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## Reinventing Art and Ethnography: Hurston, Dunham and Deren in Haiti

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# REINVENTING ART AND ETHNOGRAPHY: HURSTON, DUNHAM, AND DEREN IN HAITI

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*Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.*  
Zora Neale Hurston (1942: 143)

While 'modernism' has been defined by some as an age based on the Enlightenment pursuit of the purity of isolated disciplines (with post-modernism framed conversely as a corrective era of interdisciplinarity), this essay considers the work of three figures practicing decisively interdisciplinary research in the very heyday of the modern era. Indeed Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, and Maya Deren were all to practice both the fine arts and the social sciences, frequently at the very same time. Specifically, I wish to discuss the ways in which, they used their 'dual citizenship' as an asset, relying precisely upon their identities as artists while pursuing ethnographic field research in Haiti in the 1930s and 40s. I will additionally contend, however, that this was hardly an academic exercise. Rather it was one deeply entangled in the urgent politics of race in the Americas.

## HAITI

With this in mind, it is necessary, at least briefly, to consider the central role of Haiti, which arguably occupied a special place in the writings of both Hurston and Dunham, each of whom traveled extensively throughout the Caribbean. (Deren, by contrast, would travel *only* to Haiti.) In the 1930s and 40s, Haiti was indeed a hermeneutic battleground, as well as the site of a recent occupation by the US Marines<sup>1</sup> and a tourist industry marketing exoticism and 'black magic' to white American adventure seekers. At the same time, however, it was to become central to concerted efforts to value the richness of black cultures on their own terms. As I will illustrate, the latter position was at the very least implicitly espoused by Hurston, Dunham, and Deren. Indeed the

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<sup>1</sup>The US sent troops into Haiti in 1915 with the declared intent of preventing German influence and preserving US interests. The troops remained until 1934 when newly elected Roosevelt withdrew them under increasing international disapproval. The occupation was characterized by numerous rebellions, some of which were violently suppressed.



three artist-ethnographers might all be said to have 'aimed', in the words of Katherine Dunham, 'at sociological as well as artistic targets' (in Waddington, 1948: 303).

Interestingly, what both the voyeuristic tourists and the more earnest sympathizers seem to have shared was a perception of Haiti as a kind of cultural bridge between the United States and Africa. For the tourists, this meant essentially that the same stereotypes applied: Haiti was an exotic, jungle land of mysterious dark-skinned inhabitants, somehow living outside of time and practicing mysterious, primitive—even 'savage'—customs. Those advocating a more nuanced and sympathetic point of view similarly stressed the tangibility of the relationship between Haitian and African cultural forms, but they did so, at least in part, to provide evidence for the resiliency of African traditions. Indeed within the US, African cultural forms were widely assumed to have been dismissed as inferior even by African peoples once they had been exposed to the 'superiority' of European cultural forms. Serious evidence for African 'survivals' in the Americas, some maintained, could be used to refute the myth that the 'Negro is a man without a past' (Herskovits, 1942: 2).<sup>2</sup> This point of view was advocated explicitly by Melville Herskovits, one of Dunham's two mentors, who wrote in 1937 what has been called 'probably the first sympathetic treatment of Vodou ever written by an outsider' (Cosentino, 1995: 129). Indeed, his *Life in a Haitian Valley* stressed a more sophisticated approach to cultural analysis, one recognizing the prevalence of syncretism, in what Herskovits would describe as the 'cultural mosaic' of Haiti, a living fusion of the cultural traditions of both Africa and Europe (1937: 249).

Indeed Voudoun,<sup>3</sup> the religious practice performed most visibly by the Haitian peasant class, evolved as a highly sophisticated and undeniably syncretic endeavor, as African slaves in Haiti, under Spanish and later French rule, developed strategies for continuing to observe African religious traditions by recognizing and exploiting analogies between African deities and what might loosely be called the 'pantheon' of Catholic Saints. For example, in an act of creative consumption, the Catholic Mater Dolorosa, commonly pictured in popular lithographs surrounded by jewel-encrusted hearts, widely comes to be seen as one manifestation of the *loa*, or deity, that is also Erzulie Frieda, the highly feminine and refined figure associated with love and heartache within Voudoun. Similarly, the serpent *loa* Damballah is frequently seen in the image of St. Patrick, who stands at the edge of the sea encircled by snakes at his feet, though he may also be recognized in the image of Moses. Such strategies were arguably rendered near impossible by Protestant slaveholders in the US, who honored no saints and tolerated nothing outside of a strict monotheism, ambiguities of the Holy Trinity notwithstanding. Dunham herself has written:

My personal observation has been that the French, on the whole, were less concerned with dominating culturally their colonial peoples than the English, and consequently the integrity of African culture

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<sup>2</sup>Herskovits's text is an extended rebuttal to the argument that nothing of African custom, language, etc. survived contact with Europeans in the 'New World'.

