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Bellydance in America:  
Strategies for Seeking Personal Transformation

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by

April Rose Burnam

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Bellydance in America:  
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April Rose Burnam

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Professor Janet O'Shea, Chair

In this thesis I argue that bellydance serves as a site for practitioners to transform their sense of self, transgress social boundaries, and build community, but that this transformative potential is compromised when the Orientalist assumptions that have historically been embedded in the practice are not recognized or challenged. I begin by highlighting particularly salient moments in Egyptian and American bellydance history from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, emphasizing the intercultural exchange and sociopolitical factors at play during the form's transnational development. I then examine the choreographic and rhetorical strategies American bellydancers since the 1960s have employed in their attempts to access the transformative and transgressive potential of the dance. I show that these strategies have given rise to new genres that either uphold or combat the tendency in bellydance performance to represent essentialized notions of gender and ethnicity, ultimately

revealing the form as a heterogeneous complex of practices that grows more self-reflexive and critical throughout its various formations. Through choreographic analysis of foundational bellydance movement vocabulary and the organizational structures of Improvisational Tribal Style I explore how engaging with the physical practice of bellydance can allow people to expand their sense of self beyond societally-imposed boundaries and to form inter-subjective community. I conclude by raising concerns about issues of representation in American bellydance, questioning the discourse of authenticity, and offering some considerations for charting a course ahead.

The thesis of April Rose Burnam is approved.

Susan Leigh Foster

Anurima Banerji

Janet O'Shea, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

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## INTRODUCTION

In the San Francisco Bay Area town of Sebastopol, California one of the largest tribal bellydance festivals in the world, Tribal Fest, has been attracting fusion bellydancers since 2000. At this alternative bellydance festival, and others like it that have sprung up all over the world in places like Croatia, Hungary, Russia, France, and Spain, women and men gather to perform their interpretations of bellydance. Participants take workshops from pseudo-celebrity American and European dance teachers and they come to buy handmade tribal bellydance couture and reproduction antique jewelry. A first-time viewer might be baffled at how different the performances at Tribal Fest are from the type of bellydance that exists in most people's imaginations, which usually looks more like the dances performed in Golden Era Egyptian films of the 1940s and 50s or "Oriental"-themed American cabarets of the 1960s and 70s. Performances at Tribal Fest in Sebastopol vary greatly, from burlesque and vaudeville-influenced American cabaret throwback, to gothic bellydance, to a faux folkloric style called American Tribal Style, to modern-dance-influenced performances with minimalist costumes and angular lines. A lay viewer would hear non-Arabic music and see performances and costuming that would perhaps bear hardly any resemblance at all to their ideas about bellydance.

One month before Tribal Fest, the bi-annual International Bellydance Conference of Canada, also called IBCC, is held in Toronto, Ontario. At this conference, participants come to take workshops with local North American instructors and witness lectures and panel discussions on bellydance-related topics, but the main attraction for most is the cast of famed Egyptian instructors. In 2012, the instructors' roster featured one of the last living *ghawazi* dancers, Khairiyya Mazen, and the

pioneer of Egyptian staged folk dance, Mahmoud Reda, among others.<sup>1</sup> The performances at the IBCC gala evening show are typically Oriental or *raqs sharqi* style Egyptian bellydance and staged North African folk dance performed to recorded and live Arabic music. The movement quality, costuming, and music of most performances, which tend to reflect an Egyptian bellydance style, would be more recognizable to a lay audience than those at Tribal Fest in Sebastopol. The difference between these two North American events demonstrates the wide range of practices that are called “bellydance” today in North America and the differing extent to which the Middle East and Arab culture is either referenced or not present in bellydance performance and pedagogy.

While many permutations of American bellydance look to North African and Western Asian<sup>2</sup> performance traditions as a model, many styles of bellydance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century do not draw explicitly on Middle Eastern nightclub, film, or folk dances or Arabic music. Whether a bellydance performance references Arab performance traditions, American performance traditions, both, or is presented as an experiment with very little reference to either, in my research I found that the majority of bellydance-identified practices in the US, Egypt, and around the world have developed synchronically and in many ways, interdependently. Bellydance practices that are considered traditional are in many ways modern inventions, and practices that are considered newly hybrid or experimental actually fit into a long transnational tradition of hybrid experiments. Typically, the movement in practices that can be defined as

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<sup>1</sup> The *ghawazi* and Mahmoud Reda troupe will be discussed in more detail in chapters one and two. Due to a last minute immigration issue, Khairiyya Mazen was not able to attend the 2012 conference, although many students attended in the hopes of studying with her.

