



# Bernard Berenson and Katherine Dunham: Black American Dance

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. [Please share](#) how this access benefits you. Your story matters

Citation	Connors, Joseph. 2014. "Berenson and Katherine Dunham: Black American Dance." In Bernard Berenson: Formation and Heritage, ed. Joseph Connors and Louis A. Waldman, 363-391. Florence and Cambridge MA: Villa I Tatti with Harvard University Press, 2014.
Published Version	<a href="http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674427853">http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674427853</a>
Citable link	<a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:34309448">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:34309448</a>
Terms of Use	This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles, as set forth at <a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#OAP">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#OAP</a>

***Bernard Berenson and Katherine Dunham: Black American Dance*<sup>1</sup>**

Joseph Connors

Final draft submitted in January 2011, published in *Bernard Berenson: Formation and Heritage*, ed. Joseph Connors and Louis A. Waldman, Florence and Cambridge MA: Villa I Tatti with Harvard University Press, 2014, pp. 363-91

On May 23, 2006 an obituary appeared in *The New York Times* for Katherine Dunham, who had died at the age of 96. It had high praise for her achievement in the world of dance:

By creating popular and glamorous revues based on African and Caribbean folklore, Miss Dunham acquainted audiences, both on Broadway and around the world, with the historical roots of black dance.<sup>2</sup>

The article went on to speak of her achievement in founding, in the 1930s, America's first self-supporting black modern-dance troupe, which had visited more than fifty countries on six continents. The author dwelt on her affection for Haiti and mentioned that she eventually became a priestess of the Vodun religion. It cited her choreography for *Aïda* at the Metropolitan Opera, her work with Georges Balanchine in 1940, her influence on Alvin Ailey, and her career in film in the early 1940s. It quoted Dunham on the diversity of response that her work inspired: "Judging from reactions the dancing of my group is called anthropology in New Haven, sex in Boston, and in Rome—art!" Her many honors culminated in an honorary doctorate from Harvard in 2002, which she received along with eleven other distinguished scientists and personalities of the worlds of economics and politics.<sup>3</sup> She counted two black presidents among her friends, Dumarsais Estimé of Haiti, who made her a Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur et Mérite of that country in 1949, and Léopold Senghor of Senegal, who invited her as an unofficial American ambassador to the Festival of Black Arts in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966.<sup>4</sup> She is reported as saying that the three great influences on her life were Robert Maynard Hutchins, the president of the University of Chicago at the time of her study there; Erich Fromm, the psychologist and social theorist; and Bernard Berenson.<sup>5</sup>

The first two made sense, but the relationship with Berenson seemed out of character. He was forty-four years older than her, and they lived continents apart. Race was still a barrier in polite European society. It was hard to imagine common interests. Indeed, in the extensive literature on Berenson there is little mention of Katherine Dunham. For details of his private life, one usually turns to Nicky Mariano's intimate biography.<sup>6</sup> Nicky was curious about the loves of Berenson's early life and got to know some of them: Gladys Deacon, Lady Sassoon, Belle da Costa Greene, Gabrielle Lacase, Natalie Barney, Countess Hortense Serristori. When new stars rose in the sky she could be consumed with jealousy, but eventually she got to know them and ended up by enjoying his new half-amorous friendships "as a mother enjoys a new toy for her baby." Nicky compares them to the instruments in an orchestra, though some, she says, were comparable to solo performers: Pellegrina Del Turco, who was shot by the Germans near the end of the war;

Clotilde Marghieri, “*la Ninfa del Vesuvio*,” with whom he corresponded for decades; Addie (Mrs. Otto H.) Kahn; Katie Lewis; Paola Drigo of Venice; Frances Francis, wife of Henry Francis of the Cleveland Museum; Freya Stark, the travel writer; Rosamond Lehmann, the novelist; Katherine Biddle, the poet. Yet Nicky remains silent on Katherine Dunham. Even the scrupulous and highly detailed biography by Ernest Samuels only accords brief mentions of her visit to I Tatti in the “social season” of 1948 and Berenson’s visit to a performance of her dances in Rome.<sup>7</sup>

The published literature thus did not help to dispel the mystery enveloping Dunham’s claim that Berenson was a major influence in her life. In the cloudy sky of my research, however, a rainbow finally appeared, one end resting in Florence, where the letters of Katherine Dunham are kept in the Berenson archives at Villa I Tatti, and the other in Carbondale, Illinois, where Berenson’s letters are kept amidst the material Katherine Dunham donated to Southern Illinois University. I have been able to read about one hundred thirty letters written in the decade between 1949 and 1959. They shed light on an epistolary friendship which, in spite of a near rupture at a crucial point, was deeply meaningful to both and continued until the end of Berenson’s life.

Katherine Dunham was born in Chicago in 1909 to a black father, Albert Dunham, and a mother of white French-Canadian ancestry, Fanny June Dunham. She was raised in the Chicago suburb of Glen Ellyn and, after dance lessons at school, began to study ballet seriously in 1928. In 1929 she entered the University of Chicago, where her older brother, Albert, was studying philosophy. Chicago was the right university for a young woman with a vibrant personality and interests equally scholarly and artistic. Founded in 1891 as a co-educational institution, there was no more open and liberal university in America. Brother and sister lived in the black theater and jazz district of Chicago, Bronzeville. It was Albert who encouraged Katherine’s ambition to be in the theater. The poet and dancer, Mark Turbyfill, sensed her talent in dance and wanted Katherine to become the first American black ballerina. Although the dance establishment did not believe that classical ballet was appropriate to the physique and temperament of black dancers, Katherine attended performances by Isadora Duncan and the Ballet Russe, and was taught dance by Ludmilla Speranzeva. She created the short-lived *Ballet Nègre* in 1930, one of the first Negro ballet companies in America, which performed in the Beaux Arts Ball in Chicago, but then was disbanded in 1931.

Katherine was highly intelligent and responded well to academic stimulus. The University of Chicago exuded intellectual energy. Robert Maynard Hutchins, the iconoclastic young president from 1929 to 1950, saw the mission of the university as the breaking down of barriers between academic disciplines. He started the department of anthropology in 1929 and attracted to it brilliant, idiosyncratic scholars from Europe and America. The anthropology teachers and visiting lecturers of those years make an impressive list. With characteristic humor Katherine

sketches their traits:

...the personal appeal and dry wit of Robert Redfield, the crashing daring of a man like Robert Warner, dapper far-travelled Fay-Cooper Cole, Margaret Mead, who exposed sexual habits in the Pacific, Malinowski, who exposed sex habits wherever he happened to be stationed, Radcliffe-Brown...a gaunt old yellow-toothed lion given to floating around the lecture hall dropping verbal bombs on tender blossoms - I being one of them - then retreating and grinning at the wreckage.<sup>8</sup>

It was Robert Redfield who realized that Katherine's disparate inclinations, to dance and to anthropology, were not incompatible. With his support she won a grant from the Julius Rosenwald Fund to study Caribbean dance in 1934. It was at a Rosenwald reception that she first met Erich Fromm, who was long to remain a friend and mentor. At Columbia, Franz Boas encouraged her, saying that she might be able to discover knowledge that was inaccessible to non-dancers.<sup>9</sup> In 1935, to prepare for her trip, she began to study with the anthropologist Melville Herskovits of Northwestern University. Herskovits had worked in the Caribbean and he encouraged Katherine to visit Jamaica and study the dances of the remaining Maroon communities, the descendants of escaped slaves who had fought the British colonial government and eventually made peace with them, but who remained highly secretive. After a stop in Haiti, Katherine arrived in Jamaica in July 1935 with a recommendation from Herskovits to a colonel in the Maroon village of Accompong. She published a literary version of her field notes in 1946, *Journey to Accompong*, which still makes for vivid reading.<sup>10</sup>

The journey of this twenty-six-year-old student to the interior of the island was not easy. No outsider had ever stayed with the Maroons more than one night. Even Herskovits had only visited them for a day. Katherine made her way to their village and stayed for a month. To add to the difficulties of living and eating, she found the dialect almost unintelligible and felt quite alone. She knew the fighting history of these resilient people, fierce and distrustful of outsiders. Herskovits supposed that among them one might find many vestiges of their West African past, such as respect for the world of spirits, polygyny, and a collectivist spirit. Katherine also hoped to see the Karomantee war dance, which was banned by the British authorities and kept highly secret, if it still existed at all.<sup>11</sup> As the month wore on, however, Katherine grew more frustrated. The only dance she saw was a Maroon version of the quadrille. Then, on the eve of her departure, when the colonel of the village who disapproved of the old customs was away, almost as a going-away present, she finally saw, and filmed, the Karomantee war dance. Later, when she visited the Caribbean island of Martinique, she recorded another martial dance, *L'Ag'Ya*:

From Martinique came the ball L'agya with its Creole gaiety, its vivid festival scene, of the Mazurka, the beguine, and majumba, its zombie Forest, its superstition and its tragic ending.<sup>12</sup>

Katherine participated in the dance herself. The field anthropologist had become an insider.

