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From the Black Death to Black Dance: Choreomania as Cultural Symptom

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Paris in the interwar years was abuzz with Black dance and dancers. The stage was set since the First World War, when expatriate African Americans first began creating here, through their performance and patronage of jazz, "a new sense of black community, one based on positive affects and experience."[1] This community was a permeable one, where men and women of different races came together on the dance floor. As the novelist Michel Leiris recalls in his autobiographical work, *L'Age d'homme*, "During the years immediately following November 11th, 1918, nationalities were sufficiently confused and class barriers sufficiently lowered … for most parties given by young people to be strange mixtures where scions of the best families mixed with the dregs of the dance halls … In the period of great licence following the hostilities, jazz was a sign of allegiance, an orgiastic tribute to the colours of the moment. It functioned magically, and its means of influence can be compared to a kind of possession. It was the element that gave these celebrations their true meaning: a religious meaning, with communion by dance … [S]wept along by violent bursts of topical energy, jazz still had enough of a dying civilisation about it, humanity submitting blindly to the machine."[2] Into this already fervid scene burst Josephine Baker with her Charleston and her charisma, and it seemed for a while that all of Paris had abandoned the kinesis of the everyday for this new form of exhilaration.

The French dance critic André Levinson described Baker's performance in *La Revue Negre* as marked with "a wild splendour and magnificent animality… the plastic sense of a race of sculptors came to life and the frenzy of the African Eros swept over the audience. It was no longer a grotesque dancing girl that stood before them, but the black Venus that

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1 Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), xv.
2 Michel Leiris, *Manhood*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), 146–47.

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haunted Baudelaire."[3] The contemporary dance scholar Ramsay Burt glosses this quote thus: "Levinson, in calling Baker a 'Black Venus,' was referring to the tradition of European visual art … by referring to Baudelaire, Levinson, however, conjures up the threat of contamination, the moral and physical decay Baudelaire went through as if infected by his Creole mistress Jeanne Duval— his Black Venus."[4] Indeed, at the start of his essay on "The Negro Dance," which is where he discusses Baker, Levinson described Black dance and music "as it is found in our present-day dance halls [in Paris] … as a symptom of an epidemic contagion which should concern the pathologist," even as "the moralist may be more concerned with the effect of this black virus upon European civilization."[5] And in the same year, while introducing Paul Colin's lithograph series entitled *Le tumulte noir*, Georges Thenon connected the Charleston through wordplay to the notorious psychiatric hospital, the Charenton, by speaking of a "charentonesque epidemic" triggered by Baker and others.[6]

Such imaginings of modernity's seeming susceptibility to the contagion of Black dance have a genealogy in nineteenth-century discussions of "choreomania," or "dance as disorder," as Kélina Gotman's erudite and captivating book on this topic reveals. Demonstrating "dance as a discipline" and "the history of science" as "interconnected discourses" (xiii) whereby "epidemic encroachment of bodies on public space and fitful motions come to be seen as two sides of the same phenomenon (7)," Gotman establishes "choreomania" as an object of scientific study that emerged analogously to Orientalism (1–24). A phantasmagoric space where science, dance, and fear and fascination toward movement converge during the long nineteenth century, it signifies the discursive capture of "a spontaneous and uncontrolled movement of crowds and the jerky and seemingly inelegant movements of bodies subject to fits and starts" (xiii). Gotman establishes its *locus classicus* in an essay of 1832 on *Die Tanzwuth* (dance mania), written by the young German doctor Justus Hecker.[7] This tract rapidly gained popularity across Europe; within the next few years, it was translated into several languages including an 1835 English translation.[8] Its English title, *Epidemics of the Middle Ages*, locates the source of Hecker's popularity within his epidemiological retelling of one of the stranger aspects of Europe's medieval past: spontaneous mass upheavals of dancing folk around specific moments in the ritual calendar, triggered by apocalyptic moments of historical change such as plagues, famines, and floods.

3 André Levinson, "The Negro Dance: Under European Eyes," first published in *Theatre Arts Monthly* 11.4 (1927); reprinted in *André Levinson on Dance: Writings from Paris in the Twenties*, eds. and trans. Joan Acocella and Lynn Garafola (Philadelphia: Wesleyan University Press, 1991), 72–75, esp. 74.

4 Ramsay Burt, *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, "Race," and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (London: Routledge, 1998), 61.

5 Acocella and Garafola, eds., *André Levinson on Dance*, 70.

6 Cited in Kélina Gotman, *Choreomania: Dance and Disorder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 271. My discussion of the interwar Paris dance scene draws on Gotman's discussion, *Choreomania*, 270–78. Subsequent references to *Choreomania* will be by page number and embedded in the body of my text.

