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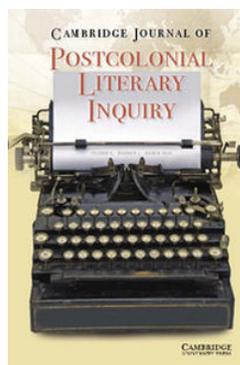
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Ananya Jahanara Kabir

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Plantation, Archive, Stage: Trans(post)colonial Intimations in Katherine Dunham's *L'Ag'ya* and *Little Black Sambo*

Ananya Jahanara Kabir
 King's College London

This article assesses the African American dancer and intellectual Katherine Dunham's vision and legacy for a performative history of the Black Atlantic by examining two of her early choreographic works, L'Ag'ya and Little Black Sambo. From little-known archival materials and her published writings, I reconstruct the genesis of these works in her fieldwork in the French Caribbean as well as in the phantasm of the Plantation. Through the emotional relationships between Africa, "Africa," and African diasporic expressive life that emerge, I excavate a hidden history for the modern subject as formed through not only the displacements generated by colonialism and slavery, but also unexpected new regimes of pleasure that were their historical consequences. The resulting imaginative and kinetic expressions that conflate colonial and postcolonial temporalities enable me to posit the limits and possibilities of "trans(post)colonial collaborations" within Dunham's repertoire as well as for the horizon of the present.

Keywords: Katherine Dunham, Black Atlantic dance, archive and repertoire, French Caribbean dance, *Little Black Sambo*, transcolonialism, trans(post)colonialism

When I first began a plan of this book I intended it to be concerned with all the gods who have walked through my life... Damballa and Agwe and Yemanja and Guede and Lenguesou and Simbi and the Congo gods... all these gods brought such fresh and delightful memories and vivid recall that I was willing to let them claim me for their own, at least for a time. It hasn't been easy, because the great baobab trees of Senegal—dry, aching stumps of branches extruding from gnarled bases as large as small huts, gaunt

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Ananya Jahanara Kabir, professor of English literature at King's College London, works at the intersection of embodiment, affect, and post-trauma in the global south. She directs Modern Moves, a European Research Council-funded research project that investigates the resilience and popularity of Afro-diasporic social dances formed through slavery and colonization.

reminders of prehistory—house their own rab, governing spirits that must be appeased by sorcery and complex curing ceremonies.

Katherine Dunham, “Epilogue,” *Island Possessed* (1969)

Here, three thousand miles from my centre of learning, either for my own awakened and undefined needs, or under pretext of fulfilling a mission, or a mixture of both, I was deep in the most banal and, at the same time, most esoteric of secret society inductions, that into ceremony, ritual, secret pact, blood sacrifice, into the vaudun or voodoo of Haiti. There we lay, scarcely breathing, waiting, listening, senses alert, packed like sardines much as the slave who crossed the Atlantic, motionless as though chained, some of us afraid.

Katherine Dunham, *Island Possessed* (1937)

In 1966, a sixty-year-old Katherine Dunham visited Dakar, Senegal, at the invitation of her long-time friend Léopold Senghor, who had appointed her as official adviser to the first-ever World Festival of Negro Arts.¹ The festival took place in April, but Dunham leased a house in Dakar, stayed on, and began writing *Island Possessed*, an engrossing memoir of her first visit to Haiti almost thirty years ago as a student of anthropology studying under Melville Herskovits at Chicago’s Northwestern University.² What in Dakar made her recall that precise, momentous year of her life and reproduce it in such clarity—as though it had all taken place just yesterday?

Dunham herself provides an answer in the book’s epilogue. In the passage I reproduce as my first epigraph, she conducts one of her frequent swerves from anthropological “objectivity” to immersion in pan-African spirituality, citing as her inspiration the dialogue between Afro-diasporic and African gods. Diverse Afro-diasporic gods are both brought to the surface by and placed in competition with the palpable presence of the “rab,” gods autochthonous—like the great baobab tree is—to Senegal. “It hasn’t been easy,” she declares dramatically yet nonchalantly, as if this extravagant consorting with multiple yet related divinities constitutes just another day in the life of Dunham. This parable of competing spirits succinctly enacts the complex emotional relationships between Africa, “Africa,” and the sites and manifestations of African diasporic expressive life that the Illinois-born, Chicago-educated Dunham first experienced during her eighteen months of fieldwork across the Caribbean (no doubt with Melville Herskovits’s thesis of “African

1 See the timeline of Dunham’s life provided by the Library of Congress: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihah/html/dunham/dunham-timeline.html>. (Accessed February 10, 2015). Léopold Senghor, poet, philosopher, cocreator of the concept of “négritude” and first president of Senegal, was a close friend of Dunham’s since their first meeting in Paris in the 1940s: see Joyce Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham: Dancing a Life* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 117. On the First Festival of Negro Arts, see Éloi Ficquet and Lorraine Gallimardet, “‘On ne peut nier longtemps l’art nègre’: Enjeux du colloque et de l’exposition du Premier Festival mondial des arts nègres de Dakar en 1966,” *Gradhiva* 10 (2009), 134–55. The festival is little discussed in Anglophone scholarship, but see Katherine Dunham, “Address Delivered at the Dakar Festival of Negro Arts,” *Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham*, eds., Katherine Dunham, Vèvè A. Clark, and Sara East Johnson (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 412–17.

2 Katherine Dunham, *Island Possessed* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1969).

retentions” ringing in her ears).³ Indeed, in the 1960s, in Dakar, she remembers herself recalling the Middle Passage while undergoing one of the most physically exacting experiences of her anthropological and spiritual awakening—her initiation into the vaudou cult of the snake-god Damballa.⁴ This recollection-within-a-recollection forms my second epitaph.

These coils of memory circle around the Black Atlantic and persist through Dunham’s astonishingly productive and varied career, bestowing on it shape, passion, and energy. For more than five decades, Dunham created choreographies for her dance company drawing on her experiences in and imaginings of Jamaica, Martinique, Haiti, Mexico, Brazil, Africa, and, of course, her African American heritage. “From her seminal mid-1930s fieldwork she re-created specific Afro-Caribbean dances into creative ballets on western stages, thus creating a dynamic confluence between anthropology and dance.... In the process, she clearly envisioned the African diaspora—the Black Atlantic—long before that nomenclature was ever used.”⁵ Despite the pioneering nature of this achievement, Dunham’s vision and legacy are far from adequately integrated into a wider understanding of “performance [as] the most recognizable intellectual traditions of the African diaspora.”⁶ To do so, we need to bring Dunham’s prolific writings in dialogue with her choreographic work, with her sensitivity to the “embodied wisdom” of Afro-diasporic dance,⁷ and with her training in one of the most celebrated anthropological traditions of the early twentieth century. We also need to revisit the early years of her intellectual and creative formation.

“When Miss Dunham undertook her fieldwork in the Caribbean in the mid-1930s, she was a young, highly educated, middle class, light-skinned African American.”⁸ What did it mean for such a person to pass through the doors of the University of Chicago, take off for more than a year (thanks to the prestigious Rosenwald fellowship) to live among maroons, fisherfolk, and vaudou priestesses in three Caribbean islands, cultivate friendships and romantic attachments at will, learn two French Creoles and the dances of different islands, return to Chicago, start her own company during the height of the Depression, and consistently reject the advice

3 See Melville Herskovits’s early work, e.g. *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990; first published 1941). After Dunham returned from her fieldwork, she switched to studying under Robert Redfield at the University of Chicago.

