

Study Guide *for the* 2009 Doris Conant
Lecturer on Women and Culture:
Barbara Ehrenreich

Chicago Humanities Festival
Education Programs | 2009 Curriculum Collection
Page 1 / 12



Chicago Humanities Festival
500 North Dearborn Street, suite 825
Chicago, IL, 60654
phone 313.661.1028
fax 312.661.1018
www.chicagohumanities.org
education@chfestival.org



BARBARA EHRENREICH is the author of thirteen books, including the *New York Times* bestsellers *Nickel and Dimed* and *Bait and Switch*. A frequent contributor to the *New York Times*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and the *Progressive*, she is also a contributing writer to *Time* magazine. Ehrenreich is the winner of the Nation Institute/Puffin Foundation Prize for Creative Citizenship. Her most recent book is *This Land is Their Land*, a collection of her published columns. She lives near Washington D.C.

GETTING TO THE CORE:

Excerpt from Barbara Ehrenreich's *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*, Metropolitan Books, 2007.

(For more on the footnoted sources, visit: http://www.barbaraehrenreich.com/dancing_intro.htm)

The Archaic Roots of Ecstasy

Go back ten thousand years and you will find humans toiling away at the many mundane activities required for survival: hunting, food gathering, making weapons and garments, beginning to experiment with agriculture. But if you land on the right moonlit night or seasonal turning point, you might also find them engaged in what seems, by comparison, to be a gratuitous waste of energy: dancing in lines or circles, sometimes wearing masks or what appear to be costumes, often waving branches or sticks. Most likely, both sexes would be dancing, each in its separate line or circle. Their faces and bodies might be painted with red ochre, or so archaeologists guess from the widespread presence of that colored ore in the sites of human settlements. The scene, in other words, might not be too different from the “savage” rituals encountered by nineteenth-century Westerners among native peoples of the world.

We can infer these scenes from prehistoric rock art depicting dancing figures, which has been discovered at sites in Africa, India, Australia, Italy, Turkey, Israel, Iran, and Egypt, among other places. Whatever else they did, our distant ancestors seemed to find plenty of time for the kinds of activities the anthropologist Victor Turner described as liminal, or peripheral to the main business of life.

Festive dancing was not a rare or incidental subject for prehistoric artists. The Israeli archaeologist Yosef Garfinkel asserts that dancing scenes “were a most popular, indeed almost the only, subject used to describe interaction between people in the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods.”¹ When such danced rituals originated is not known, but there is evidence that they may go back well into the Paleolithic era, or Stone Age. At one recently discovered site in England, drawings on the ceiling of a cave show “conga lines” of female dancers, along with drawings of animals like bison and ibex, which are known to have become extinct in England ten thousand years ago.² So well before people had a written



language, and possibly before they took up a settled lifestyle, they danced and understood dancing as an activity important enough to record on stone.

It is not easy to read the excitement of a danced ritual into prehistoric drawings. The figures are highly stylized; many of those cataloged by Garfinkel are little more than stick figures or silhouettes; few possess facial features or anything like a facial expression. Even the identification of them as dancers takes some interpretive work; the figures have to be using their limbs in ways not associated with normal activities: holding their arms up, holding hands in a circle, raising their legs, or leaping, for example. Yet even in these crude, two-dimensional depictions, some of the recognizable ingredients of more recent festive traditions shine through -- masking and costuming, for example. Some of the male figures wear masks in the form of animal heads or abstract designs; other dancers wear what archaeologists interpret as "costumes," such as leopard skins. In the clearest sign of motion, and possibly excitement, some of the figures have long, flowing hair standing out from their heads, as if they are moving rapidly and tossing their heads to some long-silenced drum-beat.