Haiti came to be the center of Katherine's anthropology and life. Herskovits did extensive fieldwork in a village called Mirebalais in 1934, and Katherine followed in his footsteps with a research trip in 1935. She was a less orthodox anthropologist than her mentor, however. She formed a friendship, perhaps an intimate one, with the progressive politician, Dumarsais Estimé (1900-53), who was later elected to the presidency of Haiti and held the office from 1946 to 1950, when he was toppled by a coup and exiled to Paris. Estimé, she tells us, would show her the exceptional courtesy of taking off his holster as they lie on the bed to talk. One evening Katherine borrowed Estimé's car under false pretense and had his terrified chauffeur drive her at night to a village deep in the interior. She had heard that an old *bocor* had died there three days before, but had still to pass on his knowledge to apprentices called *counci*. Terrified of the still-living dead, the driver fled as soon as he could, leaving Katherine behind. She passed the nights sleeping on the floor of a village house, below the pet python of her host family. Even though she was an intrepid woman, and later in life reached a sort of communion with the snake god, Damballa, she nevertheless found the experience unnerving. However, she had no fear of human violence throughout the days and nights in which knowledge was transmitted from the dead to the living.

In 1938 Katherine submitted her thesis for a master's degree at Chicago, entitled "A Comparative Analysis of the Dances of Haiti: Their Form, Function, Social Organization, and the Interpretation of Form and Function."<sup>13</sup> It was published in Spanish and English in Mexico in 1947, followed by a French translation in 1950. In the preface to that edition, Claude Lévi-Strauss makes an interesting observation about Katherine's rapport with her subjects:

To the *dignitaires* of the Vodun who were to become her informants, she was both a colleague, capable of comprehending and assimilating the subtleties of a complex ritual, and a stray soul who had to be brought back into the fold of the traditional cult; for the flocks of slaves lost on the large continent to the north had forgotten how to practice and had lost the spiritual benefits. These two reasons placed the researcher in a favored position.<sup>14</sup>

Like Herskovits, Dunham saw the dances of the entire Caribbean region, as far as New Orleans and other black communities of North America, as survivals of West African rituals, kept alive throughout the trauma of slavery.<sup>15</sup> It would have been difficult for Katherine to go further with doctoral work in this direction, however, as Herskovits published his own magisterial book on Haiti in 1937. He includes dance in a much larger panorama of social structure, property, wealth, marriage, Vodun, and ritual, and his work is informed by a profound knowledge both of Haitian history and of the anthropology the region of Africa from which large numbers of Haitian slaves were taken, the Kingdom of Dahomey. He is very much the professional anthropologist, who observed many cases of spirit possession during dance and spoke with many informants over a

long residence in his village. His contribution was to de-sensationalize Vodun ritual and see it as part of the re-lived African ancestry of the participants.<sup>16</sup>

By way of contrast, Katherine is more intuitive and spontaneous in her fieldwork, and less systematic in her analysis of the total culture. Long before Clifford Geertz, she understood the power of empathy in fieldwork and saw the dramatic character of the events she was studying.<sup>17</sup> Her anthropologist's mind absorbed field data while her dancer's eye feasted on the theatrical element in the culture. She crossed boundaries that were not often crossed. She spent time in a Port-au-Prince bordello watching the dances of the Dominican women who worked there. She entered Vodun ritual to the point of trying to be possessed, to promise the *loa* spirit that some day she would consummate the *kanzo*. Another appreciative French anthropologist, Alfred Métraux, saw her participation in the rites as the secret of her success as a field anthropologist. In 1962 he wrote:

...her talents took her all the way to the top of the Vodun hierarchy. In any case, it is from her experience as an ethnographer, acquired right on the spot, that Katherine Dunham borrowed the most beautiful themes for her dances. She has tried to release in a nutshell the moments in which the rituals reach their highest point. Rhythms of drums, songs and dances, bring us an echo of the ceremonies that, from Cuba to the Amazon, convene the African gods on American soil.<sup>18</sup>

With the encouragement of Robert Redfield, Katherine's path would take her not into academic anthropology but into dance, turning her thesis into Broadway, as she put it in an essay of 1941.<sup>19</sup> The transfer of dance in primitive societies to the American stage was possible because the primitive dances were themselves choreographed, after a fashion. Her task was to re-choreograph the dances and make them into high art. In 1938, in the Federal Theater in Chicago, Katherine staged the *L'Ag'Ya* of Martinique, which culminates in a warrior dance. She wrote about it the following year in *Esquire*:

It is the player of the *pit bois*, or little wooden sticks, who sets the basic rhythm, the drummer, who indicates the movements of the dance, the advance and the retreat, the feints, the sudden whirls and lightning like leaps in the air to sharp drops flat on the ground. He indicates the marking time as the two opponents eye each other, each anticipating every gesture on the part of the other. He keeps them there, hypnotized marionettes on a string. Then he hurls them into an embrace and as suddenly tears them apart. He draws them to a crisis as their excitement and that of the crowd mounts, and again to a finale as they become exhausted. With the true finesse of a stage manager he arranges and re-arranges them to the best advantage. With the quick perception of a director he sense the reactions of the audience. As the hidden prompter in the little box beneath the footlights carries each breath of the opera singer, so he lives the performance with the two contestants. A real *l'ag'ya* is a pantomime cockfight. But I have seen the

dance of the cockfight in the cockpits of Jamaica; the cockfight itself in Haiti, and I find no parallel between the droll, staccato strutting, mincing movements of this mimicry and the deep roll of the *l'ag'ya*.<sup>20</sup>

Katherine's dance career began in Chicago in 1938 and soon included seasons on the New York stage in 1939-40. Her first appearance in film dates to 1939, while her second, in *Stormy Weather*, released in 1943, included her entire troupe. In 1948 she went on her first European tour, including a run at the Prince of Wales Theater in London, performing to admiring reviews and the occasional presence of royalty. She remarked that Europe saved her company, and the next years would include frequent returns to the countries she liked most, France and Italy; and least, Sweden, Switzerland, and Austria.

Katherine Dunham and Bernard Berenson met during her European tour of 1948-49.<sup>21</sup> She had read about Berenson in *Life* magazine, and was brought to lunch at I Tatti by Serge Tolstoy, the son of the novelist. She began the correspondence after this meeting: "Dear B.B. (Life says that's what friends call you...)." She continued it with a letter from Stockholm a fortnight later:

Dearest B.B....Let me just say that I have now joined your long list of admirers. Unfortunately I am not adept enough in the field of painting to do little more about it than be thrilled by it on occasion; I do however trust myself always in personal judgements and for me my pleasure in knowing you lay in your vitality, charm and wisdom that are found only in truly great people. All of this is reflected in everything around you. Well enough of compliments...<sup>22</sup>

The language of her letters quickly moves from friendship and admiration to love of some sort, as far as this was possible between a married forty-year-old woman and the eighty-five-year-old Sage of Settignano. The initiative seems to have come from Katherine. Nicky astutely observed this general pattern:

Perhaps in his relations to women, whether serious or superficial, he always preferred to let them take the first step. Like the guests of *Schlaraffenland* he liked to have the roast pigeons fly into his mouth.<sup>23</sup>

The affection and admiration of this dynamic black intellectual and artist took Bernard somewhat by surprise, but he felt the magnetism. Photographs taken in the I Tatti garden of Katherine dressed in an exotic orientaling costume may date to this occasion (Figs. 1 and 2).<sup>24</sup> A passage in Bernard's diary that shows what he was thinking on this visit:

Katherine Dunham, looking like an Egyptian queen, like Queen Ti, dressed in stuff that clings to her, although of a quite current cut, particoloured green checkered with red, draping rather more than clothing her. Whence this sureness of colour and its creative use, positive, bold, and not negative as in most of us, that seems a birthright of the Blacks? Or is it that dark chocolate or dark bronze is a background on which all colours look well, and so encourages the inventive and courageous use of them? Be that as it

may, Katherine Dunham is herself a work of art, a fanciful arabesque in all her movements and a joy to the eye in colour. I wonder whether her performance will enhance these qualities for me.<sup>25</sup>

He explained his feelings a letter the next day to his long-lasting confidant in Naples, Clotilde Marghieri:

Yesterday we all went to see Katherine Dunham and I was completely hypnotized by the tam-tam effect of it all, its appeal to what in one is almost pre-human. There lurks in me a stern Puritan whom all this alarms; yet I could not help enjoying it, like Saint Augustine's penitents who confessed they could not help enjoying it when raped by the Vandals.<sup>26</sup>

Clothilde knew Bernard well enough to see that he was falling in love, a little, once more, and she wrote him back:

I just heard from Derek that Katherine Dunham is coming back from Paris to say farewell before she leaves. Instead of feeling jealous I felt admiration for her... and envy. Yes, a sort of envy not of her affection for you, not of yours for her. But of her youth, beauty, energy, health and spirit of enterprise, *vitality* in a word, which in her must be developed to the fullest, and in me is declining. And now I understand your admiration for her, and her nostalgia for the world you represent. How I should have liked to meet her and see the two of you together!<sup>27</sup>

Bernard wrote back, downplaying Katherine's charm to assuage Clotilde's jealousy:

I fear I must disenchant you about Katherine Dunham. ... I doubt whether she has any feeling for me of a "sentimental" nature. She may feel a bit better for being treated as an equal by a countryman of a country where blacks are not received in private. It may be a feather in her cap to be known as frequenting I Tatti.