4 Dunham, *Island Possessed*, 117–40. This account, which takes up its seventh chapter, concludes the first of the book’s two sections.

5 Halifu Osumare, “Dancing the Black Atlantic: Katherine Dunham’s Research-to-Performance Method,” *AmeriQuests* 7.2 (2010): 1–12, at 1. See also Susan Manning, “Modern Dance, Negro Dance and Katherine Dunham,” *Textual Practice* 15.3 (2001): 487–505, at 495–96.

6 Sara E. Johnson, *The Fear of French Negroes: Transcolonial Collaboration in the Revolutionary Americas* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2012), 139. In a recent anthology of “Black Performance Theory,” there is only one mention of Dunham’s work—within the larger context of discussing African-derived spirituality in the work of African American concert dancers: see Carl Paris, “Reading ‘Spirit’ and the Dancing Body in the Choreography of Ronald K. Brown and Reggie Wilson,” in Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, eds., *Black Performance Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), pp.99–114, at 102.

7 Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

8 Ramsay Burt, “Hospitality and Translation in Katherine Dunham’s *L’Ag’Ya*,” *Proceedings [of the] Twenty-Sixth Annual Conference, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland, June 26–29, 2003* (Birmingham: AL: Society of Dance History Scholars, 2003), 8–11, at 8.

of male anthropologists while shaping, instead, her own destiny?⁹ In this singular path, the one constant was Dunham's desire to showcase the relationship between pan-Caribbean and African American expressive cultures and to demonstrate the Afro-diasporic contribution to global modernity by staging that relationship through affection, humor, and passion. What was her emotional relationship to the phantasm of "Africa" decades before she set foot on that continent? What erasures did she have to effect, along with the retrievals and reconstructions? My essay addresses these questions through Dunham's published and unpublished writings concerning two productions of 1938 for the Chicago stage: *L'Ag'ya* and *Little Black Sambo*. While the former became a highly successful part of the Katherine Dunham Company's repertoire, the latter sank into oblivion, even for Dunham herself.¹⁰

I encountered these materials during archival research at Southern Illinois University, the repository for a large collection of papers, photographs, and footage that Dunham deposited there in 1965 after an eleven-week engagement as the university's artist in residence.¹¹ I came to this archive after being enraptured by *Island Possessed*, and, as its author had been—by Port-au-Prince.¹² Dunham's career now constitutes a crucial part of the research project I direct, "Modern Moves," which investigates the global popularity and transoceanic histories of African-heritage rhythm cultures.¹³ These often hidden histories reveal how the modern subject was formed through not only the tragic displacements generated by colonialism and slavery, but also unexpected new regimes of pleasure that were the historical consequences of those displacements. Yet, as Saidiya Hartman warns us, "issues of terror and enjoyment frame the exploration of subjection... The desire to don, occupy, or possess blackness or the black body as a sentimental resource and/or locus of excessive enjoyment is both founded on and enabled by the material relations of chattel slavery."¹⁴ With this caveat in mind, how do we assess the pleasures of plantation-derived performative traditions? Dunham's writings of 1938 reveal her

9 As reminisced a peer: "As we drugged away at the university, condemned by lack of artistic talent and beauty to become academics, we did not look at her with envy but with admiration, not only for her professional skill but also for being able to parlay a year of successful fieldwork in anthropology on a Rosenwald grant into the launching of a stage career." (St. Clair Drake, "Honoring Katherine Dunham, 26th May 1976," *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 572–77, at 575). On her fieldwork experiences (both personal and intellectual), apart from the candid yet guarded accounts of *Island Possessed*, see Katherine Dunham, *Katherine Dunham's Journey to Accompany* (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1971). For Dunham's struggles during the Depression, see her essay, "Survival: Chicago after the Caribbean," *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 85–125, and Box 2 (Correspondence) of the Dunham Papers held in Southern Illinois University. On Dunham and the male anthropologists, see Katherine Dunham, "The Anthropological Approach to the Dance," *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 508–13, at 509.

10 There is no mention of *Little Black Sambo* in the list of choreographed works prepared by Dunham herself for Appendix 1, Dunham et al., ed., *Kaiso*, 633–37, although at least one performance of this piece did take place in Chicago on August 29, 1938. See the review in *The Chicago Defender*, September 3, 1938, 19.

11 See <http://archives.lib.siu.edu/?p=collections/controlcard&id=6>. Accessed February 10, 2015, for details of the archive's holdings.

12 I visited Port-au-Prince, Haiti, during November 2013 to attend the Association of Haitian Studies' annual conference and conduct research into social dance practices in Haiti.

13 See the project website at www.modernmoves.org.uk. Accessed February 10, 2015.

14 Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7, 21.

grappling with this very philosophical and psychological conundrum. Her responses participate in and revivify what Joseph Roach calls circum-Atlantic “genealogies of performance.”¹⁵

My essay excavates these genealogies to bring circum-Atlantic expressive traditions closer to the concerns of “postcolonial literary inquiry.” The temporally staggered (de)colonization of the Atlantic rim, and its linguistic fracturing by different imperial regimes, imposes methodological barriers on analyzing that “submarine unity” that Black Atlantic movement-worlds have always kept alive.¹⁶ I thus cross-hatch evidence from both the “archive” and the “repertoire” to refresh the potential, reach, and remit of the “postcolonial.”¹⁷ Dunham’s fascination with the French Caribbean island of Martinique, manifested in *L’Ag’ya*, and her attraction to *Little Black Sambo*’s phantasmatic Africa, which comes already merged with a phantasmatic India, testify to traumas, survivals, erasures, and intimations of trans(post)coloniality. This subliminal layer of the dancer’s imaginary is best reconstructed through the archival materials I privilege—the fragment, the scribble, the minor essay, and the field notebook.¹⁸ I dredge up these less-visible graphic traces from the Dunham Papers to illuminate the kinetic creative processes of someone whose “critics seem unable to reconcile her sensual and vibrant performance with her intellectual discussions of the relationship between dance and society.”¹⁹ My use of material that came to me only through my physical journey to Dunham’s archive is also a scholar’s way of paying homage to her acute awareness of the “import of the physical imprint of cultural experience.”²⁰

“Love-Theft by Witchcraft”

L’Ag’ya premiered at the Federal Theatre in Chicago on January 27, 1938: Dunham’s earliest dramaturgic creation on her return to Chicago from the Caribbean. At twenty-one minutes long, it was part of the nascent Dunham Company’s Ballet Fedré, surely a wordplay on the Federal Theatre Project of which Dunham had been recently appointed artistic director. *L’Ag’ya* consists of three acts divided into five scenes that are in turn subdivided into eight dance sections: Market Scene, Pas de Deux, Zombie Scene, Mazouk, Beguine, Charm Dance (Majumba), *L’Ag’ya* Fight, and Death Scene.²¹ These sequences are generated by a simple love triangle set in what programs down the years describe as “the tiny eighteenth century fishing village of

15 Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 24.

16 See Ananya Jahanara Kabir, “Oceans, Cities, Islands: Sites and Routes of Afro-Diasporic Rhythm Cultures,” *Atlantic Studies* 11.1 (2014): 106–24. For Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s famous declaration, “the unity is submarine,” see his “Caribbean Man in Space and Time,” *Savacou* 11.12 (1975): 1–11, at 7.

