Electronic Salome: Exotic Dance, Early Television, and Black Modernism

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Résumé/Abstract

This article looks at exotic dances on 1940s and 1950s television by performers such as Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, and Janet Collins. While their performances mixed a variety of dance styles, they all made use of costumes, setting, music, and movements that looked beyond the space and time of the contemporary United States, to the "Orient," Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. This article examines the industrial reasons for this proliferation of exoticism in early television dance and considers how this accented the discourses of Black Modernism that these artists also engaged in. It then turns to the history of dance performances of Salome, and how Eartha Kitt enacted this history of gendered racial appropriation and Orientalism in modern dance within the new medium of television. This article reveals not only postwar US television's exoticism and a wider range of Black television representation but also an alternative vision of television history wherein Black women choreographers and dancers defined and propelled modernism at midcentury.

Mots clés/Keywords

Dance; Television History; Exoticism; Black Modernism; Gender.

À propos de l'auteure/About the Author

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On April 22nd 1949, the broadcast of *Admiral Broadway Revue* (NBC and DuMont), a dance act titled "After the Mardi Gras," begins with a curtain opening on a stage where a shirtless black man sits with a djembe (West African drum) between his legs. He is wearing light-colored long shorts and a garland. Behind him is a painted backdrop of nineteenth-century New Orleans. The announcer's off-screen voice introduces Janet Collins, the first Black ballerina at the Metropolitan Opera, who enters the stage wearing a ruffled and tiered high-waist skirt. She is barefoot and her ruffled bandeau blouse (with stringy straps) reveals her toned arms. Her headdress has a large feather plume, and large hoop earrings frame her face. The shirtless man begins to drum and slowly an orchestral musical accompaniment can be heard. While Collins performs an Afro-Caribbean style dance, she occasionally slips some movements in from European ballet (which she is obviously very well trained in). Her moves begin to look unstable, as if she is about to fall. She begins to look ill and almost gags. As the dance goes on, the studio audience laughs at what was by then familiar "shtick." Collins is playing a drunk—a familiar vaudeville comedy role for both men and women.[1] The orchestral music then dies down to a faint drumbeat. Still hiccupping, Collins sashays her skirt with moves resembling the Kpanlogo, a dance from Ghana. The drummer finishes with an upbeat improvisational flourish. As the curtain closes, the audience applauds.

This Afro-diasporic dance—performed by a Black ballerina no less—may seem odd given the early TV context. However, on early television these kinds of dances were not rare. In this article I focus on the TV performances of Black women dancers, who have seldom been included in discussions of early television.[2] Alternatively featured as acts on popular variety shows to a form of "high" art on commercial educational programs, dance on television traversed various cultural spheres and tastes. The dancers I discuss in this article worked in a variety of cultural spheres, including nightclubs, Broadway shows, operas, the academy, art cinema, and Hollywood films. Amongst these, television was another performance venue for these dancers. The new medium was initially indiscriminate in the origins of the performers and offered opportunities for Black dancers, who operated within the confines of a segregated arts and entertainment sphere.

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1 See MacDonald, 2009: "Vaudeo to Sitcom," *One Nation Under Television* <http://www.jfredmacdonald.com/onutv/sitcom.htm>.

2 Notable exceptions are the following which draw attention to music programs (that also featured dance) in the 1950s: Forman, 2012; Williams, 1998; Spigel, 2008; Vogel, 2012: 1-24; Han, 2012.

Their dances mixed a variety of dance styles including social, folk, chorus line, comedic, modern, and ballet. Additionally, many of these dancers gained visibility through the mining of exoticism, meaning these performances made use of costumes, setting, music, and movements that looked beyond the space and time of the contemporary United States, to the "Orient"—Middle East and Asia—as well as Africa and the Caribbean. While these artistic choices may seem gimmicky, these performances of exoticism offered opportunities for Black dancers to visualize the diasporic production of identity and history. Furthermore, these dances not only exhibited cosmopolitanism but also drew attention to the entrenched cultural and racial appropriations of modernism in dance.[3] By recovering and examining these modern dances on early television, this article not only expands our understanding of the range of representations of blackness and modernism in early television but also interrogates the racial parameters of modernism.