<sup>3</sup>It may be worth noting that there is little—if any—consensus on the spelling of Haitian terms. *Voudoun* may be alternately spelled *Vaudoun*, *Voudou*, etc., and in the US, it may also be written as *Voodoo*, though the term as it is popularly used in this country has little to do with Haitian tradition and practice. Similarly *loa* might also be spelled *lwa*; *Danto* as *Dantor*, *Damballah* as *Danballah*, etc.

and the sanctity of African religious tradition persists to a greater extent in, for example, Haiti and Martinique than in Jamaica or Trinidad (1941a: 217–18).

Nevertheless, the Catholic Church in Haiti has proven loathe to accept these correspondences between its own holy figures and the *loa*, who have been vigorously dismissed as pagan. Hurston, Dunham, and Deren were all to find, however, that its efforts to suppress Voudoun had met with little success. Maya Deren has commented on this point, astutely taking into account the political imperatives of Voudoun's syncretic nature:

Against the serviteur who sincerely insists that he believes in the trinity, who baptizes his children and his drums, places the saints on his private altar, and makes lavish use of the sign of the cross, the Catholic Church has been, in a sense, helpless. It is in the peculiar position of trying to convert the already converted. A religious system that opposed Catholicism would have been overcome. But in the face of such tolerance, the violent efforts to eradicate Voudoun have remained largely ineffective (1953: 57).

Though some Haitian *loa*, specifically many of the 'red' Petro strain, have been identified as original to the New World and even more specifically to the Haitian Revolution of 1804, most—if not all—of the *loa* associated with 'blue' Rada practice are understood to be 'spirits identified with "Ginen"—Guinea, or mythic Africa, whose roots can be traced back to Dahomey' (Cosentino, 1995: 58).<sup>4</sup> Herskovits, as previously suggested, furthermore stressed the survival of 'Africanisms' throughout daily life in rural Haiti, in everything ranging from food preparation to styles of singing. Though he was also to stress both the co-mingling of European influences in Haitian life, and the presence of African traditions within the United States, Haiti nevertheless seemed for many to hold a special prestige as a means for understanding confluences of 'race', politics, and culture. Herskovits would furthermore claim that in Haiti:

clues may be available not only for a clearer understanding of the processes of culture as a whole, but also to point the way toward a more fundamental approach to the immediate problems of race as they are found in the New World, thus at once furthering the ends of scientific understanding and a more satisfactory social adjustment (1937: 305).

Perhaps, however, one would be remiss not to note in this context a simple pragmatic consideration, that the mere physical proximity of Haiti to the US made it geographically and financially more accessible to artists and graduate students than travel to Africa itself. Indeed Hurston's first Guggenheim application for travel to Africa was denied, and of the three women who are the subject of this paper, only Katherine Dunham would ever reach the shores of Africa.

### ZORA NEALE HURSTON

Though the particulars of Haiti cannot be denied, the central question at hand is how and to what degree the fine arts backgrounds of Deren, Dunham, and Hurston in-

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<sup>4</sup>Rada and Petro are the two forms of Voudoun most frequently cited by Hurston, Dunham, and Deren. Other 'nations' within Voudoun include Congo, Nago, Mahí, Ghédé, and Ibo. Both specific names, including *Congo* and *Ibo*, and the description of related practices as *nations* indicate a clear consciousness of religious practices brought to Haiti from diverse African cultures.



fluenced and enabled their pursuit of an anthropological social science. Of the three, Zora Neale Hurston was perhaps the least specific in addressing this point overtly, though few would contest the point that her literary skills manifest themselves quite assertively in her published research. Indeed both *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse* are replete with narrative devices including metaphor, shifting subjectivities, and a poetically charged language exceeding that of simple description. Here, for example, is a passage from *Tell My Horse*, which acknowledges her limits as an anthropologist while reinforcing the distinctness of her voice as a literary narrator:

During the process with the bull I heard the most beautiful song that I heard in all Haiti. The air was exquisite and I promised myself to keep it in mind. The sound of the words stayed with me long enough to write them down, but to my great regret the tune that I intended to bring home in my mouth to Harry T. Burleigh escaped me like the angels out of the Devil's mouth (1938: 172).

Already a published fiction writer with an Associate's Degree from Howard University and a growing reputation within the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston began formal studies in anthropology as an undergraduate at Barnard College in 1925. Her mentor there was Franz Boas, whose importance for both Hurston and the field in general must briefly be considered.

Boas is frequently credited as the founder of American academic anthropology, and he was indeed mentor, as Gertrude Stein might say to 'everybody who was anybody' within the American field at the time. This would include the likes of Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Melville Herskovits. Though his legacy is not without controversy, Boas adopted what was, for its time, a 'progressive' methodology, conceiving of anthropology as a vehicle for establishing the relativity of cultural forms and values.<sup>5</sup> Such relativizing arguments, in his view, functioned to defy the ethnocentric and racist absolutism that measured non-European cultures by European standards only to find them lacking, in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

In his preface to *Anthropology and Modern Life* (1932), for example, Boas declared:

In writing the present book I desired to show that some of the most firmly rooted opinions of our times appear from a wider point of view as prejudices, and that a knowledge of anthropology enables us to look with greater freedom at the problems confronting our civilization (7).

