

**“Where My Dancing Had Saved Me from Disgrace”**

**2006 Selma Jeanne Cohen Fund Lecture**

Barbara Browning, New York University

There is a passage in Katherine Dunham’s beautiful book, *Island Possessed*, that moves me deeply, and I always draw the attention of my students to it before I see them embark on any ethnographic fieldwork dealing with dance. It recounts a scene near the end of Dunham’s research trip to Haiti, a *vodun* ceremony in which Dunham failed, or felt she’d failed, to fully live up to her ritual obligations, which included writhing on the floor of the temple like a snake, and swallowing the uncooked contents of a rancid egg. Soiled, humiliated, she manages to recuperate the event:

“Someone handed me a kerchief, I wiped my face and started to dance. I danced more than I have ever in my life, before or after. I danced out all my anger at unknown things and at myself for trying to know them... A week later I left Haiti... When the little Royal Netherlands boat left La Gonâve and the pink cathedral behind I could still see the tangled jungle of my future home, the property Leclerc and the mountains hiding Julien’s village, where my dancing had saved me from disgrace.”

In 1983, looking forward to my undergraduate graduation from Yale, I applied, somewhat on a lark, for a Fulbright Fellowship to perform research in Brazil. I'd lived briefly in that country during high school as an exchange student through the American Field Service. I'd kept up my studies of Portuguese and Brazilian literature in college as a part of my major in Comparative Literature. And in my non-academic hours, I listened somewhat obsessively to Brazilian popular music, which I'd come to regard, with an unapologetic bias, as the most beautiful music in the world. I tended to proselytize on this point.

I knew I wanted to pursue a graduate degree in literature – and in fact I'd already been accepted into Yale's PhD program. But I thought a year away from New Haven might do me some good. I wasn't completely sure about this plan. For one thing, I was in love with my college boyfriend. One of my advisors, an acerbic Polish Assistant Professor, said wryly, "Well, a Fulbright is an excellent way to get out of a relationship." That wasn't my motivation, although in retrospect this comment seemed kind of prescient. Anyway, I worked out a proposal with another advisor, this one a Brazilianist, and received a fellowship to research popular literature in the northeast.

I did indeed complete the project for which I received funding. I wrote a substantial paper on *literatura de cordel*, the cheap street market poetry which is sold suspended from strings. I collected a vast amount of these pamphlets, which on my return I donated to the library. But my interest in the popular culture of the northeast of Brazil was certainly not limited to this poetry. The truth is, once I got there, I ended up much more absorbed by the music and dance of the region. Always having danced, I quickly

found myself attracted to capoeira, the Afro-Brazilian martial art performed to music. Friends from capoeira class then introduced me to the “folkloric” dance classes offered at the Federal University of Bahia. I became a devoted student of a particularly charismatic young teacher there, Rosângela Silvestre. She taught both traditional and stylized versions of the complex choreographies of Candomblé, Afro-Brazilian religious practice. The “dance community” in Salvador, Bahia (a kind of questionable phrase, since virtually everyone in that city dances) became my social sphere, and while I was ostensibly devoting my research time to literature, in point of fact, dance occupied an ever more important place in my studies. I documented my experiences in poems and diaries I would later come to regard as field notes.

Arriving in Brazil fresh from four years of intense academic privilege, I was simultaneously struck by the disadvantages suffered by Brazilian academics (the university seemed to be perpetually hobbled by strikes on the part of legitimately beleaguered faculty, students, and service workers, and the library resources were limited at best), and awestruck by the alternative pedagogical structures offered by my friends in the dance world. Capoeira is taught in *academias*, training centers which provide not merely instruction in movement techniques, but social and political lessons as well. The religious dances I was learning at the university ultimately led me to make contacts within functioning houses of Candomblé. These community centers, in contrast to the capoeira academies, were dominated by women, who tutored each other not only in dance steps, but in the delicate arts of working, parenting and surviving in a larger social context often inimical to women of color. Suffice it to say that I was learning a tremendous amount outside the walls of the Federal University.

