

## Choreomania: Dance and Disorder

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As the series editor's foreword to *Choreomania* sets down, the work is an interdisciplinary study of manias of dancing. The inter- or a-disciplinarity of this work involves the disciplines of literary criticism, the literary and cultural theories of postcolonialism and Foucauldian historicism, dance (in particular collective or popular dancing), and the history of medicine. Moreover, the author explains in her preface that political events definitive of the decade in which the book was written (2008–2018) find themselves “in the fissures of this book,” as it elaborates nineteenth-century fantasies of dance in all its polysemantic meanings: self-expression, revolt, disease and contagion, movement, and a concomitant biopolitics of movement. Dance, therefore, is both identifiable gestural repertoires in this reckoning and an indeterminate (often excessive) possibility of corporeal behavior. In eleven short chapters, arranged in two sections, the book offers a selective period survey (from medieval dance to the nineteenth-century pathologization of the dancing disease in Europe) and a geographical survey involving case histories drawn from southern Italy, Madagascar and Brazil, the American plains, the South Seas, and, finally, popular dance in the United States. The cultural phenomena studied include the medieval St. John's dance, the early modern St. Vitus's dance, the religious practices of the French Convulsionnaires, Charcot's hysteria shows, the southern Italian tarantella, the Ghost Dance of the American plains, and popular dance forms in the modernist United States.

A key challenge for Gotman is to define choreography as it pertains to the art of dance *and* its extended definition as an orchestrator of motion. Gotman offers the following: “Choreography in the sense I propose thus suggests an act of articulation, one that negotiates a border zone between order and disorder, planned and unplanned motion.” The excursive interpretive gestures get bolder—and less and less precise—as Gotman describes the act of choreography as a spectrum or “choreozone,” pertaining to a wide range of movement in between the constative and performative registers of language. The key theoretical texts that enable this expanded understanding of the

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concept of choreomania are Deleuze and Guattari's *What Is Philosophy?* and Said's *Orientalism*, engaged as they both are, in singular ways, with the history of ideas in an ideologically rigged discursive domain. Gotman aspires to apply Said's insights in particular to the repertoire of nonverbal and bodily events "at the borderlines of dance," which have shaped the medical and social sciences, and which, she claims, has not previously been choreographed. A dizzying array of theorists and thinkers are drawn into the conversation—Freud, Foucault, Agamben, Gilroy, Clifford, (Wendy) Brown, Khanna, Bhabha—although this is mostly in the form of passing references to critical concepts that are already in wide circulation in the Anglo-American academy.

The vaunted interdisciplinarity of the project poses a difficulty from the introduction itself in the way research (the author's own as well as primary and secondary works) is presented and cited and a reading public proleptically posited. Because the audience of a multidisciplinary work is expected to be both specialist and nonspecialist, concepts have to be introduced in simple terms before they can be elaborated and complicated: while this is in itself laudable for the expansion of readership it hopes to invite and facilitate, occasionally it results in the lack of depth and detail in the coverage of a given field of scholarship. The section on hysteria in the introduction, for instance, a vital area of research given the time period under consideration in *Choreomania*—and Gotman's constant evocation of histrionic disorder in the "history of medicine" frame—mentions a handful of works from the substantial corpus of scholarship in this very field that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s. The pathbreaking contributions of Elaine Showalter, Felicia McCrarren, Janet Beizer, Juliet Mitchell, Monique David-Ménard, and others on gender, hysteria, movement, and motility are conspicuous by their absence. Although some of these names are briefly mentioned or appear in the bibliography or footnotes, Gotman neither dwells on specific elaborations of hysteria studies or the key ways in which the aforementioned scholars mentioned connected hysteria to aesthetics and literature. Demonstrating a similar lack of sustained focus in race and postcolonial studies, Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* is evoked in the introduction as a key theoretical source, but there is no subsequent examination of the vicissitudes of African roots and routes, as Gilroy had proposed. The rhizomatic structure of Blackness introduced by the text is used instead to talk about "colonial politics and cultural translation" in general. When Gotman revives the *Black Atlantic* to talk about popular dance in the United States, the discussion of Blackness is woefully incomplete. The point I am making here is that while the scope of this work enables Gotman to mobilize a very expansive network of comparisons in the service of the guiding concepts, the comparative network itself is not rigorously examined, let alone justified, in part or whole. The individual cases, cultural texts, or phenomena suffer from a full fleshing out of historical context and laborious specialist skills, oriented as they are forcefully toward illustrating the increasingly commodious idea of choreomania.

Examining two chapters, one from each of the book's two sections, may help us ascertain the connection of part (of the comparative frame) to the whole. I have chosen these on the basis of my own disciplinary interests and specialisms, in the history of psychoanalysis and race studies, respectively. Chapter 6, "Médecine Rétrospective: Hysteria's Archival Drag," is presented as a nodal point between the two sections as the first moves from Europe to a "colonial terrain." This dwells on hysteria and the contribution of the hysterical body to the growth of modern science. Some factual

inaccuracies and unsubstantiated statements aside—Paul Richer, a sculptor, anatomist, and physiologist is labeled “neurologist,” for instance, presumably for his influential neurological drawings—this is an interesting revisiting of hystero-epilepsy in light of modern neurology.