17 Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

18 An approach I already formulated in Ananya Jahanara Kabir, “Reading Between the Lines: Whitley Stokes, Scribbles, and the Scholarly Apparatus,” *The Tripartite Life of Whitley Stokes (1830–1909)* ed. Paul Russell (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 78–97.

19 Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham*, 49.

20 Ibid.

21 For more on the structure of *L’Ag’ya*, see VèVè A. Clark, “Katherine Dunham’s Tropical Revue,” *Black American Literature Forum* 16.4 (1982), 147–52.

Vauclin,” Martinique. Loulouse and Alcide are in love, but the jealous and spurned Julot seeks to thwart their happiness. Entering the Forest of the Zombies, he obtains a love-charm, the *cambois*, from Roi Zombie (the Zombie King). Julot manages to administer the cambois to the entire village, which has assembled at a ball to dance the mazurka (*mazouk* in Creole) and beguine. The villagers turn to stone; Loulouse breaks into the majumba dance, slowly shedding her clothes for Julot. But Alcide overcomes the effects of the cambois and challenges his rival to a round of l’ag’ya (*ladja* in Creole), a Martinican martial arts form not unlike Brazilian capoeira and Reunionnais moring in history and form.²² Although Alcide throws Julot, the latter sneaks up from behind and kills Alcide just as the reunited lovers embrace. Bereft, Loulouse grieves over her dead lover’s body.

From the start, *L’Ag’ya* won the hearts of its audiences. An effusive review appeared the very next day: “Miss Dunham’s dance drama ‘L’Ag’ya’ carried off the evening’s first honors. Her large troupe of colored dancers moved with admirable ease and lack of affectation. John Pratt’s handsome tropical costumes and Robert Sanders’ pointed and danceable score shared the distinction of Miss Dunham’s choreography.”²³ It continued to provide the *pièce de resistance* in Dunham Company revues through the subsequent decades. New York, Hollywood, Copenhagen, Paris, London—wherever the company performed, they performed *L’Ag’ya*. In 1938, when the original score went missing, Dunham commissioned its creator, Robert Sanders, to re-create it; *L’Ag’ya* reemerged through the sounds of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra at the July 1944 Hollywood performance. Watching it in 1949, one of London’s leading ballet critics proclaimed: “this daughter of slaves has come as a conqueror to Europe.”²⁴ In April 1988, *L’Ag’ya* took center stage at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre’s retrospective and tribute, “The Magic of Katherine Dunham.” This was the only time that Dunham sat in the audience watching someone else play Loulouse.²⁵ *L’Ag’ya*’s first performance had cast Dunham’s friends and lovers in the main male parts, and populated the stage with people “off the street: maids, cooks, typists and chauffeurs.”²⁶ Although the cast soon began to reflect the increasing professionalism of the Dunham Company, with Alcide, Julot, and Roi Zombie being roles reserved for star dancers like Vanoye Aitkens and Lenwood Morris, it was always Dunham who played Loulouse. Some of her most arresting studio and stage photographs—barefoot, in a white *broderie anglaise* petticoat with ribbon trim typical of Martinique—are from *L’Ag’ya* performances.

What was the secret of *L’Ag’ya*’s success? Critical reception of Dunham’s work evolved between pre- and inter-war America.²⁷ Nevertheless, reviews of *L’Ag’ya* are consistent about what constituted its appeal. In 1938, a reviewer writes delightedly of “the folklore of Martinique,” “love theft by witchcraft,” “zombie charm,”

22 Robert Farris Thompson, “Black Martial Arts of the Caribbean,” *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas* 20.37 (1987): 44–47.

23 Cecil Smith, “Federal Dance Project Gives First Program,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 28, 1938.

24 Richard Buckle, ed. *Katherine Dunham, her Dancers, Singers, Musicians* (London: Ballet Publications, 1949), x.

25 Alan S. Kriegsman, “Ailey Does Dunham,” *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 595–97.

26 Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham*, 114–15.

27 See Manning, “Negro Dance.”

“Miss Dunham (an exquisite figure) ... yield[ing]her clothing item by item until Henry Pitt, her rightful swain, suicidally intervenes,” “brilliant costumes,” “delightful movement,” and the “tragic and powerful ending;”²⁸ in 1988, a reviewer was still talking about “villainous interloper,” “evil zombie king,” “stiff-legged zombies who rise from the ground of their foggy graveyard, a cackling witch doctor, vigorous folk dances and a frenzied, erotic striptease.”²⁹ Michael Jackson’s music video for *Thriller* (1982) surely colors the later reviewer’s imagination, but, as the similar language of both reviews suggests, the ingredients that seduce remain constant: a simple but strong storyline populated by folk and quasi-fairytale figures that hover at the edge of rationality; inspired costumes which drew equally on historical sources and Dunham’s fieldwork (frills, ruffles, and headscarves for the villagers; dark Grecian lines for the zombies; and, for Roi Zombie, a combination of a dressing gown and a grass skirt);³⁰ a spirited score, and a variety of dances enthusiastically performed by African American non-professionals. Through their unexpected encounter with a kinetic history both familiar and estranged, they “gave the stage the dimension of reality which made the folk myths believable.”³¹ Her principal dancers regularly cited *L’Ag’ya* as eliciting their most memorable work.³² And there was the mind and body of Dunham herself: as Loulouse, and as the work’s fons et origo: “I don’t think anyone else used classical ballet [as I did] in *L’Ag’ya*.”³³

“Ecstases de Vauclin”

In Box 48 of the Morris Library’s Dunham Papers (Manuscripts series) is a slim, blue-covered, A4-size notebook of eight pages dated 1936. Handwritten on its front cover is “Miss Katherine Dunham,” and, at an angle to the name, “cinnamon, allspices, cloves.” The date and contents—staccato handwritten observations on dance—point it to being a field notebook from her time in Martinique. On its first page, under the rubric “Haute-Taille,” are instructions in French for this set dance for couples that descended from the European quadrille.³⁴ Over the next two pages, other couple dances popular in the French Caribbean are mentioned: “Biguine,” “Polka,” “Mazouk,”

28 Eugene Stinson, “Music Views, Some Dancing,” *Chicago Daily News*, February 3, 1938. Cited in Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham*, 114.

29 http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1988-04-14/news/8803080817_1_aley-dancers-katherine-dunham-theatricalizing. Accessed February 10, 2015.

30 Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham*, 117: “The costumes of ‘L’Ag’Ya,’ though imaginatively conceived by Pratt, included authentic hats, designs, and materials she had brought back from the Caribbean.”

31 *Ibid.*, 114–15.

32 In the words of one of her principal dancers, Vanoye Aitkens: “the hardest, not the most difficult, but the most demanding would have been years of doing *L’Ag’ya*. *L’Ag’ya* is three acts, and I had a great response because of that fight at the end. It had to look realistic. I didn’t look forward to the death scene because I’m there, getting my last breath. I perspired like a dog, and winter, summer, spring, or fall, I had pools of water—even in Columbia in freezing weather. That was really burdensome and there was no one else to do that part except me. Do you understand? No one, ever. I had no understudy.” (VèVè A. Clark, “On Stage with the Dunham Company: An interview with Vanoye Aitkens,” *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 274–87, at 283); Julie Robinson Belafonte, wife of Harry, principal dancer of Dunham Company in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, said she loved dancing in *L’Ag’ya*’s zombie scene (VèVè A. Clark, “An Anthropological Band of Beings: An Interview with Julie Robinson Belafonte,” *Ibid.*, 364–81, at 374).