7 Justus Hecker, *Die Tanzwuth, eine Volkskrankheit im Mittelalter. Nach den Quellen für Ärzte und gebildete Nichtärzte* (Berlin: Enslin, 1832).

8 Justus Hecker, *The Epidemics of the Middle Ages*, trans. B. G. Babington (London: Sherwood, Gilbert, and Piper, 1835). Hecker's first essay in the volume, translated by Babington as "The Dancing Mania of the Middle Ages," was soon being printed and sold separately throughout the English-speaking world. My citations in the following are from one such translation.

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Leading us to the writings of Hecker and others in his wake, and taking us through various "colonial and postcolonial stages" for subsequent experiences and imaginings of choreomania, Gotman presents us with "19th century fantasies of medieval and colonial outbreaks of dancing and song" through which she uncovers "a whole history of thinking about the forms—the choreographies—of unrest" (xiii). Being a one-time medievalist who moves back and forth through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in pursuit of colonial modernity's symptoms and structures, what I have found most promising in Gotman's *Choreomania* is its mining of a discursive seam where Black dance and the Black Death, seemingly improbably, collide. Although my current explorations of African-heritage social dance drew me initially to this book, it is the return to medieval Europe through which Hecker staked a claim to modernity, and which Gotman so compellingly details, that has stayed with me. What I have taken away from *Choreomania*, then, is its ability to make us glimpse, albeit partially and tantalizingly, the long histories of labor, leisure, and the structuring of communal existence through capitalism within which its intersecting explorations of dance and science sit. Its exhaustive footnotes and bibliography allowed me to trace my own path through the discursive topography she excavates, opening up vistas where my older interest in "imperial medievalism" may finally meet my newer work on the political and libidinal economy of Black dance.[9]

"The effects of the Black Death had not yet subsided" declares the opening lines of Hecker's *Dancing Manias*, "and the graves of millions of its victims were scarcely closed, when a strange delusion arose in Germany, which took possession of the minds of men, and, in spite of the divinity of our nature, hurried away body and soul into the magic circle of hellish superstition."[10] Hecker's tract begins with a dramatic plunge into the biggest calamity of the medieval era, the Black Death or plague epidemic, only to bring us face to face with the dance mania that was its unexpected corollary. From the evidence of various medieval German chronicles, Hecker notes that these mass convulsions were called "the dance of St John or St Vitus." These names point to the clustering of these outbreaks around the feast of St. John (June 24, or the summer solstice), as well as to their characterization as collective dance (the early Christian Sicilian Martyr Vitus was the patron saint of dance). The description of the dance, however, reaches beyond the Church to ancient Greece: "the bacchantic leaps by which it was characterized, and which gave to those affected, while performing their wild dance, and screaming and foaming with fury, all the appearance of those possessed" (1). This already impressive mass "convulsion" had an even more startling dimension, moreover: its ability to spread mysteriously just like the plague.

This dancing malady, first experienced in Aix-la-Chapelle, had been followed by a breakout at Cologne and a near-simultaneous one at Metz. From the late fourteenth to the early fifteenth centuries, there had been outbreaks in Germany and the Low

9 Michelle R. Warren, *Creole Medievalism: Colonial France and Joseph Bédier's Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). See also Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams, eds., *Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

10 Justus Hecker, *The Dancing Mania of the Middle Ages*, trans. G. B. Babington (New York: Humboldt Publishing Company, 1885), 1. Subsequent references will be by page number to this edition, embedded in the body of my text.

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Countries before they gradually died down, never again to reappear, but enshrined nevertheless in collective memory through various medieval chronicles.[11] With each recurrence that Hecker reports, the number of the afflicted increases, so that by the time we arrive at Metz, we are faced with streets filled with "eleven thousand dancers" (3). The additive structure of the rhetoric mimics the contagion of the subject it purports to discuss. At the same time, Hecker draws on an emergent vocabulary of the pathology of infectious disease—contagions and epidemics—that he would have been exposed to during his medical training at Berlin. Nevertheless, his accounts of the medieval dance outbreaks are also colored by a strongly moralistic lexicon that reaches back to the Christian Middle Ages. As he says in a fairly typical sentence, for instance, "dance mania" did not remain confined to particular localities, but was propagated by the sight of sufferers, like a "daemoniacal epidemic, over the whole of Germany and the neighbouring countries to the north-west, which were already prepared for its reception by the prevailing opinions of the times" (1). The phrase "daemoniacal epidemic" tellingly juxtaposes Christian and medical signifiers for maximum rhetorical effect.