On my part, I admire her as an artist just as you would, and with a little sex feeling. She has, as you say, great vitality and elegance and creative taste. I was entranced by her performance and it still haunts me. Last time I saw her, two days ago, her husband, a white Canadian who does the costumes and scenery of her performances, was talking to Salvemini and Raymond Mortimer. She sat apart with me and began to tell me how she feels with her personality absorbed completely the institution she has herself created. And the tears flowed as we talked.

There it is, my dearest of Darlings. Perhaps my "success" with women now is so great because something in me leads them to reveal themselves to themselves. I long to see you and to embrace you. B.B.<sup>28</sup>

Yet Katherine remained on his mind, and he found her rare visits fascinating:

Katherine Dunham talked with no Negroid lisp or richness of voice, on the contrary with



a cultivated accent and vocabulary, and revealed an unusually subtle but rational personality, completely free of mannerisms of any kind. She complained of many things, but most of all that New York was ruining her art (and all the arts) by insisting on mere newness. To produce it creators of a ballet had to hurry and fuss, and do anything sensational, being given no time to meditate and mature. She thought the best ideas come while daydreaming, ruminating, and not when searching as for a bull's-eye in the dark.<sup>29</sup>

So we have Bernard's side of the conversation. What was Katherine thinking? At the time of their first encounters in 1949 and 1950 she badly needed a guiding star. Her cherished older brother Albert, who had watched over her through the university and introduced her to theater and dance, died in 1949 after years of hospitalization for depression. He had made a brilliant start as a philosopher at Chicago, but then, when he tried to assume an academic career, he hit the color ceiling, went into a tailspin, and withdrew into himself. His death affected Katherine enormously. She sought help from the psychologist Erich Fromm. Berenson was a symbol of impeccable high culture to many, Katherine included, but for her he also assumed another dimension. She projected emotions onto him as one might onto one's analyst. From Paris she will later write of her feelings of loss, since she cannot be near Bernard and his great store of knowledge and wisdom and perception: "I need a master badly at this moment and unless I am blind there are practically none left in the world."<sup>30</sup> She hoped that Berenson, with his vast erudition, might help her find a fitting subject for a play or movie that she would produce with her troupe.<sup>31</sup> In 1952 she writes to him of her thrill on becoming pregnant, and the supportive reaction of her husband John, even though he knows that the child cannot be his, and when she lost the pregnancy, she describes her dejection to Bernard.<sup>32</sup> Strangely, Katherine never mentions the daughter that she and John Pratt adopted in Paris at the age of four in 1951, Marie-Christine Dunham Pratt.<sup>33</sup>

The beautiful surroundings of I Tatti meant something to her as well. In 1949 she had acquired an estate in Haiti, Habitation Leclerc, which had been built by General Charles Victor Emmanuel Leclerc, husband of Napoleon's sister Paulina Bonaparte. Gruesome memories were attached to the property of the torture of slaves during the campaign to subdue the black insurrection on the island. These ghosts had to be exorcized and the grounds put into order. In I Tatti, she could see an example of a landscape made fruitful and beautiful, an ideal toward which Habitation Leclerc could aspire some day. From Buenos Aires she writes to tell Bernard of the many times that she sees in her mind's eye the quiet avenues of I Tatti, and hears the buzzing of the bees, as on the first day they sat in the sunlight in the middle section of the empty greenhouse:

You have no idea the number of times that I see in my mind's eye those quiet avenues of "I Tatti" and even hear the buzzing of the bees or flies or whatever they were that first day as we sat in the sunlight in the middle section of the empty greenhouse. It was a distinct childhood sound and made me feel like being somewhere again that was warm,

sunny and protected. I am sure that over the course of these two thousand years and more I have seen things and places as beautiful as your habitation, but they evidently have escaped me or at least are not a part of the level on which I now live and dream. It is interesting to note as I write this and unfold these thoughts to you that one of my many recurring dreams for a number of years has been a dilapidation and decay and material deprivation which was some part of the material surroundings of some part of my childhood and I work in these dreams for years and years to clean, paint, scrub, disinfect, de-mouse, de-rat and make habitable and charming this dilapidated building. Undoubtedly there is a great sharpening of impressions and it can't have been as bad as all that, besides it is more a symbol than anything else. I think I have then hit upon our "anima" correspondence and all of these things which surround you as a waking counter-balance.<sup>34</sup>

We have already seen Bernard's reaction to her performance in Florence in 1950. He saw her again in Rome in 1952, and recorded his impressions in detail:

Performance of Katherine Dunham. All based on Negro beliefs, rites, and holiday extravagances. From our point of view, it is a call of the wild, and a very successful one. It wakes up and brings to life in one even like myself the sleeping dogs of almost prehuman dreads, aversions, aberrations, appeals. The shrieks so staccato, the metal of the instruments, the dry crack of castanets, the shimmy-shakes, the stampeding, all go to one's marrow. How all this would have horrified most of us fifty years ago. Should have found it squalid, vulgar, shaking [shocking?], and now babes and sucklings come with their parents to see and hear and be entranced, hypnotized, overwhelmed. We feel at last free to return to the primitive, the infantile, the barbarous, the savage in us, even the way Greeks of the best period did to Bacchic rites, so wild, so cruel, so filthy!<sup>35</sup>

However brief their meetings were, an attachment came to be formed between this unlikely pair. Katherine was the one who initiated it and nourished it with frequent letters written during her far-flung travels with her troupe. From Zürich she reminds Bernard of the pleasure of receiving letters, the familiar handwriting that testifies that one is thought of, that one counts. "When I read 'Dearest Katherine' or 'my darling' I feel such pleasure and comfort."<sup>36</sup> From Lima she writes that she composes letters in bed, in her dressing room, in the bath tub, but that is dangerous because they seem to be getting done but aren't.<sup>37</sup> From Port-au-Prince she says that "For nights on end I lie in bed and write to you on the fabric of my mind and imagination."<sup>38</sup> From Paris she writes that almost every day she composes a letter or at least a note: "They are not on paper, but I will have to count on you to feel this communication."<sup>39</sup>

When Bernard was at the height of his powers as a connoisseur he used to keep a fake Renaissance painting on his desk to invite the admiration of the unwary. Now he used Katherine

as a touchstone in judging authenticity in people. If they approved of her, then they might be all right:

Lady Mallet hitherto treated me as if I were a bad smell, and I felt toward her somewhat as I did toward Edith Wharton between our two first meetings. Yesterday she spoke of Katherine Dunham with such penetrating, such subtle, and such delicately human admiration, that I there and then concluded that if chance favoured, she and I could be intimate friends. Even if for some interested reason she revealed what was in her, and not of any interest in me, the revelation was unmistakable, and changed my pattern of her.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Southland***

For a brief moment at the beginning of 1953 this new friendship was sorely tested. Katherine engaged in the most daring project of her career, and Bernard advised against it. Their love was put on ice, briefly, only to return more ardently and with deeper understanding than before. The problems arose over Bernard's attitude to *Southland*, a ballet Katherine performed about a lynching in the American south.<sup>41</sup>

As early as 1937 Katherine had introduced the theme into the ballet *Tropic Death*, performed at the YMHA in New York. In it, her teacher, Talley Beatty, is cast as a fugitive from a lynch mob. The subject was highly topical in these years. Between 1936 and 1946 forty-three lynchings of mostly southern blacks were reported, as well as hundreds of near escapes. There were no prosecutions. The NAACP had fought for a federal anti-lynching bill for thirty years, but it was killed in congress in 1950. Protest came in poetry, music, and dance, especially in *Strange Fruit*, the song of 1930 that was popularized by Billie Holiday and interpreted in dance by Pearl Primus, as well as in Talley Beatty's dance of 1947 on the theme of Reconstruction in the Old South, *Southern Landscape*.

