

Preserving Katherine Dunham's Legacy: A New Call to Action

by

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After teaching university courses every summer since 2002, I finally had my first summer off to work exclusively on my research (thank you Dean Theodoulou, the Dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at California State University, Northridge, for awarding me with a Summer Research Stipend to conduct this research). What was the first thing I wanted to do? Attend the 30th Annual International Authentic Katherine Dunham Technique Seminar in St. Louis during the last week of July 2013. Why, you might ask? Even though I never had the opportunity to meet Ms. Dunham personally, I have always had an unexplainable connection to her. She even spoke to me in a dream once. In fact, a few years ago, I began writing an article on her contributions to the discipline of Black Studies entitled "Dancing Across the Diaspora: Katherine Dunham's Foundational Contributions to the Establishment of Black Studies in the Academy." Although other publication opportunities have arisen since then forcing me to place this article on hold, I was very excited to spend my summer writing about Ms. Dunham, and eager to add information on her dance technique and the annual Technique Seminar.

Katherine Dunham, born in 1909 and made her transition in 2006, was an African American female dancer; performer; choreographer; teacher; scholar; activist; author; musician; Broadway star; film star; and creator of her own dance technique, company, and schools. Throughout her life, she worked with everyone from George Balanchine to Leopold Senghor; conducted fieldwork and research in places such as Accompong, Jamaica, Martinique, Trinidad, and Haiti; graduated from the University of Chicago and created her own academic discipline entitled Dance Anthropology; travelled the world with her dance company performing in places such as Italy, Spain, Germany, Chile, France, Mexico, Africa, Denmark, Australia, New Zealand, Asia, and the United States; starred in several films and Broadway shows; wrote five books and countless articles; fought injustice, racism, and segregation throughout the United States and abroad; and became directly involved in national political discussions that even resulted in her going on a hunger strike to support Haitian refugees who were mistreated by the United States' government.

Ultimately, there is not enough space in the world to discuss the many things that Katherine Dunham accomplished during her lifetime. But, it is very easy to see that her story is woven directly into the fabric of America, and how her legacy and contributions should be treated with the same importance and respect as W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, and others.

Before traveling to St. Louis, I had seen several videos of Katherine Dunham and her company dancing, and also saw other companies, such as the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble and the Charles Moore Dance Theatre, perform her work; but, I never had the opportunity to take a Dunham Technique class myself. The seminar itself was more phenomenal than I could have ever imagined. Throughout the week, we had the privilege of taking Dunham Technique and Repertoire classes from master teachers, Ruby Streate, Michael Green, and Jeanne Speier, all who had personally danced and performed with Dunham; and additional classes from other certified Dunham instructors: Jan Blunt and Heather Beal-Himes. The drummers who played for our dance classes and who taught our drumming class were also personally trained by Katherine Dunham: James Belk, Montra Mumphard, and Jared Brown. I was so completely mesmerized by all of these amazing individuals who had interacted with Dunham so closely, and who have made it their life's work to continue Katherine Dunham's legacy.

