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Core Connections: A Contemporary Cairo Raqs Sharqi Ethnography

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Critical Dance Studies

by

Christine M. Şahin

September 2018

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Jacqueline Shea Murphy, Chairperson

Dr. Sherine Hafez

Dr. Anthea Kraut

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The Dissertation of Christine M. Şahin is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the dancers of Cairo. Listening to the rich complexity of contemporary Cairo through your danced and verbal story-telling has been an immeasurable blessing, honor, and privilege. Thank you for sharing your stories. Thank you for courageously stepping onto those stages and sharing your dance, and the incalculable strength and heart it takes to do so. May you continue to move yourself and others into deeper ways of feeling, being, knowing, and doing. *Alf Shukar.*

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Core Connections: A Contemporary Cairo Raqs Sharqi Ethnography

by

Christine M. Şahin

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Critical Dance Studies  
University of California, Riverside, September 2018  
Dr. Jacqueline Shea Murphy, Chairperson

My dissertation, *Core Connections: A Contemporary Cairo Raqs Sharqi Ethnography* investigates local, intra-MENA, and global circulations of *raqs sharqi* centered within Cairo, Egypt. I use dance ethnography to explore ways *raqs sharqi* contexts and bodies relate to tumultuous contemporary Middle Eastern politics. While most belly dance scholarship remains highly western-centric, addressing the practice in terms of its use by and value to western practitioners, and only tangentially treating the topic of how the dance circulates within Middle Eastern sites and through Middle Eastern bodies, I centralize the Cairene dancing body as a means of knowledge production and dissemination while fleshing out nuanced portraits of the lives, stories, and political insights of Middle Eastern dance and non-dance bodies.

This is particularly necessary, I argue, considering Cairo's position as a key center within the Middle East today, with nations looking to Cairo for not only the latest trends in music and dance but also as a key negotiator since the aftermath of the series of Middle Eastern political uprisings, known as the 'Arab Spring,' particularly Egypt's

January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011 revolution. I thus position my research in Cairo as a core site for analyzing the political, gender, and economic transformations the country has been experiencing. My project queries and argues for the unique insights, tactics, and corporeal knowledge a ground-level, multi-sited, and dance-centric analysis offers to such pressing politics.

My ethnographic research methodology consists primarily of participant-observation fieldwork at an array of class-stratified performance venues, with a focus on choreographic analysis within these field sites. Additionally, I conduct interviews with professional dancers and others involved with the dance industry at large. The project sites include Nile cruise ships, five-star hotels studding the Nile, and the cabarets with all male spectators clustered along historic Pyramid Street.

In addition to interweaving Dance and Middle Eastern Gender Studies, my dissertation charts invigorating new approaches on how to ‘do’ and write multi-sited dance ethnography. I propose and implement using the Cairo-based choreographic structure and aesthetics of *raqs sharqi* itself as research and writing model as a means of negotiating my own positionality to the project while remaining focused on mining intra-MENA dance circulations and contexts.

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## **Overview of Project:**

My dissertation investigates circulations of raqs sharqi (belly dance) within Cairo, Egypt.<sup>i</sup> I use dance ethnography to explore the myriad ways raqs sharqi contexts and bodies relate to contemporary local and global intra-Middle Eastern politics. I position my research in Cairo as a core site for analyzing the turbulent repercussions of the political, gender, and economic transformations the country has been experiencing since the January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011 revolution<sup>ii</sup>.

My research questions include: what are the meanings and use values of raqs sharqi within differently classed venues of Cairo? How are these meanings and contexts in conversation with larger gender, nationalist, and economic political dynamics, particularly the January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011 revolution and ongoing political transformations? What unique insights and knowledge does a dance-centric lens offer to such politics? In other words, how are dance/non-dance intra-MENA<sup>iii</sup> bodies across variously classed sites negotiating the increasingly slippery terrain of Cairo's post 2011 political and economic transformations? In particular, how are they doing so as these forces tug on, and are entwined with, identities, embodiments, and performances of gender, sexuality, nationality, and class? How is corporeality core to these larger themes, and what tactics and knowledge do these various actors and corporealities offer to such pertinent politics moving forward?

My research methodology consists primarily of participant-observation fieldwork at an array of performance venues with a focus on choreographic analysis. My project

encompasses multiple sites and bodies, including the five-star hotels and cruise ships studding the Nile, as well as cabarets with mostly all male spectators clustered along historic Pyramid Street. Specifically, my project aims to round out the scholarship by centralizing intra-MENA bodies and significations within the three field sites of five-star hotels, Pyramid Street cabarets, and Nile cruising ships<sup>iv</sup>. Additionally, I conduct interviews with professional dancers, audience members, managers, and others involved within the dance industry at large. I have spent nine months in Cairo over four ethnographic research trips and have undertaken in-depth fieldwork and interviews with key contacts and sites central to my topic.

**Significance:**

My deep intertwining of Critical Dance Studies and Middle Eastern Gender Studies allow me to centralize the Cairene belly dancing body as a means of knowledge production and dissemination while fleshing out nuanced portraits of the lives, stories, and political insights of Middle Eastern dance and non-dance bodies. The bulk of belly dance scholarship remains western-centric, addressing the form's value and meanings to western practitioners in western contexts, and treats only tangentially the topic of how the dance circulates within the Middle East.

This is particularly hindering considering Cairo's historic role as the center of pan-Middle Eastern circulations of entertainment such as dance and music, and its leading historic role in pan-Middle Eastern nationalist and feminist movements. Cairo's position as a key center within the Middle East continues today, with nations looking to

Cairo for not only the latest trends in music and dance but also as a key negotiator in the ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings and their repercussions. Further, Middle Eastern Studies works to deconstruct stereotypes of the Middle East, while highlighting women’s agency. However, these studies have yet to fully recognize the agency of women’s bodies, particularly professional dancing bodies. Due to legacies of colonialism and waves of conservative Islamic ideology, raqs sharqi is devalued, considered frivolous at best, or immoral at worst. My dissertation expands upon both fields by highlighting how dancers and dance actively and diversely participate in Cairo’s contemporary political dynamics.

### **Literature Review:**

Though there exists an entire industry of literature on belly dancing, the scholarship continues to benefit from being circled back upon, as well as vigorously shaken up. The wealth of research on belly dancing is impressive and highlights how dynamically dance functions as a form of knowledge production and dissemination. Because the bulk of literature is penned by practitioner-scholars it centralizes the dancers’ perspectives with integrity and intellectual vigor. While recognizing the merit of such in-depth research, there remain key gaps that demand fleshing out, as well as a need for continued studies that engage with the cutting-edge contours of contemporary considerations of the forms’ use value, contexts, and meanings today.

Corresponding with my multi-sited ‘mapping’ of Cairo raqs sharqi, I have categorized and analyzed the copious amounts of belly dance literature; like my project, based in site-specific approaches. I will present and examine each site-specific center of

belly dance scholarship in turn. I began with moving from the western approaches, then onto the Middle Eastern, and finally turn to the global/international. By calling attention to where and how scholars frame and focus their studies in addition to their overall arguments, I make clear how these frames and focuses shape loftier political agendas. In other words, the core arguments within the literature have made critical advances in the field of belly dance scholarship, but a deeper attention to the framing and focusing of such studies is also doing specific kinds of political work when it comes to centering and marginalizing certain bodies and spaces. Further, this approach demonstrates how my project will expand upon the discourse by honing in on, and richly navigating, a multiplicity of sites and subjectivities within contemporary Cairo.

## WESTERN SITE-SPECIFIC BELLY DANCE SCHOLARSHIP

### GENDER AND SEXUALITY

The overwhelming majority of belly dance scholarship centralizes western spaces, contexts, bodies, and significations. These western frames target belly dance's gender and sexuality politics, use-values, and orientalism. I will analyze each of these categorizations in turn. To begin, raqs sharqi research continues to be interrogated through a focal lens of gender and sexuality. Numerous scholars have addressed questions around whether belly dance can be considered an empowering or oppressive practice. Though all research concluded that belly dance was empowering, at least to some extent, frictions arose out of questions for whom, where, when, and how. This scholarship, by and large, argues for female empowerment through practice, performance, and community building. However,



within this discursive approach there exists waves of scholarship that embody the politics of larger western feminist movements. For example, early literature primarily held an ecofeminist framing, where empowerment was found through belly dance's 'natural' and innate womanly 'essence' that practitioners could tap into through the feminine gendered movements<sup>v</sup>. Ecofeminism became popular within belly dance during the 1970's, coinciding with a particular shift in the prime spaces where the form was practiced and the communities it reached<sup>vi</sup>.

Ecofeminist discourse within belly dance highlighted ways that dance creates agency and identity formation, but also reduced women to unchanging and universalized 'essences.' Further, ecofeminism strands within scholarship centered white women's bodies at the expense of erasing the subjectivities of male dancing bodies. Additionally, ecofeminist belly dance works also further marginalized MENA subjectivities and participation within the dance through universalizing white-western feminism. An example of this includes how ecofeminist interpretations of belly dance often argue that the dance has ancient matriarchal roots tying the form to goddess worship and spiritualities that see the dance as either 'skipping over' MENA culture and communities or corrupted by Arab patriarchy and Islam. Further, this discourse perpetuates the dualism of the mind/body split. For example, Wendy Buonaventura's most commonly cited book within belly dance and Arab studies literature aims to trace the 'Arab women's dance' throughout history, but her argument relies on imperialist rescue narratives of the west preserving and elevating what, through implication, Arab women could not. Through rooting the dance in ancient goddess spiritualities, she laments the era of the dance within

MENA contexts as overly objectifying and destroyed by Islamic patriarchy and colonialism, but concludes her text with a proposal of the dance's elevation and hopeful future in western artist's hands as well as the western proscenium stage.

Dance scholars Anthony Shay and Stavros Stavrou Karayanni offer an intervention into the ways so much scholarship has focused on women and the feminine: in their scholarship, they visiblize the male dancing body, asserting that feminism, and gender at large, cannot solely be reduced to 'female.'<sup>vii</sup> They also address the dance within both MENA/Greek and western contexts. Both scholars focus on the colonial era as well as contemporary times, as their research is informed by their own practitioner experiences. Shay focuses much of his impressive volume of literature on the nationalist work of the Egyptian Reda troupe, and how male bodies were erased or homogenized due to western imperial projects of heterosexuality and strict normative gender roles. He highlights how hyper-gendered movements with minimized sexuality were employed in Reda troupe repertoire in order to legitimize the male dancing body at the expense of further solidifying heterosexuality and hyper masculine gender norms as nationalist identities. His work is critical for dissecting the relationship between gender and nationality through dance as a meaning-making and political activity. Shay's substantial work on belly dance highlights pertinent nationalist and gender politics, focusing on the radical transformations of colonialism and subsequent nationalism.

Scholar Stavros Stavrou Karayanni argues that Middle Eastern dance (incorporating belly dance) engages issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationalism. He posits the dancing body as actively participating in these discourses and

as a primary site to be controlled, but also resistive, to the colonial and imperial masculine gaze. He argues for the dancing body as a site of both discipline and resistance to these hegemonies through its transgressive movements that produce both fear and desire from the spectator. Similar to Shay, he debunks popular tropes of belly dance as naturally feminine, or a woman only dance, through highlighting the various sexual fears and desires at play within imperialist politics. These dynamics have labored hard to erase the male dancing body from history or confine it to heterosexual norms. Shay and Stavros Karayanni's deeper and more holistic investigations of gender and sexuality are pioneering. I hope to expand upon their work in my investigation of intersectional gender, sexuality, class, and nationalist corporealities in creating meanings at various Cairo raqs sharqi venues. While 'center-staged' male dancing bodies aren't the focus of my ethnography, I do attend to other critical, yet peripheral, dancing male corporealities, and non-dance male choreographies and corporealities, within and between raqs sharqi venue spaces.

Other scholars in later waves of feminism acknowledge the limits of ecofeminist discourse, and work to de-naturalize both the female and the dancing body, while still centering women's subjectivities<sup>viii</sup>. To cite one example that gives a sense of these approaches, Dance scholar Andrea Deagon focuses her study on the tipping practices of American belly dancers and challenges simplistic understandings of female empowerment within the dance (Deagon 2013). She argues that costume-tipping during performances is a vested collision-site wherein narratives of female empowerment, largely white and middle class, clash with more dominating perspectives of belly dance

as a sexualized exotic commodity from the U.S. and MENA<sup>ix</sup>. Her work is also noteworthy for its consideration of corporeal interaction between the dancer and audiences including choreographic analysis of tipping procedures. However, her study-like many others working in similar ways, centralizes western-dominated practices of costume-tipping (placing a bill in the costume belt or bra straps) and peripheralizes common MENA methods of tipping, such as money showers<sup>x</sup>.

In framing her study on dominant western tipping customs over the multiplicity of tipping customs and practices, Deagon highlights important economic threads interwoven with gender and sexuality politics, but leaves unexplored the subversive potential of MENA practices as well as the complexity of overall tipping histories, negotiations, and meanings. This is an area that my research will expand upon, through an investigation of economies of tipping across a kaleidoscope of sites and bodies within contemporary Cairo, also including choreographic analysis as a main methodology. Scholar Virginia Keft-Kennedy covers the history of the dance in the MENA region, arguing that belly dance is a site for various contradictory constructions of femininity that employs multiple meanings. She focuses on colonial travel literature and the U.S. World's Fairs up to U.S. 'how to' magazine phenomenon in the 1970's, but privileges the empowering capabilities of the dance after its appropriation by contemporary white western women (2005). While she mentions that 'Arab dancers could demonstrate agency within the dance as well,' her repeated concentration on the patriarchal and colonially-violent history of the dance in MENA regions up until its transmission to white female bodies is problematic. Such studies, of which Kennedy is but one example, while vital for their contributions, gesture

toward racialized hierarchies within the dance. In other words, while these scholars argue for the agency of all belly dancers, the framing and focus of their studies center white western women and western contexts, which serves to parcel out the value and complexity of Arab women's involvement in the dance's capabilities while carving out a linear trajectory wherein the dance and dancers gain value, complexity, and agency as MENA dances cross over from Arab bodies and contexts to white western bodies and significations.

#### USE VALUE

Another wave of scholarship has framed discussion around considerations of belly dance's use value. Dominant themes traced within this approach include use values related to spirituality, healing, community building, and leisure. These approaches also typically center on studio locations within the United States, highlighted as accruing the most empowering semiotics of belly dance. Consequently, the economic aspects and performance contexts of the dance are downplayed. These scholars argue for belly dance as a site for personal transformation and identity formation and performance. This is the largest slice of literature penned by scholars in fields outside of dance studies. Leisure studies scholar Rachel Kraus's findings centralize the variety of ways practitioners experience dance's healing and leisure benefits due to her methodology of interviewing. Kraus contends that when practitioner's voices are privileged in the research, a myriad of meanings becomes visibilized (2009). Her interviewing methodology as well as narrative form, which foregrounds practitioner's voices, negotiates an important balance within

belly dance scholarship that often privileges the single voice of the practitioner-scholar over other dancers.

While it is encouraging to see scholars from fields ranging from international relations, religious studies, and sociology taking up dance as a primary research lens, without an intersectional approach combining dance studies theories and methodologies the research tends to flatten dance's dynamic meaning-making capacity in favor of liberational and essentializing tropes. Notably, the literature would benefit from an enhanced focus on the specificity of bodies being analyzed and a more critical assessment of dance's potential to be liberational. Without such theoretical anchoring, whiteness often circulates as the universalized belly dancing body and experience.<sup>xi</sup> As an example, sociologist Angela Moe argues that belly dance in the U.S. studio is a form of feminist leisure. To craft her argument, she defines belly dance as an ancient and expressive form of feminine-associated movement that is 'juxtaposed' to its Middle Eastern contexts of gendered commodification, exploitation, and sexualization (204-205, 2012). It is contradictory, and reinforces an orientalist hierarchy of the progressive Western women versus the oppressed Eastern woman, to only compare a leisure site within one country solely against paid professional contexts of another, when in fact both countries have leisurely and professionally stigmatized contexts. These studies explore western non-Arab bodies, yet disembodied references to MENA dancing bodies and locations greatly embellish the texts. Sprinkled throughout the texts, these references often function in order to legitimize the western-centric significations and subjectivities of the dance. For example, studies focusing on belly dance as leisure with primarily or exclusively white

women compare paid studio-classes to the MENA *baladi* social dance in order to ‘culturally legitimate,’ desexualize, and destigmatize the classes for white western women. Consequently while making this claim, the MENA social dance is flattened to a static and homogenize ‘community dance of joy’ (Kraus 2009, 2010, 2013, and 2014).

This also elides the capitalist-economic ‘pay-to-play’ power dynamics of western women’s classroom empowerment. The intimately entwined relationship between capitalism and U.S. women’s often ‘purchasable’ sense of empowerment/value warrants deeper mining. Leisure studies often gloss over how U.S. women’s sense of worth and empowerment is achieved when they align and reify capitalist goals that involve them paying money to harness a social value, such as empowerment or ‘femininity.’ In this light, it becomes a notable contradiction to legitimize pay-to-play studio-class empowerment and use value through a comparison with social dancing in MENA contexts. This works to not only deny complexity and value to Arab bodies, but also obscure the economic foundations upon which many western women rely to buy into their self-worth. My project will expand upon this necessary conversation by exploring various overlapping economic power dynamics that professional and social dancing occur within in Cairo.

Another central issue that emerges within an abundance of use value research focuses on the multiplicity and complexity of spirituality within the U.S. as entwined with belly dance praxis. While an equal depth of richness circulates within the MENA in regards to the interplay of dance, spirituality and religion, the MENA is often largely represented reductively, in both popular and scholarly discourse, as a monolithic Islamic

region or suffering from Islamic fundamentalism<sup>xii</sup>. Islam then comes to stand in for the entire MENA at the expense of understanding the multiplicity of religions and religious practices and ideologies within the heterogeneous regions. This is a particularly hindering considering the importance of the body in Islamic practice, as well as the increasing piety movements in Cairo specifically, as well as the waves of conservative Islamism spreading from the Wahabi Islam of Saudi Arabia.<sup>xiii</sup> All of these forces effect how the body is constructed and understood in contemporary Cairo contexts.

A master's thesis by dance scholar April Rose is worth mentioning because it aims to institutionalize a growing trend among tribal and fusion belly dance practitioners wherein the dance is argued to be transnationally originated and developed between Egypt and the U.S. This dual development argument is often engaged as a scape goat in order for fusion and tribal practitioners to fuse and appropriate various cultural practices and aesthetics within their choreographies without a deep and invested responsibility towards the MENA cultures of development. While I agree that the dance developed with a massive influx of transnational influences, to give equal credence and weight to the western role, particularly focusing on the changes wrought due to the desires of male colonialists and travelers, further solidifies a duality between the East and West at the expense of recognizing the overwhelmingly creative agency, capabilities, and pan-MENA flows and developments that resulted in popularization and development of raqs sharqi<sup>xiv</sup>. My project will further elaborate on such intricately woven pan-MENA flows of exchange and influence. Overall, there is a push in the use-value approach that parcels belly dance into segregated spaces, such as the studio-site, that is quite hindering in



grappling with the complex interactions and relationships this dance has in all its interconnected and diverse contexts. Additionally, studies often create a linear mapping, or linearly back-and-forth directional flow, of belly dance from the Middle East to the West, wherein the dancing itself highlights curves, soft and vibrant shimmies, as well as complexly inter-related circular patterns of movement that themselves offer challenge to any linear understandings of the form.

## ORIENTALISM

The political repercussions of framing and focusing studies on primarily white and western contexts and bodies becomes pointedly apparent when the scholarship turns towards interrogations of belly dance's engagements with orientalism. These interrogations make up the bulk of belly dance scholarship. While much of the literature highlights how belly dance in the west is perpetuating orientalist politics, even if it simultaneously is offering western women a limited form of agent-ful self-fashioning, other works attempt to disarm orientalism with limited success. Scholar Donnalee Dox sums up the findings quite clearly through her article on U.S. belly dance and orientalism, arguing the western practitioners continually rely upon, yet dance around, orientalism (58). Dox states that western belly dance challenges orientalist frames by critiquing western culture and rewarding positive values orientalism typically critiques of the east, but at the same time belly dance validates the western ideologies and aesthetics at the very core of orientalism (53). Though an overwhelming majority of research concluded that belly dance embodies orientalism, a range of responses added complexity to the discourse in dissecting how and why dancers engaged with an embodied and

representational ‘exotic other’ to craft more empowering versions of themselves (Bock and Boreland 2011, Shay 2002, 2006, 2008, Shay and Sellers-Young 2003, 2005, Sellers-Young 1992, Dox 2006, and Kennedy 2005). Problematically, these representations of the ‘exotic Arab other’ gave western practitioners the wiggle room of a ‘safety net’ to work through their own self-fashioning and identity transformations without having to tackle the harsh political realities of being Arab ‘other.’

What consciously surfaced during this series of scholarship in particular, was how deeply orientalist forms of knowledge production and dissemination has permeated not only the dance practice, but also the scholarship. I became enraptured with how, despite all earnest attempts to destabilize orientalism, belly dance knowledge was chiefly produced, disseminated, and reproduced through the orientalist paradigm. Most studies fell into research conclusions that continued centering on dualities and linear evolutionary models (i.e. the dance is empowering and complex for the west, oppressive and unfussy for the east.) For example, a number of studies by western-based academics work to challenge orientalist paradigms by grappling with the complexity and heterogeneity of how western practitioners negotiate these politics with aims of shedding light on the fluidity and contradictory nature of belly dance’s embodied orientalist praxis in the U.S. However, with such a large and uneven amount of literature focused on utilizing orientalist frameworks to better understand the implicitly complex western subject, the limits of their studies are exposed in challenging orientalism’s flattening disposition only by using the silenced ‘eastern Arab other’ to add humanity and

complexity to the western subject<sup>xv</sup>. In other words, the ‘Arab other’ exists and is ‘known’ through what she can offer the western self.

This notion is a key premise of orientalism and highlights how these studies reify this deeply entrenched power dynamic. Two key articles by long-term belly dance scholar Barbara Sellers-Young and ethnomusicologist Anne Rasmussen in some ways also further reify orientalist paradigms within the scholarship by perpetuating co-constitutive binaries between the simplistic east and dynamic west, even while contradictorily laboring to deconstruct such binaries. Sellers-Young’s works often juxtapose the complex and changing meanings and contexts of the dance for western women against what she states is the ‘authentic’ base of the dance, the social *baladi*, or the ‘pure’ dancing, in the MENA world. This overlooks the variety of contexts of dance in the Arab world, the complex network of influences constantly changing and effecting social dancing over time and across regions, as well as marginalizing more fitting comparisons of the paid professional contexts of *raqs sharqi*, even as they may derive from more spectacularized and fused movements of *baladi*. In other words, Sellers-Young’s work, while undeniably pioneering within the field of belly dance scholarship, due to its focus on western significations and bodies, continues to richly flesh out whiteness by understanding it through comparisons to more simplistically understood MENA bodies and contexts. In her early work, “Raks al Sharki: Transculturation of a Folk Form” Sellers-Young argues that while most dances of a specific ethnic group arrive on a new shore at the same time as the immigrant population, *raks sharki* is a unique case... she then goes on to highlight the dance’s dissemination and popularization

through the early feminist movements and the practice of white U.S. women (1992 141). While her nuanced explorations into the popularization and dissemination of early belly dance in the U.S. is incontestably valuable, the framing further peripheralizes the role and agency of the early Arab immigrants that brought belly dance to the U.S. through opening up the early supper clubs where most of the earliest dancers, wait staff, and musicians were from throughout the MENA region. Sellers-Young and other pioneering scholars complexly argue for belly dance's fluid meaning-making capacities in constructing feminine subjectivities. However, at the same time, caution needs to be raised through how threads of these investigations may reify orientalist power dynamics within such identity formation and embodiment.

Likewise, ethnomusicologist Rasmussen argues that early Arab-American supper clubs and restaurants allowed musicians and owners to creatively adapt orientalist tastes with their own Indigenous musical traditions to create a new musical and dance scene that involved self-orientalism with capitalist gain for the musicians and club owners (1992). Though she gestures towards the clever capabilities of these early immigrants, an orientalist nostalgia for 'pure and authentic' MENA traditions haunts her work through her lamentations over the 'flattened Eastern' sounds these musical contexts produced compared to their regionally-specific and non-orientalist tinged musical performances before these clubs. While calling attention to changes over time and contexts is important an additional critical focus on hybridity would enhance her work and result in an even more dynamic understanding of Arab American subjectivity. For example, there are a number of ways to read these early clubs as doing much more in addition to just

capitalizing upon self-orientalism<sup>xvi</sup>. Clearly there existed intense pan-MENA negotiations of the rich heterogeneity of the MENA world that isn't given due credit in studies that explore these socio-historical moments in purely east/west terms.

Thus, scholarship surrounding orientalist praxis of raqs sharqi overwhelmingly make their case by creating a duality between the west and east that mainly functions to legitimate western studies and complexity. In consequence, the MENA regions and peoples function as a trope, as a lesser 'other' upon which the western subject defines their own progressive identities and politics. But as Edward Said reminds through his ground-breaking theory of Orientalism, this process has material consequences. This results in a dehumanizing discourse that further marginalizes Middle Eastern and North African populations and denies the diversity of their experiences and practices. In regards to Cairo specifically, the historic and continued legacies of colonialism, imperialism, uneven global capitalism, and current political upheavals make this particularly disconcerting.

An encouraging intervention into these orientalism-focused studies was work by dance scholar Jennifer Fischer who firmly anchored her research in ways of being in the world that rejected absolutes and binaries, but instead privileged multiplicity, relationality, and multiple meanings<sup>xvii</sup>. The Critical Dance Studies theoretical and methodological frameworks she offers in her research offer a refreshing intervention within current belly dance scholarship while still centering western subjects. Further, Arab and Asian Studies scholarship follows a range of responses to orientalist approaches to belly dance. Scholars such as Amira Jamarkani, Jennifer Haynes-Clark, and Maira

Sunaina posit that belly dance is a non-Arab orientalist product, it is western fantasy. This is a fairly standard viewpoint from western-trained academics, and Arab Dance Scholar Najwa Adra, though speaking generally, intervenes in their findings by arguing that often western-trained academics elitism, paired with raqs sharqi's local (MENA) stigmatization and popularization amongst working class populations, result in attitudes that deny the various roles and contexts of belly dancing within the MENA, and dismiss the meaning-making capabilities of dance in general.

Arab Studies scholar Amira Jamarkani explores and deflates popular representations of the belly dancer as orientalist artifact throughout US history. Jamarkani argues that these representations are cultural artifacts and mythologies of a much larger narrative within the US of progress and power. Rather than offering any 'real' truth, these representations work to fulfill the desires and needs to the US's imperial narrative as it changes through time. Through dissecting these representations complexities within particularly situated socio-political contexts through time, Jamarkani deflates the orientalist power dynamics within such imagery (2008). Jamarkani concludes her book with an inquiry of what's obscured through a focus on orientalist imagery, and a subsequent call for future scholars to take up the voices and effects of these discourses on Arabs and Arab Americans to see how they may resist and re-shape them. I hope to partially take up her call though centering the lives and stories of pan-MENA bodies involved within the lived reality of dance culture of Cairo. Asian Studies scholar Maira Sunaina's article on US belly dancing as 'Arab-face' argues that white women's belly dancing performances are entangled with imperialist engagements that link the US and

the Middle East and reveals a deeper politics of imperialism, racialization, and feminism in US empire (2008). While Sunaina's interlacing of dance with imperialist politics and western feminism brings up much needed conversation, her side argument that belly dance was 're-invented' and sent back to Cairo as an exoticized western tourist spectacle after westerner's highly sexualized the nightclub style is reductive. Her de-Arabizing of raqs sharqi reifies orientalist power dynamics that situate MENA bodies as passive receptacles of self-orientalism and further erases the vastly dynamic and complex significations of raqs sharqi in MENA sites and bodies.

Dance scholars Shay and Sellers-Young innovative 2005 anthology on belly dance remains one of the most highly consulted and read books on belly dance scholarship for academics and practitioners alike. The book, with articles contributed by authors with backgrounds from anthropology, women's studies, ethnomusicology, and history, explores the changing position of belly dance in the twentieth-century within the framework of orientalism as well as the ever-growing transnational community and body of discourse (2005). The volume greatly contributes to challenging orientalism through revealing its complexities, as well as centers belly dance as a transnational dance with meanings distinct to its particular contexts of practice and performance<sup>xviii</sup>.

Najwa Adra's article on social *baladi* dance also offers a critical intervention into the field by asserting that social dance is not a homogenous and static 'authentic' base of the dance, but rather is as dynamic and polysemous as the professional and international versions as well (2005). Additionally, Adra firmly situates raqs sharqi within MENA bodies and contexts as more than just self-orientalist product or regurgitated western

fantasy. Her work will be explored more in depth in later sections, but its framing position within the above mentioned prominent belly dance anthology bears mention. Despite her significantly apt efforts to center *baladi* dance and agent-ful MENA subjects, her article appears in the formidable belly dance anthology, that frames, contains, and situates her introductory article as the foundation upon which all other orientalist explorations of the dance will be situated against. It states:

“This volume opens with Najwa Adra’s essay ‘Belly Dance: An Urban Genre.’” As an individual raised in the Arab world, Adra is *completely at home with the domestic world in the Middle East*, and she analyzes the playful and valued role that this dance tradition has *for all men, women, and children in many Arab countries*. Adra sets the *context* for both the domestic and professional traditions of this dance genre, how they are perceived and performed by everyday men and women and thus, *she sets the stage for the essays that follow*” (2005 4).

This framing and containment of scholar Najwa Adra and her essay as standing in for the entire experience of all different types of gendered and aged bodies, in a conglomeration of diverse and class-distinct Arabic-speaking countries, is limiting the work she is able to do when it is framed within such homogenizing confines. Further, it highlights how Arab scholars and their experiences have been relegated to the peripheries in western scholarship. This is to be expected when the entire MENA is constructed as a ‘set stage’ upon which a range of dynamic and mobile performances of western contexts and bodies will perform on, but the MENA contexts and bodies are literally made into a set material object that largely exists for the non-MENA dance subject to perform upon.



This has critical parallels with Edward Said's notion of the 'oriental stage' that is constructed out of western power and exists solely for oriental characters and stories to appear that are suited to western desires and audiences (1978 71). Thus, even as Adra labors to deconstruct orientalist notions of MENA dance, she operates within an already orientalist structure due to the anthology's framing and the authoritative voices and power of the North American scholars to already define the MENA's 'place' in the field, western academia, and the world at large. Consequently, arguments of how and in what ways MENA dance and bodies contain use-value within pan-MENA flows of power and meanings, historically and contemporaneously, are too often overlooked or dismissed. Thus, situating *baladi* dance and raqs sharqi dance solely as foundational or historical development sites are problematic.

#### MENA DANCE SCHOLARSHIP

There are an emerging number of raqs sharqi studies focused on scholarship within MENA contexts for analyzing the dance outside of the dominating western center. Cairo clearly becomes highlighted as the next main focal point of dance scholarship. Investigations that center Cairo as their research location tend to avoid the trappings of western works that refer to it as an 'authentic' locale of dance (prevalent with colonialist nostalgia that stagnates and essentializes the region), and instead offer Cairo as one of many historic and contemporary centers of globalized raqs sharqi dance. The scholars all contend that as dance travels it takes on new forms, meanings, and manifestations particular to these localized contexts.

Scholars Cassandra Lorus and Noha Roushdy stand apart within feminist scholarship on raqs sharqi for their exemplary consideration of Egyptian bodies, contexts, and agency. Lorus focuses her analysis around a wedding performance of star Egyptian dancer Fifi Abdou, and how she is able to tactfully ‘play’ with perceptions of her own threatening sexuality as well the sexuality of her guests, especially the wedding couple (1996). Through performing with *baladi*<sup>xix</sup> gestures and stylization in her dance, as well as skillfully teasing out the double-meanings inherent in the song lyrics, she is able to shake up norms of how sexuality intersects across gender and class lines<sup>xx</sup>. She accomplishes this through interaction with her audience, melding her suggestive dancing with the double meanings apparent in the song lyrics. Lorus’s article is critical for deconstructing the notion of essentialized Arab sexuality, while also centering the Egyptian dancer and audience with agency and complexity.

Anthropologist Noha Roushdy’s work highlights the *baladi* social dancing of Cairo and how this relates to changing gender and identity norms (2014). Her work provides a necessary intervention through arguing for the changing and always dynamic form of social *baladi* dance. She argues that social dancing works to construct the ideal Egyptian subject while also allowing room to play with social and sexual mores. Due to how she interrogates *baladi* as dynamic and open to change over time, she challenges dominant discourse coming out of western scholarship that often appropriates simplistic notions of *baladi* as a mere ‘happiness dance’ that ignores its ever-shifting relations to greater cultural and gender dynamics. While she too, contends that *baladi* is a core

foundation to raqs sharqi, she deeply understands and presents this foundation as fluid, contextual, and porous to other socio-cultural forces.

An insightful article by anthropologist Shannon Arvizu focuses on the politics of belly dancing within contemporary (early 2000's) Cairo. She begins with the regulations and policing of the dance by the government and what this may entail. Through analyzing the multi-faceted belly dance scene in Cairo, she shows the regulation of dance is indicative of tensions felt by performers, the state, and society that is generated by contemporary processes of cultural globalization (2004). The state sees the dance as a legitimate heritage commodity that should thus be 'owned' by local bodies to benefit from the capital, however, it's the foreign dance tourism that keeps much of that capital flowing to and from Cairo. Later, she argues for the current MTV-style music video clip as replacing live performance. She adds that this style of presentation is a crude commodity of female objectification while also allowing female bodies to self-fashion their own identities in a globalized world. She begins with government regulations and how they act to 'police' the moral boundaries of society by posting the belly dancing body as the opposite of what a good Egyptian female body should be. She then argues that despite the limited venues for dance (cheap cabarets and expensive five-star venues) the dance is re-emerging in a new screen form via the MTV-style music video clip. She challenges local critics of these video clips that claim they are 'western influences' by stating this is a common scape-goat to ignore the local issues circulating between commercialism, media, and gender. She concludes with a focus on the continued importance of dancing bodies in challenging morality, ideas of Self and gender, and

nationalism as evidenced through these negotiations and state regulation. She ends, ‘the role of dance performers as agents of change remains paramount to this discussion (178).’ My project also aims to speak towards the contemporary changes, now wrought by post 2011 revolution Cairo, centering dancing bodies as critical actors of change.

A couple works in particular stand out as exemplary models to follow in future ethnographic scholarship. Turkish dance scholar Oyku Potuglu-Cook’s article on neoliberalism in multiple sites within Istanbul is full of rich nuance and complexity because it looks at dance within multiple connected contexts within one major city<sup>xxi</sup>. This multi-sited methodology allows for a complex understanding of the various contexts and significations of dance within one city and ruptures predispositions towards singular meanings and static dancing bodies and forms. The majority of studies that did de-center the west, including those analyzed in other strands of the literature, tended to only focus on elite bodies, or one contextual location of dance (weddings), rather than grappling with the complexity of multiple positionalities and circulations of dance in various locations and as they co-constitute one another. Cook’s ethnography allowed a complex and multi-faceted exploration of one local and global city as its neoliberalist politics are negotiated through belly dancing.

A second exemplary work, this time on Egyptian dance, is anthropologist Karin Van Nieuwkerk’s ethnography on the working-class dancers of Mohamed Ali Street in Cairo<sup>xxii</sup>. First, Nieuwkerk is one of the only scholars to undertake research not focused on elite dancing bodies and contexts as she argues for nuanced understanding of the working-class lives of female dancers on the wedding and nightclub circuit from historic

Mohamed Ali Street. Secondly, Nieuwkerk and Cook's ethnographic approaches allowed them to better grasp the ground-level lived reality and voices of multiple bodies that participated within dance contexts allowing for research findings with a greater multiplicity of knowledge perspectives. However, Nieuwkerk's study is isolated to a particularly community of dancers within one class, therefore she sacrifices breadth and the inter-relations of multiple dance bodies and contexts at the expense of a deep exploration of one particular working-class community. I hope to expand upon her exemplary work in this regard. Her work opens up threads for future researchers to explore and link together<sup>xxiii</sup>. Additionally, a Dance Studies expansion of her work would add a nuanced bodily analysis alongside interviews and life stories by locating how constructions of gender are corporeally negotiated in different dance contexts through dance and non-dance movement.

The emerging number of studies within MENA contexts add critical complexity and challenge to the overwhelmingly western-centric discourse, and my project aims to further enrich Middle Eastern centers through focusing on intersectional approaches as well as a ground-level lived reality exploration of the multiplicity of bodies that create meanings within larger dance events. I hope to shake up preconceived generalizations from one group, such as elite star dancers at weddings standing in for the inter-related, but different, realities of other groups of dancers. Further, my study will further round out the scholarship by focusing on both dance and non-dance bodies that constitute various meanings within the larger dance experience. For example, including the workers, dancers, musicians, and pan-MENA audiences at a nightclub show as research subjects –

rather than only those dancing on stage -- would highlight more intra-MENA dynamics and highlight the heterogeneity of meanings circulating.

#### GLOBALIZATION BELLY DANCE SCHOLARSHIP:

Finally, a turn towards recent scholarship in the field provides a road map of what central questions are being considered now, as well as illuminate important shifts in the scholarship, and provide answers to what continues to be missing from the discourse. This compilation of research demonstrates how the field has turned towards issues and impacts of globalization. Recent writing within the field, including the newest belly dance anthology 'Belly Dance Around the World,' have turned towards tracing the routes and new roles the dance takes in new contexts. Core questions being interrogated include: what happens when dance crosses into new communities in new geographic locations? What role does it offer to normative gender roles? How is Egypt and the MENA in relation to these new communities and places? How is the global community transmitting and communicating knowledge? Basically, how do dances' meanings change as it crosses new borders and bodies? I argue that new technology, scholarship on globalization, and the continual migration and movement of bodies transnationally has engendered these new shifts in the field.

A question my dissertation will follow and develop is: where is Egypt figuring in this transnational discourse? A primary example of this new globalized approach to research is highlighted in practitioner-scholars Sellers-Young's and Caitlin E. McDonald's recently published co-edited anthology 'Belly Dance around the World.'

This anthology offers a series of essays where scholars and practitioners from around the world consider the role of belly dance as a globalized dance practice. There is a focus on interrogating the new belly dance communities that have formed in diverse locations throughout the globe and what role the dance plays in these communities, cultures, and as a form of identity formation. The editors consider the role of the global belly dance community as one that is an empowering force founded in identity formation alongside imagination, the internet, and the social power of localized communities.

The introduction by pioneering belly dance scholar Sellers-Young argues that the global discourse of belly dance takes place in three interactive locations: Egypt, as performed socially and professionally, The Arab diaspora throughout the globe, and thirdly, the women across the globe engaged in self-fashioning and orientalism in order to stretch gender norms. She contends that each community's version of the dance, though sharing some basic vocabulary or aesthetic sensibilities, is localized to the communities' particular shared cultural and social beliefs. She states that the essays will address the following issues: the role of religious attitudes in the evolution and transmission of the dance from the MENA<sup>xxiv</sup>, the role of Egypt as the pivotal site of ongoing discourse and evolution due to its role as the cultural center of the MENA, orientalism as an on-going frame through which the dance must negotiate the world over, and variant interpretations of the feminine. Lastly, the anthology addresses the specifically localized versions of belly dance as they tackle these above issues. She then moves on to discuss how belly dance holds a paradoxical position in women's lives the world over as they negotiate power dynamics, particularly of gender, through the dance.

Next, in ways that mirror her first anthology with Anthony Shay, she states the book's 'stage is set' with the two articles that focus on dance in an Egyptian context. She contends that Egypt remains the 'hub' of global belly dance particularly through the international festivals and YouTube accessible videos of dancers from Cairo. The two essays address dance's role in Cairo focusing on how social dance and aesthetic expression relate to cultural identification. I find it important to note how Sellers-Young repeats the move of her first anthology by 'setting the stage' in Egypt. Although this time that stage is considered local *and* global, she states Egypt's continued importance in belly dance discourse relates to the festival scene and internet. While these are two important areas of analysis, I pause to point out that they remain the most recognizable and readily available to western audiences<sup>xxv</sup>. Overall, 'Belly Dance Around the World' includes twelve chapters, only three of which articulate understandings of community dynamics beyond the western world. Of the three articles (two in Egypt, one Northern India) there is only the revised version of Roushdy's *baladi* social dance article discussed previously, which primarily focuses on non-elite bodies. Overall, all the chapters focus on privileged communities and bodies in ways that visiblize which bodies tend to be considered when scholars turn towards global dance industries, sites, and bodies<sup>xxvi</sup>.

Another recent book by Arab and Islamic Studies practitioner-scholar Caitlin E. McDonald, 'Global Moves: Belly Dance as an Extra/Ordinary Space to Explore Social Paradigms in Egypt and Around the World' explores the dynamics of globalization within Cairo. McDonald argues that belly dance becomes an extra/ordinary space in Egypt and elsewhere for practitioners to challenge or uphold dominant power structures,



particularly around gender norms (2012). Her text is an exploration of how dancers around the globe use Egypt as a reference point for situating themselves within the global belly dance community. She argues that Egypt becomes romanticized and fantasized in global dancers' references when in fact dance in Egypt is an expression of joy and can be a potential site for defining gendered behavior, competition, and resisting cultural norms. Her work is a comparative analysis of the dance's use value in Egypt as well as within the international belly dance community. She contends that the dance serves different roles in Egypt than it does elsewhere, but belly dance is utilized by the international belly dance community to also question social paradigms, particularly those around gender.

While McDonald initially planned to do all her fieldwork in Cairo, studying the dance in various contexts, that didn't pan out due to how sick she became in Cairo from the pollution/constant cigarette smoke. Instead, she re-focused her work around the international belly dance community within Cairo, those foreign dancers from North America and Europe who were paid to dance in middle class and up venues, as well as the international belly dance community as situated within North America and Britain. Though I can undoubtedly relate to the difficulties of undertaking fieldwork in Cairo, the specific nationality of bodies her work highlighted further cautions towards which subjectivities become unevenly centered and peripheralized when a global-scale lens is taken up within research. My project aims to balance out such scholarship by pointedly centering variously classed intra-MENA bodies and their stories.

In a recent article, scholar Sellers-Young dissects the gender issues related to belly dance in a globalized era. She states that while belly dance has a long history within

an orientalist framing as an empowering dance for women, this discourse doesn't acknowledge historical positioning of dancers in the Middle East nor the conversations between practitioners of the evolving dance community in the twenty-first century. She argues that the conjunction of the stage with the virtual world of the internet has created a converging space of the imagination, allowing the dance to become a site for playing with the norms of gender identity (2014). Demonstrating that belly dance has become a form encountered in face-face spaces (stages, studios) as well as virtual (YouTube, Facebook) she considers how the dance negotiates media imagery as well as physical movement.

She then posits that currently in Egypt male dancers must negotiate their masculinity on stage whereas for females the challenge is their modesty. She concludes that since the Worlds Fairs, belly dances gender dynamics, both within and outside of the Middle East, have been determined according to local as well as transnational and global cultural flows. Thus, the U.S.'s role in constructing the dance must always be considered as well as whatever local meanings that dance takes on. I think this interplay and sometimes tension between the contemporary local circulations of dance as they negotiate the global is a key relationship to pay attention to moving forward. My research, in addition to focusing on both male and female bodies, will also make clear how a kaleidoscope of local and global intra-MENA circulations of semiotics are intertwined amidst such flows. In other words, it looks at overlapping local, intra-MENA, and global circuitries from a Cairo-centric foundation.

This focus on the ‘new’ and ‘global’ is adding fresh breath to the discourse but scholars must take caution to remember that just as there is no universal belly dancing body, there is no singular ‘global.’ Power flows and circulations move in a multiplicity of overlapping and uneven configurations. In regards to Egypt in particular, global flows emanating from oil rich Arabian Gulf countries cannot be overlooked, nor intra-MENA political economic circuitries in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. More readily available and accessible east/west configurations and privileged bodies and contexts must not override the mining of multiplicities and nuanced intersectional research.

In conclusion, a review of the belly dance literature illuminates the urgent need to circle back to Cairo and the Middle East and North Africa at large in a multiplicity of contemporary contexts in order to destabilize the orientalist paradigms the scholarship has relegated these regions to as well investigate today’s use values and politics of raqs sharqi. Further, a deeper attention to the multiplicity of spaces as well as dance and non-dance bodies within contemporary dance contexts utilizing Dance Studies methodologies of choreographic analysis and ethnography would lend to rich and nuanced research results.

## MIDDLE EASTERN GENDER/SEXUALITY AND ETHNOGRAPHY SCHOLARSHIP

Recent scholarship in Middle Eastern Gender and Sexuality Studies and ethnography provides enabling roadmaps and models that can serve belly dance scholarship in general as well as my own project in particular. To begin, a solid

foundation in Middle Eastern Gender Studies provides exemplary knowledge and analytical models imperative for anchoring and contextualizing my research project in Cairo, particularly as it relates to positionality politics and how to ‘do’ this dance ethnography as a U.S. located white practitioner-scholar. These approaches, combined with Dance Studies theories and methodologies, will result in a sensitively nuanced multi-sited dance ethnography of Cairo raqs sharqi circulations that traces the multi-directional landscape of multiple and overlapping power configurations across bodies, time, and space. An exploration of this literature teases out what analytical approaches will be particularly enabling for my particular study and positionality, as well as how to expand upon potential limits from each model, to overall gain a more complex and diverse investigation.

Historian James Gelvin argues that we must historically contextualize the MENA region in order to understand contemporary events; he also promotes the argument that the Middle East must be situated globally, within its own local and international relationships, in order to be understood with integrity (2016). Within his approach, Gelvin focuses on what he deems the ‘human element’ of social change, arguing that agency and action of a multiplicity of human bodies must be recognized and interrogated for more dynamic understandings of such change. He critiques the rhetoric of the ‘Arab Spring’ as perpetuating orientalist discourse, and instead promotes a historic model of accumulation, where these events were not ‘spontaneous’ but conscious and built upon by numerous protest movements and political activism that came before. Though Gelvin’s analytical approach is critical, he overlooks the diversity of bodies and how they

are stratified and asymmetrically mobile according to class, gender, and race. Thus, the limit of his approach is the lack of intersectionality that would become legible within an ethnography that investigates the ground-lived reality of heterogeneous bodies.

Next, we come to the foundational and ground-breaking work by scholar Edward Said on his theory of orientalism. He argues that ideas, cultures, and histories cannot be seriously understood or studied without their configurations of power (1979). Despite the exemplary ennoblements of this theory, as many since have noted, it is limited in that it often flattens agency and perpetuates the very binaries and dualistic understandings that it attempts to challenge. Though a majority of belly dance scholarship works to disarm and dissect orientalism following Said's theory, it consequentially reinforces it by falling into this same dualistic pattern. In contrast, Said's work was an essential jumping off point for numerous MENA feminist scholars that have greatly critiqued and expanded upon his work through more dynamic and intersectional studies of power, also offering powerful models of how to do ethnographic research.

In Said's later work, *Culture and Imperialism*, he seriously undertakes the criticisms from *Orientalism* and argues that there exists a mutually constitutive relationship between culture and imperialism (1994). He laments the notion of totalized identity that imperialism constructed through conceptualizations of nationalism, and instead forwards that all cultures are impure and based on fluidity, hybridity, and based on inter-relationality to all other people, places, and politics. Said urges scholars and people to think, write, and know one another based on our inherent *interconnectivity* in

ways that avoid dominating forms of duality and division and instead centralize multiplicity and constant movement.

In *Re-Making Women*, a collection of essays edited by feminist scholar Lila Abu-Lughod, scholars delve into the complexities of contemporary gender studies in the MENA. The scholars all argue for ground-level lived analysis of women's worlds within the Middle East to better grasp this complexity as it shapes, and is shaped by, women (1998). Likewise, scholars judiciously negotiate the messiness of accounting for local and contextualized specificities within the Middle Eastern contexts to deconstruct orientalist paradigms while maintaining a sensitive account of the ways in which the colonialist legacy and encounter with the west has informed the regions. The task then becomes how to balance the two, recognizing the western encounter and impacts while not granting the western models overwhelming permeation into these localized projects. The scholars offer approaches to such vexed entanglements through focuses on the ground-level lived reality of women alongside deep contextualization and historicity. They focus on tracing the cross-fertilization of seemingly distinct 'spheres' such as the family, society, work, and the state, to show how all these spheres constitute one another and cannot be studied in isolation. Finally, Deniz Kandiyoti reminds scholars in her conclusion that gender does not equal female, and to be more attentive to all the bodies related to our studies because these bodies, like the 'separate' spheres, are dynamically and inherently connected and constitutive of one another.

Three key articles on gender and the Egyptian revolution by scholar Sherine Hafez exemplify the importance and necessity of considering female corporeality within

Egypt's political transformations (2012, 2014, 2014). Through protest stories, Hafez articulates how Egyptian female corporeality is disciplined and controlled, while simultaneously embodying possibilities of resistance and transformation. Both processes are entwined and work upon the body hand-in-hand. Thus, protesting bodies are capable of carving out new and multiple meanings. Further, Hafez's case studies highlight corporeal modes of transmission for varying degrees of resistance and oppression; such as how a lifeless protest body was able to transmit multiple meanings through media representations, which were then re-imagined and resulted in a mass protest by many live resisting bodies. This is enabling in highlighting how corporeal significations can circulate, transmit, and accumulate amongst various bodies as well as across live and digital modes.

Ethnographer Lila Abu-Lughod offers a feminist ethnography of the Awlad-Ali Bedouins in Egypt and in doing so complicates notions of cohesive cultures and posits how dominant discourses do not blanket groups homogeneously (1999). In positioning herself to her research, Abu-Lughod comes to realize and offer that all knowledge is situated and partial, thus tracing the contours of power within one's relationality to their research on personal and historic levels becomes of utmost importance. Abu-Lughod critiques western feminism and instead tries to, "uncover the terms in which women and men in this social system see themselves and the social system, instead of imposing on them ideals of equality and critiques of morality that derive from foreign contexts" (xv). Abu-Lughod also warns scholars to be careful about resistance, that uncritical celebration of small acts of transgression result in tropes of liberation that do not do justice to the

complexity of marginal people's lives, but also finding the balance in acknowledging their tactics for negotiating larger dominating systems on their own terms. Though this is thoughtful advice for my own project, she also considers these small acts of transgression and tactics 'non-revolutionary.' I can understand not granting these tactics undo celebrations of resistance or hegemonic transcendence, but I also argue that the accumulation, transmission, and circulation of such small but significant acts are the minute threads that larger tapestries of political and social transformations are made of.

Feminist scholar Marnia Lazreg also attends to the ways that there are multiple modes of being female, and that we cannot only understand and read agency in western forms (1994). Thus, Lazreg contends that gender studies conducted in the Middle East perpetuate historical violence when they assume and further institutionalize within academia the notion that these women ('Arab', 'Middle Eastern', 'Muslim') are oppressed and passive. She illustrates how there is no singular 'Algerian woman' but that a multitude of intersecting factors, time, and space work together to create a colorful and rich mosaic of women's lived realities. Lazreg presents multiple frameworks and methods for moving beyond the paradigms of the oppressed 'Arab' woman as well as the overly determined religious paradigm (i.e. where Islam is seen homogeneously and as the essential cause of gender inequality). She instead argues that silence can be eloquent and transformative. She forwards that scholars need to investigate and understand the value and meaning within small gestures, seclusion, softness, subtlety- all qualities that western feminism may dismiss as weakness or passive. In regard to deconstructing the



overbearing Islamic religious paradigm, she argues that Islam must be seen as a process, and not to dismiss nor inflate it (14).

Finally, anthropologist Karin Van Nieuwkerk argues that the performing arts in Cairo, and female celebrity figures in particular, actively shape, and are being shaped, by larger Islamist, economic, gendered, and national forces (2013). Nieuwkerk contends that there is no 'pure' body that isn't already interpolated by larger systems of power. Her approach to Islam is enabling, understanding Islam as a diverse process with multiple facets of individualism, as well as institutionalized and global circulations, that all have a range of results for the local Cairo community. Her approach to globalization and transnationalism is also enabling for my work, Nieuwkerk considers multiple overlapping hegemonies between and within nation-states, in particular she notes how Saudi petrodollars operate alongside more conservative waves of political Islam that are intimately tied to oil economies and are made legible in nuanced ways through investigating the performing arts. This is similar to what I have observed within the five-star hotel and cabaret raqs sharqi circuits.

**Positionality:** Ethnographic Fieldwork in Cairo as *Agnibiya* (Foreigner) Practitioner-Scholar

An analysis of the analytical approaches from the Middle Eastern Gender Studies literature coupled with Dance Studies methodologies and theories gestures toward the same framework of structured improvisation that raqs sharqi routines predominantly follow. In doing so, these approaches, and gaps, from my literature review combine to provide re-directions and beneficial models for my own positionality towards my project that centers the variety of corporealities engaged with my project, including my own. This puzzle of how to do my ethnographic project, with aims of centering intra-MENA bodies and significations with my own body situated as a U.S. located white practitioner-scholar, has been a politically vexed puzzle. The choreographic structure of raqs sharqi provides useful tools for negotiating this puzzle in the specific case of my project. A structured improvisation demands deep contextualization of one's show, informed by particular histories of places and bodies, with an acute awareness of gender, class, nationalist, and sexuality dynamics, within such histories. Additionally, it's within the nuances of subtle movements and pauses where the deepest power or meaning can be 'read.' A multi-sited dance ethnography that combines a richly contextualized focus on space and bodies of Cairo's contemporary raqs sharqi scene as it relates to larger politics, alongside nuanced choreographic analysis and privileging of interviewees perspectives, will help to garner a vigorous and sensitive dissertation project that doesn't elide or inflate my role as researcher. This approach will help to capture the complex ground-level lived reality of dance and non-dance bodies, as well as allow the dancers to take

center stage. The choreographic analysis is a critical element because the micro analysis of movement and relationality within and between bodies, including my own, pointedly gestures towards the larger macro dynamics of power that all our bodies are engulfed within. Certainly, there is no way to avoid my body, and the larger histories it carries, from framing the end product my dissertation takes, but as long as I critically attend to the overlapping power relations between my body and other bodies, I can at least make visible to readers how this research is particularly, and always only partially, situated and positioned.

It is imperative to move beyond researcher positionalities that follow an ‘insider/outsider’ binary, as this doesn’t do justice to the multiple relations of power my body, and all the other research bodies, are entangled within. This project will suggest that it is more productive to tease out, acknowledge, and trace these various asymmetric power dynamics, and offer ways a focus on micro-interactions on the bodily level can help illuminate when larger hierarchies of power are transgressed or reified. This will also work to disrupt dualistic understandings in my research and move beyond a narrow scope of analysis that further reifies east/west orientalist paradigms while always remaining aware of how my positionality effects my project. A bodily approach, and a raqs sharqi bodily approach specifically, trains me to pay acute attention to the polysemic significations of corporeal silence, withdrawal, pause, stretching and lingering, and other moments of kinesthetic knowledge and affect within my body as well as my research partners.

Middle Eastern Studies scholars Lazreg and Hafez also remind me to avoid the seductive romance of resistance; that sharing a complex, intersectional, and visceral story holds more integrity and grit than crafting a happy ending superficially suited to progressive politics. In the end, conceiving of my positionality as a puzzle doesn't pan out, because puzzles piece together perfectly in the end, and this project is far too vexed and messy of a process. Yet, as Abu-Lughod reminds, these stories are worth telling in all their messiness and contradictions (25).

Another complexity this project productively grapples with is the way the existing belly dance scholarship overwhelmingly privileges the embodied knowledge and voice of the practitioner-scholar – sometimes at the expense of a rich investigation of other subjectivities and positionalities. The role of 'the practitioner' in the scholarship is used to add legitimacy, authority, and 'insider status' to the scholar. While the perspective of the practitioner is indeed critical and leads to particular knowledges and focuses that other perspectives may elide, which was often the case before the field of Dance Studies, the caution within this approach is to not just position oneself as a practitioner, but simultaneously deeply situate and mine the political positioning and relationality to the research subject and bodies one has.

Within transnational research of a dance form that's practiced around the globe, relying on practitioner knowledge can be hindering or enabling depending on if one is able/not able to pick up on the acute differences or similarities between musical interpretation, style, and performer-audience interaction, but these nuanced observations are dependent upon the researcher being consistently and earnestly open, vulnerable, and

positioned as a learner. Belly dance scholarship serves as an important model for practitioner-scholar positionality due to the fact that most writing is penned by practitioner-scholars, though most do not elaborate on the role of this particular relationship to their research (Keft-Kennedy 2005, Deagon 2013, Buonaventura 1989, Kraus 2013, 2014, Moe 2012, 2014, Shay and Sellers-Young 2005, McDonald and Sellers-Young 2013, McDonald 2010). Scholarship by Anthony Shay often begins with stating he relies largely on his own experiences as a practitioner, but this positionality isn't followed through to all of its fluid and contested politics. For example, Shay notes the enablement of practitioner-based positionality, but does not elaborate on the particular and partial nature and limits of practitioner-based research. Arab scholars tend to position themselves as researchers in more political, nationalist, or ethnic relationships that tend to the contested nature of political engagements with the dance. For example, scholar Amira Jamarkani, writing on the cultural mythology of imagined Arab womanhood in the U.S., begins her book with the politics involved growing up an hour from Disneyland with the name Amira – princess in Arabic. She states,

“It seemed clear to me that ‘princess’ was a category reserved for communicating the confluence of impossibly magical qualities that cohered in Disney characters- those idealized figures of white femininity. From an early age then, I knew something about the limits of translatability for cultural categories...as I grew older, though, I began to link my experience to larger problems of translation when it came to popular U.S. representations of the Arab world. I noticed the ways in which imprecise and broad categories took up the space where lives had been and the way in which cartoonish

caricatures eclipsed the possibility of considering or representing the realities facing Arabs, Arab Americans, and anyone lumped into the category of Arab or Muslim other in the United States” (xi).

Other thoughtful approaches to the complexities of positionality are noted within dancer Lynette Harper’s interviews and stories between herself and other Canadian-Arab women on their relationship to dance and cultural heritage. Her work stands out amongst practitioner-based scholarship for carefully considering her own positionality to her practice but also for how this sense of positionality politics translates to her writing style and methodology of including the voices of an array of dance bodies. She notes, “All five narrators identify multiple belongings and have chosen flexible cultural identities that link the national and the transnational” (49). This sense of multiplicity is enabling in research, being aware of the many interrelationships your body has with the dance form you practice but also the larger transnational and political relationships that are entangled within this network, while maintaining the awareness of the fluidity your positionality can take.

Though the newest anthology on belly dance declares that the volume essays “embrace the intersection between ethnographer and dancer” (Sellers-Young 12) the critical positioning of the practitioner-scholar has not been pushed enough into all its ever fluid and contested interrelations between multiple bodily politics (nationality, class, gender, race) and larger historical-political transnational relationships. Belly dance scholarship thus far functions simultaneously as an example of how dedicated practitioner-scholars are in documenting and investigating belly dance while also

providing caution for how practitioner-scholarship must focus more on delving into the complexities and criticalities of ever-changing and pertinent political positioning between the multiplicity of bodies, spaces, and histories within research projects and undertakings. This is important, Dance Studies scholarship has pushed for practitioner-based scholarship, my own research explorations raise cautions and re-directions. My project will serve as a model for not allowing the weight of practitioner-experience to override more crucial, vexed, and intersecting political, racial, and gender issues that need addressing. Instead, my project suggests that these multiple identities and relationships must be interwoven to understand their full impact on the research. Simultaneously, my project provides a model for utilizing one's embodied knowledge as a practitioner-scholar in sensitive ways when conducting dance research across new borders and bodies, especially when uneven imperialistic power relations deeply entwine the site of my own research body as well as my fieldwork site. This is particularly volatile for my project where I, a U.S. based white female practitioner-scholar, am conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Cairo that focuses on centering intra-MENA subjectivities and significations.

Taken even further, a deeper attention to the multiplicity of bodies involved in dance ethnography becomes urgent. A multiplicity of fluid meanings is constantly negotiated within a dance event, but solely spotlighting the dancer misses out on critical nuances and other meanings being constructed and transmitted from other bodies, particularly other marginalized bodies such as non-dance laboring and spectating bodies. This is also related to the caution of highlighting the dancer's experience at the expense

of seriously considering the power dynamics and semiotics circulating between the variety of bodies making up the larger dance event. This is particularly relevant to the western-centrism and practitioner-scholarship discussed above because the very understandings of raqs sharqi within most Cairo contexts revolves around the *tafaal* (interaction), *hadoor* (chemistry, often stated as charisma), and *ihsas* (feeling) that comes from the combined and shared relationality of the musicians, dancer, and audience<sup>xxvii</sup>.

### **Ethnographic Research Methods/Approach:**

Overall, my objective is to critically expand upon this discourse through an intersectional and multi-sited dance ethnography of various Cairo circulations of raqs sharqi dance, and how these circulations signify locally as well as intra-culturally throughout the MENA region, and globally. My dance ethnography will encompass dance and non-dance bodies, as well as a critical attention to my own privileged positionality, yet also limited positionality due to gender, with a focus on choreographic analysis and interviewing to capture a partial, yet nuanced, portrait of Cairo centered raqs sharqi. Contextualization from Middle Eastern Gender and Sexuality Studies serves to ground my project, and ethnographic approaches from this field also provide beneficial models for negotiating my own positionality as researcher in the field.

I also contend that a richly class-intersectional exploration is needed to shake up the field. Particularly with contemporary scholarship centralizing globalization theories and questions within belly dance, scholars need to carefully articulate the way globalized spaces often privilege elite bodies and contexts at the expense of understanding the



complex yet critical inter-relationship of local and global bodies, contexts, and meanings as they co-constitute one another through varying degrees of class-based dynamics. Additionally, a deeper mining of intersectionality as it particularly relates to class, but also gender, race, and nationality is also warranted. A focus on the relationality and mutually co-constitutive connections between the various circulations of the local and global, as well as various contexts of dance and dance and non-dance bodies would also enliven the discourse with more fluid, polysemous, and dynamic research.