At the time, I was quite ignorant of the field of dance scholarship. I hadn't read the body of dance ethnography which had begun to coalesce in the United States during the 1970s. I hadn't yet read early works by the students of Franz Boas, nor the groundbreaking work of visionaries like Maya Deren and, in particular, Katherine Dunham which would later provide me with so much inspiration. Later, reading of their encounters with similar dances in Haiti, I would find myself recognizing moments of both shattering insight and profound discomfort and self-doubt.

I did know I wanted to write about what I'd learned. Several years later, I wrote and published my first book, *Samba: Resistance in Motion*. It was my entrance into a scholarly dialogue in which I continue to engage, and while my earlier training in literary analysis continues to inflect my interpretive strategies, it was my study of dance which brought me to the institutional home and scholarly community I've found so fruitful. For the last twelve years, I've taught in the Department of Performance Studies of New York University. I have the privilege of working with young researchers investigating dance in a wide variety of cultural and historical contexts. What tends to unite their work is a commitment to looking at dance's relevance in its political context – which is not merely to say how it reflects the political movements surrounding it, but often how it helps to choreograph social change. Such projects have ranged from a study of the notion of “revolution” in the development of the waltz in Europe<sup>1</sup> – a social dance which effectively reconfigured gender relations in the eighteenth century – to a reading of the relationship between dance techniques and body techniques of passive resistance that developed simultaneously in the U.S. during the civil rights movement<sup>2</sup> – to an analysis

---

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Claire

<sup>2</sup> In Danielle Goldman

of dance practice and urban movement patterns in several major metropolises in the Chinese diaspora.<sup>3</sup> This last project was actually supported by a Fulbright fellowship, and the author's ability to perform extended fieldwork enhanced tremendously a dissertation which was theoretically provocative, but which needed on-the-ground experience to be fully persuasive.

I mentioned above my particular debt to two extraordinary women who wrote about their own experiences learning sacred dances in Haiti, a country with both cultural and historical similarities to and differences from Brazil. Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen* and Katherine Dunham's *Island Possessed* are astonishing works documenting the authors' initiations, scholarly and ritual, into a world in which dance is often the language not only of the gods, but of social change. In fact, when I read that this year's Fulbright Association conference was taking up the topic of civil society, it struck me that no figure better exemplified the capacities of the dancer – and dance scholar – to participate in, or help create, a civil society than Katherine Dunham. She herself was a recipient of Fulbright funding to Brazil. The organizers of this meeting, in fact, did me the profound courtesy of sending me a talk that she herself gave several years ago at just such a meeting as this, recollecting her trip in 1986, when she was already in her 70s, to Brazil. 2006 has been a year of painful losses for the community of dance scholars. Selma Jeanne Cohen, the most significant of philanthropists supporting research in dance, and the supporter of the talk I am giving today, passed away. And so did Katherine Dunham. The fresh passing of these two women, both iconic figures in the world of dance and also

---

<sup>3</sup> SanSan Kwan

staunch supporters of the mission of the Fulbright, presses us to consider how dance and dance scholarship are linked to social responsibility and a commitment to art as a force of change.

As a way of demonstrating the artistic legacy of Dunham, I want to present you with some of my recent conversations with Rosângela Silvestre, the dancer and dance educator I first encountered over twenty years ago during my Fulbright Fellowship. In the intervening years, Ms. Silvestre and I have remained in contact. While I pursued my academic career, she pursued a bi-continental career as a choreographer, teacher and performer, refining the technique which she once called “Contemporary Afro-Brazilian” but now, in a gesture reminiscent of Katherine Dunham’s trajectory, has come to identify as her own (the “Silvestre Technique”). Silvestre currently divides her time between the U.S. and Brazil. In the U.S., she has persistently stretched her limits, setting her work on prestigious dance companies, and collaborating with adventurous improvisatory musicians and artists. In Salvador, she continues to work with the dance community in which I first encountered her – and continues to frequent the popular sites from which her dance vocabulary originated. Her mother is a respected priestess in the Candomblé religion, and while Silvestre’s own path has been a secular one, she readily acknowledges the lessons she learned under her mother. As I wrote above, the lessons garnered in a house of Candomblé far surpass the transmission of physical gestures and steps.

