Choreographing Empathy

“This is an urgently needed book – as the question of choreographing behavior enters into realms outside of the aesthetic domains of theatrical dance, Susan Foster writes a thoroughly compelling argument.” André Lepecki, New York University, USA

“May well prove to be one of Susan Foster’s most important works.” Ramsay Burt, De Montford University, UK

What do we feel when we watch dancing? Do we “dance along” inwardly? Do we sense what the dancer’s body is feeling? Do we imagine what it might feel like to perform those same moves? If we do, how do these responses influence how we experience dancing and how we derive significance from it?

Choreographing Empathy challenges the idea of a direct psychophysical connection between the body of a dancer and that of their observer. In this groundbreaking investigation, Susan Foster argues that the connection is in fact highly mediated and influenced by ever-changing sociocultural mores. Foster examines the relationships among three central components in the experience of watching a dance – the choreography, the kinesthetic sensations it puts forward, and the empathetic connection that it proposes to viewers. Tracing the changing definitions of choreography, kinesthesia, and empathy from the 1700s to the present day, she shows how the observation, study, and discussion of dance have changed over time. Understanding this development is key to understanding corporeality and its involvement in the body politic.

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Choreographing Empathy

Kinesthesia in Performance

Susan Leigh Foster
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Introducing Choreographing Empathy

What do we feel when we watch dancing? Do we “dance along” even without moving overtly? Do we sense what the dancer’s body is feeling? Do we imagine ourselves performing those same moves? Launching buoyantly into the air? Rolling with increasing speed across the floor? Balancing on our toes? Undulating the spine? Floating? Diving? Bursting? Or pausing in stillness? Do we sway to the rhythm of the motion we see? Do we strain forward, lift upwards, or retreat backwards in response to different motions? Might we even feel our muscles stretching or straining? Our skin rushing past air or sliding across the ground? A shortness of breath? The damp from perspiration? Do we feel fear, witnessing the precariousness of the dancer’s next step? Delight in its expansiveness? Anxiety from its contortedness? And to the extent that we feel any of these things, in what ways do these responses form part of or otherwise influence how we experience dancing and how we derive significance from it?

Choreographing Empathy responds to these questions by examining various claims that have been made concerning the sense of immediate and unmitigated contact between dancer and viewer. Early twentieth century dance theorist John Martin argued for a vital rapport between dancer and viewer and an equally basic connection between movement and emotion. Dance, he explained, conveys meaning because viewers, even though sitting in their seats, feel the movements and consequently the emotions of the dancer. Now at the beginning of the twenty-first century neurophysiologists are likewise claiming an intrinsic connectivity between dancer and viewer based on the discovery of mirror neurons – synaptic connections in the cortex that fire both when one sees an action and when one does that action. Although both claims argue for a fundamental physical connection between dancer and viewer, they differ markedly in their underlying presumptions about the nature of subjecthood and the way that perception takes place. Martin believed in an autonomous inner self that, impressed upon by its witnessing of the dance, responded with its unique interpretation of the dance’s expression. Neuroscientists, in contrast, propose that selfhood is continually reforming as part of the ongoing process of perceiving the dance.

This study foregrounds the differences in claims such as Martin’s and those of contemporary neuroscience in order to challenge the assumptions of a natural or spontaneous connection between the dancing body and the viewer’s body. It seeks to demonstrate that what is often experienced as unmediated is, in fact, carefully constructed. The dancer’s performance draws upon and engages with prevailing senses of the body and of subjectivity in a given historical moment. Likewise, the viewer’s rapport is shaped by common and prevailing senses of the body and of subjectivity in a given social moment as well as by the unique circumstances of watching a particular dance. And these experiences of body and self have changed radically over time. In order to launch an inquiry into how dance summons its viewers into an empathic relationship with it, I have undertaken a genealogical analysis of three related terms: “choreography,” “kinesthesia,” and “empathy.” I argue that any notion of choreography contains, embodied within it, a kinesthesia, a designated way of
experiencing physicality and movement that, in turn, summons other bodies into a specific way of feeling towards it. To “choreograph empathy” thus entails the construction and cultivation of a specific physicality whose kinesthetic experience guides our perception of and connection to what another is feeling.
What is choreography?