Dance Studies also provides key models for my ethnographic project. As mentioned, Cook's multi-sited analysis of neo-orientalism within Istanbul highlights the nuanced power dynamics and methods that become visibilized when multiple sites of dance are put into dialogue with one another for how they co-constitute larger political dynamics and meanings. Cook explores how these sites are co-constitutive through a mining of how space is used by different bodies and how the belly dancer's technique is adapted for each venue. Investigating multiple sites, Cook is keenly aware of how the multiple meanings of space are not just due to greater histories and social contexts, but also by how bodies move within/outside of those spaces to shape their significations. Dance scholar Priya Srinivasan's *Sweating Saris* highlights otherwise erased forms of transnational labor through the sweat and materiality of dancing bodies as they circulate within meanings directly tied to their gendered dance histories (2012). Thus, she is able to 'read' the circulation of multiple bodies, historic and live, within a seemingly singular dancing body. Her method relies on ethnographic-historiography as well as her own approach as the 'unruly spectator.' She lets her practitioner status inform her, particularly

through memories and the underlying political discomforts they bring up, but in doing so she remains a vulnerable and keen observer and listener, letting the other dancers stay center-staged. Her model of using one's kinesthetic practitioner knowledge in ways that inform deeper listening and investigation are particularly beneficial to my own research project. She reminds me that my dance knowledge, when in Cairo spaces, can best serve as a deep listening tool as my research body takes a spectating role in dance events.

Dance scholar Cindy Garcia's *Salsa Crossings* provides exemplary models for looking at dance as a larger practice within multiple nightclubs (2013). Garcia's nuanced attention to the interaction of multiple bodies on and off the dance floor, as well as how her own presence effects these interactions, allows her to articulate negotiations of larger power dynamics on micro bodily-levels with multiplicity in meanings. Her model results in a richly intersectional and nuanced ethnography of the larger practice of salsa in L.A. nightclubs. My project will model off of hers in using a comparative lens between micro-sites within Cairo's dance scene as a way to trace how the politics and meanings of all my fieldwork sites co-constitute one another in relationship to the larger gender, economic, and nationality politics they grapple with. Finally, performance studies scholar SanSan Kwan's *Kinesthetic City: Dance and Movement in Chinese Urban Spaces* considers how bodies are simultaneously choreographing space while space choreographs bodies to create ideologies of 'Chineseness' across multiple urban locations (2012). A primary methodology Kwan uses in her ethnography is the kinesthetic experiences of her own body moving through the city alongside the choreographic analysis of dancers within those cities. In my own work I pay attention to the movements of getting around

the city, to and from my research sites, as well as in and out of them, in order to mark my own bodies particular relationship to my research as well as more deeply mine the myriad of meanings within movement, both urban and dance.

When dance scholarship, exemplified by these scholars, focuses on the ‘movements of movement’ multiple configurations of power are made visible as well as the multiple positionalities of diverse corporealities that negotiate these political circuits. Larger hegemonies of power intersecting with race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and ethnicity are fluidly embodied and contradictorily contested upon bodies and their relationships to one another. A focus on circulation of dance is particularly enabling in centering the otherwise peripheral. This framework focuses on multi-directionality and multi-positionality of power dynamics in ways that do not flatten studies to bilateral or top-down structures of power, but also considers politics between variously marginalized corporealities as significant.

**Fieldwork:**

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork throughout greater Cairo consisting of in-depth participant-observation and interviews over the course of nine months between 2015-2017. I spent one month in summer 2015, two months in summer 2016, four months in winter-spring 2017 and a final two months in summer 2017 living and conducting fieldwork in Cairo. I observed multiple dancers in an array of venues (five-star hotels, weddings, cabarets, and cruise boats) every week throughout these periods, averaging about three shows per week. The three main field sites for my project are

Pyramid Street cabarets, Nile cruising tour boats, and five-star hotels with regular dancing shows. In addition to participant-observation at these shows, I used choreographic analysis as a main methodology. I extended my approach to choreographic analysis to include all the bodies involved within the larger dance event, from dancers to musicians and wait staff. Further, I focused not only on analyzing how, why, and when these bodies moved in time and space but also how they interacted with one another as well as the particular venue space we were within.

I have conducted over sixty informal interviews with dancers, managers, venue staff, musicians, audience members, and others involved in the dance industry at large. For many of these interviews I worked with a trusted translator Karim, fluent in English and Egyptian Arabic. While I am conversational in Egyptian colloquial Arabic, I preferred working with Karim to get a more in-depth understanding of my interviewees perspectives and experiences without them feeling the desire to ‘tone down’ their responses to meet my level of vocabulary. By my second fieldwork trip Karim generously became my key research partner, accompanying me to cabaret shows and being the ‘middle man’ between myself and many of the male contacts within the industry.<sup>xxviii</sup> I attended regular dance shows in over thirty different venues from working-class or ‘*shaabi*’ cabarets, Nile cruise ships, and five-star hotels, frequently returning to a few key venues from each type to focus my case studies. Interviews ended up being as multi-sited and improvisational as the participant observation field sites themselves. Interviews occurred in various spaces, from dancer’s apartments to mixed-gender environments and bustling public places, such as a coffee shop area outside a

venue or a management office. Others occurred quickly within cramped and stuffy dressing rooms with the music blasting in our ears or behind cabarets in narrow alleys between gigs with male interlocutors hovering nearby. Interruptions are constant, and many others involved with the dance industry in some form would enter in and out of the interviews which added an interesting flavor to the discussion and further matched the bustling nature of the city nightlife industry. The two main methods for connecting with industry personal for interviews was through social media messaging over Facebook, where I would reach out explaining my project, as well as through gatekeepers, almost always male. Usually, Karim worked with them in order to arrange the when and where of the interviews. Many of these gatekeepers we met on site during observations at different professional performance venues.<sup>xxix</sup> Interestingly, in many ways my research body is entangled in similar ways as female dancers are within the male dominated talent and venue management system.

**Narrative/Research Structure:** Structured Raqs Sharqi Improvisation

*-They don't know how to listen.* I could quote this statement, but there are far too many Egyptian dancers to name that have bluntly and exasperatedly exclaimed this to me as the number one problem when asked what is the biggest mistake you see non-Egyptian dancers make in raqs sharqi. It is exceedingly relevant here, in my project, as well as to a practitioner and academic western readership at large. Western practitioners and scholars do not know how to listen. Dozens of Egyptian dancers have complained to me repeatedly about how *aganeb* (foreigners) are getting 'it' wrong by not listening to the music, not listening and understanding the lyrics, just plainly not listening. Due to the

fact that *aganeb* do not listen, the majority of Egyptian artists conclude that non-MENA dancers have no feeling. *Ihsas*, feeling, is a fundamental value within raqs sharqi, cutting across contexts, from the working-class cabaret to elite five-star hotels and weddings. A main objective of professional raqs sharqi performances is to create feeling that is shared and mutually transmitted throughout and between the musicians, dancer, and audience within the performance space. Taken off stage and placed within an academic or general public western sphere, this critical mistake of not listening, remains imminently relevant. I argue that western practitioners, academics, and the general public project onto the Middle East what we perceive to ‘know’ about it, within western and MENA relations, *aganeb* continue to take the role of star performer that projects outward and fills up the stage, rather than that of learner, listener, and earnest student. I have well over a decade of practitioner experience in raqs sharqi, as a student, teacher, professional performer in a variety of US venues, and as a dance scholar. For my project centered in Cairo, I found that culminating my embodied knowledge from raqs sharqi was most useful when I stepped back and positioned myself as a listener, learner, and informed spectator<sup>xxx</sup>. First and foremost, this necessitates deep and vulnerable listening, and figuring out methodologically how to do this kind of visceral work as an *agnibiya*. Listening in earnest to what means the most to, and what my Egyptian participants would have this project focus on and do, as well as listening to the dance form’s structure and aesthetics within Cairo contexts was central to best figuring out how to do this ethnography with integrity. This sense of deep listening has greatly informed my project as a whole, from my fieldwork methodologies to the kaleidoscope of bodies and stories I highlight. From

the taxi drivers that maneuver the curves and congestion of Cairo city streets, to the exhausted but enlightening cabaret dancers sharing their perspectives with me as they rush between gigs at 5am, subtle and sustained listening was essential. This further extends to being aware of and listening to the kinesthetic sensation of Cairo city and dance circuitries. How are the sudden curves in the road in conversation with the dancers' languid hip curve articulations from cabarets to hotels? How are the various bodies moving throughout this city in conversation, and what are these choreographies at large saying about contemporary Cairo?

Dance Studies asserts that the dancing body is producing its own discourse, thus, it is incredibly enabling if the scholar is able to map and apply her dance's choreographic structure onto her research frameworks, methodology, and writing. This approach to the research and writing will not only allow for a deeper and dance-centric analysis of larger gender, class, nationalist, and sexuality dynamics, but will also provide a productive model of how to do dance ethnography. In particular, this approach is fruitful when dealing with a transnationally practiced dance form such as raqs sharqi, when the practitioner-scholar is exploring the form in new cultural contexts and on different bodies. It de-centers the practitioner's authority as a practitioner while transferring her embodied knowledge garnered from doing the form over the long-term to that of the dedicated mentee and learner. In other words, my project as a white *agnibiya* (foreigner) practitioner-scholar gestures towards a research model that keeps the keen awareness and vulnerable curiosity of the student-teacher relationship wherein the researcher/student is open to and honors new knowledges and techniques all while remaining deeply informed

by her already embodied knowledge of the form. If you think of the various roles one has as a practitioner, my model cautions against employing embodied knowledge as a solo star performer, a major facet of my own identity as a raqs sharqi professional and scholar, and instead reminds that in my particular research contexts as a white *agnibiya* it is best to focus on my role as learner, long-term student, and even the informed and appreciative audience member.

What raqs sharqi offers is that I am most capable as a dancer when I can keenly and acutely improvise within the over-arching structures I find myself within, musically as well as contextually, such as knowing how to best engage and capitalize upon my audience and material surroundings in any particular, yet ever shifting, moment. Raqs sharqi, like dance and MENA gender studies scholarship, all gesture towards an understanding of the body as capable of agency, yet always already interpolated and framed within various larger and overlapping hegemonies. The dancer can negotiate these larger systems to her best advantage through various tactics, but can never transcend them entirely. These negotiations and ‘wobble room’ within larger power structures are not solely determined by the dancer. The dancer/researcher must always be keenly aware of all bodies, particularly her own as it’s employing, playing, and being read in gendered, classed, raced, and sexual lenses. All the bodies within the space, including those historic bodies that helped create the current conditions for where the dance event is now, co-constitute meanings in conjunction, and never evenly or homogeneously. Like the raqs sharqi performance, one can never fully anticipate the circumstances they will burst onto the floor and find themselves within, but with utmost preparation and training the dancer



can have a foundation that enables her to do her best to most sensitively grapple with and navigate these situations.

In the immediate moment, it's about going with your gut, as there's no time for anything else. At the same time, a dancer learns to trust her own gut because that feeling is based on one's depth of ever-growing experiences and preparation in dealing with various kinds of people, music, and shifting contexts. In other words, hers is an informed intuition based on the accumulation of all her stage experiences and negotiations with various bodies over time. Her sphere of awareness is circular and constantly on the move, whether at a crowded wedding party surrounded completely by over enthusiastic guests, or on a small stage at a hotel, a full band of male musicians behind her that she controls while her audience is seated all around the stage's perimeter as she connects with them through gesture and chemistry. The dancer, like myself, should be continually, and intensely aware of all the micro and macro interactions that are engulfing the larger dance event, and be ready to shake up her foundational theoretical and methodological techniques in order to most eloquently fit the music. First and foremost, this necessitates open and vulnerable listening, and responding earnestly to what means the most for the people you're performing for while not over-stepping the music. It further necessitates an understanding of the particular space you're within, and knowing that there is not one set method, technique, or model that will fit and do justice to each situation.

Cutting across Cairo contexts of dance, a successful show is about cultivating meaningful connections. The core aim of raqs sharqi in most professional Cairo contexts is to create connections between bodies emboldened with feeling (*ihsas*.) A sound dancer

must connect to her musicians, to her singer, and especially the audience. In making subtle movements and interaction, eye contact and playful or powerful gesturing with her crowd, in knowing where and when to pause, punctuate, or stretch out the emotional lyrics of a song through the lingering sinuosity of her hip work, a dancer, at some bodily level, knows that everything, and everyone, connects to everything else. Her job is to highlight and make the entire room feel that sense of connection, while also working to maintain central control over the precarious kaleidoscope of power dynamics intertwined within and between this fluid web of connectivity. As the solo female dancer, her body and choreography, while grappling with these forces, simultaneously become the pinnacle nexus of all these criss-crossing forces and power plays. As a researcher, I must learn to feel and know how everything connects to everything else, and which forces become more centered, marginalized, buttery-smooth and disruptive throughout these tethered interplays. This lends to layered mappings of multiple meanings rather than singular, as well as research results that resist linear, binary, and singular analysis within any dance event. Instead, circular awareness and movements alongside vibrant shimmies shake up and produce discourse that rounds out analysis to center what's often peripheralized.

The raqs sharqi body is founded on an aesthetic interplay of softness and strength. It is constituted of fluid and fleshy circles and curves that can only be fully appreciated when their inter-relationship is engaged. Yet, this fluid relaxed and earthy quality is also interspersed with sharp hip and chest accents and vibrant shimmies, embodying the robust percussion that's become contemporary in much raqs sharqi performance music

today. The limbs largely function to focus and frame the torso and hip movements, gesturing towards the power of both the dancer, as well as practitioner-scholar, to direct and hold the audience's gaze. What the dancer frames and focuses upon becomes centralized, not just for her, but also in ways that transmit this centralization to wider audiences. This serves as an apt metaphor for the re-direction of western-centric belly dance scholarship in general. Her movements and weight are heavily grounded, bound to the earth as *raqs sharqi* remains anchored in the contemporary people, life, and semiotics of the social. *Raqs sharqi* necessitates slowing down, pausing, and stretching out movement in syrupy extension as a means of staying centered, and in best control of keeping hold of one's audience. While embodying the music, and being careful never to over-dance the music, the dancer must critically 'play' with her audience using the right combination of strength and softness through technique, charisma or chemistry (*hadoor*), feeling (*ihsas*), and interaction (*tafaal*). At the core of these interactions is gender, class, nationality, and sexuality as tethered to larger transnational economics and politics. Circling back, there's a rich potential in modeling my research project as well as writing on *raqs sharqi*'s choreographic structure in order to grapple with the significance and complexity of the circulations of various politics through dance in contemporary Cairo contexts.

### **Contributions:**

My dissertation project provides several critical interventions and expansions upon Dance Studies. My project offers critical cautions and re-directions for how to approach practitioner-based scholarship in sensitive cross-cultural contexts. It offers a

nuanced case study of how practitioner experience should be used to intimately inform but not override more vexed political positioning and inter-relationships of the researcher to their project. Taken further, this project will serve as a case study for western scholarship and scholars to study the MENA regions in ways that endeavor to learn from orientalist paradigms and move towards more particularly positioned and partial studies that neither inflate nor ignore the role of western politics and dynamics within non-western scholarship. This project will expand upon intersectionally focused dance scholarship by investigating lived realities of dancers in Cairo at a corporeal level in how dynamics of gender, sexuality, nationalism, and class are employed, mis/read, policed, and played with to achieve particular ends through choreographic analysis. My project offers a strong model for how to ‘do’ dance-centric analysis wherein dance is at the core of the research, writing, and ethnographic frameworks.

This project serves to expand upon dance ethnographies by following models based off of the choreographic structure of raqs sharqi in research and writing. This work will also add to multi-sited dance studies that focus on the multi-directional flows of power between and across powerful and variously marginalized bodies. Additionally, this study attends to the maneuvering and mapping of multiple mobilities, highlighting the ways people, including myself as ethnographer, move amidst the city to and from the specific site-specific raqs sharqi stages, as well as on those stages, to capture how various circulations of micro and macro corporeality are tethered to a kinesthetic kaleidoscope of local, global, and mobile meanings. Even the exploration of dancing bodies moves off the stage to highlight the *riklam* workers and other often peripheralized bodies<sup>xxxii</sup>. Further,

this project offers a refreshing take on globalization studies in exploring the overlapping hegemonies of intra-MENA power dynamics as well as western neoliberalism and capitalism, while maintaining a focus on pan-MENA significances without singularly focusing on elite bodies and sites. Finally, this project centers on structured improvisation, a betwixt and between dance genre that partakes from choreography, social dance, as well as improvisation while avoiding the highly structured as well as ‘liberational’ tropes on either end of this dance spectrum.

Additionally, my dissertation project expands upon Middle Eastern Gender Studies. My project delves deeply into a body and performance-centric focus of political and economic transformations that have occurred in the ever-unfolding aftermath of the 2011 revolution. It highlights these transformations viscerally from the ground-level lived reality of a plethora of male and female intra-MENA bodies within the raqs sharqi industry throughout greater Cairo. In doing so, my project expands upon cutting-edge theorizations on corporeality within MENA scholarship. This also expands upon Middle Eastern ethnographic studies by focusing on corporeality and dance as a central research lens, method, and form of knowledge production.

This is especially highlighted in my project’s focus on choreographic analysis of multiple movements within and going between larger dance events. My project centers bodies often marginalized within MENA scholarship, from raqs sharqi bodies, *riklam* workers, and taxi cab drivers. I distinctly recall a taxi driver calling me an *abeeta* (idiot) under his breath upon hearing about my research, ‘the people can’t afford bread here, and this idiot thinks we need research on dance.’ He thought I couldn’t understand or catch

his Arabic, but I was listening. Repeated encounters such as this have re-directed my own project to focus on economic and class threads as core contours of my project, while at the same time, advocating for the meaning-making capabilities of dance as practice and academic inquiry.

# **Multi-Sited Contemporary Cairo Raqs Sharqi Ethnography**

## **Chapter 1**

### **City Circuitries: Mapping the Curves and Contours of Contemporary Cairo**

#### **Part 1: Cairo Contextualized - A Historic Overview**

Before delving into the complexities of contemporary raqs sharqi in post-revolution Cairo, it is necessary to contextualize events leading up to the cutting-edge contours of today's political and dance dynamics. The following provides a historic overview of Cairo's layered political and dance history from the monarchy era up until contemporary times (2017), with a focus on a gendered reading of these events. While the series of MENA political uprisings, including the 2011 revolution, have been termed the 'Arab Spring,' it is important to note that these were not spontaneous events that suddenly and spectacularly mushroomed throughout the MENA, as the term may assume. Rather, these events are more productively read as moments within a long connective history of peoples and places struggling for more democratic lives and freedoms. Just as improvisation as a dance genre is often misunderstood as spontaneous and 'natural' movement, it is critical to trace the underlying experiences and foundations upon which such movements and genres are built upon, to better understand with integrity both the political and dance events as they have, and are, unfolding. Upon investigation, in both cases of the 'Arab Spring' movements as well as raqs sharqi improvisation, what becomes legible is a deeply rich foundation of knowledge and experience upon which

these movements derive, culminated from continually linked failures and successes over time. As Middle Eastern historian James Gelvin posits, “History is cumulative, and so-called revolutionary events are as much the product of change as they are the source of it” (259). Therefore, in providing this historic overview, I hope to set the stage for contemporary choreographies while demonstrating just how actively entwined raqs sharqi has always been to greater political, gender, and economic conditions. Additionally, I hope that, despite my condensed macro-level overview, this history provides a sense of the grit, innovation, and resilience, of Egyptians in persistently and courageously striving for more just and democratic lives.

### **Monarchy Era 1923-1952**

Following Egypt’s 1919 revolution against the British, the country became a constitutional monarchy in 1923 and became partially independent from British rule and domination with a liberal democracy. A wealthy bourgeoisie existed at this time and the economy was generally stable and focused on agriculture, particularly the exporting of cotton and other textiles. Globally, the 1930’s were the years of the Great Depression, which had economic ripple effects felt across the globe, as well as the years of the formation of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Results of World War 2 (1939-45) included increased British resentment as well as swelling numbers of Europeans that lived in an already cosmopolitan Cairo.

During the period from 1923-1952, upper-class post harem family life, partial independence from British rule, and early nationalist sentiments changed gender relations



across social classes. Notions of cultural authenticity and nationalism permeated sociocultural life and women were expected and encouraged to obtain modern education and take on modernist ideologies. The Egyptian Feminist Union was formed during this time, spearheaded by Huda Sharaawi, as a culmination, and continuation, of middle and upper-class women's feminists' efforts and politics following the 1919 revolution. Though integral to decolonization and nationalist efforts through demonstrations and women's presses, these women found themselves marginalized from full political participation after the revolution. This will become a reoccurring theme throughout Egypt's history, but is also an issue found throughout revolutionary nationalist movements across the globe. In the domestic realm, men's patriarchal domination of the home remained unreformed in cultural ideology or within legal laws, creating a split-role for women. Women were encouraged to become educated mothers, essentially constricting them as the bearers of culture and tradition at home where they had scarce legal rights or protection from their fathers and husbands, while re-aligning them as mothers to future generations of modernized Egyptian men. While women were deemed essential to rising nationalist efforts and anti-British decolonization, they were not given the full rights of citizenship as were men.

Gender relations amidst the working-classes also shifted during this period. Previously, women of the working classes lived in relative autonomy. They could own small businesses and were not subject to the gender segregation of Ottoman harem life as were the upper classes. However, the western-oriented modernization project of the liberal democracy period found these women increasingly alienated from social and

capital mobility. Instead, finding they had scarce benefits to gain from this new system, these classes re-identified and consolidated through a new conceptualization of Islamist life, holding tightly to more conservative Islamist ideology and gender segregation that was not a large part of their lives before the threatening divide of European-oriented modernization. This ideological and class split would cleave deep into Egyptian society. In 1928, for example, the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood occurred, an example of an Islamist political group resistive to what they perceived as threatening westernization, and a group that will continue to resurface with verve post 2011 revolution. The Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoot, the Muslim Sisterhood, held strict gender ideologies wherein men hold authority over women.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Subsequently, the dance form that came to develop and crystalize into what is termed raqs sharqi developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a fusion of local and international dance genres with urban Cairo *baladi* at its core. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a split between two popular groups of professionally paid female dancers, the *awalem* and *ghawazee*. *Awalem* were known to recite poetry, sing, play instruments, and dance for women's eyes only and were more esteemed, whereas the *ghawazee* were known to be ethnic 'others' that performed in public places in front of men such as streets outside of coffee shops, marketplaces, weddings, and for Saint's Day celebrations or *mawalia*<sup>xxxiii</sup>. The distinction between the two groups largely collapsed within Cairo by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and most paid performers for the popular classes in weddings and Saint's Day celebrations were termed *awalem*. The dancing of *ghawazee* and *awalem* was largely occasion-based, occurring at weddings, Saint's Day

celebrations, and other special occasions, or otherwise for the wealthy, such as for tourists on their boats (Nieuwkerk 33-34 1995).

Raqs sharqi as a distinct genre developed and was popularized during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries alongside a significant shift in the sites where it was performed. It was during this time, particularly crystalizing in the period of liberal democracy, that innovative performance venues sprang up in Cairo to situate and contextualize raqs sharqi. The area of Ezbakiya, bordering old and new Cairo, was highlighted in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as an area to be modernized and turned into a European-garden style promenade with restaurants, boutiques, coffee shops, and new entertainment venues to suit the tastes of the Egyptian elite as well as Arab and international tourists (Nieuwkerk 1995, Roushdy 2009). Intended as the new city-center, Ezbakiya served an incredibly cosmopolitan Cairo population. Adjacent to this area was Muhammad Ali Street, which became famous as the professional entertainment street where *awalem*, musicians, and singers resided and could be found to negotiate business throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. New performance venues housed variety entertainment shows of local dance, largely known as raqs sharqi at this time, as well as international dance, singing, and other entertainment (Nieuwkerk 1995, Roushdy 2009). Known by a number of terms, these new venues provided local and global entertainment for an equally local and global spectatorship.<sup>xxxiv</sup> It was during the early part of this century that raqs sharqi developed into what practitioners are familiar with today in terms of style, technique, musicality, and costuming.<sup>xxxv</sup>

It's important to call attention to the fact that as raqs sharqi developed within these new sites, it was thus intertwined with Egypt's larger modernization schemes, negotiating local and global tastes, performances, and spectatorships. Here, I use the term global to refer not only to European or western cultural flows but also pan-MENAT, as many of the entertainment types offered, as well as spectators and dancing bodies, were from throughout Egypt and the MENAT.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Calling attention to these new sites of entertainment and dancing bodies as grappling with multiple circulations of local Egyptian, pan-MENAT, and other global flows is important in destabilizing discourse that often posits raqs sharqi dance and venues developed in direct response to western or non-MENAT demands and desires.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

While the heart of raqs sharqi developed largely in downtown Cairo, particularly towards the end of this era even more venues started to become regular sites of entertainment housing raqs sharqi. Additional sites that began emerging to regularly host raqs sharqi included five-star hotels and Nile cruising ships, though the popularity and reach of these sites crystalized in the Nasser era. Historic Pyramid Street, *Sharia' Haram*, was originally built by Khedive Ismail for the opening of the Suez Canal to transport his elite guests from Cairo to the pyramids, but became a famous street for hosting cabarets. During this time two elite casinos opened up on Pyramid Street with featured variety entertainment including raqs sharqi, the Oberge and Shalimar, frequented by the well-to-do locals and tourists. Pyramid street became a much more popular entertainment site during the tourist boom of World War 2, at which time it was still a relatively isolated area, not in the midst of a bustling residential area as it is today. However, much of these

early entertainment venues were concentrated within the centrality of downtown Cairo and surrounding areas, and the cabaret was the most imminent site for raqs sharqi during this time. Within dance throughout this era, there was a large split between popular entertainment at local urban weddings and festive occasions that continued in the tradition of the *awalem*, as compared to site-specific raqs sharqi in venues that catered towards more upper-class audiences locally and internationally.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Due to the limited venues for housing raqs sharqi throughout much of this era, cabarets were elite and featured star artistes, a common name given to the performers in these sites. Thus, compared to contemporary times where cabarets have a negative and lower-class connotation, at this time they were the places one would largely go to see a star singer or dancer.<sup>xxxix</sup> This period was also when Cairo and Alexandria's film industries flourished, with Egypt becoming the central hub of films throughout the MENA world. This new medium not only further disseminated dance locally and globally, but became an alternative to the cabaret performance scene, so as time passed star performers could work within the 'respectable' medium of films as dancers and actresses.

At the same time, one of the main components of gendered labor within these enclosed cabarets was a practice known as *fath* 'to open.' *Fath* was when performers in the cabarets would sit, socialize, and drink with men and get them to open expensive bottles of champagne and other alcohol. The dancers got a large commission from this practice, and it was known that some women would not want to leave the tables to dance, and some were known to only be able to stumble on stage after being so drunk (Nieuwkerk 44 1995). These women, known as *fatihat*, initiated competition between

men within the venues through the consumption of alcohol and the large bills they were able to pay. Staff would elaborately bring out alcohol and make a show of how much money a client was able to spend to stimulate rivalry amongst other guests. This male competition steeped in spending and strategically provoked by female laborers provided a key majority of cabaret income. While cabarets flourished during this time, it's important to note that a hierarchy of levels existed within cabarets, some were considered more elite and family-friendly while others catered to more lustful desires and all-male clientele. Consequently, the containment of raqs sharqi alongside heavy alcohol consumption and sexualized female labor in the new site of the cabaret further marginalized the dance and dancers while contradictorily stigmatizing these venues as sites of sin on the one hand, and establishments of elite decadence on the other.<sup>x1</sup>

### **Nasser / Nationalist-Socialism 1952-1970**

In 1952 an Egyptian group of military soldiers called the 'Free Officers' overthrew the Egyptian monarchy running the country and shortly thereafter one of the officers, Gamal Abd Nasser, became the president of fully independent Egypt. During Nasser's almost twenty-year rule, nationalism continued with renewed fervor and a militarized state authoritarian system tightened its grip upon Egyptians alongside a centrally planned and state-controlled economy. Nasser's Egypt was characterized by strong Arab nationalism, secularism, and state socialist ideology and policies. The bourgeoisie class slowly diminished under state socialism, and foreign presence greatly diminished.

Women's self-image was refashioned towards their deepened roles as mothers and daughters not only within the home, but also of the nation, now constructed as a family. Women were constructed as mothers and daughters of Egypt, and they believed their efforts in raising and participating as dutiful family members amidst the zeal of Arab nationalism as critical to Egypt's independence and continued success. Women's liberation expanded due to increased job and labor opportunities outside of the home under increased industrialization which led to greatly amplified public visibility and acceptance. Further, women were granted the right to vote and granted equal access to state resources of social welfare, education, and other health and government services. However, though women's responsibilities and duties were expanded, their private family relations scarcely changed. Women were still expected to carry out patriarchal subordinate roles within the family, gained few legal rights within personal status laws, and participated in building a new republic that was entrenched in the male dominated perspectives and ideology of a military autocracy. As Middle Eastern Gender scholar Sherine Hafez elaborates, "Once again, state governments chose fraternity over equality and women paid the price. Once again, women's bodies were claimed by domestic laws that precluded their full participation in the public sphere" ("Revolution" 180). In other words, though women's bodies swelled in the public sphere in regards to labor and education opportunities, they were more deeply tied to the patriarchal state under a military autocracy that wasn't concerned with women's rights and legal equality in the domestic sphere. Further, women's traditionally domestic roles expanded, as they were

not only viewed primarily as wives and mothers in the home, but now also within the imagined community of Egypt as a ‘family’ nation.

Due to Egypt’s independence and opening of the economy, a boom of stratified venues opened that regularly featured raqs sharqi performances. Five-star hotels began springing up, particularly along the Nile, featuring nightclubs that began hosting regular raqs sharqi shows as a way to keep affluent guests spending within the hotel rather than outside of it in an upscale and family-friendly atmosphere. On the heels of the five-star hotels, Nile cruising dinner ships began regularly featuring a packaged entertainment deal of tourist-oriented and family friendly live music, raqs sharqi, and tanoura as the entertainment portion of a 2-hour cruise.<sup>xli</sup> Cabarets continued to operate and open, though during this era the downtown cabarets largely lost their ground as the foremost center of raqs sharqi entertainment, and started catering to the lower-middle classes and local Egyptian clientele. Pyramid street grew to be not only a bustling residential and commercial area during this time but also continued to be a site for newer cabarets. As the number of hotels, boats, and cabarets mushroomed, each had its own hierarchy or ‘levels’ of venue, from low-class to high, in connection with the level of entertainment offered as well as other services such as food, waitstaff, venue atmosphere, clientele, and management. However, it is important to call attention to the fact that as different strata and types of venues opened they created competing and comparative reputations within the mindset of the general public. For example, five-star hotels and boats were seen as family friendly and respectable sites of entertainment, while cabarets were increasingly viewed as mostly male sites of drinking and debauchery.



During this time there became a split in the business systems used for raqs sharqi performance bookings and operations. The popular classes and wedding circuits continued to largely operate in the traditional *awalem* style, with a female-led *usta* system and informal word of mouth or colloquial contracts<sup>xliii</sup>. On the other hand, with the opening up of the economy towards the international market, newly owned and operated hotels and boats began utilizing the male impresario system which is still dominant today. Nasser introduced many new regulations and laws to further regulate and monitor raqs sharqi. These new regulations alongside international business dealings made written contracts and bilingual and bicultural work procedures standard fare for conducting entertainment business in these newly popular sites. Nasser's increased licensing, regulation, and monitoring of raqs sharqi ensured now only that it would continue to contribute to the economy, a main motive for regulation and policing throughout the dance's history, but also to steer the infamous image of the 'dancer – *ra'asa*' farther away from his conceptualization of Egypt as a nation, and more specifically, the ideal of Egyptian womanhood as a dutiful mother/daughter.

Nasser's government realized the potentials dance holds within political projects of nationalism. Traditional heritage arts flourished during Nasser's time, aiding in his project of nationalism. Early in his presidency, Mahmoud Reda and Farida Fahmy, elite and educated Egyptians, pioneered the *firqa Reda*, or Reda Troupe, a theatricalized dance form that was a blend of the popular Soviet-style state troupes of the time, theatrical dancing and staging from ballroom and other forms, as well as a core grounding in stylized regional folk dances derived throughout Egypt.<sup>xliii</sup> Politics of representation

performed by state folk dance ensembles, with the Reda troupe as the emblematic Egyptian example, participated productively within Nasser's political project of nationalism. Politics of representation include performative power, the power to define who and what the nation is, and maybe even more importantly, who and what the nation is not. The Reda troupe was founded on its reputation for being clean theatrical folk-inspired dance, on reputable state-sanctioned stages, and performed by educated middle-class and up men and women from 'good families' (Fahmy 1987, Shay 2002). As anthropologist Roushdy notes, "In contrast to the by-then-familiar cabaret style performed in the two-piece costume, the choreographies of Rida softened and stiffened the shakes, stressed movement in space and use of legs, and were performed in the traditional garments worn by provincial and urban women" (2009 35). The Reda troupe presented Egypt as a family nation wherein heterosexuality, as demonstrated between the male-female staged pairings, as well as educated middle-class and up citizens performed hyper gender roles and thus idealized constructions for men and women. Men performed hyper-masculine movements and erased the *baladi* serpentine and shimmying hip work from their repertoires while women performed a 'cleaned up' version of hip work and coquetry that erased the sexuality from their movements (Fahmy 1987, Shay 2002).

In doing so, raqs sharqi performed solo on stages throughout Cairo lost respectability and became further marginalized. As Nieuwkerk states, "belly dancers were seen as a bad advertisement for Arabic Muslim womanhood" (1995 48). While raqs sharqi became less state-sanctioned with the arrival of Reda troupe, it continued to be increasingly under state surveillance and control.<sup>xliv</sup> On an intra-MENA scale, films

starring Egyptian dancers and further disseminating the nightclub style remained popular throughout the Arab world and many professional dancers, as well as folkloric troupes, travelled throughout the MENA and internationally giving performances, with Cairo remaining a key center throughout these political and dance circulations.

### **Sadat / Economic Liberalization 1971-1981**

After Nasser's death President Anwar Sadat took over and radically shifted Egypt's political and economic landscape. Sadat's era is often referred to as the 'open door' time, or *infitah* 'openness,' to private investment and a neoliberal capitalist economy. Turning from Nasser's socialist economic ties with the USSR, Sadat opened up to the USA and capitalism with his 'open door' economic policies and political alliances that encouraged investments locally and globally into the private sector. This unfortunately was a failed economic liberalization. Welcoming neoliberalist capitalism only served to drastically increase the already rich, particularly allies within the regime, while further marginalizing the middle class and poor. As Egypt became an ally with the US the country began to rely heavily on US aid in exchange for peaceful negotiations and treaties with Israel, further alienating Egypt from the rest of the Arab world. This economic unrest was extolled in the 1977 'bread riots' that occurred throughout Cairo by thousands of working-class demonstrators against the IMF and World Bank policies that led to the termination of state subsidies on basic food stuffs (Gelvin 23). To gain political support, Sadat returned the multi-party system and supported Islamist political movements, such as loosening up restrictions and incarcerations of the Brotherhood. This allowed Islamists groups to gain strongholds while spreading more conservative ideology

to the popular classes in the face of harsher economic realities. Further, the Arabian Gulf oil boom in the seventies led to a huge migrant workforce of Egyptian men that sent home remittances to their families back home. Alongside their incomes, supplemented by petro-dollars, these migrant workers also returned home with new outlooks and values based on their exposure to the conservative Wahabism strain of Islam from Saudi Arabia, a major force behind the growing conservative Islamization of Egypt.<sup>xlv</sup> This flow of bodies circulated, as rich gulf *khaleegy* tourists started coming to Egypt in droves, particularly during what came to be known as the ‘Arab season,’ the summer months of vacationing where Egypt’s milder weather offered relief from the scorching heat of the gulf.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Due to the failed economic liberalization of the country, women’s roles also suffered. Under patriarchy, women receive the benefit of financial care by the men in their lives, but the economic disenfranchisement of large sectors of the population negated this possibility for many and families struggled. As Hafez articulates, “social norms were left to the mercy of global capital on the outside and Islamist ideology on the inside – once more, women’s bodies mirrored this split in sociopolitical discourse” (“Revolution” 181). Women of upper classes that could capitalize upon the *infītah* took on dress and viewpoints that were largely western-oriented whereas other sectors of society increasingly turned towards conservative Islamist doctrine and dress; thus women’s bodies in public reflected this ideological split through their dress and veiling once again became more common (Hafez “Revolution” 2014, Botman 1999). Though Sadat’s wife Jehan toiled hard to gain rights for women, particularly drafting laws that

granted better equality in divorce, she was met with fierce opposition by increasingly powerful Islamist groups as well as women's groups that perceived her work as imposed from a corrupt top-down regime (Hafez "Revolution" 181). Full rights of citizenship for women were increasingly met with opposition from fundamentalists who believe a women's role is exclusively in the domestic realm. Women, particularly of the middle and lower classes are continually caught in a contradiction as an increasingly dire economy requires their public work outside the home, yet traditional ideology continues to stigmatize this lifestyle as taking away from their primary role within the family. Contention around Sadat and his wife's support of women's rights were one of the main undercurrents leading to his assassination by fundamentalist Islamists that ended his presidency.

Major shifts and innovations also occurred within raqs sharqi during Sadat's era that tied directly into the overlapping hegemonies of the Saudi oil hegemony alongside western neoliberalism's economic upheavals from the IMF and World Bank structural adjustment policies and loans. Due to the open-door policy, the *awalem* and entertainers of Mohamed Ali Street lost their long-held monopoly on the trade due to drastically increased profits and individualization of the profession. During this time the wages dancers could earn swelled, causing many outsiders working as individuals within the male impresario system to enter the market and oversaturate the trade (Nieuwkerk 1998 55-60). Raqs sharqi shows within Nile boats, five-star hotels, and cabarets of all levels continued to be popular, though the music and style of dancing within these sites was, as always, shifting.

During this era *shaabi* music became extremely popular and incorporated into raqs sharqi shows. *Shaabi* refers to a popular working class musical genre that incorporates instrumentation of Upper Egypt alongside new instrumentation such as the accordion with working class sentiments and vernacular. Ahmed Adaweya was the first to become a famous star singer from this genre from Mohamed Ali Street. His upbeat and fast music extolled the conditions of working-class lovers and life (Roushdy 42). Adaweya's duets with many star dancers led to the popular incorporation of *shaabi* aesthetics, music, and styling into raqs sharqi shows across venues. Raqs sharqi necessitates embodying the music, thus the pace, gesturing, technique, and attitude of performers embodied aesthetics and movements from working-class vernacular<sup>xlvii</sup>. Star dancer Fifi Abdou became a popular emblem of *baladi* and *shaabi* styles during this time, particularly her tableaux incorporating the *maalima* (boss lady) persona and *baladi* movements while wearing the white *galabeya* as opposed to the two-piece bra and belt/skirt costume.

At the same time that *shaabi* burst onto the scene, Arabian Gulf *khaleegy* tourism was also greatly shifting the landscape of raqs sharqi across venues. The oil boom, and particularly the oil embargo crisis of 1973, resulted in vast wealth for the gulf countries and their economic dominance in the region was visible through the drastic increase of gulf tourists flooding into Cairo.<sup>xlviii</sup> The economic power these Gulf tourists wielded was immediately felt in raqs sharqi as demands, backed by bursting thick wallets, for *khaleegy* regional music and dancing permeated venues from the elite five-star hotels to late night Haram Street cabarets. Particularly within cabarets on Pyramid Street/*Sharia*'

*Haram*, the combination of petro-dollars and Sadat's increasing regulation of dance re-oriented the structure of cabaret nightlife. In 1973 the *musannafat*, a government organization established towards the end of Nasser's era and in charge of licensing and regulations for raqs sharqi professionals, successfully prohibited the practice of *fath* under Sadat. The crackdown was more intense than previous attempts to eradicate the practice, and this combined with the influx of petro-dollars and *khaleegy* clientele resulted in a new system of competition within the male-dominated cabarets of Pyramid Street. Instead of *fatihat* women generating profit through male competition through the purchasing of alcohol, the competition was re-oriented in the form of highly corporeal tipping methods. Gulf clientele started to toss, throw or 'shower' money onto the stage and over the dancers and singers in these cabaret clubs, and different male clients would compete with one another to see who was throwing the most money. This new influx of clientele and their methods of competition led to an immediate surge in cabarets throughout Pyramid street, with well-known cabarets such as Lucy's Parisiana, El Leyl, and others popping up along the street to further capitalize upon this lucrative new opportunity and client base.

One star dancer, Nagwa Fouad, became popular during this time and added innovative changes to the structural performance of raqs sharqi that had lasting significance. Nagwa Fouad was the first dancer to have a *mejanca*, or entrance opening piece, composed specifically for her dance performance, allowing her to create a dramatic choreographed spectacle for the opening of her shows. Additionally, in her showmanship desire to upgrade raqs sharqi to a more theatrical form, Nagwa popularized the use of

*funun shabeya*, or folkloric dancing men, with her on stage to create a *tableau*, or more narrative story/character scene within her long show<sup>xlix</sup>. The use of crafted entrance pieces that are often at least somewhat choreographed, along with the use of *funun shabeya* to add a tableau to part of a dancer's show, are still common elements in Cairo raqs sharqi performances today.

During Sadat's era the incorporation of *khaleegy* and *shaabi* music and dance within raqs sharqi gestured towards overlapping and uneven economic flows locally and globally. Taken together, both trends argue for the primacy of economic power dynamics within dance, a facet of the globalized belly dance world that western dancers tend to dismiss. As the khaleegy petro-hegemony made its prowess known internationally, it was deeply felt across Cairo raqs sharqi venues as the seats were filled with gulf clientele and increasing numbers of working and middle class Egyptian men left to become gulf migrant workers. At the same time, the *shaabi* style embodied in gesture, dress, and persona, the ever-growing reality of middle and working-class women that must take on more socially-constructed 'male' attributes such as working outside the home, and lyrics representative of the struggles and stories of everyday life for the working-classes.

### **Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011)**

After his assassination, President Anwar Sadat was succeeded by President Hosni Mubarak. Mubarak continued the failed economic liberalization policies of Sadat, and the gap between the rich and poor continued to grow as the middle class drastically disappeared. Allegations of corruption ran high, and alongside the vast economic



disparities between the wealthy and poor, further conservative Islamization grew. Though Egypt's aid in the Gulf War of 1991 granted the country major debt relief, it wasn't enough to stop the continued deterioration of government services and extreme poverty in the lower-classes. Religious revival and piety movements were common in this era and by the 1990's had even spread to certain sectors of the upper classes as well as performance arts (Nieuwkerk 2013, 3). Many public entertainers and professional women retired and/or took on the veil during this time, and a new genre of pious entertainment was created (Nieuwkerk 2013, 3). The continued state of emergency led to severe restrictions of political activity and autonomy, freedom of expression, and assembly as Mubarak ran a tightly controlled autocratic regime. The patriarchal structure continued to breakdown, demasculinizing men that couldn't be productive economic providers, and led to further disenfranchisement with Mubarak who deemed himself the 'father' of Egypt, though he could not provide for everyday Egyptians as the term would imply. Tensions further erupted throughout Egypt with a series of terrorist attacks by fundamentalist groups that targeted tourists, Christian Coptic minorities, police and government officials.<sup>1</sup> Further, the spatial design of Cairo continued to change, with new gated districts becoming populated for the wealthier classes and to relieve congestion in Central Cairo, however these new affluent compounds and districts further separated classes and were farther away from many of the entertainment establishments that the wealthy used to frequent. More spatial reconfigurations occurred due to globalization and the open economy, with discotheques for youth to go social dancing, large shopping malls, and international coffee chains popping up that were safe places to socialize for

men and women. Technology changes also led to the growing popularity of DJ's for entertainment venues and weddings as a fashionable, and economically viable, alternative to full orchestra bands of the past. In December 2010 in Tunisia, protests arose after a street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire after his business vendor cart was confiscated by the government. This was the first event that started the series of political uprisings throughout the MENA known as the 'Arab Spring.'

While the government of Mubarak era set back most of the improvements in women's rights set forward during Sadat's presidency, Mubarak's wife Suzanne continued to be a prominent advocate of women's rights as was Jehan before her. Feminism became state-run under Suzanne's leadership within the National Council for Women and had many highly visible feminists in its membership, but due to its state incorporation autonomy and diversity was limited (Botman 1999, Hafez 2014). Advances were made in legislation providing greater rights for women in divorce (the *kohl* law), and greater political participation with a set number of seats guaranteed for women in parliament. However, these advances were met with intense objection, and due to the overwhelming economic inequalities, women still paid a hefty price in gaining equality and status in society during this time. Like his predecessor, multiple overlapping tensions plagued Mubarak's regime. As feminist historian Selma Botman articulates, "His regime wants to cast an image to the outside world as progressive and reformist and believes that modernizing women help give the impression that Egypt has a maturing social structure. But Mubarak's government prevents women (and men) from organizing independently. As a result, women have been relegated to the sidelines of important discussions and

deliberately shut out of the political mainstream” (92). Thus, the autocratic regimes that curtail freedom of political participation and expression negatively effect both genders, and the detrimental economy only further marginalizes the rights of women, many of whom found recourse in the conservative political Islamist movements spreading throughout the country as a retaliation to the threatening neoliberalism of the global economy.

During Mubarak’s era there was a flood of foreign raqs sharqi dancers competing on the professional Cairo market for hotel and boat venue dance jobs. Globalization spurred by cheaper air travel and the established immigration and subsequent cultural production of Middle Easterners throughout the globe led to a deeper dissemination and popularization of belly dance that markedly circled-back to Cairo during the 1980’s and onwards. Foreigners, particularly from the United States, Europe, and Russia, looked for work opportunities in Cairo, the heartland and cultural hub of belly dance locally and globally, for in-depth performing experience, money, and their rise to fame transnationally and in their own home countries. Just as larger economic and cultural dynamics destabilized the long-held monopoly of Mohamed Ali street entertainers in Sadat’s time, the influx of foreigners without in-situ knowledge of the Cairo dance business and culture, led to a rift in the market for local Egyptian dancers. A greater number of male impresarios and businessmen also entered this growing market opportunity, hungry to seize upon the economic benefits of these new job opportunities, however, this wave of new food and beverage managers and impresarios were predominantly businessmen, and often didn’t have the connoisseur tastes of their

predecessors when it came to raqs sharqi aesthetics and history. Many of these foreign dancers worked for less than their Egyptian counterparts and didn't have the same cultural stigma and societal expectations to reconcile with as did their Egyptian colleagues. For example, the shame associated with being a public dancer, the economic hardships, and the expectations of motherhood as a primary role for women didn't affect foreigners in the way it often paused, troubled, and deeply affected the careers of Egyptian women. Many foreign dancers came to Egypt with the expectation, and privilege, of working to gain experience, fame, and a bit of money before moving back to their home countries to work as a bigger name on the teaching circuit.<sup>li</sup> Notably, the influx of foreign dancers in Cairo did not permeate the thriving cabaret scene, only those venues classified as more 'elite, reputable, and clean' – boats and hotels. Many foreign dancers reported not having any interest in what they deemed the 'low class' cabaret scene, and likewise, most that did audition for these jobs were not desired or hired by the venues.<sup>lii</sup>

Further, creative entrepreneurs in the famous touristic souk Khan al Khalili started capitalizing upon this growing globalization (and deepening commodification) of belly dance by offering paraphernalia and whole shops dedicated to the sale of coin scarves, dance props, and costumes<sup>liii</sup>. While a drastic increase in foreign dancers characterized this era, so did a heightened number of ordinary urban Cairene social dancing bodies. While popular social dancing has always been common amongst the popular classes at weddings, during this time it became increasingly popular at weddings across all class levels.

Due to global fashion trends and technology changes in music, as well as the poor economy and series of terrorist incidents, tourism began to take a serious dip in Cairo. This affected the extravagant five-star hotel shows, it was no longer fashionable, nor economically feasible, to carry on in the tradition with hour-long shows with twenty-plus orchestras in decadent hotel nightclubs. Changes in fashion, economics, increasing conservatism, along with the Gulf War fallout resulted in a dearth of elite nightclub patrons and many hotel nightclubs shut their doors. However, one star dancer, Dina Talaat Sayad, that rose to popularity in the 1980's and 1990's (and remains famous until today), carries on in this changing tradition. She was named 'the last Egyptian dancer' by Newsweek (2008) and many inside and outside of Egypt say she is the last star to come forward in raqs sharqi. Dina is a particularly unique woman in that she came from an educated elite background but chose to become a dancer anyway, despite having many other more 'respected' options available to her. In the 1990's she catapulted a change in aesthetics through a 'modern Cairo' styling and the two-piece costume, shocking and exciting audiences with risqué costumes including skimpy bras and mini-skirts.<sup>liv</sup>

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century Cairo's raqs sharqi scene engaged with another wave of changes. The elite hotels and Nile cruise boats responded to the security threats and drop in tourism by amping up their security features, and around this time it became standard for security apparatuses to mediate entrance to these venues. For example, since this time it has been common to have your vehicle inspected before dropping off guests in front of the hotel entrance, for example, an armed guard or two may check your license, your trunk, and have a sniffing dog encircle your vehicle. After this, patrons must pass through

guarded metal detectors at the hotel entrance. With more upscale boats and a few elite cabarets, a guarded metal detector often has to be walked through and your bags inspected before entering the venue. While the series of terrorist incidents and growing Islamist fundamentalism made many non-MENA tourists concerned about coming to Cairo, the ‘Arab season’ would continue with full force, and Arab tourists typically spent much more money on their vacations in Cairo, and stayed for longer periods, than other nationalities (Wynn 14).

Madam Raqia Hassan, an Egyptian theatrical folklore dancer trained in Reda troupe and master raqs sharqi choreographer, capitalized upon the buzzing globalization of belly dance world wide and started the first large-scale oriental dance festival in Cairo, *Ahlan wa Sahlan* in 2000 (Hassan interview, 2017). The high cost of the festival oriented it towards foreign clientele and marginalized local Egyptian participation, but the new festival scene in Cairo created an exceptional opportunity for Egyptian dancers to become teachers on the international belly dance market and re-affirm Cairo’s central location within transnational belly dance circulations via the festival site (located within elite hotels across Cairo). In addition to the classes and workshops offered in the budding festival scene, elite fitness centers within Cairo began offering women-only raqs sharqi dance fitness classes for the first time, classes that became increasingly popular, and remain popular, today.<sup>lv</sup>

Further changes in technology such as the reach of satellite television channels resulted in a new rush of provocative music video clips, similar to ‘MTV’ style clips, that emerged and quickly became popular during this time. This became the newest and most

popular medium for raqs sharqi to be disseminated in Egypt and throughout the MENAT. It would be difficult to find an ordinary Cairene man or woman who hasn't been exposed to dozens or hundreds of these music video clips, played on televisions at home but also on public television screens in cafes and coffee shops throughout Cairo. Additionally, in the years immediately preceding the revolution the economic gains of the 'Arab season' were threatened with a series of years (from roughly 2008 up until 2016) when the holy month of Ramadan cut directly across the time frame of the tourist season.<sup>lvi</sup> YouTube and Facebook also became popularized within Cairo during this time, and played an interesting role in dance. For example, Facebook has become a common and economic way for venues and dancers to market themselves and gain a more international reach, and the same follows for YouTube, as clips of dancers in boats, hotels, and festivals began circulating across the web. It is important to note that cabarets once again remained more shielded from the foreign gaze, as there is a strict no photo and no video policy within cabarets to protect the privacy of those within. In terms of musical genres, *maharagan* (festival) music, a unique hybrid of electro-*shaabi*, taking some inspiration from *mulad* and hip hop music, began in the working-class areas around Cairo just prior to the 2011 revolution and embodied a range of working-class political, economic, and everyday life sentiments (ElShamy "Mahraganat"). On the eve of the January 25<sup>th</sup> revolution, many dancers were working on stages across Cairo throughout the night, but woke up to find their world changed once again.

## **Part 2: Contemporary Cairo: Routing the Revolution's Ruptures and Resilience**

### **Revolution and (SCAF) Military Rule**

The January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011 revolution occurred throughout major cities in Egypt and followed quickly on the heels of the overthrowing of the Tunisian government on January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2011. The date was selected to coincide with Egypt's annual 'police day' by various youth groups to protest against police brutality of the Mubarak regime through various demonstrations, marches, strikes, and occupations of public spaces (of which Tahrir Square in Cairo became a world-wide image). Though largely initiated by youth groups, the demonstrators consisted of tens of thousands of Egyptians from all socio-economic and religious backgrounds. They participated in the protests and demanded the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak and an ending of the regime side-by-side. The demonstrators were fighting for more just and democratic lives; revolutionary topics included police brutality, lack of free elections and freedom of speech/public participation, corruption, dire economic conditions, and the right to have all their voices heard. Violent confrontations between security forces and demonstrators ended in the deaths of over eight-hundred people and thousands of injuries (*Almasry-alyoum*). The government imposed a mandatory curfew, but it was impossible to enforce and thus continually defied. As revolutionaries occupied Tahrir Square and other areas throughout the country, Egypt once again became a central figure in what came to be known as the 'Arab Spring' political uprisings. Following Tunisia and Egypt, protests and demonstration soon occurred throughout the MENA, with major protest movements occurring within Syria, Libya, Jordan, Bahrain, and Yemen. In just over two weeks from initial protests on



January 25<sup>th</sup>, on February 11<sup>th</sup> 2011, Mubarak announced his resignation as president, and that power would transfer to SCAF- the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. The military regime took over the country, headed by Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, and within days declared that the constitution would be suspended, parliament houses dissolved, and that SCAF would continue to rule over Egypt until free elections occurred (Ghanem 19). Unrest continued with calls for other members of Mubarak's regime to step down from their high positions, and Mubarak stood trial on charges of premeditated murder of peaceful protestors (of which he was cleared in 2014.) While Egyptians were hopeful and jubilant during the early transition of the revolution, the military's violence and continued repression quickly demonstrated the tangled and thick roots of the regime's 'deep state.'<sup>lvii</sup>

As during the previous revolutionary political changes of 1919 and 1952, women found themselves integral to the revolutionary political effort, as their protesting bodies on the ground pointedly articulated. Eye witness accounts claimed that women made up to twenty to fifty percent of the protestors in Tahrir Square (Hafez "Revolution" 38). Calls for gender equality were part of initial revolutionary demands, but after the toppling of Mubarak it became increasingly clear that women's political equality and participation would once again be sidelined by the military regime. Reports of sexual harassment against women in Tahrir Square started to rise during the continued protests after SCAF's taking over, and women were excluded from the committee on constitutional reform, as well as the constitutional changes that were then put in place (Hafez 40, 2012). Not only were women revolutionaries marginalized in the political realm, in the public space of

Tahrir Square their bodies increasingly became violently unwelcome under SCAF's rule<sup>lviii</sup>. Women protestors were subject not only to sexual harassment and violence, but arrested and forced to undergo invasive virginity tests (Hafez "Revolution" 173). Women actively pursued a range of tactics in order to productively and safely protest in Cairo that aligned with values and norms of nationalist loyalty, patriarchal protection, and religious honor. For example, many women came to Tahrir with their children or husbands, identifying as mothers of the family and nation, while others adorned their bodies with flags and symbolism of patriotism to Egypt as a nation, and others engaged in pious activities such as praying (Hafez "Bodies Protest" 23). The military regime tried to justify and normalize their militarized masculine violence with claims such as, "these girls are not like daughters of yours or mine," constructing protesting female bodies as marginalized 'others' (Hafez "Bodies Protest" 25). Notably, whereas state feminism marked past regimes, in the immediate wake of the revolution numerous independent grass-roots women's' groups flourished, despite being denied a public political presence. While the image of a crowded Tahrir Square full of Egyptians from all walks of life proudly waving red, white, and black flags was initially circulated at the success of toppling Mubarak's presidency, images and news of gendered harassment, rapes, and violence quickly became representative of SCAF's take over as continued repression of human rights and dignity marked the regime's rule.

The January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011 revolution and its immediate aftermath through the SCAF military run regime highlight how gender remains core to the uprising and its repercussions. Hafez argues that continually undermined masculinity and patriarchy are

at the core of the revolution, and as gender is co-constituted through men and women this has particularly adverse effects for women (Hafez “Bodies Protest”, “Revolution”, “No Longer”). Women, as well as youth, benefit the least from the patriarchal system and regimes, particularly those from the working classes. Despite the continued pattern of women’s marginalization in the political and public sphere, during the revolution of 2011, just as those that became before, women from all walks of life have refused to sit idly. Though women were sidelined from the political processes, they corporeally protested and performed their rights by taking up the public space of Tahrir Square, despite the constant threat of gendered violence. Despite that women’s resistance has continually been framed within the over-arching structures of patriarchal hegemony, women of all socio-economic backgrounds and religious inclinations have recurrently, cleverly, and courageously persisted in putting their bodies on the line to fight for more equitable lives.

While numerous raqs sharqi performances occurred throughout Cairo on the eve of January 25<sup>th</sup>, on the day of the revolution dance work grounded to a halt. A number of foreign dancers left the country as business tanked. Their embassies assisted them in leaving the country and returning to their home countries where they performed and taught on the local teaching and performance circuit. Other foreigners chose to wait it out through numerous wedding and gig booking cancelations. Most Egyptian dancers, and musicians that depended on dancers for work, suffered a crushing blow as their jobs were either lost or greatly diminished in quantity. For example, the Nile Maxim cruising boat stopped working for about a month, then resumed with fewer cruises (from 2-3 pre-

revolution down to 1-2 post revolution) as well as slashing performer's and musicians' pay. Many dancers not only suffered deep pay cuts, but also pay their band members from their pay, so many male musicians found themselves cut from the band entirely as bands became smaller due to economic necessity, and those that remained hired were paid significantly less. Many dancers reported that their pay, for themselves and all members of their band and crew, was slashed in half after January 25<sup>th</sup>. The large hotels, such as Nile Hilton, Semiramis, and Sofitel that are in very close proximity to Tahrir Square, one of the main protest sites, shut down and a few hotels boarded up their doors and windows to prevent looting and vandalism. As in the past, the cabarets on Pyramid Street were looted and targeted from multiple parties.<sup>lix</sup> Many cabarets also boarded up their doors and constructed brick walls with shards of glass on top to protect their venues from looting and destruction while others permanently shut their doors.

For months following the revolution there was little to no work, especially with the SCAF enforced curfew and ensuing unrest. Egyptians either had no disposable income to spend on entertainment or were deciding to not go out to spend it, and tourism was barely at a trickle. Foreign investors stopped investing in Egypt due to the political instability, so there was also scarce business-related travel from other Egyptian regions to Cairo, (visits that possibly included a night out with entertainment). Despite the curfew, as the summer months came, work picked up slightly for dancers, particularly with wedding season bookings. In what has always been an extremely competitive industry, the scarcity of work only added to the already tense competition between dancers and musicians for work. Controversially, within months after the revolution a couple

television channels came out that featured raqs sharqi ‘MTV-style’ music video clips, one in particular, ‘El Tet,’ exclusively played these clips 24-hours long, with advertisements running across the margins of the screen, sometimes for adult entertainment products and services, such as Viagra. Some clips were produced in Egypt, but the channel also picked up any three to five minute clip from YouTube of belly dancers across the globe to broadcast. Many of the *shaabi* dancing clips from Cairo were controversial for their ‘vulgarity,’ and these clips in general were seen as falling prey to western culture and exploitation.<sup>lx</sup> Dancers of the older Cairo generation such as Nagwa Fouad and Zizi Mustapha stated that the clips were not of ‘professional’ dancers and connoisseurs of the artform weren’t the ones watching these clips. Further, they both explained that Egypt was going through a revolution and difficult times, thus these channels were not appropriate (Adum “*Wahda*”). These channels fall into a pattern of loosened censorship and a flourishing of various artistic and performance autonomy that was opened up in the uncertain yet open months following the revolution. Other performing artists within Cairo, particularly from theatre and contemporary dance, also expressed the sense of autonomy immediately post revolution due to the instability that caused a breakdown in the usual censorship of artistic and theatrical production (Martin 217). However, as raqs sharqi is so deeply intertwined to the economy and political stability as it effects tourism, raqs sharqi professionals were largely concerned by the complete cut in incomes. Dancers at all class levels were worried about mouths being fed, either their own, or otherwise, their male musicians and other working-class employees that worked under them.

### **Morsi June 2012-2013**

After the revolution against Mubarak and a period of rule by the SCAF, a series of popular elections resulted in the Muslim Brotherhood taking over power in Egypt through winning more than half of the parliamentary seats, and crystalizing with the election of Islamist President Mohamed Morsi in June 2012. However, Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood rule encountered fierce opposition after his attempt to pass a constitution that followed extreme Islamist views, and after he attempted to abruptly change laws in ways that would grant himself unparalleled powers, more so than any other president in Egyptian history<sup>lxii</sup>. (This says a lot considering the history of autocratic rule in Egypt since the monarchy era.) His proposed constitution sparked general outrage from secularists, Christian minorities, women's groups, and members of the military, and was followed by mass protests as political unrest and instability continued. Morsi reigned for a short time, but focused that time around consolidating his power and grip upon the country while furthering the Muslim Brotherhood's political agenda at the expense of prioritizing the distressing economic situation. Political and security instabilities only continued to negatively impact the economic realm. Inflation and unemployment rose during Morsi's short presidency, while foreign investments and tourism continued to fall.

Morsi spent his short-lived reign attempting to implement Muslim Brotherhood doctrine and ideology into the social and political sphere. As mentioned previously, Muslim Brotherhood doctrine and thinking is strictly conservative towards women's roles and duties. Women are seen as exclusively belonging in the domestic realm as mothers and wives, whereas the realm of the public and politics is for men. Conservative Islamist

dress and veiling for women became more common again, as women had heightened pressure to negotiate their bodies in public masculinized spaces during Morsi's rule. In the numerous protests that occurred during Morsi's presidency, sexual attacks and harassment were particularly vehement against women, but cross-gender alliances were formed in retaliation, creating groups of anti-harassment task forces and resources (Pratt 50.50).

