



**FIGURE 1.1**

*Dunham at Mocambo in Tokyo. Katherine Dunham Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.*

# Katherine Dunham

*Recovering an Anthropological Legacy,  
Choreographing Ethnographic Futures*

## Introduction

Elizabeth Chin

Anthropologists, by the nature of our work, tend to live rather extraordinary lives, and yet even among an illustrious group of the intrepid and adventurous, Katherine Dunham stands out for the sheer range and scope of her achievements. One of the first African Americans to obtain a degree in anthropology, she conducted groundbreaking fieldwork in Jamaica and Haiti in the early 1930s and wrote several books that ought to be considered classics of early ethnography, including *Journey to Accompong* (1946a), *Island Possessed* (1969), and *Las Danzas de Haiti* (1947). Decades before Margaret Mead was publishing for popular audiences in *Redbook*, Dunham was writing ethnographically informed essays for *Esquire* and *Mademoiselle* under the pseudonym Kaye Dunn. The first person to head a black modern dance company, Katherine Dunham toured the world, appeared in numerous films in the United States and abroad, and worked globally to promote the vitality and relevance of African diasporic dance and culture. She was a cultural advisor to Léopold Senghor, president of Senegal. Throughout her life, she was a teacher, starting her first dance school in Chicago in 1931 and going on to establish schools in New York, Stockholm, and East St. Louis. A Kennedy Center honoree, she also received eighteen honorary doctorates. She used her fame to make political statements and at the age of eighty-two undertook a forty-seven-day hunger strike to protest US intervention in Haiti and the discriminatory treatment of Haitian refugees.

This volume explores Katherine Dunham's work as part of a larger effort to recuperate her contribution to anthropology more broadly. One of our main emphases has been to consider the ongoing relevance of her ideas and methodologies for contemporary anthropology. Following Dunham's example, the authors have worked collaboratively from the outset, and we have engaged ourselves beyond the academy. With generous support from the School for Advanced Research (SAR), the work group mounted a session at the 2009 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, where we addressed the work of Katherine Dunham from a variety of viewpoints, in particular, experimenting with Dunham's research-to-performance methodology. That session provided an important foundational experience for what was to follow when we went to Santa Fe in 2010 for our week-long advanced seminar on the SAR campus. Because that 2009 session was so influential for our work, I describe it here in some detail. In addition, the contributions of Lee Baker and Gina Ulysse were part of that first session and critically important for us all. They were unable to join us in Santa Fe and were deeply missed. We had called upon Baker to tap into his skills in plumbing the history of anthropology; before the session took place, he mysteriously said to us, "Here's a hint: railroads and Sears." From his cryptic remarks emerged a discussion of the role of the great migration in establishing Chicago as a hub for black artists and black culture that rivaled the Harlem Renaissance. The Sears connection referred to the Julius Rosenwald Foundation, established by the owner of Sears, Roebuck & Co. This foundation played an important historical role in supporting education for African Americans, particularly in literature and the arts; Katherine Dunham first traveled to the Caribbean with support from the Rosenwald Foundation. Others who received fellowships from Rosenwald included Zora Neale Hurston, Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Arna Bontemps, Marian Anderson, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison. There can be little doubt, seeing this list, of the influence the Rosenwald Foundation had upon the cultural scene in Chicago and its importance in supporting key African American artists in developing their crafts. Highlighting Katherine Dunham, Baker also laid groundwork for our discipline to consider the importance of Chicago itself for the history of African American arts, letters, and anthropology. Dunham, he pointed out, was part of an upswelling of intellectual and artistic energy emanating from The Windy City that begs to be more deeply explored by scholars.

The 2009 session purposely included a mix of academics, performers, and artists, who presented their ideas in a variety of formats; several of those original presentations were refined for the SAR seminar and further

revised for this volume. A. Lynn Bolles explored Dunham's development as a field practitioner through an analysis of Dunham's *Journey to Accompong*. Dána-Ain Davis and Aimee Cox created a "script" designed to illustrate some key principles from the Dunham technique and also engage the audience in choreographing on the spot; Anindo Marshall, a dancer and percussionist who worked closely with Katherine Dunham for twenty-five years, offered music and an account of her own journey with Dunham technique; and my presentation was what I call "performative PowerPoint," in which I mixed PowerPoint slides with dancing and speaking to explore Dunham's technique and its relation to ballet. The session closed with a galvanizing performance from Gina Ulysse that, with great spiritual force, called upon her powers as a performer, upon the audience as witness-participants, and upon our discipline as an arena of inquiry ripe for change. It was the perfect closing to a session that had been interrupted earlier by a blond woman flinging open the meeting room doors and ordering us, "Stop the drumming!" So "Stop the drumming!" became our ironic motto, an imperative that we took to heart by turning it on its head and using it as a shorthand way of explaining why we needed to continue our work. It is repeated several times in the chapters that follow, and, as I am sure will become clear, we have no intention of being compliant.