In writing about the formation of modernism in the Harlem Renaissance, Jayna Brown notes the importance of transnational mobility in writing:

> Their eloquent renderings were at times nostalgic, but they were always the result of a change in perspective, the development of a modern view, which was the result of purposeful travels. The modern view combined intense intimacy and unbrookable distance, and it required the ability to record what one saw or felt from above, below, inside, or outside. Modern black self-definition claimed these views, and, most importantly, rights to various black diasporic proximities. (Brown, 2008: 228)

Similarly, the black modern dancers I discuss below, such as Collins, Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, and Eartha Kitt, navigated this tension between "intense intimacy" and "unbrookable distance" in their productions of modernism. As these productions were broadcast on television, a medium and technology that was purported "to marry spectacle and intimacy," I explore how their performances maintained an "unbrookable distance" in spite of the colonial rhetoric of television's advertisers.[4]

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3 See Lemke, 1998: 95-116.

4 Sylvester "Pat" Weaver, NBC executive, stated, "to marry spectacle and intimacy." (Sylvester R. Weaver, Montecito, California, Interview 12 August 1982. Cited in Mayerle, 1983: 217, 283)

Distance and Intimacy

Television, even in its early imaginings and marketing, was not only anticipatory of the global as a space to conquer but also figured the globe as variety entertainment. In a 1945 advertisement, DuMont claims "All The World's A Stage…With Television" (*The New Yorker*, 1945). We see a globe, in which each continent offers a mini-touristic site or form of entertainment. A bubble with a scene of a baseball game appears in North America while an image of Big Ben appears in Europe. In Africa we see an image of the Serengeti, and from South America bolts of energy reproduces an enlarged image of flamenco dancers projected on a big TV screen. The ad promises that "[t]elevision will bring [to the audience] the drama of every land, real and make-believe from jungle life in Africa to opera and immortal plays" (*The New Yorker*, 1945). Significantly, the emphasis is not on transporting the viewer, but rather the transport of the "world-wide stage" into [his] home (*The New Yorker*, 1945).

As television became incorporated into actual domestic space in the 1950s, it could at once see at a distance, while also offering the comfort and intimacy of other home furniture and technologies[5] Raymond Williams emphasized this dynamic between domesticity and technologies of transportation and communication as integral to television's rise as a cultural and technological form. He states:

> The earlier period of public technology, best exemplified by the railways and city lighting, was being replaced by a kind of technology for which no satisfactory name has yet been found: that which served an at-once mobile and home-centered way of living: a form of *mobile privatization*. Broadcasting in its applied form was a social product of this distinctive tendency. (Williams, 1975: 19-20)

This concept of mobile privatization and its impact on the tension between distance and intimacy in television underscores how black dancers' "modern view," as Brown notes above, was augmented and exacerbated by television. Because television sought "to marry spectacle and intimacy," Black women's inclusion in this new medium often made the "purposeful travels" and "diasporic proximities" that informed their art into just another part of variety television's "world-wide stage" that would be broadcast into the home.

5 See Spigel, 1992.

Exotic Dance and Early TV

Though television was in many ways a new platform for other preceding art and entertainment forms, early technological limitations allowed for some transitions to be made more easily than others. Studios were often cramped and the cameras were large and difficult to move. In instructing performers on how to break into this new medium, *Dance Magazine's* January 1947 issue emphasizes the importance of vertical movement in dance routines.

> The most suitable dances for television are those that require both a minimum of floor space and vertical movement, such as to spring a partner into the air. For these reasons, Oriental, tap and rumba routines are ideally suited to the medium. The dances of the far East have been successfully televised since most of the rhythm is expressed by the hands and arms permitting close up camera shots (*Dance Magazine*, 1947: 19).

Here, "exotic" dances provide an appropriate style of movement to deal with the technological and economic limitations of the medium and its emerging industry.

Beyond vertical movement, the exotic had other attributes that aided in making good dance television:

> Costumes greatly add to the visual interest of a television program. The picturesque costumes worn for all types of specialty dances have tremendous video appeal. The colorful Oriental and Spanish costumes, the Hawaiian grass skirt, native dress and brief shorts and blouses lend grace and beauty to the dance and emphasize the flavor of the musical accompaniment (*Dance Magazine*, 1947: 19).

