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ORIGINAL PAPER

Reading gesture: Katherine Dunham, the Dunham Technique, and the vocabulary of dance as decolonizing archival praxis

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Abstract
This paper examines how the African diasporic dance works of anthropologist, dancer, and choreographer Katherine Dunham has endured over time through both archival intervention and through Dunham's dance pedagogy, the Dunham Technique. Interrogating the ways that dance and gesture are rendered readable through visual literacies, the paper explores codification and transmission as apparatus for ensuring the continuation of culturally informed movement such as the Dunham Technique. The author argues that reading gesture as a document or as a record functions as a decolonial archival praxis, opening archives to modes of cultural expression that might otherwise be rendered invisible by extant western archival practices. The gestural document is conceptualized as a codified, culturally informed, and embodied record capable of being engaged at the archival threshold. The author also argues that gestural documents are capable of capturing and preserving cultural context as well as bringing into the present more robust and culturally informed readings of the past, generating conditions of possibility for remediating anti-Blackness in the archives.

Keywords Katherine Dunham · Dunham Technique · Dance · Gesture · Transmission · Codification · Visual literacy · Decolonial archival praxis

Over the past two decades a growing body of archival scholarship has addressed legacies of imperialism and colonialism in archival theory and practice, examining the ways that non-European histories and cultural forms are altered, further marginalized, or rendered invisible by the western archival endeavor. In challenging these colonial and imperialist legacies, archivists and archival studies scholars have

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considered custodial and post-custodial paradigms (Cook 1992; Bastian 2001, 2002 and 2009; Kelleher 2017), reparations and other redress for absences and silences in the cultural-institutional discourse (Sutherland 2017; Hughes-Watkins 2018; Robinson-Sweet 2018), the inclusion of oral cultures and traditions (Fisher 2004; Turner 2012; Sutherland 2019), and challenges to dominant evidence-based definitions of records (Caswell 2016).

This article makes a new intervention in these discussions by examining the ways gesture can be read as a decolonizing archival praxis. Through an analysis of the Katherine Dunham archives and the Dunham Technique, I argue that gestural documents are capable of capturing and preserving cultural context as well as bringing into the present more robust and culturally informed readings of the past, generating conditions of possibility for remediating anti-Blackness in the archives. I begin with a narrative framing of the life and work of anthropologist, dancer, and choreographer Katherine Dunham and then consider the relationship between the Katherine Dunham archives and the Dunham Technique, which Dunham used as a radical intervention against cultural hegemony in western and European dance forms, as a tool for decolonizing cultural communication among Black Americans, and importantly, as an embodied archive. Next, I conceptualize the gestural document as a codified, culturally informed, and embodied record capable of engagement at the archival threshold. Finally, I argue that reading gesture as a document or as a record can function as a decolonizing archival praxis, opening archives to modes of cultural expression that might otherwise be silenced or rendered invisible by extant western archival practices.

Katherine Dunham

Known through journalistic coinage as "Katherine the Great" or "Anthropological Katie," Katherine Dunham was born in Chicago in June 1909. Her first dance company, *Ballet Nègre*, was established in 1930 as the premier Black ballet company in the USA. In 1936, Dunham earned a bachelor of philosophy in anthropology at the University of Chicago, focusing her studies on the dances of the African diaspora.

Dunham was trained in classical ballet, her formative training influenced by artists such as Ludmilla Speranzeva and Vera Mirova. Speranzeva, who came to the USA with the *Chauve-Souris*, a Franco-Russian vaudeville troupe, was one of the first ballet teachers to accept Black dancers as students. In the late 1920s, just before the economic collapse of 1929, Dunham studied ballet with Vera Mirova; through Mirova, Dunham was exposed to East Indian, Javanese, and Balinese dance forms. By 1932, Dunham had consulted with her former ballet teacher, Ludmilla Speranzeva, about her desire to open a school for young Black American dancers where she would teach them about their African heritage. Speranzeva advised her to forgo ballet, to focus instead on modern dance, and, most importantly, to develop her own style (Library of Congress Performing Arts Encyclopedia).

Dunham was particularly interested in dances and rhythms as they applied to her own ethnic and cultural background. Upon entering the University of Chicago, she began teaching her own style of dance, partly to explore her theoretical

beliefs about the rhythms of people from the African diaspora, and partly to meet the financial demands of private university education. As a scholar, Dunham theorized that Caribbean thought and movement—particularly for those of African descent—were directly correlated to that of their African forebears, despite differences due to the shift from tribal to folk culture, miscegenation, and cultural contact (Dunham 1941b). This shift from tribal to folk culture in Africans transplanted to the French and British West Indies formed the basis for Dunham's dance anthropology; her scholarship focused on the survival of dances in the midst of this shift. Dunham further theorized that French colonizers were less interested in cultural domination than their English counterparts. Subsequently, she argued, the integrity of African culture and the sanctity of African religious traditions persisted more readily in Francophone island nations such as Haiti and Martinique than other Caribbean countries, including Jamaica and Trinidad (Dunham 1941a).