33 Clark, “On Stage,” in *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 244.

“Biguine Belair,” together with occasional marginal annotations (“rumba transposed as beguine [sic]”). Soon the writing peters out into jottings. “‘Bele martiniquaise; bele guadeloupeanne; bele dominicaise; bele cayennaise,’” a sequence declares, suggesting Dunham’s interest in the prevalence of the Martinican folk dance form “bele” in neighboring islands (Guadeloupe, Dominica) and in French Guyana (Cayenne).³⁵ Below “bele martiniquaise” are indications of costuming used for the dance: “grande robe, jupe” (large dress, skirt). Dunham’s analytical bent is visible in a list of villages, occupations, and the names of dances filling the notebook’s last two pages: for instance, “St Joseph—canne à sucre (sugarcane), banane (banana), ananas (pineapple), distillery; ag’ya, haute-taille, belere”; “Rivere-Salee—largest factories, small proprietors of sugarcane who sell to usine-Ag’ya is much danced”; “Trois Ilets—large pottery—tiles—lime—fishing secondary—best ag’ya drummer, much interest in ag’ya for fighting, belere known.” The prominence of “ag’ya” in this list reveals an early attraction to the kinetic practice somewhere between dance and fight that will reappear as the climactic moment in the eponymous *L’Ag’ya* two years later. In the list, too, is “Vauclin- factory, sev(eral) distilleries, sugarcane, fishing, ag’ya, belere well known, haute-taille.”

This, then, is the “tiny eighteenth century fishing village of Vauclin,”³⁶ on the southeast coast of Martinique. Of the many villages where Dunham, as “all dancer and little scientist” enjoyed “the festivals, dance halls, rhythms, and laughter of the island,”³⁷ Vauclin left on her the greatest impact. It was here that she filmed an actual performance of the ag’ya with a 16mm Kodak Special II camera.³⁸ Not unsurprisingly, Vauclin lent its name to the setting of *L’Ag’ya*. Even more interestingly, it played a central role in a sequence of essays entitled “Sketchbook of a Dancer in Martinique,” conceived by her between 1937 and 1938. A sheet of typescript paper from the same box as the blue notebook contains the following “plan for a complete overview”:

- I Fort de France (with apologies)
- II Bamboo and Fujia (in the north)
- III Procession to the Sea (in the south)
- IV Ecstases de Vauclin [ecstasies of Vauclin]
 - Les Pecheurs [the fishermen]
 - Les Vierges [the virgins]
 - L’Ag’ya
 - Constance
- V La Boule Blanche (bigine-bigine!)³⁹

34 Dominique O. Cyrille, “The Politics of Quadrille Performance in Nineteenth-Century Martinique,” *Dance Research Journal* (2006): 43–60; for an overview of the Afro-diasporic transformation of European set dances including those mentioned in this notebook—the mazurka, the polka, and the beguine, see John F. Szwed and Morton Marks, “The Afro-American Transformation of European Set Dances and Dance Suites,” *Dance Research Journal* (1988): 29–36.

35 For a useful discussion of the “bele” (from the French “bel air”; Creole spellings vary, as Dunham’s own jottings illustrate), see Johnson, *Fear of French Negroes*, 149–55.

36 Dunham, “Survival,” *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 97.

37 Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham*, 63–64.

38 Dunham, “Dunham Technique Prospectus,” *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 529–35, at 534.

39 See Box 48 (Manuscripts) of the Dunham Papers. Where necessary, I have inserted translations into English within square brackets.

We do not know whether all these pieces were ever written. The incunabula of Box 48 include complete typed drafts of only four essays: “La Boule Blanche,” “L’Ag’ya,” “Les Vierges,” and “Les Pêcheurs.” Of these, “La Boule Blanche” and “L’Ag’ya” found an unexpected showcase in a 1939 volume of the gentlemen’s magazine *Esquire*, whose owner, Al Smart, Dunham had met at a Rosenwald party in Chicago earlier that year.⁴⁰ These extant constituent parts of “the ecstasies of Vauclin,” structurally central to the planned “Sketchbook of a Dancer in Martinique,” supplement what the jottings in her real sketchbook indicate: that for Dunham, the rhythm world of Martinique was one of her earliest sources of creative inspiration and that Vauclin was a microcosm of this world.

Despite their provisional and protean quality, Dunham considered these incunabula and stray notes precious enough to preserve them for two decades and then include them within her first official archive. Precious they indeed are, offering unique insight into the creative process behind a work of constant significance to her repertoire. Most crucially, they help correct certain assumptions regarding the genesis of *L’Ag’ya*. It was certainly inspired by “an event during her Caribbean field trip in 1935–1936 when she witnessed and filmed the *ag’ya*, the fighting dance of Martinique”;⁴¹ nevertheless, as proclaimed by a scribbled sequence on the blue notebook’s inside cover—“ag’ya- belere- haute-taille- ag’ya- belere-jumba-haute-taille”—the *ag’ya* coexisted on a rhythm spectrum that included different dance genres. Moreover, the African-heritage constituents of this spectrum are, at this early moment in *L’Ag’ya*’s history, wholly French Caribbean: *pace* the Library of Congress’s statement that its choreography included “traditional folk and social dance forms such as the *habanera* (Cuba), the *majumba* (Brazil), and the *mazouk*, the *béguine*, and the *ag’ya* (Martinique).”⁴² There is no “habanera” in this version, and neither is the “majumba” (called “jumba” in the sequence cited above) Brazilian—as we shall see in the following section. Finally, as evident in the notebook’s list of villages with their occupations and dances, Dunham was keenly interested in the relationship between dance and labor. “Underline names of towns in order of importance: fishing—black; factories and distilleries—red; cultivation private—purple; specialized industries as basketry, pottery, mass cultivation—green”: declares a “note to self” on the notebook’s inside cover. Clearly, the conjunction of aesthetic, analytical, historical, and kinetic considerations was already in place during her fieldwork in 1936.

“Pride in Their Rhythms and Their Bodies”

These archival traces reveal Dunham’s understanding and use of dance to reconcile the different expressive cultures of the North American and Caribbean African diasporas. In the uncertainty of the Depression, *L’Ag’ya*, her first balletic experiment after returning to Chicago, gave ordinary African Americans the chance to

40 See Dunham, “Survival,” *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 113. “These stories... were the first to be published in *Esquire* either by a woman or by a black writer.” (Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham*, 107). “Les Pêcheurs,” later titled “Promenade to the Ocean,” also appeared in *Esquire*.

41 <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ih/as/html/dunham/dunham-notes-lagya.html>. Accessed February 10, 2015).