Katherine created *Southland* while on tour in South America in 1950-51. In the preface to the French version she says:

Though I have not smelled the smell of burning flesh, and have never seen a black body swaying from a southern tree, I have felt these things in spirit...Through the creative artist comes the need to show this thing to the world, hoping that by exposing the ill, the conscience of the many will protest.<sup>42</sup>

*Southland* was presented in Santiago, Chile in January 1951, with music incorporating blues and spirituals by the Jesuit composer Dino Di Stefano. At center stage was a magnolia tree and a southern mansion. Black lovers, Lucy and Richard, embrace under the tree until the drunken, quarrelsome white lovers, Julie and Lenwood, enter. Lenwood beats Julie and leaves the scene, but when she awakes and sees Richard, she accuses him of rape and advocates his lynching. The crime is soon carried out by the crowd. Lucy has left the scene, and when she returns, she finds Richard's body. There follows the song, *Strange Fruit*, and then the funeral procession, moving

among singers and gamblers in a smoky cabaret, where a black man, in a symbol of vengeance, plunges a knife into the floor.

A Communist journalist in Chile told Katherine that there would be no reviews of *Southland* other than his own, since the United States would cut off newsprint to any paper that dared publish one. The American ambassador in Santiago, Claude G. Bowers, had written a book in 1929 criticizing Republican policy during Reconstruction and justifying the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. *Southland* was not performed again during the company's South American tours of 1951 and 1952. But during their next European tour, Katherine rehearsed the ballet in Genoa and presented it in Paris in January 1953. She tried to see the American ambassador beforehand but was told he was out. The American cultural attaché who received her at the embassy simply said:

We trust you and your personal good taste and we know that you wouldn't do anything to upset the American position in the rest of the world.

Katherine later said: "He wouldn't go any farther. So I did it." But she paid a price.

Reviews were mixed, with predictably opposite reactions from the conservative and the left-leaning press. *Le Monde* summed up the puzzlement of some critics by asking, "What has happened to the anthropologist we once admired?" Katherine was glad, at least, that the Communist press had not used the ballet for anti-American sentiment, and she felt that by showing that freedom of speech still remained a basic principle of American democracy, the performance had done more good for the American government than they realized. Her strong feelings were not widely shared, however. Her own company had not wanted to perform the ballet. They wanted to shed feelings of racial difference, which they felt they had succeeded in doing on tours outside of America. Paris had accepted them, and they did not want to change the world, and yet the dance made them more conscious of color than they wanted to be.

*Southland* was not maintained in the company's repertoire after its performance in Paris. The dance historian Constance Valis Hill sees a kind of quite censorship at work on the part of the U.S. State Department. In spite of their policy of supporting American music and art abroad, the American government never subsidized Katherine's troupe, and it refused permission for her to accept an invitation from China in 1956. Hill sees the lack of governmental support as the reason for the eventual dissolution of the company. The dance was last performed in the Apollo Theater in Harlem in 1965. It inspired other protest dances: Talley Beatty's *Road of the Phoebe Snow*, Donald McKayle's *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder*, Eleo Pomare's *Blue for the Jungle*, and Alvin Ailey's *Masekela Language*. Hill concludes:

Although *Southland* instigated the dissolution of Dunham's company, it laid the moral groundwork for subsequent expressions of affirmation and dissent and may forever embolden all those who dare to protest in the face of repression.<sup>43</sup>

Berenson has entered the Dunham literature as the disapproving critic of Katherine's brave protest. Indeed, he did advise her not to perform the piece in Europe. However, the letters tell a nuanced story, in which a close friendship is tried but survives and grows deeper than before. Let us allow the protagonists to speak for themselves.

Katherine did not at first tell Bernard about the performance of *Southland* in Santiago in 1951. However, on 1 November 1952 she wrote to him saying that she was going to perform *Southland* in Paris. She visited I Tatti around Christmas 1952 and left in some distress, which she recounts in a letter written a year later: "Just a year ago Thursday we were together and I left your house in such despair, but since in essence we were both right there is nothing lost but rather much gained."<sup>44</sup> Early in the new year of 1953, still in Genoa, she wrote again about the lynching ballet that she was about to perform. This last letter is missing, but we have Bernard's reply, written on 6 January 1953. He assumed that the ballet was still in the planning stage and advised her against it. Using an unfortunate metaphor, he said that if it was too late for a miscarriage or abortion, she should have it born in America. If it were produced in Europe, he felt it would fuel anti-American propaganda and damage her career.

However, by the time she received Berenson's advice, *Southland* had already opened at the Palais de Chaillot on 9 January 1953. Courageous but vulnerable, Katherine was hurt by his discouragement. It seemed that a precious friendship had been severed by him, unfairly, because she had been faithful to her innermost feelings. A month later she wrote a long letter to Bernard from Paris about the distress she felt over his advice. She acknowledged his feelings towards the American Department of State and its power to hurt her career, but she dwelt on the importance of integrity. She is upset that such a deep affection as that which had existed between them could be abruptly terminated by an act that grows out of integrity. She stresses her innocence in performing *Southland*, "a thing to me of great beauty and of a newness in the theater, and an expression of some of the passion which is in me just as much as those things that you have seen and admired." She went on to mention the paradoxical reactions in the French press, with praise coming from both the Gaullist right and the Communist left. Most of all, she is hurt by "this irrevocable rejection," which threw a dark cloak around her whole being for the weeks she was in Paris.

Bernard was not in Paris at the time of the single performance and never saw the ballet. Once he received a copy of the Paris program, he realized that it had already been performed, and that Katherine was terribly hurt by his letter. He immediately tried to control the damage and repair the friendship. He wrote on 7 February 1953 to tell her that he would not have counseled stopping the ballet had he known that it was already in production. He tells her that the synopsis is fascinating and that he wishes he could see the ballet staged. A month later he wrote again to reassure her of his love and to complain about the distressing reviews he had read in the Parisian

press about her performance. By the summer of 1953 the friendship had been repaired, and the electricity flowed even more deeply than before. From Reno, Nevada, she wrote him a four-page typed letter ranging from the segregation and squalid living conditions of blacks to the recently detonated atomic bomb. She returned to *Southland*:

But believe me, B-B-, I do not speak with bitterness or resentment or any of the things that you seemed to feel that I was trying to express or satisfy in myself in *Southland*. I do feel and have always felt as sort of objective observer in this thing. My own life had been so different that I see this as one of the vast problems of the entire human race.... I had to do *Southland*, and I believe that many an American, even in the diplomatic service, admired the amount of strength, not courage, that it took to do it, *not* for propaganda or negation of one's national heritage.<sup>45</sup>

The correspondence of these two unlikely friends continued with its old intensity and intimacy in the six years between *Southland* and Bernard's death in October 1959. Once again Bernard assumed the role of analyst, while Katherine combined the roles of descriptive anthropologist and self-aware analysand. She even sent him a carbon copy of the nine-page letter that she wrote to her husband, John Pratt, in 1957, detailing all that was wrong with their marriage, which seemed on the brink of dissolution. In that letter she told John that "BB's constant, constant letters just about saved my life on one or two occasions."<sup>46</sup>

Bernard told Clotilde Marghieri in 1950 that he admired Katherine "with a little sex feeling." It might have been a lot more had he been younger and had they had more time alone together. Their few meetings, however, were at I Tatti, where Nicky was on hand to welcome and to watch. In any case, Bernard spelled out his attitude to sublimated sex in a passage in his diary, written ostensibly about Hortense Serristori, but applicable also to Katherine:

Friendships with women are never sex-free, but sublimated into an atmosphere of delicate, subtle tenderness. It is an exquisite relation, and perhaps the inspiration of much of the very noblest painting, music, and above all of poetry. It has played a great part in my own life, ever so much more than mere animal sexuality... Sublimated sex can last a lifetime. It certainly has in mine.<sup>47</sup>

Katherine feels free to write about sex to Bernard in the way that one might speak of it to an analyst. She confides to him that she is afraid of actual contacts, even when they seem successful, and that is what is wrong with her sexual life. From Zürich she writes him about the easy sexual encounters of her dancers, which contrast with her own loneliness:

But the amazement to me is the chance meeting in a bar, the greeting at a street corner, the signing of an autograph at the stage door that results for these extroverted young animals in a night, or maybe just moments of completely abandoned pleasure. Our backgrounds are reasonably the same, so I can no longer lay my "inadequacy of the

moment” at the doorstep of Puritanism. It must be the result of a gradual, continual system of either insurance against harm or refinement of taste over the years. And we can be so trapped by our refinements. So that while they burst with the curiosity of what each day may bring to them as an individual, while they compare teeth marks and other ‘épreuves’ of passion, I read and think and work and wonder if my life would seem any more livable were my day revolving around a certainty of anonymous passions at night.<sup>48</sup>

It is not sex that Katherine wants from grandfatherly Bernard, but understanding bathed in love. After leaving I Tatti, she writes a love letter a few hours later from the Hotel Baglioni in Florence:

I have just left you and am so used to arriving at the rail crossing (that seems to be a landmark) sad and alone. This time I suddenly melted into floods of tears. I know that when we were along for those few moments something wonderful happened - that I experienced a true love and meaning of love that was too big for this mortal self. And I have left with you something that perhaps you gave me a thousand years ago – apart of myself that is deep and inner and that I am scarcely aware of, only through feeling.