Condemnation notwithstanding, Hecker's accounts of medieval dance manias generate a raucous Rabelaisian community, reminiscent of a Breughel painting: "They formed circles hand in hand, and appearing to have lost all control over their senses, continued dancing, regardless of the by-standers, for hours together in wild delirium, until at length they fell to the ground in a state of exhaustion" (1). In the ensuing melée, commerce and labor are discarded in favor of an emergent community forged in the heat of the Carnivalesque: "Peasants left their plows, mechanics their workshops, housewives their domestic duties, to join the wild revels, and this rich commercial city because the scene of the most ruinous disorder. Secret desires were excited, and but too often found opportunities for wild enjoyment; and numerous beggars, stimulated by vice and misery, availed themselves of this new complaint to gain a temporary livelihood" (3). Patriarchal structures were abandoned in favor of a roving amorality: "Girls and boys quitted their parents, and servants their masters, to amuse themselves at the dances of those possessed; and greedily imbibed the poison of mental infection" (3). The censorious metaphors are laced with the frisson of breached propriety: "Above a hundred married women were seen raving about in consecrated and unconsecrated places, and the consequences were soon perceived" (3). Hecker's *dramatis personae* and the scenarios they populate thus embed within a recognizable medieval European social frame, the "implicit fantasy of Dionysian frenzy and ancient bacchanals" that pervades his account.[12]

It is the same body "under the spell of the Dionysian," engaged in the improvizational, demotic dimension of collective dancing, through which Friedrich Nietzsche heralds the collapse of the "*principium individuationis*" in his *Birth of Tragedy*.[13] His rhetoric is powered by the emotive connection he makes with medieval German

11 From Hecker's footnotes, these appear to be written in Latin and a range of Franconian and medieval German dialects. Accessing these primary sources would be an important step in trying to understand the phenomena within the horizon of their present.

12 Gotman, *Choreomania*, 33.

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 22.

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remnants of the Dionysian principle, under the influence of which "increasingly large throngs of singing and dancing people surged from place to place" around the feast of St John. Nietzsche places these "St John's and St Vitus's dancers" in a genealogy with "the Bacchic choruses of the Greeks, with their prehistory in Asian Minor, stretching all the way back to Babylon and the orgiastic Sacae."[14] Already in 1869—before the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*—he was attributing the beginnings of drama to "the orgiastic celebrations of Dionysus" that were "not entirely remote from the lives of the German people," and seeing "the St John's or St Vitus's dancers, who used to wander singing and dancing from town to town in enormous and constantly increasing masses, as nothing other than such an ecstatic Dionysian movement, even though in medicine today the phenomenon is regarded as an epidemic of the Middle Ages."[15] Gotman enables us to read Nietzsche's binary between Apollonian and Dionysian principles in light of Hecker's work, which is implied in the reference to "medicine today." Nietzsche rejects Hecker's largely negative connotations of the epidemiological interpretation, but not the interpretation itself: "The ancient musical drama blossomed out of such an epidemic; and it is the misfortune of the modern arts that they do not stem from such a mysterious source."[16]

While nineteenth-century commentators were lamenting the disappearance of St John's dances, alternatingly fantasizing about or fearing their excesses while pushing them to the Middle Ages, the dances themselves were taking on new shape in various colonial sites as part of creolized culture.[17] All across the former Portuguese empire, in particular, St. John celebrations became an immensely important part of the ritual calendar, and, from Brazil to Goa in the postcolonial present, they continue to be significant expressions of heritage and community. The numerous saints' days during June peak with St. John's Day on the 24th, occasioning extended feasting, processions, and dance parades—in the case of Brazil, indeed, *festa juninha* celebrations stretch across the entire month. In June 2017, I researched one such St. John's Day festivity in Santo Antão, Cape Verde, and those experiences returned me to reading Nietzsche.[18] Santo Antão's *festa sanjon* (feast of St. John) certainly fits the bill of the "Dionysian spell" that Nietzsche imagined being cast on German townsfolk once upon a medieval time, though its community-oriented dynamics didn't reveal (to me, at least) an "orgiastic" dimension. For an entire week, the island suspends normal activities for a festival timetable that breaches divisions between night and day, public and private through sell-out, standing-only concerts in huge stadia, agricultural fairs, carnival-style floats, as well as the processions up and down the island bearing the local version of St. John the Baptist. The soundtrack is the syncopated beat of myriad *sanjon* drums, supplemented

14 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

15 *Friedrich Nietzsche: Writings from the Early Notebooks*, eds. Raymond Geuss and Alexander Nehamas, trans. Ladislaus Löb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 10.

16 Guess and Nehamas, eds., *Friedrich Nietzsche*, 12–13.

17 On creolization in this context, see Ananya Jahanara Kabir, "Decolonizing Time through Dance with Kwenda Lima: Cabo Verde, Creolization, and Affiliative Afromodernity," *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, September 6,02018 (https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2018.1512849).