While many of Silvestre’s choreographies read abstractly, the technique she has developed is firmly rooted in certain social realities. It not only references the narrative gestural vocabulary of Candomblé dance, but also remembers and reproduces the body

training acquired by predominantly underclass women of color in Brazil as they go through the daily choreographies of labor: stirring large cauldrons of bean batter, washing clothing by hand, or, on a more minute scale, performing their personal toilette.

These body techniques, arduously acquired but expressive of an elaborated grace, inform Silvestre's training technique, and her choreographies. But they also inform her view of the relationship between dance and the small but important social structures which give support to the community in which she was raised, and in which she continues to teach. A sophisticated, politically engaged understanding of the stakes of moving African diasporic religious dance onto the stage is the clear link between Silvestre's artistic trajectory and Katherine Dunham's. And it was during Dunham's Fulbright to Brazil that the two dancers first encountered one another. Dunham, unfortunately, contracted a stomach virus during her travels, and was confined to a bed for several days, but she did manage to attend a performance of Odundê, the dance collective at the Federal University of Bahia in which Silvestre was performing. Silvestre danced for Dunham once again just three years ago, in the U.S., at a celebration honoring Dunham.

Because of her highly developed personal technique, her deep familiarity with traditional forms and her outspoken ways of articulating the importance of African diasporic culture in dialogue with Western aesthetic forms, Silvestre has often been compared to Dunham – particularly when she first arrived in the U.S. Both began firmly rooted in classical ballet, and despite their commitment to African diasporic culture, they both retained a respect for ballet as a technique. But more significant to me than their

technical mastery and originality is their mutual interest in the function of dance in the small, politically resistant communities of African diasporic religious practice.

Dunham is recognized as constantly having crossed boundaries: between art and scholarship, between cultures, between the religious and the secular, between the popular and the erudite, between the personal and the political. Silvestre, too, has insisted on pushing herself in new and unexpected directions. Her early work took up the challenge which Dunham's had already posed: how to translate religious dance to the stage, while maintaining respect for its origins. Silvestre has been steadfast in distinguishing between what she does as a teacher, choreographer and performer from what her mother practices within the *terreiro*, or the temple of Candomblé. She occasionally is called upon to choreograph "traditional" pieces, and in fact her mother sometimes performs in them, but they are very clear in distinguishing these presentations from what happens in a ceremonial context. Religious dance, Silvestre says, is "dancing the orixás," or divinities. Performing their movements without divine animation is "dancing *for* the orixás," and in a third phase, when these movements are abstracted and stylized, the moment that a particular technique and stage aesthetic is introduced, Silvestre says her dancers are "dancing the movement of the orixás."

While these transitions – from the *terreiro* to the stage to a new and fully articulated technique – are of interest, the transition I find most interesting in Silvestre's trajectory is the one which occurred in recent years, largely through a collaboration with the experimental U.S. jazz artist Steve Coleman. While Dunham came out of an African American cultural experience and turned to the Caribbean and Latin America to understand her connections to global culture, Silvestre moved in the opposite direction,

finding in a U.S. jazz artist an artistic fellow traveler – literally. Coleman and Silvestre have traveled the globe together researching different cultural configurations of time, rhythm, movement and cosmology. The fruits of those conversations have been extraordinary, if at times dizzying in their cosmopolitanism. At the same time, Silvestre has maintained her own cultural identity.