Clearly, danced rituals did not seem like a waste of energy to prehistoric peoples. They took the time to fashion masks and costumes; they wantonly expended calories in the execution of the dance; they preferred to record these scenes over any other group activity. Thus anthropologist Victor Turner's consignment of danced ritual to an occasional, marginal, or liminal status seems especially unwarranted in the prehistoric case -- and more representative of the production-oriented mentality of our own industrial age than of prehistoric priorities. Surely these people knew hardship and were often threatened by food shortages, disease, and wild animals. But ritual, of a danced and possibly ecstatic nature, was central to their lives. Perhaps only because our own lives, so much easier in many ways, are also so constrained by the imperative to work, we have to wonder why.

Anthropologists tend to agree that the evolutionary function of dance was to enable -- or encourage -- humans to live in groups larger than small bands of closely related individuals. The advantage of larger group size is presumed to be the same as it is for those primates who still live in the wild: Larger groups are better able to defend themselves against predators. Unlike most animals -- antelopes, for example -- primates are capable of mounting a group defense: mobbing the intruding predator, threatening it with branches, or at least attempting to scare it off by making an infernal racket. In the case of early humans, the danger may have come not only from predatory animals like the big cats but from other now-extinct hominids or even from fellow *Homo sapiens* bent on raiding. And of course, in the human case, the forms of defense would have included fire, rocks, and sharpened sticks. But the first line of defense was to come together as a group.

In his justly popular book *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*, the British anthropologist Robin Dunbar argues for an optimal Paleolithic group size of about 150. He speculates that speech -- the gossip in his title -- may have helped bind humans into groups of that size, much as mutual grooming -- picking insects and bits of dirt out of each other's hair -- appears to do in the case of other primates. But although it does not appear in his



title, it is in fact dance that he invokes to hold these early human groups together. The problem with speech, according to Dunbar, is “its complete inadequacy at the emotional level.”

Just as we were acquiring the ability to argue and rationalize, we needed a more primitive emotional mechanism to bond our large groups . . . Something deeper and more emotional was needed to overpower the cold logic of verbal arguments. It seems that we needed music and physical touch to do that.³ In fact, he sees language as subservient to danced rituals -- “a way to formalize their spontaneity” and provide them with a “metaphysical or religious significance.” And it should be noted that while hundreds of prehistoric images of dancing figures have been found, there are no rock drawings of stick figures apparently engaged in conversation.

Dunbar is not the only one to see group dancing -- especially in lines and circles -- as the great leveler and binder of human communities, uniting all who participate in the kind of *communitas* that Turner found in twentieth-century native rituals. Interestingly, the Greek word *nomos*, meaning “law,” also has the musical meaning of “melody.” To submit, bodily, to the music through dance is to be incorporated into the community in a way far deeper than shared myth or common custom can achieve. In synchronous movement to music or chanting voices, the petty rivalries and factional differences that might divide a group could be transmuted into harmless competition over one’s prowess as a dancer, or forgotten. “Dance,” as a neuroscientist put it, is “the biotechnology of group formation.”*

Thus groups -- and the individuals within them -- capable of holding themselves together through dance would have had an evolutionary advantage over more weakly bonded groups and individuals: the advantage of being better able to mount a collective defense against any animals or hostile humans who encroached on their territory or otherwise threatened them. No other species ever figured out how to do this. Birds have their signature songs; fireflies can synchronize their light displays; chimpanzees sometimes stamp around together and wave their arms in what ethologists describe as a “carnival.” But if any other animals create music and move in synchrony to it, they have kept this talent well hidden from humans. We alone are gifted with the kind of love that Freud was unable to imagine: a love, or at least affinity, holding people together in groups much larger than two.

Of course dance cannot work to bind people unless (1) it is intrinsically pleasurable, and (2) it provides a kind of pleasure not achievable by smaller groups.⁴ Whatever the ritual dancers of prehistoric times thought they were doing -- healing divisions in the group or preparing for the next encounter with their foes -- they were also doing something that they liked to do and liked enough to invest considerable energy in. Practitioners of ecstatic danced rituals in “native” societies attested to the pleasures of their rituals; so can any modern Westerners who have participated in the dances and other rhythmic activities associated with rock concerts, raves, or the current club scene. As the historian William H. McNeill pointed out in his book *Keeping Together in Time*, there is a deep satisfaction -- even a thrill -- to the simplest synchronous group activities, like marching or chanting together. He writes of his experience as a young soldier drilling during basic training for World War II.