I left a part of myself that is deep and inner with you. ....sat in your beloved presence a different self ...made me feel fuller and calmer and more sure of the great plan of life and its inevitable circular motion. You must feel me breathe into you my love, my warmth and the saving grace of this dark blood. Stay with me, dearest BB and stay with all of us who love you as I do. Catherine.<sup>49</sup>

In her letters Katherine offers Bernard her anthropologist’s eye, letting him see places he would never visit and hear of societies he would never know in person. In 1950 he wrote him from São Paulo, Brazil, about witnessing sacrifices and ceremonies called “macumbas” of goats, sheep, chickens, when the officiating priest became possessed of a warrior god and started eating raw livers.<sup>50</sup> She adds that it affected the troupe’s appetite for many days. In the long letter from Reno (“the last frontier in America”) of 1953 that was quoted above, Katherine asks Bernard:

Can you imagine what it must be like to work for a full hour before, or rather surrounded by, within touching distance, the faces and bodies of thugs and gamblers and hustlers and prostitutes and exploiters and touts and all of the ones that are the only ones who can afford these places, and while one works with perspiration dripping over ones false eyelashes and knee with a floating cartilage threatening betrayal at any minute and muscle and joint and heart weariness struggling to take control, this great sodden beast eats steaks, drips spaghetti, guzzles bourbon, talks, laughs, and once in a while gets up to go to the water closet...<sup>51</sup>

She then touches on the theme of sex and the erotic element in her art:

The success we have at these places is very strange. It seems to be chiefly on an erotic basis as that is the most direct way to reach them. This type of person comes to a place like that to see Negroes only as a burlesque character, or to have their sluggish currents pepped up by a jazz beat, by the out-do all that the human body seems capable of doing that has meant the success of the Negro tap dancer...always something ingratiating, physical agility. Or the Negro singer that transports them in abandon. The foreign element that we bring puts them ill at ease at first...then the drums reach something, though they don't know just what. My form of sex is more refined than they are used to, but sets them to thinking that they might be missing something. Above all, I believe that they are impressed by a certain intellect that they can't define, and a certain untouchability that makes them wish that they had it themselves.<sup>52</sup>

In October 1954 she writes from Buenos Aires about conditions under the Peronist regime after the passing of Evita Peron.<sup>53</sup> She gave a masterly summing up of her visit to Mexico,<sup>54</sup> and Bernard thanked her, recalling his own early interest in pre-Columbian art:

Pity that I have not been able to get there, altho' my interest in its art goes back to my college days. Then I discovered at Harvard a show full of Aztec and Mayan sculpture, and was deeply impressed. I have since then tried to see all that could be seen out of Mexico itself, and I have most of the illustrated publications in the library of I Tatti.<sup>55</sup>

From Las Vegas she sends him some samples of her "prose-poetry."<sup>56</sup> From Melbourne she writes in 1956 about giving a speech for an Aboriginal Girls Hostel. From New Zealand in 1957 she writes about attending a gathering of 3000 Maori from several tribes to bid farewell to a Maori girl leaving for England to play in a tennis tournament:

The songs and dances in native costume were so full of affection and spiritual care for the girl – they were so proud, and so integrated that I looked on with a certain envy, I must admit. Surely there are not many such people in the world. Handsome and open and undestroyed by white colonization.<sup>57</sup>

From Kuala Lumpur she writes in 1957 about the excitement in the air as freedom was about to be granted from the British colonial occupation, but also of the fears inspired by the Communist bands sweeping in from the jungles to the north and infecting Singapore with strikes and riots.<sup>58</sup>

In 1957 Katherine disbanded her company. Financial travails were part of the cause, but she was also growing tired of the tensions within. She wanted to find a new career. In 1949 and 1950, in Paris and Buenos Aires, she had tried painting. Seriously misjudging his aesthetic preferences, she sent photos of her canvases to Bernard, with a disclaimer:

They are not really paintings at all but expressions of a search of other selves which in me seem to be multiple.<sup>59</sup>

What did Berenson think of her paintings? A Florentine newspaper clipping shows Dunham and



her dancers in the Boboli Gardens in 1950 (Fig. 3), and puts into a headline his improbable advice: “*Keep on painting*, says Berenson to Dunham.”<sup>60</sup> However, it is difficult to imagine that Berenson, who had shed his early admiration for Matisse and Cézanne and who was at that time engaged in a study of the decline of form in western art, really approved. More honest was his encouragement for her to turn to writing: “I am sure there is a real woman of letters tucked away in you,” he wrote in 1955. A month later, he continued:

Your bitter-sweet verses delight me. They are so charming, and yet so deep-sounding, light, almost gay, but with a distant rumbling of a tragic sea... [To get them published] TRY younger people if there be any you suspect of aesthetic heart and mind.<sup>61</sup>

After the return of her dancers from their last Asian tour to America, Katherine stayed in Japan in 1957 and 1958 to write her autobiography. She sent a draft to Bernard in February 1958, but he seems to have found it obscure and in need of correcting.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, although it not such a short book, it covers only her childhood and adolescence, not the formative years at the University of Chicago or the foundation of American black dance. Strong emotions welled up and kept her writing slowly: “It is so painful. I weep over many pages, but after five times, it will be writing, not emotion, I hope.” When *A Touch of Innocence* came out in 1959, she dedicated it to B.B.

The admiring affection between Bernard and Katherine echoes, in a more Platonic vein, Bernard’s ardent affair with Belle da Costa Greene (1883-1950) a generation earlier.<sup>63</sup> Born Marion Greener, Belle was the daughter of Richard Greener, the grandson of a Virginia slave and the first black to graduate from Harvard College. His career, at least in its early stages, was spent in campaigning for the right of suffrage and for public education for blacks in the post-Civil War era. Greener openly identified with his black ancestry and was an active advocate of racial equality, but he also claimed the right to live in white society, as befitting a cultured and educated member of the middle class. His wife and family, however, all light skinned, disassociated themselves from their father’s identification with blacks. Belle in particular broke with three generations of black activism to live as a white. She adopted a Portuguese name, da Costa, to explain her Mediterranean complexion to the many people who noticed her exotic looks. It was a strategy adopted gradually between 1894 and 1900, and it served her well in the spectacular career she developed under the patronage of J. Pierpont Morgan and his family. The severe and unpleasant Isabella Stewart Gardner, stung by Belle’s criticisms of her collection, thought of her as a “half-breed.”<sup>64</sup> However, Belle never thought of herself as black, and admitted only veiled and humorous allusions to her dark complexion. Most of her acquaintances and romantic attachments in New York society accepted her fiction of a southern Mediterranean ancestry, and admired her beauty, vivacity, exotic looks, and growing knowledge of rare books and manuscripts. Bernard never alludes to questions of race, although Mary and Nicky sensed

there was something exotic about this “most wild and woolly and EXTRAORDINARY young person”<sup>65</sup> who swept Bernard off his feet.

Katherine Dunham represents a diametrically opposite stance on race. Also a light-skinned African American, she actively identified with the American Negro. This was a conscious choice. Race was not a barrier for her at the University of Chicago the way it would have been at most elite universities. In her fieldwork in Jamaica and Haiti, her color was a distinct advantage in achieving empathy with the communities she studied. Katherine fought discrimination all her life, protesting in hotels and theaters where her troupe was not treated equally.<sup>66</sup> Any attempt at “passing” or living as white was simply out of the question for this strong personality.