As she told me recently, “I don’t say that I teach ‘a technique of Brazilian dance.’ I say that I teach ‘a Brazilian technique of dance.’ Because the former would indicate – what? – samba? a Brazilian genre of dance? I say my technique is Brazilian, because it draws on a number of Brazilian cultural elements, but it’s not limited to a particular style of Brazilian dance.” The ‘Brazilianness’ of the technique has not only to do with the gestural references to the movement of Candomblé dance and to capoeira, but, more significantly, to what she characterizes as a culturally ingrained capacity to adapt to changing circumstances. While Brazilian dance is all too often characterized as “spontaneous,” Silvestre is attentive to the technical preparation which spontaneity requires. She says that in the Candomblé, initiates go through an elaborate process of training – not merely learning the choreographies of the *orixás*, but learning the mythology, the songs, even washing the garments and preparing the food necessary for the ceremonies – and all these processes of training prepare the body to “let itself be carried away” – *se deixar levar*. “In that moment in which you let yourself be carried away, how does it happen? You connect this being carried away to a structure. This way, you can respond to any incentive which comes to you, to carry you.”

While she does attribute not only her movement vocabulary but also her philosophy of preparedness to her background, Silvestre has increasingly incorporated

other vocabularies into her technical language, finding, for example, parallels between various aspects of Brazilian and South Asian traditional dance forms. She's elaborated her system through a combination of culturally specific and sometimes idiosyncratic references, including the energy pathways identified as *chakras* in South Asian movement philosophies. While some of this intercultural referencing might at first appear a little arbitrary, Silvestre is convinced that putting her technique in global context is essential to its relevance. When she first began to tell me about the relationship between the *chakras* and the orixás as conceptions of energy and force, I must confess I had some doubts about the applicability of one cosmological and bodily conceptual system to the other. Which is why I was particularly surprised and delighted to listen to Dunham's Fulbright address, in which she stunningly, and unexpectedly, introduced the notion of *chakras* into her own account of her encounter with Afro-Brazilian religious dance. If both Dunham and Silvestre intuited the connection, who am I to question it?

Silvestre's pursuit of a global context for a culturally situated technique obviously resonates with Katherine Dunham's cosmopolitan vision, but it emerged in the period of Silvestre's remarkable collaboration and intellectual exchange with Coleman. With Silvestre currently spending much of the year in Brazil, they haven't been performing together, but, in her words, "Steve Coleman and I have a permanent connection. I don't need to be working with him on the stage to maintain an exchange of ideas. Our communication is continuous."

Coleman and Silvestre, like Dunham, are both big thinkers, and good talkers. To see them perform together, you might imagine they were connecting intuitively, through

a compatible sensibility. Each is a skilled technician, a virtuosic performer, but also capable of communicating tremendous sensuality. Often, trying to characterize Coleman's music, I've found myself saying, "It's extremely intellectualized, but it makes you want to dance." After speaking with him, however, and with Silvestre, I realized that the problem with that characterization is the "but": the music can be as smart as it is *because* of the movement implicit in it.

"I'm into movement." Coleman told me recently. "Even before I could call myself a musician, I was into movement. I've always liked movement, motion." Coleman was responding to my question about his initial decision to invite Silvestre to participate in his ensemble, and ultimately to travel with him and several other collaborators on research trips to investigate approaches to music and movement in Africa, India and the Caribbean. I said that what was most striking to me when I saw them perform together (in 2003, at the Knitting Factory in New York City) was the way in which Silvestre was incorporated into the musical ensemble. Coleman had introduced the members of the band, in typical fashion (on drums..., on piano...), and when he came to Silvestre, simply said, "on movement, Rosângela Silvestre." She remained on stage for the duration of the performance, much of the time with eyes shut, interacting with the other members of the ensemble as an equal participant, neither marginalized nor highlighted. She "soloed" to the same extent that they did, occasionally elevating the intensity of her participation, but often maintaining a subtle and sensitive presence in the playing. Much of her movement was in the hands, wrists and arms. Her gestures were sometimes recognizable as drawing on *orixá* vocabulary, but also evoked the mudras of Bharata Natyam. Sometimes they

were expressive of something more abstract – purely liquid, or flashing with an electric energy that both sparked and responded to the musical texture around her.