The term “choreography” currently enjoys widespread use as referent for a structuring of movement, not necessarily the movement of human beings. Choreography can stipulate both the kinds of actions performed and their sequence or progression. Not exclusively authored by a single individual, choreography varies considerably in terms of how specific and detailed its plan of activity is. Sometimes designating minute aspects of movement, or alternatively, sketching out the broad contours of action within which variation might occur, choreography constitutes a plan or score according to which movement unfolds. Buildings choreograph space and people’s movement through them; cameras choreograph cinematic action; birds perform intricate choreographies; and combat is choreographed. Multiprotein complexes choreograph DNA repair; sales representatives in call centers engage in improvisational choreography; families undergoing therapy participate in choreography; web services choreograph interfaces; and even existence is choreographed.¹

Dances also evince or articulate a choreography, and some artists who make dances call themselves choreographers. Dance scholars have also implemented the term in a range of debates concerning dance’s meaning in relation to society and politics. They have theorized the ephemerality of performance in relation to the documentation and analysis of it, and they have examined how choreography operates in relation to the construction of agency. They ask where might agency be located when dances are authorless? And, depending upon the specificity of the choreography, to what extent do dancers exert agency in their individual performances of it? They have also considered the relationship of choreography to issues of ownership in dance and how choreography has participated in arguments concerning access to copyright.

Sometimes choreography is construed as being in opposition to improvised or spontaneous elements in the dance performance. At other times, it is interpreted as a score or set of principles that guide spontaneous invention. In her study of contact improvisation, Sharing the Dance, Cynthia Novack observed that the modern dance tradition out of which contact improvisation emerged typically posed an opposition between choreography and improvisation, envisioning improvisation as a creative method that could be implemented in support of choreography as the making of a dance. Contact improvisors, in contrast, eschewed choreography as the formal and crafted shaping of movement for presentation to viewers, preferring instead to focus intensively on the moving point of contact between two bodies and the concomitant and unpredictable unfolding of movement produced by that focus. Sensitive to their pursuit of an informal, spontaneous and open-ended exploration of movement possibilities, Novack identified the central and underlying precepts governing the generation of movement in contact improvisation – sensing with the skin, using 360 degree space, going with the momentum, etc. – as forming a style of moving.² She posited that the practice of these precepts generated meaning that permeated the individual and social lives of the dancers. Thus, “Going with the flow” was a value to be embraced in dance and in everyday life.
Novack argued persuasively for dance as a site capable of producing, and not just reflecting, key cultural values and concerns, including notions of gender, class, and race. Along similar lines, Randy Martin, Mark Franko, and Thomas DeFrantz have challenged the notion that choreography operates only in an aesthetic register separated from social or political realms of experience. Martin has identified choreography’s capacity to summon together bodies whose exuberant expenditure of effort defies traditional economic theories and offers, instead, a new vision of what political mobilization might be. He has also examined the ideological effects of specific choreographic structures. Aligning dance with labor, Franko imbues choreography with the ability to organize “the physical potentials and limitations of the human body’s movement,” and, consequently, to represent the social and political consequences of a given action. DeFrantz locates choreography at a nexus of physical and representational events that includes the arrangement of motion, formulations of gender and sexuality, beauty and class mobility, and also an “unusual nodule of everyday American politics …” All three scholars envision dance movement and its organization as containing and surveying a politics.

Rather than defining choreography in terms of its capacity to formulate guidelines for action, André Lepecki explores its function as, what he calls, an “apparatus of capture.” Similar to the arguments made by Peggy Phelan concerning the ephemerality of performance, Lepecki locates the dance in an always vanishing present and charges choreography with the role of pinning the dance down. It thereby performs reductively to designate and stand in for only a residue of the actual dancing. At the same time, it opens up the potential to celebrate the dance’s vitality as an effect of its liveness or presence. As Diana Taylor points out, however, this approach forecloses consideration of the ways that performance endures in cultural and individual imaginaries and how, as a result, aspects of its form persist in time. By bringing into liveness various values and what she calls “scenarios” that render visible power relations, any performance creates a trace whose ideological impact can be examined and evaluated.