Bernard and Katherine each overlooked barriers that are usually effective in keeping elective affinities from becoming passionate. For Bernard it was the barrier of race, which he lowered to accept Katherine’s offer of “the saving grace of this dark blood.” The barrier Katherine overlooked was that of age. Forty-four years would in most cases constitute a firebreak that ardor will not overleap. Katherine, however, was completely nonchalant about age. Early in their relationship, when she was preparing for a visit to Venice, she offered to fly to see him:

Then on one of these inbetween days I will make it a point to take advantage of this technological age and fly to whatever point you may be stationed. Then we can talk about material for a play, the glories of the Renaissance, your beloved Italy, my beloved Haiti, bronze statuary, and those utterly unfounded notions of yours about time and age, as I am sure that you realise that extending backward and forward there is no such thing as a conclusion of anything, even the human mechanism at 84, so I count on you for that eternal youth which I enjoy myself, because at 38 I feel neither young or old, but just as timeless as I am sure you feel at 84, and as I am sure I will feel at 187.<sup>67</sup>

The meaninglessness of age in relationships is a theme that returns often in her letters. She reassures Bernard that it is the inner man she loves, notwithstanding the waif-like weakness of his octogenarian and then nonagenarian body. On his side, Bernard was always conscious this barrier. Living to his age was an adventure he did not recommend to anyone. He was all the more grateful to Katherine for ignoring it. In 1955 he wrote to her:

I have weathered the cape of 90. I have avoided ceremonials by refusing to go to Oxford to receive an honorary degree, and by keeping away from Rome and Florence.... There have been “gratifying” words about me in many American, English, Italian, even French and German papers. They don’t mean much to me and do not reconcile me to myself - a self toward which my esteem is uncertain and my affection dubious. I cling to you and to the few who really love me. You ask me why[.] I cannot tell.<sup>68</sup>

And Katherine, on her part, assured him, when he was ninety-one, that she kept a picture of him above her mirror: “I am so happy that it is never too late to love.”<sup>69</sup> In 1957, when he was ninety-two, she replied to his laments:

Don't worry about your looks. You are there inside the same dear and alert self as always – I can tell from your letters. Do you still wear the shoes that I admire so much?<sup>70</sup>

After Berenson's death in 1959, Katherine did not become a writer or a painter, but rather a teacher and a social activist. Her last Broadway performance was in 1962, but she choreographed *Aïda* for the Metropolitan Opera in 1963. She founded the Performing Arts Training Center in East Saint Louis, Missouri, in 1967, and the Katherine Dunham Museum and Children's Workshop in the same difficult, ghettoized city in 1979. It was here that she initiated a fast to call attention to the plight of Haitian refugees turned away from the United States in 1992.

Bernard Berenson thought of Katherine Dunham as a living work of art, beautiful like a bronze statue, and animated by a deep inner vitality. She appreciated and in fact needed this response from the ultimate aesthete, and reciprocated with a love that survived his critique of *Southland*. Her letters lit up his final decade, and his offered her an anchor in times of emotional upheaval and constant global travel. Fresh and not at all cloying, they still make wonderful reading.

*Correspondence of Katherine Dunham and Bernard Berenson regarding the performance of the ballet "Southland" in Paris in January 1953*

1. KD to BB, Santa Margherita Ligure (Genoa), 1 November 1952, VIT.

In Paris in January I plan to do our ballet *Southland* which we did only once in Santiago, Chile. Part of my feeling of incapacity and creative immobility comes from not saying what I want to say – that is, having more to say than the medium which I have chosen permits.

2. BB to KD, Settignano, 6 Jan. 52 [*sic!*, for 1953], Special Collections Research Center, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Berenson misdates the letter, forgetfully carrying over the old year 1952 although he wrote the letter in 1953.

Beloved Katherine,

Thanks for a dear word from Paris.

If you feel too far gone in pregnancy to expect a miscarriage or to have resource to an

abortion you, an American of such destination must have it born in America. The child I have in mind, as of course you know, is the idea of turning a lynching into a ballet, -- “suffering into song”. If you produce such a ballet in the States, and it takes on there, you could bring it over to Europe. If you produce it here, it will serve only to give fuel to the fire of anti-American propaganda. All the communists in Western Europe will take it up, and the Soviets and their satellites from the Elbe to the Yangtse, will feast on it and more. A mad resentment will be roused against you in the United States. It may end by driving you to seek refuge in Russia.

Can you face such a possible result?

Therefore: - Either give up the idea, or carry it out and produce it in America.

Your loving friend

B.B.

P.S. Happily Nicky’s health is improving.

3. KD to BB, Paris, 1 February 1953, VIT. Paragraph six is quoted in Valis Hill, p. 6, republished in Clark and Johnson, *Kaiso!*, p. 354.

Dearest B.B.,

I have put off writing to you for some time hoping that the distress which I felt leaving I Tatti that rainy night and have felt ever since would diminish. I know and respect all of your feelings towards State, many of which I have, but I know also that in your wisdom you must feel and know the importance of integrity to oneself and one’s creative drive. And while I might have expected to have been abjured by you, I did not expect that a deep affection, to say nothing of the love that one individual can have for another – such as I thought we had – could be so rudely destroyed because of an action obviously growing out of a fundamental integrity.

I have turned every possible searchlight and inner eye on my feeling towards performing *Southland* at this time, and I must say that I feel absolutely innocent. It was a thing to me of great beauty and of a newness in the theater, and an expression of some of the passion which is in me just as much as those things that you have seen and admired. Amusingly enough it has been severely attacked not only by “right” press, but by even such a communist press as *Le Combat* from a theater point of view. It has been equally praised by the communist *Humanite*, by the extreme rightist Gaullist *Ce matin – Le Pays*, and in between has reached a storm of enraged criticism as well as personal attack not only on *Southland* but on me in general, because I have betrayed the French and not continued to give them the opiate which they first received in 1948. There have been as many exceedingly laudatory criticisms and a number of congratulations on my efforts to break away from the limiting category in which I had been placed against my will by the French. I have not, however, been approached by either communists or the communist

press who I believe, since after all they are often very perceptive people, do not see anything either in the ballet or in the material for anti-American usage.

On one side I see repeated with the rhythm of an out of gear piece of machinery “music hall”, “betraying of racial origins in emphasising orchestra instead of tam-tam”, “cerebralism”, “Sorbonnism”, “intellectualism”. On the other side I find words such as “beauty”, “unforgettable theater”, “courage,” “improvement of production and technique”, “charm, wit and fortitude.”

Naturally I admit that I have been deeply grieved by some of the unkind remarks, but I would have been more deeply grieved had I betrayed myself. The next grief to this comes in the loss of your understanding and friendship, and in this I feel helpless because somewhere in me are roots stronger than I am, based probably more on intuition than reason, which seem to walk hand in hand with my own will and judgement so that I seldom falter in an act, and if I do I am almost always regretting and ashamed.

As to the repercussions of this ballet, its symbolism is far over the heads of most of the French and it is treated on the stage in a combination of symbolism and realism which they do not understand at all. Many Americans have seen it. Some do not like it a bit and others (not by any possible means or stretch of the imagination communist) have come backstage to thank me for making them think. A number of people, some of them southern, have met the company in various bars and told them how much they admired the ballet and the manner in which that particular subject was presented. I go out very little myself and therefore have small opportunity to meet this sort of person.

A few days before the opening in my distress I asked to see the Ambassador whom I know to ask his opinion. He was not in town but the Cultural Attache very warmly recommended that I have no reserves in relationship to what the American Government might think and agreed with me that to stop the presentation when it is known that this work is repertoire would have a far more serious repercussion on the American Government than its presentation ever could. In my heart of hearts and with my own primitive animal intuition, I know also that this has done more good for the American Government than perhaps even they know, although I feel sincerely that some of them do. It has proven to the world that the thing of which they are being accused every day due to the acts of such people as Senator Macarthy and so forth, has not yet become a fact, and that freedom of speech still remains one of our basic principles.

In my opinion, since I know the truth with which the ballet is presented and its lack of propagandistic structure, I feel that the American Government has moved a step ahead in the eyes of European Government in not interfering and in calmly taking for granted this thing as they do articles in the various foreign editions of their publications on such subjects.

Literally it is documentary, and since I allowed the year 1952 to pass without performing it and there we[re] no lynchings in that year it is away ahead historically. Dramatically it is a high point in my own efforts at welding mime and motion. Choreographically it is extremely simple but with high moments of gymnastic beauty and plastic flow. Auditorally there is some beautiful singing in it and I myself like the orchestra arrangement. From a production point of view I feel that it is a real achievement in lighting and staging, especially with our own slender means. But I would not apologise for this even on Broadway.

So my dearly beloved friend during these years of our close association I have always turned to you with eagerness for those words of wisdom which you know so well how to mete out. I have felt that the only way which I could repay you would be to try and reach somehow your level of thinking, which is hard for me in reality because I live in this continuous removed intuitive, even I suppose semi-mystic state. I have felt unworthy of you and unworthy of knowing you and I would willingly have withdrawn from knowing you would it in any way be profitable to yourself or even comfortable to you. But I have not expected from the greatness which you have always meant to me the irrevocable rejection which was the result of my own poor efforts to try and clarify and to strive and help.