In 1935, Dunham was awarded a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship to conduct fieldwork in the Caribbean, where she studied the survival of traditional African dance in the face of European colonization and acculturation. Nervous about the disappearance of dances from many tribal and folk communities, Dunham proposed using film to document these traditions as well as to document and preserve her own technique. As early as the mid-1930s, Dunham was utilizing a Kodak 16-mm camera to record her field studies in the Caribbean in what was, at the time, an innovative approach to fieldwork (Johnson 2005). For Dunham, fieldwork in Martinique yielded a familiarity with not only national dance forms such as the *beguine* and the *valse creole*, but with fighting dances such as *l'ag'ya*. *L'ag'ya*, a cockfight in its most essential form, is performed throughout Martinique where multiple versions, derivations, and significances of the dance once thrived. Also known as *damier*, the movements of *l'ag'ya* resemble those of a living chess game, with dancers dancing only in the squares of the chessboard (Dunham 1939). *L'ag'ya* movements are also stylistically similar to Brazilian *capoeira* and the French *savate* (Perpener 2001).

When Dunham returned from the Caribbean, she became a supervisor for the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' and Theater Projects. Through this position, she received funding to produce her first ballet, titled *L'Ag'Ya*. Rather than a cast of professional dancers, Dunham cast her ballet with working class people—cooks, chauffeurs, maids, and typists—all of whom were unemployed and destitute in the thick of the Depression (SIUC 3/RG 4/FP 20-7-F1). Inspired by her Caribbean field study, *L'Ag'Ya* debuted in January 1938 at the Federal Theater in Chicago and is regarded as Dunham's first significant artistic breakthrough. *L'Ag'Ya* is a classic example of Dunham's style. Although stories about tempestuous love triangles can be found in many concert dance repertoires, the movement vocabulary in *L'Ag'Ya* originated from the authentic Martiniquais fighting dances by the same name. Dunham's *L'Ag'Ya* is culturally dynamic: it is born of American creative

sensibilities but informed by both African and European dance cultures (Perpener 2001, p. 141).[1]

Although best known as a choreographer and dancer, Dunham constructed new kinetic models that tested traditional "high culture" paradigms. Dunham was a scholar first and foremost; she was an anthropologist who sought to maintain scholarly engagement through artistic endeavor and her scholarly contributions furthered the study of comparative diasporic religions, including Haitian *Vodun*, Cuban *Santería*, Jamaican *Obeah* and Brazilian *Candomblé*. Through her work in cultural anthropology and her dance work—which together comprise the foundation of the Dunham Technique—Dunham established movements that analyze and excoriate the legacy of slavery while espousing the worth of African diasporic cultural traditions. Dunham's dance work embodies what Dunham scholar Sara E. Johnson (2005) calls the "lived dimension of a theoretical construct"—that of the African diaspora.

The Dunham Technique emphasizes cultural contextualization in movement as well as attention to spiritual well-being. Sharing the principles of this Technique was among the primary objectives of the Dunham School of Dance and Theater in New York City. Established at the end of World War II, the Dunham School was unique in that instructors not only gave professional dance classes in several genres besides Dunham Technique, but also taught music, drama, languages, anthropological fieldwork techniques, and an extensive curriculum in the humanities. Following its inception in 1944, the Dunham School became the institutional base where Dunham Technique was developed and codified, offering certificates of completion that were accredited by nearby Columbia University (Institute for Dunham Technique Certification, n.d.).

In 1951, despite warnings from the US Department of State, Dunham premiered her ballet *Southland* in Santiago, Chile. *Southland* condemned American racism through exposing the practice of lynching in the American South and was considered a public embarrassment to the USA. Following *Southland's* presentation, Dunham's company was effectively blacklisted by the US State Department, which had been supporting her work. Financial support was withheld by the Department of State in an act of retribution that Dunham scholars and dancers assert led to the demise of the Dunham Company in 1965. Concern over the loss of Katherine Dunham's legacy and a desire to preserve and perpetuate Dunham Technique prompted Albirda Rose, co-founder of the Institute for Dunham Technique Certification, to codify Dunham's dance work; this same archival impulse eventually led to the establishment of Dunham Technique Seminars (Rose 1990). The first Dunham Seminar was held in 1984; by 1990 early efforts to codify Dunham Technique had already begun with the publication of Rose's book *Dunham Technique: A Way of Life*. In 1994, as another means of codification, instructors began to be certified in Dunham Technique. Other efforts to preserve Dunham's dance work were taking place at the

[1] Recordings of Dunham dancing *L'Ag'Ya* and footage from her Martinique field work are juxtaposed in the short film "Free To Dance," (PBS 2001) which provides a glimpse into Dunham's choreographic method.