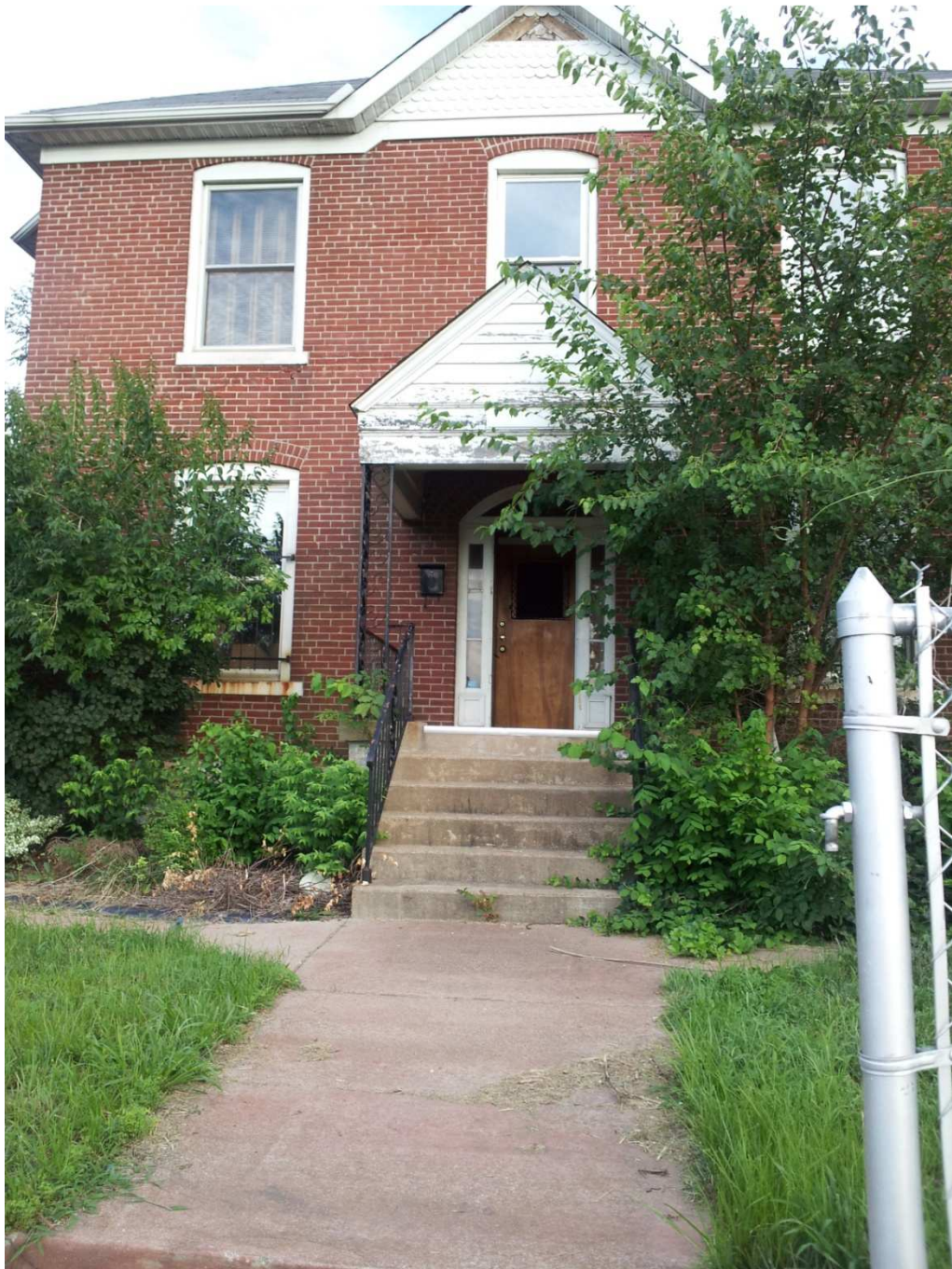
In addition to Dunham Technique and Repertoire classes, we also had Vinyasa Flow and Acro Yoga classes taught by fellow Dunham Technique participant, Giana Montoya. There were also World Dance classes, also taught by Giana Montoya and her partner, Nery Garcia, both professional salsa dancers, who taught us how to dance Salsa, Cha Cha, Merengue, and Bachatta. The best part was that the drummers even learned these dances with us. These classes, although not Dunham Technique classes, are representative of Katherine Dunham's philosophy because she believed that her dancers, company members, and students should be well rounded and knowledgeable of all different types of movement from as many diverse cultures as possible.

But, our most eye opening experience occurred when we took the train from Washington University (where the Dunham Technique Seminar is held) to East St. Louis, Illinois to visit the Katherine Dunham Museum. Although Ms. Dunham could have lived anywhere in the world, she chose East St. Louis. If you spend any time in her neighborhood, you know exactly why she made this her home. While walking through this predominantly Black neighborhood, you can definitely see the lack of resources and opportunities represented in the boarded up buildings and empty lots. The only places in the neighborhood that have continued to flourish are the many newly renovated churches. Katherine Dunham settled here because she wanted to create opportunities that were not otherwise available by offering the community the chance to learn more about culture, history, music, dance, and movement. Her success in accomplishing this goal is evident by the many individuals who spoke at the technique seminar (especially, the Black men) who said that Katherine Dunham saved their life by getting them off the streets and offering them something productive to do.

The moment we walked into the museum, I automatically felt Ms. Dunham's spirit, the spirit of the ancestors, and the spirit of all of the gods and goddesses she was so closely associated with (most likely present in her many African World artifacts displayed throughout the museum). While walking through the museum, I was especially intrigued with her book collection and noticed that it looked like the library of most Black Studies' scholars. I also noticed that in her office, she had two awards from the National Council for Black Studies (NCBS), the premiere organization for the discipline of Black Studies: The 1982 Award for Academic Excellence and Social Responsibility and the 1992 Zora Neale Hurston and Paul Robeson Award for Artistic and Scholarly Achievement. I have been an active member of NCBS since 2002 and presented the rough draft of my article on Katherine Dunham a few years ago at the annual conference. But, I never knew she received either of these awards.