The list of beliefs to which he consequently identified himself as 'diametrically opposed' included, 'The identity of race and nation, the superiority of the White race, the identification of absolute ethics with our modern code of behavior, [and] the resistance to fundamental criticism of our civilization' (7). According to this view, then, an-

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<sup>5</sup>Both Boas and the notion of cultural relativism have indeed become the objects of critical scrutiny. Arguments against Boas's integrity include accusations of 'scientizing race', performing 'salvage' anthropology, romanticizing 'pure' cultures, and fostering condescending relationships with his students, including Hurston. Herbert S. Lewis provides an overview of such criticisms—all of which he roundly rejects—in 'The Passion of Franz Boas' published as the Afterword to the recent edition of Boas's *Anthropology and Modern Life*.

Cultural relativism, meanwhile, has faced attacks on two fronts, both reactionary (that it is tantamount to moral relativism) and post-colonial (that it ultimately validates iniquitous distributions of wealth and power). Clifford Geertz acknowledged the complexities of the debate in adopting the term 'anti-anti-relativism' in his 'Distinguished Lecture to the Institute for Advanced Study' in 1984.

thropology was a tool for demonstrating the falsehood of racial stereotypes, and as such it was an instrument of both human knowledge and cultural criticism:

Anthropology is often considered a collection of curious facts, telling about the peculiar appearance of exotic people and describing their strange customs and beliefs. It is looked upon as an entertaining diversion, apparently without any bearing upon the conduct of civilized communities. This opinion is mistaken (11).

Under the tutelage of Boas, Hurston returned to her former home in rural Florida in 1927 to collect 'folk tales', or 'lies', as she often called them, on what was to become the first of several fieldwork trips. Later trips would take her to New Orleans and the Bahamas, where she collected songs and the 'folklore' of the black populations. In New Orleans, she would additionally study 'hoodoo' rites, training as an initiate. As an anthropologist in training who was herself also a published fiction writer, her research into community narratives clearly served both her interests, and indeed throughout the late 20s and early 30s, she continued to publish both research and fiction, including the novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and the anthology of southern tales *Mules and Men* (1935). 'Folklore' provided sources of narrative inspiration within the context of a living tradition, while her developing research credentials would enable her work to penetrate multiple contexts of reception, both popular and academic.

In 1935, she enrolled at Columbia University with the intent of pursuing a doctorate in anthropology, again with 'Papa Franz.' Though she never completed her degree, and by some accounts rarely attended classes, Hurston received a Guggenheim grant to travel to the West Indies for additional research in March of 1936. After spending six months in Jamaica, she traveled to Haiti in September of the same year. It was here that she wrote her now celebrated novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, reputedly in seven weeks, and it was here too that she would spend a year, only briefly interrupted, gathering material on the study of Voodoo. Soon after returning to the US, Hurston assembled her findings into the book *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, published in 1938.

That *Tell My Horse* represented a fusion, or what Herskovits might call a 'mosaic', of literature and social science was immediately remarked upon in several period reviews. C. G. Woodson, for example, wrote that, 'The work is entertaining and at the same time one of value which scholars must take into consideration in the study of the Negro in the Western Hemisphere' (1939: 146). Similarly, Harold Courlander, himself both a novelist and an anthropologist, noted in his review Hurston's efforts to mediate between romantic and analytic points of view:

[William] Seabrook exposed [Voodoo] in sensational, wishful terms. Dr. Herskovitz exposed in its coldest mathematical terms. Miss Hurston tries both. To an extent she is successful, for Voodoo in Haiti is both warmer, possessed of more poetry, than Dr. Herskovitz realized, and less wild and orgiastic than Seabrook intimated (1938: 142).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>The reference to Seabrook is to his 1929 text *The Magic Island*, which is widely held to be sensationalistic at best and at worst unapologetically racist, particularly in its inclusion of expressionistic caricatures by Alexander King.



Indeed, stylistically Herskovitz's *Life in a Haitian Valley* can read at times like a series of lists (African influences in food, African influences in clothing, African influences in architecture, etc.), and one finds also that the somewhat conspicuous use of the passive tense masks Herskovitz's role as subjective observer. *Tell My Horse*, by contrast, vacillates between memoir and reportage. Readers indeed encounter multiple voices ranging from the omnipotent narrator, to the opinionated first person witness, to the simple vehicle through which other 'characters' tell their own stories. This is arguably only appropriate to the subject, for the story of Haiti is indeed a story of many traditions. Dozens of distinctive African cultures, the indigenous island culture, and European Catholicism, have all left their mark in language and culture. Hurston's skill as a narrator, however, renders a portrait of Haiti at once coherent and diverse.

*Tell My Horse* is perhaps somewhat less explicit than other writings in articulating Hurston's desire to '[point] Negro expression back towards the saner ground of our own unbelievable originality' (1942: 285). Nevertheless, the text on the whole reads as sympathetically authored. Perhaps the most notable exception to this rule is to be found in her discussion of the role of women, an issue only touched upon by Dunham and Deren. In the chapter of *Tell My Horse* entitled 'Women in the Caribbean,' Hurston wrote:

If you [a woman] try to talk sense, they look at you right pitifully as if to say, 'What a pity! That mouth that was made to supply some man (and why not me) with kisses, is spoiling itself asking stupidities about banana production and wages!' It's not that they try to put you in your place, no. They consider that you never had any. If they think about it at all, they think that they are removing you from MAN's place and then granting you the privilege of receiving his caresses and otherwise ministering to his comfort when he has time to give you or such matters (57–58).