Performing Arts Training Center (PATC) which Dunham established in East St. Louis, Illinois.

Given Dunham's directorship of one of the first Black American dance companies to tour internationally, her creation of a new dance technique, and a career that spanned close to 70 years, her relatively low profile is cause for critical conjecture. It is perhaps the breadth of Dunham's accomplishments that is responsible for the underappreciation of her work; because Dunham created paths where there were none, her contributions resist easy categorization. Dunham, Johnson asserts, "has catalogued, interpreted and transformed New World, African-derived sensibilities from the vantage point of multiple disciplines, consistently putting them into dialogue with other epistemological frameworks (Johnson 2005, p. 3)."

Halifu Osumare, co-founder of the Institute for Dunham Technique Certification, argues that Dunham's anthropological work offsets theoretical deficiencies long current in the study of other cultures, and develops an integrative, participant-oriented approach to fieldwork that was decidedly postmodern in a time preceding the ubiquity of the term. Dunham's "research-to-performance" methodology exemplifies critical innovation, while her dance work demonstrates that profound humanism emerges from a deep knowledge of cultural specificity (Clark 1994). Dunham's dance work not only documents the traditions of communities neglected by elite historiographies, it also challenges audiences to acquire a new literacy about the cultural context of these traditions, in both their original milieu and through contemporary frameworks (Johnson 2005).

The Dunham Technique and the Katherine Dunham archives

"Dunham Technique is a way of life." –Katherine Dunham

In her essay, "Notes on the dance," Dunham suggests that dance is a constitutive and foundational determinant in all societies:

> The emotional life of any community is clearly legible in its art forms, and because the dance seeks continuously to capture moments of life in a fusion of time, space, and motion, the dance is at a given moment the most accurate chronicler of culture pattern … Alone or in concert man dances his various selves and his emotions and his dance become a communication as clear as though it were written or spoken in a universal language (Dunham 2005, p. 2014).

Katherine Dunham described Dunham Technique as "a series of movement patterns, isolations, progressions, and exercises based on primitive rhythms in dance (Rose 1990, p. 4)." The Technique has long been used as a tool for dancers to facilitate an understanding of culture. Dunham traveled to Haiti, Martinique, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Mexico and Brazil to better understand the cultural significance of movement. In asserting the need for Dunham Technique, Dunham said, "The techniques that I knew and saw and experienced were not saying the things that I wanted to say. I simply could not, with purely classical

ballet, say what I want to say. I could do a story, of course, ballet is you know, so much ballet is just a narrative, but to capture the meaning in the culture, in the life of the people, I felt that I had to take something directly from the people and develop that (Library of Congress 2002b)."

During her fieldwork, Dunham found that certain dances had specific form and specific function within a given culture, and this cultural significance is immediately apparent in people's movements. This transmission of culture through anthropologically and culturally informed dance work forms the core of the Dunham Technique. This work was—and still is—vital: American slavery broke essential cultural bonds and created enduring cultural disruptions. Dunham sought to restore them. This attention to cultural transmission fundamental to Dunham Technique took a specific and distinctive form.

There are three theoretical models developed by Dunham each of which is necessary to properly execute Dunham Technique. They are: Form and Function, Intercultural Communication, and Socialization through the Arts (Rose 1990). Used primarily to understand discrete dances and specific dance movement, Dunham's theory of Form and Function unthreads the ways dance relates to the overall cultural patterns inherent in a given culture's belief system. Dunham understood that movement has a particular form based on a specific function in a given set of circumstances; translating this cultural knowledge into staged dances for Dunham precipitated cultural exchange. Information, she believed, was being passed from her choreographic research to her dancers and then, through them, to the audience. Dunham's theory of Intercultural Communication builds on the theory of Form and Function. This method is used as a means for gaining a universal understanding and acceptance of others. Dunham believed that through dance, information could be gathered about one's own culture and the cultures of others. As an anthropologist, Dunham recognized the intersection of movement and life patterns; the dance work she saw in the Caribbean was linked to specific cultural perceptions of life and preparations for life events such as birth, love, and death. These two theoretical models lead to the third, Socialization through the Arts which Dunham used to train people as both artists and communicators. Dunham believed that, given the opportunity, people would learn important information about themselves through the art forms of their given culture(s), situating them within a global context and again promoting intercultural awareness and appreciation (Rose 1990).

Dunham Technique, while it consists of a system of learnable and transferable qualities, is also dynamic; it continues to incorporate and merge methods of teaching style and application from earlier generations with the contemporary ideas, methods and philosophies which emanated from and were taught by Katherine Dunham. Albirda Rose, co-founder of the Institute for Dunham Technique Certification, asserts that the Dunham Technique, as a decolonial and decolonizing form "allows one to understand a culture, or many cultures, through dance. [Dunham] found that an understanding of different cultures takes place when one is immersed in the culture. Through experiencing other ways of living, especially through the dances, knowledge is acquired (Rose 1990, p. 17)." How, then, has Dunham Technique—as a dynamic and decolonizing form—been documented and preserved in

the American archival tradition? What are the current cultural-institutional engagements with the embodied cultural records that comprise Dunham Technique?