Words are inadequate to describe the emotion aroused by the prolonged movement in unison that drilling involved. A sense of pervasive well-being is what I recall; more specifically, a strange sense of personal enlargement; a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than



life, thanks to participation in collective ritual.⁵

In fact, we tend to enjoy rhythmic music and may be so aroused by watching others dance that we have a hard time keeping ourselves from jumping in. As some Western observers of native or enslaved people's rituals observed, dancing is contagious; humans experience strong desires to synchronize their own bodies' motions with those of others. The stimuli, which can be auditory or visual or derived from an internal sense of one's own muscular response to the rhythm, can, in one psychiatrist's summary of the research, "drive cortical rhythms and eventually produce an intensely pleasurable, ineffable experience in humans."⁶

Why should humans be rewarded so generously for moving their bodies together in time? We are also pleasurably rewarded for sexual activity, and it is easy to figure out why: Individuals who fail to engage in sex, or heterosexual intercourse anyway, leave no genetic trace. When nature requires us to do something -- like eating or having sex -- it kindly wires our brains to make that activity enjoyable. If synchronous rhythmic activity was, in fact, important to human collective defense, natural selection might have favored those individuals who found such activity pleasurable. In other words, evolution would have led to stronger neural connections between the motor centers that control motion, the visual centers that report on the motions of others, and the sites of pleasure in the limbic system of the brain. The joy of the rhythmic activity would have helped overcome the fear of confronting predators and other threats, just as marching music has pumped up soldiers in historical times.

We do not yet understand the neuronal basis of this pleasure, but an interesting line of speculation has opened up only recently. Humans are highly imitative creatures, more so even than monkeys and others of our primate cousins. As all parents learn, to their amazement, an infant can respond to a smile with a smile, or stick out its tongue when a parent does. How does an infant transform the visual image of a protruding tongue into the muscular actions required to make its own tongue stick out? The answer may lie in the discovery of mirror neurons, nerve cells that fire both when an action is perceived -- when the parent sticks out his tongue, for example -- and when it is performed by the perceiver.⁷ In other words, the perception of an action is closely tied to the execution of the same action by the beholder. We cannot see a dancer, for example, without unconsciously starting up the neural processes that are the basis of our own participation in the dance. As the neuroscientist Marcel Kinsbourne writes:

Perceived behavior gives a leg up to more of the same in the observer, who becomes a participant . . . The rhythm of the drum drowns out independent judgment and induces a reversion to the primordial state. To cite [Walter J.] Freeman . . . "to dance is to engage in rhythmic movements that invite corresponding movements from others." Dancers synchronize, reciprocate, or alternate -- all of which are forms of entrainment open to the infant. Entraining with others into a shared rhythm -- marching, chanting, dancing -- may trigger a primitive sense of irrational and beguiling belonging, and a shared mindset.⁸

It is important to point out, though, that dance does not simply merge the individual into the group in the regressive way that Kinsbourne seems to imply. This is a common Western prejudice, but as I pointed out in the introduction, dancers in existing "traditional" societies often devote great effort to composing music for the dance, perfecting their dance steps or other moves, and preparing their costumes or other body decorations. They may experience self-loss in the dance, or a kind of merger with the group, but they also seek a chance to shine, as individuals, for their skills and talents. There may even have been what



evolutionary biologists call sexual selection for the ability to dance well, or at least make a good appearance at the dance -- just as there appears to have been sexual selection for males with deep voices and females with hourglass figures. The ability to dance or make music is not confined to a single sex, but we are often attracted to individuals who excel at these activities, and this could have given them a definite reproductive advantage.

In fact, the seasonal rituals and festivities of larger groups -- several hundred people from different bands or subgroups gathering at an astronomically determined time -- probably also served a reproductive function, providing an opportunity to find a mate outside of one's close circle of kin. In this endeavor, talent at music and dance might well have been an asset. At least such a possibility is suggested by a study of young, unmarried Samburu men in Kenya in recent times.