<sup>2</sup> I recognize that the terms “North Africa,” “Western Asia,” and the “Middle East” refer to the same geography but are ideologically distinct labels. I use the terms interchangeably in this thesis as well as the term “Middle Eastern/North African” (sometimes referred to as MENA).

bellydance has an explicit relationship to music, whereby improvisation and choreography are guided by the rhythm, melody, and compositional structure of the music.<sup>3</sup> Most bellydancers perform hip vibrations, torso isolations, and undulation of the spine, but some practitioners prioritize the use of *bedlah* or *baladi* costuming and Arabic music over these movement qualities when determining whether or not a style of performance is bellydance. While many bellydancers' choreographic vocabulary includes sinuous rounded movement, undulations and isolations of the torso, and vibrations of the hips and shoulders, some bellydancers rarely (if ever) exhibit these movement qualities, nor do they perform to Arabic music wearing a *bedlah*.

So what then is bellydance if it is not performed in the Middle East, features non-Arabic music, and may not even include shimmies and snake-like movements? Traditionalist North American practitioners who typically attend events such as the IBCC consider the Middle Eastern/North African elements of costuming and music to be essential in all practices labeled as “bellydance.” The alternative bellydance communities in the US that attend Tribal Fest are interested in challenging the conventional “Oriental” mode of representation and typically locate bellydance vocabulary in their own Western sub-cultural contexts by incorporating aesthetic, musical, philosophical, and movement influences from modern primitivism,<sup>4</sup> goth,<sup>5</sup> hip hop,<sup>6</sup> and whatever else is available to them.

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<sup>3</sup> In a panel discussion I attended at the International Bellydance Conference of Canada in Toronto 2012, famed Egyptian staged folk dance choreographer, Mahmoud Reda, explained that bellydance choreography must be made in response to the essential components in Arabic music: rhythm, melody, and composition. First a bellydancer must find the most obvious component: the rhythm and percussion, then he or she must also embody the melody, and finally the speed, duration, and intensity of her movement must mirror the composition of the music. (Panel Discussion, *Foreign Influences: All Directions*. IBCC. May 4, 2012)

<sup>4</sup> The modern primitive movement refers to the reemergence and increasing popularity of body modification practices such as tattooing, piercing, scarification, corsetry, and sideshow, ritual, and other practice in contemporary Western society, specifically in the 1980s and 90s. Common use of the term “modern primitive” is primarily due to the popularity of the 1989 RE/Search publications book *Modern Primitives* written by V. Vale and Andrea Juno. This book and the modern primitive movement developed

In this thesis I investigate the historical factors and political concerns that have influenced the genre of bellydance to become so far reaching and difficult to define. I seek to expand the discourse beyond dichotomies of tradition versus innovation and Middle Eastern versus Western in favor of a discussion among practitioners about how the form has been constructed and defined throughout a history rife with imperial and nationalist politics, and always embedded with issues of representation, appropriation, and incorporation.

This selective history and choreographic analysis of variants in Americanized bellydance encourages the reader to understand bellydance not by the images that typically come to mind when the word is evoked, but as a set of movement practices that share key markers in movement quality and extend out of the same transnational history. I demonstrate that American variants of bellydance are not hybrid forms of an essentially North African dance tradition but that bellydance is a synchronically developing tradition in North Africa, Western Asia, the US, and elsewhere. Each permutation of bellydance responds to its own unique cultural context while remaining

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synchronically with American Tribal Style bellydance, discussed in Chapters Two and Three, in the San Francisco Bay Area in the late 1980s and early 90s. Vale, V. and Juno, Andrea. 1989. *Modern Primitives*. San Francisco: RE/Search Publications.

<sup>5</sup> Goth subculture began in the early 1980s in the gothic rock scene, an offshoot of the post-punk genre. Goth imagery and cultural associations are influenced by 19<sup>th</sup> century Gothic literature, horror films, to a lesser extent, BDSM culture, and other increasingly diverse influences. Gothic fashion aesthetics are generally considered macabre, eroticized, or morbid and often, but do not exclusively, references Victorian era costuming and pagan, occult, or other religious imagery. Goodlad, Lauren M.E. and Bibby, Michael. 2007. *Goth: Undead Subculture*. Durham: Duke University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Hip hop is a form of music, dance, fashion, and artistic subculture that originated in African American and Latin American communities in the US during the 1970s. The culture has expanded far beyond its original roots and is now a worldwide subculture comprising rapping, DJ-ing, hip hop dance, and graffiti art. Hip hop culture has revolved around the idea of “sampling,” “flipping” updating classic recordings, attitudes, and experiences for modern audiences, challenging or upholding conventions of mainstream culture depending on the context. Perkins, William E. 1995. *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