Members of the dance industry at large reflect back upon Morsi's rule as a time of tepid anxiety and walking on eggshells. Winter of 2012 is when I first visited Cairo for a little over a month, and I recall all my friends glued to the news, constantly worried about repression and even more dire economic conditions. I recall going to tourist museums and 'hot spots', and being the only visitor in the entire place. I recollect pulling into giant vacant parking lots and attending tourist museums and establishments where staff members had to unlock doors and turn on the lights because nobody else had come through. A dense air of uncertainty permeated the streets, though dancing started trickling back since the initial pause of the 2011 revolution. To combat the curfews and dire economy, and to keep business moving as usual, male business owners began opening up a new type of venue to house raqs sharqi for the elite generation that had nowhere to go out or spend money post revolution. New nightclubs were opened up, largely within hotels and docked multi-venue hosting boats, that catered to the wealthy classes while economizing on the elaborate expenses of five-star hotel nightclubs that came before. These clubs had DJ's as opposed to bands with multiple musicians, and often had the dancer work on a bar, very small stage, or no stage at all, and desired dancers to perform

in a style similar to what was being disseminated on the satellite and YouTube music video clips. As Egyptian dancer Amie Sultan who worked in a number of these clubs told me in an interview, “They’d tell me to stop dancing so much! They said just be sexy and give a wink here and there, twiddle my hair, and stop trying to be so classic. There wasn’t even a stage or space for me to move! They paid peanuts, and the crowd was all A-class elites mostly high on ecstasy looking for somewhere to go out” (March 5, 2017).<sup>lxii</sup>

While the satellite channels broadcasting belly dance video clips continued to operate through some of Morsi’s rule, they eventually were shut down by the courts with the endorsement of the Muslim Brotherhood, in part because the shutdown would ‘protect community values’ (Mekky, *Al-Arabiya*). Older dancers in the community reflected back upon what they felt the future of raqs sharqi under Morsi’s Egypt would have been. One Cairo-based dance mentor, Sara Farouk Ahmed summed up, “They would have banned dancing publicly, but it would still exist, and that’s the thing. It would have been behind closed doors of these power-hungry men seeking any sort of validation they never had a taste of their whole lives. It would have been purely prostitution, in the worst possible way... that’s the really scary thing about it all” (Feb. 2, 2017).<sup>lxiii</sup> The sense of power some Brotherhood allied men felt via exertion of that power in punishing ways over marginalized bodies was a palpable anxiety during my initial visit to Cairo as well as in interviews from men and women in the dance industry.<sup>lxiv</sup> Concerns over power and repression were felt throughout Cairo by the military and marginalized groups, and on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013, just past a year since his election, Morsi was deposed by a military group led by the minister of defense, General Abdel Fattah El Sisi.



### **Abdel Fattah El Sisi June 2014-Present (2017)**

After the overthrowing of President Morsi, Abdel Fattah El Sisi, at that time the commander in chief of the military, dissolved the controversial 2012 constitution and paved the way for new presidential and parliamentary elections. Interim President Adly Mansour, a politician and president of the Supreme Constitutional Court of Egypt, governed for roughly a year from July 4<sup>th</sup> 2013 until June 8<sup>th</sup> 2014. During Adly Mansour's rule, and continuing into the rule of Sisi in 2014, a political crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood occurred once again. This political transition of power made international headlines during the August 2013 Rabaa Massacre, where police raided pro-Brotherhood protest camps and killed over 800 demonstrators (*Amnesty*). Sisi retired from his military career and ran in the 2014 elections, and with an overwhelming majority vote, was sworn into office as the sixth President of Egypt on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014. President Sisi will stay in power until elections in 2018, so it is during his presidency between 2016-2017 that my dance ethnography takes place. In similar fashion to military autocrats before him, Sisi has continued to give the military large amounts of power and cracked down on oppositional political freedom and autonomy. Though publicly President Sisi aims to show a modern and democratic society to the rest of the world, this 'democracy' is undermined by continued repression and human rights violations of a deep-rooted military regime. However, Sisi claims his tight lid on freedom of expression, participation, and independent organizing is necessary to keep Egypt safe from 'multiple forces that would destroy them', such as Islamist extremists. This view is supported and endorsed by large sectors of the Egyptian population.

One major hurdle Sisi is straddled with addressing is the volatile economic conditions of the country, as the economy is even worse than it was during the Mubarak era. Thus far, Sisi has been continuing in the legacy of neoliberalism that was implemented in the Sadat era and continued through with Mubarak, in Sisi's government this takes the form of the large sectors of industry owned and run by the military armed forces. Over thirty percent of the industry is run by the military, which contradicts Sisi's claims to help boost the private sector (Ari and Mor, *National Interest*). Sisi has also accepted a long-delayed 12 billion-dollar IMF loan which resulted in the flotation of the Egyptian pound, slashing subsidies, and reliance on Gulf aid (Roula, *Financial Times*). Comparing with Mubarak's era pre-2011 revolution, there is higher unemployment, less capital, continued dependence on foreign aid, the pound has drastically lost its value on the market, and there continue to be food scarcity and sky-rocketing inflation. Tourism is still low due to political instability and threats of terrorism, especially coming from the Sinai and sea resort regions. Despite the new constitution's aim to limit the use of the state of emergency which has been almost constant since the Nasser era, after multiple church bombing killed a number of Christians throughout Egypt, Sisi has enacted, extended, and renewed the state of emergency until the time of this writing. The middle class has almost become a myth of day's past, and the wide gap between the rich and the poor continues to be a source of contention.

In the months following the revolution up until the time of this writing, Cairo has become known not just as a hot spot for political instability, but also locally and internationally as a city prone to sexual harassment against women (Pratt 50.50).

Tellingly, while a diverse range of grass-root movements arose by women's groups to combat harassment post-revolution, with the reimplementing of top-down state feminism via the NCW (National Council for Women), the issue has largely flatlined. For example, NCW's President Morsi derided the critical issue of sexual harassment stating it was simply not true, that there was less than 'ten percent' of sexual harassment in Cairo (*Egyptian Streets*). Sisi's government has drastically expanded its censorship and autocratic reach, any civil group now has to be incorporated by the state, thus there has been a stifling of the polyvalent women's groups and movements that flourished post revolution in favor of top-down state control. Despite this, Sisi's government has made headway in implementing legal rights and protections for women, with harsher punishments for sexual harassment as well as a constitutional article explicitly stating the state's commitment to ensuring gender equality and women's participation in state institutions (Pratt 50.50). Hoda Elsadda, a critical player on the drafting committee for getting the gender equality article included argued that it was successful due to a number of reasons, including "the desire of the committee to differentiate itself from the Muslim Brotherhood, to reaffirm the dominant narrative of Egypt's modernity, of which progress on women's rights is seen as a key marker, as well as to recognize women's role in the revolution" (Pratt 50.50). Further, Sisi's regime has been one of the worst in Egyptian history when it comes to the vilification of LGBTQ rights and subjectivities; multiple arrests and crackdowns have occurred since his taking of office, surpassing the human rights outcry from Mubarak's 2011 arrests known as Cairo 52.<sup>lxv</sup>

In regards to sites of dance at this contemporary time, boats, cabarets, hotels, weddings, and the new nightclubs continue to be the primary venues for hosting regular raqs sharqi shows. Shows in hotels are becoming more popular again, though without the elaborate decadence of decades past. The shows more often occur in restaurants with a small stage to a CD or modest band size, the main exception being Dina's (Egyptian) weekly Thursday night shows at the five-star Semiramis hotel. Weddings for youth have witnessed an increase in hiring professional dancers during this era, likely as a consequence of dancer's becoming fashionable again (though often with dj), thanks to the music video style clips and new nightclubs for the elite classes.

However, what's noticeably changed in relation to these sites are the options for moving to, from, and between the raqs sharqi sites. In 2014, ride sharing applications and services were introduced and quickly became popular within Cairo, such as internationally known Uber and the local Egyptian version, Careem.<sup>lxvi</sup> Uber is a popular option for the slightly more well-off Egyptians, as well as foreigners and women, who often find these services more safe, clean, and comfortable. There was a large initial push back by everyday white taxi cab drivers who felt the services had an unfair advantage over their businesses and sought to ban them (Menna, *Ahram*). These new modes of getting around the city relate to gender and economic politics that will be explored within this dissertation's 'taxi transitions.'<sup>lxvii</sup>

Foreign dancers, particularly from the U.S., Eastern Europe, Russia, and South America have begun dipping their toes back into the Cairo work scene in larger numbers since the revolution. One Armenian dancer in particular, Sofinar (also known as Sofinaz),

became wildly popular throughout Cairo as a raqs sharqi dancer after her role in the film ‘the Sweeper’ (*Al quashash*) and a series of both homemade YouTube performance, as well as professional music video clips since 2013. A non-MENA foreigner has never achieved such popularity in Cairo in such a short time, largely helped by the media presence and dissemination. Consequently, her blue-eyed, white skin, and black hair became a standard within Cairo, as dancers began imitating this look through contact lenses and other alterations. She is widely credited with popularizing percussive ‘chest pops’ now common throughout raqs sharqi performances, and was controversial amongst other dancer’s for her dancing’s perceived vulgarity. By the time of my fieldwork, mostly conducted in 2016-2017, Sofinar’s fame was already sizzling down, mostly doing *shaabi* music video clips and performing at private weddings and parties after a series of run-ins with the government authorities<sup>lxviii</sup>.

*Maharagan shaabi* music, which began just prior to the revolution, has now fully permeated the social scene, particularly for youths and the working classes, but can be heard and enjoyed at all class levels for listening and social dancing. Dancers have started incorporating hit *maharagan* songs into their shows at special parties as well as the elite new nightclubs, and taxi drivers are regularly heard blasting the music throughout the tangled traffic of Cairo. In the dance industry, cutting across class levels, dancers feel the work is beginning to pick up since Sisi took over, this has been particularly true during the time of my fieldwork in 2016-2017, when Ramadan also stopped largely interfering with the lucrative ‘Arab season.’

Though my contacts in the dance industry were almost unanimously in agreement that Morsi would be profoundly negative for the arts, women, and raqs sharqi in particular, I found the dance community far more divided when it came to their opinions, hopes, fears, and experiences since Sisi came to power. Their stories, struggles, and hopes will be fleshed out throughout the following chapters.

## **Conclusion**

This historic overview has briefly mapped out the gendered history of Egypt, with a particular focus on Cairo, during seven political categorizations from the monarchy era of 1923 up until the time of my contemporary ethnography during Sisi's presidency of 2016-2017. I hope this history has highlighted the orientalist limitations of the term 'Arab Spring' for understanding the series of political uprisings in Egypt and throughout the MENA, instead tracing out how the struggles for 'bread, freedom, and human dignity' have long, linked, and tenaciously rich roots throughout modern Egyptian history and social life<sup>lxix</sup>. Armed with such knowledge, contextualizing and understanding the significance and semiotics of contemporary political issues and conditions becomes more vibrant, nuanced, and palpable.

As demonstrated within the above history, gender hierarchies and uneven political dynamics have long characterized Egyptian politics within the domestic and public realms, exasperated by the occupation of foreign rulers for hundreds of years prior to the start of my historiography, and ensuing with decolonization and nationalist movements since. For purposes of this contemporary ethnographic project, I take the rupturing

moment of decolonization and nationalism as the starting political categorization for my historiography, though it is essential to note how radically this history has been, and continues to be, entwined with the colonial experience.<sup>lxx</sup> Though women's roles and terms of participation have changed over time within Egypt, women's roles at home and in the public spheres continue to be defined and contextualized in relationship to patriarchal systems of dominance. Such subjugation is common across nation-states and not unique to Egypt or the MENA. Despite this, women's roles and efforts have been central to the construction, successes, and continuation of the family, economy, politics, and nation-state throughout Egypt's modern history. Women from all classes and societal sectors have courageously and creatively persisted in working towards better and more equitable lives for themselves and other Egyptians. As historian Selma Botman articulates, "those who articulate a forward-looking doctrine... continue to be challenged by Egypt's history of state-centered control over political and social activities and by the strength of the fundamentalist movement in the country" (xii).

A theme becomes apparent that women's roles and rights were continually appropriated to serve regime needs first and foremost. It is also noteworthy how moments of revolutionary and nationalist ruptures, such as 1919 revolution leading towards the monarchy era, Nasser's state-formation in 1952, and the 2011 revolution all resulted in fissures of the hegemonic patriarchal order, resulting in the proliferation of diverse women's movements and expanded gender roles in domestic and public spheres. However, following such ruptures, the state seized up and consolidated power once again, and women's roles and rights were always one of the first, and most evident, areas

to be controlled and policed. Again, this pattern of women's expanded gender roles and power, followed by tight conservative suppression, during times of greater political shifts is not unique to Egypt or the MENA.<sup>lxxi</sup>

Another theme that becomes legible is the pressing concern and thread of the economy, itself related to political stability, as intertwined with notions of masculinity. Being able to economically provide for the family continues to be a hallmark of masculinity within Egypt, and overlapping hegemonies within the nation-state, Gulf petro-dollars, and western neoliberalism continue to undermine the possibilities of such identity since the Sadat era. The dire condition of the economy hurts all sectors of society, but the way the economy is embedded in notions of gender, as well as uneven access to local and global capital and opportunities, particularly effects the working classes, women, and youth who have benefitted the least from such economic systems and changes.

Raqs sharqi developed, and continued to adapt and flourish, throughout these political periods. While most orientalist discourse would posit raqs sharqi as an 'ancient dance,' I instead propose how wonderfully and viscerally contemporary it is. Raqs sharqi developed during a key moment of Egypt's own decolonization and nation-building modernity project, and continues to be richly entangled with the gendered, economic, and socio-political dynamics of the country at large, as well as to nationality and state-building and policing. Raqs sharqi developed within newly established entertainment sites while Egypt was constructing and defining itself as a nation, but also as the newly independent Egyptian nation negotiated intra-MENA flows and influences as well as



western global influences and flows; thus raqs sharqi embodied these multiple circulating tensions, flows, and hybridities. Further, raqs sharqi developed during the modernity project in sites aimed at better regulating and profiting off the dance, though dancers and savvy business owners continually found ways of evading such government control and policing. Thus, as women's progress has repeatedly been challenged by state control and surveillance, raqs sharqi may offer tactics and insights into how women may maneuver and circle-around such controlling systems. Further, raqs sharqi cannot be separated from its development and continued relation to the economy as a professional performance form within these sites. Yet, though enmeshed in the economy, raqs sharqi takes an exciting twist on traditional economic gender norms, as the female dancer is the one paying and in charge of a handful or more of male musicians behind her. Most importantly, when I have asked dancers in the field what makes raqs sharqi so special and different from other forms, a majority responded with this sentiment, "it is all about being a woman." Elaborating on their comments, I find it theoretically exciting exactly how raqs sharqi constructs, embodies, and performs gender in such a way that it is inextricably yet fluidly interwoven within the linked relationships of the particular context and moment, including the space, music, and all other bodies within that space. Gender cannot be isolated from these ever-shifting forces and it necessitates studying them intersectionally and in their specific historical and spatial contexts. At the same time, amidst all these intersecting and mobile forces, it is the dancing women's body that remains the centrifugal force, the core nexus of these negotiations and understandings.

Throughout my fieldwork opinions were split on the state of Egypt in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. Nearly six years after Egypt's January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011 revolution, many of the same factors that contributed to the uprising are arguably worse: the country is more repressive, its politics are more autocratic, gender dynamics are volatile, and its economy remains in critical condition. Though professional raqs sharqi has been particularly affected by these conditions, and continues to operate on the margins of society, dancers continue to innovatively carve out peripheralized yet boldly strong and vulnerable female subjectivities and stories through their danced discourse. My question is, what are these stories saying now, and what particular insights do they offer, in the continued turbulence of contemporary Cairo? To follow, how do I, as a white *agnibiya* practitioner-scholar, most sensitively and supportively listen to, and stage the sharing of, such stories?

### **Part 3: The Maneuverings of a 'Moving' Multi-Sited Dance Ethnography**

It never ceased to catch me slightly off-guard, the stunning contrast between the beginning of a night of fieldwork and the ending. The fieldwork starts with negotiating getting to the venue amidst the congested chaos of bumper-bumper city traffic and the never-ending chorus of car horns bleeping their frustrations. More often than not, I found myself fretting in the car or taxi about being late to catch a boat or first act in a hotel or cabaret. This is how my nights often started, which differed from their completion, which often involved stumbling out of a hotel or cabaret in total exhaustion between 3-6 a.m., to a city just barely awakening from its slumber, seemingly unaffected by the chaos and commotion contained within that night's entertainment venue. The serene and colorful

sunrise mixed pleasingly with the lingering haze of the previous night's dust and traffic pollution, and the drive home was often uninterrupted by the usual beratement of horns, traffic, street peddlers, and other attributes of the city's density. I usually stopped at the colorful *foul* cart, just starting to set up station in the wee morning hours, grabbing a quick bean sandwich as I quietly treaded up to my apartment and forced myself to stay awake an hour longer to sketch out field notes from the night's escapades.

Yet, this contrast was even further distanced from the process of writing that every ethnographer goes through when they go from 'doing' the field work to writing it up into its final ethnography form. This writing up of this project happens in such a different space. Sitting in various U.S. coffee shops, undisturbed except for the quiet hum of soft jazz and an occasional tinkling of cutlery, a creamy latte by my side, I was struck by how the quiet and calm environment inexplicably contrasted with the vivid and visceral memories of the field that came flooding back. Feeling this contrast and living/recalling their sensory immersions, I found myself becoming overwhelmingly emotional to the point where I'd find myself sighing heavily while swallowing back tears. What a strange cocktail of emotions to wrestle with in the midst of such a sanitized and still place. How pressing it felt, then and still, that I somehow in my writing do justice to all the people, places, and experiences whose affectual residues so easily penetrated this distant space.

In my gut I knew it wasn't the differing environments that made this task so formidable, but rather, two related phenomena. First, the weight and unease of the position of power I had to confront every time I opened my laptop. My position felt

somewhat swapped, from sitting in the audience listening to the danced discourse of dancers across various Cairo stages to physically imprinting, fixing, and having the final word via my typing of these stories on my laptop screen. There was so much to write about, valuable stories, stories incredibly worthy of sharing, but by my white hands, in the English language, in such elite academic form as the doctoral dissertation? Academic writing, particularly as penned by white westerners, has long operated as a dominant and hegemonic form of knowledge production and dissemination, often drowning out the voices and multiplicity of knowledge and perspectives offered through other peripheralized storytellers and forms of knowledge creation and transmission, such as dance. Again and again, the quagmire of how to do and write a Cairo-centric dance ethnography with sensitivity and nuance as a white *agnibiya* practitioner-scholar both constrained and compelled me in my project. Thus, I remind readers of my body behind these words, and my particular positionality to the project as I choreograph and stage this ethnography, and finally, how it is but one of many possible and partial accounts.

With full conviction I can assure readers I have done my best, but by virtue, my best simply cannot be enough. It is not supposed to be, and that's productive. If any ethnography were ever to be 'enough' it would mean there's one absolute truth, only one pristine and pure way to tell a story, wherein certain storytelling bodies, and certain storytelling formats, are 'most effective.' This means of knowledge production and dissemination would merely continue the violence of dominant hegemonies, such as whiteness, imperialism, elitist institutions and modes of knowing such as writing, in consolidating their power over the wondrously polyvalent ways of being in the world.

Thus, I state that this ethnography is not a transplantation of ‘what happened’ in contemporary Cairo’s raqs sharqi scene, or even my translation of what happened, rather this ethnography is my own choreography and staging of my experiences via my particular relationships with the people, places, and politics of contemporary Cairo’s raqs sharqi scene. It is a few intricately and tenderly interwoven scraps of storytelling fabric from a richly colorful and perplex tapestry that’s always ‘in process’ of becoming. There is no transcending the uneven power dynamic of a white U.S. scholar, a race and nationality that embody long tumultuous imperialist, economic, and military relationships with Egypt and the MENA at large, but, returning to my positionality section earlier, I do my best to neither inflate nor elide my role in the research nor the writing of this ethnography. In the text, this means writing in the presence and particularity of my body’s power dynamic while not centralizing or pedestaling this thread, allowing it to be one of many threads interwoven throughout the ethnography. Accordingly, this ethnography must be engaged with as a work that is particularly positioned as well as always and only a partial telling of a story.

The second phenomena is related to the powerfully moving emotions that well up throughout the writing process. Just as the objective of creating core connections through feeling (*ihsas*) is a pinnacle aim of raqs sharqi performances, so too do I aim to foster this sense of knowing and connection through feelings by writing this ethnographic project. Of course, the cornucopia of emotions that swell within my heart while writing is likely a common occurrence for ethnographers from all disciplines, but why and how the writer chooses to engage with this emotional tugging is vital choice that shapes the research. In

the case of this particular project, I choose to let the emotions tangle up in my words and honor their place in this work, both vulnerably and sensitively. Just as I have argued that using raqs sharqi as a research model has been particularly enabling and productive for achieving these aims for this project, so too do I forward raqs sharqi as an ethnographic writing model. If a dance-centric lens and danced discourse focus in my ethnography is core to my project, I maintain that I must write in a way that best respects and embodies the contours of raqs sharqi in Cairo contexts. Consequently, I aim to write a ‘moving’ multi-sited ethnography, wherein ‘moving’ means critically attending not only to movement and mobility as a core site of knowledge, but also ‘moving’ in the sense of inspiring poignant emotions and affect. The way the term embodies both meanings serves a rather productive and poetic fit for a raqs sharqi ethnography.

As mentioned, a pinnacle aim of raqs sharqi performances is to create connections between bodies emboldened with feeling, *ihsas*. As many dancers in the field have told me when attempting to define raqs sharqi, ‘dance *is* feeling.’ Thus, I write with this same objective, using tactics and structures garnered from raqs sharqi as a writing methodology. This compels me to push at the limitations of the written record, to choreograph my writing in a way that words, stories, and emotions have the sensation and potentiality of movement. More than just writing in a way that evokes sensation through deep description, but to write with the intention, and structural design mirroring raqs sharqi, in order to promote having the affectual knowledge within these words, derived from the danced discourse, move from my body to the page, and again into the reader’s body. I go with my gut, allowing myself to write vulnerably from the strong emotions

that my own connections in the field have carved into my being and created within me, and hope readers will also open up to letting these words tangle up in their own bodies, stir up feeling, and ultimately create core connections between bodies based in a deeper sense of human-human connectivity.

As such, readers of this ethnography also have work to do. I advocate that you engage with this text as an ideal raqs sharqi audience member. This means reading with active engagement, pausing when something either resonates with you or leads to discomfort or further questioning, writing it out in the margins or on a separate notebook, and keeping that energy circulating by following through on your own reactions as you read. I ask that readers also be sensitive, vulnerable, and attuned to their emotional responses to this work. Pay attention and listen to how the words move into you, as well as how you move after interacting with these words and listening to these stories, do you notice subtle repetitions, pauses, or themes? After you leave this ethnography performance, try to engage with it in a way that nuances your own deep listening skill set. Try to engage in a way that rounds out your sense of being in the world in ways raqs sharqi dancing already embodies and valorizes, by doing and being with more *ihsas*.

I have designed this ethnography to parallel the structure of a raqs sharqi show, thus the first chapter can be understood as a '*mejance*' or introduction piece to begin the performance. The introduction is often somewhat choreographed, and serves as the musical piece that familiarizes the dancer, musicians, and audience with one another. It is akin to initial greetings and small talk when two people first meet each other and are trying to figure each other out to make the rest of the show more meaningful and take the

audience on a deeper journey. As the show progresses, the connections between dancer, music, and audience are ideally supposed to deepen, and the creation of *ihsas* become heightened. In other words, the chapters start with what's likely most familiar and then go deeper into the core of Cairo as the show progresses. The '*mejance*' may also be the most 'technique intensive' aspect of the show, with lots of rhythmic changes in the song, the dancers shows off her skillset in technique before moving on to songs that are more focused on audience interaction and embodying and sharing the meaning behind the lyrics and musical moods. As such, I have chosen to open with the venue of the Nile cruising boat to start my site-specific set of three chapters. This decision reflects not only my own movements of accessibility into the field as ethnographer but will also be the most 'familiar' of the three sites in terms of venue, accessibility, and theoretical approaches to the largely western audience likely to make up the readership of this dissertation. As a dancer, I know the most effective and affectual show is one directly catered to the audience of the evening. The Nile cruising ship is a venue most easily accessible to *aganeb* (foreigners), and the most cosmopolitan raqs sharqi venue covered in this project. Following, I turn to the chapter on five-star hotels and conclude with the chapter centered on cabarets. In doing so, I move the reader along my own ethnographic journey, as this was the order of my own entry into the research sites, and the bodies within these sites move from being more cosmopolitan and international into an increasingly pan-MENA and local community. Additionally, this ordering reflects general non-local access to these sites, with my hope being that by the time readers arrive to the least explored, and yet most stereotyped and marginalized site of the cabaret,



readers are at the deeper point in the raqs sharqi structural journey that they are more receptive and open to new understandings, connections, and maneuvers.<sup>lxxii</sup>

Further, choreographing the writing to centralize dance and movement as method means attending to the movements of bodies as additional structural design, to better reinforce the danced knowledge embedded within this ethnography. As such, I imprint the movements that were integral to the ‘doing’ of the fieldwork in this text to more richly reveal the knowledge and insights gained from maneuvering to the various city rhythms of Cairo. This includes navigating getting to and from research venues, due to this, I have included ‘taxi transitions’ between the site-specific chapters of this ethnography. These ‘taxi transitions’ are just that, the connections between sites and places within Cairo that include multiple routes and modes of transportation. These transitions ‘link’ together the ways raqs sharqi sites and bodies are entwined with larger choreographies of the city while keeping the analytical focus on the ground-level micro politics and bodily mobilities at the core of such linkages.

Throughout this writing I maintain a central framework on how micro politics of movement and corporeality speak richly and subtlety towards larger macro movements of multiple power configurations circulating throughout Cairo. This attentiveness to the movements of movement helps illuminate these larger power trajectories in insightful and invigorating ways. Thus, I have readers step into chapters with the kinesthetic entering of the particular field site by a variety of bodies, such as the dancer’s, my own, or an audience member. Moving from the larger cityscape into the borders and boundaries demarcating the field site of the boat, hotel, or cabaret proves to be productive in setting

the stage for that chapter's particular political frameworks while at the same time calling attention to the interrelationality and fluid co-constituting meanings between space, movements, and bodies.

**- Taxi Transition 1 –**

I sighed in exasperation as I wiped the beads of sweat from my brow, *I really can't be late this time*. I stood on the edge of a busy street and hastily hailed a taxi, I had a Nile cruising tour boat performance to catch. I was worried about being late and missing the boat that sets off at 8pm sharp. While being 'late' was an all too pervasive state of being in the condensed city of Cairo, well known for its gridlocked traffic (*zahma*), and other series of delaying obstacles amid any simple task that involved maneuvering throughout the city, as a U.S. ethnographer I still felt sizable anxiety at the thought of being even a moment late to meeting new dancers and other research collaborators. However, in this case, if you arrive late to catch a boat performance, you really feel unprofessional, as the boat leaves the dock to cruise the Nile river. If you fail to be on board by the appointed time, your last resort is to hop onto a small speed boat and 'catch up' to the boat where staff helps you very awkwardly clamber aboard while you desperately hope that you don't fall into the Nile. (Yes, I know this from personal experience.)

I snapped out of my anxiety when one of the city's black and white taxis pulled over just ahead of my position, I swiftly stepped towards the driver side window to see if the driver would accept my destination. Despite my hurry, I stopped suddenly. Glancing

at the driver, I paused to evaluate the situation. Based on my own positionality, being alone as a young, white U.S. *agnibiya* (female foreigner), I was always vigilant about situations I was potentially putting myself into. Though catching a taxi may seem a simple enough task, I often used first impressions and my gut reactions to hypothesize if this ride might result in harassment, a terrifying Mario-kart style speed race down the jammed streets of Cairo, or most likely, being enormously ripped off when it came to payment. While I've experienced an overwhelming number of positive taxi rides with professional and thoughtful drivers, my reasons for hesitating were all real concerns, and at the very least taxi riders can expect a less than comfortable ride; usually the AC is broken or not used, you spend considerable time roasting away in sun-soaked stopped traffic, the pollution and dust slaps you in the face through the open windows, and if you don't like second hand cigarette smoke, well, tough luck.

In a city with a population of over nine million, where the average Cairene salary is around 4,500 (in USD), the uncomfortable cab conditions and chance to make extra pounds off a usually much more well-off foreigner are unpleasant but pragmatic realities. In this case, my pause was due to the gruff and weathered male face that peered at me through the open window. Dressed in a sweat-stained *galabeya* (traditional robe-like garment traditional the Nile Valley), cap, and long full beard, with stern but tired brown eyes, my impression was that this man wasn't just religious and traditional, but probably conservatively so, and I wasn't sure what he'd make of a young *agnibiya* travelling alone throughout Cairo. However, perhaps due to my rush, I leaned over slightly, lightly placing my left hand on my chin so that my arm crossed by chest and any 'immodest'

views' that my leaning forward might create, and more timidly than I'd aimed to sound, asked, 'Zamalek?' He nodded abruptly and with a mix of gratitude and hesitation I yanked open the creaky rear door, the socially appropriate place for a single young woman to sit, and plopped onto the torn and faded leather seats. The engine rattled as we headed off into the dusty traffic, I gazed out the open rear window as a light breeze caressed my cheeks, I felt my shoulders relax.

The trip was characterized by small lurches forward constantly interspersed with stopped pauses due to the traffic, I felt my body vibrating slightly with the rattling of the engine. The constant cacophony of car horns bleating their frustrations was mixed with voices and radios from passing by vehicles, but this taxi's radio was playing Quran, though the recording was scratchy it somehow mixed pleasantly with the outside *dosha* (loud noisiness) and simultaneously calmed the chaos engulfing our vehicle. As the recitation washed over me I felt all the stress and difficulties from the long day melting from my tense muscles. On rough days, and this had definitely qualified as one, being alone living in Cairo as a 26-year-old ethnographer attempting to deeply engage with Cairo's male-dominated nightlife entertainment industry was rife with difficulty, self-doubt, and exhaustion- to put it lightly. The poetic flow and beautiful heart lifting words of the Quran weren't just washing over me at this point, rather I felt the words penetrating my bones and filling me up with a much-needed sense of peace and resolve. It overwhelmed me, and without warning I burst into tears of serenity. I scuttled for a tissue from my purse and tried to get myself under control, but quickly glancing up at the rear-view mirror I saw the driver looking at me, his previously stern brown eyes now

softened with concern. As our gazes met in the mirror he gently asked, '*enti kwayisa?* Are you okay?' I nodded shyly, pointed towards the radio and acknowledged in broken Arabic, 'Cairo is difficult, but this is the most beautiful voice in the world, I feel relax.' The driver beamed with a bright smile as he looked upwards and lifted both his palms up in thanks, '*Allahu Akbar*. God is great.' He twisted around in his chair and exclaimed to me, 'this is Quran, the words of Allah, I am so happy to have foreigner feel Quran in my taxi. And yes, I agree with you on these points. Where are you from?' '*Amreeka*.' 'Ah, *Amreeka*. Most American people I meet them, they sit here in my taxi, they are so nice and good. But you must know, and I'm sorry, the American government is so bad for the world. But of course, the people are not the government, and the government is not the people, I hope you feel same about Egypt. If you cross the world you will find most of the people are good, but that is the important thing, you must know the people.' He stated this as his hand gestured back and forth between the two of us, referencing an additional bodily face-face element to his assertion. He lightheartedly concluded with a laugh, 'You must ride in the back of many taxis, haha.' The halted traffic subsided, as the driver, Mohamed, lurched our taxi forward, and we continued the ride.

My aim was for this initial transition to give a partial sense of the chaos, calamity, and 'cooker-pressure' density that is Cairo city life and transportation. At the same time, this experience illustrated for me just how often capacities for human connection and complexity are opened up within the bubbling chaos, in curious ways that are both hindered and enabled by that same chaos. Starting off a raqs sharqi ethnography steeped in Cairo's nightlife, often marginalized as seedy and suspicious to the general public,

with the flowy eloquence of Quran recitation might seem slightly out of place, but that's the point. Mohamed, the working-class traditionally garbed thick-bearded religious man being the first character we meet in this story would seem antithetical to the sultry sexy midriff bearing dancers soon to take over, but that's the first step that needs to be crossed, to break down this sense of binary being, seeing, and separation. The Middle East has long been caricatured in orientalist representation by these two figures; the lavish belly dancer available for consumption and the oppressively conservative Muslim brown patriarch.<sup>lxxiii</sup> The reality, moving past representational tropes, is more complex, rich, messy, and full of human capacity for more humane, dignified, and nuanced connection. Further, while religion is often treated politically and theoretically within academic discourse, it is important to know the diverse and often beautifully subtle and mundane ways it's experienced and interwoven into a multiplicity of lives. It also demonstrates the key importance in acts of deep listening; listening to your gut, the larger circumstances and context of the moment, as well as the subtleties and pauses in music and rhythms, whether they be in a boat, hotel, cabaret, or the city streets. At the same time, my aim is that moments of connection can exist alongside cautions against romanticizing, as an analysis of our two bodies, mine and Mohamed's, within the space of the taxi also gestures towards uneven power dynamics. The uncomfortable conditions of the taxi, the poor and overcrowded infrastructure and cityscape of Cairo, and the sweat-stained *galabeya* highlight the personal labor and hardship of Mohamed, a working-class man, within larger structural problems that he must navigate to survive and provide for his family. Mohamed also teaches that rifts exist between governments, national politics,

and the everyday people. He advises that the best way to know others is through ground-level bodily interaction, rather than looking solely from the macro-level of politics outside spheres of lived realities nor from top-down approaches. Most importantly, as Mohamed's combined verbal and kinesthetic discourse states, is to know the people through more personal and ground level relationships. As both *agnibiya* and back seat passenger, on the one hand, I found my responsibility was to go along for the ride, while focusing on listening in more nuanced and diverse ways. On the other hand, our positionalities resists romanticizing as they point to both gender and class dynamics in our use of the taxi space. To choose to set upon this dissertation project with the mobility afforded by my passport and the purchase of a \$1,000 US dollar plane ticket differs from the driver I met in the midst of a stifling hot and uncomfortable work day. Further, my back-seat positionality also highlights uneven gender dynamics, as a male body would not have warranted the same expected physical distance between our bodies. Upon arriving outside the boat entrance, I exited the taxi, thanked the driver for the ride, and paid. While Mohamed and my paths have yet to cross again, and considering Cairo most likely never will, I remain thankful for the momentary connection.

## Chapter 2

### **Nile Cruising Boats: Cruising the Nile while Contesting Borders, Boundaries, and Bodies**

After stepping out from the taxi I double checked the sign above to make sure I was at the correct boat. I walked up to the two male security guards standing idly around a thin walk through metal detector and began to slide my purse off my shoulder for their inspection, but they waved their hands indicating it wasn't necessary and allowed me to pass straight through the detector. I wondered what their criteria was for allowing certain people to 'pass through' without thorough inspection, my foreignness, my gender, or was the security apparatus just symbolic more than pragmatic? I then headed down a small flight of stairs to reach the docks where the large Nile cruising boat was docked<sup>lxxiv</sup>. The boat loomed large against the backdrop of the now darkened Nile river, the waters gently lapping against the platform I stood upon. I could see the Nile water glistening with the reflection of the numerous lights from various lit up hotels, buildings, and giant advertisement billboards that were clustered together on the other side of the Nile, shining reminders of cosmopolitanism and commodification within the city. The familiar whooshing sound of compressed air releasing upon a large bus stopping outside the guarded entrance interrupted my scenic viewing, I looked over my shoulder to see one of Cairo's large tour buses beginning to unload about a dozen or so international tourists. I briskly crossed the ramp into the boat entrance to be seated and settled before the large crowd arrived. An elderly man greeted me outside the boat and checked my reservation



information, reminding me of the 350 or so pound minimum charge and that beverages were extra, then a suited waiter escorted me to my table within the boat.

The boat was decorated without an overarching theme, but the plastic chandeliers, bow-tied waiters and slightly cigarette-burned table clothes all hinted towards an air of elegance catering to middle and upper-class tastes. The tables were seated in a general ‘U’ pattern around a small square dance floor with a keyboard and drum set sitting idly behind it. A medium-sized buffet with an assortment of mediocre-quality Middle Eastern and international food was set up in front of the stairs that would take you to the second floor and the open-air deck above that. I headed upstairs for some fresh air before the night began, as I walked across the upper deck it felt like a domino-style procession of eyes looking me up and down from the mainly Gulf and Egyptian men sitting along the deck’s perimeter smoking and drinking tea and coffee. I often went to boat shows alone; I faced the least harassment in these sites and they weren’t quite as suspicious towards a young foreign woman on her own as compared to my other research sites. I thought I’d find a quiet spot to gaze upon the Nile at the end of the deck, but there I was greeted with bartering attempts by a local tradesman with two tables set up full of typical Egyptian tourists trinkets of little pyramid, Pharaoh, and Bastet figurines. I picked up a Bastet figurine and flipped it over and translated the Arabic sticker on bottom, ‘*sanaa fi seen /* Manufactured in China.’ ‘Everything hand made from Egypt’ the man retorted in English as he gestured to the rest of his wares. His display of cliché tourist trinkets alongside his masking of the paraphernalia’s manufacturing origins demonstrates not only the significant touristic nature of boat cruises, but also the particular tourist relationship

between westerners and Egyptians. The tradesman cleverly marketed his stock in an ‘authentic’ way that often appeals to western tourists and their imperialist nostalgia, or western longing steeped in racial domination for a pure ‘ancient’ Egypt unaffected by modernization, while also masquerading uneven globalized economic flows that have made it cheaper to import tourist goods from China rather than make them locally. I sighed and leaned over the railing at the farthest end of the open-air deck, I could see the forefront of the boat down below where two middle aged men in *galabeyas* were settling in before the cruise set off. One was sitting on a plastic chair taking a cigarette break while the other man was performing his prayers using a large towel for as a prayer mat. After spending some time above deck I headed back down to the first-floor restaurant to make observations as the boat was starting to fill up.

During the time of my fieldwork most boat cruises were relatively filled with customers, unlike some of the hotel shows which might just have a scattering of guests throughout the room. Tonight’s mix appeared to be a standard cosmopolitan mix, about half of whom were from throughout the MENA, particularly Egypt and the Arabian Gulf (*khaleeg*), with the other half being from India, China, Japan, Europe, and South America. Family crowds were most likely to be found in boats as well as some hotel shows, hardly in cabarets. The audience tonight was a mix of couples, large tour groups herded in like sheep, and individual families. I often learned to tell those coming off the large tourist boats not only from their large size but usually because they looked the most exhausted and starved, after all tonight’s cruise was usually one of the last ‘stops’ after a day long series of excursions throughout Greater Cairo. Most of the clients had finished

spilling into the boat at this point, and the two-man team of musicians began taking their places just behind the square dance floor. The variety entertainment show was about to begin.

In this chapter, I aim to introduce the more internationally accessible site for raqs sharqi, as well as the site I personally engaged with first, the Nile cruising tour boats. As mentioned, these sites are incredibly diverse and there exists a hierarchy of class tiers within each of my three main field sites, as such I present my experiences on various boats throughout Greater Cairo as just that, my particular experiences. To provide a sense of this scale, though I spent nine months conducting fieldwork on a wide variety of boats from all tiers, for every boat cruise I took, at least ten more were simultaneously occurring. While hiring professional dancers for tour boat cruises for locals and tourists has been a staple in Egypt at least as far back since the colonial era, where orientalist travelers such as Flaubert and others documented such occurrences<sup>lxxv</sup>, it was beginning in the Nasser era and crystalizing during Sadat and Mubarak's eras that raqs sharqi on boats was popularized and standardized in a similar fashion as experienced today with the standardized variety entertainment due to larger economic, professionalization, and globalization shifts.

Continuing, I will provide further general context for boats, focusing on how they're viewed within the Cairo dance industry. At the top tier of standard cruise boats, you have the Nile Maxim and Nile Pharoahs, the Pharoahs was the first boat of this kind in Cairo to start having the 'packaged deal' variety entertainment show with musicians, dancers, and tanoura. There are a plethora of cheaper boats that also carry less reputable

status throughout Greater Cairo and then more recently there has become a style of boat sites that remain docked and function more like nightclubs for Egyptian and intra-MENA audiences, such as the Blue Nile and Nile Lounge/Nile Dragon VIP. This chapter speaks towards cruising boats only. These two-hour cruising boats were ‘retired’ ships that could no longer reliably make the longer cruises between Cairo to Luxor and Aswan, so they were transformed into this shorter and lucrative venue. Within the three field sites explored within this ethnography, these boats are unique in that they are the most mobile site, literally and figuratively. The boats move, cruising up and down the Nile, while the bodies on these boats are most likely to be the least anchored to Cairo, meaning that many visiting tourists make up the audiences and boats are where the most transient dancers, particularly foreigners, are hired. Most boats have a minimum charge for the food, but boats are still not nearly as expensive as five-star hotel venues, though the minimum price is still about a few weeks of salary for an average Egyptian, so these trips are often saved for special occasions or the upper middle class and upper classes. The standard variety entertainment includes a house band playing MENA and international music with possible open-floor social dancing followed by a two-part raqs sharqi show with male tanoura performance before or between the dancer’s sets, separated by her costume changing, then back to the house band. It’s the main raqs sharqi tourist venue to find tanoura, which does not occur in the five-star hotel or cabaret raqs sharqi shows. Everything is scaled down to the smaller size of the boat and particularly the boat’s stage, so there are fewer musicians than a dancer may bring to a wedding or hotel, and the show is also truncated compared to how long a wedding or hotel show might be.

Consequently, the pay is also less for entertainers than they'd likely make in wedding, hotel, or more upscale cabarets. Additionally, because the tours have set times in the early evening, often between 8-10pm, it is easier to find musicians to hire for boats because venues and dancers are not competing with the later and often more lucrative hotel and cabaret jobs that mostly occur later in the night. This earlier time also results in the more 'family friendly' atmosphere since families can go out and celebrate a nice evening, possibly with children, while still being home and getting to bed in plenty of time for work in the morning.

Many boats, unlike cabarets and hotel shows, work with tourist companies to create 'package deals' and are the most common venue for international tourists to have access, affordability, and interest to go to. As such, this venue is known within the industry to be the most 'touristy' of my three field sites, and due to this idea that dancers are just one of a handful of elements drawing tourists in (in addition to the cruise, buffet, and tanoura) it has a lower reputation for star dancers than hotels and weddings. Many in the industry have explained that 'tourist boats' are for the mediocre dancers who can get away with putting on less of a wonderful show because they 'just dance for tourists' that aren't as analytical about the art form (implying non-MENA), and foreigners looking for a 'clean' place to dance. Here, 'clean' refers to the job being less likely to involve sexual harassment towards the dancer by audience members and staff/management alike, as well as not having significant numbers of sex workers in the audience. However, most boat dancer's and staff will tell you audience are typically half MENA and Egyptian, with the remaining half being non-Arab tourists from throughout the globe. Yet, this still contrasts

to wedding, cabaret, and hotel gigs where the Egyptian and intra-MENA clientele overwhelmingly make up the dominant audiences.

Returning to foreign dancers, this is currently and historically one of the most common sites for foreign dancers to work. I state this for a variety of reasons. While many foreign dancers and Egyptian talent and boat management have rather harshly stated that foreigners train harder, are reliable with putting in effort and being on time, and are ‘better dancers,’ compared to their Egyptian counterparts, deeper mining would argue that it is a combination of factors, particularly those imbued with orientalism and imperialism. For example, the desire for lighter skinned dancers with body types and overall aesthetic ‘looks’ that fall into globalized western beauty standards are prominent amongst boat management and their elite MENA and global audiences, and the ‘in betweenness’ of foreign dancers that dance raqs sharqi with more western-imbued techniques and looks cater towards orientalism’s desire for the ‘familiar in the exotic’ as Edward Said states (1978, 58-59). It’s also worth noting that stating foreign dancers prefer the safety net of the ‘clean’ reputation and environment boats offer may imply that intra-MENA dancers are more likely to engage in ‘non-clean’ activities and solicitation for work, when this is also imbued with moral superiority towards non-MENA women. In my research, I have found that economic necessity is a larger factor weighing towards how dancers from all backgrounds approach their work, and that Egyptian dancers, having grown up in the culture, are more equipped with tactics and approaches for grappling with more dubious advances and offers that most foreigners don’t have the same culminated experience, and thus tactics, for negotiating.<sup>lxxvi</sup> As well, most

professional working Egyptian dancers are not working with the fantasy idea of Egypt and the stardom of the international belly dance market in mind, rather, they are working primarily to make economic ends meet.

The more accessible nature and affordability of boats, as well as differing reasons audiences choose to partake in a Nile cruising boat tour, dinner, and entertainment package vary, resulting in boats being one of the more stable and reliable sites of raqs sharqi. Patrons attend the boat for special occasions and a decadent night out, as well as for dual strains of ‘Egypt tourism.’ As ethnographer L. Wynn succinctly states in her work on western tourism focused on the ancient ideas of Egypt verse Arabian Gulf’s contemporary entertainment tourism in Egypt, “The difference between Arab and Western tourism is literally night and day: the pyramid tours (for westerners) start early in the morning to beat the midday heat, while nightclub evenings (for Arabs) don’t come to an end until the early-morning light (2007, 4). This combination of factors allows boats to continue attracting multiple strains of guests, from western and MENA tourists, as well as local Egyptians spending a nice evening out, in ways that help to keep boats afloat while other dips in tourism, the economy, and political stability more gravely effect other sites of dance.

Altogether, Nile cruising boats offer a dynamic site for exploring manifold representations of ‘Egypt’ that relate to intersecting class, gender, race, sexuality, nationalist, orientalist, and tourism dynamics from interwoven local, intra-MENA, and global circulations. Thus, my over-arching framework for this chapter revolves querying, what discourses are being created and circulated about Egypt through the medium of raqs

sharqi on the site of the Nile cruising boat stage, particularly as related to gender, nationality, and sexuality? Is the doing of dance within this site by different dancers enabling or hindering these discourses? To richly mine these inquiries, I analyze three dancer case studies from my ethnographic fieldwork. Likewise, these three case studies are sorted into two related chapter sections that reflect the common two-part raqs sharqi show structure on boats. Broken into two shorter sets, raqs sharqi boat shows often begin with the *mejanca* (entrance number) followed by one or two songs where dancers and audiences first become acquainted with one another, this is followed by the ‘second set’ where the dancer changes into a more folklore or *shaabi* style costume and starts with a folklore-inspired *tableau* or dance, such as *raqs assaya* for *saidi*. This is followed by a couple more songs and often includes dancer’s performing amongst the tables off-stage in order for a house boat photographer to take memento photos for purchase of guests with the dancer. From this point, the chapter takes readers aboard the Nile Maxim five-star boat where three different dancer’s shows are compared and contrasted for the ways they construct and perform gender, sexuality, and nationalism through varied borders, boundaries, and bodies. The next cruise, or part two, explores the tensions and possibilities opened up through the decision for female raqs sharqi dancers to perform either with, or without, *funun al shaabaya* (male back-up theatrical folklore dance artists). Finally, this chapter cruises to a conclusion with the comparative analysis of these different dancers raqs sharqi shows and how their insights may offer particular maneuvers into grappling with the country’s larger gendered, nationalist, and economic politics.



## **Part 1: Different Dancers, Different Shows**

Samia held the tail ends of my dangling scarf back as I washed my hands in the bathroom sink, I forced a slight smile towards her, goodness this felt awkward. I always wondered how someone as introverted and shy as myself wound up researching a dance ethnography in the bustling nightlife of Cairo. I especially wondered this whenever I had the misfortune of needing to use the restroom at one of my field sites. While a brief escape to a public bathroom may seem to offer a few precious moments of solitude, this wasn't the case in Cairo. I shut the sink water off as Samia the bathroom attendant offered me a clumped handful of tissues to dry my hands. I tried forcing a slightly bigger smile towards her as I clumsily attempted drying my hands with the tissues, though they just seemed to break off into a ton of sticky smithereens, creating a bigger mess than what I'd started with. Samia was a congenial looking woman in her fifties, dressed in a plain name-tagged uniform, black *hijab*, and without make up. She was the Nile Maxim's long-standing bathroom attendant, having worked there for the past seven years. Bathroom attendants were common in my field sites, in middle and higher-class venues they added a familiar touch of elegance and service to the environment, whereas in other cases they were just making the most out of another possible job opportunity. As a foreigner it seemed like there was a job for every simple task in Cairo that at least required tipping, *baksheesh*; from the woman that points to the open toilet stalls and offers tissues to the men that help you pull your car in and out of well-open parking spots. Regardless, I always felt awkward having someone standing around while I was just trying to use the bathroom, and especially awkward when they engaged in these small

acts of service, such as pointing to the open stalls and wiping down the toilet seat before I went in, handing out small scraps of toilet paper to use, and in this particular case, holding back my scarf from the sink water.

I was reminded of Cindy Garcia's work and how the bathroom attendant in L.A. salsa nightclubs signified an unwelcome reminder to dancers of the working-class body they were trying to disguise (2013, 128). However, aboard the Nile Maxim in Cairo, I was struck by how Samia, along with the dancer, were the only female employees on the boat, compared to the ten or so men currently spread out throughout the ballroom. The ways they negotiated their gendered bodies as workers, one covered modestly and plainly, the other exposed and adorned elaboratively, one tucked away into a gender-segregated space while the other would be center-staged, highlights the varied ways female bodies intelligently adapt to their particular male-dominated contexts in order to best capitalize upon them. However, in many ways, Samia embodied the culturally idealized working woman, from kissing and then holding up her tips in thanks to God, to her primarily women-only interactions, she clothed her working-class body with idealized piety and modesty. Thus, though her laboring body remained slipped away at the margins of the boat site, her location worked to center her working body within morally acceptable terms. I wondered what her thoughts might be on the other working women of the boat, those that strutted on the spotlighted stage, adorned in elaborate make up and gem-encrusted *bedlat raqs* (dance costumes), as well as the stigma of their trade. What unique insight might her particular positioning within this field site offer to raqs sharqi discourse?

Her name was Samia and she has been working on the Nile Maxim for the past seven years. She didn't enjoy her work per se, but was helping to support her family, as she talked she showed me pictures of her children, she beamed with the smile of a proud mother. She said to work well in Cairo you have to have a good education and have the right connections, she stated that she had neither, so she felt lucky to have this job on the Nile Maxim. She asked me why I came here so regularly alone, and I explained my doctoral research on dancing. She lit up with amusement and enthusiasm, she thought it was interesting to be able to get a Ph.D. in dance, and raqs sharqi specifically, and she gushed about how much she loved dancing. She started dancing in the restroom, gracefully swiveling her hips in a figure-eight pattern while as her hands lightly floated in the air with elegant soft waves. She said she loved to dance but only at weddings and family parties, her contextual amendment articulated the socially sanctioned contexts for dancing without stigma, as well as reified her own modest identity. "You must learn a lot about dancers from the Golden Age, the past, like Tahiya Carioca, Samia Gamal, Naima Akef... I love them all, they danced so light, raqs sharqi was more elegant back then, everything was more elegant back then" (January 2017). I asked her if she often watched the main dancers on the Nile Maxim boat and what she thought of their dancing. She held my shoulder, lowered her gaze, and winked at me knowingly.

Her reflection serves as the structure for the following chapter. Here, I aim to use the Nile Maxim boat as a case study in exploring how three different dancers necessitate three different raqs sharqi shows even while sharing the same stage in the same venue. This chapter will highlight how space shapes meanings but how bodies moving within

such spaces choreograph significant weight in what semiotics are created, deconstructed, and exchanged. While the overall variety entertainment ‘packaged performance’ on cruise boats is designed to ‘sell’ an image of Egypt to locals and tourists, what exactly that package says about the female dancing body and the nation at large is largely dependent upon the individual dancer and her intersectionally understood identity and what she intends to say with her art. While Samia’s analysis of each dancer will frame and focus this chapter, each dancer’s show is examined primarily with choreographic analysis as well as with supplemental interview excerpts from the dancers. I focus the analysis on the three featured Nile Maxim dancers during the course of my fieldwork, Randa Kamel, Camelia, and Farah Nasri, though Farah Nasri is the main house dancer working almost every day on the boat.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Show: Camelia**

International Egyptian raqs sharqi *fanaana* (artist) Camelia spun onto the stage with infectious energy in a classic two-piece bra and skirt style Egyptian costume with a pink silk veil flowing behind her. Her long and thick dark brown hair cascaded down her back as she circled the stage for her *mejance*, or entrance song. She smiled sweetly at the surrounding tables full of clientele from Egypt, the Gulf, and around the world as she sashayed across the stage. After circling the stage twice she tossed the veil behind her as the rhythm changed and she went into a series of hip drops accented with light shimmies on the down beat, she threw her head back and seemed to laugh with joy as the percussion picked up. Camelia was one of those dancers who had excellent musicality and movements, but it was her charisma that really made you fall for her. Whenever she

looked in my general direction I couldn't help but smile back at her as her sweet smile and bright eyes made me feel like we were old friends sharing a secret.

She remained on the stage throughout the first part of her show, and embodied the melody with flowing gentle arm work and wrist flourishes while her intricate hip work captured the percussion. Her movements were diverse and juicy, she had a wonderful mix of both percussive and serpentine accents and technique. She often tossed her long locks forward and back or from side-side, accenting her movements and the heavy *dum* drum beats with that sweet feminine '*dalaa*' quality through her hair tosses or cheeky shoulder lifts. '*Dalaa*' is reminiscent of that sweet innocent 'girl next door' type of femininity, for example, what you often see on Egyptian light romantic pop music videos where the male singer is chasing the affections of the shy girl next door, or often, above on the balcony. It was that elusive quality of *hadoor*, or chemistry or charisma, that drew me in to her show, but I could feel the energy exchange and circulation between her musicians, singer, and the audience as interpolated through Camelia's sincere love of the dance and music. After her entrance she performed to a popular pop song and then grabbed an *assaya*, or cane, from her assistant and performed a *saidi* song with the stick, referencing the *Said* region of upper Egypt through softer folklore movements and gestures. After a costume change she came back and did *shaabi* Egyptian music and dancing as well as *Iraqi* and *khaleegy*. She did a lot of *khaleegy* style dancing, even including a section in her *mejanse* opening, despite there not being a dominance of Gulf clientele in this venue, unlike what one would likely find in elite hotels or cabarets. She was confident in her movements but still relaxed and playful, often looking back over one shoulder while

lifting it slightly to give a coquettish smile to a client when they weren't expecting the connection because of her otherwise forward-focus. It was her consistently playful and unexpected exchange of joyous teasing facial expressions and body angles with various audience members that highlighted her charisma and strong audience connection.

Camelia was an amazing performer and extremely skilled at connecting with her audience. The clientele from that night were a mix of Egyptians, a few Gulf Arabs, and a scattering of families from the Levant, China, Europe, and South American countries. Camelia used her entire stage space, but never crossed the stage's border, even though it was just a small dance floor and not a raised stage. She only crossed it to enter and exit the main room for three costume changes throughout her show. I was sitting perhaps twenty-feet away from her, but I felt she was mouthing the lyrics and making jubilant and coquettish expressions just for me at several points throughout her show. Her contagious charisma was further amplified with her musicality, as the lyrics would begin a new verse she richly articulated the emotion of the song, whether joyous or full of longing, with her facial expression and movements. For example, when the singer's voice trembled and extended the ends of a verse Camelia's brow would squinch as she burst into voluminous loose hip shimmies and her hands would press out and downwards to the sides as if pressing into the surge of intense emotion.

Her energy was contagious, her lead drummer would often feed off her dance and start adding in wilder head tosses and percussive tilts of his own head as he dutifully followed the directives of Camelia's hips for accents and riffs. Likewise, her male singer often matched her emotive movements, both swaying with elongated and soulful lyrics

and both bobbing their heads enthusiastically with the beats. The audience too, was part of the energy circulation, particularly enculturated MENA audiences, many of whom were singing along with the lyrics and waving their hands in the air to help feel the music and keep the energy cyclical. A table of Egyptian men frequently shouted out encouragement to the dancer, praising her for her playful yet powerful interpretation of the popular songs.

Back in the bathroom, Samia was artfully giving me a French braid after that night's entertainment show, as she said my hair looked bad that night. At this point, we both looked forward to our regular meetings in the bathroom. I always tipped her generously-- I can't elide the economic aspect of our relationship-- but we'd also formed a serendipitous bond despite my shaky conversational Arabic. She finished my hair and took a few cell phone photos to show her friends. Samia was well-versed on the boat's regular performers and had strong thoughts on each that she was more than happy to spill to a curious researcher. Through an astute mix of miming and conversation, Samia would give me her opinions on each dancer after their show that night. She straightened her tan uniform shirt and checked to make sure the outer bathroom door was closed. "I love Camelia. Camelia is so sexy and such a woman. Camelia is a real woman." She repeated these words as she imitated Camelia's dancing, I stepped back to give her more room as she boldly stepped forward and claimed the small interior restroom floor and demonstrated soft, internalized, and sinuating full body undulations, hip infinities, and tight smooth circles. Her arms were relaxed and curved as they softly framed her hips. "Camelia is a real woman, a full woman! Camelia is soft, and because of this Camelia is

sexy. She can be alone on the stage and you still feel her. She is incredibly sexy as a woman with her dance.” (January 2, 2017).

Samia’s choreographic and verbal analysis calls attention to important aspects of meaning-making in Camelia’s raqs sharqi show. The first is the way in which a woman moves her body and performs her personality embodies and performs a particular type of gender construct. Further, Samia’s approval or lack thereof, of such gender performativity highlights how various types of gender constructions are either centered or marginalized within larger Egyptian cultural norms. The second revolves around how Camelia’s use of the stage space and interaction between her body and the others within the space also constructs effective affect as well as power relations and boundaries.

For example, I recall stepping back as Samia boldly commanded the small space of the bathroom to mimic Camelia’s style of dancing. Similarly, Camelia commands the stage space without robust aggression or direct confrontation, a stage that just previously had been open-floor social dancing for diverse clientele from across the world. It is not a raised stage at all, rather just a square of dance floor material that then proceeds into the carpeted floor the tables are on. Rather, in entering and circling the stage energetically with her veil flowing behind her, a mejançe prop more common on the global belly dance stage rather than the local Cairo circuit, Camelia commanded the space through a strong sense of presence and hip(g)nosis while remaining anchored in exaggerated, enchanting and both locally and globally desirability through her performativity of confident and self-assured ‘*dalaa*.’ (Borelli 2016). Hip(g)nosis is a corporeal theory forwarded by dance scholar Melissa Borelli. Hip(g)nosis theory argues that a dancer that knows the



multiple ways her body, particularly swiveling hips, are read as racially and sexually marked by multiples audiences of dominant class and racial backgrounds, can manipulate these power dynamics through carving out her own agency, identity, and power (2016).

Later on, I was able to sit down and interview Camelia with the assistance of Karim translating after one of her shows. The following excerpt gives a bit of background on Camelia as well as some of her thoughts on dance. “I start dancing when I was eight years old with classical ballet, I later studied folklore and then oriental dance. The thing is that all Egyptians, men and women, can dance, particularly at weddings and parties, we all have the moves and the feeling, but there’s two kinds of dancers, those that enjoy dance socially and those that study and perform it professionally like me. I studied folklore with the national troupe, *firqa kommeya*, and later studied oriental dance with the great Egyptian artist Mona Said. While Mona Said left an imprint on my dance style, I created my own way of dancing from my own personality and feelings. It is so important to study folklore steps as the foundation before oriental dancing. I have only ever danced in five-star hotels and other elite elegant places, here on the Nile Maxim I have been a regular performer for a long time. This is because the Maxim works the same as the five-star hotels. Even though me, Randa Kamel, and Farah Nasri all work on the Nile Maxim we each have our own unique show based on our own style. I am also a star teacher with the internationally-acclaimed Nile Group Festival. Through working with this international belly dance festival, I became famous throughout the globe and now mostly travel to other countries outside of Egypt teaching and performing dance to foreign students.

But this is also the thing, we have a big problem in Egypt. The famous professional dancer doesn't work in Egypt, they work mostly outside Egypt, they don't have any time here. Now do you get why the Cairo stage is empty from dancers? Me and Randa, we work outside Egypt. So no famous or hugely popular Egyptian dancers perform too much here in Egypt because we are too busy making better money and working outside of our own country. We teach and perform for foreign dancers outside Egypt. We have another message, we want to make dance so popular all over the world, in the right Egyptian way. So, when any foreigner comes here to Egypt she takes the spotlight and becomes popular so fast, because many of the most professional Egyptians don't really work here. The drop in the Egyptian economy effects everything here. In all the world, actually, there is economic problems now. However, here, the big issue is because most of our work depends on tourists. So especially now, we, and others like us are looking to teach outside of Egypt. Also, here in Egypt the people can think very badly about the dancers, but not me. People can't judge bad after they see me dance, maybe if they see a bad dancer in local cabaret without training they can say this, but with me no. I am an artist and a real star. I'm already a star in acting too, thanks God, so I am both a dancer and actress" (Jan. 22, 2017)<sup>lxxvii</sup>.

I asked about her stage presence and mentioned how much I enjoyed her show. "Thank you, my charisma and interaction with people is a gift from God, but also from my depth of experience. You see, when you perform more and more, you get better at it and more relaxed in dealing with all kinds of different situations, people, and moods. When I started dancing it wasn't like how I dance now, all my experience is constantly

teaching me more and more, and I take my power from the guests and the music when I dance. I can move my feelings from inside of me to the people, and they return this, and in this back and forth we make a meaningful interaction, but of course, this charisma is also a gift from God. If you dance a lot your style will change. Everything changes with time, the stage is different every time, the people, your feelings, mood, steps. Your experience is making everything. I'm another character when I come on the stage. Off stage I have my normal personality. The stage pushes me to have more character and interaction, more of myself, but still natural, it's Camelia. If I don't like the music I will not dance on it, I must feel it. The stage, experience, and time are growing each dancer. What makes this dance special is all about body language- *lughat elgism*. How you talk and feel from your body without speaking. How you translate your feelings from inside to outside with the music of your body. Can you think how the dancers make feelings from her to you by dance only, without any talking? She translates the music for you. Can you imagine any other dance in the world like this?" (Jan. 22, 2017)

Sitting down and talking with Camelia about her dance life adds more nuance to Samia's assertions. Camelia's dance movements and musicality incorporate a diverse variety of percussive and serpentine accents and modalities wherein neither becomes a dominant force. Comparatively, while much contemporary raqs sharqi within Cairo has become highly focused on the percussion, rhythm, and punctuated accents, Camelia keeps a balance of percussive accents, shimmies, and melodic circles, undulations, and sways without over-privileging the drums. The percussion heavy and rhythmic focused dancing of contemporary Cairo is often posited in comparison to the 'softer' and more

melodic styling of the Golden Age dancers of the past that Samia nostalgically yearned for as exemplifying raqs sharqi. This change in dance style is largely due to changes in the musical styles, which are tethered to larger economic, fashion, and globalization trends occurring since Sadat's era. For example, the percussion section, not including the lead drummer, are often the cheaper musicians to hire, so you can fill up your band more and add more energy without spending as much, likewise, percussion-heavy music in general but particularly in *shaabi* music originating in the working-classes and partially inspired by hip-hop beats has continued to permeate the dancing scene with a new fervor as it speaks to and resonated with the population's social issues and lives. Layering onto this, Camelia is enabled with this rich balance of movement and style in her dancing due to her particular identity, positionality, and background. Having a background in folklore dancing adds both a heightened sense of hyper-femininity to her dance as well as expanded staging elements such as larger use of stage space and floor patterns, as theatrical folklore from Reda and *Kommeya* troupes both implement notions of hyper gender identification and space to exemplify Egyptian gender identities and create stage persona (Shay 2002, 2006). Her training also included working with star dancer Mona Said, well known for her feeling in the dance, as well as looking for inspiration from Golden Age dancers that performed with more melodic music. This aligns with her *dalaa* personality that appears with her subtle use of shoulder gesturing, sweet and innocent facial expression and smiles, as well as use of her long hair. While the raqs sharqi body is denigrated for publicly performing a powerful sexual identity outside of acceptable familial contexts, the performing and embodiment of *dalaa* is both idealized and

romanticized within larger Egyptian culture, particularly the upper classes. Finally, from her mixture of a silk veil entrance, to the large dose of khaleegy dancing as well as shaabi and classics, Camelia caters to a wide range of audience preferences, locally, across the MENA, and globally. The combination of these bodily and aesthetic constructs work to make Camelia appealing to a wide range of audiences and particularly elite and cosmopolitan sites of performance such as the Nile Maxim and international festival circuits.