Among the primary institutional engagements with Dunham Technique is the Performing Arts Training Center (PATC) in East St. Louis, Illinois. The PATC is affiliated with Southern Illinois University, which holds a large archival collection of Dunham's personal and professional papers. The Training Center offers academic, performing and community service initiatives to the local community. As one of only two groups permitted to perform Dunham's choreography, PATC plays a vital role in preserving Dunham Technique. Other institutions play a role in preserving the Dunham oeuvre, including the Katherine Dunham Dynamic Museum and the Institute for Intercultural Communication at the Katherine Dunham Center for Arts and Humanities in East St. Louis, Missouri. University of California, San Diego literature professor and Dunham scholar Sara E. Johnson (2005) suggests that Dunham was "an archivist at heart," one whose legacy is forever linked to bridge-building and creating institutions. These Dunham institutions, Johnson argues, like Dunham Technique, are mechanisms for producing, preserving, and disseminating knowledge. Johnson (2005, p. 5) argues that "the Dunham Technique, and her vast corpus of written and film work, [both] function as archives, [institutionalizing] decades of research."

In addition to Dunham Institutions such as PATC, the Katherine Dunham archives are comprised of the Katherine Dunham Collection at the Library of Congress, the Katherine Dunham Papers (1919–1968) at Southern Illinois University, and the Katherine Dunham Correspondence, Contracts and Interviews collection at New York Public Library. Materials on Dunham also exist in the archives at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in western Massachusetts and the Missouri History Museum. The Katherine Dunham Collection at the Library of Congress is a collection of nearly two thousand still and moving images that document Dunham's career including her early anthropological explorations in the 1930s, her work as a choreographer, her dance technique and teaching method, performances, and her anthropological analysis of the dances and rituals of the African diaspora. The moving images include ethnographic footage collected by Dunham of Vodun rituals and other dance forms. The Dunham Technique is captured on several videotapes in the collection, demonstrating Dunham's teaching style and providing a glimpse into her methods of transmitting dance knowledge. Many of the images (both still and moving) are available for remote viewing online.

The Katherine Dunham Papers at Southern Illinois University consist of 50 cubic feet of correspondence, writings, scripts, notes on dance techniques, and musical scores. Although personal correspondence comprises the bulk of the collection, some of Dunham's anthropological dance notes are also among the papers. The Performing Arts Library at New York Public Library (NYPL) holds a small collection of Katherine Dunham's correspondence, contracts, and interviews among their Performing Arts Research Collections. Additional Dunham materials are held in the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of NYPL and can be found in the papers of her devotees, Lavinia Williams (Lavinia Williams Papers, 1940–1989) and Dr. Glory Van Scott (Glory Van Scott Collection, 1974–2000) as well as in the American Ballet Theatre Archives.

The Dunham archives currently represent Dunham Technique through collections of tangible artifacts. Although this archival work is sometimes done in conversation with Dunham dancers and devotees, when archival repositories take custody of Dunham's work, the Dunham Technique—a rich and embodied cultural form created specifically to decolonize the minds and bodies of Black Americans—is flattened, becomes two-dimensional, and is stripped of its cultural significance. Dunham Technique, in the western archival endeavor, is subsumed by the recordkeeping practices of imperial powers and diminished by the very legacies of colonialism that Dunham was working to ameliorate. While the extant Dunham archival materials do hold sentimental value for those with whom she worked and who are charged with her legacy, for Dunham dancers and devotees the only institutional archival materials that retain any kind of cultural or research value are the video recordings of Dunham Technique, sanctioned by Dunham herself before her death and housed at the Library of Congress. That instruction in Dunham Technique was recorded offers one means of codifying Dunham's dance work; Dunham's dancers assert that it is only through modes of codification and transmission that Dunham Technique is—and can be—fixed (codification) and enduring (transmission).

With an eye toward decolonial archival praxis, the Dunham archives have the potential to function in relationship with the Dunham Technique with an expansion of the definition of archival records, an extension of archival provenance, and reimaginings of both archival custody and archival preservation. Dunham Technique consists of a series of codified, culturally informed phrases which can be read as a gestural document. Like other archival records, this gestural document is capable of maintaining and preserving non-dominant cultural context as well as representing a past shaped and informed by non-western cultural traditions, creating the conditions of possibility for a more decolonial archival praxis. Presently, the Dunham archives are situated within western epistemologies and maintain the tangible aspects of Dunham Technique, while the Dunham Technique itself maintains movement within a decolonial cultural context. As Dunham-trained Point Park University dance professor Ron Hutson suggested in an interview with me in 2013, to properly safeguard Dunham Technique, however, a new archival imaginary is essential:

> There's no question for me that Dunham's true archive is in her dancers' bodies. I think that the written word has value, I am a scholar, but I think some people who are in the field of dance are totally body-oriented and I think some of us, and I think that we are fortunate, are physically as well as verbally oriented and expressive. The scholarly aspects, the written aspects, are important. It helps people who haven't danced—and even people who have danced—understand dance. There's a place for that. But there's a transference of information from body to body that's very much like oral traditions. Oral tradition has been important since the dawn of time, and even though we write things down now, we codify, the oral tradition still works. From body to body as a learning tool, that still works too.