These "odd men out," suspended between boyhood and adulthood in an uncomfortably prolonged adolescence, regularly go into trance, shaking with extreme bodily agitation, in frustrating situations. Typical precipitating circumstances are those where one group of [such young men] is outdanced by a rival group in front of girls.⁹

To be "outdanced" is to risk reproductive failure, probably for the deeper evolutionary reason that the "girls" will, at some unconscious level, judge you less capable of participating in group defense.

I cannot leave the subject of evolution, though, without throwing in my own speculation about the adaptive value of music and dance. Dunbar and others emphasize their role in keeping people together in sizable groups, but they may once have served the function of group defense in a far more direct way. Like primates in the wild today, early humans probably faced off predatory animals collectively -- banding together in a tight group, stamping their feet, shouting, and waving sticks or branches. In our own time, for example, hikers are often advised to try to repel bears they encounter in the wild with the same sorts of behavior, with the arm and stick waving being recommended as a way of exaggerating the humans' height. At some point, early humans or hominids may have learned to synchronize their stampings and stick-wavings in the face of a predator, and the core of my speculation is that the predator might be tricked by this synchronous behavior into thinking that it faced -- not a group of individually weak and defenseless humans -- but a single, very large animal. When sticks are being brandished and feet stamped in unison, probably accompanied by synchronized chanting or shouting, it would be easy for an animal observer to conclude that only a single mind, or at least a single nervous system, is at work. Better, from the predator's point of view, to wait to catch a human alone than to tangle with what appears to be a twenty-foot-long, noisy, multilegged beast.*

This form of confrontation might well have carried over into communal forms of hunting, in which game animals are driven by the human group into nets or cul de sacs or over cliffs. Many of the game animals hunted by prehistoric humans -- like bison and aurochs -- were themselves dangerous, and to confront them required courage. In communal hunting, the entire group -- men, women, and children -- advances against a herd of game animals, shouting, stamping, and waving sticks or torches. The archaeological evidence suggests that this form of hunting goes back to the Paleolithic era and possibly predates the practice of stalking individual animals by small groups of men.¹⁰ As in collective defense against predatory animals, synchronous movement could have augmented the human group's effectiveness -- making it appear to be a single, oversized antagonist.



Various features of the prehistoric dancing revealed in rock art are consistent with this hypothesis. The prehistoric dancing figures often sport high headgear or head-expanding masks, often in the form of animal faces; they wave branches above their heads. One can imagine danced rituals originating as reenactments of successful animal encounters, serving both to build group cohesion for the next encounter and to instruct the young in how the human group had learned to prevail and survive.

Over time, as communal hunting waned and the threat of animal predators declined, the thrill of the human triumph over animals could still be reinvoked as ritual. Through rhythm, people had learned to weld themselves into a single unit of motion meant to project their collective strength and terrify the animals they hunted or that hunted them. Taken individually, humans are fragile, vulnerable, clawless creatures. But banded together through rhythm and enlarged through the artifice of masks and sticks, the group can feel -- and perhaps appear -- to be as formidable as any nonhuman beast. When we speak of transcendent experience in terms of "feeling part of something larger than ourselves," it may be this ancient many-headed pseudocreature that we unconsciously invoke.

REFLECTION:

"Among School Children," by William Butler Yeats (1928)

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
A kind old nun in a white hood replies;
The children learn to cipher and to sing,
To study reading-books and histories,
To cut and sew, be neat in everything
In the best modern way — the children's eyes
In momentary wonder stare upon
A sixty-year-old smiling public man.

II

I dream of a Ledaean body, bent
Above a sinking fire, a tale that she
Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event
That changed some childish day to tragedy —
Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent
Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,
Or else, to alter Plato's parable,
Into the yolk and white of the one shell.

III

And thinking of that fit of grief or rage
I look upon one child or t'other there
And wonder if she stood so at that age —
For even daughters of the swan can share
Something of every paddler's heritage —
And had that colour upon cheek or hair,
And thereupon my heart is driven wild:



She stands before me as a living child.