rooted in a common history<sup>7</sup> of representation, cultural exchange, and imperial politics. I investigate how bellydancers in America participate in and interrogate the dance as part of an imperialist transnational dynamic, while highlighting the agency and creative experimentations of Egyptian dancers that have influenced the Western iterations of the dance. I hypothesize that American experimentations in bellydance are part of a striving for personal transformation, community formation, and social transgression. I investigate the paradoxical political implications of, on the one hand, white middle-class Americans seeking to represent Arab culture through an authentic Middle Eastern bellydance, and on the other hand, Americans decontextualizing bellydance from Arabic music and cultural practice in favor of innovation and non-“Oriental” modes of representation. I inquire why Western middle-class women and men in America desire to bellydance at all, asking how bellydance practice might open up new possibilities for constructing the body and subjectivity outside of essentialist notions of identity, while still acknowledging the regional histories and cultural traditions associated with the dance.

### Literature Review: American Bellydance as Arab-Face

There are several trends in the existing scholarship on bellydance that leave space for the further exploration I take on in this study. Anthropological studies of bellydance tend to situate Western articulations of the dance as inauthentic hybrid experiments against an authentic Middle Eastern original. In this approach, taken by scholars such as Anthony Shay and Najwa Adra, the authentic roots of bellydance are

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<sup>7</sup> All variations of bellydance share common threads of history and performance practices that developed in response to intercultural exchange and the milieu of imperialism between the East (North Africa, the Middle East, and Western Asia) and the West (Europe and America).

presumed to be located in various stable folk dance traditions throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia.<sup>8</sup> Such approaches propose that the only authentic forms of bellydance in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century are either informal amateur performances among family and friends in the homes of people living in North Africa or formal performances of staged folk dance. This approach assumes the stability and relative stasis of traditional dances, eschewing any changes made to them as a result of nationalizing reform movements or intercultural exchange.

Sunaina Maira, in her post-colonial Marxist approach to American bellydance, attacks the practice as little more than an Orientalizing expression of US imperialism. This type of polemical attack on bellydance in the US attempts to expose the dance community as materially and culturally exploitative with no possibility for productive restructuring. While a focus on global power dynamics is necessary for a complex understanding of Americanized bellydance, I attempt to question and validate the role bellydance plays in the lives of American practitioners. In her article, “Belly Dancing: Arab-Face, Orientalist Feminism, and US Empire,” Maira attacks the practice of bellydance by middle-class American white women in the post-9/11 context by arguing that bellydancing is a way to stage an inescapable culture of imperialism in the US.<sup>9</sup> For Maira, bellydance in America during a period of US military occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and continued support for Israel is an attempt by liberal feminist

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<sup>8</sup> Najwa Adra defines bellydance as “indigenous to Arab and other Middle Eastern countries, as a folk genre in an extensive and diverse dance tradition... It is both a humorous metacommentary on social mores and a metaphor of generative values in Arab society.” (Adra 2005, p.28) While Adra confirms that “there have been significant changes in the dance and its performance engendered by cultural borrowing” she defines the authentic form as informal performances for family member in the homes of Arab people living in the Middle East. (*ibid*) Anthony Shay refers to the versions of bellydance performed in the United States as hybrid variations. This study understands bellydance as a transnational practice that developed synchronically in the Middle East as well as in America. Bellydance in this study describes the complex of dance traditions that developed in the US, Egypt and elsewhere from the time the term came into use around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>9</sup> Maira, Sunaina. “Belly Dancing: Arab-Face, Orientalist Feminism, and U.S. Empire.” *American Quarterly*, Volume 60, Number 2, June 2008, pp. 317-345. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

communities to reconcile their consent to US empire through a discourse of bodily liberation and respect for cultural difference. She argues that American women define their liberal feminist identities within a middle-class sisterhood and consumer culture, in opposition to an oppressed other. Maira makes valid criticisms of the Orientalist rhetoric and aesthetic employed by some bellydancers and takes issue with the apolitical approach bellydancers present towards a practice she views as inextricably tied with politics.