Around the globe, one can find examples of codified gestures which, with the proper visual literacy, can be read, understood, and used to transmit knowledge. These codified gestures, which I conceive of as gestural documents, have

the potential to dismantle imperial and colonial legacies that devalue records and recordkeeping practices that fall outside the European and neo-European commitment to the supremacy of the printed word.

The gestural document

> Long before the written word, information was stored in bodies, in cultural memories, and in oral traditions, enacted only in their performances (Bell 2008, p. 57).

Library and Information Science scholar Deborah Turner has argued that, viewed through the theoretical lens of social constructionism, documents can be oral (Turner 2012). Turner's concept of oral documents complements extant post- and decolonial scholarship in archival studies that holds that the evidentiary properties of records supersede their need to be text based (Bastian 2009; Sutherland 2016).

Turner's assertion is based on the premise that document studies, with its focus on tangible forms of evidence, have allowed information scholars to "better understand issues involved in the systematic transmission, storage, and retrieval of informational objects (Turner 2012)." Turner posits that a recent increase in the use of social constructionist theory (which emphasizes the significance of language and its centrality to the production of knowledge) among library and information science scholars is related to an increase in work that recognizes that information made available orally plays an essential role in knowledge production. Turner's work in orality and knowledge production concludes that the transmission of oral information leads to knowledge-based outcomes similar to those of physical documents; that is, information—*regardless of format*—is transmitted, and knowledge is constructed from that transmission (Turner 2012).

Turner's work focuses on orality in institutional settings. She holds that "orality not only helps reflect and maintain institutional contexts, it simultaneously perpetuates them (Turner 2007)." Historian and anthropologist Jan Vansina, whose work focuses on African societies prior to colonization, asserts that the oral tradition plays a dual function in representing both the past and the present (Vansina 1985). Taken together, Turner and Vansina's arguments suggest that information passed through non-textual means is capable of maintaining and perpetuating context while also representing the past. These two capabilities—maintaining context and representing the past—are both key foundational concepts in North American archivy, which is centered around the related notions of content, context, and structure. Extending this argument to information transmitted through gestural means, one can begin to construct an understanding of how the Dunham Technique, a codified repertoire of cultural information transmitted through gesture (dance), functions in ways similar to conventional, brick and mortar archives: these codified, information-rich gestures form a vocabulary. This dance vocabulary is rendered "readable" through the same kinds of visual literacies one uses to "read" sign language and various other forms of artistic expression, and these readable vocabularies, which convey meaning, function as gestural documents, much the same as Turner's oral documents. This

argument for "reading gesture" as a document or a record is reinforced by a demonstrated ongoing national interest in gesture and sign-language recognition technologies. As long as two decades ago, the National Science Foundation's Digital Libraries Initiative received in excess of 400 applications, many of which were requests to fund studies on human motion, gesture recognition and sign-language recognition in digital environments (National Science Foundation). The term "recognition" in a digital environment can be seen as synonymous with a term used for real-life human gesture recognition: visual literacy.

Visual literacy refers to the ability to understand visual forms of communication. As with other types of literacy, visual literacy in artistic terms is concerned with form (or structure), context, and content. To define these terms for the purposes of this argument, form refers to the arrangement of the visual elements or the formal qualities of the image; content concerns the "sensory, subjective, psychological, or emotional properties in response to an image" such as the emotional or intellectual message, while context indicates the set of circumstances or facts that surround a given event, including historical information about the artist or issues referenced in the art (University of Maryland Visual Literacy Toolbox). Visual literacy suggests that images, or what is seen, can be read and that meaning can be communicated through visual cues. Those who create visual images—such as choreographers—do so purposefully. In order to "read" or analyze an image, the audience must be able to understand the artist's purpose and recognize the techniques that have been used. In dance terms, this means that the form of the dance must have recognizable elements that have been codified, or set, and can be combined and repeated in any order as a language, retaining meaning even as context shifts. For Katherine Dunham, codification was a means of "fixing" her dance vocabulary—it was an opportunity to allow a culturally informed movement speak for itself and to (re)present and reinvigorate the cultural traditions of African diaspora peoples most at risk for loss or obsolescence.