For us, "Stop the drumming!" is a multilayered statement. As Kate Ramsey elegantly puts it in her contribution here (chapter 4), that imperious demand is one reminding us of "the long history of colonial and post-colonial efforts to suppress African-based drumming and ritual cultures across the Americas" and points to some of the colonialist impulses that still inhere in the field. Ramsey continues, "This command was especially stunning in the context of a session on Dunham, who spent her long career countering through performance, writing, and activism the ideologies that justified and empowered such directives and policies." Being told "Stop the drumming!" is something that each member of our group had experienced to one degree or another, in terms of negotiating interdisciplinarity and most acutely as scholars with backgrounds as artists and performers. Reconciling the academy with art is no easy task, and few models are available for those who might seek to approach their work in a way that is both academically up to par and artistically disciplined. In our work together and especially during our residence at SAR, we discovered that we had all struggled with how to bring these elements of our work together in productive ways; all of us have created professionally as artists, as writers, dancers, musicians, actors—or some combination of those fields. This was something of a revelation for me as I had not selected participants on this basis and had not known about the artistic pasts of some of the group. For

all of us, becoming anthropologists had meant long periods of sequestering our artistic selves and our artistic work well away from our profiles as academics. Looking to Katherine Dunham allowed us to begin to find ways to reject the idea that art and academics need to be cleanly separated from each other. Drawing from Dunham's holistic vision, we began to experiment with how to bring the practice of art back into the discipline of anthropology—and vice versa.

### DRUMMING AT SAR

During my first visit to the School for Advanced Research, my friend Mary Weismantel leaned over at dinner and asked, "Isn't this what you thought academic life was going to be like?" She meant the long days talking about ideas, the meandering walks through unbelievably gorgeous landscapes, and the congenial dinners where delicious food and drink magically appeared before us. Indeed, this is exactly what I had fantasized life as an intellectual would offer when I sent off my applications to graduate school. The School for Advanced Research, once known as the School of American Research, is an extraordinary institution. Since the 1950s, it has hosted several advanced seminars a year, each focused on an anthropological issue, question, or problem, and nearly all of those seminars result in a volume such as this one. Many, such as *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), have become iconic, spawning ongoing debates and explorations within anthropology and beyond. We certainly hope that audiences beyond anthropology will find the work in this collection of interest. At the same time, we are mindful that anthropology provides the central starting point of our work and thus is the framework for our consideration of Katherine Dunham's writing, ethnography, choreography, and inspiration.

Those who have had the opportunity to participate in an advanced seminar know what a pleasure it is. During the Dunham advanced seminar, we quickly took to heart the mandate to explore however we needed the material at hand, and all of the SAR staff enthusiastically helped us to push the boundaries of what constitutes inquiry in an advanced seminar. Typically, seminar participants gather for breakfast at the collective table, then work in the adjoining seminar room, seated in comfy chairs or on the sofas, discussing the papers at hand. After a break for lunch (once again at the collective table), the participants regroup in the seminar room for another several hours of discussion. Although we did spend a fair amount of time sitting together and discussing papers, our work moved as well in a number of other directions and into a number of other spaces. We began by constructing an altar in the seminar discussion room, and with Dunham's photo perched on a high shelf, surrounded by offerings, we felt that she



**FIGURE 1.2**

*Participants preparing for the White sisters' pool dedication ceremony at El Delirio, mid-1920s. Note the tea-ball and cake-pan costume elements. AC20:15b, Archives of the School for Advanced Research.*

presided over us. We rose early to clear the room's furniture to the edges, teaching one another yoga and dance before sitting down to the task of discussing one another's papers. In the afternoons, we danced and drummed in various spaces across the SAR campus, and teaching dance to and learning dance from one another was a primary way of communicating knowledge and understanding. Several times, we opted to gather around the collective table to write, working on our own thoughts and words but able to see and hear one another as we scribbled, typed, or sketched. We took one afternoon in the board room to collectively interview Anindo Marshall about her years with Katherine Dunham. While in Santa Fe, we also were able to partner with the National Dance Institute to offer an open master class in Dunham technique to the wider community. It was especially gratifying to see dancers in class from the ages of sixteen to over sixty.

From our point of view, this way of working was critically important in numerous ways. It embodied the spirit of exploration and collaboration essential to our own approaches to knowledge making; it grounded

us by creating a space in which each of us was pushed to reexamine her or his work and contribution to the project; and it planted the seeds for our group's ongoing work in research, writing, and pedagogy. Since that time, we have gathered again to work collaboratively as we continue to move the project forward.