Gotman uses David Román’s coinage, “archival drag,” to explain the process of repetition wherein images, scenes, stories, and myths from the archives of the past are instantiated in (dragged into) the present. Dance mania, whether manifested by hysterics or those in the throes of satanic possession or religious euphoria, is read by Richer, a student of the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, as a form of epilepsy. With Charcot, he rifled through centuries of visual and narrative histories of ecstasy to compile “full-colour, large-format” drawings of bodies in grand mal seizure, echoing the Salpêtrière hysteria shows. Thus, they situated neurology in ancient iconography—undoubtedly an act of cultural consecration—even as Charcot drew on the iconography to choreograph and translate scenes of hystero-epilepsy. Gotman suggests that Charcot’s choreomania—its desire to capture in words the sight of the anarchic body coming undone—was, like the taxonomic category of “hystero-epilepsy,” an Orientalist construct. Similar to Orientalism, it was structured by a bias-laden binary between reason and its putative other, physical passion. The objects of critical inquiry, Charcot’s patients, in this case, reproduced gestures suggested to them, instead of initiating the same. “As Freud would note, lurking beneath the involuntary moments ... was the spectre of an obscure other side—a ‘dark continent,’” Gotman argues, but this intriguing observation is not taken to its logical limit, and the chapter moves quickly on to its next rubric after a cursory reference to Ranjana Khanna’s work on colonial psychoanalysis, titled *Dark Continents*. This is a missed opportunity, as the topic of gender and hystero-epilepsy could have been fruitfully framed in the discussion of Freud’s conflation of femininity and race in his murky formulation of the “dark continent.” And, although this chapter is a rich source of information on the role of movement and dance in transmuted epistemologies of the clinic to academic disciplines such as anthropology and ethnography, we learn very little about the suffering women—and some men—the cultivated inscrutability of whose dancing diseases became a cipher for racial, class, and cultural otherness in imperial Europe.

The final chapter, “Monstrous Grace: Blackness and the New Dance ‘Crazes,’” shows a similar lack of sustained commitment to ideas that provoke but are not developed with analytic rigor. It returns briefly to Gilroy to understand the relationship between Blackness and modernity, as this relationship is provoked by Black dance. Gotman describes modernity as “intelligibilization,” a clunky but convincing term that draws attention to modernity’s concerted project of making intelligible or legible that which is unintelligible to it. She argues further that the “unintelligible” is an invention of the very processes that seek to solve or overcome it and that “disorderly dance” falls in this category. The chapter examines the reception of jazz and ragtime as returns of and to the primitive in a machinic age, and imbibing machinic moves. Gotman is careful not to equate Black dance to choreomania, which may be Black but has the added characteristic of disorganized and hysterical movement.

The outline and title of this chapter had promised to bring together the biopolitics of diasporic modernity with that of hysterical bodies, the two ideas animating the book as a whole, and it does so to some extent. However, with its nine subsections, connected

tenuously one to the other, it also ends up providing a profusion of information that is not carefully analyzed, parsed, or synthesized. Themes discussed include the white European appropriation of Black “animal rhythms and childlike irrationality”; the self-parodying hollowness of white bodies enacting Black moves; the vilification of the raw sensuality of modern dancing in the early years of the twentieth century followed by the embourgeoisement (of dance); the role of women in popular dance movements; and the different speeds and kinetic energies of slow, nervous, or endurance-testing dances. In what feels like an abrupt conclusion to this plethora of examples of popular dance in “America” in the first half of the twentieth century, Gotman states that “the remnants of the ‘choreomania’ prejudice are strong.” The psychosomatic dimension of movement disorders is also frequently forgotten or lost in this concluding chapter.

Periodic infelicities of lack of cohesiveness and sustained attention aside, the scholarly and field research that has gone into Gotman’s *Choreomania* is astounding. The scope of the book—geopolitical and historical—is very ambitious, and it is a critical feat to be able to connect medieval with modern, Orient, and the *Black Atlantic*, mass illnesses and mass movements through the psychiatric, neurological, social, and the religious category of the choreomaniac. This work of dance scholarship is very innovative in the way it shows how there is more to dance than dance and that the phenomenon of choreomania can be taken out of Paris to speak to a wide variety of subversive kinaesthetic acts around the globe. As such, the book will appeal to cultural historians and medical historians as well as literary critics. Gotman examines with sensitivity the cultural anxiety that attaches to dancing bodies that are out of place, in disarray, moving and migrating or, indeed, vibrating like jitterbugs. If Wendy Brown has associated the organization of democratic society with the mobilizing of a plural body, *Choreomania* is about the choreographing of a different plural body, a chaotic demos, one that goes about displacing, transforming, and utterly disorganizing the individuals caught up in its madness.