I have now made several references in this article to the codification of Dunham Technique. Codification is both a legal and linguistic term that refers to the act or process of arranging something in a systematic form. Codification may also denote the result of such an act or process of arrangement. Linguistically, codification indicates that a language has been standardized, that it now adheres to a norm and that it can be read and understood by those who possess the proper literacy tools. Normalizing and standardizing a movement vocabulary has similar implications. For example, ballet—a concert dance form like Dunham Technique—was codified in the seventeenth century in the French courts of Louis XIV. Ballet enjoys its own vocabulary, based on French terminology; as a result, those conversant in ballet terminology can hear a command for a *jeté* and know immediately that they are expected to jump.[2] Likewise, when one sees a ballet dancer execute a *jeté* it is instantly recognizable as such. A *jeté* is comparable to a single word in the ballet lexicon. Combined with other "words" or codified gestures, a series of dance movements form a

[2] See for example American Ballet Theatre, "Ballet Dictionary," http://www.abt.org/education/dictionary/index.html and Wikipedia, "Ballet Glossary," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_ballet.

sentence, also recognizable as a phrase. Indeed, *phrase* is a dance term for exactly this—a series of connected movements which transmit meaning. In the Dunham lexicon, for example "fall and recover" is a phrase, both linguistic and gestural, codified by Dunham's dancers. The phrase requires a release at the midsection dropping the head to the floor, and a subsequent recovery to a standing position (Library of Congress 2002a). As scholars in the Arts Media and Engineering program at Arizona State University assert, "Phrases are a sequence of movements that exist at a higher semantic abstraction than gestures. The problem [of phrasal detection] is important since phrasal structure in dance plays a key role in communicating meaning (Dyaberi 2004)."

This understanding of phrasal structure in movement as capable of conveying meaning mirrors Deborah Turner's assertion that meaning can be transmitted through oral documents. I argue that, like text-based and oral documents, a *gestural document*—one comprised of codified gestures and/or phrases of gesture—is capable not only of communicating meaning, but also of serving the archival functions of maintaining and preserving content, context, and structure as well as representing the past. Performance studies scholar, Diana Taylor, argues in her seminal book, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, that "The live performance can never be captured or transmitted through the archive;" however, "the archive and the repertoire [described as "embodied memory," e.g., gestures, movement, orality] have always been important sources of information [each] exceeding the limitations of the other, in literate and semiliterate societies (Taylor 2003)." Taylor's notion of the archive is one that extends to the physical body, whereby performance, or what Taylor has termed "the repertoire" is, quite literally, an embodied cultural archive. So too, is the Kuma Hula of the Hālau o Kekuhi, school of hula in Hawai'i. Hālau o Kekuhi is a classic school of hula and a center of cultural knowledge. As Joy Lehuanani Enomoto and D. Keali'i MacKenzie argue in their 2018 piece on *Saltwater Archives*,

> The Kumu Hula of this halau are genealogically connected to the land they are from and the traditions they teach: hula (dance), oli (chant), mo'okū'auhau (genealogy) and mo'olelo (story/history). They descend from a line of eight generations of Kumu Hula. In this light, the archive is what is taught from one generation to another–the vast lore and knowledge of the Kumu Hula. This knowledge is then contained within the body–literally in the dances and chants memorized and performed by halau members. It is embodied within the skills passed down–the ability to craft implements, instruments and clothing.

As is the case with cultural memory in South America and with Hawaiian cultural traditions like hula, for Dunham Technique, meaning and context are specifically cultural. Dunham sought to restore a cultural past to a group of people from whom history, traditions, cultural expressions and cultural identity had been violently wrenched through the horrors of slavery, reconstruction, and the legacies of Jim Crow. Codification of Dunham Technique renders it effective as a gestural document, allowing it to be read and understood visually as a mode of cultural communication. I would further argue that the Dunham Technique consists of a series of codified, culturally informed phrases, which can be read as a gestural document. Like other archival records, this

gestural document is capable of maintaining and preserving cultural context as well as representing a culturally informed African diasporic past. Initial codification of Dunham Technique was done by Katherine Dunham with the help of Albirda Rose in 1986. Dunham and Rose spent six months poring over her materials in preparation for writing *Dunham Technique: A Way of Life* which served as the codification of some of the basic terminology Katherine Dunham used. As part of this process, Rose also worked with Master Instructors of Dunham Technique to codify the movement vocabulary of Dunham Technique.

Dunham dancer Ruth Beckford has said that there are three generations of Dunham Technique. By the time Rose wrote *Dunham Technique: A Way of Life*, she was able to discuss a fourth generation of Dunham Technique that began with the Dunham Seminars and continued until Dunham's death. This fourth generation of Dunham dancers are the last generation to be trained by Katherine Dunham herself; one is able, when looking at these dancers compared to Dunham's dancers in the 1940s, to see the evolution of Dunham Technique over time, much as one can track changes in linguistic patterns over time. For example, Dunham's dance company performs in the opening credits of the 1957 movie *Mambo*; later in the film is footage of a dance class that is representative of Level 1 Dunham Technique (which is no longer taught). To those who know how to read the gestural vocabulary of Dunham Technique, comparing *Mambo* with the archival footage at Library of Congress presents striking differences that allow the reader to connect cultural shifts from 1957 to 2002 (when the Library of Congress undertook its Dunham documentation project) to an evolution in gestural vocabulary and language.