I told both her and Coleman that her inclusion in that musical texture was profoundly moving to me, and that its ramifications went beyond simply blurring the boundary between dance and music. It struck me that the gender politics implicit in that move were deep. I asked Silvestre about her experiences of strictly demarcated gender roles within the Candomblé, where typically only men are allowed to play the drums, and women predominate on the dance floor. Did her collaboration with Coleman make her think differently about the relationship between music, dance and gender? “No, this understanding preceded our collaboration. I think this is what made it possible for us to collaborate this way.” I asked her to explain. Silvestre told me that her work with Coleman was “an intellectual process.” While he’d worked with other dancers before, and since, Silvestre felt her participation was “unique” insofar as “this idea of remaining on the stage the whole time began with me. He didn’t want little dance interludes. I am an instrument. I’m an instrument in the band.”

The *instrumentality* of a dancer is a complex proposition. Singers often refer to the voice as their “instrument,” and jazz as an idiom can be understood as having developed a space within which characteristics of the human voice might find outlet through instruments, while the voice itself might seek an expanded expressivity through an imitation of the sound characteristics of musical instruments. But instrumentality, broadly speaking, implies something larger – something closer, maybe, to what we call, in an Austinian sense, performativity – or to what’s called in Candomblé cosmology *axé*: the power to make things happen. Something, or someone, is instrumental to something

happening if they are a necessary conduit in a process. The dancer, in a Candomblé ceremony, is instrumental to the manifestation of divine principles. It's *through* the motion of the dancer that *orixás* make themselves present. And interestingly, that instrumentality can also recomplicate the notion of gender divisions: a woman dancing can be the necessary conduit for a divine principle of masculinity. The stakes of making divinity manifest are high: within the Candomblé community, manifesting the principles of social justice, of women's strength, or of public responsibility to care for the sick are not merely symbolic acts. Dancers in the Candomblé help the community to choreograph their political and social realities.

A performance by Coleman and Silvestre doesn't incorporate divine principles in such a literal sense. But it does position the dancer as an instrument – in the most abstract sense – of the music. While to an audience member, their mutual responsiveness might seem to be a matter of her musical sensibility and his capacity to correspond to physical motion, the more I spoke with both of them, the more I was convinced that the collaboration *was*, in fact, made possible by their convergence on a theoretical and political plane. That is to say, while Silvestre's dancing may evidence great musicality and Coleman's music may make *me* want to dance in a way that feels extremely immediate and sensual, their way of thinking about movement draws on certain "traditional" cosmologies and social models, but is highly abstract.

While Coleman values improvisation, he consistently emphasizes the importance of structure. He's articulated his musical philosophy through the concept of "m-base," an acronym for Macro - Basic Array of Structured Extemporizations. As he's defined it, "For us this means expressing our experiences through music that uses improvisation and

structure as two of its main ingredients.” Silvestre, too, links her ideas about improvisation to the necessity of an abstract underlying structure. She told me, “When I’m dancing with Steve Coleman, we do a lot of preparation, a lot of research, I learn the structure. Improvisation is within a structure. I’m letting myself be carried away, but I’m aware that at any moment, there will be a tone, a timbre, which will tell me that something else is going to happen. It’s not improvisation in the sense of dreaming, flying – it’s improvising within a context.” The capacity to let herself be carried away, *se deixar levar*, was dependent, according to her, not only on their rehearsal process, but on these theoretical discussions which had arisen out of their travels and research. And she also emphasized a focus on technique – not just practical training, but a highly abstract understanding of movement comprehending physical gesture, historical migration, cosmological symbology, and political context.