This feeling threw a very dark cloak around my whole being for the first two weeks that we were in Paris so that much of it seems dream-like. Then I felt exceedingly sensitive to the mass illness that is going on here in France and to the trials at Oradour and to the way of the world in general to the point where a few days ago in a false movement I knocked two vertebrae out of place. Since I can never afford to be bed-ridden for more than twelve hours at a time, with the aid of instruments and drugs there I was again doing the show without interruption and now again one day has begun to follow the other much as before.

You have no idea how important it is for me to get this letter written to you as it has been on my mind every day and I have picked up a pen and put it down and wandered past a typewriter on so many occasions knowing that once it was written at least it would be something definite. Now I must ask you to try and think of the better things that you knew about me.

My warmest love to Nicky and my continued love to you no matter what you might choose to do, because I know that whatever it would be it could only be worthy because it would come from you.

Katherine

Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

Darling, Dearest Catherine:

I am deeply moved that you should have thought me worthy of the marvellous letter you wrote Febr. 1<sup>st</sup>. So extraordinary that you should place such value on what I think of you and my attitude toward you. I am awed and want to shout Domini non sum dignus. Almost I could welcome the misunderstanding which brought out such an appeal.

Yes, a misunderstanding due in part to you and in great part to my obtuseness. If you received the answer I addressed to you to Hotel Lotti to the note I had from you written there, you would have realized that I assumed the ballet centering around a lynching was something you were going to compose and orchestrate – NOT, as now turns out, one you already had arranged to perform immediately. Had I know that you were going to Paris to produce it, I should have spoken and written differently. So long as there was a possibility of putting you off from what seemed to me a hazardous offering I felt I must do all I could to persuade you to drop it. Had I known that it was ready to be performed immediately and in Paris, I either would have said nothing or tried to cheer and comfort you.

I never meant to stop loving you, for I could not if I tried. Yet, if the U.S.A. took the performance as offensive and harmful and frequenting you had been scowled at, I am not in a position to defend you or even to go on seeing you. For I myself am only an alien-born American, an absentee, who has not been back in 30 years, and therefore am offensive to the mind of the State Department bureaucracy. Happily the U.S.A. Cultural Attaché, with all the authority and power of his office, has not disapproved, and I certainly have no reason (as the French say) to be “more Catholic than the Pope”, in my case to be more patriotic than our Cultural Attaché. And it comforts me to learn from you that the communist press thus far has made no capital out of yr. ballet.

So let me hope that it will be in every way satisfactory, both culturally and financially.

Let me not forget that yr. synopsis is altogether fascinating and makes me wish I could see the whole staged.

Are you no longer at the Lotti? I like to be able to place you. “c/o” is so vague.

Trust me to be ever and always

Your loving friend,

B.B.

5. KD to BB, Florence, 11 March 1954, VIT.

March 11, 1954

Grand Hotel Baglioni Palace, Florence, Italy

Dearest B.B.

I have just left you and am so used to arriving at the rail crossing (that seems to be a landmark) sad and alone. This time I suddenly melted into floods of tears. I know that when we were along for those few moments something wonderful happened - that I experienced a true love and meaning of love that was too big for this mortal self. And I have left with you something that perhaps you gave me a thousand years ago – a part of myself that is deep and inner and that I am scarcely aware of, only through feeling.

I sat in your beloved presence a different self knowing you somewhere else, and it was future because Niki's sister was Niki for me until Niki came in, and I vaguely remembered wondering if she had been ill or was it many years from now. There didn't seem to be time, only a fusion of something from me to you (you have always been the one to give) that made me feel fuller and calmer and more sure of the great plan of life and its inevitable circular motion. That feeling (knowledge) will always be with me and that part of me will always be with you wherever and whenever.

Everything deeper than I am tells me this and the tears that burned out of me were the tears of a final knowledge and the realization of an arrested moment in time. You must feel me breathe into you my love, my warmth, and the saving grace of this dark blood. – What else do I have? Stay with me, dearest B.B. and stay with all of us who love you as I do. – Katherine

7. BB to KD, Settignano, 19 March 1953, Special Collections Research Center, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

Dearest Katherine,

So glad to hear from you after a too long silence, and I love this last photo of yourself, and portrait of the woman Katherine whom I love so much. I do not want to guess, so try to tell me what precisely are the changes 6 wks. have brought about. The photo does not look as if they



were for the worse – I was distressed as well as shocked by some of the comments about yr. performance that I read in Paris dailies and weeklies. There is no place on earth where cliques enjoy greater power, and influence opinion more effectively. You seem to have got in the way of the Spanish solo dancing interest, which now hypnotizes the Parisian public.

I am glad you liked Nina de Cencis. She is a dear child despite her 70 years more or less. Another woman who is eager to know you is Lady Mallet in Rome, the wife of the Brit. Ambassador there.

I wish you were here in this golden weather, and before we get overwhelmed by the season's visitors.

Ever so much love

B.B.

---

<sup>1</sup> The letters of Bernard Berenson to Katherine Dunham are deposited with the Katherine Dunham Papers in the Special Collections Research Center, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC). I have been able to read eighty of his letters in photocopy; others are still restricted under the terms established by Ms. Dunham when she donated the archive. Some of the letters are accompanied by typed versions. While these were useful initially in deciphering Berenson's difficult handwriting, my transcriptions are always made from the original, often with significant variants from the typed version. The letters of Katherine Dunham to Bernard Berenson are deposited in the Berenson Archive at Villa I Tatti (VIT). They are typed or written in an elegant hand that is an archivist's dream. I have maintained the spelling and punctuation of the originals.

At the Morris Library Special Collections I offer sincere thanks to Pam Hackbart-Dean, Lea (Broaddus) Agne, and Aaron Lisec for facilitating my long-distance research in every way. In the Berenson Archive at Villa I Tatti (VIT), where seventy-three of Katherine Dunham's letters are deposited, I offer my warm thanks to Giovanni Pagliarulo, Sanne Wellen, and Ilaria Della Monica.

For the outline of Dunham's life and career, I am indebted to the fine biography by Joyce Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham: Dancing a Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002); and the comprehensive collection of materials in Vèvè A. Clark and Sara E. Johnson, eds., *Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), which is a much enlarged 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. of *Kaiso! Katherine Dunham: An Anthology of Writings*, ed. Vèvè A. Clark and Margaret B. Wilkerson, 130 mimeographed copies (Berkeley: Institute for the Study of Social Change, 1978). The website "Selections from the Katherine Dunham Collection at the Library of Congress" (accessed by entering the search terms Katherine Dunham Library of Congress), contains photographs and a selection of videos of Haitian dance filmed by her as well as her own performances. The timeline on the site does not always agree with Aschenbrenner's authoritative biography. Like all contributors to this book, I am greatly indebted to the classic two-volume biography, Ernest Samuels, *Bernard Berenson: The Making of a Connoisseur* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1979); and *Bernard Berenson: The Making of a Legend*, with the collaboration of Jayne Newcomer Samuels (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Jack Anderson, "Katherine Dunham, Dance Icon, Dies at 96," *The New York Times*, May 23, 2006; and in the same issue, Jennifer Dunning, "How Katherine Dunham Revealed Black Dance to the World," *The New York Times*, May 23, 2006; for another obituary see Sally Sommer, "Katherine Dunham: African-American Dancer, Choreographer, Anthropologist, Activist and Voodoo Priestess," *The Guardian*, 23 May 2006.

<sup>3</sup> *Harvard Magazine*, July-August 2002. Other honorands included economist Albert Hirschman, Senator Daniel Moynihan, philosopher Bernard Williams, historian Peter Brown, and former Harvard president Neil Rudenstine.

<sup>4</sup> Clark and Johnson, *Kaiso!*, 412-17.

<sup>5</sup> For example in R.H. Hagan, "Katherine Dunham Tells of Debt to Berenson," *San Francisco Chronicle* (30 September 1955), clipping VIT.

<sup>6</sup> Nicky Mariano, *Forty Years with Berenson*, with foreword by Sir Kenneth Clark (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> Samuels, *Legend*, 517, 519, 536.

<sup>8</sup> Aschenbrenner, *Dunham*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Aschenbrenner, *Dunham*, 50.

<sup>10</sup> Reviewed by Zora Neal Hurston, "Thirty Days among Maroons" (1942), in Clark and Johnson, *Kaiso!*, 272-73. The books by Katherine Dunham in the Biblioteca Berenson are: *Journey to Accompong*, with an introduction by Ralph Linton and drawings by Ted Cook (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1946); *Las danzas de Haití*, Acta Antropológica, II.4, in English and Spanish, ed. Javier Romero (Mexico City, 1947); and *A Touch of Innocence* (London: Cassel & Co., 1959). These arrived during Berenson's lifetime, while *Island Possessed* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969) was sent a decade after his death.