Camelia's story also provides further context for how she actively negotiates with the space to create layered power dynamics, boundaries, and meaningful interaction, especially over the border between her stage and the audience. The site of the tour boat, particularly a 'five-star' elite boat such as the Nile Maxim, has the aim of providing cultural and family-friendly entertainment to a local and cosmopolitan audience of the middle classes and up. Likewise, raqs sharqi in elite venues such as boats and hotels since the time of Nasser and onward have been straddled with regulations and rules that both keep the dance economically productive to the state but also maintain a sense of state control, morality, and nationalism through policing and other regulations. For example, in the multiple attempts to eradicate the practice of *fath*, or sitting and drinking with customers by entertainers, one regulation was that patrons were not allowed to go onto the stage, likewise, the dancer was also not supposed to go off from the stage or interact with customers at their table before or after her show as this could be charged with such delinquencies as 'eliciting prostitution.'

Of course, the extent to which these stipulations were enforced widely varies across sites and time. On contemporary boats, these regulations are often not enforced, but their histories still carry a weight in setting boundaries between the body of the dancer and those of the audience. Further, the fact that boats are smaller-scale and more intimate environments, along with the fact that they do not have raised stages, and these stages are often social-spaces for clientele to dance before and after the dancer's show, make the boundary of this border permeable and fluid. It is from knowing the historic politics embedded in the sites of dance, as well as their corresponding cultural and sate meanings and policing, that Camelia as a more elite Egyptian performer is able to efficiently play with this boundary and her own gender with such force and charisma. She knows the class politics and state policing within the stage affords her protection to fully commit to the vulnerability of her feelings and gendered and sexual body, but at the same time, she reifies her own class identity, respectful *fanaana* status, and sense of power as an Egyptian female performer by choosing to maintain that boundary by not crossing her stage as well as through the romanticized and ideal *dalaa* gender identity she performs. Instead, she lets her feelings as expressed through *hadoor*, *ihsas*, and *harikkat* (movements or technique) cross over and circulate amongst the clientele.

Notably, these spatial regulations and policing of raqs sharqi performances were necessary, in part, to control and contain the unruly marginalized body of the dancer and the *fitna* (social disorder related to sexual power) she may elicit<sup>lxviii</sup>. At the same time, these physical and legal borders and boundaries have actually enabled the dancer to have more power in expressing and embodying a deeper range of her own feelings and artistry

in direct relation to fully embracing the spectrum of gender performativity available to her marginalized body. Or, in Camelia's words, "the stages pushes me to have more character and interaction, more of myself, but still natural. The stage and experience are growing the dancer." In the dual restriction yet freedom the regulated site of the stage offers Camelia in cultivating her own ways of being in the world she offers, "It makes me brave all the time, and I do what I want. I become more honest with myself, and trust in myself. I come onto the stage and say *ana hina* – I'm here" (Jan. 2017).

## **2<sup>nd</sup> show: Randa Kamel**

I sat surprised that I could hear Randa Kamel, also an internationally famous Egyptian dancer, before I could see her. The long duration of a *mejance's* introduction is supposed to build up drama, energy, and add esteem to the performer before she enters the stage, usually the heightened music coming from the just set up live band is when guests start twisting in their chairs and turning their necks all around in anticipation for the dancer's arrival. In this case, Randa herself was backstage with a microphone singing the opening lyrics for her own *mejance*, usually praises of the dancer, which caught me off guard. I nodded my head in approval, thinking she must have a lot of self-confidence to pull that off, but also that she had a decent singing voice on top of being an internationally-acclaimed dancer. Soon, Randa ran onto the stage with a burst of energy, and I was immediately struck by her intense outward-focused energy as she pivoted in a circle throughout the stage area with strong linear 'windmill' arms framing her movements. Visually, she wore the standard two-piece bra and tight-fitting skirt costume, but her muscular and toned athletic body, particularly her abs, caught my attention. Her

entrance number was full of outward directed movements, drama, and power, as she spun and pivoted around the stage with crisp and strong stops and punctuated accents. She would catch the percussion with outward pops from her lower belly, accompanied with a striking linear arm punctuation or percussively bump her hip out to the side as she crisscrossed the stage with her arms raised straight up towards the sky.

Bold linear lines, seismic earthquake shimmies, and sharp punctuated accents marked her dance style. Her expressions changed with the mood of the music, but rather than emanating a circular exchange of energy and charisma like Camelia, Randa's energy was more directed outward and she seemed to take most of her power from the music and within herself rather than feeding off the audience's energy as much as Camelia. Her percussive hip accents, strong turns, and tightly internal and muscular small hip circles all point to her extensive training and dedication to the form, and her explosive delivery of this technique and powerful and linear arm framing highlight her signature stylistic interpretation of raqs sharqi.

Randa stays on stage intentionally. She wants to give a strong solo show as *fanaana* (artist). She does a classic song next which is only slightly softer due to Randa putting greater focus on using dynamic facial expressions, singing along, and gesturing to interpret the lyrics and feeling of the song. Like Camelia, Randa doesn't cross the boundary separating the stage from the guests seating area of the ballroom. However, in contrast to Camelia, Randa reaches her audience more directly through her powerhouse technique. Her feeling and personality are also strong, but not as dominantly as her physical technique. I became startled at one point during this song- because as she was



dancing across the stage, taking up the full range of space with rapid three-quarter turns, her face quickly turning to spot the turns, a male musician, in his rightful 'place' on the stage, off towards the back edge beside the rest of the percussion players, was possibly in her course of collision. I wondered what would happen as Randa came hurling towards him. The drummer's eyes widened as he quickly jumped out of her way, momentarily losing his place within the music. Randa showed no sign of the possible collision's effect on her, calling attention to power hierarchies on stage wherein the dancer holds power over her all-male band.

Randa later did a bit of a singing and dance duet during her *baladi* song, where she interacted with her young singer Hisham, as each sang the corresponding male and female exchanges of the song. Hisham seemed completely comfortable with the duet, smiling at Randa and making eye contact while he sang, even stepping back and forth lightly while bobbing his head to the music. The male singer with female dancer duet was a common part of many dance shows in Cairo, the exception here being the contrasting age difference, Hisham seemed very much in the prime of his youth while Randa was obviously a well-seasoned and mature dancer. Typically, this age contrast is different, with the male singer likely to be, or appear, older than the dancers, whom often appear in their twenties and thirties. Here, the gendered age contrast granted Randa another heightened sense of authority. This mutually comfortable and relaxed duet contrasts with how I observed Hisham interacting with another Nile Maxim dancer later on in my fieldwork.

Returning to the restroom, Samia stiffened up and took on a grave expression of disapproval. “Randa – no. Randa no, no, no.” She wagged her finger and shook her head repeatedly. “Randa is too much strong, too much, too much! Always strong, all the time! She has no *dalaa*, she make dance like man make karate! This is not a dancer! She has the stage, but she refuses to make dance, just karate!” This time, I deliberately stepped back as Samia extended her palm directly out, facing me with direct physical aggression. She demonstrated ‘karate-esque’ movements such as multiple karate chops and forward power kicks as she held her hands close to her face in fists. She laughed at herself and then leaned in towards me, “maybe I can make like a man, but”... she opened her palms to the small sparkling clean restroom we were sharing space in, “Randa does not need,” she concluded as she gestured towards the stage and live music reverberating from outside the restroom confines (Feb. 21, 2017).

Again, Samia highlights key areas of signification within Randa Kamel’s raqs sharqi show. First, she points out how Randa’s construction of a powerful, direct, and strong woman can be threatening or marginalized within larger Egyptian cultural norms, particularly due to the contexts she embodies this form of womanhood within. By noting that Randa ‘has the stage,’ Samia argues that gender constructions and embodiments are either enabling or hindering depending on their specific contexts. Further, her comparison of her work space and conditions to Randa’s highlights class and labor dynamics as they intersect with site-specific gender performativity and effectiveness. Finally, her demonstrations of karate as ‘making like a man’ and refusal to acknowledge Randa as a

raqs sharqi dancer point to how deeply gender is embedded not only within a binary system, but also a kinesthetic corpus, within Egyptian culture.

I also had the chance to sit down and interview with Randa Kamel. The interview occurred in the hotel lobby where Randa and internationally-acclaimed male dancer Tito Seif were teaching at Randa's international dance festival, 'Raqs, Of Course' to about fifty foreign women from across the globe. Some excerpts from our conversation add nuance to Randa's performance and overall dance career. Randa begins with explaining why her and Tito, both professional Egyptian dancers, spend most of their time dancing on stages outside their country. "We both mostly dance outside of Egypt now. We are too busy with teaching and shows outside Egypt for the world-wide dance community of foreigners. I only dance at Nile Maxim when I am here in Cairo, which is very rare. I have been working on the Maxim for so many years, it is my home. Dancing outside of Egypt at belly dance festivals around the world is different than here. Outside I feel it is totally, totally – art. They (foreigners) want technique, feeling, everything, they look at me every second and cheer, they care, they really want to catch all of my technique. But here in Egypt, we of course enjoy the dance more because it is with live band instead of a CD. The live band makes more feeling and power, and gives me more control, I can repeat sentences in the music or anything I want with a band. With CD I feel I am controlled by it because it does not listen to my lead like a live band. I love dancing outside Egypt for foreigners, but also here in Egypt for Egyptians because they understand the music and lyrics meanings without needing translation. The Gulf people come here a lot now and they prefer me to dance in their Gulf style, I do not like this, so I

do not do this. This is Egypt. But yes, I love to dance outside of Egypt because I feel it is totally art” (Feb. 14, 2017).<sup>lxxix</sup>

I asked her about how she structures her shows on the boat and how she works with her band and the venue management. “Of course, the dancer has all of the power, I control my band, they must follow my lead, off stage and on stage, by my word or hips, they follow me. I give the program of the night to my band, by myself, but we rehearse it together. The boat is my home for many years. I used to have a manager in the past, you know I used to start in cabarets and then big hotels for a little but they (Sheraton) shut down for economic reasons in the early 2000’s so I moved to the Maxim and outside festivals. I had a manager like most dancers back then but for a long time now I work alone, I do everything by myself. The boat here, the management gives me my dates and times for work and I show up, that’s it, no further involvement. I make my own show. I also have my team that helps me with organizing trips outside, but this is my team.

I make my show entirely by myself, I choose everything by myself. I do rehearsals with my musicians, I say we will do this song then this song, so it is all my show. I start, of course, with *mejance*, because this is part of the culture, I have to start with this entrance song made for dancers. What I dance next depends on my mood, if I want to dance *saidi* or *shaabi*, but I prefer *shaabi* after *majence*, after that like you saw maybe *baladi*, *yahnie*, it depends on my mood. Of course, the place changes my mood, any place is different than the other. On Nile Maxim they want a ‘show-show’, I have to make a good show. But in cabaret, you just start a short sentence, then you’re just looking for the money. It is very different, nobody cares about my technique, nobody cares about

my art, in cabaret, because this place isn't for art... just drunk cheap men. I hate to work there and would not do the teasing ways like they expect from female dancers, so I moved up quickly because I had the talent and feeling.”

Randa then explained how much a dancer suffers within Egyptian society. “I suffer. You cannot believe how much I suffer. The suffering start from my family when I was young. I loved to sneak away and dance, neighbors wedding party or anything, and when they know (my family), they would beat me. I was from a very conservative area Mansoura, but I couldn't stop my love for dance. Later as a professional dancer you can't imagine how the people talk so bad about you, they all think you are bad woman, a prostitute. The Cairo dancer lives alone, works alone, she spends all her life alone just working, and it is such hard work on top of all this! For all this suffering, I want to have family in this art, I want to become close to everyone.” I remember being struck by just how friendly and down to earth she was with festival participants between workshops and performances. She was a tough teacher but extremely generous with her time, knowledge, and care. I remember being shy to remind her about the interview because she was having such a pleasant time joking and giving advice with her students on the lobby couches outside the hotel ballroom. “But the biggest thing now is I cannot imagine how my son will suffer when he wants to marry because his mom is a dancer. I cannot imagine... I do not want to see him suffer.” She looked over at her youthful son, he was laughing and joking with friends across the lobby. I wanted to change the topic, I mentioned a comment I'd heard about her not having *dalaa* or being soft and flirty.

“I hate! I *haaaaaate!* I dance for art! I do not like or do this teasing and suggestive way with men. I want to make art, to prove, to everyone, I am an artist! I am not...something else. A lot of dancers are working for another way, hiding their true job behind the dancing. Me, absolutely no. I love dance, I love the feelings, I love art, that’s it. I finish my show and I go home. I’m very strong with this point. I hate it, to make overtly sexual movements or interaction in this type of way. I’m a married woman, a mother, a respectful person. I want the people to see my show and respect me.” I inquired about her guest interaction on the Nile Maxim, how some regular dancers there stayed on the stage throughout their show while others made it a norm to go off stage and dance amongst the tables making physical or more personal interaction with guests. “I never go off the stage and make physical close contact interaction with the guests and I am still successful. I hate this off-stage playing way, I hate it. I want to show people my art. I don’t want to be beside people in my show, I come to be beside the people after my show, as a normal human. During the show I am an artist. Believe me, my work is on the stage. I think I oblige people to respect me and come and pay money to watch my show through the way I make my show. Because God and my life experiences and feelings give me something the people like. I refuse this other way, of playing to men” (Feb. 14, 2017).

I asked about the relationship between being a woman and being a dancer. “Dancing gives me everything. Everything. Dancing makes me happy, it gives me feelings so rich you cannot imagine. It gives me life, these feelings. Dancing makes me a woman. It makes me a human. You can’t imagine how much I take from dancing,

because of the music, the feeling, everything. Every time I go on stage I show what's inside me, all that I am, when I dance." She sighs heavily before continuing with gentle nods, "I forget everything, I forget all my problems, dancing gave me a lot, really."

"About what good things and what bad things I have from dance, I have many. Let's start with the good things, the gifts. Of course, dancing gives me a good (economic class) level to live on, a good body, enjoyment in my life. Dancing taught me a lot of things about how to be a very strong person, and ... the earned respect from the people. These are the good things, the gifts from dance. The bad things, eh, how people talk bad behind me because I'm an oriental dancer, especially Egyptian people. When I imagine how much my son is going to suffer when he wants to marry, eh... and how everyone's become a teacher now at all these new festivals everywhere. They are not really teachers, just doing it for money because of the economy. About what's holding back the dance in Egypt these days... ah, maybe some problems with the foreign dancers that come for work. Some foreigners come, and they don't understand our culture, our mentality, so they work against our culture. They destroy our culture and our dance and they don't even know – *clap! Yahn*ie there will be a very nice famous venue for a show and they'll take money as tips or for very low pay - they make us cheap! Some of these dancers are not just cheap with pay, they are cheap with everyone, you know what I mean? Outside Egypt, you have different mentality, you can have a boyfriend, you can leave your boyfriend and have another and another, you have an open life, we have another culture. Here, you have to marry. If you do anything more than your husband, this means you are

not a good person. But the foreigners come here and follow their culture here. So, oriental dance gets more of a bad reputation.”

I mentioned the issue with the social mentality against raqs sharqi dance, and if she felt she was changing the mentality through her career. “*Wallahi* now, with all these problems around me, I think everything is getting worse. Ah, I did though, I changed the social stigma for myself. The people respect me after they know me and see my show. I did do this. But... one person is not enough, we have to be all together. To show everybody that oriental dance is work and talent. I have artistic show, I have family, I have husband, I am a normal person, *yahnie*, it does not mean I am prostitute. A dancing woman is not prostitute. But just one person... in this career... in this time...it is not enough.” She shakes her head and looks down. “Two is not enough. We, all dancers, have to be together to prove something, change something. I did it, but one woman is not enough, especially now.”

Later I asked what she thought made raqs sharqi a special or unique dance. “Okay, oriental dance you are alone on the stage. You move every part of your body, you show yourself, oriental dance means that you show who you really are. We all have a lot of problems in life, but when you dance you feel different, you can fix your problems. When you have pain, you can fix it with dancing. It makes you feel you are female, that you don’t need men to tell you oh you are beautiful or anything, no! You don’t need. Because you *know*. You know yourself, and you trust yourself. I can’t tell you everything now, but I saw all dances, all kinds, and oriental is the one that is feeling. It is a communication between melody, rhythm, movements, your heart, how you feel,



translation, many things come together to make you really enjoy, it's not 1,2,3 and counting steps. Yes, because except maybe *mejance*, oriental is improvisation, what I feel, I show. I love when I listen, I feel, I dance, just like that. This is better than choreography or counting.” Towards the end of our talk I asked her if she felt working as a professional raqs sharqi dancer made her strong and how. “Dancing gives you a lot, you will be very strong, you learn a lot from this dance and this life. If you dance in Cairo you will become a very clever person, because you work amongst men. Men want to *eatttt* you, in our mentality. You are beautiful and young, everyone wants to look at you like this, every man wants something from you or some part of you- money, love, body, power. It's about how you deal with all these men, to make them oblige you, to make them respect you! As a dancer you make yourself to be like a man, it's one way how you can deal with them. You have to be strong, talk like them, when you give or say your word, you must do it. When you do all this and make the people respect you, and when anyone speak to you one small tiny bad word, you will find you show him one type of face. This one and that one, however they treat you, they find a different face from you. Dance will teach you how to have many faces and know which man to show which face to, so you take what you want. In this, you become professional in dance but also in how to deal with everyone at each level, this is the point. If I talk about how I learned this, I need one full day, but really, dancing makes me strong. But really, you trust yourself and know yourself from dance.”

Combining the choreographic analysis of Randa's show, her own perspectives on dance, and Samia's comparative critiques lends a layered and rich exploration of Randa's

danced discourse. Randa Kamel is interesting for two reasons; first, she honestly admits to starting her career in Cairo cabarets and then moving up to the international teaching festival circuit. Second, for the fact that Randa is a successful Egyptian dancer that is known to be more loved outside of Egypt than within. First, from my ethnographic research and interviews with many managers and others in the range of raqs sharqi work contexts, I am confident in asserting that a significant number of dancers start working in cabarets (of all calibers) and then ‘move up’ in terms of social capital in terms of which level venue they work in, such as from cabarets to more elite five-star hotels. In contemporary Cairo during the time of my fieldwork, many dancers were working across venues, often working in cabarets, boats, weddings of all levels, and hotels. Particularly in the past since these venues became more common and thus stratified by class and social status, but still relevant contemporaneously, the raqs sharqi venue system embodies the strict social class hierarchy of the general Egyptian society.

In Cairene society it is highly difficult for social mobility to occur, you are often always known for the combined socio-economic status of your beginnings and family, even if one were to gain wealth, the social class is harder to transition. Within the contemporary raqs sharqi gig circuit, cabarets are considered the bottom of the barrel in terms of social and class status for dancers and the clientele that frequent them. Boats are often considered mid-level but family-friendly, and five-star hotels are the cream of the crop. Of course, hierarchies existed within each of these strata, for example the Nile Maxim being considered a five-star boat and actress Lucy’s ‘Parisiana’ cabaret to be considered elite.

Due to the way socio-cultural class functions in Cairene society, many dancers that start in cabarets and then move up the social ladder will eventually mask their beginnings, stating that they only ever dance in elite venues and would never be caught dead in a cabaret<sup>lxxx</sup>. A famous director of one of the prestigious belly dance festivals in Cairo frequently talks down on cabaret dancers. She tells the local and foreign dancers she trains to never step foot in a cabaret because it will sabotage their careers. Yet, at the same time, she often finds new local dance teachers for her festival from various cabarets across Cairo to market as ‘authentic rising stars’ to foreign dance clients. Admittedly, she has stated to me that they are nothing but ‘cabaret cats’ that, like the Cairo street cats, cannot stand to be in any clean elegant place and will eventually leave her and return to the ‘garbage’ (cabaret work circuit) from which they came. Thus, the fact that Randa Kamel openly admits to starting work in cabarets with honesty about her discomfort with the realities of the work is refreshing but unusual. It is also more understandable considering the bulk of her work and status now comes from outside Egypt, where this narrative of the ‘rags to riches’ parallels notions of the ‘American dream’ and is often met with open arms. This is opposite to within Cairo, where Randa’s cabaret beginnings would likely be met with harsh opposition and a blockade to social mobility.

Randa’s mobility as a dance teacher and performer has also led her to raqs sharqi circuits outside of Egyptian and intra-MENAT flows, instead she has found her home in the globalized belly dance festival circuits, which while centered in Cairo, have international flows throughout Asia, Europe, and North and South America. Her intense, strong, and outward energy are not as marketable or successful within the Cairo circuits,

Randa was never very popular as a wedding dancer, but she has strategically been able to enter the global belly dance circuit in ways that allow her dancing to do a particular kind of work. On the global festival stage, her large windmill arms and strong outward energy and focus on intensive technique are celebrated and more familiar to foreign audiences, because of the often larger proscenium style stage formats, but also due to the ways belly dance in western contexts has changed to embody the strong outward feminine archetypes of western feminism. These archetypes kinesthetically resonate with powerful punctuated accents and grandeur full body movements.

From the opening notes of her own voiced *mejance*, Randa makes a statement about being a dancer and Egyptian woman. Before any audience eyes can judge her dancing, looks, or interaction, audiences instead hear Randa singing her own praises, making it clear from off-stage that she is already certain of herself and what her work is about. This meaning not only circulates because of Randa choosing to sing her own praises, but also because the character of a dancer that is also a talented singer references back to the age of the *awalem*, when a dancer was considered *shamla* (complete) because she was multi-talented in dance, singing, and reciting poetry (Nieuwkerk 59). This was also a community that was strong before the male-dominated impresario business system took over, which is also further referenced in Randa's own choice not to have a male manager now. As Samia notes, her bold gender performativity and embodiment on stage is almost too boundary pushing for many Cairo contexts of raqs sharqi, but she has quite successfully channeled these gender semiotics into more western and internationally-palatable frameworks and contexts that have aided her in dominating the global belly

dance festival circuit in ways that deeply resonate with her own sense of Self. Importantly, she is not catering to the western market, but rather, has tactfully engaged with it and made a home out of this particular circuit while remaining true to her own core values and objectives with dance as an Egyptian woman. At the same time, it is important to call attention to the overlapping ways in which Randa has and continues to perform within Cairo circuits of class, gender, and nationalism.

Randa also talked to me about the financially well-off husband she had to help her start her career, when she was still working on stepping up from Cairo cabaret stages to five-star boat and hotel venues. Thus, her and her husband's economic backgrounds and resources worked to both start Randa in the cabaret circuit as well as aid in her social mobility from such stages. While the dancing profession is highly marginalized within Egyptian society, normative heterosexual marriage relationships are often enabling ways for dancers to gain safety, respectability, and social mobility in their dance careers and everyday life. Even now, though her performative focus on intensive and powerful outward-directed technique, energy, and physical strength and prowess alone on the stage cultivate a strong sense of womanhood that resists the binary *dalaa* or femme fatale expectation, her verbal narrative highlights normative constructions of gender. For example, in defending her respectability and self-identity, Randa identifies multiple times as a wife and mother. Thus, while Randa pushes on the boundaries of normative gender embodiment and performativity through her performance and dance career, she simultaneously reifies the respected gendered and hetero-norms of identifying as a wife and mother. Her own explanations of her dancing on stage compared with her 'normal'

life off-stage also highlights the ways the raqs sharqi dance stage has historically served as what belly dance scholar McDonald deems an ‘extra-ordinary space,’ with the performance heightening gender constructs and resistances to make these power dynamics more strongly legible (2012).

On stage, Randa’s intensely strong hip locks, bumps, and shimmies perform a strong woman that can stand alone on stage but also in life, not needing to depend on a man to define her sense of beauty or worth. Men, like her musicians, remain as background, there to follow the lead of her waist. At the same time, Randa chooses to keep her dancing within the state-sanctioned border of the stage in ways that also call attention to how her gender resistance simultaneously reifies state and class signifiers and constraints. For example, since the Sadat era, *musanafat* regulations have deemed it inappropriate for female dancers to leave the stage and intermingle with the audience as a way of eradicating *fath* (Nieuwkerk 49), by not crossing this border Randa gains power not just by refuting physical ‘teasing’ interaction with men but also by perpetuating a gendered division of moralized labor between the regulated and proper ‘artist’ verse the illicit and unruly prostitute.

## **Part 2: Balanced s or Strong Solos? Farah Nasri and her *Funun al Shaabaya***

I was particularly curious about what Samia thought about French-Algerian dancer Farah Nasri. Farah, though she identifies as mixed race and multi-cultural, is still ‘not Egyptian,’ and therefore considered an *agnibiya* by the Egyptian boat staff and general public. The Nile Maxim staff also prefer to market, promote, and identity Farah as French rather than French-Algerian. Farah had been contracted with the Nile Maxim for the past three years when I met her, and was the main dancer most often working the boat cruises every day throughout the duration of my fieldwork. Previously, she was a sought-after professional working in London, but after coming to Randa’s large international festival, decided to test the waters of working in Cairo. The two most obvious aspects of Farah’s Nile Maxim shows that set her apart from the other featured dancers is that she has decided to create her show with *funun al shaabaya*, back-up male theatrical folk dancers. Secondly, that she spends much of the latter part of her show off stage making interaction with guests around their tables.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Due to the amplified nature of theatrical folklore influences in Farah’s show as a result of her incorporation of *funun al shaabaya*, whom she endearingly calls her *shabab* (youthful men) for short, her case study is fitting for part two of this discussion of cruise boat dancers and raqs sharqi. Often the boat shows can be interpreted as divided into two parts, the introductory set starting with a *mejançe* followed by a couple songs in the classic two-piece bra and skirt raqs sharqi costume, and then a costume change usually occurs where the dancer performs a second set often starting with a folkloric *tableau* such as *saidi* or *eskandarani*, any dance that references specific regions of Egypt through costuming, music, and

technique. Due to Farah's incorporation of *funun al shaabaya* into her show, it serves as a fitting case study for melding the writing with the boat dancing's show structure. Further, with the elite exceptions of Camelia and Randa, most dancers will use the second half of the show to 'make the rounds' off-stage amongst the patrons to snap photos and interact more heavily off-stage.

Tonight, there was also a middle-aged Lebanese woman in the bathroom freshening up her make up while Samia and I had our usual enthused greetings and conversation. She exited the restroom after splashing on strong perfume as Samia gave me the next dance analysis. Samia had the strongest feelings about Farah's dancing. "Farah, no. I do not like Farah at all! Never! Farah is not a dancer, Farah is only for men. Farah goes around and around in circles for men, and this is not dance!" She demonstrated sharp, punctuated, and hard-hitting percussive hip and chest accents to go along with her disapproval of Farah's use of the total performance space. She shook her head in disapproval. She continued, "she just go to the men, *run* to the men, this is not dance!" She paused a moment in introspection then finalized, "Yes, Farah cannot even be alone on the stage, she even has to bring the men on stage with her to make her show, she cannot be alone on the stage like Camelia and Randa!" (Feb. 18, 2017).

Samia strongly felt that the two aspects of Farah's show that set her apart from the other Nile Maxim dancers: her use of back-up male folklore dancers and her heavy off-stage interaction- didn't mesh with the ideals and values she felt embodied raqs sharqi. Following Samia's lead, this section seeks to explore two questions. First, what significations does the packaged and framing of hyper gendered and nationalized



performing bodies have on this site when dancers incorporate *funun al shaabaya*?

Secondly, what meanings are being created through Farah's decision to perform a large portion of her show off-stage interacting with the audience? In order to better understand these dynamics, it is important to trace the history of how *funun al shaabaya* and raqs sharqi dancers began performing live shows together in Cairo. Though in Golden Age films, soloist dancers such as Samia Gamal and others can be seen performing with a background of male and female dancers behind them, and early cabaret clubs had background female dancers, the *funun al shaabaya* and raqs sharqi artist pairings seen contemporaneously are more closely tied to innovations forwarded by Mahmoud Reda's *Reda* troupe as well as 1970's Egyptian-Palestinian star raqs sharqi dancer Nagwa Fouad.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

*Funun al shaabaya* are a related off-shoot to the theatrical staged folk dancing Mahmoud Reda and Farida Fahmy pioneered in Cairo through the Reda Troupe in the 1950's and onward. The shared repertoire, step combinations, and aesthetics *funun al shaabaya* use in their shows with dancers still largely stems from Reda troupe work as well, though it also incorporates such aspects from other major theatrical folklore troupes that followed in the Reda Troupe's wake. The Reda troupe was in conversation with larger nationalist and socialist politics President Nasser was at the time cultivating, which soon led to a second national troupe, *firqa kommeyya*, that was aligned and spearheaded in the Soviet Moiseyev Dance Company character dance style. This innovative 'new' dance genre largely aligned with Nasserist era politics and thus came to represent Egypt, often displacing, or at least competing with, raqs sharqi soloists that had previously been

seen similarly to ‘cultural ambassadors’ of the dance at home and abroad, because it represented a cleaner (less sexually stigmatized), and more middle and upper-class masculine vision of Egypt that didn’t have to contend with the working popular class and sex work connotations and connections raqs sharqi always wrestled with<sup>lxxxiii</sup>. Regarding male dancers, Reda legitimated the professional male dancing body on stage, but he did so through hyper-gendering the masculine body through trained athleticism and technique, which suited masculine nationalist, and heterosexual constructions (Shay 2002, Vermeyden 2017). For example, one aspect of achieving the legitimacy of the male performing body was by erasing any traces of men’s playful social *baladi* serpentine hip-articulated dancing that may mimic raqs sharqi movements seen socially, by both genders, at urban weddings.

However, it was star dancer Nagwa Fouad (Egyptian-Palestinian artist performing between the 1960-90’s), who spearheaded the popularity and fashion trend of incorporating *funun al shaabaya* into otherwise live solo raqs sharqi stage shows. Nagwa was always a show woman, and desired to add more spectacle and prestige to her grand stage shows. She married and collaborated artistically with Mohammed Khalil for many years starting in the 1970’s. Khalil had been the director of the *kommeya* troupe and worked in high positions with theatre, and culture palaces under the Ministry of Culture (Safy 118). Khalil and Nagwa both shared a desire for raqs sharqi to be elevated to the point where it was not only loved, but also respected, and performed within a dignified context. Together, they collaboratively thought this could be achieved through more elaborate stage show productions featuring costume changes, composed musical and

choreographed stage numbers, and the incorporation of narratives storylines and robust folkloric *tableaus* with male and female trained back up dancers from the national troupes (118). Khalil argued that raqs sharqi never reached its full potential, as it was still being reduced to ‘sexy movement’ that’s not taken easily because it’s by a solo woman. Therefore, adding a framework through nationalist story lines incorporating dancers of both genders would create a more dignified, balanced, and respected framework for the dance (118).

Yet, going even further, working with, or without, *funun al shaabaya* becomes more complex. In an interview with dance ethnologist Sahra C. Kent, who also performed in a five-star hotel during the 1990’s, she elaborates. “Well, excluding Nagwa it became almost impossible to find women to work these back-up dancing gigs for dancers so it largely just became men, because of the women’s families and their being out at night, if they were going to do all that they would just be belly dancers to make a lot more money, but anyway you can find hundreds of trained Reda and *Kommeya* men. When I was here it was incredibly fashionable to use the guys, I used them. Now evidently when Nagwa had guys and girls she had paid chaperones and drives for them, and it was Nagwa, so that’s how it was all right for her to have men and ‘good girls’ in her group. So, everybody here is always competing with one another, Nagwa was huge, and maybe you can’t afford to hire a fifty-piece orchestra but for sure you can afford to hire a couple back up guys and suddenly your show looks bigger. If you’ve got an hour to yourself and don’t use dance props like we do in the U.S., the guys help to fill in space during costume changes and make *tableaus*, people like it, and it’s not expensive, so it stuck. But if you

don't have regular work it's hard to keep them, because like musicians they'll just go wherever they're getting paid, so when a lot of the regular work dropped so did those job collaborations" (Feb. 7, 2017).<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

Another U.S. dancer, Vanessa Friedman, currently contracted at the five-star Sofitel hotel in Cairo that worked closely with various folklore troupes, touched on the stigma and financial aspects of *funun al shaabaya* in an interview. "I knew *funun al shaabaya* guys that would never work with a dancer, because they'd think it's not nice. Others think hey, it's night orders, I get paid extra, the problem is scarcity of work, there hasn't been a lot of work, a lot of them have other jobs to make ends meet, many have kids to feed, so they'll take gigs with dancers to get more night work. Many do it for extra money, not for prestige. I knew another that only worked with dancers when he needed to pick up extra cash. I'm sure they don't feel it's the epitome of their careers just doing sashay sashay, pivot turn. Some Egyptian stars like Dina, Randa, they don't feel like they need this, they just do their own solo show. Here's the thing, I love folklore and I enjoy having the interaction with the guys if they do it well, some don't rehearse well or perform well, I'd rather work alone than have something low quality. Some girls are nice dancers but not really fabulous, and having the extra people makes it more interesting. I kind of agree that if you're strong enough you should be able to carry your own show. Many weddings and boats use them, and remember the boats are trying to have entertainment for the whole thing and some people don't like the dancer so much so adding folklore makes up for that a little bit. And some girls dance the same way for

every song no matter the change in music style so having that variety with the guys can help” (Jan. 15, 2017).<sup>lxxxv</sup>

I also thought hearing principal female dancer for the Reda Troupe, Farida Fahmy’s, opinions on *funun al shaabaya* with dancers would be enlightening. Particularly, as Farida was able to achieve a famous and respected role in Egyptian performing arts that deemed her the ‘daughter of Egypt.’ “I’ll tell you how it happened. When Reda Troupe started out and became so popular, it’s very interesting, *\*snaps finger\** the belly dancers at this time got very nervous, especially a big influential star at the time, so she said she wanted to have some people dancing around me, because she got nervous, so she thought this would be spectacle and add prestige. So, then this started with these boys in these golden suits going around doing this rubbish thing. The first thing they started doing which was really ridiculous was she would come and dance, and then she’d go out and we’d sit for a few minutes listening to the music, then she’d come out with another costume or a stick or something, but then she’d do practically the same movement as before! So, she had a small set movement vocabulary, and that’s it! So, she uses that same small vocabulary and thus needed more spectacle to make up for it. As for the guys, they just imitate, nothing original, they just do what Reda troupe does, well they try to, so it’s a knock off of a knock off of the Reda troupe, without the basic foundation that makes a dancer in the Reda Troupe stand out, get it? Most of these boys became after that free-lance, because they’re just interested in following the easy money, it’s not usually about art” (March 28, 2017)<sup>lxxxvi</sup>.

I asked how she thought raqs sharqi dancers working with back-up dancers might be enabling to their show. “If she, the dancer, stands there and does her homework well, and seriously performs what her own dance form is, and she has her own unique thing to say, she doesn’t need any of this. But, to have people just running around her, it became a trend. They were tacky clothes, really shiny stuff, and she’s standing there doing her own little movements. It’s taking a vision of the Reda troupe that was, *yahnie*... well look, most people watching dancers now are drunk anyway, so. To dance for people who are eating and drinking at the same time, it’s degrading anyway. The people that go on boats and to nightclubs and eat and drink, they don’t care anyway, it’s not respectful. If she thinks this makes her look cleaner she’s deceiving herself.”

I asked about the economic situation for male dancers that work either strictly with folklore troupes or with raqs sharqi dancers. “As for pay, those guys, I don’t think they even get paid much. I don’t even think the poor foreign dancer takes much, she’s barely living here! I don’t know why they like to come here. The whole fantasy that’s been inflated is that ‘oh I’m dancing in Cairo’—really, we have to do away with this fantasy idea of Egypt these foreigners have.” Other boat performers I talked to stated that *funun al shaabaya* used to be much more common on boats even though the space was small, but most boats have done away with them because of the budget cuts. However, they’re still often requested and used at Egyptian weddings for the middle classes and up that can afford to hire them to fill up the show time and space. Having a brief background for *funun al shaabaya*, I move into the choreographic analysis of Farah and her *funun al shaabaya*’s shows on the Nile Maxim.

---“Excuse me, where are you from?” I was trying to take mental notes of Farah’s band set-up as well as survey the audience before Farah’s show began. “Hello, excuse me, I said, where are you from, what is your name?” I thought maybe if I pretended to not hear the loud boisterous *khaleegy* man from the table next to mine he would stop interrupting my mental preparation for the show. I was wrong. A large middle-aged man with a protruding belly, pulling at the seams of his suit, now started waving his hand in my direction. He was sitting with five other men at a table center-staged in front of the dance floor. In other words, his group was given the unofficial ‘VIP’ seating for the show. It wasn’t a full night and the boat staff all knew about my ethnographic research so I sat alone at the table beside the Gulf men’s. “The show is about to start” I replied to him, trying to diffuse any chance of conversation. “Yes, but where are you from? What is your name? My friends and I are all wondering what a pretty young lady like you is doing here all alone? You know I can be the best tour guide for you ever if you want to see the best nightlife of Cairo. We are from the UAE.” I replied shortly to him stating that I was not in need of a tour guide, I was here working on a book and I was just there to watch the show.

I pulled out the small notebook I kept tucked away in my purse and pretended to occupy myself re-reading old field notes, but he persisted to his friends’ amusement. He quickly escalated to asking me on dates and assuring me he could provide the best experience of Cairo nights that I would never forget, along with other propositions full of thinly veiled innuendo. I never wanted a band to set up so fast and found myself glancing out towards the large wooden and glass doors that Farah would soon emerge from. I

turned around after a light tap on my shoulder, it was Hamid, one of the older male waitstaff on the boat that knew I was just there for my research. “Christine, are you okay?” He seemed genuinely concerned for me and his soft eyes made me feel more comfortable. “If these guys are bothering you just tell me because I can move your seat to back there.” He pointed to a far-off table almost completely behind the band where I would inevitably get a horrible view of the show. I assured him I was fine where I was but thanked him for his concern as he left to return to other business.

I tried to cover the frown that crept across my face when his concerned solution was that I be displaced, as opposed to chastising or re-locating the ‘VIPs.’ I exhaled deeply as I remembered that my solo presence was at odds with the cultural gender norms, that I was already ‘out of place’ being alone late at night in an entertainment venue, and that as much as the Egyptian male waitstaff probably desired to put these and other wealthy entitled *khaleegy* guests in their place, their paychecks depended on catering to their satisfaction. Due to the immense rift in economic privilege and dependency between the two groups since the oil economies took off in the Gulf, Hamid was reacting in a paternalist protective role that gave him a sense of control over larger uneven economic flows between Egypt and the Arabian Gulf countries, as well as reifying his own sense of Egyptian masculinity. Interruptions such as these are constant, exhausting, but revealing for how micro-level bodily interactions in contextualized space gesture towards larger macro-politics being negotiated.

Quickly after setting up their instruments on stage, Farah Nasri’s band began to play the energetic opening notes of her *mejanca*. While Farah waited in her sparkly two-



piece bra and skirt costume outside, four fresh and joyful looking men in shiny and sparkly embellished suit pants and button up shirts sashayed onto the small square stage and performed ‘jazz-esque’ steps to the opening beats of the music. Their four beaming bodies each took up position on the four corners of the square stage, utilizing pivot spins, basic step-together-steps, and large grandeur arm flourishes and reaches they conveyed the sense that a star was preparing to ascend the center of the stage the four of them were framing with their bodies. Suddenly, they all paused with proud upright posture as they reached their left arms up and towards the left, their heads also tilting to look out towards the large wooden and glass doors of the Maxim’s banquet room entrance. Two male staff workers opened the doors and Farah came running out in a light blue flowery costume, the large flower decals and the use of a large flowing chiffon skirt with open leg-slits as opposed to the common tight-fitting lycra skirt added an extra air of *dalaa* femininity to her look.

As she ascended onto the stage with a fresh vitality and robust yet still ‘girl next door’ demeanor, her back-up dancers dutifully held their pose with only the pumping up and down of their chests from exertion disrupting the stillness. Farah’s light olive-skinned body was slim and fit, her petite sizing only making her extremely large boob job all the more eye-catching. She was wearing hair extensions or a wig, and her long and full black curls spiraled out and then gently caressed the top of her flowery hip belt as she spun across the stage with eyes wide in excitement. She had long thin arms and fingers, and she used them beautifully to add flowery flourishes to frame her spins and highly punctuated hip and chest accents. Her highly percussive and accented style reminded me

somewhat of Randa Kamel due to her sharp use of power moves, but her aesthetic look with her costuming, hair, make up, and jubilant sweet energy came across for me more like she was the sweet girl next door that just received a basket full of puppies. Her energy and excitement were infectious and she often shouted encouragement to rile up her audience such as ‘yalla!’ ‘Aiwa’ ‘yalla ba’a!’ Just as the audience became acquainted with Farah’s appearance, her *funun al shaabaya* held their pose as they walked off the stage to allow Farah to finish her *mejanca* as a solo artist.

There was little softness or subtlety in her opening. Rather, Farah favored powerful and staccato hip movements and a faster-pace in her style, and she also seemed to constantly want to cover large amounts of the stage area in her show. She resisted keeping both her feet planted for more than a fleeting moment. Her pace, punctuations, constant maneuvering throughout the stage, and wide-eyed expression helped me to share in her jubilee and exhilaration. A few moments before the conclusion of her *mejanca* her *shabab*, as she endearingly calls them, returned to the stage and engaged in more theatrical but simple steps, turns, and arm swoops and frames to heighten the energy and drama for the end of Farah’s first number. Suddenly, they all span in unison and then the four men on all corners of the stage leaned in towards the center, all positioning their bodies and extended arms in learning positions towards Farah, who spun into a dramatic ending pose in the front-center of the stage. The audience cheered and clapped as genuine grins continued to grow on all the performer’s faces. They bowed and thanked the audience and then quickly exited the banquet room for costume changes.

Farah's young male singer Mohamed took a few more steps onto the stage, taking up more ground than when the dancer was performing. He was wearing jeans, suit jacket, and a button up. He started with a well-known classic song, after the first few notes one of the Gulf men from the 'VIP' table strutted right across the stage to approach him. I didn't catch any communication between them, all I saw was the Gulf man snatch the microphone out of Mohamed's hand as he was singing and start to sing himself, though he was clearly no professional singer. Mohamed paused, stunned for a moment, I felt my heart rise up in my chest, *what a jerk*, I thought. The remaining friends at his table erupted in applause and cheers of encouragement to their already tipsy comrade who had just committed the insolent mic-grab while the rest of us squirmed a bit under his harsh voice. Mohamed, with his hands still lifted as if holding a ghost microphone, broke from his temporary freeze as a forced grin crossed his face and he nodded and gave a few slow claps with his hands. His tight grin after the frozen pause demonstrated his displeasure and surprise at the mic-grabbing maneuver, but he chose to respond by catering to the table's enjoyment, even at the expense of all the rest of the audience's listening pleasure. He began to sing along with the man for a moment, also reaching out to share the microphone which he slowly took back from the guest as he used his other arm to offer a slight bow and gesture him back towards his table.

*Smooth move*, I thought. Mohamed managed to quickly diffuse the situation without allowing the nastiness of the moment to transmit to the rest of the clientele and sour the atmosphere, since Mohamed made it seem like it was all done in good fun. Aided by the fact that the Gulf man was already tipsy, his own excess made it easier to

manipulate him into swiftly, and without any fluster, seating him back down. Mohamed glanced towards the large glass and wooden doors with an expression I too, had just been pleadingly giving towards the dancer's entrance doors. It seems that we both were awaiting the dancer's strong presence to 'lock down' the unruly *khaleegy* men, in ways that highlight how the dancer, more so than any other professional on stage, becomes the centrifugal force in balancing all these uneasy power dynamics at a corporeal level.

Rather than enjoying the singer for a couple songs between costume changes, or a tanoura show like other shows and on other boats, soon after Farah exited the banquet hall the straining voice of the *mizmar* was heard, (a traditional wind instrument known for Nile Valley *Saidi* music), and Ahmed, the leader of her male back-up dancers came out proudly wielding double *Saidi assaya*, or two sticks or thick staffs, in a *galabeya*. Ahmed held the strong, proud, and erect posture signature to the *Said* region of Egypt, known as a traditional area of *fellaheen* (farmers). At the same time, his proud grin and bright eyes highlighted his own genuine love of performing arts and this solo section in particular. *Saidi* inspired-folklore with sticks is the most commonly performed folk-inspired dance of Egypt across both local and global professional stages since the popularity of the Reda Troupe. It represents Egypt in a proud, masculine, and traditional light. He strutted to the center of the stage and immediately burst into a display of his technical skill and mastery over double stick dancing based in the theatrical folklore style of the national troupes but with the added spectacle of including a lot more 'tricks' such as stick flips, catches, and balanced strikes for the boat audience. He struck the sticks on the ground, spun them forwards and backwards, and made them flip in the air, expertly

catching them while twirling so his dark blue *galabeya* spun out to give him a larger-than-life grandiosity.

The powerful strikes, erect posture, and labor some turns, and hops he engaged in marked his solo with both the skill of a hard-working professional that was dedicated to his craft, as well as the performative masculinity that Reda troupe popularized throughout Egypt. Particularly in contemporary times, with the dire economy having eradicated many regular job opportunities for *funun al shaabaya*, finding a dancer that was as skillful and dedicated to a professional performance as Ahmed was invigorating. Further, the strength, virtuosic skill, and lack of any hip movement within his national troupe-based repertoire reflects back on how Mahmoud Reda used hyper-masculinity to legitimate the male dancing body on the middle-class and up Cairo stage back in the time of Nasser. The precision and well-rehearsed nature of Ahmed's show reflects not only on his personal character and talents, but also how the Nile Maxim is an elite site amongst cruise boats in being able to sustain regular employment opportunities for the *funun al shaabaya*, particularly at a time when many boats had their dancer's cut their theatrical folklore performances due to budget slashes.

After a few moments of Ahmed's solo stage show, he was joined by the other three crew members who were holding their sticks upright in matching *galabayas*. Meanwhile, Farah brandished a sparkly-embellished thinner stick and wore a *baladi* dress with a bra-cut out to show her crystal-emblazoned push-up underneath. Farah led the remaining dancers on stage as they again fanned out to create a frame for her performance on the front-center of the stage. They all did traditional *Saidi* steps together

in unison based from the national troupe repertoires. At other times, the men engaged in simple patterned hop-steps and *assaya* air-strikes and spins while Farah added more raqs sharqi movement layered on top of and intermingling with the basic *saidi* steps. For example, she would break from the side-step hops to shimmy her hips from side-side while holding the stick horizontally above her head to help frame her isolated hip shimmy-slides. She often incorporated breast and hip shimmies on top of the basic steps and used her sparkly stick more for framing movements as opposed to spins and martial-arts like strike imitations. During their folkloric *tableaus* such as this, their side-by-side dancing highlighted the gender differences and norms in dance. The men would only appear for the *mejance* entrance doing pseudo-international dance moves such as jazz and ballroom steps in sparkly-belted suits, and reappear only for male roles within regional theatrical folklore inspired numbers also in shiny but traditional male garb. The framing *funun al shaabaya* made it clear she was the star performer: they all faced her as they kneeled on the ground, one hand covering their chest while the other would spin the stick overhead and then pause as if striking in Farah's direction. As a dancer, I was impressed by how she managed the tightened space, framed by moving sticks, with her own sparkly *assaya*. Her movements, and particularly stick movements, were more precarious and limited because of the condensed space, but I never saw a nervous expression or darting eyes from her. Nothing physically indicated she was at all phased by the constricted conditions. It was clear from the ways the five of them worked together so cohesively and creatively that they were well-rehearsed. Notably, these would be rehearsals Farah would demand upon, as well as pay each of her *shabab* for out of her total dance income.

For a significant duration of the second part of her tableau, Farah and her ‘boys’ weaved in and out between the audiences’ tables, parading right amongst the crowd while pumping their sticks in the air and making merriment through more direct audience-performer interaction. The majority of the international clientele seemed to get a real kick out of this interactive aspect of her show, highlighted by how they’d twist in their chairs to keep their focus on her as she moved amongst the large banquet dining room, as well as the plethora of cell phones immediately whipped out to capture the more intimate interaction. The *funun al shaabaya* stayed close to Farah and while she made the rounds, they pumped up the energy and encouraged female guests up to dance, while also often glancing over at Farah to make sure the male guest interaction was staying family-friendly.

The music shifted to become the popular, high-energy, and working-class connoted *shaabi* as the crew worked the crowd. Going off stage for a female dancer can be considered illegal for eliciting prostitution, and it’s always limiting in that Farah’s dancing loses a lot of visibility, thus prompting both more precarity and privacy to this off-stage aspect of her performance. Notably, such direct off-stage audience engagement by the professional dancer is typical in weddings but not many other contexts in Cairo. It’s expected for the star to remain on the stage for her show<sup>lxxxvii</sup>. However, for myself as a U.S. dancer, (and likely for Farah- having worked in Europe), this element was extremely familiar. Getting audiences up to dance and performing amongst tables was an expected norm in most western restaurant entertainment venue settings. Elements of subversive play, sexuality, and humor were clearly evident in her off-stage interaction.

She got a few white European men up to dance: she pulled them up by the hand, bouncing in excitement and shouting encouragement at them in Arabic they probably couldn't understand. She brought one of them onto the perimeters of the stage and had him mimic her movements, which he instantly complied with. With a quick gesture and directive gaze between the two bodies, and utilizing the accumulated stage power of the dancer to position her as the leader, this 'follow along' dynamic is readily understood by most audiences, from my own decade plus of U.S. experience as well as from my observations here on the boat, without any verbal communication necessary. Farah shimmied her breasts with fervor and the man attempted to follow, albeit with more of an awkward shoulder shake and butt wiggle, as he couldn't master the upper body verse lower body isolations. He and the closest sectors of the audience erupted in laughter. Farah held her long locks coyly to the side of her face while lifting and dropping her left hip up and down, layering on a coquettish facial expression. The man in jeans and a sweater again imitated her, pretending to hold back his own imaginary long locks while bumping his hip out to the side, again, not quite capturing the correct movement to fits of laughter.

He automatically follows her lead without words, as is usually the case, whatever sexual gaze or male power western and non-MENA audiences may think they hold over the dancer while they watch smugly from their seats is challenged when confronted with the powers of hip(g)nosis. In other words, a dancer that understands and employs her sexually-marked body to temporarily contort the gender and racialized hierarchy of bodies. Most of the guests laugh at the man's ill attempt to follow Farah's technique. It's



humorous because a non-MENAT man is so obviously doing something “unmanly” in directly imitating this overtly feminized woman. At the same time, there’s a deeper layer of power using these stark gender/sexuality roles in a way that hypnotizes and makes the joke on the man while the dancer accumulates more power through her marginalized yet powerfully potent gender and sexuality. The stage is hers but even when she decides to let a man enter it, that may otherwise have far more racial, gender, and class power and privilege than her, she turns it into a performance of her hip(g)nosis powers by using the very same system of normalized gender/sexuality in a twisted way.

She did this a number of times through the light-hearted banter of subversive play, using entertaining humor layered upon deeper levels of gendered significations. From other tables Farah enthusiastically pulled women up to dance on the stage, holding their hands high, she would have them follow her in percussive hip drops and full body undulations to encouraging audience applause, applause without the same comical air, as these bodies were following within normative gender constructs. The men she messed with. Sometimes she jiggled her large breasts behind their heads to their shocked expressions when they turned around which made everyone laugh... again subverting the male gaze through her direct, non-passive, and quite literally ‘in your face’ brazen sexuality, while at the same time, following within and reifying the male sexual gaze’s structure. After all, large breast enhancement surgeries and other modifications had become almost a requirement to get paid work in the world-wide belly dance industry and while catching the men off guard, her reverberating breasts in their faces was still

employing tactics wherein females cater to assumed male heterosexual desire for their bodies.<sup>lxxxviii</sup>

Farah smiled and then briskly bounced off to a middle-aged European white-looking bald man. She leaned over him from behind, delicately but humorously placing her long curly black fake hair extensions over his head to make him look like a woman and leaned her head on his making exaggerated kissy faces while other family members at the table giggled and took cell phone pictures. She pinched his cheek playfully like he was a cute little kid... she was infantilizing him while poking fun at his baldness, again seizing the opportunity to remind the audiences who held the power and prestige in the room, highlighting her desirable and healthy long locks as opposed to his baldness. At the same time, Farah was making a joke of the performance of femininity...fake hair on him that was actually her own fake hair. The whole show was a charade of sorts, in the fact that it highlighted how gender and sexuality were merely constructions played out across bodies through appearance, movements, and corporeality.

Farah and her crew seemed to be steering relatively clear of the VIP table, despite its prominent positioning in the ballroom and despite the overly enthusiastic cheers and orders from the men for Farah to come their way. Her *funun al shaabaya* hawked over her as she finally sashayed over to their table. Multiple men rose from their chairs hoping to interact a bit with Farah as well as snap photos with her, photo opportunities being a large highlight of boat dancers off-stage interaction when they engage in it. (While Camelia and Randa did not engage in the ubiquitous photo-taking that often took up a large chunk of the second part of the raqs sharqi show, Farah, and most other dancers

working across boats in Cairo, do. While the Nile Maxim has a hired boat photographer take guest/performer photos with Sukre, the tanoura performer, most other boats commonly have this occur with both the tanoura artist and the dancer during the second more folkloric-inspired part of her set. These enlarged photos are then purchasable by guests for around 30-50 pounds, but cell phone photographs and quick video clips are also extremely pervasive during this part of the show.)

Being more enculturated with intra-MENA stereotypes, stigma, and history of raqs sharqi shows, it became clear that the Gulf men were reading her off-stage interaction differently than those outside of an intra-MENA social sphere. This, alongside the tipsy men's sense of entitlement to all the excess and entertainment Egypt had to offer them on their vacation, led to a power struggle over bodily boundaries between the men and performers. One man tried wrapping his arm around the back of the dancer's bare waist as he did a few social dancing steps with her, a move that may be read innocently from a western perspective, but in the intra-MENA context it is inappropriate to expect such intimate physical contact between a strange man and woman. However, because Farah was crossing into more volatile territory leaving the safety net of the Cairo stage, combined with his own drunken sense of entitlement due to his perceived class, nationality, and gender privilege, he thought he could further push on her bodily boundaries. Farah quickly grabbed his hand to try and keep his arm from making physical contact with her back or waist, she tried dancing with him and using their arms to maintain an appropriate distance between their two bodies, but he kept attempting closeness with her. Then, a second man got up and tried to pull her in for a kiss on her

cheek while his other companion stood at the ready for the photo opportunity. Again, this is clearly inappropriate behavior in this context, and Farah immediately grabbed his face with her hand and pushed him away, giving the rest of her audience an ‘is this guy crazy?!’ exaggerated facial expression, but the transgression had already been made. The surrounding audience laughed, unaware of the depth of the cultural transgression, but, also due to how Farah, like her singer Mohamed, reacted in a way that made it seem funny, when, in actuality, she was kinesthetically creating a barrier and setting boundaries between the two while maintaining the enjoyable atmosphere for the rest of the crowd. She deployed a clever and necessary tactic of all Cairo performers, but also an exhausting labor that unevenly accumulates upon working female bodies.

This interaction highlights an important split in the myriad ways Farah’s off-stage interaction can be mined for meaning depending on the particular positionality and contextualized relationship of the dancer, space, and the audience member. Thus, while the historically regulated site of the stage can offer a dancer power when she is able to transmit *ihzas* and *hadoor* from the state-sanctioned site of the stage, when her body crosses that stage boundary, however, those historic bodily choreographies of *fath* and subsequent state policing shadow the dancer in a more precarious and suspect sexuality, class-positionality, and morality. When the dancer leaves the stage and is positioned anywhere amongst the tables she can be charged with eliciting prostitution, thus pitting the responsibility, policing, and precarity on the female dancer as opposed to the audience.

While her marginalized gender, sexuality, and economic labor become capable of accumulating power on stage due to their intertwined relegation to larger nationalist state policing, once those boundaries are crossed her gender, sexuality, and economic labor go from being powerful but marginalized to potentially illicit. Intra-MENA audiences are more adept at reading the depth of suspect sexual meanings in a dancer's use of on and off-stage space because of how these gendered regulations are more-so embedded within normative gender and spacial constructs, and raqs sharqi dance within intra-MENA cultures. Also, in this particular instance, the table of Gulf men utilized a suspect reading of Farah's off-stage dancing to grant themselves more self-entitlement to all the excess the Nile Maxim site had to offer, including these corporeal attempts to demonstrate their economic, gender, and nationalist prowess through crossing Farah's personal body boundaries. Again, while the *funun al shaabaya* hawked more closely over Farah, highlighting a sense of protection warranted over female corporeality against threatening outside forces, it was still Farah, centralized within all this drama, that had to tactfully and swiftly think on her feet and go with her gut to deflate, diffuse, and control the situation.

It was time for the finale of her show. Farah and her crew returned to the stage, the men flanking her on every corner while she took center-stage. After doing a few typical *saidi* hop steps in unison, the male dancers suddenly swarmed Farah, two of whom kneeled down on either side of her and grabbed the opposite ends of each other's sticks so that Farah was constrained and literally "boxed" in between their large wooden staffs. They moved their sticks up and down as Farah feigned shock at her entrapment,

holding both hands against her open mouth in an ‘oh my god!’ expression, but then she smiled brightly as she burst into a strong hip shimmy followed with aggressive, wide, and forceful hip bumps from side-side while she held her arms up over her head. With great power she threw her hips to the right and then to the left, over and over, her energy only seeming to accumulate with each hip bump.

Drastically and unexpectantly, Farah changed the direction of her hip articulations, suddenly throwing her hips straight back as she twisted them at an angle, then with the right hip leading, thrust her hip directly forward against the stick. The forceful blow sent the men flying backwards as their stick trap burst open by her hip’s force. As the men feigned recovery from the sudden explosion of power, Farah joyfully danced as a soloist, shaking and shimmying her hips with renewed vigor and a beaming smile. Her four *funun al shaabaya* formed a formation behind her and Farah began spinning. One by one the men followed in pivot spins behind her until they were all five spinning together. As the music came to a crescendo, they stopped on a dime for the finale pose. Farah stood in a typical super-model stance, sinking into one hip with one hand on her cheek and the other on the extended hip, while her *funun al shaabaya* all directed their extended arms and posture towards Farah. The crowd exploded with cheering and applause as the performers bowed and in thanks to the audience as well as their musicians.

Interviews with Farah Nasri as well as her *funun al shaabaya* add nuance to the discourse. I remember being apprehensive about holding the interview, since when I arrived below deck to talk to Farah in her dressing quarters there was a scene going on

over someone from the boat who had stolen all the workers' pay from Farah's bag (pay for her, her musicians, and her *funun al shabaya*). Apparently, this was not the first time something like this had happened. (It's also worth mentioning that this wasn't a situation unique to Farah, most dancers I spoke with were familiar with this scenario). Farah assured me we were still fine to do the interview, she said if I rescheduled it would just be something else the next week.

“My name is Farah, I've been dancing Oriental since I was sixteen years old, and professionally since 2007 in London. I have been working here in the Nile Maxim for the last three years since 2014. My mom is Algerian, and my dad is French, I was born in France, then at eighteen I was living in London since university until I came here. Originally, I'm French-Algerian, but I lived in London for so long I think it impacted a lot on how I deal with people. Do I identify as Arab? Well I identify as having Arab culture, there's things we do in everyday life, but of course, I identify as French... but also as a Londoner as I grew up there. The Egyptians see you as a foreigner. For them a Moroccan or Algerian is foreigner, French is foreigner, other African is foreigner. For them you're Egyptian or you're foreigner. There's nothing else.”<sup>lxxxix</sup>

“Now I'm trying to modernize things that I do, my aim now is to be creative. For example, the dancers are usually dressed in a certain way in *Haram* (Pyramid) Street. The boys, they do more things like wear loose shirts and shiny fabrics in *Haram*. I make more modern outfits with fitted shirts, ties, hats, and things, I just go for different. We are modernizing their outfits and modernizing the cuts and arrangements of the music, and the steps. We take it less folklore in one way, they do a lot of 1980's style dance steps, as

men they wouldn't do all this. *Haram* street or here, all the *shabab* do the same series of steps which is modern dance like modern jazz, kinda funny. So we're incorporating their steps with my steps and making it a mix with our version. At first, they didn't trust me and thought I was foreigner and didn't understand it, but I was understanding it very well. So I said, oh you're Egyptian you don't understand my western way of seeing things, so we had a bit of clash at the beginning, and now we know that when we all have ideas we trust each other to create things."