I aim to highlight issues of imperial politics and appropriation that work against bellydancers' search for an expansive notion of self but, moving beyond Maira's accusatory stance, I also aim to provide critical academics with a more complex understanding of the bellydance community. I focus on the inherent transnationality of the form which makes limiting who can ethically practice bellydance a difficult call to make, yet one that also imbues the practice with assumptions that are tied to an imperialist agenda. To support her argument, Maira cites authors that are known to have an essentializing rather than critical view of bellydance, and she bases her generalizations about bellydancers on a handful of interviews rather than an intimate familiarity with the practices and objectives of various bellydance communities. The result of this methodological weakness is her perspective that bellydancers have been an unchanging and homogenous community from the 1960s to now and an assumption that bellydance practice has become more popular since the US "War on Terror." While Maira is correct that many Americans have been drawn to bellydance as an "ancient practice" for channeling some divine feminine principle, especially in the context of 1960s and 70s second-wave feminism, practitioners' reasons for bellydancing are quite varied at present, at least as varied as all the many different articulations of bellydance that can be found.

In what reads like an answer to Maira's accusations, Tina Frühauf, in her article, "Raqs Gothique: Decolonizing Belly Dance," argues that gothic-style practitioners attempt to decolonize bellydance by resisting the cultural colonialism embodied in mainstream American articulations of the genre and by portraying a less socially accepted image of femininity in the US context.<sup>10</sup> Frühauf contends that while gothic bellydancers ultimately fail at resisting Orientalism and the male gaze, their dance reveals an apparent dissatisfaction with and movement against the Orientalist representation and male-determined ideas of beauty that cabaret-influenced American bellydancers display. This resistance to Orientalist fantasy in bellydance through the use of alternative, aggressive music, gothic costuming, and a less fluid movement quality is the type of self-conscious and critical trend in contemporary bellydance that Maira ignores. While gothic bellydancers seem to simply transfer the exotic fantasy onto a Victorian (albeit morbid) idea of beauty and dark feminine mystery, they are attempting to make a political move away from "Arab-face." Frühauf argues that gothic bellydance is a move toward "decolonization," a concept she borrows from Edward Said and quotes from Marta Savigliano to identify it as, "rejecting the search for the origins and authenticity of the colonized."<sup>11</sup> While I highlight the invented versus authentic or traditional nature of North African bellydance, I also propose that decontextualizing bellydance entirely from Arab history and culture can be problematic. Decolonization, or rejecting the search for origins of bellydance as Frühauf suggests, could be a move in the right direction for bellydancers so long as the "search for origins and authenticity" is replaced with a desire to understand the complex history and contemporary issues surrounding the practice.

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<sup>10</sup> Frühauf, Tina. 2009. "Raqs Gothique: Decolonizing Belly Dance." *TDR: The Drama Review*. Volume 53, Number 3. Fall 2009. (T 203), pp. 117-138. The MIT Press.

<sup>11</sup> Savigliano, Marta. 1995. *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*. Boulder: Westview Press.

In my analysis I will also draw from a body of scholarship written by American bellydance practitioners and scholars who tend toward the following polarized approaches. Some scholar-practitioners align with Laura Osweiler, whose research centers on experimental Middle Eastern dance, in espousing the malleability and expressive potential of the form while glossing over or reframing its appropriative objectifying tendencies.<sup>12</sup> Others, like Anne Rasmussen, tend to submit to the notion of bellydance as fundamentally exploitative in their attempts to complicate that designation.<sup>13</sup> The work of Andrea Deagon, Barbara Sellers-Young, and others who have written critically about bellydance in its various US interpretations are the foundation from which I attempt to construct a modern history of American bellydance that reveals how the community has addressed and ignored the issues of power and imperialist history embedded in the practice.

In addition to shared movement qualities and a shared history of American and Middle Eastern performance traditions, I define American bellydance as a complex of practices that aim toward the shared goal of expanding possibilities for the body. Through bellydance, practitioners are able to intentionally construct their own body and identity in ways that everyday life does not often allow. I aim to define American bellydance, and Americanized bellydance that is performed outside the US, not by its aesthetic but by the kinesthetic empathy that draws practitioners' interest to the form

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<sup>12</sup> Osweiler's research focuses almost solely on present-day fusion or experimental forms of bellydance theater that she terms Experimental Middle Eastern Dance. Her ethnography of fusion bellydance does not explicitly address the legacy of Orientalism in the practice or suggest strategies in fusion bellydance for confronting that legacy. Osweiler, Laura Josephine-Hosch. 2011. *Dancing in the Fringe: Connections Forming "An Evening of Experimental Middle Eastern Dance."* PhD dissertation. Riverside: University of California, Riverside.