Exoticism then offers a strategy by which performances could provide "visual interest" and "flavor." Notably, however, this and other television critics and producers do not remark on the specific differences between the dress and movements of different regions or nations. Rather, television's fostering of various dance styles from Asia, Latin America, and Hawaii, among other places, demonstrates an industrial desire to present the best acts from around the world. Television travels. Yet, rather than broadcasting from around the world, the diversity of costume and dance invokes global space.

In keeping with these suggestions, early television featured dance performances that were conducted in exotic settings or with exotic costumes. Examples of this could be seen in Katherine Dunham's production titled "Story of a Drum," broadcast on WCBS-TV (February 15, 1946) (Dupuy, 1947). Dunham was a leading choreographer in modern dance in the 1930s and 1940s and a founder in the field of dance anthropology. Like writers such as Hurston, Dunham revealed through her travels, fieldwork, scholarship, choreography, and dancing, "that movement, the cultural patterns of gestures and action, stretched past the American South to the Caribbean and Africa, preserving a racial heritage that extended beyond words." (Foulkes, 2002: 71, 201 n. 60). In this production, according to writer Judy Dupuy, "Katherine Dunham and company recreated authentic Haitian voodoo rites." (Dupuy, 1947: 30) In the photograph of the production the dresses look rather modest, yet the head wraps that the women wear mark the dance as different from dances like ballroom or ballet. The backdrop of palm trees gives the production a picturesque quality, further adding to the visual interest of the dance.

Similarly staged were "Pearl Primus dancers in a video appearance of 'Legend,' set in an African village." (Dupuy, 1947: 30-31) Primus, though a leading choreographer in modern dance, was, like Dunham, trained in a variety of styles. Beginning her dance career in the later years of WWII, her performances "followed the pattern established by Dunham [….] that created a continuity between Africa and America, dance halls and concert stages." (Foulkes, 2002: 165) Like Dunham, she also pursued anthropology. While Dunham's first fieldwork was conducted in Haiti, Primus went to Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, and the Belgian Congo (Foulkes, 2002). Like "Story of a Drum," Primus's "Legend" (1946) also makes use of a verdant backdrop. The Variety reviewer notes, "Jim McNaughton's sets, as usual, were fine, making the most of whatever illusion of depth it's possible to attain on a flat screen." (Variety, 1946: 47) Notably, "exotic" is not used to characterize either performance in the press. Instead, "authentic" is used in descriptions of both productions, with Dupuy adding about Primus, "Dancers showed not only authentic, but social content." (Dupuy, 1947: 31) After enthusing about the authenticity of Dunham and Primus and their respective dance troupes, the critics ultimately praised the productions for their entertainment value, with most credit given to the network, CBS.[6]

6 "CBS must be credited with bringing more colorful entertainment to the air via this presentation that it brought, thru color, in its current pigment pitch to the trade and consumer press." (The Billboard, 1946: 16)

Even if the critics gave the lion's share of praise to the network (rather than ascribing artistic agency to the dancers), the presence of these acts on early television is striking given the paucity of Black performers on US television in the 1950s (Forman, 2007: 121-125). Following her production of "Story of a Drum," *Variety* reported: "Starting in September, CBS television will produce a show around dancer Katherine Dunham, tentatively titled 'Katherine Dunham Productions.' Show will run 27 weeks." (*Variety*, 1946: 37) Though this show never came to be, such a promise indicates the potential for television to offer a space for Black artists.[7] Such optimism was also reflected about Primus. In 1944, one of the oldest Black newspapers, *New York Amsterdam News*, reported a "Break in Television Looms for Race Stars." (*New York Amsterdam News*, 1944: 7B) Though the article specifically focuses on new performers for programs put on by WCBW-NY, considering that television was still emerging as a new medium, the choice to showcase Black performers signaled for many readers the possibility of a more integrated entertainment sphere than had been seen in Hollywood cinema to date.