In a series of publications engaging with the term, I have proposed that “choreography” can productively be conceptualized as a theorization of identity – corporeal, individual, and social. Working to contest the reception of dance as the presentation of a kind of spectacle without a history or methodology for engaging with the physical, I initially envisioned choreography as the hypothetical setting forth of what the body is and what it can be based on the decisions made in rehearsal and in performance about its identity. Each moment of watching a dance can be read as the product of choices, inherited, invented, or selected, about what kinds of bodies and subjects are being constructed and what kinds of arguments about these bodies and subjects are being put forth. These decisions, made collectively or individually, spontaneously or in advance of dancing, constitute a kind of record of action that is durable and makes possible both the repetition of a dance and analysis of it. Approaching choreography as this kind of theorizing about what a body can be and do makes evident the ways in which dance articulates with social, aesthetic, and political values. Expanding choreography to include what Novack identified as movement style, I argued, like her, that the implementation of choices both produces and reflects
Subsequently, I argued for the further expansion of choreography to encompass a consideration of all manner of human movement including the operations of gender in constructing masculine and feminine roles and the guidelines according to which protesters have conducted nonviolent direct action.\(^9\) Proposing a dialectical tension between choreography and performance, I emphasized the ways that choreography presents a structuring of deep and enduring cultural values that replicates similar sets of values elaborated in other cultural practices whereas performance emphasizes the idiosyncratic interpretation of those values. Not a permanent, structural engagement with representation, but rather a slowly changing constellation of representational conventions, choreography, more than any performance, is what resonates with other systems of representation that together constitute the cultural moment within which all bodies circulate. Both choreography and performance change over time; both select from and move into action certain semantic systems, and as such, they derive their meaning from a specific historical and cultural moment. And both offer potential for agency to be constructed via every body’s specific engagement with the parameters governing the realization of each dance.

Pointing to the claims for universality inherent in my arguments, Marta Savigliano and Jens Giersdorf have both questioned the viability of choreography as a rubric within which to contemplate not only all kinds of dances but also the larger choreographies of social action of which they are a part. Savigliano reflects on the two sets of archives within which documentation on dance has been collected – the arts archives that emphasize aesthetic features and the ethnographic archives that probe dance’s social function.\(^10\) She sees “choreography” as a term implemented as a means of suturing together these two domains of knowledge production. In the process of unifying the social and the aesthetic, however, the use of choreography threatens to erase the histories of violence to dances and dancers that are embodied in each archive’s distinctive formation. Giersdorf likewise questions the potential loss of specificity that such a definition of choreography entails, noting that it could become an unmarked strategy within transnational academic and artistic exchange that would work complicit with other forces in globalization to erase difference.\(^11\) Anthea Kraut compounds these reservations about the utility of the term by excavating choreography’s role in excluding certain kinds of dance practices, often improvised or occurring in popular rather than elite venues, from the various canons of dance history.\(^12\)

In response to these reflections on the term “choreography” and also to the emerging demands of the new global stage, this book conducts a genealogical inquiry into the term “choreography.” Observing the accommodations, sometimes uneasy, that the world’s dancers are making to the global stage, given its demands for distinctive blends of tradition suffused with experimentation, and generalized spectacle embedded with local detail, I determined to excavate histories of the term and its usage that undoubtedly bear down on our contemporary moment. Noting my own students’ hesitations to identify a choreography as separate from a performance and from a history of practicing a given form of dance, I have endeavored to decenter choreography from functioning as an explanatory rubric, and instead, to highlight the
dilemmas that the term embodies.

Thus Chapter 1 surveys various iterations of the term beginning with its neologization in the eighteenth century as the practice of recording dances on paper through the use of a taxonomic system of symbols. I examine the assumptions underlying the notations, and discuss the consequences of breaking movement down into principles of action that locate dance within a blank geometrized space where the floorpath of the dancer can be tracked and recorded. Assessing the impact of these early dance notations on the development of dance technique, dance authorship, and the autonomy of dance as an art form, I show how the notation helped to partition dance-making from learning to dance and teaching dances. I then analyze the reemergence of choreography at the beginning of the twentieth century as the individual act of creating a dance, focusing on pedagogies of dance composition and charting the development of choreography from the act of expressing deeply felt emotions at the beginning of the century to the current practice of facilitating a collaborative encounter among dancers, directors, and artists in allied mediums. Throughout, I consider how choreography, whether as notation or as composition, functions to privilege certain kinds of dancing while rejecting or repressing others.
What is kinesthesia?

Especially when compared with the widespread application of the term “choreography,” remarkably little use of the term “kinesthesia” has been made in scholarly or public domains. Often derided or dismissed within the academy, kinesthesia and the information it might provide have typically been received with skepticism at best. Pervasive mistrust of the body and the classification of its information as either sexual, unknowable, or indecipherable, have resulted in a paucity of activities that promote awareness of the body’s position and motion, or the degree of tension in its muscles. The term has been sporadically referenced and investigated in medicine and neurobiology, and more consistently in kinesiology textbooks and dance pedagogy, but otherwise rarely appears in discourse.