18 Research on the *festa sanjon* in Cape Verde, June 2017, was funded through the ERC Advanced Grant Modern Moves, which I directed from 2013 to 2018.

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by contrapuntal whistles, while the regulator of movement is the jerky, playful, processional dance, the *kola sanjon.*

Recent commentary on the *kola sanjon* recognizes it as "a euphoric celebration of nature in its solar cycle, of the summer solstice, and the cycle of the renovating force of the earth, manifested in the adorning of the bodies of the dancers covered with rosaries made of flowers, fruits of the earth, corn, bread, and sugar."[19] These signifiers of agricultural bounty, together with the once-prohibited gesture of "navel-bumping" (the *kola*) that rhythmically punctuates the dance, attest to an "explosive liberation of the instincts of life and of instinctive sexuality inscribed within the cyclical time of the solstice," but as I experienced it myself, the controlling rhythm of the dance regulates the festival's potential to liberate revelers from "quotidian and established norms, through the manifestation of desire for intense emotions, for metamorphosis through delirium, for ecstasy, for intoxication, for trance." Thus such commentary demonstrates a stubborn continuity with the discourse of choreomania, reaching back to Nietzsche and through him, to the connection between delirium, ecstasy, and contagious ("contagioso") dance: "They pass towards the primordial origin, towards the primordial chaos, the ideal site of metamorphosis, of the uprooting of culture through the medium of the body, which transforms itself into restlessness and into delirium, of initiation, incitement, and sexual excitement." Such descriptions perpetuate choreomania as discursive othering through the diagnosis of collective movement as frenzied pathology. The contemporary, living, social activity it purports to capture points in another direction, however: to creolization as the generation of new culture. Already prohibited in one form or the other around the eighteenth century,[20] the dances of African-heritage enslaved communities took new forms around the midsummer festivals of the Portuguese—in this case, the *kola sanjon.*

The *kola sanjon*, with its connection to syncretized forms of Christianity derived from the plantation, return us to Josephine Baker's words. "One of the critics compared our movements to St. Vitus's Dance. What kind of a dance is that? I asked. "It's a nervous disorder that makes you tremble and jerk all over." "That's not a sickness," I retorted. "It's the way we act in Church back home."[21] Can one envisage an examination of documents describing the *kola sanjon* against the medieval chronicles where eyewitness accounts of St. John's dances were recorded and takes the archive back to the repertoire of St. John celebrations extant today? This task would be an exciting direction for investigations on "creole medievalism" as a register of the modern.[22] Nineteenth-century narrative invocations of the "Dionysian spell" within the paradigm of the

19 José da Silva Ribeiro, Cola S. Jon: *"Oh Que Sabe!" As imagens, as palavras ditas e a escrita de uma experiência ritual e social* (Porto: Edições Afrontamento (2001), 162. All subsequent references to this text are from this page unless otherwise noted. The translation from Portuguese is mine.

20 Ribeiro, *Cola S. Jon*, mentions colonial prohibitions of Kola S. Jon and other caboverdian dances on pages 194–98; as does Ana Flávia Miguel, *Kola San Jon, música, dança e identidades cabo-verdianas* (PhD diss., Universidade de Aveiro, 2010), 20–29, where she discusses the first documented prohibition in 1748 of the navel-bumping move (ubiquitously called "umbigada" in Lusophone colonial contexts, and in the Cape Verdean context, called the "kola").

21 Josephine Baker and Jo Bouillon, *Josephine*, trans. Mariana Fitzpatrick (London: W. H. Allen, 1978), 53; cited and discussed in Gotman, *Choreomania*, 272.

22 Warren, *Creole Medievalism*; see also Kabir and Williams, eds., *Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages.*

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medieval as modernity's other also invites further explorations of how the labor of disorderly dance was articulated to capitalist political economies.[23] Gotman has set the stage for such work by taking us so brilliantly from the Black Death to Black dance, so as to reveal choreomania as a discursive symptom. But as she recognizes, "An alternative history of the 'dancing disease' might seek to know how collective movements, upheavals, tics, and unwieldy gesticulations felt to those performing them" (13). The gift of her work is its ability to move us along new paths of research that will help us grasp choreomanias past and present as a multivalent *cultural* symptom, its discursive and somatic dimensions jerkily bumping navels in time to the polyrhythms that fissure and suture the phenomenon we call modernity.

23 In this context, see the exploration of Zumba fitness as a twenty-first century Dionysian rite, mediated by neoliberalism and capitalism, in Aoife Sadlier, "Dionysus meets Neoliberalism: Zumba Fitness and the Call to Zorbitality," *Sexualities* 23.5–6 (2020): 810–33.

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