I’d told Silvestre that from my first exposure to her pedagogy, I’d been impressed by the incorporation of quotidian movement into the training process. As I’ve said, there are certain gestures – of cooking and washing, stirring motions, scrubbing motions – which are worked into the preparatory process. When I first saw this in a class of hers, it struck me that this technical incorporation of seemingly banal gestures was an implicit acknowledgement of what Marcel Mauss argues in his classic essay, “*Les techniques du corps*”: that no movement, no matter how naturalized, or seemingly unaesthetic, is without technique. She agreed: “Within the Silvestre Technique, there exists this preoccupation with the quotidian, because it maintains the interpretation of the technique which attempts not to block the naturalness of the movement.” I asked if the “naturalness” wasn’t in fact the product of technical training, and she explained that her

use of the term “natural” in fact referenced an abstract, cosmological force: “This naturalness of movement comes from the fact that it’s also linked to the mythology of the *orixás*. Because, when I studied in the *terreiro*, this is what I took – when I teach the movement of the *orixá* dances, I draw on the traditional forms, but when I train my dancers in my technique, it’s through these quotidian gestures which are transformed into technical movements. In the *terreiros*, one has to prepare food, one has to prepare the entire ritual, and it’s these activities which prepare the body.”

She went on to explain that these movements are modified for the stage, because in a theatrical context, bending over a cauldron or a washtub won’t translate, scenically, the way a *plié* translates. “In the context of the *terreiro*, the body goes through certain processes, and acquires training in a way in which the individual is never concerned with ‘training’ – it’s the quotidian movement which prepares the body to dance, but dancers in the classroom are aware that the movements they go through constitute a training process which they’ll eventually take to the stage. And in my technical training, other elements are added – the bending over movements of labor are translated to the parallel *plié*, which will read differently on the stage. Any technique for the stage, you’ll find, will demand a certain awareness – of alignment, of the alignment of the posture, of the feet, of the arms. It becomes naturalized *because* of the quotidian movement. In the *terreiro*, people don’t use the term ‘technique’ – they speak of a ‘*maneira*’, a manner of movement. We add the word technique because there are other elements, other things we’re aware of.”

In a way, her invocation of “nature” and insistence on the greater degree of technical self-consciousness in staged dance may seem to be in friction with the larger argument regarding the unacknowledged technique of quotidian motion. But “nature” as

a conceptual category has particular resonances within Candomblé's cosmology. That is, elements and processes of nature are always already understood as being highly structured, through the principles of the *orixás*. Silvestre's technique implicitly acknowledges the instrumentality of the dancers – predominantly underclass women of color – in making these structures manifest.

Not everyone wants to see this as a technical feat. When I mentioned to Coleman Silvestre's way of talking about technique, he laughed. "Some dancers she works with say, 'She's too technical.' Something's only 'technical' when you don't know it." He continued:

Some people do this in a very unstructured way, mostly on intuition, and some people use a lot of discipline and technique, and do it through that, and try to be as free as they can within these structures. I guess I'm one of the latter people. When I first talked with Rosângela, where we hooked up was, I have a strong belief that it shouldn't be just intuition, or just logic. You were given both abilities. Most artists lean in one direction or the other. One of the areas that me and Rosângela agreed on was that all this stuff about developing techniques and developing forms is something that we have a natural inclination towards. At the same time, all this stuff about intuition, dreams, was also something that we'd been given. In ancient cultures, they didn't have this thing about the left side of the brain, right side of the brain – it was all one thing. And even the act of thinking wasn't something that was just restricted to the brain. There were all kinds of intellect – the intellect of the body. Muscle memory...

And just as Silvestre had noted the technique involved in the cooking and cleaning of ceremonial preparations, Coleman began speaking about the technical preparations that allow for naturalized movement, from driving a car to negotiating a crowded sidewalk in Manhattan. “That internalized stuff is a certain level of thinking that you’ve repeated so much that you don’t need to think about it. People tend to talk about that as intuition. To me it’s not intuition. It’s acquired.”