<sup>13</sup> In her article, Rasmussen addresses the issues of Orientalism latent in the present-day performance of bellydance. While she lends complexity to the issues, the reader is left with a sense that Orientalism will always be working against bellydance as legitimate practice. Rasmussen and many other critical scholars do not offer strategies for dealing with issues of Orientalism in bellydance practice. Rasmussen, Anne. 2005. "An Evening in the Orient." Edited by Shay, Anthony and Sellers-Young, Barbara. 2005. *Bellydancing: Orientalism, Transnationalism, and Harem Fantasy*. Costa Mesa: Mazda.

and by the complex history of asymmetrical intercultural exchange it engages with. I argue that a common element of all Americanized bellydance genres is the opportunity for practitioners to achieve a transformation in their self-definition by engaging with the dance. Through bellydance, practitioners access the potential to transform their sense of self, either in relationship to their individual body, to a community, by challenging social convention, or all of the above.

Stavros Stavrou Karayanni, in his book *Dancing Fear and Desire: Race, Sexuality, and Imperial Politics in Middle Eastern Dance*, examines imperial texts (travelers' accounts and Orientalist narratives) to show how bellydance has been the object of cultural appropriation, manipulated into complicity by an Orientalist agenda. He uses his own experiences with bellydance to show that the dance, in previous iterations as recorded in text and in current practice, incorporates an unyielding potential for social, cultural, and sexual resistance. He espouses the transgressive potential of bellydance movement, describing the physicality as "moves that signify transgression by giving voice to parts of the body that are expected to remain silent, unobtrusive, and discomfited in their postcolonial posture."<sup>14</sup> I argue that bellydance, in its many different articulations, serves as a site for practitioners to expand the boundaries of their selves beyond limited constructions of identity, to transgress social boundaries, and to form self-sustaining supportive communities but this potential is compromised by an unquestioning treatment of the Orientalist assumptions built into bellydance practice. Each permutation of bellydance in the US creates a space to enact the

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<sup>14</sup> Karayanni discovers through his reading of imperial texts that the Western subject producing the text is eager, "to surrender to the seduction of the body performing Middle Eastern dance." He writes, the imperial subject "seems eager to cross the threshold of anachronistic space and abandon itself to the fantasy of embodying the dance in order to experience the metamorphosis that movement may afford. Thus, Middle Eastern dance offers that space where transformation is possible but is curtailed by the perils that such deviation may engender, perils that are intrinsic to the process of transformation ... this dance is derided and adored precisely because of its ambivalent construction. Karayanni, Stavros Stavrou. 2004. *Dancing Fear and Desire: Race, Sexuality, and Imperial Politics in Middle Eastern Dance*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press. pp. xiii, 20.

recurring tension between its potential for personal transformation and its tendency to fail in reaching that potential by locating the site of transformation in a fantasy built on colonialist history.

I locate this inquiry in the discipline of dance studies because its purpose is to show the relationship of dance to the production of culture and identity. This project, like dance studies more generally, is invested in the notion that dance is one way for social identities to be negotiated and embodied.<sup>15</sup> Dance is a way of knowing one's world and each permutation of bellydance constructs a somewhat different world. Through the practice of dancing, an individual can construct her identity and navigate through her social surround.<sup>16</sup> As Ann Cooper Albright has pointed out: "although it is *of* the body, dance is not just *about* the body, it is also about subjectivity—about how the body is positioned in the world as well as the ways in which that particular body responds to the world."<sup>17</sup>

### The Transnational Development of Bellydance

In Chapter One, I outline a selective history of bellydance from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to show that global ideas about bellydance and practices associated with bellydance were constructed transnationally in Egypt and the US among a cultural milieu of imperialist exploitation and nationalist politics. While a complete chronological history is beyond the scope of this project, I highlight specific

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<sup>15</sup> Cooper Albright, Ann. 1997. *Choreographing Difference*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press.

<sup>16</sup> I have chosen the singular pronoun "her" in this instance for ease of reading, but I would like to emphasize here that the history and transformational potential I refer to in this thesis is not limited to women and often includes male practitioners. At other points in my analysis I use the male singular pronoun to reiterate the applicability of this study to both sexes.

<sup>17</sup> Cooper Albright (1997), p. 4. (author emphasis)

historical interstices that have shaped the public perception, movement quality, and costuming of the dance we know as “bellydance” today, revealing that the form cannot be traced historically to a single dance but to a complex of practices.<sup>18</sup> All variants of bellydance have been influenced by a shared history of asymmetrical global power dynamics, the legacy of colonialism, and Orientalist Hollywood exploitation. The periods of history I include give a snapshot of the dances viewed by foreign travelers in Egypt and by fair-goers at the American World’s Fairs, as well as bellydance in vaudeville, early modern dance, film, and in Egyptian and American nightclubs.