IV

Her present image floats into the mind —
Did Quattrocento finger fashion it
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
And took a mess of shadows for its meat?
And I though never of Ledaean kind
Had pretty plumage once — enough of that,
Better to smile on all that smile, and show
There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.

V

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap
Honey of generation had betrayed,
And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape
As recollection or the drug decide,
Would think her Son, did she but see that shape
With sixty or more winters on its head,
A compensation for the pang of his birth,
Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?

VI

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;
Solider Aristotle played the taws
Upon the bottom of a king of kings;
World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras
Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings
What a star sang and careless Muses heard:
Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.

VII

Both nuns and mothers worship images,
But those the candles light are not as those
That animate a mother's reveries,
But keep a marble or a bronze repose.
And yet they too break hearts — O presences
That passion, piety or affection knows,
And that all heavenly glory symbolise —
O self-born mockers of man's enterprise;

VIII

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul.



Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor bleary-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

LESSON PLAN:

By Greg Lundberg, Maine East High School, Park Ridge, IL

In her book, *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*, Barbara Ehrenreich explores the communal nature of dancing and other social rituals, activities with no ostensible “utility” to the community in which they take place. Yet, she argues, such rituals play an important role in the community’s well-being, encouraging as they do a strong sense of togetherness and shared joy.

Dancing as a collective, ritualistic activity continues to have great importance in our society. One has only to have attended a wedding and participated in the ubiquitous “Electric Slide” to see how people are drawn to, and uplifted by, group dancing. In the realm of pop culture, dance routines—from Busby Berkeley’s depression-era movie extravaganzas to the 1961 hit *West Side Story*, from Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” video to the recent movies *Drumline* and *How She Move*—continue to fascinate us as well.

The joy of shared activity certainly extends beyond dancing as well. As Ehrenreich writes, just as “practitioners of ecstatic danced rituals in ‘native’ societies attested to the pleasures of their rituals; so can any modern Westerners who have participated in the dances and other rhythmic activities associated with rock concerts, raves, or the current club scene.” In support of this idea, Ehrenreich quotes William H. McNeill (from his book *Keeping Together in Time*): “There is a deep satisfaction—even a thrill—to the simplest synchronous group activities, like marching or chanting together.” As a class project, we’ll explore the nature of “synchronous group activities” in our own lives.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- How might we go beyond the dictionary to develop a fuller definition of “joy”? What kinds of activities, both individual and collective, might elicit this emotion? What might be the qualities of a group experience that elicits “collective joy,” as Ehrenreich calls it?
- What kinds of collective, even ritualistic, activities exist in our society today, and where might one go to find, and even participate in, them?
- What essential ingredients make up such activities, and how do we know them when we see (or participate in) them?

GOALS:

- To first define “joy,” followed by “collective joy”;
- To explore group-based activities in today’s society, and to understand them as



“synchronous group activities” with certain shared, definable qualities;

- To compare and contrast these activities;
- To create a written argument putting one such activity on the same plane that Ehrenreich puts dance;
- (Optional) To create a “flash mob” that has the qualities of a “joyful” and “synchronous group activity.”

MATERIALS:

This lesson will primarily draw from students’ own lived and observed experiences. Mostly they will need a medium for recording their thoughts and ideas, be that a notebook and a pen or a laptop. If teachers opt to have students create a collective experience, however, in the form of a “flash mob,” students could visit one of the following websites for an introduction to the flash mob concept and some interesting examples:

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flash_mob
- Interview with Bill Wasik, “inventor” of the Flash Mob:
<http://www.ibiblio.org/pub/electronic-publications/stay-free/archives/24/flash-mobshistory.html>
- Bill Wasik’s March 2006 article for *Harper’s Magazine*, “My Crowd or Phase 5: A Report from the Inventor of the Flash Mob.”
- 24 Interesting Flash Mob Videos: <http://www.listropolis.com/2009/02/24-flash-mobs-youneed-to-see-to-believe-videos/>

TIMEFRAME:

One to two weeks...