42 *Ibid.*

escape from the breadline through dance. Dunham attributed their initial reluctance to dance on stage to Christian devoutness.⁴³ The distinction between their Protestant upbringing, which she shared, and the Catholic islands whose African-descendant population had developed their imaginative and kinetic lives very differently from North American black people, had fascinated her during fieldwork; the unpublished essay “Les Vierges” juxtaposes the sensuous pleasures of “the full-bosomed, strong legged brown girls who stride to the sea” with their veneration of virgin saints. Dunham’s “real delight and sense of achievement” lay in introducing Chicago’s church-going “proletariat” to “the hip-swaying, shoulder-shaking, lusty enjoyment of such indigenous Martiniquan dances as the majumba and beguine.” Statements that her imagination assigns to the fishermen of Vauclin are equally applicable to her dancers: They “may have forgotten the significance of this dance, but the blood of their ancestors is strong. They have not forgotten the dance.”⁴⁴ Theirs is a shared ancestral reclamation. Those fishermen—“naked to the waist, trousers rolled up to the knee, their magnificent black torsos swing[ing] in perfect rhythm as they haul the heavy nets across the sand and raise them to hang on a line of bamboo poles”⁴⁵—animated her transformation of the Chicago cast. The “cooks and maids and chauffeurs and waiters of all sizes and shapes,”⁴⁶ who danced her arrangements, in turn animated her recollection of the fishermen at work: “They must feel pride in their rhythm and their bodies.”⁴⁷

During rehearsals for *L’Ag’ya*, the mimetic capacity of Chicago’s urbanized African Americans uncannily collapsed separate histories of diaspora: “the creole waltz and mazurka they performed like true veterans, bowing, curtsying, shuffling, fluttering their beribboned fans and embroidered lace kerchiefs, swaying to Robert Sanders’ suave rhythms as I had imagined the slave population of those islands would have done in the mimicry of the masters of the big house.”⁴⁸ In this adeptness, Dunham’s cast were repeating the trans-American embodied history of these couple dances, which, arising out of European musical cultures, were transformed through the slaves’ inherited rhythmic habits. Most prominent within these inherited Africanisms was what Western musicology would call “syncopation,” a rhythmic fact realized (though not necessarily simultaneously) on musical and kinetic levels.⁴⁹ Concurrently, distinct sartorial styles mimicked—just a bit too faithfully, recalling Bhabha’s notion of “sly civility”—European codes often denied through sumptuary laws, offering early Afro-diasporic versions of what Mbembe has termed “African modes of self-writing.”⁵⁰ Dunham relied on flamboyant costume for maximum

43 Dunham, “Survival,” *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 97.

44 Dunham, “L’Ag’ya,” Box 48, The Dunham Papers. The version published in *Esquire* is reproduced as “L’Ag’ya of Martinique,” in *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 201–07.

45 Dunham, “Les Pêcheurs,” Box 48, The Dunham Papers.

46 Dunham, “Survival,” *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 97.

47 Dunham, “Les Pêcheurs.”

48 Dunham, “Survival,” *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 99.

49 On syncopation and African music, see Kofi Agawu, *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 55–97.

50 Homi Bhabha, “Sly Civility,” *The Location of Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 132–44; Achille Mbembe and Steven Rendall, “African Modes of Self-Writing,” *Public Culture* 14.1 (2002): 239–73. On the psychological implications of sumptuary codes under slavery, see Joseph Roach,

theatricality, and her archives confirm her avid interest in the use of European dress by freed and enslaved Afro-Caribbean populations. *L'Ag'ya* used elaborate eighteenth-century creole dress for its showcases of beguine and mazurka. But how empowering ultimately were these “sticky webs of copy and contact”?⁵¹ The “big house” is a traumatic splinter in Dunham’s post-slavery self. It is both evoked on stage and displaced through spatio-temporal and socio-economic remoteness (the “tiny eighteenth-century fishing village”). Similar recognition-in-denial of this ur-site of “slavish imitation” occurs in *The Black Jacobins*, where C. L. R. James lambasts house slaves for their unerring imitation of the courtly dances from Europe that provided the big house’s main entertainment.⁵²

Yet neither James nor Dunham can let go of the couple dance. As Afro-diasporic subjects, they understand well the ironies and new possibilities of creolized performance. But for both, the endless repetition necessitated by mimicry can enable release from history only under certain conditions. For James, the Black Jacobins could rise in revolution because the syncopated quadrilles and minuets existed alongside the drums in the Bois Cayman that beat out vaudou rhythms kept alive in secret societies.⁵³ On her part, Dunham had realized that the couple dance escaped from mere imitation from its continued proximity to African kinetic repertoires that survived throughout the Caribbean as signifiers of resistance, *marronage*, and deep African-ness.⁵⁴ In Martinique, these latter forms included structured movement within drum circles where the percussion was provided by the *ti-bwa* and *tambouye*: the *ag'ya*, of course, but also the different forms of *bele*. In particular, one of the movements of the *bele*, the *majumba*, caught her imagination. In her essay, “*L'Ag'ya*,” she describes how “a man and a woman alone took the centre and danced the *ma'jhumbwe*, a dance more intimate and sexual in its import.”⁵⁵ Her desire to replicate this special energy led to *L'Ag'ya*'s “*majumba*”: the dance performed by Loulouse under the influence of the *cambois*. During this sequence, the orchestra stopped, live drumming began, and Loulouse/Katherine danced her notorious “strip-tease.”⁵⁶ In 1970s Martinique, “*madjoumbe*,” which also means “pitchfork,” came to signify a roots movement in music, dance, and culture.⁵⁷ But for Dunham, the *majumba* was always the “love dance of Ancient Africa.”⁵⁸ This discrepancy reminds us that *L'Ag'ya*, ultimately, was a fabrication of island life based as much on fieldwork as on fantasy, longing, and wish-fulfilment.

“Sweating Blood: Intangible Heritage and Reclaimed Labor in Caribbean New Orleans,” *Performance Research* 13.4 (2008): 140–48.

51 Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 21.

52 C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 2001), 19.

53 *Ibid.*, 14–19.

54 On Afro-diasporic kinetic resistance, see Peter Fryer, *Rhythms of Resistance: African Heritage Music in Brazil* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), on maroons, see now Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

55 Dunham, “*L'Ag'ya*,” Box 48 (Manuscripts), The Dunham Papers.

56 For an excellent reconstruction of this moment, see Burt, “Hospitality,” 10.

57 Note the illustration of a stylized pitchfork on the cover of the 1999 album *Madjoumbe* by the Martinican roots music group Malavoi. Thanks to John Armstrong for this information (personal communication, September 2014).

58 Dunham, “Survival,” *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 97.

Purple Shoes, Green Umbrella, Tiger-Yellow Pancakes

I now explicate this relationship between fantasy and fieldwork by turning to Dunham's other production of 1938 and the inaugurator of that year's autumn season: *Little Black Sambo*. Under her directorship, the Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre Project's Chicago branch staged this work at the city's Great Northern Theatre on the 29th of August.⁵⁹ Because Dunham's next big undertaking after *L'Ag'ya*, the two productions would have developed consecutively, if not concurrently, in her mind; yet the afterlives of each work strikingly diverged. Every aspect of *L'Ag'ya*—scenography, score, choreography, libretto—was a product of Dunham's creativity. No precedent for it existed in the graphic domain.⁶⁰ But it left a substantial enough archival footprint to enable us to reconstruct its form and its reception. *Little Black Sambo* presents the opposite picture. Performed only once, it benefits from none of the photographic and descriptive record that accrued around *L'Ag'ya*. Its clearest archival trace consists of seven loose sheets of paper in the same box that contains the writings and jottings about Vauclin examined previously.⁶¹ On these seven sheets Dunham had written out, in pencil, her paraphrase of the Little Black Sambo story, with an eye to the choreography and concomitant moods she intended to convey through it. No other material evidence of the production seems to have survived. Yet, because this story draws on a text with a complex print history throughout the English-speaking world since its appearance in 1899, we can assess with some confidence how Dunham's version would have differed from its predecessors. These differences, in conjunction with her re-creation of island life in *L'Ag'ya*, help me unpack what I have called the “trans(post)colonial intimations” that shape Dunham's diasporic consciousness in this period.