Essentially, both Coleman and Silvestre are acknowledging the choreographic and compositional nature of our everyday lives. This is an insight of tremendous political significance. Denaturalizing, examining the ways we move through the world – the ways we labor, the ways we move through cities, the ways we cross national borders – entails examining that motion with great care. And all of these forms of motion, from labor to migration, are politically circumscribed. When we take up the challenge of choreographing them, we are, precisely, involved in an act of choreographing civil society.

These are the evident points of connection between Coleman and Silvestre: the preoccupation with technique, the fascination with systematizing technique in relation to diverse cosmological theories of time and motion, and the ways in which improvisation and spontaneity can emerge within highly architectonic spaces of performance. These were also topics of intense interest to Katherine Dunham. But to me, an even more significant point of connection between all three is an understanding of the complex composition and choreography of our political lives. This was a lesson I first began to learn in 1983, dancing, at first awkwardly, but with an increasing sense of grace, in the

Candomblé terreiros of Bahia, as well as in Rosângela Silvestre's challenging dance classes at the Federal University.

After all these years, I continue to return to Brazil, to the same socially precarious but civically committed little communities where my dancing, too, had saved me from disgrace. My apprenticeship with Silvestre, and with the hard-working and stately women who labor cooking, washing, and dancing to sustain each other, taught me much about the meaning of grace. This is precisely why that passage with which I began, from Dunham's *Island Possessed*, speaks to me so deeply.

I'd like to end by reading a poem I wrote on the occasion of Dunham's passing. It's a sestina, and it references not only that humiliating scene of the rotten egg which I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, but also another significant moment in Dunham's life, the hunger strike she embarked on in 1992, at the age of 82, in protest of U.S. policies regarding the Haitian military coup and the subsequent flight of refugees. She went without food for 47 days – a bodily act of virtuosity certainly more difficult than any dance she ever performed. In that act, as Sally Sommer wrote, “because of her age, her involvement with Haiti, and the respect accorded her as an activist and artist, Dunham became the center of a movement that coalesced to protest the United States' deportation of Haitian boat-refugees fleeing to the US after the military overthrow of Haiti's democratically elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. She agreed to end her fast only after Aristide visited her and personally requested her to stop.”

Aksyon degras (for Katherine Dunham)

Isolation: rotate both the shoulders,  
Individually, and together. Knees  
Bent, slightly. Parallel. The tongue  
Floats in the closed mouth like a moon  
Reflected in water. Stillness. Dancing  
Is a state of self-possession. This is grace.

You studied under Cécile and Dégrasse  
And the other *serviteurs*, grinding their shoulders  
“Like pistons of a high-powered locomotive,” dancing  
With purpose: Téoline “crouching, knees  
Together, hands clutching her dress.” The moon  
Pierced the thatched roof like a serpent’s tongue.

Sick smell of snake. A coating on the tongue.  
What was this nausea? The thick disgrace  
Of the occupation, of privilege, of the *ti-moun*  
System, of a world where a child shoulders  
Burdens too big for a man, where bony knees  
Creak under the labor of desperate dancing.

But Nietzsche, too, was right. Because your dancing  
Was “out and above and beyond” yourself. In the tongue  
Of the gods, *langaj*, you prayed – not on your knees,  
But with your strength. “*Marie, pleine de grâce,*  
*Le Seigneur est avec vous.*” Your rolling shoulders  
Yoked the tide of motion like the moon.

“*Legba, ouvri barrié pou toute moun*  
*Yo.*” And in that moment, the joy of dancing  
Overwhelmed you, and spoke through you. Your shoulders,  
Your “articulate pelvis.” The sex, too, has a tongue,  
And it speaks without shame. This is grace.  
A woman clutches her skirt and bends her knees.

You were 82, with arthritic knees,  
The year you took on the *manj moun*.  
You learned a different form of strength and grace.  
For 47 days, you watched the sunlight dancing  
On your sheets. Not a crumb crossed your tongue  
Until Titid lifted the weight from your shoulders.

I see you, rolling your shoulders, dipping your knees,  
Eyes closed, holding your tongue, by the yellow moon,  
There, where your dancing had saved you from disgrace.