<sup>11</sup> Aschenbrenner, *Dunham*, 62-63.

<sup>12</sup> Aschenbrenner, *Dunham*, 64.

<sup>13</sup> Clark and Johnson, *Kaiso!*, xviii and 215.

<sup>14</sup> Clark and Johnson, *Kaiso!*, 383.

<sup>15</sup> See Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1941), for the classic statement of this position, and its reflection in Katherine Dunham, “The Negro Dance” (1941), in Clark and Johnson, *Kaiso!*, 217-226.

<sup>16</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937, reprint New York: Octagon Books, 1964), with introduction by Edward Brathwaite, especially 177-98, “Vodun Worship: The Dance.”

<sup>17</sup> See especially Aschenbrenner, *Dunham*, ch. 5: “Anthropology and Dance.”

<sup>18</sup> Clark and Johnson, *Kaiso!*, 386.

<sup>19</sup> “Thesis Turned Broadway” (1941), in Clark and Johnson, *Kaiso!*, 214-16.

<sup>20</sup> Katherine Dunham (writing as Kaye Dunn), “L’ag’ya of Martinique,” in Clark and Johnson, *Kaiso!*, 201-07, especially 202f.

<sup>21</sup> There is conflicting evidence for the date of their first meeting, which took place either in 1948 or 1949. In the interview in the San Francisco Chronicle (30 September 1955) Dunham says she was brought to lunch at I Tatti by Serge Tolstoy in 1948, and Samuels (*Legend*, 517) places her visit in that year as well. Her first letter to Berenson, written from Antwerp, seems at first sight to be dated 9 May 1945. However, the final digit is hard to read, and the year 1945 is impossible (though it is used for the date parameters in *Bernard Berenson: An Inventory of Correspondence*, ed. Nicky Mariano (Florence and Cambridge MA: Villa I Tatti and Harvard University Press, 1965), 29). It could also be read as 1948. In it, however, Katherine refers to the article, “Life Calls on Bernard Berenson,” *Life*, April 11, 1949, 158-164 (available online through Google Books, searching “Berenson Life 1949”; my thanks to Jennifer Snodgrass for bringing this internet link to my attention). The article includes the phrase “Bernard Berenson, who is known as ‘B.B.’ to his friends...” (159). The letters that immediately follow in the correspondence are clearly dated May 1949. I tend to think 1949 is the correct date for their first meeting.

<sup>22</sup> KD to BB, 20 May 1949, VIT.

<sup>23</sup> Nicky Mariano, *Forty Years with Bernard Berenson*, 39.

<sup>24</sup> One of the photographs is reproduced in Samuels, *Legend*, fig. 35, between 490 and 491.

<sup>25</sup> Berenson Diaries, 26 February 1950, in Bernard Berenson, *Sunset and Twilight: From the Diaries of 1947-58*, edited with an epilogue by Nicky Mariano and an introduction by Iris Origo (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 162.

<sup>26</sup> BB to CM, 27 February 1950, in Dario Biocca, ed., *A Matter of Passion: Letters of Bernard Berenson and Clotilde Margheri* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1989), 253.

<sup>27</sup> CM to BB, 28 March 1950, in Biocca, *A Matter of Passion*, 253.

<sup>28</sup> BB to CM, 31 March 1950, in Biocca, *A Matter of Passion*, 254f.

<sup>29</sup> Berenson Diary entry for 2 April 1950, in Berenson, *Sunset and Twilight*, 166.

<sup>30</sup> KD to BB, Paris, 14 December 1951, VIT.

<sup>31</sup> KD to BB, Stockholm, 17 June 1949, VIT.

<sup>32</sup> KD to BB, London, 24 January 1952, VIT; KD to BB, London, 7 February 1952, VIT: KD in London to Dr. Sacha Nacht in Paris, 10 February 1952, VIT.

<sup>33</sup> Clark and Johnson, *Kaiso!*, xviii.

<sup>34</sup> KD to BB, Buenos Aires, 14 November 1950, VIT.

<sup>35</sup> BB Diary entry of 20 October 1952, Rome, in Berenson, *Sunset and Twilight*, 279, with photograph of Katherine Dunham between 470 and 471. Nicky Mariano transcribed but omitted the following passage from the publication of Berenson’s Diary: “Dec. 6, 1952. Non-Europeans still fill me with instinctive distaste that I have to fight against and the American West African I encounter with a repulsion I find it hard to get over, even in the case of a woman so remarkably intelligent intellectual and truly humanized as Katherine Dunham” (courtesy of Sanne Wellen).

<sup>36</sup> KD to BB, Montevideo, 17 August 1950, VIT.

<sup>37</sup> KD to BB, Lima, 24 January 1951, VIT.

<sup>38</sup> KD to BB, Port-au-Prince, 13 June 1951, VIT.

<sup>39</sup> KD to BB, Paris, 29 October 1951, VIT.

<sup>40</sup> BB Diary entry for 22 November 1952, Rome, in VIT, but not included in Berenson, *Sunset and Twilight* (courtesy of Sanne Wellen).

<sup>41</sup> There is an in-depth study: Constance Valis Hill, “Katherine Dunham’s *Southland*: Protest in the Face of Repression,” *Dance Research Journal*, 26.2 (Fall 1994): 1-10; reprinted without photographs in Clark and Johnson, *Kaiso!*, 345-63.

<sup>42</sup> Program of *Southland*, Paris, Palais de Chaillot, January 1953 (VIT).

- 
- <sup>43</sup> Hill, "Kathrine Dunham's *Southland*," 7-8.
- <sup>44</sup> KD to BB, Rome, 22 December 1953, VIT.
- <sup>45</sup> KD to BB, Reno, Nebraska [*sic!*, for Nevada], 17 June 53, VIT.
- <sup>46</sup> KD to BB, 13 November 1957, VIT.
- <sup>47</sup> BB Diary entry of 8 June 1957, Naples, in Berenson, *Sunset and Twilight*, 485.
- <sup>48</sup> KD to BB, Zürich, 19 November 1952, VIT.
- <sup>49</sup> KD to BB, Florence, 11 March 1954, VIT.
- <sup>50</sup> KD to BB, São Paulo, 14 July 1950, VIT.
- <sup>51</sup> KD to BB, Reno, Nebraska [*sic!*, for Nevada], 17 June 53, VIT.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>53</sup> KD to BB, Buenos Aires, 17 October 1954, VIT.
- <sup>54</sup> KD to BB, San Angel, Mexico, 5 June 1955, VIT.
- <sup>55</sup> BB to KD, Naples, 15 June 1955, SIUC.
- <sup>56</sup> KD to BB, Las Vegas, 11 March 1955, VIT.
- <sup>57</sup> KD to BB, New Zealand, 23 March 1957, VIT.
- <sup>58</sup> KD to BB, Kuala Lumpur, 20 July 1957, VIT.
- <sup>59</sup> KD to BB, Buenos Aires, 14 November 1950, VIT.
- <sup>60</sup> Camille Cederna, "Continui a dipingere disse Berenson alla Dunham," undated newspaper clipping, c. 1950, with a photograph of Katherine Dunham with her dancers in the Boboli Garden, and a photograph of one of her paintings, VIT.
- <sup>61</sup> BB to KD, Settignano, 29 March 1955, SUIC.
- <sup>62</sup> KD to BB, Tokyo, 10 February 1958, VIT.
- <sup>63</sup> There is a brief but fascinating chapter in Jean Strouse, *Morgan: American Financier* (New York: Random House, 1999), 509-20; the definitive study, with probing thoughts on larger questions of race in the period, is Heidi Ardizzone, *An Illuminated Life: Belle da Costa Greene's Journey from Prejudice to Privilege* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company), 2007.
- <sup>64</sup> Rollin van N. Hadley, ed., *The Letters of Bernard Berenson and Isabella Stewart Gardner 1887-1924*, with correspondence by Mary Berenson (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), p. 463.
- <sup>65</sup> Ardizzone, *An Illuminated Life*, p. 123.
- <sup>66</sup> Dunham mentioning hotels that refuse persons of color: São Paulo (KD to BB, 14 July 1950, VIT), Reno Nevada (KD to BB, 17 June 1953, VIT), Las Vegas (KD to BB, 24 January 1955 VIT), San Francisco (KD to BB, 12 October 1955, VIT).
- <sup>67</sup> KD to BB, Amsterdam, 15 July 1949, VIT.
- <sup>68</sup> BB to KD, 23 July 1955, SIUC.
- <sup>69</sup> KD to BB, 31 December 1956, VIT.
- <sup>70</sup> KD to BB, 22 November 1957, VIT.