Codification is an attempt to bring all of Dunham's work under the same umbrella; it is a way to make it last and to perpetuate the work. Plainly stated, there is a vocabulary of Dunham Technique and it is codified and readable as a gestural language. Each dance is also readable as a gestural document comprised of gestural phrases. In an effort to guarantee that Dunham Technique is codified and transmitted in a unified gestural voice, ensuring that Dunham Technique endures is now handled by a committee of Dunham-trained dancers and devotees. Together with Albirda Rose's book *Dunham Technique: A Way of Life*, the Library of Congress recordings and the embodied knowledge of Dunham's dancers create additional layers of codification. Dancers being considered for certification in Dunham Technique must excel in a rigorous program that begins with understanding how dance, society, and African diasporic culture are intertwined. Dancers must also have previous dance training in Dunham Technique and *evidence a working knowledge of the Dunham vocabulary*. Like sign language and ballet, Dunham Technique is comprised of a set vocabulary of movements which can be combined in varying ways to convey meaning and transmit knowledge. These vocabularies present the conditions of possibility to read gesture as a documentary record and for the reading of gestural documents to be a radical, liberatory, and decolonizing archival praxis.

Reading gesture as decolonizing archival praxis

As French historian Pierre Nora has argued, if we were able to live within memory we would not need to consecrate sites of memory. Rather, each gesture "would be experienced as the ritual repetition of a timeless practice in a primordial identification of act and meaning (Nora 1989)." I take up Nora's assertion in arguing for reading gesture as a decolonizing archival praxis by simultaneously naming gesture as an identification of act and meaning and recognizing the gestural document as a site of liberatory potential. I have previously argued that the continued privileging of writing and print in American archives has had devastating consequences for generations of Americans from the African diaspora and have made recommendations for creating space and accounting for oral records and traditions in the American archival discourse (Sutherland 2019). Here, I would like to extend those arguments to incorporate other kinds of embodied records, namely the gestural document. Records that account for nuance and complexity in African diasporic histories, evidence of historical traumas, evidence of African diasporic excellence and of non-western cultural praxis, and representations of non-western cultural beliefs have been silenced or rendered invisible by the enduring imperial and colonial sovereignty of American archivy. "While the privileging of narratives and documentary forms that reinforce and reinscribe ideologies of whiteness and white supremacy in American archives have been challenged by archival studies scholarship, there is little evidence that much if anything has been done to amend actual archival praxis.[3] It is here that I hope to make an immediate intervention by advocating for a decolonial praxis that includes expanding archival thinking to incorporate traditional knowledge systems not based in Eurocentric ideologies and paradigms.

The Dunham archives have the potential to function in relationship with the Dunham Technique with an expansion of the definition of archival records, an extension of archival provenance, and a reimagining of archival custody and archival representation. I contend that because the codification of gesture contributes to a sense of institutional credibility and trustworthiness, archivists should become proficient in reading gesture as a necessary and prerequisite visual literacy. In a 2014 interview with me about Katherine Dunham and the need to codify Dunham Technique, Point Park University Dunham instructor Ron Hutson asserted that "one of the things that gives ballet and modern dance such dignity is that there is this whole body of recorded information on them. They are all codified. And people don't look at Afrocentric dance forms, art forms, as having this kind of codification." Hutson is correct in his analysis. Dance critics from the 1940s through the mid-1960s, when Dunham's company disbanded, categorized her choreographic work as "Negro" or tribal dance, subtly implying in their reviews that these dance forms—and Dunham's work—lacked the seriousness and "high art" qualities of their western counterparts.

[3] It is worth noting that archival scholars such as Michelle Caswell have offered practical solutions in their work to guide others in dismantling white supremacy in archival spaces. See: Michelle Caswell, "Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives," *The Library Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (July 2017): 222–235.

In part as a result of this perception of Afro-Caribbean and other African diasporic dance forms as primitive and unsophisticated, and because of the knowledge that codification contributes to a sense of institutional and societal credence, codification of Dunham's repertoire became the primary way that Dunham's dancers chose to continue her legacy and preserve the Dunham Technique. This awareness on the part of Dunham and her devotees is evidenced in the Library of Congress documentation project, which carefully records Dunham herself teaching both the act and meaning of each gesture in her repertoire. Here, the archives function in relationship with the Dunham Technique to record, preserve, and maintain a series of gestural documents. Although the information conveyed in the record is embodied, it is no less legible or authoritative because it is an embodied text rather than a written one. The recording itself is not incidental, although it is primarily the custodial imperative of the archive that requires the recording. While Dunham herself began recording her work in the 1930s out of a fear of loss, projects such as the Merce Cunningham Dance Capsules evidence that other modes of preserving embodied records are possible.