Kinesthesia was coined in 1880, in response to a growing body of research establishing the existence of nerve sensors in the muscles and joints that provide awareness of the body’s positions and movements. The meaning of the term has been expanded, abandoned, and revised several times over the course of the twentieth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, kinesthesia was largely replaced in neurological investigations by the concept of proprioception, naming a more focused system of spinal-level neural arcs that continually adjust for the body’s changing relationship to gravity. At mid-century it was revived by perceptual psychologist James J. Gibson, who envisioned kinesthesia as a perceptual system that synthesized information about joint positioning, muscular exertion, and orientation within space and with respect to gravity. Gibson further posited that kinesthesia assisted in integrating sensory information from all other systems. More recently it has been taken up in the work of neurobiologists exploring how the brain senses bodily movement.

If physiological inquiries into kinesthesia have been somewhat sporadic, dance pedagogy and criticism have consistently cultivated understanding of the existence and importance of kinesthetic awareness. John Martin based his entire theory of how dance communicates upon the assertion that viewers actively partake in the same kinesthetic experience as the dancers they are watching onstage:

> When we see a human body moving, we see movement which is potentially produced by any human body, and therefore by our own … through kinesthetic sympathy we actually reproduce it vicariously in our present muscular experience and awaken such associational connotations as might have been ours if the original movement had been of our own making.\(^{13}\)

Working to validate and champion the new modern dance, he further argued that kinesthetic experience was intrinsically connected to emotional experience. Noting the new cultivation of movement’s rhythm and tensility pursued by early modern dancers such as Isadora Duncan, Mary Wigman and Martha Graham, Susan Manning and Dee Reynolds have examined these artists’ elaboration of kinesthesia as a central component of modernism.\(^{14}\)
Focusing more on the ability of the dance researcher to perceive her own kinesthetic experience along with that of others, Diedre Sklar argues for kinesthetic analysis as a crucial methodology in understanding cultural distinctiveness not only in dance but also in all aspects of daily life. For Sklar kinesthetic analysis entails attending to the qualitative dimensions of movement, the kind of flow, tension, and timing of any given action as well as the ways in which any person’s movement interacts and interrelates with objects, events, and other people. Deepening Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus by taking the example of religious worship and examining in detail the kinds of movement patterns practiced at specific events, Sklar, like Bourdieu, imbues these patterns with symbolic meaning. Taken together, these patterns constitute a way of knowing in a given cultural context, a form of embodied knowledge in which “are stored intertwined corporeal, emotional, and conceptual memories.”

Similarly, Randy Martin posits the existence of a social kinesthetic, a set of movement attributes or traits that make evident the “deeper affinities between movement and culture.” Where Sklar considers in detail how movement repertoires engage with religious and gendered symbolic systems, Martin emphasizes the politics implicit in a given kinesthesia. He posits a connection between a decolonized worldview and a preference for decentered movement, and points to the range of contemporary practices including capoeira, contact improvisation, and hip-hop that celebrate an off-balance and risk-oriented investigation of the body’s capacities for movement. That bodies might develop such diverse movement practices that nonetheless share common preferences for moving illustrates a crucial feature of diversity in today’s globalized world.

Like Sklar and Martin, Lena Hammergren focuses on the connection between kinesthetic experience and cultural values. Unlike them, she utilizes the kinesthetic as a framework for organizing aspects of physical experience that would help the historian reconstruct performance and value systems from an earlier time. Remodeling Walter Benjamin’s concept of the flâneur with its emphasis on visual information, Hammergren introduces the flâneuse as a figure whose kinesthetic engagement with her surroundings in terms of touch, smell, and physical action, amplifies the historian’s access to the past. Hammergren sends her flâneuse on a hypothetical stroll around the 1930 Stockholm Exposition, where she is able to synthesize information from multiple documents and sources that all provide clues to the kinesthetic experience of engaging with the vision of modernity promulgated by the exposition’s architecture, dining, and entertainment offerings. By noting the feel of doorknobs, the smell of flowers or rye bread, and the spectacles of social dancing and gymnastic exercises, the flâneuse registers a different story about the event and its historical moment.

