Title
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There are no video records and little documentation of the performance; however, choreographer Katherine Dunham’s obscure dance work, *Southland*, still succeeded in epitomizing a community that was enshrouded in the complex negotiation of three distinct modes of solidarity: the performance of race, gender, and national identity. Using dance as a mode for analysis of these types of categorical tensions “can provide a critical example of the dialectical relationship between cultures and the bodies that inhabit them” (Albright 3), and as such Dunham’s ballet works subtly, but intentionally, to subvert a supposed hierarchy between these three systems of oppression. Through the analysis of the three women present in this performance - the white avenger, Julie, the mournful black lover, Lucy, and the highly-politicized choreographer herself – Dunham presents the tension that resides in performing nation, race, and gender.

“This is the story of no actual lynching in the Southern states of America, and still it is the story of every one of them because behind each one lies the violence of anger, fear, and lust, which generates a sickness of profound guilt” (Dunham, *Southland* Program 342). This quote was taken from Katherine Dunham’s program notes in the first of two performances of her controversial ballet *Southland*, which was performed to mixed reviews in Santiago de Chile in 1951 and Paris, France in 1953 (Hill 348, 353). Dunham’s ballet tells the story of two couples, a slave couple, Lucy and Richard, and a white couple, Julie and Lenwood. The main plot begins with a violent fight between Julie and Lenwood that leaves Julie beaten and on the ground. Richard passes with a group of field hands and stops to aid Julie only for Julie to recover and loudly scream, “Nigger!” which is the sole spoken word in the ballet. Julie then summons a presumably white mob through pantomime and accuses Richard of rape. He is lynched by the mob offstage and dramatically hung from a tree for the audience to see. Julie tears a piece of cloth from Richard’s hanging body and passes by Lucy who is weeping for her lost lover. Lucy then follows the coffin through the street to begin the second scene.
The second scene takes place in a segregated cafe filled with African-Americans whose reactions to the coffin are displayed in various manners that signify unrest. The interactions of the dancing couples and craps players exhibit a bodily tension with undertones of violence. The final moment, as expressed by Dunham, fulfills the ballet’s intent through the abstract revelation of the blind beggar who is “seeking the answer, which all of us who love humanity seek more than ever at this moment” (344).

“In all of their lives in America…black women have felt torn between the loyalties that bind them to race on one hand, and sex on the other” (Collins 124). While Dunham’s ballet Southland is often analyzed for its overt display of racial injustice, the more subtle issue of sacrificed gender identity is at play as well. The fact that an African-American female choreographer sought to approach a dramatic story of lynching where the white female plays the primary active role provides an interesting twist on the traditional white “male gaze” usually associated with the production and choreographic direction in ballet. The roles of Julie and Lucy illustrate Dunham’s powerful reversal of “dualist notions, (where) women have been portrayed stereotypically as either the ‘virgin’ or the ‘whore’” (Adair 72). Higginbotham’s analysis of the “White Ladies” and the “Black Women” (Higginbotham 5) presents the usually assigned role of the white woman as “virgin” or “lady” and the black woman designated as the “whore.” Therefore, the early feminist movements that were beginning to take place found different women trying to prove different things: “Black women to prove they were ladies…White ladies to prove that they were women” (Giddings 54). In the story, Julie appears to fulfill this role of the violated “lady” in the eyes of the angry mob, thus justifying the lynching as proper punishment for Richard’s behavior. According to Patricia Hill Collins in Black Feminist Thought: “Lynching emerged as the specific form of sexual violence visited on Black men, with the myth of the Black rapist as its ideological justification”(147). This myth was propagated through the fear of the “other” as sexually deviant. Dunham exposes and combats this myth not
through the actions of the black man or woman, but rather through the resonate lie of the white woman. The revelation of Julie’s true character highlights the conflict of assigning dualist values, for “whether a woman is an actual virgin or not is of lesser concern than whether she can socially construct herself as a ‘good’ girl within this logic” (Collins 134). This type of binary thinking is debunked in the complex character development of Julie.

Another layer in this performance of the racially-charged utterance lies in the experiences of the performers asked to enact such a moment. Julie Robinson Belafonte, the lone white company member in the cast, was asked to perform this word in front of her fellow company members. The intimacy of using the dancers’ real names for the names of the characters as well as the repetition of the moment in rehearsal brought the power of such hatred to a peak; for several of the dancers, Julie’s closest friends, began to murmur about the intensity of the acting. Company member Lucille Ellis speaks of this transformations: “It meant that color came into play, shades of color, because some dancers where white and some were lighter than others” (355). This performative quality of dance, of doing something which somehow leads to being that something, is delved into by Ann Cooper Albright in her book Mining the Dancefield: “But at the very moment the dancing body is creating a representation, it is also in the process of actually forming that body…” (3). This negotiation for Belafonte becomes apparent when her acting ability became so convincing that it brought about the question of realism in her performance.

To speak about gender within the context of race it is also necessary to understand “the code of silence mandated by racial solidarity” (Collins 127). The piece of fabric that Julie takes from Richard’s hanging body reinforces a history of deep hatred that has been fostered between whites and blacks, but this moment also reinforces the example of gender identity operating within a larger racial schema. It becomes a performative example of how race “precludes unity within the same gender group” (Higginbotham 5). The moment that she rips the clothing is the sole moment of meeting
between Julie and Lucy in the ballet. It is seen in this meeting that Julie and Lucy’s racial solidarity has mandated that each woman maintain an allegiance to their race, thus castrating any opportunity to discover allegiance within their gender.