Additional comments acknowledge, however, that gender roles may be complicated by issues of race and class: 'Of course all women are inferior to all men by God and law down there. But if a woman is wealthy, of good family and mulatto, she can overcome some of her drawbacks' (58). In light of these scathing criticisms, however, it is interesting to note that Hurston makes little point of addressing her own gender in the body of her text. In this way she casts herself as an observer of gender inequity rather than a victim of it.

In another passage of note, however, Hurston seems to romanticize the US occupation of Haiti. In an undeniably poetic but politically curious passage, she wrote:

A prophet could have foretold [peace] was to come to [the Haitian people] from another land and another people utterly unlike the Haitian people in any respect. The prophet might have said, 'Your freedom from strife and your peace shall come when these symbols shall appear. There shall come a voice in the night. A new and bloody river shall pour from a man-made rock in your chief city. Then shall be a cry from the heart of Haiti—a great cry, a crescendo cry. There shall be survivors, and they shall have a look and a message. There shall be a Day and the Day shall mother a Howl, and the Howl shall be remembered in Haiti forever and nations beyond the borders shall hear it and stir. The shall appear a Plume against the sky. It shall be a black plume against the sky which shall give fright to many at its coming, but it shall bring peace to Haiti' (65–66).

Elaborating upon the meaning of these portentous symbols, the last is revealed to be the 'smoke from the funnels of U.S.S. *Washington* ... a black plume with a white hope' (72). Courlander was quick to chastise her for these remarks:

she could not have read the late Dr. James Weldon Johnson's articles which appeared in the *Nation* during the summer of 1920. The hardships inflicted by the occupation upon all but the merchants of Haiti have not been forgotten to this day (141).

Indeed, Dunham, too, would later comment that, 'The Americans occupied Haiti with very little consideration for the customs, desires, and habits of the people themselves, and with no wish, until the harm was done, to find out what the national character was like' (1969: 24). Hurston's passage on the contrary seems optimistic to a fault. While it is preceded by remarks on 'white oppression' and the 'spilt blood and tears [of] blacks,' her desire to find closure in the U.S.S. Washington might best be described as misplaced.

Some have furthermore found her presentation of Haitian life 'mythologiz [ing]' (Hurbon, 1995: 190), and perhaps there is indeed an undue emphasis on aspects of Voodoo that were already sensationalized in American eyes, such as 'zombies' and the 'Secte Rouge.' Though she makes a point of stressing that zombies are *not*, as American myth would have it, the living dead, and she furthermore emphasizes the popular disapproval of the Secte Rouge, the vividness of her own descriptions might well outweigh the rationality of her cautionary advice.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that her text also employed Boasian techniques of relativization to pointedly illustrate that Americans who would judge the people and culture of Haiti might well be living in glass houses. Of conversations she held with 'a very intelligent Hatian young woman,' she has written:

We had gotten to the place where neither of us lied to each other about our respective countries. I freely admitted gangsters, corrupt political machines, race prejudice and lynchings. She as frankly deplored bad politics, overemphasized class distinctions, lack of public schools and transportation. We neither of us apologized for Voodoo. We both acknowledged it among us, but both of us saw it as a religion no more venal, no more impractical than any other (1938: 203-04).

### KATHERINE DUNHAM

A number of striking parallels mark the career trajectories of Hurston and Katherine Dunham, though the latter would earn her artistic reputation in the field of dance. Like Hurston, Dunham had already shown a marked artistic tendency at the time that she began her studies in anthropology, and also, like Hurston, she grew up as an African-American living under the realities of Jim Crow. Indeed her memoirs are replete with references to the challenges facing an integrated touring group, including segregated theaters and hotels that refused them even in northern cities. Dunham, however, clearly viewed both the arts and anthropology, the much disparaged 'handmaiden of colonialism,' as tools for combating racism. Indeed, she has stated explicitly, 'There is no doubt but what we are doing is creating a better understanding of, and sympathy for, the American Negro. From the beginning, I aimed at sociological as well as artistic targets' (in Waddington, 1948: 303).

Dunham's career in anthropology began in 1928 when she enrolled as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, where she studied with Robert Redfield, who 'not only pioneered ... new [documentary] methods ... but involved himself in the



fight for equal opportunity of education in the US for blacks and other minorities' (Marcus and Fisher, 1986: 186n1). While Dunham took courses, she continued to train, to perform publicly, and to teach dance on the side, sometimes struggling to divide her time between two full-time pursuits. So it was that when she traveled to Haiti as a graduate student in 1935, she bore a calling card labeled 'anthropology and the dance.' Both Redfield and Herskovits at Northwestern encouraged her to forestall the decision of choosing between a career in dance and one in anthropology specifically because they believed that the two fields could so readily enhance one another. Indeed, they insisted that her dance skills and background would give her a unique perspective and point of entry into the cultures she would engage. Dunham biographer Joyce Aschenbrenner, has even written that at a fête held in Dunham's honor prior to her departure, 'Boas expressed his regret that he had not been a dancer while studying Northwest Coast Indians, and he predicted that she could discover cultural knowledge that was inaccessible to nondancers' (50).

