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## Choreomania Forum Response

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Ankhi Mukherjee’s curiously at first vitriolic attack on the book ends, surprisingly, with a fair bit of praise; it seems that the book’s difficulty and strength is its scope. What concerns me with her reading is the unfortunate misreading of the book evidenced throughout her remarks, including that I am in some sense suggesting “surveys,” geographic or historical, or that I am suggesting that events “at the borderlines of dance” were somehow not *yet* choreographed (“not previously choreographed”), when what I am arguing is that these are not choreographic events in the strict sense of the term, where “choreography” is the deliberate arrangement of bodies on or off stage, according to a repeatable pattern, or a writable code. Much of what the book offers, in fact, is a rethinking of the category of the “choreographic,” to include writing about dance that falls outside orderly arrangement; and, moreover, to attend to ways that writing itself can be understood choreographically, that is to say in terms of its movements, its trajectories, and pathways globally. This is where I find her comment that the “short” chapters are arranged in a survey form a bit astonishing; for one thing, if these chapters are “short,” I would be interested to hear what a “long” chapter would be for her. The book runs to 240,000 words; it traces the discursive movement of the term and concept of “choreomania” across geographic terrains and histories. The point of the book is not to find what the women and men were doing, as I write plainly (though we learn about this where possible and relevant along the way), but to think about the language of “choreomania”—the complex of imaginaries that its genealogy reveals. My methodology is Foucauldian, and in this sense, I am interested in the way language about dance helps us understand ways movement—particularly, in this case, disorderly movement—is articulated primarily in scientific and social scientific texts in the long

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nineteenth century. Of course, this is very different from a scholarly monograph that would look up close at a fifty or even a hundred-year period. That is not the book's aim, and to do so (for example looking at hysteria, which has been done, as she notes, a lot) would be to write an entirely different book altogether. It would certainly be fascinating, but it would not afford the comparative remit here that allows for detailing ways that nineteenth-century discourse drew from the medieval, for example, or the early modern, to describe concerns that were present then. If frames such as the *Black Atlantic* are deployed summarily, this is because the book does not aim to engage with this at its core, but finds this framework useful at the point at which this emerges. The primarily critical framework is Foucauldian throughout; and the field of intervention primarily sits within a history of ideas about dance, whose definition I deliberately open up here.

I am delighted to read that Ankhi Mukherjee does find the book ultimately “astounding,” as it was, I am sure she and anyone else can well appreciate, no small feat to find throughlines across these terrains. It seems to me that our intellectual and academic structures—systems of research evaluation, peer review, and more—force us to produce and to reproduce works that are always of the same or of similar scope, according to formulas that may be tested and true within disciplinary paradigms, but rarely allowing for acts of articulation that draw far beyond. I think here often of Eric Hayot's remark at the ACLA convention in 2014, that unfortunately, academic writing comes only in certain “sizes” of work and of thought: the twenty-page paper, the eighty-to one-hundred-thousand-word monograph, and so on.<sup>1</sup> I took a risk here diving into this genealogy because I hoped—or rather, I found as I went—that this allowed for elucidating something that was far more complexly transhistorical and transcultural than any habitual period-specific work would allow. This has naturally its shortfalls, not least in terms of sanity and feasibility while working; I doubt I will ever produce a book such as this again, but hope nevertheless that what I was able to draw through this was, as she also notes, in the end highly “sensitive” and “appealing” to a wide range of readers who might not otherwise necessarily come into conversation within the same room.

Mukherjee remarks on the “innovative” aspect of this work, and this is an element of the book that Ananya Kabir draws on also, quoting extensively from the sources I offer and recognizing here at least the “exhaustive footnotes” that I think warrant further recognition of the book's deep commitment to transdisciplinary and transhistorical scholarly rigor. Kabir takes us back through Hecker's work, which I center the book on, as well as Nietzsche's—to me, initially surprising—likely acquaintance with this work. She—contrary to Mukherjee—finds the articulation of Black Dance, in relationship to the Black Death, immensely compelling and productive, and indeed her work with these concepts in her own research on the Brazilian *kola sanjon* performs just the sort of elucidation and extension of the “choreomania” concept that I anticipated and hope the book will fulsomely allow. Her reading of ways Brazilian practices of St. John's Day dances offer a “creole medievalism” suggests that much more can continue to be done to think ways that carnivalesque modes at once recuperate figures of Dionysianism such as I analyze throughout *Choreomania* and rearticulate the postcolonial (and precolonial) contexts within which these continue to proliferate and transform. Kabir's attention to

1 Eric Hayot, “ACLA Presidential Address: On the Lack of Curiosity Regarding Institutional Life,” *Comparative Literature* 66.4 (2014): 481–88.