Despite this optimism, television into the 1950s did not feature many Black performers. "The networks could afford to be relatively liberal toward African-Americans when, as in December 1949, only 4.5 percent of all sets were in the South." (MacDonald, 2009: <http://www.jfredmacdonald.com/onutv/tvrace.htm>) With the networks expanding there was a fear of regional boycotts by Southern affiliates and their viewers. In an effort to be more accommodating to the largely white audience and not lose potential consumers, advertising agencies and sponsors did little if anything to support black performers on television. Station and network executives followed suit, as well as writers and producers. "In practical terms this meant moderating or eliminating images of racial equality in TV dramas, lobbying against 'overexposure' by black guest stars on network shows, non-support for programs hosted by African-Americans, and respecting Jim Crow state laws prohibiting black and white athletes from competing together." (ibid.) Even with these racial segregationist codes, there was strong opposition from not only black performers and the black press but also white television producers. Independent producer Joseph Cates, who produced the program *Look Upon A Star* (WABD-NY, WTTG-DC) which featured Dunham's interracial group, stated:, "As producers[,] we exercise the democratic privilege of producing our shows as we see fit. The prejudiced television viewer can exercise his democratic privilege of producing our shows as we see fit. The prejudiced

7 See Hill and Saverson Hill, 1985: 1; *Ebony*, 1950: 22-23.

television viewer can exercise his democratic privilege of switching his dial off, or to a different station." (*The Chicago Defender*, 1947: 10) Though this program was met with hate mail, it aired in New York City and Washington, D.C. and was then sent to WGRB, a General Electric outlet in Schenectady, NY. (ibid.) Ultimately, despite Cates's rhetoric of "democratic privilege," many television producers acquiesced to the business imperatives of their sponsors that wanted to reach Southern markets (Forman, 2007: 129, 132).

Black Salome

Despite the absence or more marginal presence of black performers on television, exoticism was often used as a way to circumvent racist programming practices in order to gain visibility. Even before television's proliferation in the 1950s, many black dancers passed as white or foreign as a way to gain entry into white dance studios (Foulkes, 2002: 55). Edna Guy, a modern dancer and contemporary of Dunham, "trumpeted her mixed background, claiming, 'My grandmother is not a negro—she is Arabian and American Indian. Many people ask her and her mother if they are colored. My grandfather was French and colored.'" (Foulkes, 2002: 55, 197 n. 18) Even with this thorough genealogy, "[t]he director of the dance camp to which she wanted to apply recommended that Guy send a photograph and perhaps pass as East Indian." (ibid.)

This anecdote illustrates the tensions faced by many black dancers. On the one hand, passing as exotic allowed one entry into segregated institutions. On the other, many African American dancers, as well as African American people, also had mixed-race, Indigenous, and Afro-diasporic heritage that became visualized in their productions. Though their renderings were not necessarily tied to their actual family history, their respective genealogies propelled an investment in the African diaspora and sent them traveling abroad to study, dance, and choreograph.

The December 18, 1955 broadcast, *Omnibus* (CBS, 1952-1956), featured a performance of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, made specifically for television. Though *Omnibus* was technically a variety show, it sought to cultivate a love of and interest in the arts, humanities, and science through commercial educational entertainment (See McCarthy, 2010: 18). Starring, as the titular character, was Eartha Kitt, a dancer and singer who got her start in Dunham's dance troupe at age 16 (Kirkley, 1955: 10). In this program, Kitt not only performed as a dramatic actress for the first time on television, she also did the iconic "dance of the seven veils." (*Chicago Daily Tribune,* 1955: W12) This dance from Salome was "[p]opularized in the United States and Europe by white dancers during the early twentieth

8 See also *New York Times Magazine*, 1908: 4.

century." (Krasner, 2001: 199) "Percival Pollard of the *New York Times* dubbed the craze itself 'Salomania.'"(Krasner, 2001: 199, 210 n. 39; Pollard, 1908)[8] The various white women that performed this dance on stage and on film participated in an Orientalism that at once liberated them from the confines of Victorian white womanhood while circumscribing them into an exoticized role of "Oriental" seducer.[9] While the dance contested gender codes of the white middle and upper class in the US and UK, as it was performed by dancers of color, a different negotiation of race, gender, and Orientalism took place.

In discussing Aida Walker, a black choreographer and dancer from the early 20th century and one of the first to choreograph and perform *Salome*, David Krasner notes,

> Walker challenged the accepted notion that only white women could dance the modern "classics." Nevertheless, she had to suppress the erotic component of her dancing. As a result, her choreography, although notable for its grace, was also known for its propriety. Walker had to be especially careful not to offend black audiences, while she simultaneously refused to succumb entirely to prudery. She affected the bourgeois norms of good taste, which meant she submitted her costume to a regime of concealment and restraint (Krasner, 2001: 199).