While Dunham was deeply invested in the message and production of *Southland*, there was some hesitancy from her dancers who had not had to experience the full impact of racism. Most of the dancers in the cast had left America in order to escape persecution in their daily lives. While the company did experience various forms of racism while touring, their celebrity status often exempted them from fully experiencing the hatred of racism. According to Lucille Ellis: “We were not ready to go into anything that was racial because it was back to a history we wanted to rest” (Hill 355). However, Dunham’s mission was to “continue presenting the ballet until the lynching of black males in the United States ceased” (Aschenbrenner 149). Her stance reflected a growing sense of Black nationalism that was rising up in reaction to the Jim Crow laws in the United States. However, *Southland* illustrates how the growing sense of Black nationalism was perceived as at odds with American nationalism.

“U.S. Black feminism will remain hindered in its goal of fostering Black women’s empowerment in a context of social justice unless it incorporates more comprehensive analyses of how nation can constitute another form of oppression” (Collins 229). The political climate in which Southland was produced took place during the McCarthy era of secrecy and trepidation and the African-American civil rights movement of the 50’s and 60’s. The Red Scare and the Cold War both contributed to a curtailing of the right to the freedom of speech due in part to the fear of “otherness” brought about by these supposed enemies. While racism was in fact being confronted on American soil, international protest became an entirely different field of play for artists, a field that was not encouraged to say the least. “That an American artist, a black woman in a foreign country known for its strong Communist base and anti-American sentiment, had dared to expose America’s darkest side,
was a flagrant betrayal of her country” (Hill 352). Dunham, however, countered this idea of betrayal by stating: “I would have grieved more deeply had I betrayed myself” (358). Within this political context, the ideas of “race, class, gender, and sexuality all remain closely intertwined with nation” (Collins 229). Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham investigates Du Bois’ concept of “two warring ideals in one body” as African-Americans attempt to negotiate the existence of an African-American nation within the larger American nation during this period in history (Higginbotham 14). Not only must the African-American woman negotiate her selfhood as a woman within the context of her race, she must similarly learn to negotiate her race within the context of her nationality. Katherine Dunham exemplified this tension between race and gender through her female characters in the ballet; however, this same strain of tension can be felt in the controversy surrounding the creation and presentation of *Southland* in its negotiation of race and nationality.

Just as racial solidarity mandated a “code of silence” (Collins 127),” so did Dunham’s choice to portray “overseas our country’s dirtiest social laundry” indicate that she had “betrayed a trust of silence” (Clark 335). Dunham’s *Southland* broke this code of American silence when she chose to use her company’s role as unofficial cultural ambassadors in order to highlight the injustice of racism and lynching still occurring in America. Dunham’s struggle to identify a racial problem occurring within America was perceived by many as a means of undermining America’s best interests internationally. Her choice to reveal this in a country with strong underground communist ties and leanings (Chile) made the decision all the more detrimental for America’s public image, at least according to the U.S. State Department. In fact, only one communist newspaper in Santiago de Chile wrote about the performance; all of the other were controlled by American newsprint and thus strongly discouraged to report on the ballet (Hill 352). The idea was to fight the breach of silence with silence as discussed by Constance Valis Hill: “The intention of the ensuing silence was to pretend that Southland never happened” (353).
A blackballing of Dunham and her company by the U.S. State Department quietly ensued after *Southland*’s premiere, and especially after the performance in Paris. Dunham’s refusal to omit *Southland* from the company’s performances in Chile and Paris was only one of the “many instances where Dunham’s artistic integrity affected her career” (Aschenbrenner 150-151). It is in fact this integrity that made Katherine Dunham a pioneer in bringing the struggles of African-American women to an international audience. As suggested by Collins, “While Black women…rarely worked exclusively on behalf of other Black women, the types of issues they championed and the ways in which they operated within these organizations suggest that they brought an understanding of Black women’s concerns to their political activism” (Collins 218). So although Dunham’s work was not specifically championing the African-American woman, the simple fact that an African-American female was using a role of leadership to promote political activism and raise social awareness made *Southland* a pioneering piece in Black women’s international activism. Similarly, it could be said that Dunham was bridging the gap not only between racial solidarity and national solidarity, but also opening the dialogue to include the issue of gender within a national and international context. Her activism made the issues concerning race not just a problem for African-Americans, but also a means for which all members of the African diaspora could see the implications of race in their respective countries. It was one of the first steps taken in the creation of a necessary international dialogue that would combat the oppression placed on race and gender through the idea of the nation.

*Southland* was to be the eventual downfall of Dunham and her company. The company’s last performance took place in 1965 in New York after years of struggling to overcome the lack of funding and at times direct sabotaging of the company’s performances both at home and abroad by the United States government. But Dunham would not have expressed herself any differently given the chance: “Your daring has to be backed up with a willingness to lose that point. To make a bigger point, you might have to lose one” (359).
Works Cited


---. “Southland Program: A Dramatic Ballet in Two Scenes.” *Kaiso! Writings by and


