katherine Dunham was one of the first researchers who studied the West Indian dance traditions and their socio-cultural contexts. Through her fieldwork and dancer background she could transform specific Afro-Caribbean dances into modern ballets on American and international concert stages, thus creating a dynamic confluence between anthropology and dance. According to her dance was largely ignored as a valuable socio-cultural text by scholars in academia, and she knew that she was breaking new ground.<sup>123</sup>

Through her presence in the dance practices in the Caribbean and her communal activity, Dunham confronts the intrinsic modernity of black societies in the West Indies, which her professors did not recognize. Her observations were supposed to be read as evidence of an African past, rather than as dynamic cultural practices with ongoing social function and meaning. Pioneering anthropologists such as Herskovits and Boas who studied African and Afro-Caribbean dance practices were more interested in the survivalist element of Caribbean cultures than in reading them as ongoing processes or as psychological responses to present social conditions. They analyzed cultural practices in historical terms and thus tended to support a misleading concept of cultural purity and disregard the Black Atlantic as a key site of

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<sup>123</sup> Selections from the Katherine Dunham collection. Video clip #33. Library of Congress <http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200003840>

modernity, while Dunham sought to understand dance practices of the black new world in their contemporary contexts.<sup>124</sup>

According to Véné A. Clark, by recreating her researched dances as “repositories of memory” for the theatrical stage, Dunham developed a “memory of difference” in the re-contextualization process. Dunham’s research-to-performance method placed many Caribbean dances in dialogue with each other, and simultaneously the Katherine Dunham Dance Company re-interpreted the Caribbean dances, bringing their own Afro-diasporic perspectives to the process. In this way, performed memory lives through the obvious differences in interpretation of that lived history.<sup>125</sup> With ballets like *L’Ag’ya*, not only did she mobilize the diasporic culture but confronted Western audiences with peasant cultures and thus brought Western “hegemonic” cultures into communication with subaltern societies.

Since Postmodernism, the era of cultural hybrids that emerge from mixing the categories of “high” and “low” cultures, and different cultural forms, transdisciplinary discourses have become necessary in analyzing art, also that the field of Humanities and Cultural Studies stress interdisciplinarity, my choice of a visual art method to read dance material, as experimental research methodology seems to be appropriate. Even so, if we consider that paintings and dance are both aesthetic expressions of perceptions, emotions, and experiences through a creative representation and they share certain expressive elements, such as theme, motif, structure or tone. Moreover, they both engage us to sense and experience

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<sup>124</sup> Durkin, 128-129.

<sup>125</sup> Clark, 320-337

what is in front of us might make us cultural studies researchers use methods across these fields.

My choice of methodology is based on the assumption that our visual cognition is instantaneous we can take in a painting or a sculpture at a glance, so is the way we perceive dance. Although dance is a time-based art, choreography can present a series of tableau-like moments we can perceive at a glance. However, these moments communicate both through themselves and through their relation to each other; and there is a need to find ways of recognizing and understanding complex interactions between the different levels of this discourse.<sup>126</sup> The three-tiered analysis I utilized throughout my study turned out to be useful in identifying certain elements that on the second level could be brought into communication with movement types and dance styles/practices. The third level of analysis reconnects these themes and movement practices and interpret them as evidence of the social-historical environment they were created in.

Although throughout my analysis I worked with visual sources, video recordings of Dunham's piece, I looked at *L'Ag'ya* as a choreography, the act of designing, the materialization of a personal vision of its creator, rather than a single live performance. This approach made Panofsky's method of analysis usable and valid, because a choreography, which can be notated on paper, is made up of a series of instantly perceivable tableau-like moments, just like paintings. This approach allows us to break the art piece down to single elements, which communicate both through their individual presence in the choreography and through the

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<sup>126</sup> Burt, p. 3-5.

relations to one another and transmits both the creator's personal vision and the social-historical environment in which it was created.

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