The originating text for Dunham's piece is the children's storybook *Little Black Sambo*, written by a Scotswoman of Empire, Helen Bannerman, in the 1890s. Born in Edinburgh, and living in India as the wife of an imperial medical officer, Bannerman wrote and illustrated this story to amuse her children while on a train journey, purportedly between the southern Indian locations of Kodaikanal and Madras.⁶² Little Black Sambo is a boy who lives in a jungle; his parents are Mumbo and Jumbo. Mumbo presents Sambo with a set of new clothes: a pair of purple shoes lined with red silk, a little red jacket, a little blue pair of trousers, and a splendid green umbrella. Accoutred thus, Sambo sets off for a walk whereupon he encounters four very hungry tigers. Their appetite for Sambo is kept at bay only by his offer, to each tiger, of one of these items of clothing. Not only are the tigers readily diverted by these sartorial offerings, but they are prompted by their possession into narcissistic infighting, which leads them to self-combust into pools of butter. The story ends with Sambo's parents, Mumbo and Jumbo,

59 *The Chicago Defender*, September 3, 1938, 19.

60 I use this sense of the “graphic” after Fred Moten's articulation of the dialectic between the “graphic” and the “kinetic” as illuminating African American aesthetics. See his *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

61 Box 48 (Manuscripts), The Dunham Papers.

62 Elizabeth Hay, *Sambo Sahib: The Story of Little Black Sambo and Helen Bannerman* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1981), 24–27. Many editions of Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* exist. For this essay, I used a number of early editions published successively from 1899 onward.

using the butter to make tiger-yellow pancakes of which Sambo devours 169. Eye-catching illustrations of the narrative's major moments enliven this simple, if bizarre tale. Published from Edinburgh in 1899, the story quickly gained popularity throughout the Anglophone world. Early reviews confirm that it was the text's short sentences, repetition, rhythm and cadence, pleasing synchronization of text and story, and above all, its folktale simplicity that ensured this positive reception: "this story which might almost have come out of some folklore collection, has about it an effortless perfection which baffles analysis."⁶³

Because similar ingredients went into the narrative of *L'Ag'ya*, we can see how these aesthetic possibilities would have appealed to Dunham, although she could not have been unaware of the racist controversies that *Little Black Sambo* was increasingly generating. Although Bannerman had not verbalized the race of her protagonists, her choice of names suggested a stereotyped, if not pejorative, invocation of an African heritage: Sambo was a popular name in Blackface minstrelsy,⁶⁴ and Mumbo and Jumbo had become a phrase suggesting "gibberish" with a connotation of vaudou's perceived irrationality.⁶⁵ Moreover, Bannerman's simplified illustrations showed a dark-skinned, black-haired family in clothes reminiscent of the African diaspora—knotted headscarf, striped blouse, and Madras skirt for Mumbo and jaunty stripes for Jumbo. The American versions of *Little Black Sambo* that soon proliferated, including pirated ones, progressively reinterpreted Sambo as the African American "pickaninny" stereotype.⁶⁶ "Possibly, the popularity of Sambo was due to an acceptance of racism and a fascination with the distorted images of blacks presented in the entertainment industry," suggests a historian of the text's American reception.⁶⁷ By 1917, Sambo's face starts resembling minstrel makeup, and by 1933, the caricatured features of Sambo and his parents prompted Langston Hughes to declare the text as "amusing undoubtedly to the white child, but like an unkind word to one who has known too many hurts to enjoy the additional pain of being laughed at."⁶⁸ Yet Hughes's dear friend Dunham chose to rework precisely this "unkind word," even roping in Shirley Graham, future wife of W. E. B. DuBois, to create its music and scenography.⁶⁹ What made these African American women at the vanguard of the Chicago Renaissance turn their collective talents to this problematic work?

63 Phyllis J. Yuill, *Little Black Sambo: A Closer Look* (New York: Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1976), 4–8, at 7.

64 Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in 19th c America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 31, n. 49.

65 A history reappropriated by Ishmael Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972); see the discussion by Barbara Browning, *Infectious Rhythm: Metaphors of Contagion and the Spread of African Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 12, 13, and *passim*.

66 Hay, *Sambo Sahib*, 155–75.

67 Yuill, *Little Black Sambo*, 9.

68 Langston Hughes, "Books and the Negro Child," *Children's Library Yearbook* 4 (1932), 108–10. For the history of *Little Black Sambo*'s North American reception, see Yuill, *Little Black Sambo*, 43, and also Hay, *Sambo Sahib*, 153–59. For the friendship between Dunham and Hughes, see Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham*, 25.

69 Jodi Van Der Horn-Gibson, "Dismantling Americana: Sambo, Shirley Graham, and African Nationalism," *American Popular Culture* 7.1 (2008). Accessible at www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2008/van_der_horn_gibson.htm. Accessed February 10, 2015.

“Melted Butter (Or ‘Ghi,’ as It Is Called in India)”

The answer lies in certain aspects of Bannerman’s text that undercut *Little Black Sambo*’s recalibration as a potentially unflattering African American story. Although the illustrations lent themselves to stereotypes damaging to black self-perception, the storyline itself encouraged the text’s recuperation as an affirmative tale of survival through Sambo’s quick thinking and the tigers’ self-destruction through greed. Thus a national debate on whether *Little Black Sambo* was a culturally appropriate read for children declared it “free from caricature” in 1943.⁷⁰ Graham and Dunham would have probably concurred with this perspective; each even tailored the text to articulate her political position. Graham used *Little Black Sambo* to deconstruct “the minstrel notion of blackness,” evoking a “whimsical, poetic, colorful never-never land” nevertheless “based on a sense of African nationalist consciousness and identification.”⁷¹ Dunham’s handwritten paraphrase additionally reveals an investment in Afro-diasporic dance traditions across languages and different colonial histories. Witchdoctors perform “a tap dance very much in the Harlem style”; Sambo joyfully dances the cakewalk on receiving his flashy new outfit. When the first tiger accepts the offer of Sambo’s red coat, they seal the transaction with “a few measures of a stately contredance.” After the third tiger absurdly agrees to wear Sambo’s fine but too-small shoes on his ears, he and Sambo similarly “waltz together a few steps.”⁷² Through *Little Black Sambo*, as in *L’Ag’ya*, then, Dunham developed the semiotic and affective possibilities of creolized Plantation dances, including those she writes about and stages in *L’Ag’ya*. But this text also pressed upon Dunham an encounter with colonized peoples beyond the African diaspora. For Bannerman had placed people with African-sounding names within a setting with distinctly Indian aspects—as clinched by her statement that the tigers became “melted butter (or ‘ghi,’ as it is called in India).”