"So, we applied the Western ways of working and the Egyptian ways of working, we modernized it to suit us all. We made it not only polished, but we fused our cultures and understandings of dance together and that's how we get to do these things. We have regular rehearsals, where other groups do not do this regularly with their back-up dancer. We rehearse once a week on Tuesdays with the band, but me and the guys are almost every day with rehearsals. I think they are bringing so much to the show and I think they are not valued enough in Egypt. Typically, they just come as an opening for belly dancers and *khalas* (enough, that's it) they go from one cabaret to another in *Haram*. They have a set of routines that all *shabab* in Cairo will know. So, with my crew we train a lot and listen to each other a lot, and I do not change my *shabab*, I have the same crew from two years. So, we really understand each other. Usually, the boys come to a wedding and a dancer is coming and they don't know which dancer is coming and which *shabab* they just know we'll do *saidi*, so she does her thing and they do their thing around her. My guys just work with me, nobody else, because we have enough work thanks God, so it makes us work better together. Some are *kommeya* (the national troupe), some are Reda



(Reda troupe), all of them are working in the shows at Dream Park as well. Some guys on *Haram* street they just come from the street, no formal training, you'll see they can't pick up the steps as well as others, or their arms are not placed, they can't figure out staging and space on stage, but all mine are trained dancers."

"It's not normal, usually the dancer doesn't work much with her guys, except Asmahan (Argentinian) that was here before (the dancer that elevated the Nile Maxim to a five-star status boat). By staging she made them bring her onto stage but not really dancing with them, whereas I dance with them, so we create together. So, I make steps and from my steps they make their steps around me. It makes my show stronger. I would not approach the show in the same way with or without them. The first eight months I was doing the show on my own, as a soloist, so I approached things differently, now my whole show is very dynamic with them."

Later I asked Farah about the larger working conditions as a professional dancer. "At the beginning, there's the backstage and the on stage. At first you think everyone is so nice to me, No! you learn very quickly that everybody in this business, or any business, they only think about themselves. So, you go through a lot of heartache. Lots of things, I don't know, musicians that don't want to rehearse, musicians that only want to come on their time, and a lot of other stories, that are really not nice for women. You are put in situations that you wouldn't want to, because you're trusting them, and still now, you see what happened to me today? I just want to trust them, to trust people. What foreigners do here as a mistake, they are too nice. But, what I learned, you need to put barriers. Boundaries and barriers. You need to keep your environment. It's like, and not

only in Egypt it will be same in finance or anywhere, but this is what I learned as a woman, you need to put your boundaries and your borders. As a woman. As a dancer. As a worker. You need to say ‘hey, no. That is wrong. You *cannot* do that.’ At the beginning, as a foreigner, ‘uh sorry.. um... I think it’s wrong.. can you please come on time next time?’ here it does not work. Here they like strong woman, you have to be *maalima* (female boss persona).” She snaps her fingers quickly, “You have to be ‘hey! Where is this?! Why you not on time?! Nah, nah, nah!’ and suddenly... they have respect for you.”

“It’s not to disrespect *them*, it is to show that you are a strong person, you know what you want, and you know where you stand. I believe in respecting everybody, and I do not believe in the discrimination that you can see in these social classes here, but I do believe in women needing to be stronger. They, my *shabab*, are all my brothers, but still, they know if I get angry, I’m employing them.”

I also asked Farah what she thought about the way she created her shows compared to Randa and Camelia. “Yeah, we are all very different. It is boundaries again. Basically, from my perspective, Camelia and Randa are coming from backgrounds where dancer is *fanaana* (artist) and the dancer has to stay on stage and remain on stage, here in Egypt the people they’re like no, no, you’re the *fanaana* you must stay on stage. So, I was like okay, why not. So, in the beginning, I was doing that here too, staying on stage for my full solo show. Then I realized, in my character, I like to at some point, be with the people, involve people, this is common back home in our countries. Also, I get as much pleasure as the audience gets from it, I love to do that, it brings a different

atmosphere, it's less formal, I like it. It all depends on the dancer's character. Randa started and didn't want to be thought of as a *sharmouta* (whore), she needed to be intentional in being *fanaana* only, so that is where she comes from, because that is the cultural understanding of her job and she needs to be direct in challenging it. Actually, we cannot even share the same musicians, I had used Randa's band before. I tried, but the musicians were nice to my face and then would talk badly behind my back so I had to get my own band. Her band didn't even hear or interpret the music the same way that I liked and heard it based on my character, it was not working. I wanted more base, more remixes, a brass section and western drum, they would challenge me on this saying I'm foreign and don't know the music or dance. Also, in work I sometimes act a bit like the innocent *abeeta*, (idiot), off stage to get my way. But, I'm playing roles according to my character, which can't be the same as Camelia or Randa who are Egyptian and must be *maalima* all the time off stage. It's not fair, but as Egyptian and foreigners we are not judged the same way. For example, I can go around the people and be a bit sexy or flirty during my show, and off stage in my business dealings I can play the sweet idiot role, but they cannot do this and be successful. There's different standards, expectations, and characters. If I act *maalima* like an Egyptian woman I'm seen as a rude foreigner, if they play *abeeta* they're weak. I'm really growing, as a person, as a woman, and as a dancer as well, but especially in knowing my own character, in knowing things I didn't think I was able to do or say. So yeah, you have to get tough here. All your little heart aches, you're like okay. Today the money is gone, okay, we will deal with it, next?"

I appreciated hearing Farah's perspectives and stories and we agreed for me to return during one of the rehearsals and to set up paid interviews with her musicians and *funun al shabaaya*. She suggested I pay them each about 20 pounds for a quick interview before their next show. Below are excerpts from the conversations with Farah's crew as related to the topic of her off-stage interaction as well as what meanings are created when dancer's work with *funun al shaabaya*. These interviews also occurred below deck in the dressing/waiting rooms of the Nile Maxim with both Farah and Karim helping to translate. Farah's *funun al shaabaya* crew include Ahmed, Wael, Salah, and Mahdy. Ahmed, the leader of the male crew, was also the most vocal during the interview. He explained a bit about what their work is and how it came to be.

“We are all friends, so we eventually join together in this team. All of us design (choreograph) the dances and perform them together as a team but Farah is the main one. We study folklore with folklore teachers, so it is all Cairo-style folklore, coming from Mahmoud Reda's troupe. Now, we get out and do more than just what's within the folklore circle, we try and learn how to dance Latin, salsa, modern, this stuff that wasn't in folklore repertoire before. We make it new and now we put even more styles of dance into our performances. We help the raqs sharqi dancer to make *tableau*, like *saidi* or *eskandarani*, when she first come out on stage we help her with *mejance* entrance, we help her to make 'show-show.' This is most common in wedding parties but we here regularly on Nile Maxim also. We do not dance the full show with Farah, we are just here to help her with *tableau* parts of it and her entrance and exit, Farah is always the main one, we just assist her. If she is just doing raqs sharqi dance, we have nothing to do with

this, nothing, but if she is making a *saidi* or bits of folklore we come to help her make it a bigger show. Again, it started that the belly dancer is the main one, and the *shabab* are background for her. This is the relationship from then till now. Like the main portrait and the background landscape, it's a complementary balance" (March 21, 2017).<sup>xc</sup>

Samah added his thoughts on how working with a crew makes a dancer stronger. "Some dancers do not prefer to work with us but that's because she's not clever. She can't catch the spotlight from us, because we are professional. If she is professional she can outshine us and take the spotlight... but if she is just normal she cannot. The clever one dances with or without *shabab*, any time, any place. The bad dancer feels scared because we will do some steps so hard she cannot do it with us and take the guests' attention" (March 21, 2017). Ahmed agreed. "Raqs sharqi you face the audience alone, only you, so you have the spotlight, guests are only looking to you. No one is helping you, only your costume, so you should be so brave, and have a great charisma. She should work so hard to do her best to make the people respect her from her dancing. Now for folklore, we work all together, its teamwork. I think the teamwork is so hard, more than working alone. It's hard to work with people doing the same moves at the same time and to look like one unit. If you make a wrong move, everyone will notice it, but in oriental if you can hide your mistake. So, I think a dancer is more clever if she works with *shabab* because it means she can do both aspects, she can be alone and together."

Farah Nasri added her opinion. "I know some dancers say that good strong star dancers will not need to work with *shabab*. This is not the case. While others say that if you are a weak dancer you need to have *shabab* to make you look better because you're

not good enough alone. This is also not the case. To handle four men with you, if you are not a good dancer, they eat you alive! People will not watch you if you don't have the charisma to handle all of them and the audience. Especially the way we dance, because we all dance together, and I keep them on the stage for more of my show. Whereas if you go to *Haram* (Pyramid Street where the cabarets are), the men will come for the very first song at the beginning just to make a little bit of atmosphere for the dancer's entrance. They act like a space warmer, just warm up the space, then go. However, to keep them on the stage, not everyone does that, because they can eat you alive. You see the energy and the strength they have, so I must also be so strong and have a lot of charisma. Also, I don't dance the folklore like the *shabab* do. What they do behind me or next to me, they dance like *funun al shabaaya*, that's what they do. They do not dance like me. I do not dance like them, only maybe a step or two. I mix it with oriental, I don't do pure folklore like them."

I inquired why the men and women can't do the same steps, or why she only does a sampling of their steps as opposed to the men doing a sampling of her raqs sharqi steps. Ahmed interjected immediately, "*Ayb!* (Shame!) It's a shame for a man to dance oriental dance. It's a shame for *saidi* to dance like oriental dance, so we only do folklore. The oriental dance is only for women, it's a feminine dance, so we do not dance oriental dance. This never happen." Samah elaborated. "Raqs sharqi belongs to girls, not boys. Folklore, for a working dancer, is for men. So, we work together to merge these parts. We work together to make a good portrait. The origins about raqs sharqi comes from Pharaonic people. The doctor made a training for the pregnant woman, and this exercise

creates waves to make giving birth so easy. Then the man catch her when she is exercising and sees her when she is practicing for pregnancy. He see this and then likes it in more of a sexual kind of way. Then he wants her to make this same exercise for him even when she's not pregnant, and it has a sexual meaning. That's how raqs sharqi came. So, this is saying my point, the dancing is for women, pregnant women. Men cannot be pregnant, so they can't be dancing raqs sharqi! Here in Egypt, it belongs to women only. Sometimes in wedding parties you see men dancing raqs sharqi same as women socially, but it's not for paid professional work. It's not a job. It's just for fun. He is not wearing a costume and working. We have our steps and she has hers."

Farah elaborated further, "They all know how to do the raqs sharqi movements, but they will never do it professionally on stage. One day, I wanted to do *shik shak shok* (popular raqs sharqi song) and they all were like 'no no no, never!' I just wanted them to dance the very beginning of it before I come on stage. They refused, because this is music for raqs sharqi and they say raqs sharqi is for women only." Farah turns to her crew, "So why can I do like you on stage but you cannot move like me?" Ahmed responds, "It's because of impressing people. If you watch a woman dancing like men you are thinking, 'wow,' but if you see a man dance like women you like 'this is terrible.' But it's impressive if you see women performing like a man, because male movements are so strong and difficult for her. So, we prefer women dancing like masculine man, this is showing her talent." Samah adds, "When she dance like us, it's only thirty seconds, that's it, because it's so hard for her. The culture in Egypt does not allow for men to dance with his waist like in raqs sharqi, he can only dance like a man."

I re-focused on another aspect of the men's off-stage lives that I was interested in. I wanted to know how society and their families felt about their work, particularly, if it varied depending on working with, or without, a belly dancer. Ahmed responded, "Some people like it, and some don't like it. They say, 'how you are a man and how you are dancing for work?' Before they refused to have a man dancing as a professional work, but now they like us because when the people watch us we make a difference in their perceptions of us. Dancing in Egypt it like, umm, it does not have full rights, there doesn't exist a big place for it professionally in a serious way. It's hard to conceive of a man as a dancing artist and dancing as a worker." Farah Nasri asks, "But with a dancer? This is good with your family?" One of them responds, "*Ayb*. Here in Egypt it's like so bad to work with a dancer. My family doesn't understand my work, like if I'm working alongside a dancer or not. But I want to avoid this question because I don't want Farah to feel bad, I think she will feel bad."

Our conversation then moved on to questions focused on the off-stage interactive aspects of the Nile Maxim shows, including their thoughts and roles within this part of the performance. Ahmed began, "Because she's a woman she can make interaction with people, but we are men, so we cannot interact with the people, she is the sexy one, not me haha. We four, we make the same thing, but she's solo, so she makes a unique thing and needs to interact with people. She has to lead as the dancer, and everyone else follows her. We follow her around as she makes her show and help keep the atmosphere. Also, maybe if someone is drunk we have to protect her, or maybe they are sexually excited people, and we have to watch out for her." I questioned if she needed their protection or



if she could handle herself. Ahmed immediately stepped forward, “Look, if someone try to hurt her, I will hurt him!”

Farah interjects, “This never happened, well not here, not in this place, once I had a guy bothering me and I had Ahmed (*makes hitting gesture*), but not here. On Nile Maxim the people are very chic.. and I have ways of pushing them nicely... I have different ways. I make my own limits. But other places we were working, thank God they were there, because the crowd was all around me! I was totally swarmed, so they made a circle of protection around me and thanks God gave me my space to dance. But most of the time I can handle myself, unless I’m in a position where the security in the place is not well organized. We never talk about this, but it just happens. They look with their eyes, and me with my eyes, and this just happens.”

I asked the men if they’re ever flirted with like Farah while making the rounds. They erupt in laughter. (It was a bit of reversal to question the male dancer’s bodies as sites of sexuality and consumption as opposed to merely assuming Farah’s body as such.) They puff up a little and all remark that women always make interaction with them in this kind of teasing way. One of the men jokes, “The dancing and interaction is just for fun and everyone is happy. We make them happy, but she is more the sexy one, not us haha, but women like us of course.”

It was important to hear the dancer’s perspectives on their work and how it related to raqs sharqi and larger economic and gender dynamics within Cairo. Dancers in Egypt tend to have strong opinions on whether dancing with *funun al shaabaya* adds to,

or takes away from, a raqs sharqi dancer's show. After interviewing Camelia on the Nile Maxim, she called me as my translator and I were hailing a taxi to go home to add that she felt dancers who worked without *funun al shaabaya* were stronger because they were *shamla* (complete), in that they could stay captivating in all aspects and musical styles of their show without needing help from the men, and that men were only useful as background to make a folklore-inspired *tableau* or for weddings when they couple requests it to add more atmosphere and show off the money they're spending on entertainment. Other dancers such as Randa Kamel and Egyptian star dancer Dina Talaat intentionally do not work with *funun al shaabaya* because they want their strong solo dancing to be a testament to their strength, talent, and stardom as Egyptian women. Overall, the main critiques of *funun al shaabaya* tended to center around the ways their presence didn't mesh with the idea and values of a strong solo woman doing her own raqs sharqi show.

In other words, raqs sharqi was meant to be a solo woman's dance and a dancer should be *shamla* (complete) enough in all aspects of dance and music styles, charisma, and interaction, to not need any assistance in holding an audience's attention throughout the duration of her solo show. Additionally, through comparing the case studies of the three dancers, it becomes clear that the meaning and use-value of raqs sharqi also shifts when *funun al shaabaya* are incorporated for the ways it also transfers the focus from creating connections in feelings and kinesthetically embodied charisma of the female soloist to the spectacle and more theatrical entertainment nature of a show that incorporates *funun al shaabaya*. However, Farah, her crew, and the innovators of *funun*

*al shaabaya* and raqs sharqi collaborations, legendary Nagwa Fouad and her husband at the time Mohamed Khalil, argue that working with *funun al shaabaya* presents a ‘balanced landscape’ while adding different dynamics to a dancer’s show that do a different kind of work that complements the solo raqs sharqi. Rather than decide which is ‘better,’ I delve into the tensions and possibilities opened up through incorporating *funun al shaabaya* into an otherwise solo female raqs sharqi performance. I’m interested in engaging with the different kinds of work each choice is doing, and what significations each type of work is circulating.

I agree with Randa, Camelia, and Samia in that an immense part of what makes a woman raqs sharqi dancer in Cairo so strong is how she is *shamla* (complete) in captivating an entire crowd through her intertwined movements, feeling, and interaction through her charisma and *hadoor* (chemistry).<sup>xci</sup> It is the tantalizing mix of being both strong and vulnerable at the same time, as such a marginalized yet ‘sure of yourself’ figure spotlighted on the stage, to be able to create an atmosphere of feeling and enjoyment through dancing out your emotions and life experiences on the stage in ways that are earnest enough to transmit throughout the audience. However, as Randa points out, this strength in being a working woman is deeply tied to how you learn to deal with all kinds of men in a kaleidoscope of contexts in ways that result in you getting what you want. Thus, in some ways, stating raqs sharqi as a ‘solo’ form is hindering in that it can elide just how strongly and complexly the female dancer is bounded by male relationships both on and off stage. As observed and stated in interviews, dancers must maintain control of their all-male bands, often male singers, managers and venue staff, as

well as audience members and their own complicated off-stage marriages to men as working women in a highly stigmatized yet economically productive job.

However, what dancers such as Randa and Camelia are stating with their solo shows is that they love themselves enough, and trust themselves enough, really understand themselves and what they want from life enough, to make a statement with their dancing that they are what audiences are getting and they are just that- enough. They are enough in their own fully embraced, dynamic, and confident corporealized womanhood. Further, they and other dancers are successful in accomplishing this because they pull from a movement and musical foundation that is rich and dynamic, they have unique movements, energy, feeling, and aesthetics for each different aspect of the multi-faceted raqs sharqi show, from the *mejanca* to *shaabi*, *baladi*, classical, and *saidi*, etc.

On the other hand, dancers such as Farah that regularly work with *funun al shaabaya* can be criticized for not having this layered and dynamic foundation to be considered *shamla* artists. Due to the intersecting gendered and economic dynamics of the *funun al shaabaya* entertainment trade, the dancer comes not only to collaborate with other dancers to aid her show in success, she comes specifically to work with male dancers primarily from lower socio-economic backgrounds. While the overall power hierarchies remain intact for the dancer, she being considered the lead power figure above her primarily male musicians, and the musicians considered above the male *funun al shaabaya*, she still tacks on more male employees to deal with professionally, artistically, and corporeally. Innovators Nagwa Fuoad and Mohamed Khalil contended these collaborations created ‘balanced landscapes’ through incorporating both genders and

more overt nationalist signifiers through the regionally-inspired folkloric *tableaus* that worked to desexualize and thus ‘elevate’ the context of raqs sharqi to the Egyptian public.

This containment and balancing of the solo dancer’s powerful sexuality can be seen through the more obvious framing containment of the dancer, she often being ‘boxed in’ or flanked by multiple male *funun al shaabaya* while performing her show. In addition to just containing and balancing her sexuality through their physical bodies adorned in traditionally regionally-specific Egyptian costuming, and the larger nationalist staging, framing, and narratives their bodies all perform within, these configurations also reify a woman’s sexuality within state-sanctioned gender norms; as mentioned, the men often take on a protective role over the dancer, particularly in cases where they feel unorderliness or danger from drunken clients or instances of *fitna*, social chaos as related to her sexuality, may pose a threat. Additionally, the interaction between the dancer and her *funun al shaabaya* often embodies joyful folkloric numbers that mask political strife different ethnicities and regions in Egypt face under the State, as well as include flirtatious interaction that reifies the male and female dancer’s sexuality within heteronormativity. The female raqs sharqi dancer’s marginalized sexuality is thus constrained and contained representationally through the framing male figures representing clean and dominating Egyptian nationalism, particularly state-aligned masculine and heterosexual normativity. Thus, Nagwa Fuoad’s innovative folkloric collaborations are tied to women’s projects in Egypt at large, wherein as women

endeavor to create more space, opportunities, and potential for themselves, they simultaneously create or comply with new forms of control and surveillance.<sup>xcii</sup>

However, at the same time, this combination results in aspects of the show that rely less on *ihisas* (feeling) to create power and success, and more on spectacle and entertainment. As such, contradictorily, it's the very mixture of vulnerability and strength through a dynamic and wholeheartedly embodied sense of her embraced sexuality that a dancer creates transmittable art and feeling. When this vulnerability is traded in for a more contained, relegated, and protected 'balance' of gender and consequential patriarchal state guardianship of sexuality, the significations of the dance becomes more about spectacle, and less about *ihisas*, the very quality that so many Cairo dancers posit is what sets apart raqs sharqi from any other dance in the world, and the main quality that made them fall in love with the art form.

In contrast to this, Farah Nasri and some of her crew focus on the dynamics working with *funun al shaabaya* creates from the perspective of the labor and doing of the dance itself. While touching on the representational politics of 'balanced landscapes' as related to gender and sexuality, Farah and her crew more so discuss the kinesthetic negotiations and challenges wrestled with by the performers that choose to collaborate in this way. Looking at the performances from this other perspective offers new insight that might otherwise be overlooked from an outsider perspective. For example, she and her crew posit that working with *funun al shaabaya* offers different challenges to maneuver, such as small boat stages that become even more condensed and constrained for the raqs sharqi dancer because she has physically less space to move, but also because she must

now also contend with other close by moving bodies. While still needing to project strong energy to the audience seated throughout the large boat ballroom, Farah must also work harder, yet more carefully, to claim her space on the shrunken stage. Not only this, but Farah must also be aware of the male theatrical folklore repertoires and steps as well as skillfully be able to layer the expected feminine raqs sharqi techniques and aesthetics on top of, and in addition to, the steps constructed as masculine.

All this has to be done while now working to stay in synchronization with her crew, as mistakes become all the more obvious when the dancer is no longer a solo body on stage. As they note, the dancer now must compete and labor to keep and maintain the spotlight from the multiple men surrounding her, she must know their steps, be aware of their movements around her, and be able to layer her own charisma, technique, and musicality on top of, and in excess to, all these other factors to make it evident that the audience focuses mainly on her as the star. While the men stick to basic Reda repertoire combinations, the fact that they greatly outnumber the dancer on stage makes their show have more physical presence, Farah is thus charged with needing to be able to ‘make like a man,’ while also having to always be outputting more than the multiple men around her in artistry and personality to reify her position at the top of the power hierarchy.

On the other hand, the men are able to do more basic steps and combinations due to the fact that their gender is already the largest presence on stage, as well as the fact that they depend upon, and expect, the dancer to be doing the most unique and exceptional labor to lead and carry the show. While Farah must be able to ‘impress’ the crowd by embodying the ‘difficult’ masculine movements and steps, the men refuse to return the

favor, finding it shameful, forbidden, and unnatural to perform any movements that would be read as raqs sharqi (implying feminine) on stage. Thus, trying to create new work with *shik shak shok*, Farah is limited artistically by their stiff gender constructs, while her own body is laboriously stretched for having to make up for this stiffness through her own gender flexibility and performativity. While it impresses the people if she can pick up the difficult kinesthetic labor attributed to men, because she is often read as the weaker gender, she's dually constrained by the fact that the *funun al shaabaya* and audiences have no pressure, expectation, or see potential in taking on, or watching, typically gendered female steps, roles, and aesthetics.

While Farah's raqs sharqi body labors at the margins of acceptability in society due to her particular profession, her work dynamics are akin to larger struggles other working women are negotiating, particularly within difficult economic times. As Middle Eastern Gender Studies scholars Botman and Hafez both argue, though the terms of women's citizenship and rights have changed over time since independence from British rule, citizenship continues to be defined within patriarchal terms, and the domestic family laws have largely been left unreformed (Botman 1999, Hafez "Revolution" 2014). On the ground, this refers to how women are increasingly taking on responsibilities and roles normatively deemed 'masculine' in the public realm, such as the labor force, without any relief of pressure, roles, or duties in the domestic family spheres. While women across classes, though particularly the working and shrinking middle classes, are taking on more roles and labor, men are not reciprocating this growth by taking on more roles and duties normatively assigned to women. As Farah's story highlights, this stunts creative growth



and capacities, as well as puts an immense and exhausting pressure upon the female laboring body. As Botman contends, gender hierarchies have been created both in the family and in society that have resulted in inequality for women in politics, the workplace, and social life, and she urges for a rearticulating of gender relations that can only be achieved through full democratization in both the family and in the state (1998).

Working with *funun al shaabaya* doesn't necessarily make a dancer any less. Yet, it certainly does make her work and approaches different. Finding and tracing the power within these differing work and performative conditions is important due to the myriad constraints and capabilities different dancers have to negotiate depending on their backgrounds and performative contexts. In Farah's case, she and her crew are successful because they work collaboratively and creatively together in ways that interweave their hybrid understandings of dance and art as well as their cultural backgrounds. Significantly, these relationships are built upon trust- trust in each other as individuals, but also within each artist's individual approach to creating dance for the stage. It's the trust that you can see between the crew in their dressing rooms below deck as they joke and laugh together, as well as their genuine expressions of joy and dedication on stage, that result in sustainable success. At the same time, though they work collaboratively, Farah and her crew are always aware that Farah must hold the reigns, artistically and professionally, while they remain as background allies. On the other hand, a main cause of their sustainable success is enabled due to economic stability and resources that are not common conditions for most *funun al shaabaya* and dancer collaborations across Cairo. The local and cosmopolitan site of the Nile cruising boat, alongside the myriad appeal of

dance shows with *funun al shaabaya*, and the five-star Nile Maxim in particular, result in steady and reliable job opportunities for Farah and her crew, even when shows are less frequent. Farah earns enough income from dancing outside for the Egyptian upper classes to make paid rehearsals to keep her crew sharp, synchronized, and motivated. This is a privilege most *funun al shaabaya* aren't currently experiencing, but Farah utilizes it well to strengthen their shows and thus career sustainability over the long term. Due to the economy, most stages are requiring strong female solos, significantly because they cannot afford to have it any other way.

At the same time, Farah and her crew, as well as Randa and Camelia, also reaffirm their professional and successful status by perpetuating and further cleaving divisions between classes. In particular, the working-class dancers (*funun al shaabaya* and raqs sharqi performers) working in cabarets across *Haram* (Pyramid Street) are denigrated in all three dancer's accounts and marked in ways that reify class hierarchies within the dance industry. In this hierarchy, cabarets are classified as the 'low class' sites of performance and works within the industry for performers to add respectability and status to their own bodies at the expense of denigrating and devaluing the sites, bodies, and significations of cabaret's and their employees. This is noted in Farah's decisions to utilize her men differently than the cabaret circuit while also dressing them and moving them in ways that would set them apart from a *Shariaa Haram* street dancer, while Randa and Camelia both assert how cabarets are not sites for art or even dancing, diminishing the use values of dancers in these contexts. Importantly, the economy and gender shifts at large are necessitating both scenarios, strong female solos because there just isn't the

capital to add male labor on raqs sharqi stages, but also necessitating *funun al shaabaya* to take on night work orders wherein they'll be under the charge of a strong female lead and must learn to accept this background position.

### **Conclusion: Pulling into Port**

I lingered at my table after the Nile Maxim had docked and the audience began steadily streaming out of the boat. The stage was now empty except for a musical technician who was busy wrapping up musical cords and stowing away equipment from the evening's entertainment. He must've noticed my contemplative lingering and walked over to ask how my research was moving along. I told him I was just thinking about the different dancer's shows that I'd seen recently and asked what his thoughts were. He replied thoughtfully, "Look, the important thing about this kind of dancing is that each woman come to it and creates her own style with it. Everyone says her own special thing with this dance. Every woman is different than the other, so every dancer in this dance must have a different style. This is what makes you interested in her as a dancer, through what she is coming to the stage to say by her body language" (Jan 27, 2017).

Ahmed simply states a vital component of raqs sharqi within Cairo contexts- that successful and captivating dancers become such due to the ways they embody and perform their own unique sense of Self. Further, he highlights how although dance's form and structure are shaped by the space it occurs within, it is the bodies within those spaces that have the ultimate power in creating meanings. Thus, different dancers create different shows with differing semiotics even while sharing the same stage space. As

such, dismissing Nile boats as sites of ‘mediocre dancing’ for ‘tourists’ does an extreme disservice in grappling with the complex, and largely MENA-centric globalization and intra-MENA circulations of dance dynamics the sites embody.

As the boat pulls into port it brings along a number of key insights, tactics, and knowledges that become productive moving forward with larger contemporary issues Egypt’s grappling with. To start, Farah and her *funun al shaabaya* teach audiences at large to not just look at issues from an outside representational perspective, rather they offer a new perspective on how to analyze and see through a focus on detailed ‘doings’ of bodies and their interactions. Rather than seeing Farah as a vulnerably exposed woman entrapped by the multiple strong men around her, she and her crew suggest that focusing on the movements and relationship between bodies moving within these seeming constraints offers critical gendered knowledge and insightful ways of moving in the world. During their finale, when Farah accumulates power with percussive hip bumps from side-to-side, the men kneeling on either side of her as their sticks ‘box’ and ‘entrap’ her, Farah feigns dismay and shock before suddenly reverting to moving her hips in a new and unexpected direction, bursting forward to break free from the confines and then bursting into powerful and joyful hip shimmies as the men recover around her.

As I reflected upon her finale, I was struck by ways it paralleled current discourse about Cairo being one of the worst cities for sexual harassment against women in the world. This discourse on sexual violence and harassment was particularly marked after SCAF and Morsi came into power in Tahrir square, the public site that most represented the January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011 revolution and its aftermath to the rest of the watching world.

Stories of groups of men ganging up on single women abounded. I remember U.S. dance practitioners pitying the women in the square. But what was the female body engulfed in this masculine and male military violence doing at a deeper and more detailed level? Farah's hip bumps and directional 'twist' speak towards paying attention to the details, in this case the dynamic array of grass roots and women-led anti-harassment networks, campaigns, and organizing on the ground, constantly buzzing and accumulating agency in how to 'do' the female body in public protesting spaces differently. These were also women-led and focused groups that collaborated with men, but as background allies and trusted supporters. These were bodies working within the over-arching masculine militarized violent constraints doing phenomenal and ground-breaking work in rearticulating gender relations. I wondered if the U.S. practitioners so concerned for women's wellbeing in the square were aware of any of this grass roots work, because where we focus and frame our attention does make a difference, it transmits particular feelings out to the wider audience watching and can move bodies into new ways of thinking and being, or, it can simply replicate the status quo.

There is no one raqs sharqi show or dancer, just as there is no singular 'Egyptian' or 'MENA' woman. Though they may share the same stage, each dancer has something unique to say on it through her dance. Farah and her crew teach to look at these conditions from diverse and undermined new angles, while forming relationships between genders and social classes built upon hybrid collaborations founded within trust and creativity. Randa and Camelia offer insight into how to craft successful strong female solos, that necessitate being built upon a dynamic, holistic, and varied foundation that one

can quickly tap into improvisationally according to what best fits the music, mood, and context. This knowledge is based upon going with one's gut, not through an understanding of the gut as related to intuition based on women's perceived closeness to nature and the natural, but rather through a gut instinct based in diverse experiences, hard work, and trusting in oneself as being enough. But, to be *shamla* and have a strong solo, one needs to know what you're saying with your dance, not just what you're negating, (such as the cabaret circuit or prostitute stigma). But rather, what new possibilities, or ways of being/seeing, are you embodying, creating, and transmitting? This proscription, crafting your show based on a holistic depth, of not just what you're resisting, but what world you are creating, is pivotal to politics moving forward.

Camelia embodies a multiplicitous world in her diverse range of musical and dance styles that she, and multiple local and international audiences can take pleasure within. Randa performs and projects a world where a woman never need scale back her power to appease the fragile masculinity of men. Meanwhile in the bathroom, Samia enables a world of prideful peace and agency in embodying her modest piety and dutifulness to family. All four women recognize the power of various boundaries and borders, both physically and ideologically, and the need to either step across, maintain and work within, or breakdown such edges. All dancers through their verbal and danced discourse argue that moving forward women's bodies and roles must be contended with as the centrifugal lead forces that they are, and men need to take more background roles as allies and support while following the primary necessity of considering female corporeality.

## - Taxi Transition 2 -

I'm savoring the scent of freshly baked bread with deep inhales as my friend Wael and I walk past a bakery outside of downtown Cairo. Meanwhile, a jam-packed herd of people impatiently await to purchase the fresh goods. Between the mixture of sewage, car exhaust, and pollution, most large cities don't have the most pleasant of smells, Cairo being no exception. However, part of any city's charm is when you're walking about and get those whiffs of pleasurable scents that momentarily override the rancid, serving as reminders of the enriching multitude of people, places, and opportunities a crowded city space offers. I slow my pace to take in a few more breaths, the scent offering me a brief respite from the everyday city hustle. With a jolt, I realize my companion isn't sharing this sensation.

Suddenly, Wael stops and taps me on the shoulder, roughly shaking his head in frustration. "So get this, my dad is always complaining to me, why I don't have a better job and make more money with my education... he's always pushing me to go work overseas in the Gulf, or at least to have tried to become something in the military. Haha, but get this, I tell him ok *baba*, I'll work so hard in the military and for what? To put on my flowery apron and bake sugar cookies, haha! Can you believe this?!" I'm confused, the coupling of military soldiers and baking in aprons doesn't fit together in my mind. Wael elaborates, "The military's really expanding into the economy, everything's coming under military-state control, now even the bread and bakeries- seriously! You cannot imagine how many sectors of the economy the military has taken over. Ha, you look confused, that's just the thing, it doesn't make any sense! Can you imagine a military

officer spending his time baking cookies and sweets, when supposedly we're being plagued by terrorists from every corner of the country?!" He shakes his head in exasperated frustration. As we continue on, I simply listen and offer an empathetic expression.

With this exchange, yet another seemingly pleasurable and innocent sensation of my own ethnographic adventure crumbles before me. Though I shared the same street and scents with my comrade, our experiences of these sensations starkly contrasted. Struck with the reality of my own romanticism, countered by the real-life struggles of someone I deeply cared for, I question again how much impact my project could possibly have. We continue to move forward, now walking more slowly alongside the city streets. I cast my gaze down upon our trekking feet, only hoping that in the sustained sharing of these streets, the sharing of our struggles, joys, and stories, visceral and valuable links can be crafted.

A couple weeks later...

"*Maalesh*," our Uber driver apologizes again as we back out of another dead-end road the GPS had led us onto. I offer a sympathetic smile from the back seat. For once, I am not in a hurry. Wael and I had planned on making an interview with a cabaret manager before catching performances later on in the evening, but our interview was rescheduled at the last minute (an extremely common research occurrence!) Instead, we decide to relax at a coffee shop by the Nile until it is time for the evenings dancing shows. Still, the driver seems surprisingly flustered by the constant misleading directions



of the GPS. He is much older than most of the youthful Uber drivers I encountered during my stay in Cairo. The driver then turns right onto a main street, and Wael, having worked nearby the area, politely tells him that he should've went left. The driver grimaces and quickly wipes a few beads of sweat from his brow.

I realize he must be nervous. We are in a nice Uber, the car is in good condition with the air condition blowing full blast, a welcome treat from roasting away in old smoky taxis. Wael offers him a cigarette to help him relax. He refuses but takes it as an opportunity to share a bit of his own story. His name is Ahmed, and he is new to Uber. He never thought he would find himself in this situation, being an older established husband and father, he tells us. As he has been thrown into the midst of unemployment, he figured, since his car is still in good condition from his previous career, that he could take up Uber to help make ends meet. He is doing fine, not wealthy, but all his family's needs are being met. He is the proud father of three girls. He was established and respected in his community, he tells us. He pulls the photo of his three smiling daughters off from his dashboard to show Wael, who is sitting beside him in the front passenger seat. He used to own a bakery, he loved his job, he was highly experienced and skilled at his trade. However, with all the problems in the political and economic sphere, from the government's continuous cutting of subsidies, the flotation of the pound, and the military increasingly taking over state-owned bakeries, he couldn't compete, he just couldn't make it, and suddenly he lost everything. He sold the building, and that money helped for a little while, but now here he is, lost and meandering in a city he stated he used to have a permanent place in, a real sense of belonging. He worries for his daughters' futures,

rather than his own. He boasts to us about what bright and clever girls they are, with strong moral compasses. He wants them to feel secure and provided for. “I hope these dead ends are just on the road, and not in my life”- he jokes, as he shakes his head in bewilderment.

### *A'eesh* – Life Bread

The colloquial Egyptian Arabic word for bread is the same as ‘life’- *a'eesh*. The struggle for bread is deeply entangled with larger economic and political struggles in Egypt, harkening back to the ‘bread riots’ of 1977, when then President Anwar Sadat cut bread subsidies as part of a World Bank loan measure, and thousands of working-class Egyptians protested. Though their protests were ultimately successful in reversing the subsidy cuts, they were first met with army tanks (“Bread Riots”, TheNewArab 2017). Echoes of these riots were resurfaced again in Tahrir Square in 2011, as the revolutionary chanting for ‘bread, freedom, and social justice’ highlights the drastic ways basic life needs, the economy, and the neoliberalized State are entwined. More recently, since President Abdul Fattah el Sisi’s 12 billion-dollar IMF loan once again included measures related to slashing food stuff subsidies and the ever-increasing grip of the military not over government, but also over the economy, particularly in ways the military unevenly reaps benefits from.<sup>xciii</sup>

In these ‘bread riots,’ largely working-class bodies courageously put their protesting bodies at risk throughout the country over bread, a basic but powerful metaphor for, and reality of, *a'eesh* – life. Since the ousting of President Morsi in 2013

the regime has put in place strict anti-protesting laws, and the state of emergency has placed added precarity on these protesting bodies who can be arrested and detained without due process (Magdi 2017). At the same time, these larger IMF loans, military government controls, and rising inflation with slashed subsidies have more mundane, yet still meaningful, consequences.

In the narrations above, bread viscerally ties into two previously middle-class men's sense of masculinity, now both struggling since the drop in the economy starting around 2008 and continuing post revolution. Whereas for me, the wafting smell of freshly baked bread may bring back memories of home, family meals, and comfort, for Wael it immediately welled up feelings of frustration over a lack of control over his own career options in a stifled economy over which he was increasingly witnessing the military-government regime taking more and more of an autocratic grip. For Ahmed, our Uber driver, it resulted in a physical displacement, from his established life as an economically-providing father and husband with his bakery to an overwhelming sense of up-rootedness and dislocation, as he now continues trying to carve out a new path for himself while still dependent upon economic opportunities that seemed to suddenly career into dead ends and wrong turns.

Due to his older age, and as his furrowed sweaty brow reveals, for Ahmed to find himself dislocated from his previously solid identity as a stably providing and knowledgeable father and worker is a threat to his role of provider as both husband and father. Yet, at the same time, his tensed knuckles that grip the steering wheel and turn sharply in and out of dead ends and wrong turns, highlight his resilience to defeat and

docility in the face of a repressive regime and dire economic woes. Instead, his laboring body, though lost more often than not amidst the city streets and chaos, continues to keep moving forward. Despite the tangible obstacles at every wrong turn or cut off, what remains at the forefront of his labor and vision, is the dashboard photograph of his three grinning girls. Thus, Ahmed maneuvers not merely amidst the shattered economy and patronizing political sphere, but more strongly within his kindred love for his daughters. Moving from this foundation, of sincere love and hope for a better future for more than just oneself, therein he finds a source of sustainable strength that fuels his persevering present and *inshallah* (God willing) fruitful future.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Five-Star Hotels: Checking In, or Checking Out? Contemporary Conditions in the Revolution's Aftermath**

My steps slowed as I approached the main entrance of the Cairo Marriott Hotel and Omar Khayyam Casino on the Gezira Island of the upscale area of Zamalak. It was only a short stroll from a coffee shop where I had just been typing up interview transcripts, and because of the upscale area I felt perfectly safe walking alone despite the late hour. My pace slowed upon arrival of the hotel's main entrance due to its elaborate opulence. The main entrance was bedecked in shiny tiled flooring, while dignified lion statues flanked the main doors, and golden architecture and columns spread out amidst the large open entrance area. The architecture's neoclassical decadence and layered historic décor fascinated the academic in me, while the scale of extravagant elegance struck the part of me trying to pull off this level of fieldwork on a miniscule, self-funded, graduate student budget. It was clear from first impressions that the Marriot had a rich history, as well as continued extravagant contemporary appeal. My heels clicked on the tiling as I entered the main doors, and I could also hear the sound of car doors slamming shut behind me. Having walked over, I by-passed the first level of security for vehicles entering the Marriott. This first outdoor security measure has become standard throughout five-star hotels in Cairo following the series of terrorist incidents in the 1990s. Here, cars are stopped at a guarded gate outside the hotels entrance, drivers must hand over their identification, and their cars and trunks must be inspected by a guard with a sniffing dog before being granted entrance to the hotel grounds. I passed inside the large

entrance doors and was greeted by two more male workers supervising the next level of standardized security. Next, one had to pass a walk-through metal detector and a conveyer belt inspector for purses and bags. After passing through this final level of security, I immediately headed towards the grand historic staircase that would lead me down towards The Empress nightclub. The majestic staircase was part of the original restored historic palace of Khedive Ismael built in 1869 that existed before the site transformed into a hotel. I spotted the nightclub's entrance and took a seat on a lounge couch outside the venue in the lobby area waiting for my companions for the evening to arrive, meanwhile I savored the views of the restored architecture, furniture, and décor reminiscent of the original palace. As the nightclub was tucked away in a bottom section of the hotel amidst the historically restored part of the Marriott that used to be Khedive Ismael's loyal palace, my thoughts also backtracked to the history of raqs sharqi within five-star hotel sites in Cairo, considered to be the most 'artistic' and elite of site-specific raqs sharqi work, as well as the predicament of raqs sharqi within five-star hotel's unstable future since the 2011 revolution and economic fallout.

A week later...

As my Uber driver offered the security guard at the five-star InterContinental Semiramis hotel's entrance gate his identification I couldn't help but peer out the window as the other guard had the sniffing guard dog encircle our vehicle while inspecting our trunk. I missed my dog back home, but was well aware this dog was 'on the job' and making sure that there were no security threats from vehicles dropping off passengers to the grand hotel. The Semiramis was an elite five-star hotel particularly known as a

hotspot for *khaleegy* guests to stay in. As it was the ‘Arab season’ months of the sweltering summer, I expected the hotel to be crawling with Saudi Arabian families and men alongside a smattering of wealthy businessmen and international tourists. The Semiramis also held a long history in Cairo, starting as one of the first hotels to be built along the Nile by a Swiss hotelier in the early 1900’s. Ever since, the hotel has remained a decadent spot for Egyptian as well as international high society to stay. The hotel was completely rebuilt in the same location in the 1970’s as the InterContinental Semiramis hotel. It was now owned by the Egyptian Hotels Company as well as a group of Saudi investors (Gerber 2012). Since its beginnings, the hotel loomed large against the Nile with a demanding presence over the city. However, now, the skyscraper hotel is just one of many studding the Nile. The hotel’s design, with square modern architecture and large glass windows, gestured more towards an air of elegance and modern architectural tastes more so than the historic glamour of the Marriott’s main entrance.

It almost felt routine, going through the usual procedure of paying for the Uber and then passing through the interior security metal detector then waiting for my purse to slowly make its way through the conveyer belt. The dual security checks upon any elite hotel entrance always made me feel a bit as if I was entering an ‘island,’ or other isolated entity. Certainly, the glitz, glam, and comfortable amenities of these five-star hotels were far from my everyday life living day to day in an apartment consistently out of hot water and routinely broken air conditioning units and elevator service. Furthermore, Dokki, where I lived and rented my furnished apartment, is considered a relatively well-off area in Cairo. Still, it was a far cry from the overpowering citrusy scent of cleaning products,

twinkling chandeliers, and expensive espressos found in the five-star hotels. It was this combination, the elitism with the multi-layered security entrances to these sites, that created a sense of separation from the everyday. Curiously, a thick wallet and a non-Egyptian passport could offer one a sense of security and comfort in being worthy of such cushioning in a country deemed as ‘politically unstable,’ but under what systematic valuation of which bodies matter? Compared to the often unsupervised and shoddy walk through metal detectors of tourist boats, it was evident that tourist bodies increasingly mattered as their wallets likewise thickened. At the same time, while tourists have been targeted by violent extremism in Egypt, the numbers overwhelmingly highlight that Egyptians themselves are the primary bodies at risk. Particularly, this includes minority bodies such as Egyptian Coptic Christians, or bodies that resist the State authoritarian system such as protesting or dissenting Egyptian bodies. Thus, these elite protected sites within Cairo not only signaled locally and globally which bodies mattered, but also how protecting economic flows amidst a country desperate for US and petro-dollars, as opposed to local currency, *ginia* (pounds), becomes embedded within bodies exchange and circulation values.

I was still relatively zoned out and going through the motions of brushing my long hair out of my way to re-position my handbag on my shoulder as my heels clicked on the shiny tiled floor. I squinted up my face as the intense scent of citrusy-cleaning products overwhelmed my senses. Then I looked up. I felt a deep chill surge through my body, and froze in my tracks, unable to move for a moment, as if a startled deer caught in the blinding haze of headlights. I’d looked up and frozen as a dozen or more eyes deeply



penetrated into my own. An assortment of single or paired *khaleegy* men sat in the lounges and coffee shops by the lobby entrance, staring at me hungrily with cigarettes and cups of espresso dangling from their idle hands. *Ah, right, gendered bodies are on the market in even more complex ways*, I thought. As a U.S. working belly dancer I'd had offers made to me a handful of times in various Arab nightclubs from patrons mistakenly assuming I was advertising other forms of night work, but to be so starkly caught off-guard by the profuse intensity of teeming glares sizing me up as if a purchasable and consumable *shwarma* was unnerving. I glanced at my cell phone, I was supposed to meet an Egyptian male friend for coffee before attending legendary star dancer Dina Talaat Sayad's raqs sharqi show in the Harun al Rashid nightclub in the hotel. His presence would undoubtedly dissipate my currently suspect position alone in the hotel lobby areas at such a late hour. No word from him. I thought if I sat near the reception area I'd be okay, but almost immediately men started walking by, or sitting a few feet away from me, and muttering prices under their breath with discreet but purposeful eye contact.

Prostitution is illegal in Egypt, but has been noted to be on the rise since the revolution and ensuing economic fallout. Though it takes two to tango, only one body will pay the harsh legal penalties, as in most areas around the world, Cairo being no exception, the criminalization of sex work unevenly falls upon the laboring body of the sex worker, dominantly female, as opposed to that of the purchaser. Again, the bodies that matter in these exchanges unevenly privilege the wealthy, the male, and in the five-star hotel sites, this means *khaleegy* and other non-Egyptian nationalities. I found myself anxiously glancing at the police standing idly about the hotel's entrance, I wasn't looking

for any trouble, but the nightclub wasn't going to be open for at least another hour. Being a lone female body in the elite space put me on the alert, on the one hand, I found my left hand double checking that I had my US passport in my bag, unconsciously reassuring myself of the privileged protective shielding my nationality may afford, a benefit actual working-women sharing the space with me would not be entitled to. Simultaneously, my other hand pulled at the hem of my long dress, trying to better camouflage my curvy body into a shapeless lump. 'We take photo.' A younger man sat beside me and began to pull out his phone for a selfie, 'No, I do not want' I replied curtly. He stood up, looked me up and down, and as he was walking away turned around to make sure he had the final say, 'bitch.'

As a practitioner-scholar there seemed a constant in-flux tension in five-star hotels, a kaleidoscope of hypocrisy and contradiction fluctuating between appearances versus actualities that demanded deeper dissection. The space of the sites themselves coordinated well-enough with the price tags, with the expensive lobby espressos to 1,000 pound and up minimum entrance fees for nightclubs shows, paralleling the sparkling clean chandeliers, suited wait staff, and squeaky clean tiled floors and red-carpet staircases. However, it was what, why, and how various bodies moved within these elite spaces that marked their changing functions and contradictory collisions. Five-star hotels, and the upper-class bodies that are able to afford them, circulate discourse about upper-class bodies and sites being more elite, family-friendly, 'artistic,' (wherein artistic is referred to in opposition of the drunken, debaucheries, and sexually-driven desires embedded within more 'entertainment' based cabaret sites), and 'clean.' Yet, the

traditionally *dishdasha*-dressed Saudi Sheikh planted within the sparkling clean lobby nursing his expensive espresso as he surveyed the numerous scattering of sex workers for his evening 'holiday' served to chisel away at the elaborate displays made to maintain class and moral appearances.

Five-star hotels became a popular site for decadent 'five-star dancers- *fananeen* (artists) and extravagant raqs sharqi shows. These hotel shows were particularly booming after Sadat's opening up of the economy, yet their numbers and extravagances were already beginning to dissipate with the economic woes and increasing conservatism during the Mubarak years, grinding to a temporary halt with the Jan. 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011 revolution. Locally within Cairo dance circuitries, as well as within the international belly dance community, an established performer at a five-star hotel in Cairo is understood and circulated to be the 'cream of the crop' of elite stardom, the ultimate dream. As different established sites for raqs sharqi performances became standardized within Cairo, such as cabarets, boats, and five-star hotels, a hierarchal categorization was constructed in the minds of dancer's and the general public alike that relegated certain sites, and the bodies within them, as low versus high class. Additionally, the rubric of cleanliness, sexual promiscuity, and morality, and 'entertainment versus art,' also grew as sites for dance were ranked higher up on the hierarchal scale. Though a hierarchy of 'status' levels exists within each type of raqs sharqi site within Cairo, the emergence of raqs sharqi within five-star hotels came at a time when there already existed a stark split between popular class *awalem* dancing and '*fananeen*' (artists) raqs sharqi professionals<sup>xciv</sup>. Five-star hotel nightclubs for raqs sharqi were considered elite, extravagant, and by and for the well-to-

do of Egyptian, intra-MENA, and international high society. As professional dance mentor and Cairo resident Sara Farouk Ahmed stated in an interview at Eman Zaki's costume atelier, "When people are spending their money they want to see it. Five-star hotel shows they want to see a 'show-show.' They want to see costume changes, large extravagant orchestras, expensive dinners and drinks, and audiences used to come to see a star dancer with a good reputation, it was the specific star dancer that was the draw. It's not like a boat where you just want to see the Nile, tanoura, and any 'belly dancing', no, in the past you go to a five-star hotel to see a specific dancer, like Fifi Abdo, Soheir Zaki, or Dina, the dancer is the draw. As for the minimum charges, those were in place to keep certain people out, for the average middle-class bank teller Egyptian a night out would cost you a good month's salary or more" (February 2, 2017).

Since the blossoming of five-star hotels in the Nasser era business owners wanted to find more ways to keep hotel guests and wealthy locals spending within the hotels, rather than outside of them. International variety dance shows and raqs sharqi performances proved to be a productive means of doing so. In hotels you would have more upper-class family and male audiences and family audiences. Contemporaneously, five-star hotel audiences are dominated by upper class Egyptian and intra-MENA, particularly *khaleegy*, audiences, with a smattering of international tourists (including the occasional table full of foreign belly dancers on vacation in Cairo).

Raqs sharqi shows in five-star hotels are typically much longer than in other sites, often including three costume changes and a forty-five to hour and a half long set that includes a three-part show. For dancers they are the most lucratively paid site-specific

gigs. The show is largely at the artistic discretion of the dancer, more-so than any other established site of raqs sharqi within Cairo, though she informs her music and dance selection based upon her audience. For example, perhaps the dancer will incorporate older classics with an older Egyptian audience, or a *khaleegy* or *Iraqi* number for mostly Arabian Gulf clientele. The show begins with a *mejance*, the standard entrance-piece often individually crafted by the dancer and her band. The dancers has her own regular band, and the band is often larger in hotel shows. Following the *mejance* the dancer often performs a couple songs of her choosing, then changes costume for a second more folklore-*tableau* inspired set such as *saidi*; the third part is also totally up to the dancer. In decades past, the five-star hotel shows were packed with entertainment. Often multiple bands and popular singers came on between 10pm-2am with the dancer and her show remaining one of the key highlights. Now, there is often just an opening band or singer, the dance show, and the entertainment concludes with another singer and band.

Even discernable within these generalized descriptions, there's an obvious cleavage between 'back then,' what was standard within five-star hotel shows when they were a more prosperous staple of raqs sharqi entertainment, versus the contemporary contexts of dancing within these sites since the Jan. 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011 revolution. Many hotels have only recently begun re-opening their interior nightclubs and fancy restaurants for raqs sharqi shows after periods, ranging from months to years, of being closed around the time of the revolution. Extravagant hotel shows have been dwindling since the economic decline of the Mubarak years. During Mubarak's time many famous star Egyptian dancers and hotel clubs were retiring or shutting their doors throughout the 1990's and early 2000's. Many

of the hotels are not a far stroll from Tahrir Square, thus during the months following the Jan. 25<sup>th</sup> 2011 revolution they were closed and many boarded up to protect from vandalism and looting.

It is largely due to these changes in sites where raqs sharqi is regularly performed, as well as by whom, that a popular discourse within the local and global dance community, as well as everyday Egyptians, is that ‘raqs sharqi is dying.’<sup>xcv</sup> However, since President Sisi has come to power in 2014 and slowly been improving the down-trodden economy, as well as the return of full-swing ‘Arab seasons’ to Cairo in 2016-2017 (uninterrupted by Ramadan), locals and dancers alike are ruminating about the future of such elite sites of raqs sharqi will become. Many dancers and Egyptian businessmen in the industry are hopeful in thinking five-star hotels will kick back into action, though many point out they will be the last spaces to recover from the revolution and economic fallout because of how costly the shows and sites are. Others continue to see the art form as a whole in ‘decline’ in Cairo, with their focus on the lack of famous Egyptian dancers since star Dina Talaat Sayad, (still performing at Semiramis weekly), and the lack of elite sites for raqs sharqi. However, I argue that raqs sharqi is not ‘dying’ in Cairo, and caution against the classist politics embedded within such phrasing. Rather, I propose that the work of raqs sharqi is changing. In other words, not only is the site-specific professional ‘work’ of raqs sharqi changing within contemporary Cairo, but also the political work the dance is doing in regard to larger class and nationalist politics.

Thus, the core research for this chapter queries how the work is still there, but the work has changed. Particularly, considering five-star hotels’ decadent past (and elite

centralization within both local and international belly dance histories), how are these spaces, and the bodies within them, functioning in today's Cairo since the post Jan. 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011 revolution and economic fall out? What political and economic relevance does the contemporary raqs sharqi in these sites offer?

To meaningfully 'check-in' to the core issues five-star hotel raqs sharqi shows and dancers are embodying, this chapter explores a fieldwork case study focused on a specific dancer performing within an established hotel site: Amina at the Marriot hotel's Empress nightclub<sup>xcvi</sup>. To deeply embody the ways raqs sharqi is situated within five-star hotels, this chapter's research and writing centralizes the dancer's choreographic analysis as the main 'draw' for the investigation as well as writing structure, just as audiences would typically be drawn into certain hotel shows based on who was the performing dancer. Just as staying at a hotel is 'bookended' with the checking in and out process, the choreographic analysis of Amina's show begins before she takes to the stage, and wraps up with her larger hotel site exit.

Furthermore, that intense citrusy-cleaning product smell, or rather what it represents, permeates the chapter just as it overwhelmed and permeated my senses within extravagant hotel lobbies, restrooms, and elevators. Ostensibly, it's a difficult and pressing labor to keep up appearances when they may contradict with lived actualities. In other words, this chapter purposefully fluctuates between the ideological surface-level appearances such elite site-specific structures work to construct, as well as the actual bodily labor, what I refer to as the 'actualities,' of various bodies moving within and amidst such larger situating structures to capture a richer and corporeal level of meaning-

making and knowledge. This is also done at a structural writing scale. The chapter's case study follows Amina, a working-class cabaret dancer from Alexandria that's recently arrived in Cairo to try and become more established, and economically successful, as a working dancer. While the Marriott hotel's 'The Empress' nightclub has been graced with such famous greats such as Nagwa Fouad and Fifi Abdou, it has scarcely been operating since the revolution, now only one night a week, and for a mere handful of tables sprinkled throughout the large nightclub. Thus, this case study reflects the contemporary tension and uncertain future of raqs sharqi within five-star hotels, where Amina and the Marriot are both struggling to survive and rebuild from more precarious economic situations. Thus, the case study would initially appear to support popular discourse on the 'dying legacy' of both five-star hotel shows as well as five-star Egyptian dancers, but is there more to the physical actualities than meets the eye? As my nostrils flared from inhaling another overwhelming explosion of citrusy cleaning product from a long-gone housekeeping worker, my body, sensitively listening across multiple modes, assured me, yes.

As my gut productively tangled with the sensory information from the glistening sheen of golden framed mirrors and décor to the powerful lemony-fresh scents, it would later tangle again, months later and over an ocean away from these sites, with tense contradiction as I sat down to type up this chapter. Sure, these words being read are fixed now, organized, tidy. But what if I scrub away at their neat and fixed exterior to highlight my own experience as I wrote them, tried to make visible both my own labor's limitations and enablement? My objective is to choreograph the writing based on the



site-specific raqs sharqi's form and structure. As I have listed this includes a deep mining focused on individual dancer's as the 'draw' to these sites. I planned on my case study focusing on the individual dancer's life story, including a full-length interview paired with rich choreographic analysis. Most of my interviews were long and drawn-out sit-down affairs, and I have hours' worth of interviews with a handful of other hotel dancers in Cairo, and there were other hotel shows I was able to visit much more frequently than the Empress nightclub's because they didn't have as staggering high of a minimum charge. But in my gut I was still drawn to write about Amina, despite not being able to secure an interview with her, and having more resources and access to other hotel sites and dancers because of the cheaper costs, my raw field notes exploded with insight, excitement, and fine details when discussing encounters and shows with Amina at the Marriot hotel. I felt torn, it didn't initially appear to mesh with the choreography of writing I envisioned as best suited to this chapter to end up writing about the only hotel dancer I was not able to procure an interview with. *But the dancer is the draw, you go to that space largely because you are drawn to her, what she has to offer and say with her dance.* My gut was certainly drawn to Amina, and every time I tried finding a different angle to present other hotel sites and dancers I just kept being pulled back to Amina.

I reflected on my failure to procure the interview, and in doing so came to realize my own bodily labor in the many 'failed' processes of trying to get the interview and continued site access directly tied into the danced discourse I learned from Amina. Trying to hide my own discouraging labor in the ethnographic process by going against the draw in my gut would be to provide a polished product that was more superficial, at the

expense of focusing on the messier and more uncertain actualities of my own ethnographic experiences. I failed at procuring the sit-down interview I so desired because I simply didn't have the purchasing power that was so essential to entering these sites, not just as an audience member, but also as researcher.

My limitations into doing this site-specific research were attuned to the contemporary contours of raqs sharqi within five-star hotels, where the thicker the wallet the greater the accessibility. After all, those steep price tags and minimum charges are designed to keep certain bodies out. These barriers are further enforced by the multi-layered male management business system encountered within elite venues as well as with star dancers. As with Hollywood celebrities, there's multiple 'walls' one must go through before being able to speak directly with the artist, in these sites those barriers were dominantly male staff and management working for either the dancer or the hotel venue. Like the heavier security upon entering these sites, these barrier systems, physical and corporeal, are set up not only to protect and ensure the safety of certain bodies, but also to ensure the paid-for privileged privacy of certain bodies.

My own access to these particular sites and dancers were intricately dependent upon not only my own intersectional class, gendered, nationalist, and racial positionality, but within the entanglements of how my positionality tied into those of my research collaborators and other research bodies within the sites. Sometimes the ways our identities synced together was enabling, and other times hindering, but the interlinking relationalities were the primary key to unlocking both limiting and enabling power dynamics. To give a quick sense of this, unlike boat cruises, five-star hotels were sites I

did not feel comfortable attending alone. As my entrance into the site demonstrates, this is read as a suspect position and leads to unwanted attention. Further, culturally I'm granted more authority and respectability if I follow the cultural codes for gendered bodies in these sites, which is helpful when trying to break through the multiple layers of the male management system. However, most of my research collaborators in Cairo were working and lower middle-class Cairene men. These collaborators couldn't afford to come with me to these sites and the late hours didn't mesh with their often twelve-plus hour workdays in the summer heat. I couldn't afford to cover both of our entrance fees into these sites, and more often my male companions weren't comfortable letting me do it as a woman in an elite site they already felt out of place within<sup>xcvii</sup>. Thus, I found myself waiting outside of nightclubs waiting for someone such as the dancer's male manager or male technical assistant to arrive to 'let me in' without having to pay. In exchange for this service they often tried to hold my hand or link arms as we entered together, if that was subtly declined they'd at least jokingly flirt with me, my youthful white-skinned foreign body adding to their social capital and appearances of robust heterosexual masculinity.

In the end, Amina remained the dancer I was drawn to, and just as a captivated audience member would follow this resonance into the corresponding hotel show, I followed my own gut to write about Amina despite the research restraints. Further, as I'll come to argue, the way our gendered bodies were granted mobility/lack thereof in these sites aligns with the contradictory collisions of appearances versus actualities within contemporary five-star hotel raqs sharqi sites.

### **Case Study: Amina at the Marriot Hotel's 'Empress' Nightclub**

“Hey! Hope you haven’t been waiting long, I got stuck in a bunch of traffic,” I was stirred from my ponderings on the lounge couch just outside of the Marriot’s “The Empress” nightclub as Krystal approached and plopped down beside me. Krystal was one of many foreign professional belly dancers currently working within Cairo, and she had previously connected me with the manager Yasser who organized the singers and dancers at the Marriot during this time. Krystal, originally from the USA like myself, had worked a number of five-star hotel contracts in the Gulf area before briefly trying her luck in Cairo. She felt the dance scene might be recovering from the revolution enough for her to make her name here before eventually moving on to the international festival teaching circuit. The normal minimum charge for the nightclub at this time was just under 100 US dollars, so the only way I was gaining access to this location was through connections, so we were waiting for the manager to arrive and physically seat us in the venue in order to bypass the minimum charge. While we waited for Yasser to arrive Krystal gave me the scoop on the evening’s entertainment. “In five-star hotels, especially ones with a history of reputable dancers like this, you must make a big show. It needs to be dynamic and artistic. You need to hire a big band, and hold the audience’s attention for at least forty-five minutes. You can expect to see three costume changes and a well-rounded range of dance genre styles and music” (January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017). She paused and then rebutted, “Well, I mean, that’s how it’s supposed to be. The dancer here currently is Amina from Alexandria, she’s actually from the cabarets. The thing is now all the nice venues are just trying to get back on their feet and lots of licenses for entertainment have lapsed and

things, so it's just easier for venues to hire Egyptian dancers instead of foreign because they don't require the expensive paperwork and contracts that we're required to have" (Jan. 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017). Before I could press her further on her nationalist and classist conflation between Egyptian dancers and cabarets and foreign dancers and 'nice' five-star venues, Yasser arrived.