Dunham's later memoir, *Island Possessed* (1969), reveals that indeed her very particular background ameliorated some of the travails of gaining acceptance as an observer in a foreign land. She has said, simply enough, 'I explained that I was there to learn dances because I like to dance; to a people for whom dancing was an integral, vital expression of daily living this explanation seemed natural enough' (xxiii). Thus, she established her own credibility as a transparently interested person who liked to dance, rather than as a detached and culturally parasitic scientist, studying humans as one might study insects.

Dunham has also spoken of enhancing her credibility through what she has called, 'racial affinity.' On this point, she has written, 'Many liberties were permitted me because of my unofficial position as emissary of the lost black peoples from [Africa]' (1969: 15), meaning specifically those who were taken to the United States, where ancestral traditions were more dramatically curtailed. In this case, too, it was the confession of a personal interest that helped her to become an effective participant-observer, gaining the trust of a self-conscious people already weary—and wary—of tourists, marines, and journalists from the mainland.

Dunham's writings on the subject of Haitian culture included a Master's Thesis called 'Dances of Haiti,' eventually published in English, Spanish, and French. The latter edition included a preface by Claude Levi-Strauss, in which he affirmed the benefits of her unique credentials:

An unquestionable originality marks Katherine Dunham's book ... Her penetration into the life and local customs of the country was doubly facilitated by her common origin with the inhabitants and by her theoretical and practical knowledge of aspects of dance ... In addition to these somewhat personal advantages, her book has the great merit of reintegrating the social act of dance, which serves as her central theme, within a total complex. Katherine Dunham proposed not only to study a ritual but also to define the role of dance in the life of a society (xvi).

As I have already indicated, Dunham's other book on Haiti is her memoir, which situates her accrued knowledge of Haiti within a framework both narrative and subjective. Aschenbrenner, for one, has celebrated such an approach, as one anticipating more recent critiques of the presumptions of neutrality and objectivity within traditional anthropology. Though she reports that *Island Possessed* was criticized as unsci-

entific at the time of its publication, Aschenbrenner has defended the liberties taken by Dunham as follows:

A radical critique of traditional approaches depicts ethnography as a dialectical process, involving the people the anthropologist is studying in the creation of a statement about a culture. The contextual information Dunham provided is valuable to those who aspire to understand another culture because she openly portrayed her problems and tactics in relation to people. We see that she related to the people upon whose cooperation she depended in their terms, not by imposing her own conditions, and she exposed her own vulnerabilities in writing about her encounters. In this, she differed from her predecessors and contemporaries, who recorded such matters in private journals, not for publication (86).

Indeed, the first-person travelogue format of William Seabrook's 1929 *Magic Island* might also be said to have provided 'contextual information' revealing of his subjectivity and the dynamics of his relationships, but Dunham's text is marked by a greater sensitivity and a degree of humility lacking in Seabrook's account. Where Seabrook cast himself as a hero, the intrepid explorer, Dunham more openly acknowledged the complicated politics of her situation as a middle-class American: 'It was with letters from Melville Herskovits, head of the Department of Anthropology at Northwestern University, that I *invaded* the Caribbean [emphasis added]' (1969: 3). Her text also addresses her situation as a woman and as a relatively fair-skinned African American:

Of my kind I was a first—a lone young woman easy to place in the clean-cut American dichotomy of color, harder to place in the complexity of Caribbean color classifications; a mulatto when occasion called for, an in-between, or 'griffon' actually, I suppose; most of the time an unplaceable (4).

A seemingly nondescript listing of the contents of her luggage, furthermore includes reference to 'unworn lace underclothing', 'sanitary napkins', and 'hair ointment for the year', interspersed with the books, the camera, and the typewriter (10). This is the luggage of an *embodied* intellectual.<sup>7</sup>

Dunham's collected choreographic works drew their inspiration from a broad range of Caribbean and non-Caribbean cultural sources. Among the works specific to Haitian history and culture are *Christophe*, described as a 'dance drama of the first kingdom of Haiti' with a 'text of spoken lines being down by Langston Hughes' (Dunham, 1941–42: 289), and *Haitian Roadside*, a dance of 'Market people and wayside travelers' (1946: 292). Such works clearly situate the dance within larger frameworks of symbolic meaning, referencing in these instances the nation's political history and the social structuring of everyday life.

Dunham's contributions to the field of dance also involved the development of a pedagogical practice that would come to be known simply as Dunham Technique. According to Albirida Rose, central to her technique was a process of 'Progressions in Cultural Context', in which:

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<sup>7</sup>Other than this, however, Dunham, too, makes little point of the role that her gender might have played in determining her acceptance or lack thereof, except to note that as an outsider, she was given opportunities to engage in activities normally reserved for men, such as handling the sacred drums.



rhythm forms are used . . . that reflect a cultural heritage of a specific group . . . These rhythms usually have specific dance steps that accompany them, and these steps usually reflect the basic concept of that dance or why that dance is performed (492).