We found in the SAR setting and history kindred spirits for our work; the SAR campus was once the estate of two sisters, Martha Root White and Amelia Elizabeth White, whose bohemian outlook and creative enthusiasm are in evidence everywhere. As we prepared our public colloquium and toured the administrative building, we were captivated by a set of pictures lining the building's main hallway. Many of the photos on display came from a party that had been thrown to inaugurate the sisters' in-ground swimming pool, the first of its kind in Santa Fe. What thrilled us no end was realizing that the ancient "Mayan" costumes the partygoers were wearing had been rigged out of kitchen implements: breastplates made of cake pans, earrings of giant tea strainers, necklaces of ladles and forks. We were buoyed by the imaginative and creative spirit that brought the sisters to Santa Fe, and we tapped into that sense of adventure when we created our colloquium presentation for the SAR public as a performative event, one that began and ended with Anindo Marshall's spirited beating of the drum.

## **ABOUT THIS VOLUME**

In part because Katherine Dunham's influence has been so broad, it was important to bring together a similarly broad group of people to explore her work. The chapters in this book range from formal academic essays, to more informal interviews, to experimental approaches to writing and thinking. It is our aim that this volume be useful for anthropology, of course, but beyond this, in seeking to expand the understanding of Dunham's endeavors, our goal is to provide multifaceted resources for those interested in Dunham's work, regardless of their discipline or background. These have at times been delicate imperatives to balance: particularly, as we have sought to make the case for the seriousness and substance of Dunham's importance for anthropology, it may appear that we have neglected the artistic elements of her work. I cannot emphasize enough how strongly we assert that art and academics should not be an either-or proposition. Nevertheless, the academy at this time continues to impose this dichotomy much more often than challenge it. Whereas Dunham's artistic legacy is widely known and much celebrated, her intellectual and academic acumen is not, aside from the standard mention of her studies at Northwestern and the University of Chicago. We have chosen to focus on

demonstrating the intellectual and academic in Dunham's work precisely because it has been so thoroughly sidelined.

About a week before I was due to send the finished draft of this volume to SAR Press, Anindo Marshall, a seminar participant, presented me with a box of her husband's papers. Ronald Marshall, who passed away in 1998, was a certified Dunham technique instructor and a close associate of Dunham's. At the time of his death, he had been working on his master's thesis in the Dance Department at UCLA, a project that analyzed the early Chicago roots of Katherine Dunham's little-studied dance drama *Floyd's Guitar Blues*. We felt it time for Ronnie's work to finally see the light of day, and chapter 5 is drawn from Marshall's analysis of *Floyd's Guitar Blues*. From his papers, we have culled a short biographical sketch he wrote of Dunham and have added this to his autobiographical statement. Together with Anindo Marshall's biographical account of her long-term apprenticeship to Dunham, these pieces offer a sense of the awesome sweep of Dunham's influence and inspiration. As his biographical statement notes, Ronald Marshall had a generations-deep legacy of dancing in Chicago; in addition to being a longtime student of Katherine Dunham, he was a colleague of the well-known vernacular dancer Chester Whitmore and for many years worked as an assistant to the Nigerian percussionist Babatunde Olatunji. Anindo Marshall was born and raised in Kenya and had a solo singing career in Europe before arriving in the United States, where she met Olatunji, Ronnie Marshall, and then Dunham. One of only a small number of certified Dunham technique instructors, Marshall is among an even smaller group of instructors—fewer than ten—who were certified personally by Katherine Dunham.

In the chapters that follow, we focus on the potential—much of it as yet unrealized—for Katherine Dunham's ideas and methods to aid us in creating better anthropology, for enacting social change, and for merging the enterprises of art and academics. One of the key innovations Dunham engineered was what Vèvè Clark has termed a methodology of “research-to-performance” (2006[1994]). As Rosemarie Roberts notes in chapter 2, connected to this methodology was Dunham's development of the lecture/demonstration format. (I cannot resist mentioning that one of Dunham's earliest lecture/demonstrations featured her mentor Melville Herskovits playing the drum for her as she danced.) It seems hard to imagine schooling at any level without something as basic as the lecture/demonstration. Roberts's recognition of Dunham's role in developing this form—virtually nonexistent before Dunham began working in that way—points yet again to the breadth of Dunham's influence beyond the stages and classrooms where she worked.



Roberts's chapter 2 traces the development of Dunham's research-to-performance methodology and in so doing provides a crucially important analysis of Dunham's process. Clark's theoretical discussions of research-to-performance are foundationally important, and Roberts adds a careful analysis of some specific experiences and some historical background to show how and why Dunham was dedicated to working in this way. This method remains cutting-edge, useful, and particularly relevant for youth in addressing problems they face in their own worlds. This concern for youth and using the arts as a means for personal and political development was a consistent one in Dunham's career. In Roberts's account of developing the project *Echoes of Brown*, she powerfully depicts ways in which the research-to-performance method holds continuing potential for creating work that is as academically rigorous as it is artistically valid—all while being politically engaged.