Yasser was a stout Egyptian man in his forties, and he managed the entertainment, including singers and dancers, in a few venues throughout Cairo. He beamed brightly as he approached Krystal, he leaned over and kissed her upon both cheeks, making sure to linger a bit too long with each kiss than would be expected, then eventually turned and offered me a light handshake. Rather than take the open end of the couch he gestured for us to split so he could sit between us in the middle, thus flanking himself with the prestige of two pale-skinned foreign women on either side of him. He made a flirty joke about me in Arabic to Krystal, grabbing my hand and holding it against his chest, I awkwardly pulled away and wondered if he was aware that I could understand him. Either way I pretended not to. He then pulled out his cell phone and twisted towards Krystal as he showed her photos of the working Cairo dancers, foreign and Egyptian, alongside descriptive commentary not focused on their dancing abilities, but rather on their makeup, bodily attractiveness, and costuming. He came across a photo of Krystal wearing a thousand-US dollar designer costume, zoomed in on her well-endowed chest, and stated how beautiful 'they' were, and that audiences thought they were natural. Krystal giggled and pumped her fist victoriously in the air, "that's what happens when you get 'em done in the USA!" She cheered. Yasser nodded in approval, and he scrolled

to a picture of Amina, Krystal suggested that her large round butt must be surgically enhanced in some way, that it couldn't be real. Yasser wasn't sure, but was definitely intrigued at the suggestion.

As if by clockwork, we looked up upon hearing the rolling wheels of a dancer's gig suitcase, the technical assistant Abdu, working under Yasser, arrived escorting Amina. Amina was wearing a blouse and very tight-fitting pencil skirt, I think all three of us immediately were drawn to her extremely well-endowed bottom, I even found myself siding with Krystal that it was likely enhanced somehow, as mentioned bodily enhancements, surgical or otherwise, were almost a work requirement to be a professional belly dancer, particularly in cities such as Cairo where it's taken as such a wide-spread professional industry. Yasser rose to greet her and explained that I was writing a book on dance and that we should make an interview together after her show sometime. She politely nodded in response as they turned to enter the nightclub together so she could begin getting ready for her show. Yasser leaned in, and as they walked and exchanged a few whispers, suddenly Krystal and I saw him reach down and intensely squeeze a large handful of Amina's butt cheek. She spun around to us, eyes wide in shock, I think I must've been returning the same wide-eyed expression back to her, she paused, just for a brief moment, then threw her head back and burst into laughter. She then quickly grabbed her suitcase and skirted into the club. Yasser turned to us, "What? I asked her if it was real and she was joking with me asking if I wanted to try it, so I tried!" Obviously, he violated what was supposed to be a joke, but Amina's conclusive cackle showed her negotiation of how to deal with the uneven power dynamics of the encounter,

and in a way that let her move as quickly as possible into the space where she could continue on with her prerogative for the night, her lucrative paid work.

Suddenly, Yasser puffed up his chest, lifted his chin slightly, and offered his arm to Krystal. It appeared he was transforming his performance into that of the ‘gentleman’ to walk her white upper-class foreign body into the site. As for me, I sluggishly trailed behind them with my head down, while Amina was skilled in quickly thinking on her feet to improvisationally deal with the situation in a manner that let her most efficiently continue to attend to her own objectives within the site, I as *agnibiya*-ethnographer was not so clever. *Abyud...eshta...* as I tread into the nightclub all the incessant yet unsolicited compliments men in the streets would call out to my white-skinned body as being beautiful due to its whiteness seemed to weigh down my steps with a heavy and sticky molasses-like consistency that slowed my dragging pace even farther. Despite the feeling of wading through a thick sticky muck, it was this exact racially gendered component that was paving the way for my body to enter the site with such ease despite my lack of financial resources.

After the sexual harassment occurred, both Amina and Yasser immediately turned, not to one another, but to the two white U.S. spectating bodies in the lobby, highlighting how the interaction was an exercise in power that our two white U.S. bodies were not only complicit in, but aided in creating the conditions of possibility for the interaction to occur. Our U.S. whiteness, and all the historical and contemporary ‘muck’ it carried into the encounter, placed limits on the wiggle room Amina had in humorously attempting to deflate and avoid bodily violation while still capitalizing upon her sexual appeal in a

male-dominated industry. At the same time, our spectating bodies granted more entitlement and a sense of virile masculinity to Yasser. Altogether, our entrances into the site highlighted just how heavy and deeply the quagmire of mobility, access, and corporeality was tied to gender, race, class, nationalist, and sexuality politics.

Crossing into the interior of the Marriot's Empress nightclub I was taken aback by the emptiness of the space. The large room had a dance floor and stage as the primary highlight, placed directly in the middle of the room as the focal point of the venue, and circling up and around the dance floor was tiered-raised seating. Often this seating style was even further class divided like a concert, with 'front-row' seats costing more than those way up in the back. White floral-clothed tables set to seat four or more people were organized throughout the room, and spread across the ceiling mini chandeliers dripped with glistening lights. Multiple waiters in suits and bow ties stood about idly, the decadent space contrasted with the mere scattering of bodies that tried to take up space within it. Only a scant handful of tables spread throughout the nightclub had patrons, mostly wealthy men from the Arabian Gulf, Levant, and Egypt, with elaborate food dishes and expensive alcohol piled up upon their tables. The negligible amount of bodies within the extravagant space gestured towards the state of economic decline within these sites as well as the haunting of their once glamorous past. Amusingly, a white European couple squabbled for their bill and the rest of their meal to go; apparently, they had an early morning awaiting them to view some of Egypt's famous Pharaonic sites, or perhaps it was the pyramids. Regardless, they complained loudly about the high bill and the entertainment not getting started until midnight as they took their leave. They missed the



entire show, as their focus was elsewhere, and thus their entire temporal and cultural understanding of Cairo. The manager dismissed them apathetically, the show wasn't centered around them anyway. A male and female singer each switched off throughout the night. When we arrived Gigi was belting out tunes from across the MENA with a strong focus on Egypt, the Levant, and Arabian Gulf. After a few more tunes Gigi took her leave and the dancer's band started setting up their instruments behind the curtain on the raised stage just past the large circular dance floor.

Suddenly the curtains drew open, and we were greeted with a band with about a dozen musicians playing, including two keyboard players, an accordionist, violinist, and a dominance of drummers. They began playing the dramatic opening notes of a classical *mejanca* for Amina to make her entrance. Four youthful *funun al shaabaya* men came out in shiny suits with sparkling gold vests and bow ties. Though the music was a pulsating *malruf* rhythm with dramatic flair, the men appeared to only half-heartedly perform pivot spins alongside large sweeping arm flourishes. Their lack of enthusiasm and energy worked to chisel away from the otherwise building energy of the musicians laboring behind them. Unfortunately, this flattened atmosphere is what Amina found herself making her grand entrance upon. She came out in a bright yellow bra and skirt costume, the hips and bra cups adorned in three-dimensional flowers, with her yellow booty shorts showing beneath her transparent yellow chiffon skirt. She had a beautiful soft and curvy body, olive skin, and long black hair, which went a long way to add to her physical appeal despite the cheaper quality of her costuming. There were no crystals, elaborate

beading, or stones to catch and sparkle in the dazzling stage lights, all attributes that would raise the cost of the costume.

She held up large golden wings of Isis which she then spun onto the stage with. The wings length and golden sheen adds to a dancer's sense of stage presence for their initial *mejanca*. The *funun al shaabaya* framed the four corners of the circular stage as Amina spun, sashayed, and performed hip drops center-stage. The golden wings extend the dancer's natural arm and body lines, but due to the framing of the *funun al shaabaya*, rather than grant the dancer a 'larger than life' presence, they served to shrink her on stage, as at times Amina would pull in her arms in a chicken-wing like position to avoid whacking the men as she spun and maneuvered about the stage. Likewise, the *funun al shaabaya* performed uncomfortably around the winged dancer, often hesitating between step-together-steps and arm flourishes to make sure they wouldn't be whacked by an extended wing. The hesitations, power posture shrinking, and lack of synchronicity between the male dancers and Amina highlighted scant economic and resource realities within contemporary Cairo. To elaborate, unlike Farah Nasri and her *funun al shaabaya* discussed in chapter two, there was not a steady and reliable enough flow of work for Amina and the *funun al shaabaya* to be able to afford investing in rehearsals together. Likewise, due to the absence of beaming smiles full of pride and joy found on Farah's *funun al shaabaya*, but absent from those in the Empress nightclub, it was likely that these male dancers were their primarily to pick up extra cash for nightwork, rather than a more invested dedication to creating art with a raqs sharqi dancer.

Another issue revolved around power dynamics. Here, the *funun al shaabaya* were contracted not by the dancer herself, making her their employer, but rather through the venue. Therefore, Amina lacked the purchasing power to claim greater authority and respect from the men on stage, and instead uneven gender and sexuality power struggles became center-staged in their professional relationships. As an example, though all of the dancers were stigmatized for taking up dance as a profession, particularly in a nightclub, the golden bow-tied suits of the men versus the revealing golden booty shorts of Amina highlighted a greater suspect stigma through sexualization of Amina's female body. This led the *funun al shaabaya* to challenge her taking up of the space as the dominant authority figure during the show. This was made evident again when Amina tossed the wings aside and began to circle the perimeter of her stage with a series of quick pivot spins. One *funun al shaabaya* was in her directional path, she had to gesturally 'wave' him out of the way before crashing into him, he obliged, but not without hesitation as well as responding with a dirty look and sneer. *Funun al shaabaya* were incorporated into large five-star hotel raqs sharqi productions to create a grand spectacle and more 'dignified' and de-sexualized context for the solo dancer. However, in this case, the lack of a sustainable and sound economic foundation with the female dancer at the helm can result in greater power hurdles and labor for the solo female dancer to negotiate.

Upon Amina's cue, the *funun al shaabaya* took their exit. They stood with erect posture, lifted and posed towards Amina with strong 'L' arms, and then quickly turned and exited the stage to allow her to finish her *mejance* solo while they changed into their next costumes for her folkloric *tableau*. I was relieved to see the male dancers take their

leave. Their presence, though ideally meant to greaten Amina's stage presence, had the opposite effect of diluting her stage power. I was frustrated with the male dancers, and how they knew they could get away with giving such a lack luster performance because it was ultimately 'Amina's show.' In the end Amina would bear the weight of having to crank up her own charisma, technique, and power to make up for their watered-down dancing. Though the show was created by a dozen bodies, from Amina to the *funun al shaabaya*, manager, technician, and musicians, it was Amina's responsibility to carry the show. The *funun al shaabaya* were getting paid poorly, but knew they'd get paid despite their bare minimum quality and effort, in doing so inadvertently dumping excess labor, expectation, and responsibility on Amina, who did not have as secure a job position within the nightclub. The professional raqs sharqi industry is set up to centralize the dancer, this can hold great power and potential for the dancer. On the other hand, it can also bear to vilify her and hold her accountable for any number of scenarios largely out of her hands. Further, from displeased sneers to the ways the male dancers didn't allow Amina to fully take up her stage space, the framing men not only placed undo labor burdens on Amina, but also reinforced their own sense of heteronormative masculine power. They did this through micro level corporeal aggressions aimed at challenging the established status quo of gendered bodies on stage. For whatever miniscule and momentary sense of entitlement this offered the *funun al shaabaya*, on a larger scale of revamping the Empress's nightclub shows in the long-run, this wasn't a sustainable form of cultivating gendered relationships.

After the men left, Amina seemed to relax more into her signature technique and style. She performed most of her technique with a wide-legged stance, extra apparent due to the transparency of her chiffon skirt. She performed most movements flat-footed, only occasionally going up onto relevé for a few spins from her introductory *mejance*. She performed juicy hip swivels center-stage while her hands gently caressed down the sides of her body. Then she began to walk towards the all-male audience seated around the stage's perimeter. She walked the perimeter, stopping to perform full body undulations, hip figure-eights, and hip drops while intimately standing just a few feet away from the seated patrons. The men would wave their hands to the music or offer words of beauty to Amina as she directly engaged with them. It seemed Krystal was also able to focus more on Amina's show after the distracting *funun al shaabaya* left. She leaned over towards me to offer a critique of Amina's costuming and technique. "I just don't understand why she always wears these see-through skirt costumes, it makes her cabaret stance all the more obvious when she could at least hide it. She should wear skirts that aren't see through and don't have slits" (February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

A wider-legged stance is one of the first 'mistakes' belly dancers world-wide are corrected upon in class and workshop settings, instead being told to keep the feet and legs close together. Globally, this is taught to add the esteemed mark of a 'trained' and 'correct' technique to practitioners. Teachers often state that a wide-legged stance doesn't look as modest, or simply looks more vulgar, or 'not classy.' In contemporary Cairo contexts of professional raqs sharqi, as noted here, this wider-legged stance signifies a working-class cabaret dancer. Here, too, it signifies being 'untrained' in reference to

going professional directly from a social *baladi* foundation, without training either by a raqs sharqi choreographer, one of the folkloric troupes, or through other techniques such as ballet. However, all of these wide-stance ‘technique critiques’ have roots derived from when raqs sharqi split into a staged professional performance form from the popular *awalem* dancing. One of the hallmarks setting apart this ‘split’ in professionals was if the dancer’s legs were close together (raqs sharqi), or wider (*awalem*). Thus, the distance between a dancer’s legs came to embody classist connotations that also became conflated with sexual modesty or impropriety, wherein the wider the stance the lesser the sexual modesty and ‘class.’ Krystal’s comment that she could easily hide this ‘cabaret stance’ further elucidates how certain bodies are policed and marginalized according to economic class within sites of raqs sharqi, particularly five-star hotels. Yet her words also highlight how these borders are not fine lines that have, and especially during hard economic times continue, to be blurred by the bodies that cunningly and courageously cross them.

Amina continued, performing hip drops and large loose hip shimmies, but within moments it became clear that her signature moves included the wide variety of robust chest articulations, from rapid vertically-oriented chest circles, loose shimmies (with lots of jiggly cleavage reverberation), and chest pops and bounces. Her execution of chest movement vocabulary was particularly impressive, as she confidently wielded a wide range of motion in her chest and sharply caught the percussive accents in the music with powerful chest punctuation. At the same time, the way she emphasized this chest movement vocabulary was reminiscent more of the popular MTV-style *shaabi* music video clips proliferating across YouTube and television screens across Cairo, more so

than what aficionados of raqs sharqi would expect in a five-star hotel show. In an interview, Yasmina, a seasoned professional dancer who is now retired and running a bed and breakfast in Cairo elaborated, “people are telling me that dancers are being hired that are more out there in your face type dancers, not the gentle relaxed Egyptian dance style from before, but that it’s highly sexualized nowadays, and that seems to me to be partly a result of also the video clips, not about dancing as much as just eye candy” (April 29, 2017). Certainly, Amina’s performance was very robust and more directly ‘in your face’ sexy. There were no subtle, delicate, or playfully shy *dalaa* in her show. In MENA contexts of raqs sharqi, the mutually exchanged performer-audience corporeal interaction is a key circulation that creates the atmosphere of *ihzas* (feeling) and togetherness. However, it was notable how much of this exchange Amina elicited through such immediate and direct personalized attention to the male spectators at the borders of her stage, as opposed to commanding this from the center through more subtle movement and interaction.

However, her most signature move, and one I only saw performed in a few cabarets elsewhere, was to stand with feet wider than hip-width apart, back facing her intended audience, then to bend over at a full ninety-degree angle and vivaciously shake and shimmy her well-endowed *derrière*. The extensive emphasis Amina put on this particular set of technique registered a specific set of connotations across audiences. Matching her costuming, Amina’s dancing was transparent. She was sexy, directly engaging, and not partial to hiding the roots of where she came from to make her taking up of this elite space more palatable to traditional upper class sensibilities and ‘golden

era' nostalgia. The scattering of alcohol-drinking male patrons from throughout the MENA enjoying her show with attentive eyes didn't seem to mind, either.

Though historically, tipping within five-star hotels was strictly forbidden, distinctly to differentiate these sites as hierarchally 'better' than cabarets, during the time of my fieldwork it was quite rampant, though still stigmatized. An older man from Saudi Arabia, sitting with three other colleagues, took a few hundred-pound notes out from his wallet and extended them out towards the stage, gently waving the bills to the melody of the music. The male singer that was accompanying Amina lifted his eyebrows towards the client and began to stroll over to him to accept the tip. The Gulf man shook his head as the male Egyptian singer approached, instead tilting his head towards the dancer. The singer looked disgruntled for a moment then turned to face the other patrons as Amina caught the eye of the client and began to slowly walk over to him, gently swaying her hips in a figure-eight pattern. She held his gaze as she took her time to cross the stage. Her slow paced matched with the continued eye contact worked in her favor, she'd only crossed halfway when the man began to dig back into his wallet to take out another hundred-pound note.

Notably, a similar sneer to the one I'd observed earlier from one of the *funun al shaabaya* crossed the singer's face as he side-eyed Amina's interaction with the tipping client. Amina's ability to solicit increased economic capital from the client under these conditions are impressive. As typically, the singer would wave the dancer over and they both would work together to give personalized attention to the tipping client to make him more willing to dig deeper into his wallet. However, in this case, the singer literally



turned his back on the opportunity. This created an even more difficult environment for Amina to be lucratively successful within, a feat she was able to independently surmount even from across the stage. Amina approached the table of Gulf men. Standing just barely a foot in front of the man holding out the notes, she gently took the bills from his hand with her own. She then continued to hold his gaze as she lightly half-tucked the tipping into her left bra cup. She shimmied her breasts loosely, the exposed half of the notes flapped in a catered display of personalized attention to the tipper. His table chuckled and clapped in approval. Then Amina removed the notes from her bra and walked over to Abdu, the technical assistant standing at the perimeter of the stage. She handed him the notes and he eagerly accepted them, then jogged over to our table to graciously hand them over to their manager Yasser with a huge grin. Yasser stoically took the tipping and then counted it, twice, before pocketing it.

He didn't seem disturbed or worried by the blatant accepting of tips in a five-star hotel setting. From my own observations it was quite a common occurrence at this particular time, but I couldn't put my finger on his indifferent body language. Amina continued to dance around the perimeter of the stage, giving very intimate eye contact and robust chest articulation to the men flanking the stage's border. Yasser shifted towards me, "They are supposed to give me all the tipping when they work, but I never see her make this much tipping when I'm not around, so all this tells me is that she's sneaky, she keeps the tips for herself and maybe gives Abdu a share to stay quiet if I'm not here to supervise, for sure I know they do this" (February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017). I was stunned by his calculation, that he distrusted Abdu and Amina in their work, but more so for how

the blame and responsibility was, once again, dumped onto Amina's laboring body with such disapproval and disgust.

As a practitioner, I was well aware of the plethora of tactics possible to hide the full amount of tips from a band or singer that may want to share in the spoils. For example, Amina could have plunged one or two of those notes deep inside her bra cup where it would solely be hers, rather than spread and dangle them out for all to plainly see. However, I also wouldn't be surprised, or condemnatory, if her, or her and Abdu, did engage in this practice, considering the tips are only exchanged and circulated due to her own labor, and as the rejection to the singer showed, solely meant for the dancer. Despite which bodies are engaged in the most physical and demanding labor, it's dominantly male managers that take the biggest cuts of the total income from the dancer, and often they deal out which of their employees is allotted which amount. Many dancers I interviewed weren't aware of what the total price was for the jobs they were working.

What I was taken aback by, was how, despite the dancer's clever performance in sultrily accumulating capital within an environment of scarcity while simultaneously performing propriety under suspect surveillance, she was still ultimately disparaged, by both the male singer and the manager. In other words, Amina was incredibly honest and straightforward in the tipping interaction. She could have deeply plunged the bills into the hidden depths of her costuming or kept them clumped in her hand, but instead she chose to fully spread out and display the full amount for all to see. This worked both to increase the sexually-stimulated pleasure of the tipping client and give him an inflated sense of importance due to his capital, while at the same time also giving an open and public

display of the transaction under multiple policing gazes. From where I sat, she seemed to be doing everything strikingly right in an incredibly improvisational moment. However, the male singer's sneer highlighted his disapproval of her gendered and sexualized performance being spotlighted over his own performative singing labor, despite the fact that the dancer is the draw for these type of shows, and the singers are more replaceable (outside of celebrity singers.)

In the end, Amina's overt five-star hotel performance of a straightforwardly sexy and desirable dancing body, coupled with her successful tipping exchange, still fell short of overriding her stigmatized and suspect position as a working-class cabaret Egyptian dancer. The combination of her class, nationality, and cabaret work origins worked to overshadow the actuality of her laboring body in an air of suspicion, greed, and distrust. It was a notable contradiction, first, that despite working in a five-star hotel, her body was still marked as 'working class' and 'cabaret.' Furthermore, that her working-class 'cabaret' body was more heavily policed within the elite space, despite the fact that her class-border crossing was the pinnacle reason that capital was being exchanged and accumulated within the Empress.

Thoughts swirled within my head. How would Amina's career, this five-star hotel nightclub, and raqs sharqi within five-star hotels end up? I was withdrawing into my own thoughts when I abruptly snapped back into the performance. Amina had finished her *meleya luff eskandarani* (Alexandrian) *tableau* number with her *funun al shaabaya*, where she'd been monotonously teasingly shimmying and undulating in front of one back up male dancer than another. Again, in a repeatedly blatant outward display of

heterosexual sexual appeal between her body and the male dancers<sup>xcviii</sup>. She then surprised me by hopping up and sitting upon the edge of the musicians' raised stage at the back of the central dance floor. She crossed her ankles and took a *mandil* (tissue) packet from one of the drummers and used it to take her time dabbing away at her sweaty brow, cheeks, and chest. She fiddled with her hair a bit and was gently rocking her legs forward and back, now leaning back onto one arm in a relaxed posture.

Amina was taking an on-stage break, the longevity of which created a sense of suspense and curiosity. What would happen next? It reminded me of those moments in high school when the class would start to get out of hand, a bit too unruly and rambunctious, so our teacher, rather than yell and demand her authority, would simply sit back in an unpredictable and gripping silence and stillness. Amina chatted casually with the singer and a few of the musicians, and after another moment slowly rose, shook out her hair, then casually walked to the center of the stage. Still holding the *mandil* in her left hand, Amina pliéed as she simultaneously rolled her left hip down, then slowly circled her left hip up, her arms also raising above her head as the singular deep reedy bellow of the accordion filled the room. They breathed in unison, as Amina inhaled deeply, lifting her arms overhead along with her gaze towards the ceiling. The accordion's bellows expanded with her, and at the apex of the movement they both paused. Amina closed her eyes with her sweat-stained *mandil* still held high, and after a moment of lingering stillness, they (Amina and the accordionist) exhaled in harmony. Amina exhaled while slowly and purposefully bringing her arms down as her head gently fell back and her

belly relaxed, as she again pliéed and sunk her full body weight deep into her hips and straight down through her legs into the ground.

I felt chills on my arms. The entire atmosphere was somehow caught up within their stillness, and as they exhaled and sank deep down into their cores, both Amina and the accordion's collapsing bellows, the audience, including myself, were completely drawn in. The men put down their glasses and forks, abandoning their hot entrees, their only motion was taking long draws from their cigarettes as their eyes remained fixated on Amina. Amina was closing out her show with a *baladi* progression, a structured form of musical improvisation often between a *tabla* (drum) player, accordionist, and dancer, which highlights the deep *baladi*-rooted power, pride, and femininity of the dancer<sup>xcix</sup>.

Amina began moving, the accordionist following her lead, with a buttery smoothness. Her feet were planted deep into the earth, and she dug deep into the ground through the balls of her feet to then slowly transfer that power to swivel her hips like syrup, one after the other, in rich circles and loops, moving throughout with the consistency of honey. She held her hair up above her head with both hands as she looked down towards her heavy hip work, her ribcage gently rising and falling. She was taking her time to breathe and relax as her hips slowly melted into downward figure-eights. Amina's hip work was like the trickling of honey, slow and thick, with the subtlest dribble adding the perfect taste of lingering sweetness to any cocktail. The lead drummer began kicking in with the 'call and response' section percussion accents. Amina embodied and drove the percussion with spot-on punctuated hip and lower belly accents. She used the accordion melody to accumulate her energy, such as pulling her left hip up

into her rib cage, then holding, pausing with engaged muscles as she held the worked-up energy, before plopping the hip down to catch the drummer's accent.

It was this sustained stillness before the powerful accents that created a palpable sense of stage presence and power. The men at the perimeters of the stage responded with encouraging utterances of 'aiwa' and 'aaah!' No longer were the male spectators using their physical gestures and verbal cues to beckon the dancer over to them and their wallets. Rather, they were now thoroughly pulled into her hurricane of power. The accumulation of authoritative presence Amina was circulating throughout the space, with the collaborative aid of the musicians behind her, overrode any other directional flows. The centralized power of the dancer was further enforced by her centrally planted, unwavering, and spotlighted position on stage. The *baladi* progression calls for a more stationary performance, and performing it as the finale to her show created a powerful spiraling effect. Amina started off her show circling the peripheries of the stage, giving and receiving attention through explicit interaction that crossed over the circular stage border, now, to conclude her show and make her final statement, she stood as the eye of the storm, the stillness strengthened by the whirlwind of struggle previously all around her.

The male musicians behind her were also given greater spotlight during this more intimate, improvisational, and personalized *baladi* progression. The accordionist and drummers become more animated, smiling, joyful, and energized as they all creatively and collaboratively work together in a synchronized and mutually respectful flow of performance that created space for honoring each individual artist's talents. Though

directed by the dancer, this collaborative performance flow was founded in a musical tradition of honoring *baladi* roots, and as such, honoring where you came from, where you currently stand, and pulling on the deep linkages between these potentially two distinct foundations to generate abundant power, pride, and surety of self.

The gendered and class relationships between bodies on and immediately surrounding the stage are now done differently. The relationships between the working-class male musicians and Amina are highlighted, their mutually creative and collaborative solidarity cultivates an atmosphere where once marginalized bodies are given greater emphasis and exchange value. Meanwhile, any subtle but fully committed to movement or pause from Amina elicits both positive verbal and kinesthetic response from the male audience. They clap, wave their hands, sit up in their seats, all the while their eyes remain fixated on her hips as their dinners grow cold. Gone are the sly smirks, teasing jokes, and hungry glances full of privileged macho masculinity. At this point, Amina has taken her audience on a journey where the end destination is not what her audience had come to expect. Amina simply waited, building up to her finale, and in the meantime thinning the spectator's wallets, but now she fully committed to claiming her singular spotlighted position center-stage.

The drum solo section of the *baladi* progression was underway. Now Amina and the lead drummer showed off their precise technique and creative accents together as the pulsating beats further amplified the energetic atmosphere. To wrap up the drum solo, and her forty-five minute performance in total, Amina started a large smooth hip circle, but paused halfway through and transitioned to her signature movement, the fully bent-

over vigorous butt shimmy. Amina bent fully over so her backside was entirely the focal point of the finale, she placed her hands lightly on the ground in front of her feet as her head hung loose, and her long locks gently caressed the floor. Completely folded over, Amina shimmied and shook her butt vigorously, the drummers heightened the movement with *rishes* from their instruments. Amina kept the movement going. Being able to sustain this volume and intense of a shimmy from this body position was particularly difficult. For many dancers it's hard to sustain this type of movement when you bend forward at all, but it seemed Amina could continue throughout the night. The fervor with which Amina shook, and the drummers' fingers played the drums, amplified. Amina embellished the sustained shimmy by adding heavy heel drops to catch the bass drum accents, adding a percussive element that showed off her difficult technique, but also continued to very pointedly draw her audience intensely and exclusively to her booty work.

However, when previously this technique largely read as sexually enticing to a specifically moneyed male audience, now, after the accumulation of her total show, and within the specific musical context of the *baladi* progression, its significance shifted. The difficult labor it took to sustain this technique, and heightened excitement driven by the handful of drummers responding with her shimmy through drum *rishes*, constructed a sense of earned and unabashed pride and honor to Amina. An often-demonized movement, and a stigmatized body, so denigrated by the dance industry as well as general MENA population, was instead honoring and celebrating her roots, as well as the specific aspects of her artistic technique that marked her body as otherwise not belonging within



the elite space. The sustained spectacular shaking of her backside shook up spectator's sense of superiority and sure-footedness within the elite space. It shook open stereotypically stigmatized and uni-directional top-down readings of her performance and her interpolated dancing body, gesturing that the actualities are always more complex and richer than the surface-level appearances.

Next, during a particularly sharp drum hit, Amina flipped her hair overhead as she rose and spun to a fully standing position facing her audience. She stood with both hands placed firmly on her hips in fists, and with her chin tilted slightly down, took her time to scan her audience with a smoldering glance. She held this power pose, her chest slightly heaving with the physical exhaustion from the show's duration, hands still boldly placed upon her hips, as if daring any spectator to misread her dancing body as weak or passively consumable to the whims of larger sexually-charged economic and patriarchal flows, daring anyone to challenge her earned spot, center-staged, lucratively paid, and spotlighted in the five-star hotel, daring anyone to condescendingly marginalize her by a mere stereotypical and uni-directional thought. After a powerful pause, the audience erupted in applause and verbal approval and enjoyment, Amina grinned with joy but held her pose a moment longer.

Throughout her dance and end pose, Amina's *mandil* never left her hand. Just as dance scholar Priya Srinivasan's focus on the sweat-stained Sari of the Indian dancing body argues for the visiblization of otherwise erased forms of transnational labor, Amina's sweaty-tissue likewise demanded recognition for her marginalized, yet successfully lucrative, labor in the face of larger global patriarchal and economic

disparities (2012). Her cabaret working-body's border crossing into the elite and lucrative space was not hidden or covered up in opaque skirts, sweet *dalaa* interaction, or swiftly wiped-away sweat. Instead, she expands upon Srinivasan's analysis, as she chose to bear these denigrated bodily markings in the palm of her hand for all to bear witness to. She held the power to shake up limiting preconceptions, prejudices, and peripheralizations, and she wasn't ashamed, to show the grueling and unforgiving labor that such work pragmatically required in post-revolutionary Cairo.

### **Checking Out: A Conclusion with/out Closure**

I remember my heart racing as I sped down the grand staircase to catch Yasser and Amina as they made their weekly entrance into the Empress. I had been observing Amina's shows for a couple months now, always spellbound by her *baladi* progression finales, and tonight I was sure to secure the much sought-after interview. I had a translator waiting in the lounge lobby, the money to pay for his entrance fee if necessary, and a third back up plan ready in case of any other haphazard last-minute obstacle. I thought I had all my bases covered. I beamed excitedly as I approached Yasser, he was speaking on his cell phone in the lobby. After he hung up, I asked him when Amina would arrive, he looked at me sardonically. "She's not coming," he retorted abruptly as he began to walk into the nightclub. I was confused, and Yasser didn't seem to be offering any additional explanation or clarifying details. I inquired about why Amina wasn't coming, and when she'd be back. "She stopped," he responded curtly. I pleaded with him about her whereabouts, where I could contact her, and that I could pay her for an interview at her home or any other location. "She stopped, she is pregnant, *khalas*,"

Yasser looked at me like I was an idiot. “She’s pregnant,” was all he answered to my continued beseeching about the interview. He turned his back on me and entered the venue. He was done talking to me, and clearly not going to aid me in contacting Amina. I felt crushed. I wondered about Amina. Was the pregnancy planned, had she saved up enough income from dancing to resign from her work comfortably to motherhood, was motherhood her ultimate aim? Would she miss the spotlight of the stage, and eventually return to dancing after her child’s birth, or was her performance career just a quick, temporary, and lucrative means to a preferential and ideal end of marriage and motherhood? Particularly for many non-elite Egyptian dancers this was certainly a common and desirable trajectory.

Surprisingly, as these thoughts continued to brew and stir within my head, I began to feel comfortable with the uncertainty of how Amina ultimately took her final exit from the stage. The plethora of possibilities served as a reminder of how many hard-earned opportunities Amina accrued for herself, as well as the reminder that there were multiple modes of being female, all of which embodied a range of desirable power positions. These modes stretched across the range of identities that were socially centered and peripheralized, from respected domestic motherhood to stage-commanding yet stigmatized *ra’asa* (dancer). Ultimately, Amina’s Empress ‘check-out’ without closure left me impressed with the wide and colorful array of potentialities available to her, and despite the multi-layered structural level hardships Amina had to negotiate from her nights at the Empress, highlighted through the micro-level interactions she encountered with the multitude of variously positioned men sharing the space. She left me with hope

for a rich and fruitful future, and the reminder to seek out abundance in the fissures and opportunities of what's dominantly read as demising in scarcity.

Observing Amina's Empress performances week after week, from the initial multi-directional male-dominated power plays to her finale, where she claimed and commanded the center-stage with her earthy *baladi* progressions, was moving. Amina left her audience assured that the closure of the show will be on her terms, strongly, honestly, and deeply rooted in her own *asil* (authentic) journey and Self. Further, Amina animatedly shakes up the understanding of *asil*, typically meaning 'authentic' in a *baladi* Egyptian sense, often dualistically contrasted with things and traits considered *afrangi*, or western-foreign (Hilal 2, Roushdy 2009). Amina's performance takes audiences deeper into a more complex and richly entangled understanding of *asil* to highlight a transparent recognition of Self as engaged in interlocking class, nationality, race, gender, and sexuality interpolations and constructions that attend to both the pitfalls and catalytic potentialities, of the present moment and place where one must stand their ground. The sense of a particularly local Egyptian honor and pride remains in Amina's performed understanding of *asil*, but, matching the honey-like consistency with which she swerves her hips in the *baladi* progression, it is sweetened and enhanced with a richer, thicker, and more nuanced density. This nuanced focus on heavily-grounded and interwoven dynamics of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality are of paramount importance in how larger audiences, inside and outside of Egypt, situate and contextualize what's happening not only within five-star hotel raqs sharqi shows and their unknown futures,

but also in regard to the country's macro level economic and political romanticisms and realities at large.

While popular discourse inside the Cairo and international dance community may posit that raqs sharqi as an art is 'dying' in Egypt because of the decline in elite and extravagant five-star hotel shows and the ever-increasing popularity of cabaret work and MTV-style *shaabi* music video clips, this dismisses the necessary work of looking at how raqs sharqi within hotel sites has changed and what these changes are saying about dance, economics, and politics at large. Further, in reductively dismissing the changes in five-star hotel raqs sharqi as declining into non-existence or depravity, practitioners and other members and audiences of the dance industry at large are placing ourselves in the limiting pitfalls that Amina so directly disrupts: that of uni-directional understandings that reinforce dominant hierarchies of power in favor of seeing across senses and polyvalent significations that may slightly but meaningfully shake up normalized hegemonic discourse. Notably, the decline in five-star hotel raqs sharqi shows as a sign of a troubled economy and lack of 'artistic' dancers and audiences, alongside the tension between appearances versus actualities, holds pertinent resonances with larger political projects of the state regime under President Sisi.

Sisi's campaign and popularity are sizably founded in the dual claims that he is capable of improving the economy as well as exterminating 'internal and external threats' to the country, and surface-level numbers and appearances would validate these claims, showing Sisi has eliminated over two-thousand terrorists and arrested over 16,000 terrorists (McManus 2017). Despite backlash due to harsh economic trade-offs for a 12

billion-dollar IMF loan in the fall of 2016, resulting in the flotation of the pound and high inflation rates, for many Sisi supporters the revamping of the economy and elimination from ‘threats’ to the country are deemed primary priorities in stabilizing the country and moving forward since the ousting of President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood regime. Time and time again my colleagues in Cairo would tell me the economy and the safety of the country from ‘enemies’ needs to come first, then we can get to ‘everything else.’ I often found myself in agreement, particularly when trying to successfully ‘do’ my ethnography I was continually frustrated by my lack of economic access to sites and prolonged successful fieldwork.

But Amina’s performance gestures to the shaky foundation of this line of thinking, at both the micro-level of hotel shows and macro level of political state-stability. Amina critically reminds that understandings of contemporary contexts and conditions necessitates sweetening with honey. In other words, Amina’s performance reminds of the importance of richly grounded, holistic body-centric, and intersectional analysis that take their time to pause and relish in the inextricably linked dynamics of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nationality within economic and political projects and positionalities. Stating that my access and exclusion from elite sites was simply due to money would be to erase the complex ways my interpolated body was relationally tied to other gendered, raced, classed, sexualized, and nationalist bodies within those sites. From the hungry teeming stares of *khaleegy* men in the lobby, to Yasser’s violating butt-squeeze, and the ‘gentlemanly’ arm-escort offered to Krystal, the interwoven power politics of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nationality must be accounted for to secure

solid footing and move forward with integrity in any larger political projects of the country with the *asil* earth-grounded capabilities of Amina's *baladi* progression finale.

Yet, Amina also reminds to not romanticize her performance, as her show necessitates confronting the excessive labor and burden, already uneven and heavy enough without dousing on profuse citrusy cleaning polish. Instead, her show argues for the futility in focusing on surface-level disembodied appearances at the expense of delving into grueling labor of corporeal actualities. As Amina dabs at her sweaty brow and then holds out her sweat-stained *mandil* for all to see, she likewise rubs away romanticism in favor of a messy reality grounded in corporeality of labor. A multiplicity of bodies needs to be at the helm of politics moving forward, from the economy, to scapegoating with broad floating references to disembodied 'threats' to the country's safety. Amina's choreographic analysis demands a grounded exposure and analysis fleshed out with meat, bones, sweat, tears, and blood of variously marginalized and centralized corporealities. For example, the successfully eliminated and arrested 'terrorists' are actually not specific to violent terrorists, but rather in Sisi's state of exceptionalism a 'terrorist' or 'threat' can be any person that dare speak out against the state, or move through the world in a way misaligned with a militarized patriarchal heterosexual authoritarian State. President Sisi continues to use the pretext of existential threats to clamp down on dissenters, a category that increasingly includes other peaceful political opponents, civil society actors, human rights activists, journalists, LGBTQ citizens, as well as other everyday non-violent Egyptians, including many youth involved with the 2011 revolution (McManus 2017, Magdi 2017).

Amina challenges all of us to oscillate between the body-politics of both intangible appearances and corporeal actualities to ask not only where and which bodies are valued in these broad political projects, but also which are centered and which are marginalized? Finally, in addition to deeply dissecting our understandings of politics and power plays to include an intersectional *asil* analysis, Amina offers potential-full probing moving forward. As Amina stands with her hands on her hips, *mandil* still in hand, looking out upon her spectators with a smoldering glance, she daringly demands a foremost focus on cultivating her complex redefinition of *asil* relationalities; where bodies that bear the often polished-over and invisibilized labor, marginalization, and sometimes violence of dominant discourses are instead centralized and given space to become centralized in their full creative and commanding potential.

### - Taxi Transition 3 -

One of my favorite things about when my friends and I would take one of their private cars to get around the city, instead of public transportation or taxis, was that it allowed us the liberty to have all-out vehicular dance parties. Driving around Cairo late at night when the traffic had mostly dissipated was relaxing. Karim, Wael, and I were enjoying this ride home by blasting music and dancing. We wildly used our arms, hands, and upper bodies to swerve and percussively accent the song's beats, while laughing and feeding off each other's frenzied creativity. Frequently, these car jams culminated in each of us trying to out-do one another, seeing whom could dance the weirdest by garnering the most laughs.



*'El'ab yalla! Eshrub yalla!*' the singers Oka and Ortega of the hit *mahragan* song *'El'ab Yalla'* boomed out through the speakers as we cruised down the sparsely occupied streets. This was one of the hit songs, particularly among younger generations, during the latter end of my fieldwork in Cairo. The lyrics sang about a man that was trying to stay on the good and straight path, but whenever he tried, the devil would come up to his ear and tell him to play, drink, and other things that would, once again, lead him astray. Karim usually chose this song to start our dance parties, and then repeated it multiple times throughout the drive. The pulsing energy of the song was contagious, and the lyrics resonated with my friends.

That night, when we were in full dance mode, abruptly, Karim cut the music. I saw him and Wael exchange glances then quickly put on their seatbelts. I leaned over from my position in the backseat to peer out the front window. I saw that we were coming up on one of the many random police check points scattered throughout the city. Any vehicle could be stopped and searched for whatever reason. This wasn't, in itself, that unusual, and it was common to at least pass by a checkpoint when driving around the city. As Middle Eastern ethnologist Farha Ghannam elaborates, random police presence, checkpoints, and corruption in Cairo are one way that Egyptian male youth are interpolated with suspect criminalization (67 2013). Young men may be questioned, or taken off the street, for simply being out and about in their own city. Just as Oka and Ortega's hit lyrics could be heard blasting sporadically throughout the city streets from vehicles, so too, and perhaps with subtle synchronicity, were these checkpoints be sporadically encountered.

Surely enough, our vehicle was stopped, and two armed policemen told my friends to hand over their identifications. I started to unzip my bag to hand over my U.S. passport, it usually worked as a 'golden ticket' in these instances to quickly be 'green lighted' to pass through without any delay. Karim winked at me as he gestured for me to wait, and I saw him and Wael exchange furtive smirks. I didn't understand. The police then asked my friends to step out of the vehicle, only as he was exiting did Karim quickly whisper to me to hand him my passport. He grabbed it quickly and put it into his pocket as he reassured me everything was all right. I waited, nervously watching from the backseat window as they spoke with the two police and a third officer a few feet away. Wael waved his arm towards me and the group turned, then Karim swiftly pulled my passport out from his pocket and presented it to the officer as if it were a winning lottery ticket ready to be cashed in. The officer grabbed the passport and flipped it open. He looked up and marched over to me, 'you are American?' he asked, I nodded. 'Welcome to Egypt,' he responded as he handed me back my passport through the rolled down front window and my friends came back to the car.

My friends quickly buckled up then we continued past the check point. As soon as we past they burst into roaring laughter and triumphantly clapped their hands together. They animatedly joked back and forth as their laughter continued to bellow. I was still stumped, obviously missing what was so enthralling about what I found to be a nerve-racking confrontation that they unnecessarily extended. Wael turned to me, 'Sorry, we just wanted to see the look on their face when they realized you were American,' Karim agreed, 'His eyes stuck out like a bug! Then did you hear the officer scold them, calling

them idiots!?’ ‘So great!’ Wael shouted as he grinned from ear to ear. I must’ve still looked perplexed. ‘Look, it’s just.. *yahnie*.. a tiny ‘fuck you’ ... because these guys think they can do anything.’ They carried on their enjoyment and enthused banter from the encounter as we drove on.

My comrades didn’t need to disrupt their travel and seating arrangements, they could’ve flashed my passport from the moment they rolled down their window. However, they chose to purposefully extend and linger within the confrontation before revealing my identification. Personally, I was a bit uneasy that their sense of rebellious success was only possible because it centered around my little blue U.S. passport, and my white *agnibiya* body that it identified. I was reminded of Middle Eastern feminist scholar Lila Abu Lughod’s caution against romanticizing small acts of resistance. Lughod ruminates on how these acts lead to tropes of liberation that don’t do justice to the complexity of marginalized people’s lives, while still acknowledging the importance of calling attention to these acts as tactics people use to negotiate larger dominating systems with (xxii 1990). As a transient outsider and non-citizen, the fact that I had the ‘golden ticket’ of privilege, that they as rightful citizens did not, felt terribly unjust. I wondered how significant their fleeting moment of resistive pleasure could be, particularly when it was only enabled due to the political weight my U.S. passport carried?

Yet, as a practitioner-scholar I was still drawn to how Karim and Wael choreographed the passport performance. They purposefully extended the time of the unidirectional top-down corrupt police power, and only after this lingering, where the sense of authority and power was able to accumulate, did they decide to interrupt it. Thus,

not only did my material little blue book carry a heavy political weight, but likewise, so too did the quick-thinking creativity and guts of how Karim and Wael choreographed the performance. Through keenly playing with the time, material resources, and bodies within the shared space, they imbued their fleeting moment of resistance with more grit, and quite apparently, meaningfully personal satisfaction.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Pyramid Street Cabarets: Negotiating Slippery Stages and Contradictory Competitions**

I ordered three vanilla lattes at the Dunkin Donuts nearby my apartment as I waited for Karim to pick me up for the night's cabaret excursion. It was already one in the morning, and I wanted to make sure we would be wide-awake to observe all the colorful commotion of the long night ahead. Despite the already late hour, the cabarets were just getting warmed up, and the entertainment within would carry on well past sunrise. It was one of Karim's conditions that when we went to cabarets on Pyramid Street we had to both take our own car, rather than an Uber or taxi, and two, we would only go with one of his robust male companions tagging along for added 'protection'. I reluctantly agreed. I didn't feel the secondary male 'protector' was necessary, but perhaps more so than that, I felt the added personal expense to me of paying the entrance fee of this secondary male figure was straining on my largely self-funded fieldwork.

My phone rang to signal they were waiting outside. I plopped down awkwardly in the backseat trying my best not to spill the lattes in the process. I smiled politely as Karim went through the procedure of trying to explain why my doctoral research included spending many nights observing dancers in cabarets to our third comrade for the night, Mido. My dance research was often met with strange curiosity and dismissal, but explaining the importance of the cabaret field-site and bodies in particular was always a particularly awkward conversation. This is due to how deeply marginalized and

stigmatized these sites are to general society. ‘You know you will not find any dancing in these places, just drunks, drugs, and I’m sorry, but prostitutes,’ Mido, our ‘secondary security’ for the evening lectured me. I took a long, slow sip from my latte as I glanced over at Karim. He understood my silent plea and took on the burden of further elaborating upon and defending my research. The constant dependence on male barriers and interlocutors was both enabling and hindering in my research. Many times, it offered peace of mind in knowing that I could let them be the barriers in dealing with all the practical fieldwork issues and obstacles, such as transportation and negotiating entrance fees and interviews. On the other hand, the barriers work both ways, and dealing with the imposed conditions and other controls on my project was sometimes tiring and hindering.

Upon arriving at the stretch of cabarets that were sprawled out across Pyramid Street Pyramid Street, Karim and I started to deliberate on which one we would experience for that night. After settling upon a site, the men would park the car and wait for the door man to greet them. Then, they’d step out of the car and begin the bartering negotiations for the cabaret while sharing smokes. Negotiations included how much we would each pay, what was included (usually a drink or two and a few table snacks), and what the cabaret had to offer compared to its various competitors just a short stroll down the road. Often Karim would disappear for a while to take a look inside with the door man as part of their negotiations. All the while I sat patiently waiting in the backseat sipping away at my latte. After a while Karim would re-enter the front passenger seat, slam the door behind him, and give me the quick summary of the place and the deal. If I accepted I’d then quietly dig into my wallet and covertly pass over the total amount, plus

extra for tipping. This way Karim could pass off the money as his own and not be embarrassed. As this chapter will come to dissect, this routine gesture of secretly passing off my money as his own within the cabaret field sites foreshadows the gendered economic politics of not only the site, but larger Egyptian and intra-MENA economic political entanglements.

Initial preparations for ‘cabaret nights’ were long and drawn out affairs. It always took Karim at least an hour or two longer than he planned to secure a borrowed car for the evening, as he didn’t own one himself. Additionally, the outside entrance price negotiations and site selection often took a good chunk of time, as well as number of smoked cigarettes. However, after this preliminary preparation, physically entering the cabaret was hasty. There was often little to no security outside to pass through, and after walking up or down a small flight of stairs or through a hallway, we’d arrive into the main seating area. This plain and prompt entrance was sharply contrasted with the complete sensory overload that we would be confronted with upon stepping into the cabaret.

An explosion of sensory stimuli crashed over my body like a tidal wave, from the pulsating percussion-heavy *shaabi* music thumping in my heart, to the dense layer of shisha, cigarette, and *hashish* smoke, to the multi-colored flashing lights dashing across the venue. Movement assaulted the vision from every direction. Bodies were dancing socially throughout the stage as well as the tucked-away back corner tables. Even waiters could often be seen bopping along and sharing in the excitement. Teenage boys were frantically crawling and squatting throughout the venue to hastily plow armfuls of five-

pound notes together from off the floor to be collected than recirculated within the venue. Overly-attentive waitstaff would suddenly lean across tables, rushing to light patron's cigarettes or open their beers alongside every table. Youthful women were planted strategically throughout the venue, often dancing socially amongst one another to advertise for the venue, or to please whichever male client was paying for their company. Of course, this is all not to forget the actual paper money sporadically exploding into the air here and there as if confetti being tossed on New Year's Eve. This money often littered across the seating area and stage, making an increasingly slippery terrain for the dancer to negotiate.

We were seated along one of the back tables in the cabaret. As usual, Karim gestured to me to take the middle seat. This ensured I was safely 'sandwiched' between their two male bodies. Though my comrades did not have the financial prowess that most of the other clientele in the cabaret had that evening, the way they interacted and situated themselves in relation to my own female body was similar to the more moneyed-men seated throughout the venue with paid female company sitting, flirting, or dancing beside them. Not to dismiss the care and amiability within their sandwiching spatial configuration, but like the other men and their *riklam*, to differing degrees they were performing and reifying their masculinity through relational power over the female bodies beside them, whether as guardians, or for purchasable desirability, attention, or sex<sup>c</sup>. Notably, these emblazoned masculinities could only be successfully realized because other male eyes were there to witness, and often compete, with these gendered power configurations.



At the same time, male eyes were not the only ones watching and making exchanges, as playful and strategic glances were made between working *riklam* throughout the venue. These less dominant but prevalent female-female exchanges highlight not only a layer of paid female sociability that the cabaret conditions nurture, but also gesture to non-dominant semiotics and solidarities circulating within the cabaret. Finally, there were those bodies that were contradictorily most invisibilized within the space, despite their most pervasive, and invasive, physical presence crawling, running, crouching, and clambering around the stage, seating area, and within and amidst the table and chair legs beneath and around all of our feet. These almost exclusively young Egyptian men, mostly small in stature, were quick and constantly exerting robust physical labor winding throughout the mass of feet, table and leg chairs, as if competing in a timed obstacle course. Their sole job was to collect the tip money (*keet*) as rapidly as possible from the floors, stage, and tables to ensure the tip money was ready to be re-circulated<sup>ci</sup>. However, their labor was also to ensure the *keet* was staying in circulation, and not being taken by any number of the bodies that could potentially tuck away a few notes. I heard if the known amount of total *keet* was less than what the cabaret management had originally counted to begin the night with, it was these youthful men and boys that would take the fall, whatever that may entail, and by their frantic and grueling physical labor this assessment seemed accurate.

Despite the youth's intense physical proximity to patrons, they were almost entirely ignored. This in/visibility contradiction gestures towards their low-status on the hierarchy of bodies within the site. Their choreographies within the cabaret mirrored the

gendered labor and economic conditions of Egyptian male youth at large, both pre and post revolution. Male youth scrambled for fewer and scarcer employment opportunities that mostly had a glass ceiling already based on one's socio-economic background. There structurally weren't opportunities to continue to move up if you just simply 'worked hard.' Yet working hard was the only way to survive with increasing inflation of basic goods and foodstuffs. Like a hamster forever running in his wheel, these boys labored intensively to keep the *keet* off the floor, just to have it placed back into the already wealthy hands of those whom would simply re-toss it. Within the dire economy and greater patriarchal norms these youth found themselves at the bottom of the pile of those which benefitted the least from these systems, alongside the working-class women. Yet, these structures demanded their physically exhausting and increasingly resourceful labor, but also the greatest potential for policing and punishment. Despite how critical their work was to the overall system, it wasn't set up as a fair game, and ultimately, despite their toils, they received little sustenance or benefit from it.

My eyes continued to dart randomly throughout the packed venue. There was so much commotion all around the venue I couldn't figure out what to focus on. Still attempting to take my seat, I was suddenly drawn to one corner of the venue where a handful of Egyptian men were dancing *shaabi* socially amongst one another, Stella beers in hand, and laughing loudly. Simultaneously, a squabble was breaking out beside the door over pricing between the staff and some younger Egyptian men. Then suddenly, before my eyes could rest, a flash of red panties pulled my focus in yet another direction as a Lebanese man's hired 'date' for the evening was suggestively swaying on the edge

of the slightly raised stage. She was slightly biting her lower lip as she swerved her hips so vehemently that her dress hem would ‘swish’ up just enough to provide provocative peaks of what lie underneath. Due to my lack of focus, I plunked into my rickety middle chair quite clumsily, but was too distracted by the vast kaleidoscope of moving bodies all around to feel embarrassed. I ordered a Turkish coffee *zeida* (sweet) and hoped it’s intensity would aid me in keeping up with the sensory surplus of the night. Particularly, as all this bustling movement and interaction was occurring just within the time it took to take our seats.

A dancer had just started her *nimra* (show number) and was circling the centralized stage’s perimeter. She greeted and shook hands with the men surrounding the stage, though she didn’t seem too familiar with any of the clientele from their introductory exchanges. This was a vast difference from the local all-Egyptian *shaabi* cabarets found in areas such as downtown, where most clientele were regulars. The dancer, announced with her stage name Suzy, smiled and nodded as she greeted the tables. Her entrance interaction delivered a sense of individualized importance to each front-row client, and, betting from a few of the exchanges of facial expressions, quite a few dirty jokes, to set the tone of her performance. Her immediate physical contact with individualized guests differed from other entertainment establishments, as cabarets are the only site where the dancer regularly shakes guests’ hands as she takes the stage. This entrance not only has combined class and sexual morality connotations, painting the dancer as just that, ‘*ra’asa*’ (dancer), which is a label colloquially juxtaposed with the designation of the ‘*fanaana*’ (artist), placed upon dancers working in other sites

considered more respectable (such as hotels). The immediate physical contact between genders also gestures towards the purchasable physical contacts available to the male clientele in the cabaret, not necessarily with the dancer, but these transactions and relations are certainly significant draws<sup>cii</sup>. On the other hand, the apparent physical intimacy of the dancer's entrance, as well as the way spectators' attention was pulled in multiple directions, highlight another special signification of the site. Whereas spectators attend boat or hotel shows to see a show as more passive audience, in the site of the cabaret, everyone becomes more a part of the total event, because a night in the cabaret is particularly about everyone in the space.

This chapter will focus on a typical Pyramid Street cabaret during the 'Arab season' frequented by both middle-class and up Egyptian and MENA men, although primarily saturated with clientele from the Arabian Gulf. This Gulf saturation is especially prevalent during the lucrative Arab Season of the summer months. Pyramid Street, or *Sharia Haram*, was originally built by Khedive Ismael to transport important dignitaries from Cairo for the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. The first two elite casinos with raqs sharqi, Oberge and Shalimar, opened on the street when these sites were visited by the upper crust of local and international guests to see star dancers. During Nasser's era the street became the bustling residential and commercial area it remains to this day<sup>ciii</sup>. Particularly during Sadat's era and the Arabian Gulf oil boom, and continuing with the steep economic decline in Mubarak's era, the cabarets on Pyramid Street drastically changed to become focused around the pinnacle objective of getting clients to throw money showers as tipping, known as *nuq'ta* or *keet*. Since this time the

cabarets have been characterized by the *nimar* system, where multiple dancers perform a thirty-minute or so *nimra* (performance number) in one costume before a brief transition and then the next dancer circulates in for her show. Often a handful of dancers can be seen performing throughout the night and making their rounds up and down the street.

The thirty-minute or so *nimra* may start with a *mejance* or entrance number made specifically for a dancer, but afterward the dancer must improvise according to the requests of the moneyed patrons and singer. Often the music is dominated by Egyptian *shaabi*, where *mawaal*<sup>cv</sup> are quite popular, as well as *khaleegy*, with a smattering of other requests from Um Kulthum classics to Lebanese *debke*<sup>cv</sup> depending on the biggest-tipping clientele of the evening. The dancer doesn't know what will be played next. Sometimes dancers spend twenty-five minutes of their total show dancing one *khaleegy* song after another. With the exception of star cabaret performers such as Aziza, the majority of dancers work with a house band that is paid and hired by the venue.

Another key characteristic of cabaret performances is the constant interruption of the music, singing, and show for the *tahaya*. A *tahaya*, or greeting, is when the singer abruptly cuts off the show to say the name, region (country or neighborhood), and sometimes occupation of a client in the microphone. This is done in order to show his importance to the rest of the venue, as well as simultaneously get him to cough up more tip money. Colloquially, this is akin to a 'pay-to-play' 'shout out.' Often while the greeting is being pronounced the singer or client will be throwing, raining, or holding up and wagging *keet* for all to witness. This *tahaya* works to encourage the masculinity-fueled tipping competitions that are the main objective of cabarets. For example, if one

man's name and country are being praised it challenges another man to show his importance and wealth as well. Nationality also is tied up in these equations as clients from the same country like to see their nation upheld as the most prominent/generous, while other nationalities may enter into the competition to stake a claim in being recognized. These competitions can be invigorated with generosity as well, and often generosity and personalized importance are the smoke screens the gendered-economic and nationalist rivalries operate within and under. For example, many nights I witnessed two Saudi men clinging to each other, hugging, non-stop kissing upon the cheeks, forehead, and tops of the head while raining and throwing money upon one another in drunken stupors of camaraderie. Either way, these 'tipping wars' are corporeally tied to notions of masculinity as entwined with economic and nationalist prowess<sup>cvi</sup>.

Cabarets are one of the original sites for housing raqs sharqi within Cairo, though their reputations have made a one-eighty turn from the monarchy era of being decadent sites for the upper crusts of celebrities, dignitaries, and even King Farouk to see the top star performers in the MENA world. Since the economic decline of the Mubarak era, cabarets still have hierarchies from 'low-high,' but overall, all cabarets are considered by general society and those within the dance industry as the 'seediest' of sites where men go to drink, get high, and watch women's bodies.<sup>cvi</sup> Yet, cabarets are one of the venues that largely carried on in the immediate aftermath of the revolution when many boat cruises and hotels completely shut down or drastically cut their number of shows and sails<sup>cvi</sup>. Thus, it would seem these ferocious 'tipping war' schemes vicariously tied to men's sense of masculinity offers a sustainable system. Seated in the cabaret, watching

Egyptian pounds fly around the room and be continually ‘scooped up’ by tip boy collectors, as busy plowing the notes together as if snow plows amid a wintry storm, it would appear so. The dynamics of the cabaret system, with its primary focus on men, masculine competition, and the intense value pitted upon the thickness of one’s wallet, bore strikingly similar parallels with the primary focus and objective of President Sisi’s government, also intensely concentrated on the masculine projects of national security and the economy as the primary path to Egypt’s successful sustainability.

Simultaneously, the intense number of cross-armed and suited Egyptian male bodies staggered throughout the venue, there to keep watchful eye and policing presence over maintaining this primary focus and flow of the *keet* also reinforced the methods and values of the continuing masculinized and military autocratic regime under Sisi- uni-directional, top-down, linear, and tightly-controlled.

But as a feminist dance ethnographer, I must ask, is there more to the cabaret circuitries than dominant understandings and bodies? What, or whom, is keeping the *keet* circulating? Are there other ways of being, knowing, and moving circulating within the cabaret? In an interview with oral historian Sayyad Henkesh, he explained to me that there was a time when all the tipping money in cabarets was real. However, after some time the system changed, and cabarets used fake notes, or primarily, used a strategic ‘purchasable ploy’ to further amp up and hasten the tipping wars.<sup>cix</sup> Moving forward with this understanding, it points out how the seemingly ‘sustainable’ system is a façade in significant ways. Further, the tipping used to be split three ways: house, dancer, and band, but since the Mubarak era all the tipping almost exclusively goes to the house.

Thus, the competitive tipping war scheme that's become the main objective in cabarets is ultimately not a sustainable system. Further, it's a system that's becoming increasingly and particularly precarious for the more marginalized Egyptian cabaret laborers.

Likewise, this knowledge gestures towards the necessity of looking deeper, from more perspectives and positionalities to get richer understandings, and thus more nuanced tactics, for creating better and more sustainable worlds, at both the micro level of the cabaret as well as the macro level of the national economy and gender dynamics.

This chapter aims to investigate how the various bodies within the cabaret site actively negotiate the increasingly slippery terrain of turbulent gender politics, undermined by repressive regimes, and economics as related to changing gendered notions of masculinity, the female laboring body, and the overlapping hegemonies of the local Egyptian economy as well as Gulf petro-dollars tied to the oil industry. To mine the semiotics of this site in ways that embody the contours of the cabaret entertainment system, this chapter is structured by *nimar*. This includes the interim gap period between *nimar* (cabaret dancer sets), when the stage is swarmed with other dancing bodies, from *riklam* to tipsy clientele. At the same time, while the analysis focuses on choreographic analysis of the variety of bodies that take to the stage, the writing, like the show, is constantly interspersed and paused for *tahaya*. While cabaret greetings focus on keeping money flowing, they do so by calling public attention to 'bodies that matter' within the cabaret. However, in this chapter, bodies that matter are not valued due to their monetary richness, but rather for their wealth of wisdom. Therefore, interview excerpts from a vast



array of peripheralized cabaret characters are inserted within the writing, adding powerful punctuated pauses to the choreographic commotion.

Finally, the cabaret site was chosen for the final chapter in this ethnography due to how it often requires deepest access into intra-MENA circuitries, bodies, and significations. The surface of this dissertation started off through scraping away at the often binary, stereotyped, and reductive formulations of raqs sharqi, dominantly understood in western contexts and readerships through an orientalist ‘east-west’ lens. This deep into the dissertation, my hope is that the audience is more primed for valuing and deeply listening to the intra-MENA bodies, meanings, and contexts through Cairo-centric circulatory paradigms and rhythms. As the cabaret is the most locally and internationally stereotyped, de-valued, and dismissed venue, this is particularly relevant. Following, I would typically provide a chapter overview, adding firm structure to help guide the reader. However, this doesn’t fit the cabaret, because after the *mejançe* entrance number, (if there even is one), any song could play, anything goes. There is so much happening all at once, the song could cut at any moment, so the writing must likewise pen and value the highly improvisational cabaret schema and just jump in to enjoy the show.

As if reading my thoughts, the center-staged dancer suddenly cast her gaze out upon the peripheries of the room. Despite the density of heavy smoke, money shower cascades, and an array of men and women dashing and dancing about the stage, she cut through the thickness and caught my eye. Suzy winked at me, followed by seductively blowing me a kiss. Such a subtle gesture compared to the larger chaos engulfing the setting, but I found myself shyly smiling back at her. I was more emotionally captivated

by her minute exchange than by the ostensibly more commanding forces and movement all around. “*Tahaya* Suzy! The people judge and reject me because I reveal my body, but oh, if they could only know what I know, live what I live, feel what I feel, and do what I can *do* with this revealed body” (Feb. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2016).<sup>cx</sup> Cutting through the metaphorical and tangible smoke screens, she beckoned me to answer my own hypothesis about *keet* circulation and non-dominant semiotics through following her hips.