Though Dunham Technique is widely described as borrowing syncretically from ballet, jazz, and modern dance, prominent elements associated specifically with African-based dance include a technique of articulating the joints through processes of rhythmic isolations and the establishment of 'a new vocabulary of movement for the lower body.' As Millicent Hodson has summarized, 'The Dunham Technique makes available to the "modern schools" of dance the liberation of knees and pelvis that is fundamental to African dance' (498). This, in combination with her emphasis on 'Progressions in Cultural Context', established what Hodson would term 'a new level of literacy in dance' (499).

Like Hurston, Dunham never completed her terminal degree in anthropology, but she can hardly be said to have abandoned anthropology for dance. Indeed, she continued to lecture internationally on her research, even as she developed a reputation for being the 'hottest thing on Broadway.' As she would declare in 1941,

Now that I look back over the long period of sometimes alternating, sometimes simultaneous interest in both subjects, it seems inevitable that they should have eventually fused completely (1941b: 214).

Though she considered the dances themselves to be anthropological of their very nature, in their stress of social context and function, she also, on occasion, combined the work of her two fields more explicitly. In 1942, for example, she presented 'A Lecture-Demonstration of the Anthropological Approach to Dance and the Practical Application of This Approach to the Theater' at UCLA (See Dunham, 1942: 508–13). This event combined a lecture, both autobiographical and theoretical, and a performance in which members of her troupe tangibly demonstrated the movements described.

In another noteworthy program reflecting the fusion of her two concerns, the Dunham Experimental Group of the Dunham School of Dance and Theater performed at Howard University in 1947. The program, entitled *Caribbean Backgrounds*, grouped dances and songs in thematic categories, such as 'social dances', 'ceremonial dances' (consisting of the Voudoun dances of Yonvalou and Zépales), and 'work songs' (See Dunham 1947: 299–301). The program thus emphasized the role of function and context as a generator of (relative) meaning. Though the opening note stressed the search for 'authentic information concerning the dances and rituals of the people brought to the Western Hemisphere as slaves', the 'social dance' portion consisted of a comparison of a 'Traditional European mazurka', and 'The *mazouk*', a 'West Indian form of the mazurka brought to the Islands by the French.' Also integrated into the event was a screening of a film by Dunham illustrating both *La savante*, 'a French form of fighting with the feet' and *L'ag'ya*, 'the Martinique version.' This was followed by the performance of Dunham's own choreographed ballet of the *L'ag'ya*, thereby providing an immediate opportunity for audience comparison.

One of the more frequent criticisms of her work, however, is that she 'stylized' the dance forms. Though not referring directly to Dunham, Yvonne Daniel, for example,

has written that 'Haitian' dance in the US 'seemed rather theatrical' (6). Maya Deren would posit a related criticism:

It should be obvious that a 'Haitian dance' which strains a trained, professional dancer and leaves him or her winded after a ten-minute performance could not be as 'authentic' as the program notes for such theatrical presentations of 'ethnic dance' would lead one to believe (1953: 229n).

Dunham herself was perhaps not as vocal as one might expect in defending against such charges, but Vèvè Clark has suggested that

Criticism of this kind is irrelevant, because it fails to understand that Caribbean dance has been stylized and transformed throughout history. More importantly, stylization has been a tradition in American modern dance since its inception (1994: 324).

Indeed, one might further stress that such stylization merely acknowledges the reality of the artifice, that Dunham was both an anthropologist *and* an artist, and that her hybridized works were ultimately choreographed compositions for the stage performed by trained dancers. Even as such, however, they were deeply informed by the larger concerns that had motivated Dunham's joint pursuit: that dance as a human activity bears a history, a politic, and a language rendered meaningful by social and cultural context.

For its significance as a unique form of cultural history written with the body, dance had indeed been relatively overlooked by anthropologists coming from a western tradition with comparatively little emphasis on dance, particularly within a religious context, and thus many such anthropologists simply found themselves unqualified to consider it deeply. Aschenbrenner has even described an incident in which Herskovits referred to the content of one of Dunham's films, depicting the Koromantee, as 'that picture where men are hopping about very fast' (63). He failed in this instance to even recognize that he was looking at dance. Reiterating both the intellectual and the political necessity of her own interdisciplinarity, Dunham wrote in 1963:

Disturbed in my early years of social anthropology at the lack of emphasis on the complex of the dance in primitive society, I proposed that my scholarship from the Rosenwald and Rockefeller foundations be directed toward an effort at repairing this lack. Also involved was an element of rebellion against the often condescending attitudes toward not only Negro performing arts but those of all deprived, minority, 'exotic' folk (1963: 522).<sup>8</sup>

### MAYA DEREN

One year before she traveled to Haiti, in 1946, Maya Deren published the essay titled, 'An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film', which included her remarks on the relationship between art and science. Like Habermas (and Max Weber before him), she addressed the limits of disciplinary professionalism: 'Modern specialization has discouraged the idea of the whole man' (1946: Appendix 6). She, too, rooted this situ-

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<sup>8</sup> Into the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term *primitive* was still widely used within anthropological discourses to refer to what might now be more likely to be termed *non-industrial*. The context with which Dunham uses the term clearly indicates a lack of derogatory implications, however inevitable they may seem today.



ation in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century western philosophy, stressing that both art and science have evolved as efforts to redefine humankind's place in a world in which God is no longer the center. She has written, for example, that the 'task of creating forms as dynamic as the relationships in natural phenomena, is the central problem of both the scientist and the artist' (Appendix 12). Though her text seems to privilege the 'natural' sciences, Deren's work would soon come to explore the problems of representation shared by the artist and the social scientist.