In keeping with our insistence that Dunham be recognized as an ethnographer of considerable capacity, A. Lynn Bolles (chapter 3) rereads the classic *Journey to Accompong* as an account of the birth of a fieldworker. *Journey* was compiled from Dunham's original journal notes, and Bolles engages with them to do a meta-reading focused less on the ethnographic content than on the content of the ethnographer. With proper fieldwork as the sine qua non of anthropological achievement, particularly in the United States, as Bolles shows, Dunham very early put her particular stamp on the ways she did fieldwork and had her own view of what constituted participant observation. More participant than observer, Dunham was even in the 1930s most certainly pushing the limits of positivist anthropology, creating her own methodological interventions and refusing to shy away from affective and emotional engagement.

These innovations are further explored by Kate Ramsey (chapter 4) in her reassessment of Dunham's possible influence on the mouvement folklorique in Haiti. Ramsey's effort goes beyond a reconsideration of the ways in which Dunham's work and activities in Haiti can be seen to be entwined with the mouvement folklorique and proposes ways in which anthropology itself can benefit from critical reanalyses of its own histories. Given the broad adulation with which Dunham's work has often been greeted, it is a particularly difficult task to consider what her impact may have been yet refrain from giving her so much credit that her contribution overshadows that of Haitian artists. Dunham would never have sought to be credited with innovations not of her own making and certainly would wish to recognize the important and courageous work of the Haitian artists who first began to present Vodou dance and music on theater stages. Ramsey judiciously revisits Dunham's work in Haiti with particular attention to a

number of rarely discussed performances and exhibitions in which Dunham played a central role.

Delving further into Dunham's uses of ethnographic material, my own contribution (chapter 6) closely analyzes Dunham technique itself to show how Dunham's choices of material were likely rooted in her ethnographic knowledge of what she called "form and function." Paying particular attention to the Haitian dance *yanvalou*, which is key to Dunham technique, I argue that the technique ultimately constitutes an ethnographically based system designed to shape and support a dancer's mind, body, and spirit. Also key to the technique is a political challenge to the traditionally elite and white culture of the dance studio. Together, the ethnographic base and political thrust of the technique are designed to equip those who study it with tools for meeting life's challenges. Ultimately, then, in my view, Dunham's technique is her greatest anthropological achievement, although anthropologists have not viewed it as falling within the discipline because it works on its feet rather than moves across the page.

How much is the divide between art and scholarship one that we impose upon ourselves before we even know what we are doing? In "Katherine Dunham Made Me..." (chapter 7), Dána-Ain Davis riffs on Dunham's influence on her own scholarly and artistic development, providing an intimate and unusually honest account of her own journey to ethnography. Arriving in graduate school having had another career and also a history as a working artist, Davis stumbled upon Dunham early, but it was not until later reflection that she more fully understood how Dunham's out-of-the-box example helped her weather the challenges and insecurities of establishing herself within the field. Part of what Davis emulates in her chapter is Dunham's own reflexivity and facility with writing.

Coming full circle, Aimee Cox (chapter 8) brings us back to youth and the urban politics with which Dunham was so deeply concerned, particularly during her years in East St. Louis. Working, as Cox says, "along the seams of anthropology," she shows how Dunham's emergent work with urban youths' dance "street teams" continues in the vein of Dunham's vision of arts for cultural development. For the youths Cox knows, dance is both literal and figurative capital, providing identity and belonging but also generating money, which teams distribute along egalitarian lines for needs like medical bills, school books, and new clothes—all while donating a portion to charity. Making use of texts, tweets, and Facebook, these twenty-first-century youths dance across landscapes we have only barely begun to explore. What has not changed, Cox makes clear, is that dance and social change go hand-in-hand and that ethnographers have much to learn by stepping into the circle.

The wholehearted anthropology exemplified in Katherine Dunham's approach is holistic: like Franz Boas, she strongly encouraged her dance students to study four-field anthropology. Dunham's holism, however, extended even further, requiring an equal commitment of mind, body, and spirit. Rejecting institutionalized partitions between what counts as intellectual or as artistic, she included among her close friends and mentors psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, showman Sol Hurok, and Haitian president Dumarsais Estimé. Among dancers, Katherine Dunham was widely admired for her feet, which were well formed, high arched, and preternaturally strong. For her, the feet, with their connection to the earth, were the beginning of dance, of movement, of engagement with the world. With those feet, she forged a path uniquely hers and yet allowed plenty of room for others to walk by her side or to follow her lead. We anthropologists have not tended that path particularly well; much of it is overgrown and neglected. As the contributors to this volume explore Dunham's path, we honor the trailblazing she undertook. In honoring that work, we seek to master the steps along that path, to choreograph our own ethnographic ventures, and to continue the project of inhabiting an anthropology that strives for a full and uncompromising engagement with the world around it.