All I could do was stand there and cry. I cried because the discipline of Black Studies has yet to fully embrace African/Black dance and therefore, has yet to embrace Katherine Dunham (even with these awards). In fact, many scholars who have earned their Ph.D.'s in Black Studies do not know who she is or what she accomplished. I also cried because I felt like I had inadvertently contributed to this lack of inclusion. Of course, I include Ms. Dunham in my classes and assign my students to read her articles and view footage of her company dancing; but, my article on her contributions to Black Studies was written several years ago and I have yet to complete it or publish it. After my tears subsided, I suddenly became energized and even more motivated to work as hard as possible for the academy to know who she is.

After we were given a tour of the backyard of the museum and the dance studio, the drummers walked us over to Ms. Dunham's three houses located about a block away from the museum. The house on the left was where she lived; the middle house was for her costumes; and the house on the right was where past participants of the Dunham Technique Seminar stayed so they did not have to pay for a hotel. As we approached the house she had lived in, we noticed that the window in the front door had been smashed in, and the bars over the window had been pried off. We looked through the broken window and noticed that something had been ripped out of the wall. The drummers told us that drug addicts broke into her house and tore out the copper wiring so they could sell it for drugs (this also meant there was no electricity). They said her house had been stripped of everything of value and was, therefore, empty. They could not show us the inside because they did not have the keys for the door; but, the damage to Ms. Dunham's house was completely overwhelming and disheartening.



The house Katherine Dunham lived in has been vandalized, the window in the front door has been smashed in, and the bars over the window have been pried off.

After walking around the outside of the third house where the Dunham Technique participants used to stay, we made our way over to her costume house. All of a sudden, one of the seminar participants, Bobi Greene, tried climbing through one of the broken basement windows because she saw something: costumes, trunks, and other artifacts that were all sitting in the basement. We walked around to the back of the house, through knee deep grass and uncut foliage, and noticed that the back door was gone. Instead, there was a large piece of plywood because someone had destroyed the door when they broke into the house. We collectively decided, at that moment, that we were going to rescue as much as we could from her basement. It did not take long for us to realize that because of the present conditions of the basement (i.e. water, mold, bugs, etc.), this was going to be harder than we anticipated. After trying to retrieve several different items, we were only able to rescue one large, wooden basket that had Katherine Dunham's name and a number on it, along with some material used for costuming. The drummers went back to the museum during our exploration in the basement to get the President of the Katherine Dunham Board of Directors, Leverne Backstrom. She came to the costume house, loaded the basket in her car, and took it over to the museum to be cataloged and displayed in the future.



The rescue team with a wooden basket with Katherine Dunham's name engraved, found in basement of Katherine Dunham's costume house.

When we returned to the museum, we all agreed that future Dunham Technique Seminar participants should be required to take part in a day of service at the museum or at one of Dunham's houses. This is when we collectively decided that everyone at this year's Technique Seminar would return to the costume house on Saturday (the last day of the seminar) to try to recover as many artifacts as possible from the basement. Although some of us, like myself, had to leave before Saturday; we still followed our fellow dancer's journey as they retrieved a truck load of statues, masks, drums, etc. from the costume house. This discovery even made the local nightly news in St. Louis (<http://www.ksdk.com/news/article/391770/3/Dance-legends-artifacts-discovered-in-East-St-Louis>). Although what we did was helpful, it is just not enough. The unfortunate reality is that there is so much more work to be done and many more valuable artifacts that need to be retrieved and catalogued, not to mention the additional work that needs to be completed at the museum, in the backyard, in the dance studio, and in her three houses.