Relative to Hurston and Dunham, Deren would even come to make the most explicit appeal for the merits of the artist practicing ethnography. Perhaps, this may be due in part to the fact that her own professional credentials were seemingly less substantial, as she was the only one of the three who did not major in anthropology at the undergraduate or graduate level. (Her BA from Syracuse University was in journalism and political science, and her MA from Smith was in English Literature.) Though Deren's book on Haitian Voudoun arguably conforms most conscientiously to scholarly conventions, including copious endnotes and a more comprehensive approach to systematizing the material she had gathered, in its introduction, Deren freely acknowledged her lack of formal training in anthropology. Indeed, she never claimed to have gone to Haiti as anything other than an artist, though the experience would clearly prove to be a transformative one, as I will discuss below.

Deren's interest in Voudoun seems to have been initially inspired by Dunham, to whom Deren served as a secretary for a period of nine months beginning in the spring of 1941. Six years later, when Deren received a Guggenheim grant to travel to Haiti in 1947, it was to make an art film that would essentially be a kind of visual essay on the aesthetics of Voudoun-related dance. Though she remains best known for the experimental short film 'Meshes of the Afternoon', at least two of her other previous short films, notably 'A Study in Choreography for Camera and Ritual in Transfigured Time', would already have established her as candidate well qualified for the role of dance cinematographer. And indeed she arrived in Haiti with, in her own words, 'a carefully conceived plan for a film in which Haitian dance, as purely a dance form, would be combined (in montage principle) with various non-Haitian elements' (1953: 5). These 'non-Haitian elements' were to include segments of Balinese ritual and dance and various games played by Western children.<sup>9</sup>

Though indeed she shot 20,000 feet of film toward this end, Deren never completed the proposed film. What she produced instead, and published in 1953, was a meticulous tome entitled *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, which was preceded by a foreword by Joseph Campbell. In her own words, 'this book was written not because I had so intended but in spite of my intentions.' Further elaborating, she has claimed:

I had begun as an artist, as one who would manipulate reality into a work of art in the image of my creative imagery; I end by recording, as humbly and accurately as I can, the logic of a reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity, and to abandon my manipulations (1953: 5–6).

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<sup>9</sup>Sullivan provides a detailed discussion of Deren's original design of the project, including her consultations with Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson.

In other words, she realized the necessity of the relationship between form, content, and context, and that a process of decontextualizing the forms of the dances would render them incoherent. Indeed Deren herself has claimed quite directly that she 'realized that the dance could not be considered independently of the mythology' (7). This most decisively sets her apart from the image of the 'primitivizing' modernist, who stands accused of pillaging the styles of African and Oceanic cultures in decontextualizing gestures tantamount to cultural colonialism.

Though she would abandon the project of her 'art' film, Deren would nevertheless insist that artistic training may in fact be an asset in the practice of ethnography:

I also discovered that my background as an artist and the initial approach to the culture which my film project induced, served to illuminate areas of Voudoun mythology with which the standard anthropological procedure had not concerned itself, or if so, from a different position entirely (6-7).

Her argument to this effect goes on to summarize the importance of subtle variances of form as providing important cues to understanding the underlying concepts motivating such forms, as in, for example, the difference between an apple painted by Raphael and one painted by Cézanne. She has claimed that her own sensitivity to visual form enabled her to distinguish intuitively between conceptually different types of dances, those of *rada* and those of *petro* Voudoun:

Indeed, my interpretations of the rituals, based on my immediate experience and without the clues (and misguidances) of historical and esoteric research, proved so consistently correct that the Haitians began to believe that I had gone through varying degrees of initiation (9).

All three of the artists discussed in this paper have indicated at some point a sensitivity to the problem of gaining acceptance within a culture as an outsider, and as Americans in particular. Deren, however, was unlike both Hurston and Dunham in that she could claim no shared ancestral ties with Africa, something which Dunham in particular has stressed as an asset in her own experience. Somewhat boldly perhaps, Deren makes an alternate claim to kinship with the Haitian peasants and practitioners of Voudoun, so often the study of American anthropologists and the curiosity of American tourists. In her own words:

in a modern industrial culture, the artists constitute, in fact, an 'ethnic group', subject to the full 'native' treatment. We too are exhibited as touristic curiosities on Monday, extolled as culture on Tuesday, denounced as immoral and unsanitary on Wednesday, reinstated for scientific study Thursday, feasted for some obscurely stylish reason Friday, forgotten Saturday, revisited as picturesque Sunday (7-8).