This taming of Orientalism and sexuality was also observed by reviewers of the time, who claimed, "Miss Walker's Salome is something like the others, being more modest, [….] but there is nothing of the hooch-ma-cooch effect which adds a suggestion of sensuality to the exhibitions of other Salomes." (Krasner, 2001: 201, 210 n. 52)

In stark contrast, reviews of Kitt's *Salome*, occurring almost 40 years later, note that her dance was "extremely sensuous and vibrant." (Singer, 1955: 8) Though her costume is not particularly risqué (her top has short sleeves and only bares her midriff), the voluminous skirt and cropped blouse are encrusted with

8 See also *New York Times Magazine*, 1908: 4.

9 See Brown, 2008; Studlar, 1997; Daly, 1992; Kendall, 1979; Showalter, 1990; Bizot, 1992; Desmond, 1991; Garelick, 2007; Koritz, 1997; Srinivasan, 2011; and Jarmakani, 2010.

with numerous jewels adding to the spectacle. Despite these entertaining qualities, critic Jack Singer strongly criticized Kitt for her acting. “Except for her dance scene and the final sequence where she makes love to the decapitated head of John, The Baptist, Miss Kitt’s performance was rather static, a quality that was not alleviated much by her monotone manner of delivery.” (ibid.)

The contrast between the reception of her as a dancer as opposed to an actress could be seen as a reflection of Kitt’s inexperience as an actress. At this point, Kitt had only a few appearances in film and television, and mostly as part of Dunham’s troupe or a featured singer on variety shows, such as *The Colgate Comedy Hour* (NBC, January 3, 1954). *Salome* was in many ways a landmark debut. Kitt even later remarked, “I had to get that for myself, too [….] My own agent wouldn’t even call the Omnibus producers. ‘After all, Kitty, you’re a Negro,’ was the answer I got.” (Humphrey, 1958: 12) Despite her agent’s negligence, she claimed she went ahead and approached *Omnibus* producer Paul Feigay. “[I] told him I’d like to do one of their shows. Two months later he gave me ‘Salome.’ There wasn’t one letter of protest from anybody.”(ibid.) This anecdote then suggests Kitt’s commitment to the production, as she was not only talented but also very much aware that this starring television role was a rare opportunity for a black woman performer.

Rather than the tell-tale signs of a new actress, then, we could see her “monotone manner of delivery” as a deliberate tactic of a skilled performer of the cabaret. In writing about a similar aloofness of another famous black woman performer, Lena Horne, Shane Vogel notes,

> This aloofness, communicated and enacted both on film and in live performance, was a response to the interracial intimacy produced by performance across the color line. The stance toward her audience and the model of intersubjectivity Horne describes when speaking about her cabaret performances suggest that the scene of segregated nightlife performance organized an aesthetics of interracial intimacy. The intimacy of the segregated cabaret was predicated on the promised display and exposure of black female interiority, an expectation that informed the different but related racial discourses of primitivism and exoticism shaping representations of black performance in the 1930s and 1940s (Vogel, 2008: 18).

Similarly, Kitt was conversant in this aloof style. Given Kitt's struggle in securing any kind of dramatic role on television, it is understandable to have a similar—at worst—hostility or—at best—ambivalence to predominantly white television programmers, sponsors, and home audiences whose participation in Jim Crow bar her from exhibiting her talent.

In regards to her role in Salome, in a 2005 interview, Kitt recalled,

> During the part where Salome takes the brother and throws him down the stairs and says, "Get me the head of John the Baptist,'' Mr. Paley [the head of CBS] came in and had a meeting with us afterwards on the set and said, "You can't do that. We can do that to you, but you can't do that to us.'' Salome was not black or white or pink or green. She was a biblical subject. The director was forced to cut those scenes. I remember looking at the director, who also had some tears in his eyes because it was so stupid. (Alba, 2005: 98)

Here then, Kitt's aloofness in her acting could be seen, like Horne's cabaret performance style, to not only obscure the real person or frustration behind playing the character, but to also deprive the audience of a performance of interracial intimacy, empathy, and understanding. This tactic then strongly went against much of postwar popular culture's sentimental address in fostering understanding across racial, ethnic, religious, national, and cultural borders.[10]

Unlike Horne, however, Kitt is also a modern dancer trained by one of the eminent black modernist choreographers, Katherine Dunham. In that sense, we might also interpret her performance style as a move away from emotional melodrama in the narrative towards an emphasis on the dance performance itself, which becomes the vehicle for her emotion and expressivity. The fact that Kitt's dance number conveys more enthusiasm than the dramatic narrative is not surprising as these moments of performance, momentarily decontextualized from the narrative arc, strongly resemble the space and time of the cabaret.