This study also focuses on the experience of kinesthesia in past moments and on how that experience might have changed over time. Although the term “kinesthesia” was invented only at the end of the nineteenth century, Chapter 2, aligned with the history of choreography presented in Chapter 1, first examines early eighteenth-century practices of bodily disciplining in order to establish general features of physicality that indicate how people might have experienced the body and movement. In so doing, it historicizes the invention of the term while also asserting the enduring
yet specific nature of kinesthetic experience. Considering the assumptions about the nature of the body implicit in a wide variety of sources, including cartography, medicine, courtesy and conduct literature, and physical education, it endeavors to ascertain standards of physicality in a given historical moment and from these to infer a normative experience of kinesthesia. Dancing, I argue, developed alongside these other practices, both drawing upon and producing a kinesthetic experience similar to the one yielded up in these other activities. Yet dancing also foregrounded the production of kinesthetic experience, making it an important source for how the body and its movement are experienced in a given historical moment.

The chapter tracks the transformation of the Galenic conception of the body as a sack of sloshing humours into a physicality displaying an erect posture and acquiring the ability to maintain an awareness of its own movements through space. It demonstrates that choreography was only one of many practices that encouraged this awareness of one’s body, configured almost as a vertical silhouette located on a blank horizontal grid. I then show how the body assumed an increasingly volumetric and dynamic forcefulness over the course of the nineteenth century, and how its musculature, itself a concept only invented in the late nineteenth century, came to play an increasingly important role in self-presentation. By the early twentieth century, the body was no longer experienced as a mechanics of pulleys and levers, but instead, as a tensile and momentum-driven force that alternately exerts and relaxes in relation to gravity. At mid-century the body transformed yet again into a vehicle for exploring consciousness and its many modalities. James Gibson drew upon this experience of physicality in his pioneering work in perception. Mirror neuron theorists, in turn, draw upon Gibson’s work as precursor to their own interpretation of mirror neuron functions, yet they also envision the body as a network. I associate their neurological inquiries with new disorienting and orienting practices such as the cellphone and GPS navigation systems, all of which are helping to produce a new kind of kinesthetic experience as well as a new awareness of that experience.
What is empathy?

Invented in the same decade as the term “kinesthesia,” “empathy” was coined by German aestheticians seeking to describe and analyze in depth the act of viewing painting and sculpture. Calling the experience Einfühlung, they posited a kind of physical connection between viewer and art in which the viewer’s own body would move into and inhabit the various features of the artwork. When the term first came into English language usage at the beginning of the twentieth century, it likewise connoted a strong physical responsiveness to both people and objects. Over the course of the twentieth century, however, the term, like “kinesthesia,” changed substantially, eventually residing within the domain of psychology where it has been investigated largely as an emotional, and not physical experience. Sklar, for example, calling for recognition of the fact that empathy entails a kinesthetic level of recognition, names her own technique for observing the actions of others a practice of “kinesthetic empathy.” The fact that the experience of empathy needs to be qualified with the adjective “kinesthetic” belies the pervasive assumption that emotional and physical experiences are separate.

In keeping with the original usage of the term, Chapter 3 explores how empathy has been variously conceptualized in relation to physical experience. In tandem with the genealogies of choreography and kinesthesia, it first looks to the antecedents of empathy proposed in the early eighteenth century in theories of sympathy such as those of Bernard Lamy, Abbé DuBos, and David Hume and the refinements to these made by Adam Smith. During the eighteenth century, sympathy was most often theorized as a form of fellow-feeling, the product of “delicate nerve fibers” reacting to the sorrow or joy of another. Both the individual’s expression and demeanor, and also the entire scene affecting the object of one’s sympathy needed to be evaluated in order for a sympathetic reaction to occur. When empathy was neologized in the 1880s, it functioned quite differently, as a process in which one’s entire physicality comes to inhabit the other. Early twentieth century theories, such as those of Vernon Lee and John Martin, included a strong kinesthetic component in which the observer’s sense of their own physicality plays a central role. Seen from this perspective, the term “empathy” was invented not to express a new capacity for fellow-feeling, but to register a changing sense of physicality that, in turn, influenced how one felt another’s feelings. As the body acquired a musculature and transformed into a volumetric and dynamic organism, the entire project of inhabiting another’s situation or feelings likewise changed. Instead of casting one’s self into the position of the other, it became necessary to project one’s three-dimensional structure into the energy and action of the other. Although empathy was subsequently taken up in psychotherapies, where it became associated with emotional reactions, its kinesthetic dimension has more recently been reintegrated in the neuroscientific investigations of mirror neurons.

Alongside this tracking of the concept of empathy, the chapter poses the question of the power relations inherent between those who feel and those who feel for or with them. Although a large number of scholarly works examine empathy as an aesthetic and social theory, little of it places this work within the context of Britain’s discovery