As an early review of Bannerman’s *Little Black Sambo* noted, “his history was not written with an eye to parents and guardians, otherwise the inconsistency of mixing up the African type of black with delightful adventures in an Indian type of jungle with tigers would have never been allowed to pass.”⁷³ This geographical inconsistency was subsequently widely criticized,⁷⁴ but it has always functioned as a safety valve of sorts, with revivals of the text in a more politically correct era even replacing Bannerman’s Mumbo’s Afro-diasporic clothes with a sari.⁷⁵ Although Bannerman never visited the African continent,⁷⁶ her life in India would have made her aware of a host of plausible Indian-sounding names for her characters, as well as how to clothe them in appropriate fashion, if a completely Indian story is what she had sought to write. A close examination of the original text’s narrative and illustrations in fact reveals a sustained ambiguity that could hardly have been unintentional. Nothing in it suggests either India or Africa exclusive of the other. The written text contains

70 Yuill, *Little Black Sambo*, 12.

71 Van der Horn-Gibson, “Dismantling Americana” (n.p.).

72 Dunham, “Little Black Sambo,” Box 48 (Manuscripts), The Dunham Papers.

73 *The Spectator*, December 2, 1899, quoted in Hay, *Sambo Sahib*, 28.

74 Hay, *Sambo Sahib*, 29.

75 *Ibid.*, illustration 44.

76 Banham spent a part of her childhood in Madeira, though. See Hay, *Sambo Sahib*, 4–7.

signifiers of “Africa(n-ness)” (most obviously, the names Sambo, Mumbo, and Jumbo), of “India” (the bazaar, tigers, ghi, and a brass pot carried by Jumbo); of the African diaspora (pancakes); and of an indeterminate tropical location (a palm tree). On the visual level, the characters are bestowed with a complexion, hair texture, and physiognomy that suggest black African heritage, and, as has been remarked on earlier, clothes suggestive of the African diaspora; but an orientalized Indianness is also invoked through Sambo’s loincloth and turned-up Aladin shoes, Bannerman’s illustrations of the tigers, and the brass pot on which is even inscribed “tiger ghi.”

This conflation of geographically discrete spaces is a phantasm generated by the imperial imagination—as confirmed by Bannerman’s visual presentation of a generic, if incompletely constructed, colonial subject. Mumbo and Jumbo wear a bricolage of Western-style clothes in tropical patterns and colors; Sambo, when not sporting his new outfit, is in a mere loincloth; all are barefoot, signaling but a veneer of sartorial civility. The final illustration is suggestive of the triumph of civilisation—the family sits around a table neatly covered with white linen and eat their pancakes with cutlery. Beneath the tablecloth, however, bare feet still lurk. This fragile imperial construct is imperiled by Sambo’s overweening desire for fancy clothes and the tigers’ overweening desire for Sambo. Despite the unfavorable balance of power, Sambo emerges victorious. He safeguards his body by persuading the tigers to transfer their desire to his clothes; he regains his clothes because the tigers autodestruct in their fight over their spoils; he devours the tiger-butter pancakes. The fate of the all-powerful tigers, ultimately consumed by the disempowered colonial subject, suggests acute anxiety regarding role reversal. We should recall that Bannerman’s British India had already experienced the violence of the so-called Sepoy Mutiny, the confirmation of fears of native revolt, and the consequent hardening of imperial control.⁷⁷ The tigers’ alchemical yet nauseating transformation into butter that is further transformed into pancakes asks to be read as the delirious product of a guilt-ridden imperialist imaginary sublimated through the medium of children’s story. In this movement among guile, guilelessness, violence, and desire, played out “necropolitically” on a body that has to surrender external markers of sovereignty,⁷⁸ Dunham found a compelling vehicle to perform that other site of Afro-diasporic trauma linked to the big house: the Plantation.

“Le Coulie des Trois-Ilets”

In a masterful deconstruction of Bartolome de las Casas’s account of a plague of black ants, discordantly intercalated within his *Historia de las Indias*, Antonio Benítez-Rojo has exposed this foundational text for the colonization of the Americas as “a discursive point of origin” for writing about “the emergence of African slavery in the Antilles.”⁷⁹ Benítez-Rojo interprets de las Casas’s description of an army of black ants that swarms over the island of Hispaniola, and the *pedra soliman*

77 See Zahid R. Chaudhary, *Afterimage of Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-Century India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

78 Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 11–40.

79 Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean in Postmodern Perspective* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 85.

(an alchemical substance) that miraculously overcomes them, as metaphorical substitutions leading back to the Plantation's slave laborers (the black ants) and its prized commodity, sugar (the white soliman). He also points to the text's numerous silences and displacements—for example, its hovering as close as possible to the word *cañas* ("cane," via the cañafistola trees that the ants destroy), without ever mentioning the Plantation. These substitutions and evasions, argues Benítez-Rojo, reveals de las Casas as deeply traumatized by his advocacy of slavery for the New World's plantations. His analysis of de las Casas's fantastical digression from historiography helps us understand better both the function of the self-combusting tigers in Bannerman's story and Dunham's attraction to it. Like de las Casas's anecdote, *Little Black Sambo* articulates the Freudian uncanny, a phantasm that haunted Bannerman's imaginary to signal the Empire's recognition and repression of historical responsibility. Dunham's realization that the history of slavery in the Americas was best retrieved through performance rather than narration allowed her to recognize the discursive substitutions already at play in the confrontation between Sambo and the tigers. She could thereby interpret it in terms of the "ferocious battle between origins" that constitutes the foundational trauma of the Americas.⁸⁰

Dunham bestows on Bannerman's jungle the same deep African-ness that the majumba solo and ag'ya fight had evoked in *L'Ag'ya*. "Against a background of kettledrums are projected the night sounds of the jungle," states her opening directions, subsequently adding the "chant of the witch doctors" and "native drums." The witch doctors of *L'Ag'ya*'s Zombie Forest return, sporting body paint, "top hats," "grass skirts," "fine spats and shiny shoes." Their performance of "a dance at first African, later a tap dance very much in the Harlem style" suggests diachronic movement out of Africa, but the text scrambles linear temporality through a return to "the gay sounds of an African morning." The ambiguity is ontological as well as spatio-temporal. Revisions to the manuscript indicate Dunham's increasing desire to present the action as Sambo's dream; in the statement "they [the witch doctors] advance slowly and with great relish toward LBS, who becomes more and more uncomfortable in his dreams," the word *dreams* replaces a crossed-out *sleep*. The "evil Witch Doctors" who disappear when Sambo "starts suddenly from his sleep" inhabit an oneiric world, yet, as the chief doctor had earlier been stirring "the huge kettle ... obviously preparing for LBS [Little Black Sambo]," it is unclear who is dreaming up whom.⁸¹ There is also affective ambiguity. Despite the happy ending, the text is shot through with compromise, signalled by Sambo's unhappy yet unavoidable exchange of precious clothes for life. The Witch Doctors' unexplained malevolence also suggests betrayal from within, although this possibility is not as well developed as in *L'Ag'ya*. Through these ambiguities, together with the kettledrums, witch doctors, and creolised dances, emerges the Plantation, a traumatic yet life-affirming site of memory. This Plantation creates newness through the kinetic-percussive inheritances of Africa and Europe, the embodied source materials of cultural compromise.