Before his death in 2009 at the age of 90, dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham developed a legacy plan to preserve the dance work of his company as well as his original choreography. The Legacy Plan comprises a Legacy Tour, a digital preservation plan for Cunningham's dances, arrangements for the closure of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, and the transfer of all Company materials to the Merce Cunningham Trust (MCT Legacy Plan). The Legacy Tour commenced in February 2010 with a two-year celebration of Cunningham's life's work and gave international audiences a final opportunity to see Cunningham's original dances. What is most relevant to my argument here, however, is the creation of Digital Dance Capsules (MCT Digital Dance Capsules), digitized documentation related to 86 of Cunningham's dances. Cunningham's dance knowledge, largely pulled from the Cunningham archives, and inclusive of lighting, music, set design, choreography, and costumes are systematically described, digitized, and entered into a database for re-staging Cunningham's work. The Merce Cunningham Foundation is attempting to preserve Cunningham's key works so that future generations can study and perform these dances with knowledge of how they originally came to life. If a company seeks to perform a piece of Cunningham's choreography, however, they do not simply receive the Digital Dance Capsule, but also are assigned a Cunningham-trained dancer to work alongside their company in re-staging the piece.

Here, I am arguing for an archival praxis of analytical dualism wherein the structure and agency of archives are understood to be co-constitutive (i.e., structure is reproduced through agency which is simultaneously enabled—or constrained—by structure), allowing for the structure of the gestural record to be reproduced through the agency of embodiment, and in which embodiment as archival praxis is enabled by a liberatory and decolonial archival structure (non-western, non-custodial, and inclusive of multiple simultaneous epistemologies). As evidenced by both Dunham and Cunningham, the embodied gestural record and the extant archival record can be understood to work in tandem, each giving structure and agency to the other without losing their relative import and impact, or the ability to conceive of them as separate. An archival praxis of analytical dualism as a liberatory and decolonial

archival praxis must therefore also make intellectual space for record formats that do not fit neatly in boxes, for collections that defy traditional notions of provenance, and for non-custodial relationships with records and records creators. Embodied records (oral, gestural, or otherwise) will necessarily defy traditions of archival provenance and *respect des fonds*. These traditions are rooted in the French Revolution, "a simultaneous destruction and reconstruction of the archive, an attempt to both erase and recast the historical record (Bailey 2013)," and grounded in colonial practices (Bastian 2009).

As archivist Jefferson Bailey (2013) argues, provenance and *respect des fonds* were "born of a particular historic moment, for a particular type of archival document, and [were] conceived to address the practical needs of specific social circumstances." Reimagining provenance and *respect des fonds* in archival representation has come of age in the era of born digital records. Extending these new understandings of provenance to embodied records creates the conditions of possibility to privilege new and different contextual relationships as decolonial archival praxis. Community archives scholars and scholars of post-colonial archives have also argued extensively (Bastian 2001; Caswell et al. 2017; Drake and Williams 2017) that custodial relationships must be renegotiated, reinvisioned, and even dismantled in the service of more liberatory archives. While I will not retread this ground here, I will make another appeal to archivists enmeshed in western and imperialist/conformist traditions of archivy to embrace these calls to take up non-custodial and consultant roles.

I have already argued in these pages that gestural documents are capable of capturing and preserving cultural context as well as bringing into the present more robust and culturally informed readings of the past. Here, I extend that argument, asserting that the inclusion of gestural documents in the archival corpus is a potential means of remediating anti-Blackness in the archives. As Katherine Dunham was keenly aware, Black Americans and others from the African diaspora were stripped of cultural agency and cultural affluence as part of the colonial and imperial American project. Dunham sought to renew cultural power in people from the African diaspora living in the USA through the Dunham Technique's gestural connections to the diasporic past. Understanding Dunham Technique and other gestural forms as cultural documents and records and creating space for these kinds of epistemologies in archival discourse and praxis is a liberatory and reparative stance. Just as oral traditions from the African continent have been continued and maintained in African American, Black American, Caribbean American, and other diasporic communities, so too have traditions of dance and other forms of gestural expression. Through colonial endeavors, which seek to define these communities through the lens of whiteness and white supremacy, these embodied records have been denied constitutive authority in archives. By expanding archival notions of record, provenance, representation, custody, and preservation to include praxes around gesture, orality, plurality, self- and community-determination, and non-custodial consultancy relationships, it becomes possible to imagine the archives of the African diaspora: an archive of embodied records held in concert with other tangible records described in culturally affirming terms and cared for—with dignity and trust—by the people and communities who created them.

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