In complementing Vogel's work, Daphne A. Brooks distinguishes Kitt's cabaret performance style from that of Horne's. "Kitt addresses the scene of interracial encounter in her cabaret performances by engaging her audiences directly while invoking parodic constructions of 'whiteness,' 'womanhood,' and

10 See Klein, 2003; Wald, 2000; Rogin, 1993; Smith, 2004; Patton, 2007; Leibman, 1995; and Cripps, 1993.

'primitivist' caricature all at once and conflated all together." (Brooks, 2011: 121) As Kitt takes on a role that has been a hallmark for modern dance and a re-definition of white femininity, she traffics in the entrenched Orientalism of modern dance. While dance alone does not give her the space to more directly address her audience in a musical and comedic fashion, she vibrantly puts into relief modernism's limits in relation to gender, race, and empire. Kitt's *Salome* in many ways is in accordance with prescriptions for exotic dance given in *Dance Magazine*. Yet, its coupling with an aloof dramatic style suggests how the mode of the exotic, while confining and devaluing for many performers of color, also opened up a space from which to perform and lay claim to modernism.

"It is a dead woman rising from a tomb"

Within the segregated context of early US broadcast television, participation in exoticism offered visibility for the various black performers discussed above. Though exoticism often came with harsh criticism, in its strategic deployment it could be used to obstruct sentimental structures of cultural understanding and interracial intimacy, which often failed to dismantle or even address raced asymmetries of power. This ability for exoticism as a performance style and tactic to prevent the audience from fully knowing and understanding the performer—the maintenance of "unbrookable distance"—holds some resistant power. Unlike Horne's aloof impersona, exoticism, as seen in Kitt's Salome, is at once aloof and vibrant, intangible yet spectacular (Vogel, 2008: 19-20). It is what Elizabeth Fox-Genovese calls a manipulation of language and gesture by which black women "speak in a double tongue, simultaneously associating themselves with and distancing themselves from the dominant models of respectability." (Krasner, 2001: 207, 211 n. 67; Fox-Genovese, 1990: 20). While Walker's early-20th-Century *Salome* "expressed herself in a 'double tongue,' fearlessly exploiting the notions of primitivism and the exotic, [….] there was also the importance of being taken seriously as an artist." (Krasner, 2001: 207) Similarly, Kitt's performance is congruent with the worldly glamour deployed in her vocal performances while also doing justice to her skill as a modern dancer conversant in various Oriental and/or primitive styles. Brooks argues that while Kitt "traffics in the familiar hypersexualization of black womanhood that [Josephine] Baker would mediate with a skirt of bananas," she also "destabilizes this type of imagery by continuously disturbing its reception." (Brooks, 2011: 122-123) As her Salome is both aloof and spectacular, she implements the performance style of the cabaret to mediate "this interplay of closeness and

distance, acceptance and refusal, connection and disconnection, concentration and distraction" in order to "disrupt essentialist fantasies of the sexualized colonial female Other." (Vogel, 2009: 27; Brooks, 2011: 123) Kitt refuses to play the role with full authenticity. Rather, even in her dazzling jewel-encrusted costume, she brings into relief the utter inauthenticity of the Orientalist production.

This is not solely because she is a black woman playing a role that has, with the exception of Walker, only been played by white women. Rather, Kitt's performance as Salome, the gendered colonial subject, brings into relief the absurdity of the racial passing in the whole production, and previous ones. For even in earlier renditions of Salome, when white women "dramatized the colonial subject," they were always performing as "the colonizing women of empire." (Brown, 2008: 176) Whiteness is made visible as that which must be disguised, blacked or browned up in order to perform this classic text of modernism. By performing the entrenched Orientalism (and glamour) of the production, Kitt's blackness, however, becomes like Josephine Baker—"ultra-modern, born and bred far away from 'home.'" (Brooks, 2011: 123, n. 16; Brown, 2008: 256)[11] Though Kitt's Salome figuratively sends her to both the "Orient," as performed in the piece, and Europe, by invoking the history of the production, Kitt herself traveled.