Josephine Baker and Michel Leiris's narratives, which I read in *Choreomania*, further help triangulate—as I do in this book—the medieval, read through the nineteenth-century German lens; the Black interwar period in Europe and America; and the indigenous and creole practices of political movement that can be read, experienced, and thought through across a wide range of sites. What *Choreomania* does in order to avoid the infinite proliferation of “case studies” of “choreomania” as a concept that is, indeed, and that's my point, expansive, is to wrap the studies I read closely into a very clear genealogy that is centered, as I make plain, on Hecker's and attendant texts. What I do very specifically is to read what he read and to follow the footnotes, translations, and the scholarly, pedagogical, and other recuperations of this work as it traveled with colonial physicians and others around the world. That I stopped at that genealogy—and that set of journeys—because it was already more than enough to show how ideas move (and ideas, in this case specifically, about intensely “disorderly” movement) does not for a moment negate the possibility of just the sorts of readings and analyses Kabir offers; for that, I am grateful.

It does seem to me that one of the most complex aspects of the afterlife of *Choreomania* so far, as I have found speaking about the work for contemporary festivals, nightlife events, and more, is the way this concept, which I analyze in the mode of critique, can be taken at “face value” and understood as something that I believe or see as existing as such—that “choreomania” would be a way to describe collective, disorderly motion, a reclaiming of the right to move and of the streets. Of course, I advocate strongly for reclaiming the right to move in all sorts of ways, against the over-commercialization or policing (governmentally sanctioned or no) of gestures not deemed suave or controllable enough. But this does not equate to a claim that “choreomania” is a type of dance; far from it. What I show is how every sort of dance, gesture, movement, has been *described* in the terms of “choreomania,” as a dancing disease. What I have been interested in is the specific way that pathologization plays into the “choreomania” discourse and ways that this pathologization is often, unsurprisingly perhaps, but very subtly, wrapped into modes of (often, anti-anticolonial) governmentality. Kabir's work strikes just this balance, between recognition of the proliferation of dance forms that draw from this repertoire and this body of figures and concerns, while falling just short of celebrating the apparent mayhem uncritically, that is to say, without due regard to the networks of reference and power structures that are deployed.

For Gladys Francis, the question of the disabled body comes to the fore; she reads a series of works that examine Blackness and fears of contamination, debility, epidemiology, and more, alongside my chapter on “Monstrous Grace,” further to articulate along with this work ways that disability, disorder, madness, and unsoundness are wrapped perniciously into cultural prejudice and racist practice in the United States, in particular, not least for her in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and also in the French-Canadian filmmaker Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's work with twenty-five-year-old Souleymane Démé (Grigris), paralyzed in one leg in Chad. What Francis's reading offers is a way as with Kabir further to extend the conversation around performatic repertoires, transgression, and in this case the violence of displaced and dislocated corporealities within a contemporary framework. That “disability” should be not “just” a medical problem; but a biopolitical and a bioeconomic as well as a biocultural formulation sits at the heart of what I have aimed to do with *Choreomania* and further work I have done on what I call

alterkinetic aesthetics, where choreic and other “disorderly” corporealities appear onstage or off, shifting ways we see normality, abnormality, beauty, and the taboo.

It seems to me that one aspect of the postcolonial and the literary entanglement that drives my work on *Choreomania* and drives much of the responses offered here revolves around the question of gesture and the disciplinary or transdisciplinary ways that gesture, like orality, continues to sit (or hover) awkwardly within critical discourse in the university; that the language of dance, or choreography, or the “performatic repertoire” should be mobilized to think mobility seems to me an ongoing step in the right direction; but perhaps we have still further to decolonize our disciplines epistemologically better to reorganize, or to further disorganize, ways we see structures of priority or of hierarchy in our epistemic formations; that is to say, if questions of Blackness and disability, or of carnival and the medieval creole suggest other genealogies of community formation and subversion of gestural or identitarian norms—as imposed by generations of settler economics, as *Choreomania* also shows—then surely the work to be done today is to continue to unsettle any settler epistemologies. This means further grounding so much writing and research work in the “dialogic space,” as Gladys writes, quoting Bakhtin, lived within and across modes of engagement with books, events, moments of encounter, and more, so as to find oneself always just a bit off-kilter, *déhanché*, perhaps out of focus or at other moments crystal clear; but that any articulation of a way of seeing or a concept or history remains open. This is what I have tried to do with *Choreomania*: not only to show a history (a genealogy) of concept formation but to do the work of critique—that is to say, to be engaged in a present aiming to understand better how things came to be this way, how they can be otherwise (in this case following Foucault). I do think that with the current upsurge in attention to the biopolitics of exclusion that have brought about massacres like the Grenfell Tower fires, among others, scholarship within the postcolonial field and within dance, as well as within and across attendant disciplines, can continue to ask what is at stake in figures of motion and stillness, and in the complex webs of discourses as well as the biocultural and bioeconomic practices that divide and conquer these.