Chapter One emphasizes that the origins of bellydance are located in a complex web of intercultural exchanges since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, global and gender power dynamics, and reified images created by the colonial male gaze. Early images of bellydancers that relied upon exaggerated representations of the sexuality of Eastern women were used as tools in the imperial feminization of the East and justification for colonial pursuits. The movement, costumes and the terms that define different genres of Americanized bellydance, like “Oriental” and “tribal”, are loaded with implications of this agenda of imperial domination. The qualities American bellydancers desire in their bellydance practice, their affirming narratives of body and self, are often deeply invested in Orientalist tropes still present from the West’s first modes of exposure to bellydance: colonial-era travelers’ accounts, Orientalist paintings, expositions, and Hollywood films.<sup>19</sup> The images and associations that inform the current practice and perception of bellydance are deeply embedded in a patriarchal colonialist mode of

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<sup>18</sup> Shay and Sellers-Young explain bellydance cannot be traced historically to a single dance but to a complex of practices extending from North Africa through the Middle East and Central Asia to the western portions of the Indian subcontinent as well as Western China. (Shay and Sellers-Young 2005, pp. 1-2)

<sup>19</sup> Dox, Donnalee. 2005. “Spirit from the Body: Belly Dance as a Spiritual Practice.” (In Shay and Sellers-Young, 2005)

seeing, and many practitioners look to these imperial representations of the Oriental dancer in their search for the authentic origins of bellydance.

Anuradha Kapur, in her study of the Ramlila Indian theater tradition, proposes that “authenticity” is a category of thought intrinsically linked to post-colonial preoccupations with “identity” and “roots,” which are themselves constrained within the polarities of East and West.<sup>20</sup> A search for the authentic origins of bellydance cannot be fulfilled without a critical look at the intercultural exchanges and power dynamics that have shaped the practice. To search for an authentic point of origin in the East assumes bellydance is or once was a static tradition. The colonial pursuit for authenticity and origins denies the malleability and aliveness of a tradition, its capability to respond to, and even shape, the greater social surround. Savigliano has suggested in her study of tango that by giving up the search for origins one can begin to decolonize the practice.<sup>21</sup> In the way I have defined bellydance, one of its constitutive factors is that the practice engages with a specific complex history of intercultural exchange between the “Orient” and the “West.” Although I focus on historical influences of bellydance in Chapter One, I am not undertaking a search for authenticity so much as attempting to highlight the complexity of the form’s history and influences on the present day manifestations of bellydance that I describe in Chapter Two.

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<sup>20</sup> Kapur, Anuradha. 1988. “Thinking About Tradition: The Ramlila at Ramnagar.” *Journal of Arts and Ideas*. Number 16. p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Savigliano (1995).

## Strategies and Styles of American Bellydance

In Chapter Two, I highlight styles of bellydance that Americans have developed since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that show a critical engagement with the contentious history and essentializing assumptions embedded in the form. Each of these styles employ different strategies for accessing the transformational potential that many practitioners identify in bellydance. Chapter Two reveals that in many instances, present-day bellydancers rebel against the self-objectification and conventional ideas of gender and ethnicity that early “Oriental” dance practices represented in the US. Despite the variety of strategies American practitioners have employed to make bellydance more legitimate and authentic, or less sexualized and Orientalist, performers have tended to ultimately rely on essentialized notions of the body and identity, even in their attempts to challenge those assumptions. I argue that when bellydancers ignorantly or willfully reify images from colonial history and attempt to construct their dance and identity based on these patriarchal images, the performances tend to invite passive consumption and preclude the possibility of expanding their sense of self beyond societally-imposed boundaries.

Permutations of bellydance from the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to today have surfaced out of practitioners’ simultaneous dissatisfaction with previous incarnations of the form and their unrelenting belief that bellydance can help them achieve a secure and limitless sense of self and supportive community. The reader will see dancers of different genres of bellydance in dialogue with one another over the productive potential of the dance and the potential failings of the dance as it participates in or refuses to uphold normative ideas of gender and race. In Chapter Two I look at several strategies bellydancers have employed for restructuring the Orientalist and

objectifying representation that has framed bellydance since its introduction to America. By elaborating on the failures and success of these strategies, we can begin to theorize ways bellydancers might engage in new strategies for expanding beyond the restrictive identities and everyday societal limitations they feel are imposed on their bodies.