As part of the Katherine Dunham Company, she went "to Mexico in 1948, and on to (among many, many other places) London, Paris, Turkey, Greece, Germany, Nigeria, Australia, New Zealand, India, and South Africa." (Brooks, 2011: 118-119) While this kind of global proficiency is most definitely "ultra-modern" and cosmopolitan, Brooks cautions us to consider Kitt as "rootless," "Rather, Eartha Kitt's cosmopolitanism is in fact fueled, as she theorizes it in her memoir, by the southern, rural poor black childhood that forces her migrancies with her mother and half sister from the earliest of ages." (Brooks, 2011: 119; see also Gikandi, 2002: 609, and Shelby, 2008) Though she sought out travel, she was always already mobile. In this way, she echoes and mirrors Dunham's and Primus's transnationalism. Anthropological fieldwork and performing abroad provided them with a respite from US segregation and white hegemony in the arts. But beyond a simple escape, their on and offstage (or on and off-screen) movements did further justice to and provided larger context for the richness, variety, and contradictions of Black diasporic connections, art, and womanhood.

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11 For more on Josephine Baker and modernity, see Cheng, 2006, 2010; and Glover, 2007-2008.

My highlighting of *Salome* in particular—both Kitt and Walker's performances as well as the long history of white productions—is not incidental. One of these famous white productions of Salome was by Loie Fuller, who was particularly pioneering in her use of electric technology in stage effects and early filmmaking. In her book on Fuller, Rhonda K. Garelick discusses how Fuller, an un-svelte American, became an "Electric Salome," who despite her use of high-tech inventions still mined Orientalism (See Garelick, 2007). Her performances, which were ultimately predicated on the subtext of French imperialism, also served to affirm France's fin de siècle colonial agenda, especially as she performed at the Paris World Fair of 1900. This mix of Orientalism, gender, art, dance, and technology comes into relief again in Kitt's *Salome*, but here the performance is not electric but electronic. This corresponding shift from the theatrical and filmic to the televisual can be seen in not only how dance had to become more exotic for the cramped studios of the new medium but also how producers were theorizing this new medium's artistic potential.

In an August 29, 1955 correspondence about the *Omnibus* production of *Salome*, Art Director Peter Brook writes to Producer Paul Feigay.

> I think that "Salome" lends itself to a highly stylized production that could be extraordinarily telling on television. I want with Henry [May]'s collaboration, to design it pictorially frame by frame in terms of unrealistic images that make a striking effect on the tiny screen and achieve them by means of models, drawings, etc. as much as by the studio scenery. I want the whole thing to be a strange barbaric kaleidoscope. The nearest indication I can give you of the sort of thing I mean is to quote the effect when one switches off a television set. You know the strange shadow that remains dwindling in the centre of the screen for a moment on some sets like a dying moon? This is my favorite moment in television viewing and it is in this moment that I see lines like, "It is a dead woman rising from a tomb" illustrated. It will all be formalized with figures emerging from a strange darkness – Jews, soldiers, emperors, etc. – all interknit with this swarming imagery. A number

> of long speeches I want to enrich with illustrations, such as when Herod describes to Salome all the gifts he will give her – during this I actually want to see the extraordinary succession of pictures.[12]

At first when Brook describes it as a "frame by frame" vision, an analogy could easily be made to film and a strip of celluloid. This correspondence initially conforms to a majority of popular and academic criticism that would see television as aesthetically inferior to film, and in a state of aspiration. Yet, the comparison of a switched off TV set to a "dying moon" demonstrates how this new technology is propelling a different artistic envisioning of an old text.

The corpse of the woman, the "dying moon," and "the strange shadow" are all likened to a haunting of this new electronic media (See Sconce, 2000). Here then, this "Electronic Salome," to borrow from Garelick, does not completely upend the Orientalism of the earlier Fuller productions, but parodies them to some extent all the while offering a new technology as that which can properly present a, perhaps more capacious and inclusive, version of modernism, and in turn, a US-led imperialism. Recovering early television dance's exoticism then not only reveals unexpected engagements with modern art but also presents an alternate vision of television history wherein black women choreographers and dancers defined and propelled modernism at midcentury.

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