

Thank You Katherine Dunham  
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Back home from college during the summers, I danced Dunham.

I attended classes at the Performing Arts Training Center in East St. Louis, Illinois. At the time I thought the classes were a good physical workout, however now I see that they were much more than that. The classes were lessons on how to move through the world as a human being “confident in the knowledge of her own worth.” The classes were lessons on how aspects of different cultures could come together to make something beautiful. They were lessons on the beauty and the wisdom of blackness..

All too often the world sees blackness and expects black pain. It looks at Africa and sees starving children, disease ravaged people, villages and traditions under threat from HIV and AIDS. It sees civil war, genocide, rape and political corruption. It looks at Haiti and sees violence, poverty and political instability. It looks at East St. Louis and sees an economically disadvantaged city living on stubborn hope. Too often the world expects black intellectuals and artists to echo Fats Waller’s lament: “what did I do to be so black and blue?” Or it expects to be entertained by a one dimensional song and dance, comedy or athletic performance.

However, in these classes, the rhythms remembered a reality, a philosophy, a spirituality, a psychology before and re/membered beyond the headline news. There was no simplistic entertainment taught. Live drummers drumming on congas took us to Haiti, and Africa and the south Pacific and Europe. They took us to the best of all of humanity. They took us to the understanding that not one people, political-economy or religion owns all the wisdom, all the

beauty, all the joy or all the pain. The heart and soul of the Dunham technique is to bring together elements from African traditional dance, European ballet, American modern dance, and Haitian Vodou into a creative whole, a new exciting thing.

The technique taught us to think of ourselves as creatures of heaven and earth. The spine is a cord connecting body and soul to the sky. It pulls us up. The spine is also a rod, a soul-steel determination connecting us to the earth. It grounds us. The spine is a snake, sensual and wise, undulating to the rhythms of river water, lakes, streams, marshes. Primordial life. One beat a cord, the next beat a rod, the next beat a snake. Each becomes the other at a different moment in time and space. Because of Katherine Dunham, my body understood difference and deconstruction before I read Jacques Derrida.

And then there were our teachers. Dunham herself never taught the classes I took, but members of her company did. There was the older teacher who remembered the glory days of the world tours. There were the younger teachers dancing in the contemporary company. They represented a continuity between past, present, and the potential that we students represented. One day, after our class, Dunham herself came to teach a master class to the company. I hung around to watch. She was an elder, carrying more weight than an active dancer, yet she moved with an extraordinary grace and purpose that seemed to radiate from her whole body and out through her fingertips. It was a grace and purpose that transcended dance and insisted upon justice for the wretched of the earth. In the early nineties she fasted in protest of the treatment of Haitian boat people.

I still remember the lessons the dance teachers taught. They taught: "Don't be too stylized with the hand position. Let your body go with the rhythm. Move through the space with

confidence. Don't over think."

I remember these lessons in a variety of contexts. I still do the isolation exercises in airports and on long airplane flights. The technique has influenced my scholarly method. Katherine Dunham was a dancer and a scholar. Her scholarship informed her dancing. I am a scholar whose scholarship is informed by the dance. When I bring a diversity of ideas from a diversity of traditions and perspectives together in supplementary relationship to recontextualize thinking on such topics as religion, ethics and social justice, I am dancing Dunham.

Thank you Katherine Dunham. May you dance joyfully with the ancestors through eternity.