PROCESS & PROCEDURE

Part I (Analysis)

1. Begin by discussing school-based group activities in which the students participate. Explore what draws students to these activities. Brainstorm what, for example, seems to be happening psychologically and/or emotionally when a sports team, a group of actors, or the orchestra is in sync and performing well. Make a list of the students’ ideas, and look for similarities among the diverse activities.
2. After reading the on-line excerpt from Ehrenreich’s *Dancing in the Streets* (http://www.barbaraehrenreich.com/dancing_excerpt.htm), make a list of her key ideas about collective activity and collective joy. (Since this is a longer piece, you may need to break it into discrete parts for discussion, either over several days or as a “jigsaw.”) Do the students have any experiences, perhaps from their own cultural backgrounds, to share that reflect or build on Ehrenreich’s ideas? Do any of her ideas about collective activities make sense in light of the school-based activity discussion above?
3. As a class, attempt a preliminary, extended definition of “joy”—you can modify this definition as your inquiry continues.



4. Drawing on both Ehrenreich's ideas and the students' own experiences, make a list of "Collective Joy Criteria," i.e., the qualities of a successful, even "joyful," group experience. (This list of criteria can be modified as the students' understanding of the concept deepens.) Students will use these criteria to select and analyze a school-based group experience.

5. In small groups, students will then select one of the group activities discussed above and apply these "working criteria" to specific aspects of this group experience.

Ex: Let's say that one of the "Collective Joy Criteria" is "simultaneous movement."

Students might then write something like, "It's fun (even joyful) when everybody in a group (with a shared purpose, like a football team) is making the same movement at the same time. For example, during warm-ups, it's really motivating to know that everybody is doing jumping jacks together to the sound of the coach's count."

Groups should end up with a working list of five to six criteria, supported, of course, with specific examples from the group experience they are analyzing.

Part II (Exploration)

1. Students will then prepare to go into the field, where they will seek out and report on a "synchronous group activity" with clear elements of "collective joy." (Such activities should meet the criteria established in class; these criteria may expand over the course of this inquiry. They may include participation in a political rally; attending a fireworks display or music festival (or, for that matter, playing in a band); sitting in an audience for the opening night of a blockbuster movie; watching a major sporting event on TV with a group of friends (or training with friends for an athletic event); participation in a group art or music class, and so on. Students will closely observe their chosen activity (perhaps even photographing it), documenting its sequence and aspects relevant to the "collective joy" concept. This observation will take place outside of class and could take up to a week.

2. Students will turn their field observation notes into a more formal "Field Report"—importantly, the field report should describe the purpose and context of the group activity, identify its key components and activities, and make specific links to the "Collective Joy Criteria" established in class.

3. Finally, students will compose a cover letter for this report, addressed to Barbara Ehrenreich, arguing for the inclusion of this activity in a second (albeit fictitious) volume of her "Collective Joy" series.

Part III (Extension/Extra Credit)

*. Students can read up on, and watch videos of, the "flash mob" phenomenon and create their own (legal, non-harmful and non-offensive, hopefully humorous) flash mob. As many before them have done, they could video their effort and share it with the class.

ASSESSMENT:

The assessment will be the Field Report, which will include observation notes, a full report on the "joyfulness" of a selected group activity, and a "letter" to Ehrenreich arguing that the observed activity meets all her criteria for "collective joy" and should be included in a second volume of her "Collective Joy"



ABOUT THE CHICAGO HUMANITIES FESTIVAL

The Chicago Humanities Festival (CHF) creates year-round opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds, and economic circumstances to explore, enjoy, and support the arts and humanities. We accomplish this by presenting programs throughout the year, culminating in two annual Festivals of the Humanities, one in the spring specifically for children and families and one in the fall for the general public. The CHF's mission of providing broad access to the humanities – at a low ticket price – depends in part on the generosity of its most committed and enthusiastic supporters.

www.chicagohumanities.org