80 Benítez-Rojo, *Repeating Island*, 106.

81 All quotes are from Dunham, "Little Black Sambo," Box 48 (Manuscripts), The Dunham Papers.

The question remains: At what price? To extract the liberating possibilities of new world creolization for herself and the African Americans who were her actors and audiences, Dunham had to confront histories of displacement and trauma entangled with those of the Afro-diasporic subjects she felt an affinity with. Her understanding of the African continent's colonized modernity would have had to wait till her first visit to Paris in the 1940s, when she would meet young African intellectuals such as Senghor. In 1936, however, in Martinique, she learned of another diasporic group, the "coolies": Indian indentured laborers who were taken to the French Antilles to work on the plantations from which the slaves had lately been liberated.⁸² As in the Indian Ocean, French and British imperial collaborations brought laborers from British India to islands now under French rule. Francophone creolization processes make it nigh impossible today to reconstruct detailed histories of these Indo-French Caribbean populations. Few unambiguous sonic or kinetic traces of Indian-ness survive from the French Caribbean. Yet in Box 48, among the lyrics transcribed by Dunham as "majumba," we read the phrase "coulie des Trois-Îlets" (coolie of Trois-Îlets—a Martinican village that still boasts a pronounced Indian-descendant demographic) and the name "Madou Manovar" (most probably the Hindu name "Madhu Manohar"). Furthermore, the majumba lyrics include references to hospitals, doctors, policemen, cars, and taxis. L'Ag'ya's emphasis on the "tiny fishing village" notwithstanding, these lyrics suggest that Martinican villages such as Trois-Îlets actually boasted a full-fledged urban infrastructure, and populations whose creolization went beyond "African" and "European." Yet in reconstructing Loulouse's "majumba" as the "love-dance of ancient Africa," danced to the rhythm of African drums, Dunham erased the coolie of Trois-Îlets as well as the signifiers of civic modernity contained in the songs she collected in Martinique.

Trans(post)colonial: Limits and Possibilities

In a suggestive exploration of performative practices across different Caribbean islands in the wake of the Haitian revolution, Sara Johnson coins the term *transcolonial collaboration* to define the cultural exchanges that were triggered by the movement of former Haitian slaves throughout a Caribbean linked by still-incoming African and European populations, but already differentiated by the stamp of diverse colonial regimes. Despite the "imperial compartmentalization that divided the region into distinct linguistic, cultural, and political communities," these newly diasporized (and desubjectified) African-heritage populations found pragmatic, kinaesthetic, consolatory, and spiritual succor in communicating through "gesture, dance, and musical rhythms."⁸³ *Communitas* was fostered through "percussive-based idioms" that "occurred in the context of festive plantation traditions oriented towards both survival and play."⁸⁴ Tracing the late nineteenth century popularity of the Haitian Tumba Francesca percussive traditions in Cuba on the one hand, and Haitian

82 The "coolie" is a transnational economic migrant of South Asian origin whose labor was physical. For a philosophical recapture of this originally derogatory term, see Khal Torabully and Marina Carter, *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (New York: Anthem Books, 2002).

83 Johnson, *Fear of French Negroes*, 144.

84 *Ibid.*, 123.

“French Set Girls” in Jamaica on the other, she demonstrates how “artistic traditions born out of interisland exchanges became incorporated into diverse local island cultures,”⁸⁵ while generating a pan-diasporic aesthetic across the Americas. This duality allows us to appreciate the “flourishing regional counterplantation aesthetic during the Age of Revolution, an era that necessitated the constant renegotiation and restructuring of black community life.” Transcolonial collaborations reveal how “performers and their audiences were forced to come to grips with the dynamic tension between togetherness and apartness depending on [their] political and intellectual choices.” Johnson’s model for analyzing “rhythm as resistance” beyond the local to a circum-Caribbean scale takes further Barbara Browning’s work on the alterity of “infectious rhythms” from Haiti to New Orleans: “as mnemonic devices, dance and music (both instrumental and lyrical) also created, stored, and disseminated memories of former homes with responses to new ones.”⁸⁶

Taking a cue from, but also moving beyond, Johnson’s focus on the Age of Revolution, I have shown how a self-identified “negro” woman of the early twentieth century recovered the embodied memory of transcolonial rhythmic and kinetic collaborations arising from the Plantation to articulate her own sense of community and place within it. Dunham’s productions of 1938 urge us to insert within the transcolonial the idea of the “post” as notwithstanding the differently postcolonial status of the Caribbean islands she visited in 1938, and, indeed of the United States itself, there is a sense of the belated that attends to her discovery of the wider African diaspora through her fieldwork. This belatedness is born of her apprehending—through dance as a sensuous, embodied, participatory act—a closeness to French Afro-Caribbean dance culture, but also an estrangement from it through her African American history, modulated by Protestant Anglo-Saxonism and urban capitalism.⁸⁷ Through dance she sensed how the “negro” of the Caribbean and of North America followed separate entries into modernity thanks to being embedded within different (post)colonial regimes. Dunham’s graphic capture of kinetic practices, albeit equally belated, constituted a crucial step in her act of rekineticizing them for the Chicago stage. The “graphic” here includes technologies of writing as well as recording: The score for *L’Ag’ya* was inspired, Dunham recalls, “by old Edison cylindrical recordings I made in Martinique, as well as popular recordings of Creole mazurkas and waltzes and beguines, songs and music that I had learned, thinking perhaps of future theatre repertoire for myself.”⁸⁸ The “graphic” thus interacted with embodied memory as an aural-kinetic field. The trans(post)colonial emerges as a creative process that moves back and forth between embodiment and writing, intuition and analysis, thinking and feeling, remembering and reenacting.

The full story of how *L’Ag’ya*’s score was created helps us calibrate the collaborative possibilities of this trans(post)coloniality. Technologies of recording let Dunham share her knowledge of Creole music with the young music composer Robert

85 Ibid., 143.

86 Ibid., 123; Browning, *Infectious Rhythms*.

87 Best explicated in Dunham, “The Negro Dance,” *The Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes*, eds. Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee (New York: Dryden Press, 1941), 990–1000. Also reproduced in *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 217–27.

88 Dunham, “Survival,” *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 98.

Sanders, whom she had met at the University of Chicago. Sanders found himself drawn to “every rehearsal, and though a piano was not his instrument, he often accompanied on the old upright piano that had been installed in the basement of the Elks Temple on North Dearborn, measure by measure, practically step by step, phrase by phrase”; his embodied participation in turn “spurred [Dunham] on to greater heights of creativity.”⁸⁹ A similar collaboration, this time also in the interpersonal domain, led to the spectacular costumes and mise-en-scenes of Dunham Company productions: these were created by John Pratt, Dunham’s white American husband, whom she met in 1937.⁹⁰ It was Pratt who sensed—even better than Dunham—the necessity of a tragic ending to *L’Ag’ya* as the most appropriate expression of the compromises and betrayals embedded in Creole creativity. Yet as the dances between Sambo and the tigers enact, such trans(post)colonial collaborative possibilities were shadowed by limitations. Dunham had at hand no meta-narrative to integrate the Indian diasporic presence in the Caribbean into her program of diasporic self-fashioning. Nevertheless, the coexistence in 1938 of *Little Black Sambo* and *L’Ag’ya* suggests that, in the domain of the imagination at least, the trans(post)colonial had already realized a transcontinental dimension. It is for us of a later age to use her journeys as a way to retrieve the stories that even a visionary such as Miss Dunham had to erase in order to write—and stage—her Afro-diasporic self into danced being.⁹¹

89 Ibid., 98.

90 See Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham*, 105–37; VèVè A. Clark, “Designing Dunham: John Pratt’s Method in Costume and Décor: an Interview with John Pratt,” *Kaiso*, eds. Dunham et al., 208–10.

91 This process is already visible in the work of Dunham’s student, the Trinidadian dancer Geoffrey Holder, particularly his masterpiece of 1974 created for the Dance Theater of Harlem, *Dougl’a* (a Hindustani term that in the Caribbean indicates the offspring of Indian and African heritage parents).