She has furthermore added:

My own ordeal as an 'artist-native' in an industrial culture made it impossible for me to be guilty of similar effronteries toward the Haitian peasants. It is a sad commentary upon the usual visitor to Haiti that this discretion seemed, to the Haitians, so unique that they early formed the conviction that I was not a foreigner at all, but a prodigal native daughter finally returned . . . This affinity—resulting from a situation peculiar to an artist as citizen of an industrial culture—is a basis of communication which is not comprehended in any catalogue of professional field methods (8).



Deren extended her argument for the efficacy of the artist practicing anthropology with a claim to the effect that her own lack of methodological training afforded her an open-mindedness somewhat beyond that of the student trained in western anthropology. Of course the 'proof' of her thesis to the effect that artistic training is an adequate substitute for anthropological training is largely anecdotal: it seemed to her to be true of her own experience. But her remarks do tantalizingly suggest that there is indeed more than one path to knowledge.

## CONCLUSIONS

In a topic with so many facets, there are inevitably multiple conclusions. One, of course, is that the culture of Haitian Voudoun occupied a privileged place in the discourse of these artist-ethnographers. Perhaps the boldness of Voudoun's syncretic processes rendered it both politically and artistically inspiring by providing a model of culture as open-ended. This may well have resonated with the three artist-ethnographers who constructed their own identities in a highly syncretic fashion, piecing together 'cultures' including those of academia, fine art, rural Florida, the Harlem Renaissance, Broadway, Port-au-Prince, and rural Haiti. Dunham, for example, an African-American woman from the urban Midwest who practiced both dance and anthropology, and who designed presentations of Caribbean dance for American audiences has claimed that, 'Acculturation seemed such a natural phenomenon to me' (in Clark, 1978: 228).

A second conclusion has to do with the importance of this work within the context of the social history of the United States. Christine Obbo, for example, has characterized anthropology as both an 'international division of labor in which natives provide data and Westerners analyze it', and as 'a radical discipline ... the only discipline that can competently study the "other" humanity not covered by the Western discourses' (297). Indeed it is a discipline with the power both to undermine and to rearticulate and reinforce power dynamics, perhaps even at the same time. Nevertheless, I would like to return to a point made earlier that Hurston, Dunham, and Deren, like Boas and Herskovits before them, viewed the work of the anthropologist as politically relevant and even quite urgent. Indeed, the politics of race in the United States in the 1930s and 40s—an era in which segregation was legal and lynchings were all too common—meant that the stakes in the project of simply taking black cultures seriously were high, higher than those of transgressing the boundaries of academic disciplines. Perhaps more so than Boas and Herskovits, Hurston and Dunham in particular may have even reached non-academic audiences, but they managed to do so with the professional credibility of scholars.

A third conclusion, however, pertains to the issue of interdisciplinary praxis and its implications for the study of modernism. James Clifford has described Hurston as a 'casualty of professionalization', who was 'marginalized... as too subjective, literary, or folkloric' (353n16). Recent decades, of course, have seen a largely positive reevaluation of her work, beginning with Alice Walker's symbolic discovery of her unmarked grave in 1973. Indeed contemporary scholars have looked more favorably upon her ethnographic work as well as her fiction, though these accounts have tended to favor *Mules and Men* and other documents related to her fieldwork in the US (see Herndández and Rony: 203–11).

The shift in the ability of Hurston's audiences to appreciate her work as anthropology seems to be due in part in the situation well summarized by Simon Ottenberg:

The fact is that cultural relativism has been replaced by textual relativism. We have moved from ideas of the relativism of the cultures of the people we study to concepts of the relativity of interpretation and interpreter. This is possible because we have moved from employing scientific metaphors, particularly those relating to organic qualities (organic solidarity, society as a metaphor for a living animal) to using humanistic metaphors drawn largely from literature, literary criticism, history, and drama (symbols, the text, performance) (156).

Indeed, Ishmael Reed wrote in the preface to the 1990 reissue of *Tell My Horse*, 'With its mixture of techniques and genres, this book, originally published in 1938, is bound to be the postmodernist book of the nineties' (xv). But why must such work now be conceptualized as pre-post-modern? Why can it not rather contribute to an expanded concept of modernism? These practices are against the grain of modernism only if we accept narrowly construed definitions of modernism as a decontextualizing pursuit of pure form. If we imagine instead a pluralistic modernism—and why wouldn't we?—then we might find Hurston, Dunham, and Deren at the center of a discussion of an anthropological modernism, one which might be construed as a fusion of politics, the arts, and the social sciences.

Ultimately, then, this essay is not a manifesto imploring artists to practice ethnography and anthropologists to take up the arts. Rather it is to issue a challenge to rash dichotomies pitting the postmodern against the modern, a dichotomy perpetuated in part by the unsustainable notion that interdisciplinarity is what makes postmodernism special. Indeed this point is quite eloquently refuted by the evidence of three anthropologists, who were on the side a novelist, a dancer, and a filmmaker.

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