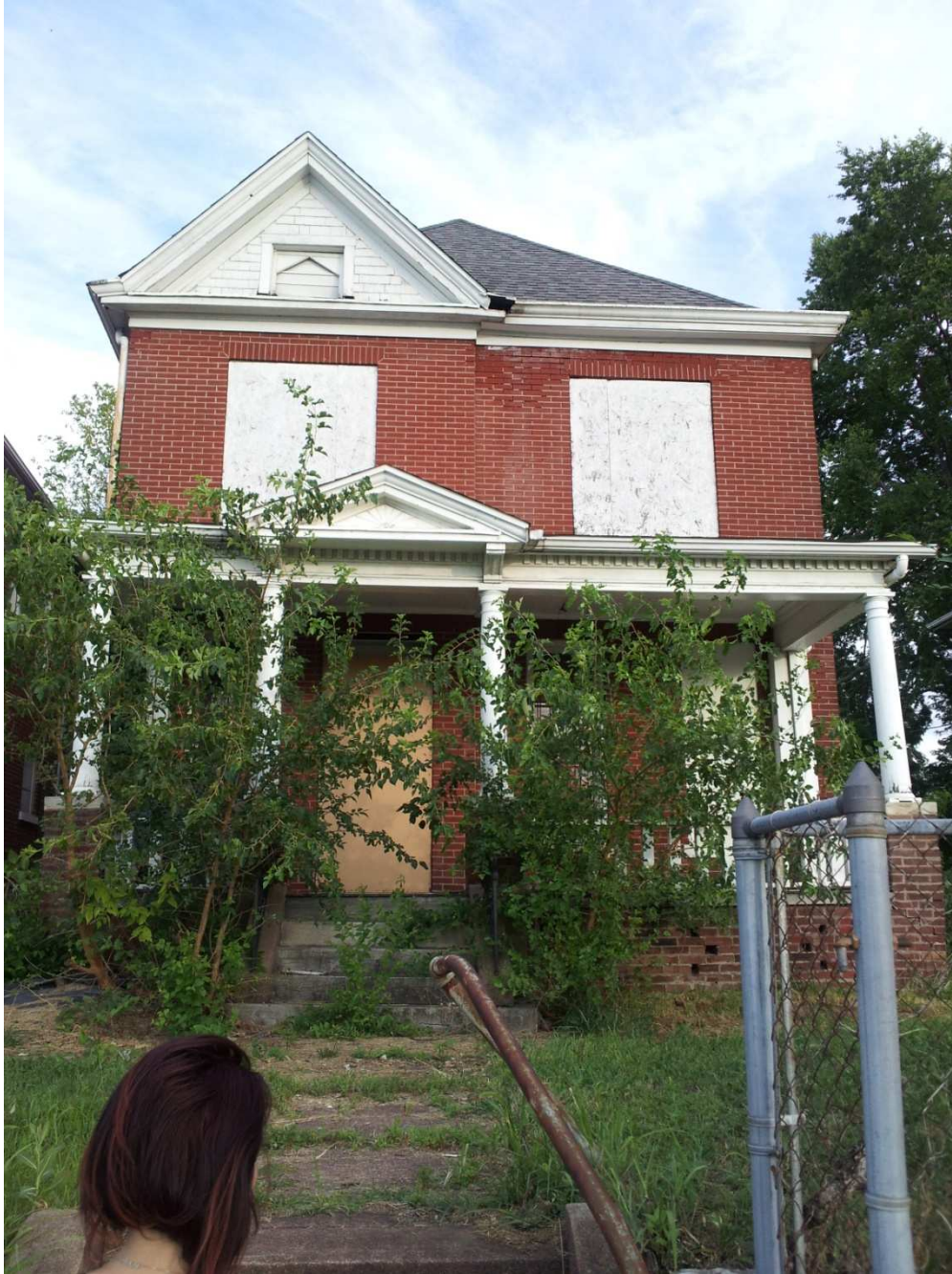
In the words of one of the Technique Seminar participants, Jeremiah Burns, this is a travesty. The elders, who are working so incredibly hard to preserve, maintain, and perpetuate Katherine Dunham's legacy, need our help. They cannot teach the classes, workshops, and seminars; train the teachers; write the grants; fundraise; maintain the museum; maintain her three houses; retrieve her artifacts; travel around the country educating people about Katherine Dunham; continue with their community outreach; etc. all by themselves, nor should they have to. It is time for those of us in Black Studies, allies to Black Studies, fellow dancers, historians, past and present supporters of Dunham, and the African/Black community throughout the Diaspora to step up and take action. Individually, we can all make a difference; but, collectively, we can make some real change.

What can you do to help protect and preserve Katherine Dunham's legacy? Here are a few suggestions:

1. Learn more about Katherine Dunham (<http://kdcah.org/katherine-dunham/>).
2. Read her books and articles.
3. Like the Katherine Dunham Centers' Facebook page to stay up to date on all things Dunham (<https://www.facebook.com/katherine.d.centers?fref=ts>).
4. Visit the Katherine Dunham Museum (<http://kdcah.org/museum/>).
5. Become a member of the museum (<http://kdcah.org/membership-giving/>).
6. Donate to the museum (<http://kdcah.org/corporate-sponsorship/>).<http://kdcah.org/museum/>).

7. Volunteer at the museum (<http://kdcah.org/volunteer/>).
8. Take a Dunham Technique Class in your area (<http://kdcah.org/certified-instructors/>).
9. Attend the 31st Annual Authentic International Katherine Dunham Technique Seminar from July 26-August 3, 2014 (<http://kdcah.org/conference-seminars/>).
10. Pass this article on to help raise awareness.

All of us have been influenced by Katherine Dunham in one way or another. In fact, our lives are better today because of the struggles she endured, the battles she fought, and what she was able to accomplish in her lifetime. But, now, it is our turn to take action. Let us honor Ms. Dunham and show her how much we appreciate what she has done for us by helping to save, preserve, and carry on her life, legacy, and history.



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