***Nimra A – Suzy:***

After a brief pause to read her audience, Suzy continued to strut, languidly swaying her hips around the perimeter of the slightly raised stage for the crowd of men from across Egypt and the Arabian Gulf. My eyes focus on her as the music transitions from *khaleegy* to a popular Egyptian *shaabi* song. Suzy was already well into her thirty-minute *nimra*. Unlike the majority of dancers working in boats and hotels, Suzy, and many of the hostesses seated throughout the venue, are of a darker olive skin color and have thicker and more luscious figures. A heavy line of percussion kicks in, the dancer beams brightly, her previously limp arm now pumping over-head in the air as her opposite hip drops earthily down, down, down, matching the drumming’s heavy downbeats. Her total change in energy and enthusiasm vividly demonstrated her happiness for the change to the songs she knew and loved, as opposed to the Arabian Gulf music that dominated that night and could get quite monotonous for the Egyptian workers and clientele. Following her eager lead, the Egyptian men, both those in the audience and those serving patrons tableside, exchange a physically discernable wave of energy with the dancer, breaking from their conversations and work to exaggeratedly clap

and shout out encouragement to her. Suzy embodies the characteristics and values of *bint al balad*, or the salt of the earth venerable daughter of the country, transmitting a sense of solidarity and pride with the other Egyptians in the room, from the working-class musicians employed behind her, to the waiters busy pouring beers and keeping cigarettes lit, as well as the moneyed Egyptian patrons<sup>cxii</sup>. The song doesn't finish before the singer has the band abruptly cut it off to start playing more *khaleegy*, a nod to the biggest spending Gulf clientele in the cabaret that night.

As the music transforms, so does the dancer. Suzy redirects her energy, steps, and charisma, adjusting her breasts in her costume bra before exchanging a smoldering glance towards a tipping male client from Kuwait. She tilts her torso forward slightly and begins to shimmy her shoulders loosely, this releases more reverberation, and an extra eyeful, of cleavage towards the tipper. Holding his gaze she slightly parts her lips, taking her time for a lingering exhale as she does so. He grabs more stacks of money, mounted high on his table, to throw in her direction. Then the dancer quickly glances over at a Saudi man across the stage who had just beckoned his waiter to bring him another tray, stacked high with a mountain of money. She catches the male singer's eye and tilts her head subtly in his direction, he nods knowingly and begins belting out and praising the other man's name and country, known as a *tahaya*, and just like that- the tipping competition has commenced. The dancer keeps her body positioned towards the Kuwaiti although she begins to step, flat-ball-flat in the gulf style across the stage, her eyes remaining locked with the Kuwaiti although her hands slowly move down toward her hips to pull the lycra fabric of her costume skirt tighter against her backside. With the skirt pulled tight against

her curves, she begins to layer sultry yet subtle round booty rotations over the *khaleegy* footwork- the Saudi's eyes follow her framing. He smirks, that miniscule yet alluring way she clings to her skirt lets him feel like she's now dancing just for him. "*Tahaya* Ahmed, a stage manager. The most important thing about dancers is how they are smart on the stage, manage everything and everyone while she dances, to make each person feel good so more money is thrown. How she makes each feel he is the best one in the cabaret, but somehow at the same time, so this starts the war between them. This is what I need, and the dancer makes this through small things with great power. She says a word here, gives a look there, move this way than that, \*snaps finger\* the money flies" (April 3, 2017).<sup>cxii</sup> '*Taheya lil' Saudayya!*' The singer belts out as stacks of money are tossed and showered onto the stage, now flying in the air from multiple directions, just as Ahmed described.

Suzy moves in closer to the Saudi man, her attention encouraging him to throw more money, but for every step closer she takes an elderly male Egyptian *duff* (frame drum) player from the band hawks over her. His body serves a dual role, first and foremost he sees himself as male protector, a position that's rarely necessary, but this sense of purpose matters immensely as he leers down at the drunken Gulf men throwing money as if children playing in piles of fall leaves. Likewise, he serves as another pair of policing eyes, making sure the dancer doesn't tuck away any of the bills into her costume, particularly tempting when the tipping wars get heated and the money escalates from Egyptian five-pound notes to hundred US dollar bills.<sup>cxiii</sup> The drunken client stumbles onto the stage and reaches for the player's *duff*; the musician pulls back and

sneers, defensively holding the *duff* close to his chest. The dancer turns around, now assertively embodying the *maalima* (boss lady persona), shoots him an angry glair and gestures to him with a quick twist of her hand, ‘*mishkilla eh?! what’s the problem?!*’<sup>cxiv</sup> He grimaces as he obliges the drunk yet oil-rich client. His lips pursed, and his empty hands now began to fidget nervously. The *duff* player is noticeably uncomfortable with being displaced from his role in the venue. The *duff* is his source of income, and having it beaten on haphazardly as if a mere toy by the *khaleegy* was shameful. Suzy obliges the client for a moment longer, then pauses, and softens, to redirect her focus, once again, from the drunken client to the *duff* player. She lightly places one hand on the *duff* player’s upper arm, while her other hand raised to her temple as she pouted her lips. She endearingly pleaded him for a tissue to wipe the sweat from her brow, now taking on the demeanor of *dalaa*<sup>cxv</sup>, the beloved girl-next-door sense of femininity praised in so many light Egyptian pop songs. He nodded assertively and quickly dove into his pockets to produce a tissue that he handed to her with a slight bowing gesture, he felt important now too, useful and productive as a provider and caretaker. After dabbing her brow and neck with the tissue she held it to her heart in a small but significant gesture of gratitude.

“*Tahaya* Suzy! What makes a good dancer? Most importantly, it’s about how you interact with people, especially the bad men that want to define you, control you, give you order, shame you or force you to retire. Do not accept them, just work harder, and this will give you a strong character. Dancing’s not just about art or money like they think on the outside, it’s about trusting yourself, and this is a big endeavor. After you trust yourself,

you feel you are a big person, not a small person, and nobody can pick on you. You take what you want” (Feb. 2, 2016).

As the *nimra* above highlights, the dancer has the capability to be powerfully center-staged within this masculine space. The dancer negotiates capitalizing on Gulf audiences with maintaining Egyptian masculinity and national pride by creating various connections of personalized importance, competition, solidarity, love, and gender in/dependence. She keeps these interactions flowing so all feel they have their place within the space, but also so all feel individually important. She largely accomplishes this through embodying her gendered-self as *dalaa*, *maalima*, and/or *bint al balad*. In doing so Suzy constructs gender as fluid, dynamic, and multiplicitous, as well as inherently interconnected to other bodies, time, and space.

Cutting across Cairo contexts of dance, a successful show is about cultivating meaningful connections. In knowing where, when, and to whom to make subtle movements and interaction, eye contact, and playful or powerful gesturing, a dancer, at some gut level, knows that everything, and everyone, connects to everything else. Her job is to highlight, and make the entire room feel that sense of connection, while also maintaining central control over the precarious kaleidoscope of power dynamics intertwined within this fluid web of connectivity. As the solo female dancer her body becomes the pinnacle nexus of all these entangled forces, potentials, and power plays.

### **Interim:**

Suzy glanced down at her wristwatch, a common accessory for dancers working the cabaret circuits. She noted that her thirty-minute *nimra* was up, and with a quick signal to the band to let them know she was finished, she hiked up the long hem of her skirt and dashed off the stage and into the back changing rooms. There, she'd quickly throw on a T-shirt and jeans after taking off her skirt or simply wear an *abaya* (modesty garment for outdoors) and meet her manager to quickly drive to the next cabaret to continue her rounds. As soon as Suzy glanced down at her watch, a plethora of other bodies, just previously spread throughout the venue, took the opportunity to step up onto the stage. The stage was only slightly raised, and had a step all around, making it easily traversable and accessible to all bodies within the room. Hostesses, male clientele, and background *duff* players all swarmed the center of the stage, thereby leaving no gap in the dancing entertainment for customers.

Though hostesses were similar in often being under thirty-five and almost exclusively from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the diversity in their bodies was a refreshing sight from the whiter-skinned and often augmented or surgically enhanced 'hour-glass' paid dancing bodies almost exclusively hired for other raqs sharqi venues. A range of skin tones were paraded on stage as signifying beauty and desirability, and an equally wide spectrum of body types. Yet, at the same time, the familiar site of heavy makeup, green or blue colored eye contacts and long and thick hair extensions was still as prevalent. "*Tahaya* Ahmed, a cabaret manager! Look, we choose the dancers and *riklam* by what clients want to see. There is not one type of sexy, all men have different styles

and different tastes, some like thin, fat, dark, all these different things, so we bring a lot of different styles of women here. Different style appeal to different tastes, so the more variety we have the more happiness, the more happiness will mean more money, it's good business" (March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017). Ahmed's 'good business model' of having a stylistic spectrum of women as beautiful is a refreshing twist from other venues. Additionally, it was personally refreshing from my own residency in Cairo, which included advertisements for skin whitening beauty products every time I opened FaceBook. Having a diversity of bodies paid and paraded as 'desirable' helped slightly chisel away at commercialized and homogenous beauty standards that increasingly called for not only white western models as ideal, but also at injections, surgeries, and other enhancements that were rarely naturally attainable and thus require purchase power. At the same time, like the clipped in hair extensions, purchasable beauty tied within racial capitalist hierarchies, from green eyes to long thick hair, had attached itself to these bodies as well, it was not a utopia. Likewise, this is not to forget the overall purchasable gendered power dynamics of the female bodies on stage and within the cabaret site at large.

The show was cut off as my view was unexpectantly blocked by a strawberry. The male waiter 'in charge' of our table was holding out a strawberry on a toothpick, just about four inches from my face. I was startled, and with a big grin he gestured for me to eat it. Apparently, I was so busy observing the entertainment that I hadn't touched the tray of snacks and fruits that comes with your two drinks. I politely declined but he insisted, now gently wagging the strawberry, still awkwardly just inches from my face. I took it and ate, thinking it would get him to back off, but then he just leaned over,



blocking my view entirely, because Karim had pulled out a cigarette to smoke and he had to be sure to light it for him. The hyper-attentiveness of waitstaff in cabarets was supposed to add to the air of client importance, but it always made me uncomfortable. Karim tried to sneak a tip over to the waiter, he caught his eye and started slowly sliding his hand holding the folded bill under the tablecloth's hem. The waiter snatched it and immediately was 'lasered' by one of the cabaret's management, (using a laser pointer to get his 'points' across from any point in the room), the waiter sighed than walked over to hand over the tipping. Karim always tried to tip the employees lower down on the pay scale, but was caught ninety-percent of the time despite his covert efforts. Policing eyes were everywhere, as management and security were also as strategically planted throughout the site as were the hostesses.

My eyes re-focused on the stage as, perhaps, a more successful covert operation was occurring. A wealthy and highly drunk man from the U.A.E. was on stage stumbling through the motions of *khaleegy* social dancing footwork as five hostesses encircled him. The male singer across the stage squinted his eyes at the circle as two male *duff* players began marching over to the group. They exchanged stern glances that confirmed my thoughts that this 'dance circle' might be used to block tipping that the women may be tucking away. I smiled at their clever use of space, but more so for how they formed solidarity together to capitalize upon their situation. The women dispersed before the multiple policing men could confront their choreographed configuration, and the singer began playing to the drunk client but he dismissably waved him away. He was more taken by one of the young hostesses from the encircling.

A burst of laughter turned my attention to the band, where the Egyptian male *toura* player Hamada was teasingly interacting with the array of older male percussion players. The *toura* player was a common part of raqs sharqi bands in hotels and cabarets, but during my fieldwork I found some of the most playful performances by *toura* in the cabarets<sup>cxvi</sup>. Hamada was in his thirties, and wore his curly black hair slicked back into a long ponytail, an array of golden rings adorned all his fingers, but the large clashing finger cymbals with which he added percussive accents, energy, and flavor to the music was his most catching attribute. Despite his rings and multiple golden earrings, the rest of his attire was plain: he wore a black t-shirt and gray sweatpants with sneakers, differing from the dressier attire of the band.

He moved with the grace and feminine-constructed *dalaa* of a raqs sharqi professional. He was percussively ‘tick-tocking’ his extended tush to the band members while musically matching his movements with his cymbals. He looked over his shoulder bashfully then cast a demure glance to the musicians as he shimmied his butt from this slightly bent-over position. Shimming just feet away from the drummers, their fits of laughter spread across the room as one musician grabbed *keet* off the floor to throw at Hamada’s *derrière* while shouting playfully flirty encouragement. Hamada slapped his backside playfully as he blew the musicians a kiss. “*Tahaya* Yossry, a cabaret drummer! *Toura* can be like you know, this way, or he cannot be that way. But in cabaret you have a different environment, it’s catering to all kinds of people and kinds of tastes. Maybe some guests enjoy with the *toura* because he is playful, they take it as a comedy and fun, but other ones find it sexually enticing. For sure he adds an extra energy... you get all

kinds of things in these types of places” (April 20, 2017).<sup>cxvii</sup> His performance caught the admiration of a table of younger *khaleegy* men, who also began throwing *keet* at his ‘amazing ass’ (which they shouted as they threw the tipping), as Hamada strutted over to them with swaying hips. He began performing *khaleegy* in front of their table.

He danced *khaleegy* footwork in the unisex ‘flat ball flat’ style, but the way he layered stylistic elements typically only female dancers would made his performance not only beautiful but also disruptive to heteronormative gender and sexuality constructions. Hamada layered highly exaggerated and full booty circles and coquettish hand gesturing to the base footwork which made the table of young men go wild. “*Tahaya* Hamada, the *toura* player! My first love is raqs sharqi, I hope to work as a choreographer and dancer, but I do *toura* now because I cannot find work in this economy as a dancer. Most Egyptian and Middle Eastern people feel embarrassed or don’t like it when a man dances, especially if he is doing raqs sharqi in a feminine style, but then you start to get men working like this in touristy places like Sharm el Sheik, but the economy dropped since then. Most people look on both work, *toura* and raqs sharqi for men, as nothing but shit, but you know what? I stopped caring what the other people think, because I love this job, it walks in my blood. Sorry, but I dance raqs sharqi as a man better than women, so how can they say this is a women’s dance only!? So, if you work hard you can be anything, but you can’t care what people say behind your back, just do what you love and be who you are” (Feb. 5, 2017).<sup>cxviii</sup>

Hamada points out another contradiction. Although the cabaret capitalizes upon and only allows strict homogenous heteronormative gender labor roles, wherein women

work as dancers and men as *toura*, musicians, and sex purchasers, at the same time this system allows for fissures in the structure that allow for multiplicitous spectrums of sexuality and gender expressions to enrich the environment and add special energy. Yet, Hamada's statement also bears its own contradiction, as he works in *toura* though his unfulfilled aim is to be a raqs sharqi dancer, currently unavailable because of the economy. Hamada poetically points out that you have to create your own path through being who you are, and he has certainly found a creative niche that allows him space to dance on stage while making money as a *toura*. However, his claim to just 'work hard' isn't necessarily fair as larger circumstances such as the national economy, and larger heteronormative gender and sexuality interpolations, also bear weight on what opportunities are attainable or not.

### ***Nimra B: Julia***

If it had not been for the booming announcement from the singer I wouldn't have noticed the next dancer, Julia, had taken the stage to start the next *nimra*. She had nearly finished 'making the round' of handshakes and greetings before I could pull my attention away from Hamada's tertiary show. A few of the hostesses stepped down after Julia started her show, but a few stayed on stage and swayed their hips to the music. Like Suzy, Julia was of a darker olive skin tone but extremely tall, her spike heels giving her even more of a towering presence. She wore an extremely full and voluminous wig of beautiful dark curly locks that cascaded down to her backside. She wore a mid-range bright red bra and tight mermaid-skirt costume, but without any jewelry accessories that helped give the image of star-status through the appearance of expensive adornments.

However, what Julia obviously had invested in was extravagant breast enhancements, all the more advertised through her teensy costume bra that her very full breast tissue was spilling out of.

Julia's technique heavily followed the percussion, including mostly rhythmic strutting about the stage as she shadowed the male singer who was busy giving personalized attention and performing greetings to tipping clients. When they paused at different edges of the stage to provide personalized attention to a table or client Julia shimmied her chest as she nonchalantly chewed gum and offered the occasional smile. Her other main movement included a variety of different sized hip circles, but she predominantly focused on strutting beside the singer, and standing with her weight sunk into her right hip as she would twiddle with her long locks and joke with the clientele. She liked to bend over to exchange a few words with the clients and shimmy her breasts as she rose back up, releasing provocative amounts of jiggly cleavage directly towards the tippers. She would then gradually take her time to tuck her slightly exposed areolas back into her bursting bra cups.

One Saudi man was particularly taken by Julia's allure and scrambled onto the stage to dance with her while the singer was off giving a *tahaya* to a table of businessman visiting from Upper Egypt. He had a hungry look in his eyes and he stared at Julia's breasts, not even breaking his greedy stare as he pulled out a couple hundred-pound Egyptian notes from his wallet. Julia sensed the precarity in his hungry gawking and started looking around for the singer to help control the situation, but he was across the stage and the Saudi man was now only a foot from her body. Julia smiled at him and

bounced her breasts percussively as she reached out to hold both his hands and socially dance. The client seemed hypnotized as he kept his stare but locked his hands in hers. Though he pressed his body towards hers, she used her outstretched arms as a barrier to keep him from touching her, and again looked over for her singer's assistance. The man broke from her grip and reached to place the notes between her breasts, and Julia quickly spun to prevent his touch without disturbing his sense of pleasurable entertainment. She used her own hands to gesture to him to toss the money over her head, in his alcohol-induced stupor he obliged her commands without thinking, lightly letting the notes fall, one after the other, onto her cleavage. She shimmied her breasts lightly while keeping her arms outstretched towards his body, ready to use as a barrier again if needed.

I empathized with Julia, recognizing her arm framing and spins as tactics dancers all over use to quickly dissipate a body tipping situation that crosses our personal body boundaries. Here, however, it was not necessarily the dancer's boundaries, but the state's. Cabarets are one of the most notoriously policed venues. If the dancer steps off the stage, accepts body tipping, or is caught without wearing long enough under shorts or *shabaka* (belly cover) she can be heavily fined or jailed. Yet, the men that crossed onto the stage's boundaries and attempted to touch dancers or purchase women's company were not under such policing precarity and pressure. "*Tahaya* Donya, a cabaret hostess! I do not like this work, but there is no other job where I can make this kind of quick money without having schooling. I hate that all people think they can have sex with me and that I am such a bad person. The blame is always cast upon me, like I am the reason these places are shameful. But why don't the people ever think to point their fingers at these

drunk vulgar men that come here to pay for these things?! I am raising my girls, *inshallah* before they get too old I will have a decent apartment and will leave this work, but these men?! They have wives, children, and they come here and spend all the family money” (July 20, 2016).<sup>cxix</sup>

As Donya points out, the working women within find their bodies bearing heavy weights not only to survive, but to try and gain financial capital while negotiating the sexually suspect criminality burdened upon their bodies. At the same time, these bodies also find ways to creatively capitalize within the space using their corporeality, as Julia’s quick pivots and extended arm work highlight. “*Tahaya Bossy*, cabaret dancer! Of all venues to dance cabarets are the most difficult, because you can get bad men that cross the line and want to touch you in a sexual way. The security in the cabaret is not the best either, because so much is happening and the staff cares mostly about keeping the money moving above all else. So, in these situations if I can’t take my protection from the management I have to take my power myself. I take my power from my charisma and clever moves. Also, I learned to read the guests very well, I can judge by their eyes and their bodies what their intentions are, and then if they get too close I have to keep them happy, and act like I’m happy too, but really, I’m using the way I dance with them to keep the line from being crossed.” (Aug 10, 2016).<sup>cxx</sup> While Bossy and Julia both expect the male management to offer protection in the cabaret system, mirroring the patriarchal gender system at large and what benefits it ought to provide, when it’s not offered they do not stand by idly or passively. Rather, they take matters into their own hands through corporealized cocktails of clever charisma and covertly coded choreographies. Bossy also

highlights the danger of systems that prioritize accumulating capital at the expense of forgetting or side-lining bodies; in this, both genders become undermined and subject to violating vulnerabilities.

A new *khaleegy* song began playing after the *tahaya*. A table of Kuwaitis were throwing keet at one end of the stage and the singer stayed near them, still leaving Julia to deal with the *khaleegy* client by herself. He grew impatient with raining the notes upon her quivering breasts, he again took a few hundred pounds and lifted his eyebrow to her as he reached for her bra cups, she gestured for him to shower the bills as before, but he wagged the notes back and forth in a ‘no, no,’ refusal. She bent over into a full, deep, hip circle, but when she arose he was still there with his hand outstretched. This time Julia shook her head from side to side, *la* – no. The man burst into laughter and nodded, ‘yes, yes’ as he dove back into his wallet and pulled out a few more hundred-pound notes. He reached for her breasts so aggressively this time that she had to use her hand to swat his hand away. The man laughed again, now asking his waiter for stacks of pounds piled high on his table. As he handed the man the stacks of money that singer and an accompanying *duff* player had made their way over to the man to encourage his tipping, though Julia had already initiated that work. “*Tahaya lil Saudayya...*” the singer began to praise the man and attempted to dance with him. The man turned and violently threw a stack of notes at the singer, rubber band still attached, so it threw all together as a projectile brick of money. The man started chucking hunks of bounded notes at the *duff* player and the singer, Julia backed up to give more room between herself and the man whose drunken stupor was turning aggressive.



The Egyptian singer and musician kept singing and praising the man as if he hasn't just incredibly disrespected them in the way he threw the *keet*. They were probably used to dealing with this kind of behavior, but I was feeling nervous. Two of the managers made their way over to the hubbub to help control the situation, showing I wasn't the only one getting nervous over the increasing tension. However, for the management keeping the *keet* in motion remained the primary ultimatum, as opposed to concern for the workers. I was frustrated that they still were focused on keeping the *keet* in circulation despite how disrespectful the man was being to the Egyptian workers. Especially, since it seemed this man could potentially turn violent at any moment and he should be taken back to his seat and calmed down. Karim must've noticed my concerned expression and assured me the management was used to handling this kind of behavior. "But he is treating them like they're shit!" I exclaimed. He laughed at me, "This the relationship between our two countries, when one is rich and one is poor, when one know the other need him... it is shit, really."

"*Tahaya* Ahmed, a cabaret singer! We must do whatever this rich clientele want, in cabarets you have to understand money is the main focus, and money happens through the *keet* wars. But, these guys still have to feel they are in my country, Egypt, and play with respect. If I feel someone is disrespectful I will wait before signaling the musicians to make the rattle for the *tahaya*. Just a momentary pause, but it's enough for him to feel a bit shaken from his status and know the ground beneath his feet is ours- Egypt." (April 3, 2017).<sup>cxxi</sup> While the uneven macro relations of power between the macho-masculinities of the oil-rich Gulf nationalities and Egypt cannot be discounted, the subtle ways

gendered bodies use their scant available resources and networks to challenge this hegemony, stake pride in their own bodies and homeland, and use time and space to create their own boundaries is significant. Specifically, these other sources of value, resistance, and validation are harvested from within the body itself, and the relations between other marginalized bodies when unified together.

Julia interjected in the bubbling tension of the man's aggression by performing a deep back bend in front of him, ending with her breasts erect and directly under his gaze as her head hung low and she fervently shook her breasts from side to side. The Saudi relaxed a little, as he began taking great pleasure in holding the stacks of money over her cleavage and letting the notes slowly spill down and bounce off her reverberating chest. Thankfully, her risky move worked to help dissipate the tension, because otherwise she'd put herself into an extremely vulnerable position, particularly considering his drunken aggression. He snapped his fingers to have the waiter continually re-supply his extended hand with money stacks to shower down upon her breasts. He cackled with excitement as he towered above Julia and watched the notes glide and bounce off her shaking flesh.

Meanwhile, the waiter scurried back and forth, breathing heavily as he rushed to keep the Saudi's supply stocked. The Saudi didn't acknowledge his waiter, he just left his hand upheld and expected it to be continuously resupplied without even looking at, or never the less thanking, the waiter. I felt my stomach churn watching the young waiter rush to do his bidding without any acknowledgement, at the man's entitled cackling, and especially for Julia's core and thigh muscles, that must be burning at this point from sustaining such a labor-intensive pose. I wondered if it was the noxiousness of the toxic

capitalist masculinity embodied within this performance that caused my stomach to twist and tie up in knots.

This *khaleegy* man vacationing in a developing country, that significantly depended on his nation for financial aid and migratory work, was exuding pleasure by dumping thousands of pounds, just for show and the performance of power it held, upon a pair of enormous fake breasts. Julia's attentiveness to the man was also not genuine lust or attraction, but part of the show. This type of world, run by virile capitalist-fueled masculinity, in a sense, had to be performed on the stage, for it was constructing worlds that only could exist in fiction. It was a sham charade, and not a sustainable system. At the same time, the strained thighs of the working-class dancer, the heaving chest of the young working-class Egyptian waiter, these were the bodies bearing the brunt of the excessive labor to try and keep up this façade. Their labor and exertion were incredibly real. This capitalist masculinity was fueled by the paradigm ideology that one was never enough, in senses of Self that were founded upon loss and deficit. The incessant need to be more, where whatever 'more' was, existed with an attainable price tag. Problematically, these attainable 'mores' could only lead to worlds of fiction and aggressive hierarchal power relationships between bodies. Julia, physically bent over backwards to uphold this fictional matrix of power, had cultivated flexibility and sustained strength within this schema, but even strong lean muscles fatigue, strain, or injure after excessive exertion.

Suddenly, the rhythmic clanging of Hamada's *toura* were heard, as he and a hostess joined in her choreography. Her friend leaned forward to shimmy her chest above

Julia's, meanwhile Hamada kneeled down and clanged his *toura* to match the shimmying energy of their chests from underneath Julia's bent back. After a moment they all rose up together and began dancing cheekily around the Saudi. The transition kept up the appearances of endless fictional enjoyment for the client, while dissipating both the building aggression, as well as imminent muscle fatigue, of Julia's thigh and core muscles. I was awestruck by how smoothly they handled the situation, but just as equally disenchanted by how unrewarded their efforts would be. "*Tahaya* Mona a former cabaret dancer! The cabarets have become so cruel financially. There was a time, probably ending some time during Mubarak's rule, that cabaret money was all real and we split the tips three ways; house, dancer, and band. Since the hard economic times and the new trick money system it all goes to the house. Maybe a few star dancers like Aziza can negotiate a share of tips, but for us normal dancers we have so much pressure to make the cabaret money that we get no share of. No matter how beautiful I dance, how I look, how I make the unique interactions with every guest to get all this flowing, at the end of the day the management only sees a number, did I make him enough *keef*? You just fight to make him more money, you don't fight to earn for yourself, you fight just out of fear of being fired. This makes everything feel so terribly heavy and awful in the cabaret" (March 2, 2017).<sup>cxxii</sup> Julia glanced down at her watch, her time was up, she made a quick circular motion with her hand to the band but couldn't wait for them to signal her exit, she simply sprinted off the stage to catch her next *nimra* down the street.

Despite the clever coalitions and choreographies performed within the cabaret, the over-all structure steeped in powerful economic hegemonies of local scarcity and

transnational dependency cannot be elided. At the same time, the cabaret circuitries offered glimpses of other worlds and ways of being. Perhaps contradictorily creating opportunities for these alternative paradigms, these ulterior circuitries and systems were constructed out of other bodily relationalities and value systems. In this tributary world, the shared space and traversable stage led to solidarities, relationalities, and coalitions that became stronger together, rather than competitive. Here, rather than understanding differences (in class, gender, or sexuality or status) as raw material for constructing isolating and competitive walls and dividers, these other networks utilized these foundations as valuable assets to create cohesively bridged community. As Hamada, the hostess, and Julia physically lifted each other up to then dance together, or as the handful of hostesses worked together to round out their own desires in the interim, when variously marginalized bodies within the cabaret found themselves ‘not enough,’ as the dominant hegemony would have all bodies interpolated, they instead found wholesome recourse in one another. Rather than buy into the schemes of being objects of purchasable pleasure or compete amongst one another for partial doses of spotlight or social capital, these laboring dance bodies found pleasure and profitable maneuvering in their own bodily networks and values of abundance, community, and corporealized creativity.

### **Conclusion: Smoke Screens and Sunrises**

Exiting the cabaret is often just as speedy of a process as entering, and the transition is just as jarring. Stumbling out of the cabaret somewhere between 5-7am, the dark and smoky atmosphere full of neon lights and disco balls is sharply contrasted with the tranquil calm of a megacity just barely awakening from its slumber. Rose-gold rays of

sunlight gently reach across and blanket the city in a mesmerizing shade as choruses of chirping birds enjoy their choirs before the bustling clamor of street traffic drowns out their tunes. We would usually walk a ways down the road, stumbling a bit from pure exhaustion but also congenially joking and enjoying one another's company in the peaceful respite of daybreak. Those strolls back to our parked car are fond memories, occurring in a liminal time and space between yesterday and tomorrow, we would all agree they felt a bit like freedom. There was hardly anybody out in the streets to even cast their watchful gaze upon you, never the less bother you, an otherwise almost omnipotently present occurrence in the public streets of Cairo.

Mido commented how the cabaret felt like a totally different world in an entirely different sense of time. Karim tilted his head thoughtfully then responded, 'Maybe it's not a different world, but it's like.. *dunya ma'louba*, (an upside-down world), because yeah there's like the creepy men and their money greed, but then there's like, all these stories we get to listen to from all these other workers there.' He turned to face me. 'Do you remember the manager that lost his accounting job and his wife left him? Or Nashwa the *riklam* that kissed me when we came in and I thought she's so bad but then we hear how her husband died and she's raising all the kids in some weird underground garage? She just wants her children to have an apartment to play in. I don't know, it's like there's the big story everyone knows, but then there's all these small stories inside that actually make me want to be- soft. I cannot explain it, as an Egyptian man in this shit (he gestures to the city around us), you never can walk around soft, you have to be so tough all the time, with everyone, but sometimes these stories give me a different feeling.' Mido hailed

a taxi to give himself a ride home in the opposite direction than we were headed. ‘Good, I hear Abdullah (the name of one of the rich *khaleegy* from the cabaret) likes to enjoy the soft ass’ he brashly joked as he facetiously policed Karim for his vulnerable expression of feelings as he laughed and slammed the door shut. As the door slammed and cut off his ensuing laughter so too did the sense of liminality close off. It was a new dawn.

I found it intriguing that Karim didn’t experience the cabaret as a different world, for him it remained the same everyday world, but rather experienced from an alternative non-normative perspective (*ma’loubā.*) Further, it seemed the competitions so critical to cabaret circuitries might not be within the masculinity-fueled *keet* wars, but rather between the various worldly paradigms that the *keet* wars constructed. One, the dominant virile masculine-economic, as well as the second beneath the *keet*-construed smoke screen, the kaleidoscope of marginalized yet multiplicitous bodies and ways of being. The hegemonic matrix of men and money contradictorily encapsulated, yet enabled pauses and fissures, for the conditions of possibly for the upside-down world to be corporealized. As laborers within the cabaret experienced working in the chaos of non-normative directionality, from tip collectors crawling between table legs to dancers holding deep back-bends, these polyvalent bodies found other ways to move through the world that meshed with their own objectives and desires, thus capitalizing upon an alternative wealth.

Paradoxically, the hegemonic Gulf oil-economies competitively combined with virile power-hungry patriarchal masculinity create sites with incredibly shared spaces and traversable stages. In the cabaret, working-class Egyptian men from young to old,

wealthy MENA men, *riklam*, dancers, musicians and *toura* all intimately share the stage and overall space. This makes the cabaret a unique site within Cairo, a city that otherwise has staunch physical and ideological divisions between those of different social standings and classes. The flat or only slightly raised stages, no photo/video policies, and *keet* wars encourage these crossings. Yet it is this precise diverse density of bodies and shared space that allows new circulations, coalitions, and collective possibilities to form in confrontation to this dominating system. Here, the variously marginalized bodies from dancers, *riklam*, *toura*, and musicians work better together to capitalize upon their own pleasure, belonging, job security, and dignity.

Wherein previous chapters, many dancers from other sites reified their social standing by placing deliberate divisions between their bodies and those sprawling across this chapter's pages, down here in the depths, different directions are taken. "*Tahaya Zara*, a self-proclaimed 'zero-star to five-star' dancer, (because she doesn't specialize in any venue but works gigs across the board). Do you know what I've learned by taking every type of gig, in seeing dance in all its form, color, and shapes? Wealth. What's the point of coming to Egypt and working only in one 'top spot?' Number one, everyone thinks of dancers as sluts, why would I get off on being a five-star slut, or a bit less of a slut because I refuse cabaret work? Internal self-hating, I think a lot of dancers secretly hate being dancers. Of course, if you are a woman who slut-shames, that's also internalized misogyny. Audre Lorde, a lesbian black feminist, she knows about discrimination, she said the true revolution is in facing, I don't know the exact words, but it's basically about getting through the oppression that lives inside you. A lot of dancers



have issues with their own art because it's associated with sexuality and prostitution and using your body to make money, and actually, there's nothing wrong with any of that. I have no issue with my art, despite the whole world having issue with it" (Sep. 13<sup>th</sup>, 2017).<sup>cxxiii</sup>

Zara doesn't just call attention to external physical and ideological divisions as oppressive and limiting. Rather, she specifically highlights the importance of deconstructing the most deeply-held internal divisions we use to define and cultivate ourselves. Her powerful statement aligns with Suzy and Hamada, who both also came to accept, love, and trust themselves despite how their loves and labors misaligned with dominant gender, sexuality, and economic norms. Their experiences gesture towards a more genuine and sustainable wealth and value system founded within kaleidoscopes of colorful corporealities, rather than the *keet* strewn across the stage and flying through the air.

This dynamic resonates with theorizations by Middle Eastern political theorist Timothy Mitchell on carbon democracy and McJihad.<sup>cxxiv</sup> In dissecting global capitalism's successful hegemony through oil economies he discovers that purposeful divisions and separations were main means by which multinational oil corporations succeeded in controlling uprisings and protests for more democratic rights. Corporations utilize divisions between classes, nationalities, and ethnicities, as well as physical divisions of the processes of production and transportation of oil, to disrupt workers' chances for collective action (2013). Within the microcosm of the cabaret, it is the way bodies use the materiality of the shared space, stage, and *sala* (seating area) that the

creation, and also vulnerabilities, within the localized and hybridized McJihad process are found. Working Egyptian-English dancer Zara pushes on his theory to point out that the core of these divisions, thus the core of potentiality, lie within corporealities.

Mining the micro-roots of these processes, and how they're played out across cabaret bodies, illuminates larger ways class, gender, sexuality, and nationality as corporealities are at the core of macro-level political and economic effecting Cairo. Focusing on insights and tactics from Suzy's *nimra*, as well as the choreographed cooperation's during the interim and Julia's *nimra* are linked to ways gender and women's issues have been dealt with drastically differently by both the autocratic State and the revolutionaries within Tahrir Square in 2011. Both pre and post revolution women's issues were limited within state-feminism which can be critiqued as monolithic, top-down, and controlled (Hafez 181 "Revolution" 2014, Pratt 50.50). Despite this being the critiqued model during Mubarak's years, it has recently been re-instated with the National Council of Women under President Sisi. At the same time, his increasing autocratic grip over independent organizing and groups has led to a stifling of the polyvalent and grass-roots women-led and focused coalitions and missions started by revolutionaries in Tahrir Square during and in the wake of the 2011 revolution (Pratt 50.50).

Yet, during the revolutionary rupture a different world was realized, because gender was done differently. Like female revolutionaries within Tahrir Square, what Suzy's *nimra*, where she performs her gender fluidly and polyvalently, instead argues for is cultivating worlds and politics where gender is not only centralized, but wherein

gender is understood as dynamic, multiplicitous, and inherently intersectional and connected with all other bodies and political dynamics. It demands ground-level and fleshed out bodily contextualization to be better understood and best pragmatically serve a wide array of female bodies across the socio-economic spectrum. Further, and again mirroring the gender and corporeal relationalities cultivated by revolutionaries within Tahrir Square, the interim and Julia's *nimra* also contend that moving forward, will mean moving together. Julia and the other laboring bodies within the cabaret worked in cross-aligned solidarities and creative coalitions that swerved multi-directionally. Thus, their corporealities and choreographies disrupt and re-direct the unidirectional and top-down directionality of power dynamics that both dominant petro-dollar fueled hetero-masculinities and iron-fisted autocracies, attempt carving into the larger social system and citizen subjectivities. While these tactics and insights apply at the macro political structural levels, Zara, Hamada, and Suzy also remind that this work dually begins deep in one's own being and body. Focusing on insights, cautions, and tactics from the cabaret over-all argue that moving forward sustainably, will mean moving together in multiplicity and multi-directionality.

#### **- Taxi Transition 4: A Final Ride as Farewell Finale -**

Karim and I got into his car to start the drive back to my apartment. I felt ready to pass out from the long night, the last bits of energy from the Turkish coffees long past. I pulled the small notebook out from my purse and began quickly scribbling away raw field notes from the cabaret excursion. Usually I would make a Nescafé at home and do this, but I knew as soon as I walked in the door I was headed straight to bed. We started

driving down some smaller bumpy back roads, certainly a major detour from our normal route home from Pyramid Street. I looked up quizzically as he smiled and assured me not to worry. We hit a particularly rough pot hole that's shock caused us both to wince in pain. I shook my head playfully and shut my notebook for the remainder of the ride. I figured the field notes would be pretty useless if they looked more like scribbles from a seismograph during an earthquake than legible handwriting. I peered out the front window and realized I had no clue where we were, but we should've been back to Dokki by now. Karim pressed his thumb and fore-fingers together and slowly drew his hand down, gesturing for me to be patient and wait.

Karim pulled off onto the side of the road to park, 'bring your notebook and come' he stated as he got out from the car with renewed energy. We walked a short distance down the road and then came upon two beautiful vintage-style wrought-iron doors which opened up to a beautiful al fresco courtyard café. The early morning's golden blanket of sunlight cast an ethereal warm glow throughout the brick-walled courtyard. A couple birds cheeped about on chairs and potted garden flowers and brush adorned all the courtyard walls. I gasped at how picturesque the café was, and nearly empty at this early opening hour. A waiter approached us. We sat at a corner café table and ordered two lattes and a light breakfast. My sleepy eyes were now wide-awake. Nothing invigorated me more than writing in beautiful outdoor cafes. Karim smiled, "I knew you'd love it. I think you will write better stories from here." I took a sip from my latte and opened up my notebook. *Here*. Of course, he meant the physical 'here' of the cafe we were sitting in, but as I began scribbling away on the blank pages, '*here*,' came

to embody a more rooted and personal meaning. I wasn't exactly sure where we were, I couldn't find this place on my own. In fact, the café was a brand-new addition to the bustling heart of downtown. If I'd driven by it during my initial fieldwork trip I would've only seen an abandoned lot piled high with rubbish. Back then, the owners were still in the paperwork process of cultivating the depraved and abandoned lot into its full potential. However, more so, I couldn't find this '*here*' on my own because there are so many tucked away, 'round the bend, or just slightly far-off and only locally-known wondrous aspects and parts of cities. Often, these valuable and potential-full city spaces and niches are only revealed through coming into meaningful connection and relationships with other bodies. These bodies then generously share how they know the city, how they've moved through and come into being in the world. Through their own unique steps, streets, and special hidden 'spots'.

People are like cities. Finding those secret spots of beauty tucked away, the resilience of flowers that sprout up through pavement cracks, the peace of hidden garden terraces and coveted Nile views- the shrewdly shared streets and squares. You have to really listen, walk through, and know them deeply to understand their beauty and hidden depths. The nooks of growing greenery and creative potential. This necessitates having to trust taking different routes than you're familiar with, getting lost, and being pulled along into adventures, because you trust that those people you're sharing this city with know the world in a richly, vividly, beautifully different way than you. Their paths have cultivated unique insight, stories, and ways of being and moving that show the city in richer, fuller, and more colorful perspectives.

This is why deep listening matters. Why going along for the ride and letting others take the wheel matters. To get a glimmer of the city through the music they choose, the roads they take, the way they navigate the chaos of traffic, road blockades, and wrong turns. It unlocks the diverse ways different bodies move through and experience the world. What I've come to understand, is that there is no 'contemporary Cairo city.' Rather, there exists a plurality of connected Cairo's based on different perspectives, paths, and positionalities. Each version of Cairo cast new light on the others. Each has unique strengths and weaknesses that, when shared, can pull out potential and possibility in one another – this multiplicity matters. It's the core of what keeps the city moving and growing.

## **Circling Back: Critical Closings and Continuations**

Centering Egyptian and MENA bodies, stories, sites, and significations while cultivating stronger, deeper, and more complexly entangled core connections to raqs sharqi within contemporary Cairo has been the primary aim of this project. I hope I did some slight yet significant justice to staging and sharing these stories in ways that the core connections result in deepened *ihzas* (feeling) for others as well. Raqs sharqi embodies how connections cultivated in meaningful feeling can move people into new ways of being, new nuanced relationships within themselves, as well as to other bodies and spaces around them. It weaves a subtle yet significant power.

As I attempt to choreograph the conclusion of this writing, my body swirls with emotions and memories from my fieldwork. Crafting a ‘conclusion’ to something that’s constantly changing, moving, and always critically continuing is a trying, contradictory, and sentimental labor. My memory settles on one particular insight from retired dancer, now costume designer, Eman Zaki. When I first met with her about my project she looked me up and down, “So, I hear you think there is some connection between dance and post-revolutionary politics?” She took a long, slow draw from her cigarette before continuing, “you are right.” Before I was ready, she dove in, sharing a rich treasure-trove of dance stories with me. She interwove stories from both her time as a dancer, as well as back in her mother’s time, as she was also a dancer. Criss-crossing throughout her storytelling were the over-arching political threads- the decadence during King Farouk’s era, to her own bodily pain from frozen muscles that she experienced daily living during Morsi’s short rule. I remember the imagery of strong swaying trees when she talked

about the 2011 revolution. As she recounted, Egyptian women at this time were like the trees. They fully realized their thick deep roots, and they grew tall (Aug. 20, 2016). Eman is a wealth of knowledge, and her unwavering affection for dance came through in the verve and entwining of her storytelling. Often, she wouldn't finish telling one story before jumping into another related one. At one point she paused. She nodded as she thoughtfully concluded, "But don't just think of it as the 'Egyptian revolution,' because the thing is... there is a revolution inside every woman" (2016).

Expanding upon Eman's assertion and conclusion, this ethnography has traced some of these revolutionary resonances within the various sites and bodies of dancers throughout Cairo. Oscillating between the micro individual level of the body, as well as the macro level of Egyptian State and intra-MENA politics, dancers such as Camelia, Randa, Farah, Amina, Suzy, and Julia each uniquely center-stage insights and tactics for moving forward sustainably, productively, and with sensitive attentiveness to humanity, in contemporary Cairo. Camelia, Randa, and Farah revolutionize understandings of the gendered self as *shamla* (whole, complete) and Enough. They place and play with corporeal and physical-external borders and boundaries to increase their power based on their unique identities and particular positionalities. Farah and her *shabab* inspire new gendered relationalities built upon creative collaborations and trust while reminding audiences of the importance of seeing from undermined and polyvalent perspectives. Amina reminds audiences to seek out abundance in the fissures and opportunities of what's dominantly read as demising in scarcity. She also demands intersectional and contextualized analysis and understandings that, in moving beyond dualistic



conceptualizations of *asil*, take their time to pause and relish in the inextricably linked dynamics of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nationality within economic and political projects. Suzy, Julia, and the other cabaret workers spotlight alternative wealth harvested within solidarities and corporeal collaborations and choreographies that cut across dominant social divides, stigma, and structures.

All these dancers, along with the taxi transition drivers, offer more nuanced, richer, and beautiful interpretations of Cairo's city rhythms. They teach academic and practitioner audiences alike new ways to more earnestly interpret, feel, and move to the music – if we have been listening. They task each of us with the responsibility and tools for deepening the depths of our listening. This is a task I too urge every academic, audience member, and practitioner to continually dedicate and commit themselves to. Listen. Listen deeply and vulnerably. Listen in order to continually learn.

While the autocratic State of Cairo continues to carve uni-directional, top-down, and narrow ways of being, knowing, and moving into its citizen-subjects, this ethnography's performers, from dancers, taxi drivers, venue staff workers, hostesses, and musicians, have choreographed and mapped out other multi-directional, multiplicitous, and meandering routes, roads, rhythms, and ways of being and moving. Ultimately, they all come together in offering this: moving forward will mean moving together in new and undermined ways that cultivate more meaningful and multiplicitous core connections. These core connections enrich the way bodies know themselves, one another, but also how they move through the city... and into new realities and relationalities. The ways

that bodies move matter. They embody, choreograph, and create the worlds we live in.

*Here*, these were worlds of possibility, potentiality, and poignant plurality.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Raqs sharqi is the Arabic term for what westerners often call belly dancing. It means dance of the East or Eastern dance. I use the term raqs sharqi because this is the name of the dance in Egypt in the Egyptian language. If Egyptians translate this to English they usually say 'Oriental dance' rather than belly dancing. If I discuss this dance in more global contexts I switch to 'belly dance' as it is more of an umbrella term for all styles of this dance. Raqs sharqi is used for the Cairo-specific professional contexts of dance.

<sup>ii</sup> Egypt's January 25<sup>th</sup> 2011 revolution was one of a handful of such uprisings or revolutions in the MENA world that came to collectively be known as the 'Arab Spring.' The Egyptian uprising, or revolution, is locally known as the January 25<sup>th</sup> revolution. Tunisia was the first with Egypt following soon after, successfully ousting President Hosni Mubarak from his nearly 30 year regime reign on February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011 with the SCAF- Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, militarily taking over the country soon after. For more on the historic and contemporary political history of Egypt see Chapter 1. *City Circuitries: Mapping the Curves and Contours of Contemporary Cairo*.

<sup>iii</sup> MENA stands for Middle Eastern and North African.

<sup>iv</sup> There are a wide variety of professional performance sites of raqs sharqi in contemporary Cairo, I have chosen to focus solely on these three for my project. For example, there are growing contemporary trends for elite nightclubs that feature dancing on bars or small stages to DJ music, as well as upper-class floating (but not cruising) sites that offer multiple venues within the structure and have dance and singing entertainment provided while patrons dine in restaurants or dance at clubs. Weddings continue to be a core site for raqs sharqi performances as well. I have chosen these three field sites for a variety of reasons including what I was drawn to with my particular research questions, as well as issues of sustainable economic and cultural access.

<sup>v</sup>A number of examples by key authors in this discursive approach highlight the limitations of ecofeminist discourse. The most cited text on belly dance in all fields is Wendy Buonaventura, *Serpent of the Nile: Women and Dance in the Arab World* (North Hampton: Interlink Publishing Group, 1989) which traces the history of 'Arab women's' dance throughout history and as it disseminated from the Arab world to the West. She argues that belly dance is a genre of 'female essence' with ancient spiritual roots that's survived patriarchy (Arab and Western) and religious repression (Islamic and Christian) throughout time. Continuing, she claims that it can now be considered empowering (after crossing over to western geographies and bodies) if (western) women are able to elevate the dance to theatrical art through its appropriation on proscenium stages. The orientalism throughout her work starts with the opening about the dance in Arab contexts and bodies, 'time stands still in remote places,' and later on the erasure of Arab significations and dynamics continues when she makes the claim that- dance is a mere expression of female empowerment, but can no longer grow in the Arab world because it's too natural there, whereas the West is capable of consciously elevating it to a modern theatrical art and ensuring the dance's survival (200). Sociologist-practitioner Angela M. Moe has also published articles that essentialized women's bodies to a natural feminine essence that works to de-Arabize the form's development and ties to the Arab world. Her studies focus on white Midwestern women's belly dance studio practice and highlight interviewee's experiences of the 'organic nature of belly dance to woman's perspectives' (50). Interview selections are highlighted that address how white women gain empowerment through repetitive statements such as 'it belongs to women and women alone' (57) or 'it's old it's ancient and it's in our DNA' (58) "Sequins Sass and Sisterhood: An Exploration of Older Women's Belly Dancing" *Journal of Women and Aging* 26 (2014): 39-65. Another example that posits the ancient matriarchal goddess foundations of

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belly dance and consequently laments its reductive sexual objectification within Arab contexts and bodies includes Shawna Helland, "The Belly Dance- Ancient Ritual to Cabaret Performance." *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*. Ed. Ann Dils, Ann Cooper Albright. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001. 128-135.

<sup>vi</sup> Soon after the dance became popularized in Arab-American supper clubs, there was a nation-wide boom of the first wave of belly dance studio group classes. Ecofeminism entered into these new pedagogical spaces as well, following a line of feminism that paired ecological and women's concerns as mutually suffering from patriarchal domination. It is important to note that ecofeminism flourished and was often pedagogically entwined with the form as it entered the new space of the western studio site. Studios were mostly all female spaces and largely segregated from the Middle Eastern communities which first brought the dance over to the west.

<sup>vii</sup> For more on the construction, erasure, and identities of masculinity and gender in belly dance note the following texts: Shay, Anthony. *Choreographic Politics: State Folk Dance Companies, Representation, and Power*. Wesleyan: 2002.

---. *The Dangerous Lives of Public Performers: Dancing, Sex, and Entertainment in the Islamic World*. Palgrave Macmillan: July 10, 2014

---. The Male Dancer in the Middle East and Central Asia. *Dance Research Journal*. Summer/Winter2006, Vol. 38 Issue 1/2, p137-162.

Stavros, Stavrou Karayanni. *Dancing fear & desire: race, sexuality and imperial politics in Middle Eastern dance*. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004.

<sup>viii</sup> For examples of this approach to feminism and belly dance see Virginia Keft-Kennedy, *Representing the Belly Dancing Body: Feminism, Orientalism, and the Grotesque*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wollongong, 2005. Andrea Deagon, "The Golden Mask: Tipping the Belly Dancer in America." *Feminist Studies* 39 (2013): 71-97. Noha Roushdy, "Baladi as Performance: Gender and Dance in Modern Egypt." *Surfacing* 3(1), 2010. 71-99.

Cassandra, Lorius. "Desire and the Gaze" *Women's Studies International Forum* 19 (1996) 513-24. Dance scholars Kennedy and Deagon centralize western bodies and contexts while adding nuance to the intricate power dynamics at play within western feminism. To illustrate, Kennedy argues for the 'orientalist feminism' of western belly dance, arguing that western women bargain for their empowerment by reifying orientalist tropes of the Arab world. She states, 'as a result of white liberal feminism's co-optation of the dance, an Eastern performance art that the West had long associated with sex and orientalist concepts of racial excess, has become, throughout the twentieth-century and beyond, inextricably linked with notions of feminist emancipation' (333).

<sup>ix</sup> She argues that at times, 'playing' with the tipping, such as circling or shimmying your hip at the last moment to throw off the tipper before letting him stick the dollar in your hip belt, can become subversive and negate the sexualizing power dynamics of the practice. Yet, she overall sees the practice as steeped within patriarchal and capitalist power dynamics.

<sup>x</sup> There is a multiplicity of tipping practices, options, and significations available to belly dancers in multiple contexts. In the Egyptian Contemporary Cairo context tipping expectations and behavior are stratified by class level of the venue and dancer. Costume tipping may occur at working-class *shaabi* weddings and some cabarets, but tipping of any kind is disallowed within elite venues such as five star hotels. However, despite the largely class-stratified tipping codes of conduct and expectation, it is important to note that in contemporary Cairo's economic drop many dancers even at elite venues do discreetly accept, and many hope for, tipping. Money showers, where one lightly tosses or drops bills over a dancer or singer's head, is common in many working and middle class venues and contexts. Tipping also

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varies widely in who gets to keep how much, for example, in some Cairo venues the dancer's manager or the 'house' will keep all the tipping wherein other areas it's expected to be split with the musicians, etc. Tipping is often understood as a way to show appreciation, as well as a way to show off the patron's wealth, but it's important to note that tipping of any form to a dancer can also be interpreted as disrespectful. It may be deemed disrespectful for showing off, because it is against the law/regulation in certain areas, seemingly taking away from the 'art' of the show and/or dancer, or finally, for spending money on a dancer and other 'frivolities' rather than on one's family. Tipping in Turkey and Greece can also more commonly have costume tipping, alongside more popularly deemed 'traditional' forms such as the money shower and even sticking the bill onto the dancer's sweaty forehead (which makes it 'stick'). Within U.S. venues all of these tipping practices can be experienced, what practice dominates a venue depends on the ethnic heritage of the owners and audiences, the local tipping laws and regulations, and the dancer's decisions. Thus, to singularly focus on the costume-tipping method peripheralizes Arab spectating bodies, dancing bodies, and other Arab-based methods for negotiating the power structures at play within tipping which I hope to expand upon.

<sup>x</sup>For example, Torkom Movsesiyan's M.A. thesis, "Raqs Sharqi in Cultural Diplomacy: An Important but Neglected Diplomatic Tool in U.S.-Egypt Diplomatic Relations" (City College of New York, 2013) takes on an uncritically liberal approach to dance. For example, he states that 'dance is a universal language that brings understanding, respect, and peace between states' as well as romantically conflating Egyptian raqs sharqi to a folk dance of pure joy and expressing the happiness of life (7). This elides all political dynamics within dance, locally and transnationally, as well as flattens the complexities of raqs sharqi within various Egyptian and transnational contexts. His thesis also perpetuates western imperialist politics he invisibilizes by arguing that the dance is going 'extinct' (90) and it is thanks to the western dancers that raqs sharqi still thrives (90).

<sup>xii</sup> A significant amount of use value research has been produced by religious studies scholar Rachel Kraus, focusing on the leisure and empowerment it offers mostly white U.S. women as well as the spiritual complexity and potential of the practice. See her articles "Straddling the Sacred and the Secular: Creating a Spiritual Experience through Belly Dance" (2009), "The Many Faces of Spirituality: A Conceptual Framework Considering Belly Dance" (2009), "I Really Don't do it for the Spirituality: How often do Belly Dancers Infuse Artistic Leisure with Spiritual Meaning" (2013), and "Transforming Spirituality in Artistic Leisure: How the Spiritual Meaning of Belly Dance Changes Over Time" (2014), as well as works by sociologist Angela Moe including "Beyond the Belly: An Appraisal of Middle Eastern Dance (aka Belly Dance) as Leisure" (2012) and "Healing Through Movement: The Benefits of Belly Dance for Gendered Victimization" (2014).

<sup>xiii</sup> For more on the role of the gendered body and embodiment in the critically increasing Islamic piety movements within Cairo see Saba Mahmoud, Politics of Piety, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). To place the corporeality of piety in context with the relationship of working class Muhammad Ali Street dancers from the 1980's see Karen Van Nieuwkerk, 'A Trade Like Any Other' Female Singers and Dancer in Egypt. (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1995). Nieuwkerk argues that the religiously gendered body within Cairo is at the core of professional raqs sharqi dancer's stigmatization. Authors including Timothy Mitchell, James Gelvin, and Karen Van Nieuwkerk all discuss the increasing role of conservative Wahhabist Islam spreading from Saudi Arabia to other MENA countries, particularly Egypt, and the role of petro dollars within this Islamist economy. These same petro dollars are also the main reason that Saudi and other Arabian Gulf clientele are the main tourists for many professional raqs sharqi shows, at middle and upper class levels of venues, within Contemporary Cairo (Mitchell 2011, Gelvin 2016, Nieuwkerk 1995). I aim to explore the interrelationality of these gendered religious and economic factors within my dissertation project.

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<sup>xiv</sup> For example, Badia Masabni is credited with popularizing what practitioners now recognize as raqs sharqi in her entertainment salas in Cairo. Masabni creatively pulled together the elite social dancing of the time and fused in elements of ballroom, ballet, and other international dances such as Latin dances to create and develop what belly dancers now recognize as the time period when raqs sharqi developed. Though Masabni has stated that western vaudeville and theatre inspired some aspect of her own shows, she claims hers is an Egyptian/Arab dance that was at the time called *raqs el hawanim* (dance of the high Turkish ladies) after the elite of the time. Masabni herself was from the Levant and her first dancers were from throughout the MENAT including Turkey, Egypt, and Lebanon. Her clientele included western tourists as well as upper class MENA citizens. Thus, historicizations such as Rose's work to wash over this incredibly complex and multi-faceted development, particularly focused on pan-MENA and non-western circuits, at the expense of creating an essentialized binary that grants the western practitioner more legitimacy in 'experimentally' fusing belly dance without responsibility and sensitivity.

<sup>xv</sup> Works that centralize the complexity of orientalist practices on western subjects and contexts include Moe (2014), Keft-Kennedy (2005), Deagon (2013), Kraus (2009, 2010, 2014), Deppe (2010), Rose (2010), Bock (2011), Shay and Sellers-Young (2005) (2011), Dox (2006), Fruhauf (2009), Shay (2006) (2008) Rasmussen (1992), and Haynes-Clark (2010).

<sup>xvi</sup> What of the pan-MENA alliances and social capital that were formed through the conglomerations of various MENA musicians, dancers, and managers working together? What of the dance skill needed to master such a plethora of complex regional rhythms and music coming from the band that thwarts the homogenizing claims of such music as just flattening the 'East?'

<sup>xvii</sup> Dance scholar Jennifer Fisher explores the "Arabian" or "Coffee" dance in the Nutcracker ballet in order to interrogate if the dancing reinforces historical stereotypes about the Arab 'other.' She argues that the answer is 'yes and no' and that meanings dynamically change according the casting, technique, contexts, and audience readings. Basically, knowledge must be explored relationally rather than absolutely, as well as with an awareness that meaning is always already polysemous Jennifer Fisher "Arabian Coffee in the Land of the Sweets" Ed. Barbara Sellers-Young and Anthony Shay. *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism, and Harem Fantasy* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2005) 221-243.

<sup>xviii</sup> The introduction is followed by scholar Najwa Adra's article on the changing dynamics and meanings within social *baladi* dance. Chapter two includes dance scholar Shay's article on male dancers in the Middle East, challenging assumptions about their role in belly dance and visibilizing male dancing bodies within the discourse. Chapter three, also penned by Shay, focuses on the ways in which dance became the subject of religious bans, fatwas, in the Islamic Middle East in hopes of countering sensationalism about Islam and dance. Chapter four by scholar Stavros Karayanni further elaborates on the desire/dismissal present in European traveler's accounts of the dancer Kuchuk Hanem within an imperialist male gaze. Chapter five by Roberta L. Dougherty examines belly dancers in Egyptian films to counter a popular misconception that all Egyptian films are musicals that feature voluptuous belly dancers. Chapter six provides an epilogue to a foundational article on Arab-American music and dance by ethnomusicologist Anne Rasmussen. Here she traces the aesthetic and environmental forces currently working to create the relationship between Middle Eastern music and belly dancing in the United States. She argues that three main forces are at work, world political events (strife and consequent immigration), revival of intra-ethnic playing, and a push for more 'artistic' forms and venues for Arab American music. Chapter seven is a description of modern dancer La Meri's involvement with Middle Eastern dance. Chapter eight is dance scholar Jennifer Fisher's article on orientalism in US Nutcracker ballets within the Arabian Coffee scenes. Chapter nine authored by long-term dance scholar Andrea Deagon writes on the roles and re-evaluations the character and embodiment of 'Salome' has taken for the U.S. belly dance community throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the dance of the seven veils, contending that explorations are tied to western

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women's anxieties of interweaving sexuality and spirituality. Chapter ten analyzes how ATS (American Tribal Style) belly dance are commodity fetishes that are both sites for orientalist fantasy as well as sites of agency in self-realization. In chapter eleven Donnalee Dox explores four approaches to spiritual belly dance and concludes that spiritual belly dance may offer participants empowerment not readily available to them in their every day lives, but questions how it reifies white western womanhood. Chapter twelve by Linda Swanson explains how media imagery and rumor mix within popular tropes about golden age dancer Tahia Carioca and how she could 'dance on a single tile.' Ed. Barbara Sellers-Young and Anthony Shay. *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism, and Harem Fantasy* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2005)

<sup>xix</sup> *Baladi* refers to a style of dance and music, as well as general character attributes, that pulls from the working-class population in Egypt. The meaning of *baladi* depends on context. It can refer to 'authentic' and salt-of-the-earth type Egyptian characteristics, unaffected by western influence, or it can refer to a loose and bawdy backwardness. Within raqs sharqi, *baladi* refers to working-class musical songs that often have double meanings within the lyrics, as well as a more grounded and 'heavy' type of dancing more tied to the social dancing and Egyptian aesthetics (i.e. dancing flat-footed rather than on relevé and keeping one's center low in the hips rather than up in the torso.)

<sup>xx</sup> Though Abdou's sexuality is perceived as full of potent and threatening excess as a stigmatized belly dancer, and the bride is perceived as a bashful virgin, Lorus discusses how Abdou plays with the song lyrics and her own dancing in ways that suggest the bride may not be so innocent and inexperienced. Further, Lorus shows how Abdou performs in a way that suggests all the upper class audiences present shouldn't be so comfortable in assuming they can control or understand any women's sexuality.

<sup>xxi</sup> Cook's article explores multiple embodied sites of belly dance within increasingly gentrified urban Istanbul in order to argue that Istanbul relies upon neo-orientalism embodied through belly dancing bodies to aid in its gentrification project. Cook uses space dynamically and analyzes multiple sites within one city as they constitute and contradict one another, but also as they constitute the local and global. Oyku-Potuglu-Cook. "Beyond the Glitter: Belly Dance and Neoliberal Gentrification in Istanbul. *Cultural Anthropology*. Vol 21 (2006): 633-660.

<sup>xxii</sup> Anthropologist Karen Van Nieuwkerk explores the working-class dancers of Mohammad Ali Street in Cairo to de-exotify their lives by presenting their stories and perspectives on their everyday working lives. Mohammad Ali Street used to be an entertainment area/market for musicians and dancers for popular class weddings and celebrations. The dancer's on this street lived and worked in communities drastically different from how dancers live and work now, during this time they were run by a female 'usta' who had a group working for her, rather than the mostly male-management and impresario system in place now. It is no longer a monopoly market largely since President Sadat's 'open door' policies in the 1960's and 1970's. Her work argues that though there exists great stigmatization against these dancers because they use their bodies for money, and female bodies are constructed first and foremost as sexual bodies, they argue that their work is 'a trade like any other' and they deserve greater respect and understanding in their own society, particularly by the middle and upper classes. Karen Van Nieuwkerk, 'A Trade Like Any Other' *Female Dancers and Singers in Egypt*. (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1995).