Where one genre of bellydance fails to allow certain practitioners to access personal transformation, a new genre emerges, attempting to fill the gap where previous permutations have failed. During the 1960s and 70s performers in Casbah-themed nightclubs and at renaissance faires tended to find self-transformation in the assumption of an imagined Oriental identity, finding power and creativity in the freedom of bellydance movement and ability to display one's body and sexuality within the ordained space of the Oriental-themed environment. In the spiritualized bellydance trends of the 1970s and 80s, dancers accessed the promise of personal transformation by performing journeys through sacred underworlds and reenacting imagined ancient female ritual rites. For these practitioners, bellydance calls on notions of ancient spiritualities, women-centered environments, access to hidden knowledge, and the universality of women's experience.<sup>22</sup> American Tribal Style bellydancers who adopted the tattooed and pierced aesthetic of the 1990s modern primitive movement expanded their sense of self by challenging conventional notions of beauty and by relating to community through the inter-subjective experience of spontaneous structured group improvisation, imagining their group identity as respected tribal women in a timeless and vaguely defined Orient. Pioneers of the gothic bellydance trend that began in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century transgressed social boundaries of beauty and femininity by adopting a more serious, emotive quality and

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<sup>22</sup> Dox (2006).

aggressive stage presence, forming community with other dancers who similarly positioned themselves on the perceived margins of acceptability. Fusion bellydancers who have recently revived their interest in Egyptian bellydance traditions and Arabic music are seeking greater compositional complexity in their dance. In looking at the various choreographic and representational maneuvers of dancers in the wide range of American bellydance genres, the reader witnesses American practitioners using bellydance as a platform for expanding beyond the boundaries they feel have been imposed on them by their own society's limited notions of identity and appropriate bodily comportment.

I argue that while bellydancers throughout history have creatively manipulated the dance to serve their own needs, the patriarchal agendas embedded in classical representations of the dance, if not confronted and questioned, will always work against dancers' ability to expand their sense of self beyond societal imposed boundaries. When dancers try to access personal transformation by embodying the colonial idea of a bodily-liberated "Oriental" other or by mapping an ideal community onto an imagined ancient past, one cannot achieve a real and lasting transformation in one's actual self and actual community. In some American variants, bellydancers construct a confident sense of self by engaging with the structures of the dance itself, constructing their identity in relationship to their immediate community and local social surround. In Chapter Three, I offer a close look at Improvisational Tribal Style to show how the experience of the dance itself serves as a site for constructing identities and community that can challenge dominant societal notions of identity.

## The Role of Bellydance in Identity and Community Formation

Many bellydancers are drawn to the form because they recognize that through the dance they are able to access a more self-aware and expansive notion of their own body and identity. Equally as compelling, many practitioners are drawn to bellydance by the sense of supportive community they find. Whether by moving their bodies in ways that are typically not allowed by proper social standards or by taking on a stage name and imagined identity, practitioners realize through bellydance that they can construct their own identity outside the boundaries placed on them by their society. On the level of the individual body, bellydance practice allows participants to transgress social limitations that restrict how body parts should be contained and maneuvered. In Chapter Three I offer a choreographic analysis of individual bellydance movement and the structural components in Improvisational Tribal Style to show how the experience of bellydancing allows practitioners to construct their identity and communities in more expansive and empowered ways than everyday life tends to allow.

As Cynthia Novack has done with Contact Improvisation in *Sharing the Dance*, I distill into words the movement quality and structural components that comprise the modern American variant of bellydance called Improvisational Tribal Style (also written as ITS) to illustrate the core values in the dance: lead sharing, individual confidence, and group cohesion.<sup>23</sup> By looking closely at the ITS bellydancing body, the effort and flow of movement, and the body's shaped configurations in relation to its own parts

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<sup>23</sup> Whereas Novack's primary goal is to draw a relationship between the movement values of Contact Improvisation and the values of the community that practices it in context of a specific cultural mood in America at the time, I am less concerned with how the movement exists in a specific socioeconomic cultural moment.

and other surrounding objects,<sup>24</sup> I argue that ITS is a site for constructing a particularly secure sense of self and supportive community and the structure of the dance is a place to reaffirm this ideology through repeated physical practice. While I do not provide a close analysis of the movement of other genres of bellydance, I believe each genre embeds some aspect of transformation into its choreography. Much like Novack's project, this reading of choreography supports the idea that "a primary means of understanding, knowing, making sense of the world comes through movement experiences society offers us."<sup>25</sup>

### Critical Engagement With History and Politics of Representation

In this thesis, I ask the question: can the transformative and transgressive potential of bellydance be harnessed in practice and performance without capitulating to Orientalism or conventionally gendered objectification? The historical moments and representational strategies I highlight along with the choreographic analysis I employ aim to illuminate an important idea. The Orientalizing and objectifying power dynamics surrounding bellydance co-exist with the transformative potential of bellydance. These two aspects exist in a tension with one another. It is the performance of this tension that allows bellydance to remain interesting and relevant for many people across the globe. Bellydancers are constantly enacting the real potential of their dance to transform their sense of self and their community while continuing to fall short of fully reaching that potential. I aim to elucidate the issues working against bellydance in reaching that potential: the complications of

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<sup>24</sup> This wording refers to "effort-shape," a choreographic notation system developed by Rudolph Laban.