<sup>xxiii</sup> In particular, the community she studied stands apart because Mohammad Ali Street dancers are often born into performance families (musicians and dancers) that held a monopoly on the market whereas the other contexts of dance within Cairo often have working dancers that chose these lifestyles. This makes for a fascinating juxtaposition. Her work explores changes over time in these street dancers' lives and explores a number of socio-historical and economic threads, but the conclusion seems to present a representation of Islamic doctrine as overdetermined and not as intimately entwined with the other critical dimensions she explored so thoroughly throughout her book.

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<sup>xxiv</sup> Sellers-Young argues that it is the combined forces of a lack of formal and codified transmission of the dance (i.e. named movement vocabulary) along with the discomfort of human representation in Islam that allowed the form to be appropriated globally with such diversity in stylistic interpretation and divorced from its aesthetic connection to Islam, or in her words, an ‘empty space’ for interpretation. This sits oddly with me, as it seems to perpetuate the flattening of MENA regions again, focusing on the dance as a social practice of joy at weddings while ignoring its many other MENA manifestations throughout history which did include variant forms of transmission that perhaps focused primarily on mimicry or used the musical sounds ‘dum, teka, tek,’ in ways that are just as legitimate as a more western studio form of transmission. As I will argue in my project, it is less about ‘empty spaces’ for interpretation by non-MENA practitioners, but more about the necessity of non-MENA practitioners learning how to deeply and sensitively listen, in new and polyvalent ways, to what MENA bodies and spaces are transmitting.

<sup>xxv</sup> Further, these sites would lend credit and agency towards elite bodies and contexts at the expense of a deeper mining, less accessible to western audiences outside of Cairo, of exactly where new moves, music, and changes in dance are largely springing from. For example, many of the new aesthetics, music, and bulk of paid performances occur in cabaret circuits, where video and photos are explicitly not allowed.

<sup>xxvi</sup> I briefly present a summary of the chapters and their main arguments from the anthology. Chapter 1: What is Baladi about al-Raqs al-Baladi? On the Survival of Belly Dance in Egypt by Noha Roushdy. Roushdy, one of the few Egyptian anthropologists looking at belly dance (*baladi*, the more ‘home style’ social dance in Cairo specifically) argues that *raqs al baladi* (belly dance) is an embodied cultural form that materializes a particular sense of personhood for Egyptians in the twenty-first century through a shared sensibility in its aesthetics. This is why, she argues, *baladi* has persisted as a popular leisure activity among Egyptians despite the stigma of professional belly dancers. Chapter 2: Finding the Feeling: Oriental Dance, *Musiqat al-Gadid*, and *Tarab* by Candace Bordelon. Dance scholar Bordelon seeks to unravel the relationship between tarab music and the oriental (belly dance) artistic process. Her aim is to add to the tarab musical and ethnomusicology discourse by adding in the voice and experiences of the oriental dancer. For Bordelon, it is the ‘feeling’ that continues to keep the dance form relevant and vital in the midst of hard economic times, religious conservatism, and decreased tourism amidst political unrest. Of important note, Bordelon is speaking towards very distinct, and especially elite, contexts, venues, and bodies (performer and audiences) within Cairo. Chapter 3: Performing Identity/Diasporic Encounters by Lynette Harris This was an enlightening essay by Arab-Canadian scholar Lynette Harris where she used four oral histories of Arab-Canadians in order to make visible the Arab-Canadian discourse in belly dance that is otherwise obscured by a dominating white middle-class dance community. She argues that by creating this space for them (herself included) to share their stories they will challenge the narrow categories of orientalism, Islam, nationalism, and feminism that have bound Arab women due to their multiple belongings and danced discourse. This brief text is enabling in offering a more complex perspective of Arabs in diaspora. Chapter 4: 1970s Belly Dance and the “How-To” Phenomenon: Feminism, Fitness, and Orientalism by Virginia Keft-Kennedy. This article was honed in from Kennedy’s 2005 to the topic of the ‘how to’ instructional manuals that became popular in the 1970’s belly dance community. Focusing on these manuals in relationship to the western communities of the U.S., Australia, and Europe, she argues that an examination of these ‘how to’ manuals reveals a discursively Westernized feminist construction of belly dance. Kennedy argues that while these manuals challenged notions of the female body they also reified it as a sexualized commodity within consumer culture and perpetuated orientalism. In other words, to achieve popularity and success, these constructions of the female body had to work both within, and outside of, dominant ideology, hence they were transgressive and complicit with dominant structures of femininity. Chapter 5: Dancing with Inspiration in New Zealand and Australian Dance Communities by Marion Cowper and Carolyn Michelle. This co-authored article seeks to discover why belly dance has become so popular in New Zealand and Australia despite their geographic distance from its places of



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Eastern origin. They argue that rather than falling into exoticizing and orientalist framings of the dance, these participants 'down under' instead take up belly dancing for the empowering spiritual experiences it enables. Chapter 6: Local Performance/Global Connection: American Tribal Style and Its Imagined Communities by Teresa Cutler-Broyles. Teresa Cutler-Broyles, a practitioner-scholar, argues that ATS is a genre of belly dance that embodied all the promises of globalization without the pitfalls, that it embodied the promise of equality and access for all and this is mostly due to its strictly apolitical stance that welcomes everybody. It is disappointing that previous literature wasn't consulted in disrupting this universalizing of white western empowerment that the text encapsulated. Chapter 7: The Use of Nostalgia in Tribal Fusion Dance by Catherine Mary Scheeler. Canadian dance scholar Mary Scheeler explores how North American dancers in tribal fusion styles of belly dance are looking less to the romantic and exoticized 'east' for their dance inspiration and aesthetic and more towards their own cultural pasts through North American working-class entertainment aesthetics from vaudeville, burlesque, and the Victorian age. The conclusion of her argument aligns with many of the texts I've read on tribal fusion styles; that they gesture towards belly dance as always transnational between east and west, I think this dualistic transnational understanding can also have the potential to ignore the various contexts of the dance in MENA areas and elide the pan-MENA circulations of the dance's history and present. Chapter 8: "I Mean, what is a Pakeha New Zealander's national dance? We don't have one": Belly Dance and Transculturation in New Zealand. Scholar Brigid Kelly argues that globalized belly dance be understood as transcultural exchange that flows in multiple directions, acknowledging the active participation of MENA populations while understanding non-Indigenous dancers as creative rather than just appropriators. She argues that New Zealanders don't deeply interrogate their own relationship with their local 'other', the other that was there first- the Maori. This highlighting of Maori exoticification is a critical reminder to focus on the actual bodies at stake in globalization and that the relationships have become more complicated than East/West binaries. Chapter 9: Quintessentially English Belly Dance: In Search of an English Tradition by Siouxsie Cooper. This chapter focuses on the popular emergence of two competing strands of belly dance within England and how these styles related to two variant constructions of belly dance history and political agendas through two main teachers, Hilal and Buonaventura. Both artists wanted to see belly dance become an 'art form' rather than male dominated entertainment club scene, but they achieved this task in ways that had distinctive political relationships to issues of nationalism, ethnicity, and gender. Chapter 10: Delilah: Dancing the Earth by Barbara Sellers-Young. Anthology co-editor, Dr. Sellers-Young, focuses on the life story of U.S. belly dancer Delilah. Sellers-Young argues that Delilah participated in the eco-feminism movement of the time through belly dance teaching, performance, and eco-art activism. Sellers-Young articulates how Delilah's danced discourse was fitting and flexible at local and global levels. She argues that Delilah's ecofeminist belly dancing was able to flourish in Seattle because of the culturally diverse and appreciative dance arts scene and the ecofeminism was similarly successful because of the active nature and ecofriendly community of the area. The geography of the land itself catered to active outdoor activities and preservation campaigns, and its beauty made it especially likely for the locals to take on greater concern and love for nature. Chapter 11: Negotiating Female Sexuality: Bollywood Belly Dance, "Item Girls" and Dance Classes by Smeeta Mishra. This is one of the few chapters dedicated to exploring belly dance outside of western contexts. Scholar Smeeta Mishra explores belly dance's hybridity within India as its represented in Bollywood films, highlighting two dance scenes as her expanded case studies, and then as belly dance instructors battle popular stereotypes about the dance form. She argues that women are challenging sexualized stereotypes by perpetuating patriarchal notions of ideal Indian womanhood based on sexual purity. Interestingly, one of the justifications used in India for belly dance to be respected is that it is the U.S. practitioners who sexualized and exploited it, whereas in Egypt it is a high classical art form. This justification highlights the prominent role North American discourse has in global belly dance discourse but also attempts to frame the dance in Egypt in ways that relate to class and nationalist endeavors of bharata natyam and other classical forms in India. Here, Egypt still circulates as a trope, but in a particularly Indian way by framing raqs sharqi as if it shared the contours of bharata natyam and other

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classical dance forms. Chapter 12: Digitalizing Raqs Sharqi: Belly Dance in Second Life by Caitlin E. McDonald. Arab and Islamic Studies scholar Caitlin McDonald, co-editor of the anthology, concludes the work by arguing that in our globalized world we need to study dance in its new transnational contexts. In this chapter she explores the community of belly dance in the virtual world of Second Life. She argues that the same people that belly dance in 'real' life are the ones participating with belly dance avatars in Second Life. Her ultimate finding is that belly dance in Second Life is the same as it is in 'real' life, about finding and fostering community.

<sup>xxvii</sup> For example, a dancer in the U.S. may reflect upon her performance as 'successful' due to how 'spot on' her technique was that night, whereas in Cairo a dancer may judge her performance by how many audience members began to sing along and wave their hands to the music as well as the overall 'mood' that was created.

<sup>xxviii</sup> It is more culturally normative and appropriate to go to many of these shows with a male companion, and much of the entertainment management system is male dominated where in Karim worked as the 'go-between' for arranging shows to watch, interviews, and contacts with male staff, musicians, and management. In most settings my female body was taken more seriously, and respectfully, when I worked with Karim and in other instances, like some cabarets, most people likely assumed I was his service woman for the evening, but still, his presence provided crucial insight and care, as well as comradeship. Karim's translating services were also approved in my IRB approval forms.

<sup>xxix</sup> There were also highly gendered, classed, and nationalist codes of conduct and contact when arranging and making interviews. For example, most often male managers and staff, including Karim my research partner, would arrange the when and where of interviews between myself and almost every Egyptian dancer. The industry is set up with these various levels of 'barriers' between the dancer and the outside world, to both protect her and keep her relaxed and distanced from the chaos of the entertainment industry, but also because every person encountered at these various levels was getting a piece of the pie, a bit of financial gain, from the dancer's work. As an *agnibiya* American woman I had more direct access to foreigner dancers but, for example, at a cabaret Karim would do the meeting and arranging through a staff member who then went through the dancer's manager who then went through to the dancer herself. I only paid a small fee of 100-300 Egyptian pounds (between 5-30 usd at the time) for certain interviews with more middle class and working-class workers in the dance industry. On the other hand, class status and level of stardom was often signaled when certain dancers or managers would insist on treating us for our coffee or tea at a café during an interview (as opposed to expecting payment or having us treat.) Being bi-lingual in English as well as Arabic was also an education and class-marker.

<sup>xxx</sup> I had many opportunities to professionally perform in Cairo at a variety of venues but politely turned down these offers. While the experience of professionally performing in Cairo contexts to live music would have garnered a rich perspective to inform my research, for me and my particular project it was outweighed by potential costs. First, there is a noticeable tension and divide between many Egyptian professionals and foreigner, where many Egyptians accuse foreigners of coming in and stealing the work by offering cheaper prices and having greater access to resources that put them ahead such as plastic surgery, whiter skin/colored eyes, and more 'open' cultural lifestyles that don't have to face the same stigma as their own. These dynamics are deeply entwined with histories and contemporary politics of neoliberal whiteness, imperialism, uneven economics, and colonialism, such as the common desire for whiter skinned performers. My goal was to gain the trust and perspectives of intra-MENA dancers and dancing for work would have directly or indirectly made me competition and lose a lot of the trust I was otherwise able to gain. Using my embodied knowledge to be able to sit back and deeply listen to and learn from intra-mena actors was of utmost importance and value in my project. Second, it's illegal for a

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foreigner to work in Cairo at venues with regular shows, such as the majority of my research sites, also adding to the ethics of my decision not to perform as a guest researcher.

<sup>xxxix</sup> *Riklam* is a Turkish word meaning ‘advertisement.’ *Riklam* is one of the titles for women that work in cabarets as a type of advertising for the club to attract more clientele. They are often found spread out throughout the peripheries of the venue’s *sala*, or seating area. Other titles these women’s job title went by in English translation were ‘hostesses’ or ‘service women.’ These women were paid a small amount to sit and party with male clientele, this could include conversation, joking, flirting, sharing their food and drink, and often socially dancing at the table or on the stage. However, to many outside the cabaret industry all of these women are painted with the brush of ‘prostitute,’ even though they may, or may not, engage in sex work. While most *riklam* share gender and lower socio-economic status, the reasons they engage in this work vary, many were single or divorced mothers taking care of children on their own, others enjoyed the exciting atmosphere and found this job to be the best for making quick money with their level of education, others simply took it as a job like any other, though with better income than what they could find elsewhere based on their gender and experience/education.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Gender ideology from key figures in both organizations focused on natural discourses of the female body as necessarily reproductive and subordinate to men, constructed in distinction to western discourses which are discerned to disregard gender norms. Women and men are constructed as different but complementary with women belonging to the domestic world as mothers and teachers of men who are prepositioned to the public sphere (Hafez “Revolution” 180). These views are important and resonate with members of the group today.

<sup>xxxix</sup> For more information on the awalem and ghawazee that is outside of the scope of this project please see Karen Van Nieuwkerk, ‘A Trade Like Any Other’ Female Dancers and Singers in Egypt. (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1995). During these times, particularly when female dancers were temporarily banned, male dancers also worked, known as *ginks* and *khawals*. *Ginks* largely came from the Ottoman empire whereas *khawals* were local Egyptian male dancers. During the time of my fieldwork *khawal* is used as a derogatory term used to mean homosexual. For more on professional male dancers and their decline in Cairo see Anthony Shay. *The Dangerous Lives of Public Performers: Dancing, Sex, and Entertainment in the Islamic World*. Palgrave Macmillan: July 10, 2014.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Terms for such venues includes music halls, *sala*, *café chantant*, nightclub, and/or cabarets. Note that the nightclub or cabaret often denoted a space where you could drink, eat, and be entertained, some early music halls did not have the food and drink. Also, some people, historically and contemporaneously, find a stigma in the terms nightclub and especially cabaret, as sites of debauchery. In my contemporary fieldwork my research collaborators also fluidly used the terms nightclub and cabaret, while others outside the immediate cabaret industry would warn me not to use the term because it has negative connotations. I choose to use the term cabaret because it was most frequently used by my research collaborators that worked in those sites although they often also used nightclub or, if it was located in downtown area, *shaabi* club.

<sup>xxxix</sup> For example, within the time of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries raqs sharqi became a local and global hybrid genre, with local Egyptian *baladi* remaining at its core. The dance centralized isolated percussive and serpentine hip and torso work as well as more extensive and elaborate use of the arms to mostly frame and focus the core body movements that embodied the Middle Eastern music. A greater use of stage space also occurred during this time as well as the two-piece *badlat’ raqs* costume consisting of a two-piece skirt, belt, and bra costume. For more detailed information on the development of raqs sharqi at this time please see Ward, Heather D. *Egyptian Belly Dance in Transition: The Raqs Sharqi Revolution, 1890-1930*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2018.

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<sup>xxxvi</sup> For more on the diversity of entertainment (including local Egyptian and pan-MENA dance) that was offered in these early entertainment venues as well as nationalities of performers and audiences, see Ward, Heather D. *Egyptian Belly Dance in Transition: The Raqs Sharqi Revolution, 1890-1930*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2018.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Examples of literature that trace a linear trajectory of raqs sharqi's development as an east/west cultural encounter include (Nieuwkerk 1995, Bounaventura 1989, Haynes-Clark 2010, Rose 2012, Sunaina 2008).

<sup>xxxviii</sup> While there was a definite 'split' between professional female dance entertainment during this era, it's important to note that many awalem would also perform as part of the variety entertainment offered in early salas or cabarets, as well as other pan-MENAT regional dances. Raqs sharqi was also offered but now served as its own category of dance, distinct from *awalem* and other regional MENAT styles. Early raqs sharqi performers were quite diverse, coming from Egypt as well as throughout the MENAT, and certainly some of them were originally, or also, *awalem*.

<sup>xxxix</sup> For example, Golden Age film stars Tahia Carioca and Samia Gamal both got their starts in Badia Masabni's popular *sala*. Many of the top singers as well as dancers of this time period started in cabarets/*salas* and were able to capitalize upon the growing technology popularization such as film, radio, and television.

<sup>xl</sup> Nightclubs, or cabarets, were often main sites of raqs sharqi dance disseminated in films throughout the monarchy era and mostly as sites of sin where men stared lustfully at dancers while consuming alcohol and engaging in fights and other drama (Dougherty 2005 167, Shafik 1998, 2007). Thus, popular conceptualizations as well as film further disseminated the raqs sharqi style as performed in these cabarets but also the site of the cabaret as a zone of sin. During the hard economic times of the 1930's cabarets were resented by parts of the popular and middle classes as sites of incredulous immoral spending. Additionally, it is important to note that prostitution and dance were legally different trades, while of course there were some dancers who were also sex workers. The prostitution quarters, for both Egyptians and non-Egyptians, were also located in the Ezkebaya area nearby the heart of the entertainment district, this also led to the stigma of these sites and dancers (Nieuwkerk 1995 45). Yet, on the other hand, more elite cabarets known for their decadence and star performers, such as Samia Gamal and Tahia Carioca, were frequented by King Farouk and other MENA and international government officials.

<sup>xli</sup> While Nile cruising ships have always been a part of professionally paid female dance entertainment in Egypt, it was around this time that the 'package deal' was crystalized, including live music, raqs sharqi, and a male tanoura. Live music consisted of Arabic and international music by a band that was then replaced by the dancer or boat's house band for the raqs sharqi show, typically in between two sets a male tanoura performed. This entertainment occurred during the guests dinners, before and afterward they were free to go above deck and take in the views of the Nile and fresh air. Tanoura is largely a male profession, and developed as a traditional Cairo heritage form from secular Sufi sects at parties and celebrations that would also typically include *awalem* from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward. It includes continuous whirling in a colorful secular costume representing the various Sufi sect colors with a large skirt, or *tanoura*, that flares out and makes colorful patterns in space while the male spins. Tanoura on dinner cruises includes spectacular 'tricks' such as whirling while manipulating umbrellas, colored duffs/frame drums, finger cymbals (*toura*), the removal of the *tanoura* (skirt) and its manipulation, as well as scarves, flags, wings, and other balancing acts. It's typically through the tricks added onto a routine that

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allow the performer to set himself and his show apart from others. Recently, the use of LED lights along the costume/*tanoura* have become common.

<sup>xlii</sup> An *usta* was the female leader of a group of female *awalem*. She had male assistants to help her with business negotiations that occurred in coffee houses around the Mohamed Ali Street area, but this business system was predominantly a female-run and informal arrangement that *awalem* held as a monopoly business along this street. For more on the *awalem/usta* business system and the monopoly of Mohamed Ali street see chapters two and three of Karen Van Nieuwkerk, *'A Trade Like Any Other' Female Dancers and Singers in Egypt*. (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1995)

<sup>xliii</sup> For more information on the Reda Troupe and its relationship with nationalism see Anthony Shay, *Choreographic Politics: State Folk Dance Companies, Representation, and Power*. Wesleyan: 2002 and Fahmy, (Farida) Melda. *The Creative Development of the Mahmoud Reda - Contemporary Egyptian Choreographer*. MA Thesis. UCLA Dance Ethnology, 1987.

<sup>xliiv</sup> During the cold war time, nations sent dance performers abroad to perform, while Egypt used to send famous raqs sharqi solo dancers such as Nagwa Fuoud, after Reda troupe began they started sending both for a brief time and then just the Reda troupe. The Reda troupe was bureaucratically placed under the Ministry of Culture in 1961 while dancers only dealt with state organizations for licensing and regulations.

<sup>xliiv</sup> The Wahabist strain of Islam is extremely conservative in its interpretation of Islam and is the prevalent practice in Saudi Arabia. This movement or doctrine of Islam has been spread through the petro-dollars of Saudi Arabia, the kingdom has invested billions in spreading this interpretation through building and supporting mosques, schoolings, books, and other media. For more on this and how it effected the performance arts read Karen Van Nieuwkerk, *Performing Piety: Singers and Actors in Egypt's Islamic Revival*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013. So, not only were these male workers being exposed to Wahabism through their migrant labor, but Saudi Arabia was also exporting this doctrine through the funding of Egyptian mosques and media.

<sup>xlivi</sup> The 'Arab season' is one of the greatest sources of income for regular raqs sharqi entertainment venues of all kinds throughout Cairo.

<sup>xliiii</sup> *Shaabi* technique and stylization is often heavier, more grounded, and derived from a low center as compared to classical raqs sharqi which can, at times, have a higher center or more lifted aesthetic. *Shaabi* incorporates gestures found in working-class vernacular and social dance, and would often be performed in a *baladi* dress or *galabeya*.

<sup>xlviii</sup> The 1973 oil crisis began in October 1973 when the members of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries proclaimed an oil embargo. The embargo was targeted at nations perceived as supporting Israel during the Yom Kippur War, including the United States, Canada, Japan, and the United Kingdom. By the end of the embargo oil prices had risen drastically across the globe, and oil-exporting countries from the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, became extremely wealthy as well as recognized for their economic and resource power on a global scale. For more on the economic and political effects of the oil embargo and Saudi Arabia petro-dollars in general see Mitchell, Timothy: *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Verso, 2013.

<sup>xlix</sup> It's likely that Nagwa was inspired by the Reda Troupe's choreographies in staging her initial *tablaeus* with *funun shabeya*. It was the conspiring of Nagwa with her husband that led to this artistic development, both of them having the desire to elevate raqs sharqi to an art form and steer it away from the connotation of immorality and sexuality, largely stemming from the fact that it's a solo female body

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on stage (Safy "Nagwa Fouad"). They wanted to create a grand theatrical spectacle that was worthy of respect, this was seen as difficult to accomplish with only a solo female dancer spotlighted. The use of *funun shabeya* accompanying dancers varies, but contemporaneously they can be found across venues, from hotel shows to some larger cabarets, but are particularly popular in weddings. However, in cabarets 'the boys' as they are often called, usually just accompany the dancer for her entrance and then don't join her again, whereas in other venues they may work with the dancer for her entrance and a number of other folkloric or character pieces with multiple costume changes and folkloric references.

<sup>i</sup> The attacks began with the Islamic insurgency during the 1990's that targeted police and government officials but also civilians including tourists. *Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* "The Islamic Group" was the primary perpetrator of the attacks. The 'Daylight Ambushes' of 1993 were another harsh year for attacks in Egypt with over 1,106 people killed or wounded, mostly targeting police. In 1996 gunmen fired on Greek and Australian tourists outside of a Cairo hotel near the pyramids. The following year gunmen attacked a tourist bus outside the Egyptian Museum. A major terrorist attack that effected international tourism was the 'Luxor Massacre' of 1997 where terrorists massacred 62 tourists outside of the Hatshepsut temple. Throughout the 2000's a number of attacks and bombs occurred in tourist sites within tourist cities such as the Sinai, Red Sea, Dahab, Cairo, and Sharm al Sheikh.

<sup>ii</sup> Many foreign dancers work in Cairo because of their deep love of the live orchestras, appreciative and actively participating audiences, and the shared musical understanding within dance contexts. However, foreign dancers are also aware of the social capital gained from having worked in Cairo, often marketing themselves as "so and so 'of Cairo.'" At the same time, not all foreign dancers operate on the same axis of privilege and circumstance. For example, many Russian and other Eastern European dancers, also coming from harsh economic circumstances, greatly benefit from the financial gains of working in Cairo as a primary benefit as opposed to the social capital of the international teaching circuit for women that are often more economically secure and coming from western nationalities. For more on the similarities and differences between foreign dancers working in Cairo see McDonald, Caitlin. *Global Moves: Belly Dance as an Extra/Ordinary Space to Explore Social Paradigms in Egypt and Around the World*. Zarafa: 2012.

<sup>iii</sup> For more on the politics, meanings, and significance of this please see chapter 4 of this dissertation: Pyramid Street Cabarets. Notably, however, the transnational mobility of foreign dancers and the sites they chose to work, and refused to work, helped shape international discourse on class, ethnic, and sexuality hierarchies related to performance venues and the performing bodies that did, or did not, perform there.

<sup>iiii</sup> Mahmoud Gaffar's now three-story building dedicated just to belly dance shopping started in the 1980's and he was one of the first to begin making the coin hipscarves for dancers. For more information on Cairo's creative capitalization and commodification of the global belly dance trend, see McDonald, Caitlin. *Global Moves: Belly Dance as an Extra/Ordinary Space to Explore Social Paradigms in Egypt and Around the World*. Zarafa: 2012.

<sup>liv</sup> In fact, the bra Dina started to wear became a standard, known as the 'dina bra' for it's large 'push-up' effect and enhancement of the breasts. 'Modern Cairo' style often references dancers such as Dina and other contemporary dancers either trained by master choreographer Raqia Hassan or that come from a folklore-troupe base and also add larger movements and accents to their style that in general takes up more space. This loosely defined style's aesthetic, technique, and staging are derived from this training based in theatrical folklore through Reda-troupe which added more complex footwork, turns, body lines, and theatrical staging to the raqs sharqi repertoire. Many credit Dina as being the dancer that was really the turning point in when 'modern Cairo style' came into being. Dina was briefly trained in the Reda troupe but credits Ibrahim Akef as one of her original teachers, but her style is her own.

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<sup>lv</sup> One of the innovative woman who pioneered these classes in fitness centers throughout Cairo is Aicha Babacar, who remains one of the most popular and sought after instructors in fitness centers and events throughout Cairo at the time of this dissertation.

<sup>lvi</sup> Ramadan is the holy month of fasting from sunrise to sunset in the Islamic faith, a sacred time for becoming closer to God and committing good deeds. Most venues stop having raqs sharqi shows in Cairo, and many fasting practitioners abstain from food, drink, as well as other activities deemed *haram* (shameful) - a category watching dancers could easily fall into. The fact that there was almost an entire decade of this Ramadan overlapping with the Arab tourist season was a great economic loss for venues that profited off of raqs sharqi and Arab tourism. Notably, it was when during the time of my fieldwork that the 'Arab season' finally 'returned' in full force to Cairo since the revolution in 2011, making this a rich time to investigate the local, intra-MENAT, and global forces at work in the city.

<sup>lvii</sup> Here 'deep state' refers to the enduring structures and institutions, such as the military, judiciary, and security apparatus, that have held real power in certain nation-states. In the case of Egypt (and Tunisia as well), as historian James Gelvin explains, the 2010-2011 uprisings were unique amongst the MENA because their deep states remained intact and in charge of the course of events in their countries, including the suppression of the revolutionary changes sought by many of the revolutionaries (79).

<sup>lviii</sup> The gendered violence of SCAF is exemplified in the case of the 'girl in the blue bra' from 2011, a protestor who was beaten unconscious by multiple military men to the point where her limp body was dragged and stomped, her black *abaya* (modesty garment) coming upon to expose her abdomen and blue bra underneath. For more on this particular incident and other incidences of gendered violence during the aftermath of the revolution see Hafez, Sherine. "Bodies That Protest: The Girl in the Blue Bra, Sexuality, and State Violence in Revolutionary Egypt." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. Vol. 40, no. 1, Pg. 20-28. 2014; "The Revolution shall not pass through Women's Bodies: Egypt, Uprising and Gender Politics." *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19:2, 172-185. 2014.

<sup>lix</sup> Controversary always surrounds the looting and destruction/burning down of Pyramid Street cabarets. Some members of the raqs sharqi industry believed that the staff and owners themselves sometimes burnt down or destroyed the clubs, seeing the economic havoc as well as realizing Ramadan would continue to cut across the lucrative Arab Season for the next five years or so they saw it wiser to cut their losses and take the compensation from the clubs. Others in the industry stated in was the Muslim Brotherhood extremists that wanted to 'make a sign to both Egypt and the world' that they were taking a firm stand of power and their version of Egypt would not tolerate such prominent sites of sin and debauchery (as these clubs are often associated with the drug trade, sex work, and dancing amidst alcohol-drinking male clientele.) Still, others thought it was just common 'street thugs' that randomly selected these and other stores/venues to loot and vandalize.

<sup>lx</sup> For more elaboration on the controversy of these dance video clips as vulgar, westernized, and/or empowering, see Arvizu, Shannon: The Politics of Bellydancing in Cairo. *The Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 12/13, No. 2/1 (Fall 2004/Spring 2005), pp. 159-181.

<sup>lxi</sup> Morsi attempted implementing laws that would place his presidential edicts above judicial scrutiny. This move among others would also alienate the military's historic grasp on power which also pitted the military regime against Morsi.

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<sup>lxii</sup> My informal interview with Amie Sultan occurred in her hotel room at the Kempinski hotel where she was working after one of her performances on March 5, 2017. I recorded the interview and transcribed it myself back in the U.S. The interview was in English.

<sup>lxiii</sup> I held a dual interview with Sara Farouk Ahmed and costume designer Eman Zaki in Eman's Dokki apartment and costume shop in English on Feb. 2, 2017. I recorded the interview and transcribed it myself back in the U.S.

<sup>lxiv</sup> This anxiety was not just affectual, it was material. During Morsi's regime harassment, attacks, and legal crackdown against non-dominant groups such as dancers, women, Christians, and non-heterosexual men was on the rise (Amnesty 2013; Pratt 50.50).

<sup>lxv</sup> Hundreds of arrests, estimated to be over 300, have occurred since Sisi came to power, particularly targeting gay and transgender men and women. While being gay or queer is not illegal under Egyptian law, these individuals are often arrested and convicted of other crimes such as 'debauchery,' and 'eliciting prostitution.' Previously, the 2001 arrest of 52 allegedly gay men from the Queen's boat nightclub during Mubarak's regime was said to be the largest crack down on the LGBTQ community in Egypt, this has been surpassed during Sisi's time though their reasons for targeting these already marginalized communities are likely similar. Both Mubarak and Sisi have come under fire by more conservative religious sectors and to appease these groups from appearing 'too secular' these crackdowns are often a major way to appease conservative religious morale, as well as distract from the dire economic situation through a policing of what they perceive as non-normative masculinity. The most recent crackdown occurred during a Mashrou Leila concert, where the band's lead singer is known to be openly gay, and a handful of Egyptians concert-goers raised a rainbow flag in solidarity, over fifty people have been arrested since (Michaelson, *The Guardian* 2017). LGBTQ dating apps and websites are now warning members to be careful and safe before meeting, as one main method of arrest is for police to go undercover on these apps and 'lure in' subjects for arrest (Youseff and Liam, "Egypt Expands" 2017).

<sup>lxvi</sup> For example, Uber and Careem have set pricing so you do not end up haggling or fighting over the final price of a ride, as well as comfortable amenities often not found in taxi cabs such as working air conditioning. Riders and drivers are held accountable through a 'rating system' and comment feedback option after every ride, which cuts down on poor customer service, as well as possible cheating and or unwanted sexual attention. Personally, as a young foreign woman, I mostly opted for Uber when traveling alone, particularly because the unwanted attention and price fighting that happened far too often in taxis was exhausting, and as an American I'm used to, and willing to pay extra, for air conditioning in the scorching heat of Cairo summers. Those in the dance industry had the option of ride sharing apps and services versus taxis as well if they did not own their own vehicle, but many dancer's with multiple gigs in a night will work with a hired driver they already know.

<sup>lxvii</sup> For more on 'taxi transitions' see 'Pt 3. Maneuverings of a Multi-Sited Dance Ethnography' in this chapter.

<sup>lxviii</sup> Controversy surrounds the sudden boom in popularity of Sofinar followed by her sudden drop from the scene, which also happened rather quickly. Most contacts agree she managed to upset the wrong people with high-power contacts who stirred up trouble for her, including her arrest for insulting the Egyptian flag in 2014 (Ahram 2015). Now, she's mostly doing private events.

<sup>lxix</sup> 'Bread, freedom, and human dignity' was one of the rallying calls during Egypt's January 25<sup>th</sup> 2011 revolution.



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<sup>lxx</sup> For more reading on the relationship between Egyptian politics, gender, and the colonial encounter see Lila Abu Lughod Ed., *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, 1998: Princeton, Princeton University Press.

<sup>lxxi</sup> For example, in the United States during WW2 women's roles and activities expanded to include what was previously in the 'masculine' domain such as working in industry and having female-headed households. Following the war, the 'honey, I'm home' lifestyle became promoted and normalized, with women urged to return to their homes and identify within the domestic sphere as housewives and mothers.

<sup>lxxii</sup> I am speaking about accessibility from a non-Egyptian perspective, which due to my dissertation's institutional form and language I believe will make up the majority of my readership. As raqs sharqi dictates, I must cater my show towards the particular audience in order to create the most meaningful connections. This accessibility is not just with physical presence of how easy it is to 'step into' such venues in Cairo but also in terms of media, wherein YouTube clips can more easily be found of boats and hotels, cabarets holding a strictly no photo/video policy. However, it is worth nothing that this 'accessibility' not only assumes a non-Egyptian body but also a middle class and up one, as some local working-class cabarets are the only accessible site of these three from a class perspective.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> For an example of binaristic orientalist representations of the Arab world and peoples, see: Jamarkani, Amira. *Imagining Arab Womanhood: The Cultural Mythology of Veils, Harems, and Belly Dancers in the U.S.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. She discusses how representations such as the sexy belly dancer are mapped onto larger power discourses of an imperialist U.S. nation and its progress and imperialist self-definition.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> These Nile tour cruising boats were often referred to colloquially as either *marakeb and/or safeena al siyaha*.

<sup>lxxv</sup> For a full example illustrating professional dancers, *awalem*, being hired for boat parties see a descriptive example from Naguib Mahfouz's "The Trilogy" (2001 6<sup>th</sup> ed.) It was likely during the business and professionalization switch to male impressarios and the opening up of the economy during Nasser's era that boat entertainment in Cairo areas switched and the system that still occurs today became standardized and popularized by the Sadat and Mubarak eras. As such, boat entertainment has a long history in Cairo, though the contexts and circumstances have significantly changed since the popularization of raqs sharqi over *awalem* dancing.

<sup>lxxvi</sup> This is not to imply that raqs sharqi in Cairo is unique for female laborers having to deal with sexual harassment and advances, as this is common throughout the globe in all professions, particular gendered entertainment industries. However, I am suggesting that how these dynamics manifest are situated within particular socio-cultural contexts in ways wherein a foreign U.S. dancer's toolkit of anti-harassment tactics may not be as effective in Cairo as a Cairene dancer who has grown up negotiating these intricacies.

<sup>lxxvii</sup> The informal interview with Camelia Masreya occurred on January 22, 2017 at a dining table within the Nile Maxim's main seating area after the close of a cruise night when she was performing. Karim was translating the interview but I also understood most of it. The interview was recorded and then I transcribed it myself back home in the U.S.

<sup>lxxviii</sup> *Fitna* is an Arabic term that loosely refers to social chaos, temptation, or disorder. It's definition often depends on the specific context of usage, in the case of female professional dancers it's used to refer to the social disorder/chaos a women's sexual power and deviancy may elicit.

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<sup>lxxxix</sup> This duo-informal interview with Randa Kamel and Tito Seif occurred on Feb. 14, 2017 in the hotel lobby of the Barcelos Hotel in Cairo. I recorded the interview and transcribed it myself back in the U.S. The interview was conducted in English and partial Arabic that Randa was able to translate when I didn't comprehend. The interview was graciously arranged by Sara Farouk Ahmed, one of the festival organizers and dear colleague.

<sup>lxxx</sup> This is also true for workers in general that begin their careers in cabarets and then move up to more socially-palatable venues. While the stigma is certainly heavier for female entertainers, male employees that work the cabarets often also do this same masking of their cabaret beginnings. This includes men working as entertainers in cabarets but also as regular service and food and beverage staff.

<sup>lxxx</sup> *Funun al shaabaya* refers to popular performing artists, and specifically in this case study to the dominantly male theatrical folklore dancers from, or following in, the lineage of the Reda Troupe created by Mahmoud Reda and Farida Fahmy in the 1950's in Egypt, as well as the *firqa kummeya* (national troupe). As I refer to them in this chapter, I refer specifically to the back-up male theatrical folk dancers that work with raqs sharqi dancers either to create spectacle for *mejanca* entrances and/or for creating a fuller show with theatrical folklore inspired 'tableaus.' *Tableau* refers to dance numbers that have a narrative or story line based in or referencing any number of regional folklore dancers theatricalized by the national troupes or other Egyptian contextualized narratives and settings, such as smoking shisha at a coffee shop.

<sup>lxxxii</sup> It is generally known that by the 1970's Nagwa Fouad was considered one of the greatest raqs sharqi artist performing in the MENA. For more information on Nagwa Fouad and her legacy as a star dancer see: Safy, Shereen. "An Uncommon Woman Nagwa Fouad, Queen of Oriental Dance" *The Best of Habibi Online*. Vol. 18 No. 3, March 2001. <http://thebestofhabibi.com/vol-18-no-3-march-2001/nagwa-fouad/>.

<sup>lxxxiii</sup> For more information on how Reda Troupe embodied values and political aims of the Nasser era, as well as its relationship to raqs sharqi at the time, see: Vermeyden, Anne. "The Reda Folkloric Dance Troupe and Egyptian State Support During the Nasser Period." *Dance Research Journal*. 49/3 December 2017. 24-37.

<sup>lxxxiv</sup> My informal interview in English with leading Egyptian dance ethnologist Sahra C. Kent occurred in the hotel lobby of the Novotel hotel by the Cairo airport on Feb. 7, 2017. I recorded the interview and transcribed it myself back in the U.S. Sahra was one of the first to get a higher degree in dance ethnology doing ethnographic research in Cairo. She also was a working professional dancer in the 1990's and still conducts in-depth annual research on dances throughout Egypt.

<sup>lxxxv</sup> Vanessa Friedman was a wonderful friend and research collaborator during my stay in Cairo. I had many long interviews with her after her show in the five-star Sofitel Moroccan restaurant where she generously shared her vast knowledge of the professional working raqs sharqi scene. Interviews occurred in English at a table after her show in the restaurant, and we were either alone or her husband, also working as a folklore dancer, was present and assisting. I recorded the interviews and transcribed them myself back in the U.S.

<sup>lxxxvi</sup> My informal interview with Farida Fahmy occurred in English in her Zamalek apartment on March 28, 2017. The full interview was in English and I recorded and transcribed it myself back in the U.S.

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<sup>lxxxvii</sup> An exception to this is the cabaret circuit, where rather than dancers largely going off stage to interact with guests, guests are often welcome and invited up onto the stage with the singers and dancers to socially dance. These dynamics will be discussed more in Chapter Four on cabarets.

<sup>lxxxviii</sup> While a significant number of professional Cairo dancers have had breast and other surgical/cosmetic enhancements to become more marketable in raqs sharqi, it's important to note that this is following a globalized trend from the cosmetic and plastic surgery industries. While dancer's may not have surgical enhancements, most working dancers, anywhere in the world, will modify their costuming and looks to better fit an idealized male gaze aesthetic. Modifications run the spectrum from wearing a padded push-up style costume bra to enhance the breast shape and size to multiple plastic and cosmetic surgeries. In the Cairo entertainment industry, across venues, it is common to enhance one's look with enlarging the breasts (through whatever method), enhance the face such as larger pouty lips, thick defined eyebrows, and false eyelashes, as well as long thick and full hair wigs or extensions. Dancer's in Cairo are also under pressure to have lighter skin, and the more upscale the venue the greater the lightness of one's skin affects their hire-ability. Finally, during the time of my fieldwork the trend for women (including dancers) to wear green or blue eye contacts was a popular fashion and desired eye color.

<sup>lxxxix</sup> The informal interview with Farah Nasri occurred in her dressing room below deck of the Nile Maxim after her show on Jan. 18, 2017. I recorded the interview and transcribed it myself back in the U.S.

<sup>xc</sup> The informal group interview with Farah Nasri and her *funun al shaabaya* (Ahmed, Wael, Samah, and Mahdy) happened below deck of the Nile Maxim on March 21, 2017. It was in Farah's dressing room and both Farah and Karim were present to join in and help translate the interview. The interview was recorded and I transcribed it myself back in the U.S.

<sup>xci</sup> It's also important to note, and Farah Nasri likewise pointed this out, that Randa, Camelia, and Samia are all much older women compared to the other dancers featured in this project. Farah is significantly younger than them and their ages also affect their life experiences and how they choose to craft their shows on stage.

<sup>xcii</sup> For a greater discussion of women's modernity projects tied to various feminisms in Egypt and how they simultaneously created both new potential and opportunities for women, as well as new forms of control and surveillance, see: Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Re-Making Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

<sup>xciii</sup> An example of Sis's economic endeavors to better the economy while simultaneously being stifled by the military's' deep-state grip over the government and the regime's own economic interests is discussed in *The Economist*. "The Price is Wrong: What Fuel, bread, and Water Reveal about how Egypt is Mismanaged." Feb. 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Cairo. <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21736552-egyptians-are-addicted-subsidies-make-them-poorer-what-fuel-bread->. Accessed March 2, 2018.

<sup>xciv</sup> Cabarets and similar venues were the originally sites that housed raqs sharqi and from the early 1900's through Mubarak eras there were always cabarets considered elite and extravagant, often those visited by world leaders, celebrities, and dignitaries locally and internationally. These star cabarets also hosted top raqs sharqi artists, however, particularly since the 1960/70's with the influx of *khaleegy* tourists and monied Libyans that began throwing money as tipping, and increasingly negative depiction of raqs sharqi nightclub dancers in media, cabarets remained stigmatized. This stigmatization was relational, often morally stigmatized as sites of debauchery, sexual excitement, and alcohol, but also from the perspective of socialist nationalism ushered in with the Nasser era that stigmatized these venues as sites of

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extravagant class excess and elitism related to the old monarchy and colonial rule (see chapter 1: historic overview from this dissertation for more information). However, as raqs sharqi became established in five star hotels later on, becoming popularized during the Sadat era, the hierarchies were already in place with five-star hotels, because of their expensive entrance fees that kept out the popular classes, were still stigmatized because raqs sharqi itself is a stigmatized form, but on the ‘rubric’ of low class versus artistic entertainment five-star hotels were seen as the highest caliber of venue outside of the smattering of elite cabarets that still existed. *Awalem* were deliberately kept out from five-star hotel raqs sharqi shows, due to their popular class connotations, though of course there were *awalem* performing in them, just under the radar, and these *awalem* would be dancing in the now well-defined raqs sharqi style, aesthetic, and costuming.

<sup>xcv</sup> One example of this discourse is when I approached internationally famous dancer Dina Talaat Sayyad at a belly dance festival in Cairo during July 2016. When I stated I was doing my research on raqs sharqi across different venues in Egypt she simply replied that “but there is no dance in Egypt now” (Sayyad, July 12, 2016). Notably, Dina Talaat Sayad was claimed by NewsWeek and the international belly dance community to be the ‘last Egyptian dancer’ (Newsweek 2008) due to growing conservatism, global fashion trend changes, and changing economics within the country. Her show at the Semiramis hotel is said to be one of the few remaining that follows in the legacy of extravagant classic five-star hotel raqs sharqi.

<sup>xcvi</sup> Amina is a pseudonym used for anonymity purposes and to comply with IRB ethics protocols. Anonymity is the default within this project as per IRB protocols.

<sup>xcvii</sup> My Egyptian male friend that was supposed to meet me for coffee in the Semiramis lobby before I went to Dina’s show alone is one example of this. He failed to ever show up because he worked overtime in the khan al Khalili trying to secure more business at a time when tourists were still just trickling through the giant tourist souk. He didn’t feel comfortable meeting me in the space without going home first to shower and change into nicer clothes, but because of working later he knew he couldn’t catch the time. He told me later he thought the entrance security wouldn’t even let him through security dressed the way he was (from work) even if he tried.

<sup>xcviii</sup> Alexandrian *melaya luff* dances are more of a character dance than regional dance, and its innovation and popularity is owed to the Reda Troupe. In the 1960’s the Reda Troupe used the *melaya*, a black long sheet-like outdoors modesty cloth for women, as a prop to accentuate the character of the flirty and teasing Alexandrian woman. Typically, throughout the dance she starts more fully covered and then teasingly and playfully unwraps the *melaya* as the dance commences, eventually tying it around her hips as a scarf. While this *tableau* is extremely popular for raqs sharqi dancers throughout Cairo, through my frequent observations of Amina’s performances she always utilized this number in her show, where it could also be used to highlight her own roots and regional background coming from Alexandria.

<sup>xcix</sup> A *baladi* progression is also known as a *baladi taqsim*, and there are specific versions gendered male and female, all of which consist of a number of distinct sections following a traditional yet loose structure. *Baladi* means ‘of the country,’ and connotes things ‘*asil*,’ authentic, and honorably country-rooted and non-tainted by western *afrangi* influence. It denotes those *ibn* and *banat al balad*, sons and daughters of the country, the ‘real Egyptians,’ with positive connotations of being good, honest, clever, street-knowledgeable and of high integrity. Most *baladi* improvisations will begin with a soulful *taqsim* (instrumental solo) by the main instrument. Next, a call and response, akin to a ‘conversation,’ occurs between the instrument and the drummer. Following this, call and response between the instrument and the drummer, the progression sinuously moves into a slower rhythmic section. The middle part of the progression might include melodies and bits from popular *baladi* songs. The finale is normally a quick tempo with accents and can lead into a drum solo. This musical performance is built around the skill and

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demands of the dancer. While *baladi* progressions developed in the countryside areas outside of urban Cairo, the tradition moved into the urban center with working and lower middle-class *baladi* families that migrated to Cairo for better work opportunities while still maintaining pride and traditions from their countryside *baladi* roots. For more information on *baladi* progressions and their history and relationship with dance, see: Hilal Suraya. “*Baladi Personae in Egyptian Dance and Music.*” Tribe, 2008. Accessed Feb 2018 from Middle Eastern / Belly Dance Academic Research and Sources Facebook Group, reposted by Maura Enright, September 2016.

<sup>c</sup> *Riklam* is a Turkish word meaning ‘advertisement.’ *Riklam* is one of the titles for the women that work this job within the cabarets, because they work as a type of advertising for the club to attract more clientele. Other titles these women’s job title went by in English translation were ‘hostesses’ or ‘service women.’ However, to many outside the cabaret industry all of these women are painted with the brush of ‘prostitute,’ even though they may, or may not, engage in sex work. While most *riklam* share gender and lower socio-economic status, the reasons they engage in this work vary, many were single or divorced mothers taking care of children on their own, others enjoyed the exciting atmosphere and found this job to be the best for making quick money with their level of education, others simply took it as a job like any other, though with better income than what they could find elsewhere based on their experience/education.

<sup>ci</sup> *Nuq’ta* is the singular colloquial Arabic, and *keet* the plural, for the specific kind of tipping money circulated within cabarets.

<sup>cii</sup> Hired ‘dates’ and sex work are a significant part of most cabaret nightlife, though not all partake in these activities. Many cabaret dancers throughout Cairo, but particularly along Pyramid Street because of the close-knit network of close-by cabarets, will work one *nimra* (show number of about thirty minutes) after another, perhaps starting around midnight in one cabaret and hitting a handful more until eventually finishing her work between 4-6am. Some dancers in cabarets certainly engage in sex work, but not all, in my experience only a minority number of dancers did this, though they were highly likely to marry someone from the cabarets or within the cabaret work industry. However, the stigma of being a working dancer, particularly combined with this site of work, cast all dancers as ‘prostitutes’ to the general Egyptian public. There is a category of gendered labor within cabaret circuitries known as hostesses, service women, and/or *riklam* (Turkish for ‘advertisement’) where the often younger women from lower socio-economic backgrounds are paid to sit and ‘party’ with customers. Sometimes, some of these women also work as sex workers. Socially dancing intermittently throughout the night is a typical aspect of the job routine. I am still investigating the origins for the word ‘*riklam*’ in connection with these women, in older times these women would sit and drink with customers known as *fatihat*, for more on this see Karen Van Nieuwkerk, ‘*A Trade Like Any Other’ Female Singers and Dancer in Egypt.*’ (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1995).

<sup>ciii</sup> For more of the history of Pyramid Street and the changes it experienced over time up until 2016-2018 see Chapter 1: Cairo Contextualized.

<sup>civ</sup> A *mawaal* is a genre of vocal Arabic music that demonstrates strong vocal abilities and improvisational skills. The *mawaal* occurs before the actual song and relates to poetry traditions wherein the lyrics may have deep meanings that audiences can mutually relate to.

<sup>cv</sup> *Debke* is popular social line-dancing music from the Levantine regions of the Middle East.

<sup>cvi</sup> Tracing the roots and routes of this site-specific tipping practice is complex, and gestures to the entanglements of local Egyptian, intra-MENA, and global forces. The practice of guests providing *nu’qta* at

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local *shaabi* wedding parties in Cairo is cited as one root of this, with the singer playing the role of *nabatshi*, or sometimes he is a separate figure within the cabaret, this is the man who does the *tahaya* and holds up the tipped money. It also intersects with the MENA oil boom and open-door economic policies of Sadat's era that resulted in the sudden proliferation of wealthy MENA male clientele within these clubs that started throwing and showering the money.

<sup>cvi</sup> This combination of 'drinking, drugs, and revealed female bodies' was consistently quoted to me by general Egyptian friends and colleagues as well as those throughout the dance industry as reasons for the seediness or 'lack of artistry' in cabarets. This particularly 'low' ranking of cabarets upon the already stigmatized dance work hierarchy is apparent in the way that many dancers that work across venues, meaning they don't specialize in just boats or just cabarets, will hide their cabaret dancing because of the heightened stigma it brings. Egyptian dancer's will market their boat, hotel, and wedding gigs on social media but not their cabaret appearances. Another example, during one taxi ride to a downtown cabaret, the driver and my male companions for the evening were chatting, but when they admitted they were headed to a cabaret the driver refused to drive us farther as it was a 'big shame' for my male friends to take a 'nice girl' to that kind of indecent place. (Thankfully we were close enough that we made the rest of the trip walking!)

<sup>cvi</sup> This is not to say that Pyramid Street cabarets had 'smooth sailing' in the wake of the 2011 revolution. Throughout their history cabarets have been targeted by certain sectors of society as being sites of decadent corruption or moral depravity. A handful of cabarets were looted and vandalized after the revolution, but it's unclear as to the reasons. Many Egyptians reported it was common 'street thugs' while others contended it was likely Brotherhood extremists. However, some cabarets did shut down, the reason possibly being tied to new strategies of erasing their 'corrupt mark' on society. Post revolution Ragab el Sawerki, a strict Islamist businessman bought up a few of these cabarets, he owns department stores throughout Cairo that adhere to conservative Islamist practices. He does not hire women or Christians and everything stops during prayer times. While he also has stores on Pyramid Street, these were not looted or vandalized as were the cabarets he was seeking to purchase after the revolution. A news article that discusses this makes the overall concern of strict Islamist who use religion as a business and want to forbid art, tourism, music, and keep women at home. The author contends it would be bad if these people started running the country. For more, see: Hanafe, Khaled. "Sawerki bought the clubs Al Andalous, Arizona, and Ghandoul on Pyramid Street." *El Fagr* Newspaper. Oct. 10, 2011. Page 15. Print. The newspaper is not available online but an insightful article by Priscilla Adum was posted on Shira's acclaimed belly dance site that elaborates on the article and its implications. Please see: "Farewell to the Al Ghandoul Nightclub on El Haram Street" Priscilla Adum. Shira.net. Accessed: May 19, 2018. <http://www.shira.net/about/el-gandoul-nightclub.htm>.

<sup>cix</sup> I talked with Sayyad Henkesh and several cabaret managers about tipping practices and history, though Sayyad was the best versed in the history. I interviewed Sayyad Henkesh several times throughout my fieldwork at open coffee shops with our mutual trusted and generous friend Khaled Mansour translating, (Aug 2015, Aug. 2016, and March 2017). Sayyad Henkesh is an oral historian from a famous Mohamed Ali Street musician family. He played the accordion. Some cabarets, Lucy's famous Parisiana being one example, may use fake notes (hers are shaped like pounds but feature a Santa Claus face in the center of the bill and the words 'special coupon' under the amount.) However, the primary way tipping works is that clients pay a set amount such as 100 Egyptian pounds, and depending on their perceived class status, personality, and street smarts, and are given multiplied amounts in return, such as 500-1,000 Egyptian pound notes. (These numbers are just used as an example.) Managers mentioned that it's never a far 'pay-to-play' scheme, but that they try and be clever through the uneven distribution of money to amplify already prominent clientele's status and enjoyment within the venue.

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<sup>cx</sup> I interviewed cabaret dancer Suzy on Feb. 16, 2016 outside of the cabaret where she'd just finished performing her *nimra*. One of the waiters, Ali, was a key interlocutor in procuring interviews with dancers, entertainers, and musicians after their shows in the alleys/parking areas just outside of the noisy cabarets. Karim was the translator for these informal interviews, and the dancer's male manager was always present. The interviews including paying a small amount to both Ali and the dancer, usually between 50-100 pounds, for quick 10-15 minute interviews before they had to run to catch their other cabaret shows elsewhere. The interviews were recorded and I transcribed them myself back in the U.S. Suzy was working the cabaret circuits for years and I was fortunate to catch her performances at various cabarets throughout my fieldwork.

<sup>cx</sup><sub>i</sub> The *bint al balad* persona in dance comes from the working-classes and is often represented in dance with a strong incoming *masmoudi sagheera* rhythm or a genre of music (also known as *baladi*.) The movements include heavy, earthy serpentine or percussive hip work as well as an extremely confident and grounded character. The 'daughter of the country' as this name translates, represents an Egyptian girl from the working class, often juxtaposed against the *afrangi* or 'westernized' Egyptian and embodies wholesome local values and tradition. This labelling identifies a 'village girl in the big city' but that retains her traditional values and strong moral character.

<sup>cx</sup><sub>ii</sub> I had an interview with star nightclub dancer Aziza and her husband Ahmed, the stage manager of a nightclub on April 3, 2017. The interview occurred before their nightclub shifts got started around midnight at a café down the street from their show. Karim was translating the informal interview which I recorded and then transcribed back in the U.S.

<sup>cx</sup><sub>iii</sub> During this time in the summer of 2017, one US dollar was worth 18 Egyptian pounds. Notably, this was when the IMF and World Bank policies had resulted in the 'floating' of the Egyptian pound, wreaking devastating effects on an already dire economy. US dollars were desperately desired and needed within the economy, thus resulting in an even greater class signifier for the man that could carry such bills.

<sup>cx</sup><sub>iv</sub> The *maalima* is often represented as a working-class woman that owns her own small business and thus has to take on characteristics typically associated with men. Characteristics include those of assertiveness, strength, and toughness due to her role in the labor economy. Within *raqs sharqi* dance, this is when the dancer performatively represents the 'one pulling the strings' economically or with power. For example, dancer's often keep their male band members in line embodying this persona due to the hierarchy of their labor roles since the dancer typically hires, and fires, the band. While many foreign dancers in Cairo spoke to me about playing the 'stupid innocent idiot' role off-stage to get their way with male employees and employers, most Egyptian working dancers said this wouldn't work with them, they must be '*maalima*.' Fifi Abdou, a famous dancer popularly performing from the 1970-1990's was known embody this character with her shisha water-pipe dance and white galabeya *baladi* number.

<sup>cx</sup><sub>v</sub> This quality embodies and performs coquettish hyper-femininity, and is very common in *raqs sharqi* performances with movements such as bashfully placing one hand on your cheek while rolling your shoulders back one after the other, or any sensual body movement where the dancer seems innocently surprised by her own beauty and charm.

<sup>cx</sup><sub>vi</sub> The *toura* are men that play *toura*, or larger finger cymbals, within the band. If a dancer can afford to hire a larger band there is the option to have a *toura* player. Sometimes the *toura* can be much more playful and performative than other band members, often leaving the band to dance with the dancer, *riklam*, or clientele on or off stage. Egyptian dance ethnologist Sahra Carolee Kent elaborates during an interview in the Novotel hotel lobby, Feb. 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017. "He's the intermediary between the male and female world of the dancers. So one thing I found out is that the *Usta* (from *awalem* and Mohamed Ali days)

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would have a *toura* who goes with her everywhere. He goes and plays but he is also her intermediary between the public male world. If she were to go alone and directly into this public male world there would be bad talk, so he goes with her and is the intermediary. When he plays and dances it's like *awalem* and *usta* style, I got so many moves from my *toura* guy, watching him dance in the hallways during our band rehearsals. So my musicians told me (and I heard this from many musician interviews of my own as well), the *toura* are considered either mentally deficient or homosexual. But I knew mine wasn't either of those, and they'd say well no, he isn't, but *toura* are, and I couldn't understand that contradiction. Several privately explained to me that no, Kassem isn't, but we have to pretend that he is. They see dancers as so powerful, so if an *Usta* can change a girl to a woman from the wedding *zaffa* (procession), she's powerful enough to play with men's minds, so he has to be one of those two things to be able to be close to her all the time and not fall in love or go crazy. He exists in that liminal space, because gender is so divided here, you need somebody in that liminal space, usually it's a young boy, but that doesn't really work for dance, you need a grown man. He can also be very protective of the dancer (I have also noticed this in my fieldwork.) It's a fascinating thing, I'm not as excited about the huge gender separation because I had to live it, but how he fills that gap, and watching my guy dance like a woman up and down the hallways was beautiful... if any woman danced like that here she'd be a star. So he's a man that's allowed to dance like a woman, but then, he's considered homosexual or mentally deficient."

<sup>cxvii</sup> I interviewed a well-known drummer Yossry el Hefni on April 20, 2017 in his music studio on Pyramid Street. He held a long career playing in an assortment of venues and worked with hundreds of dancers over the years in Cairo and international dance festivals. Karim translated the informal interview and it was recorded then I transcribed it by myself back in the U.S. Yossry was incredibly generous with his knowledge and also offered me dance training in his studio. He said it would help my project to not just interview him, but work with him through a drummer-dancer training relationship. As a practitioner-scholar I deeply appreciated and valued this thinking and his kindness. He also introduced me to other cabaret dancers for interviews and to train with in his studio.

<sup>cxviii</sup> I held a quick 10 minute informal interview with Hamada the *toura* player of a cabaret on Feb 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017 during the breaks between his performances in the parking lot area just outside the venue. Ali the waiter arranged the interview and they both were paid 50-100 pounds. Karim translated the interview and I recorded it then transcribed it myself back in the U.S.

<sup>cxix</sup> I held a quick and informal 10-minute interview with hostess Donya during one of her shifts at a cabaret on July 20, 2016. The ten-minute interview actually consisted of quick 1-2 minute question and answers over a period of breaks when she came to check on our table as she was busy working and attending to many customers. Donya started working in the cabaret after a divorce to a much older man she ran away to marry. A man in her neighborhood told her about the job and she needed money to help raise her young children alone. I paid her 50 pounds for the interview and Karim was translating. Because this interview occurred in the noisy cabaret table-side Karim recorded the interview and later translated it on our drive home. I later transcribed it by myself in the U.S. Interviewing hostesses within cabarets were some of the hardest interviews to procure as most women did not give us permission to ask questions, and other times the management would not allow it. In this case, Donya granted us permission, but made sure it was also okay with the management as well. Many cabaret staff were concerned I was working for the police or government and were concerned I would only want to report negative things about their work. Every time we did procure cabaret interviews, we were also invited at some point into the manager's office to talk about my research.

<sup>cxx</sup> I held a quick fifteen-minute informal interview with Bossy on Aug 10, 2016 after her *nimra* in a small alley outside the cabaret. Karim was translating and her manager/husband was also present. I recorded the interview and transcribed it myself back in the U.S.



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<sup>cxix</sup> I held an informal interview with cabaret singer Ahmed during after his show at a cabaret on April 3, 2017. Karim was translating and the interview took place right outside the main seating area in a more open lobby. Again, it was a brief ten-minute informal interview as he had to get back to work. I recorded the interview and transcribed it myself back in the U.S.

<sup>cxixii</sup> Mona Ghazi is a Hungarian-Syrian dancer that's been working in Egypt for over a decade. She primarily works in boats and hotels but tried dipping her toes in the cabaret scene at one point. As the quote highlights, it was not a site for her, and as she had other options for work available to her, she chose not to return. The informal interview occurred in her apartment living room and was recorded and transcribed by myself in English on March 2, 2017.

<sup>cxixiii</sup> I held an informal interview with Egyptian-English dancer Zara and her manager Ramy at an open *baladi 'ahwa* (coffee shop) during a long break between her gigs on Sep. 13, 2017. Zara works in venues across the spectrum, boats, hotels, weddings, cabarets, etc. and finds a special value in each type of venue that she's proud of and finds enriching to her dance and life experience. The interview was in English and I recorded it and transcribed it myself back in the U.S.

<sup>cxixiv</sup> Timothy Mitchell's "Carbon Democracy" argues that fossil fuels create both the opportunities for forms of modern democracy as well as their limits. This carbon-democracy is a global process wherein one countries form of politics is in relationship with various other transnational politics. It is in tracing these connections, pipelines, refineries, histories, shipments and circulations of oil and money, that Michell is able to offer a more complex and grounded understanding of modern U.S. democracy and how it relates to the autocracies within parts of the Middle East. Mitchell argues that switching to oil-based economies was deliberately tied to controlling people's claims to democracy at home (U.S.A.) but also in key Middle Eastern nations such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia by limiting their ability to produce and control their own oil. McJihad is Mitchell's theory that global capitalism can only function in different localities (such as key oil producing Middle Eastern countries) by fusing with local social forces and moral authorities (213 2013). These 'fusings' with local forces and authorities may or may not mesh with global capitalism and empire's same methods and goals, and their pairing is often rife with tension and contradiction. He argues that it is within these hybridized local forms of McJihad where people must look for the vulnerabilities and weaknesses within the system to be exploited to argue for more democratic claims to life. While Mitchell focuses on the particular tense relationship between oil economic and political Islamist movements and governments, I will apply it at an even more micro level of the cabaret. For more see: Mitchell, Timothy. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. London: Verso, 2013.

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