<sup>25</sup> Novack, Cynthia. 1990. *Sharing the Dance, Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. p. 8.

intercultural performance and the history of asymmetrical cultural exchange.

Conversely, I aim to illustrate how the perceived potential for personal transformation and community formation through bellydance in the US is palpable and often realized.

Rustom Bharucha, in *Theater and the World*, theorizes how the asymmetrical power dynamics of cultural exchange can make experiments with traditional forms of performance “partial and incomplete.”<sup>26</sup> Considering Bharucha, I suggest that in order to reach beyond experimentations that are partial and incomplete, American bellydancers, whether they are interested in innovation or tradition, must contextualize the practice in the immediacy of their lives and critically engage with the political factors that have directed the history of the form’s development.

Bharucha suggests that we can be true to tradition by subverting it through our own energy and vision.<sup>27</sup> He separates the act of imitating or “borrowing” elements of a performance tradition from using the “principles” of a tradition. The former, he argues, is devoid of inner energy and integrity, and without transformation or confrontation.<sup>28</sup> For Bharucha, to engage with a performance tradition in an authentic way is “not a question of returning to tradition but rather of catching up with its immediacies incarnated through ever-changing truths.”<sup>29</sup> Rather than disagreeing about the formal elements or appropriate aesthetic and context necessary for a performance to earn the title of “bellydance,” practitioners must take on the task of asking themselves: what are the fundamental principles of bellydance that continue to resonate with practitioners despite its changing geographical and historic contexts?

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<sup>26</sup> Bharucha, Rustom. 1993. *Theater and the World*. New York: Routledge, Inc. p. 218.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Bharucha (1993), p. 214.

<sup>29</sup> Bharucha (1993), p. 208.

I agree with Bharucha that a performance practice and “the body culture of an actor cannot be separated from the history in which it is placed and the larger processes of politicization to which it is compelled to submit and resist.”<sup>30</sup> An American bellydancer cannot be separated from her bodily history and culture, even if she takes an Arabic name and performs dances from a region of North Africa or Western Asia. Bellydance practice itself cannot be separated from its history or the cultural and political processes that participated in its becoming. To ignore the history of a performance tradition but still appropriate some of its compositional elements and movement vocabulary forecloses the possibility of critically engaging with the assumptions embedded in the practice.

The American body and the body of bellydance practices are not so separate that we should advocate that the two not interact with one another. If American practitioners care to embody and define what “bellydance” is in order to practice an authentic tradition or create provoking innovations, we must gain knowledge of the sociopolitical factors that participated in the form’s creation. While Bharucha has little hope for the productivity of intercultural performance experiments, favoring intracultural projects, I desire to find how bellydance practice may attain his definition of “real”:

By ‘real’, of course, I do not mean ‘realistic’, the trappings of well-made plays with social messages. I mean something more elusive that is linked to the historical moment of a creation. When something is ‘real’, I know it belongs where it does. It is not a formal exercise that leaves you hungering for meaning. The ‘real’ asserts what is necessary in art, not what is obligatory.

On a more technical level, the ‘real’ is an element that calls into question the formality of the work itself. It could be a detail that stings the viewer into a recognition of the world surrounding the play. It could also be a different level of energy that infuses the performance structure with a sense of the commonplace. *The ‘real’ is that intractable element of ‘life’ that resists the autonomy of art.*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Bharucha (1993), p. 245.

<sup>31</sup> Bharucha (1993), p. 218. (emphasis mine)

In this study, I ask the question, can this element of “real” be achieved in Americanized bellydance practice? Although I will show that most experiments with bellydance in the US have fallen short of what Bharucha determines is “real” and do not fully achieve their potential for expanding beyond limited notions of identity, I propose that it is not only possible, it is perhaps even being realized today among some practitioners.

### A Note on Terms

Many names exist for the complex of movement practices that I have chosen to refer to as “bellydance.” While sometimes the names are interchangeable, each term might also refer to a specific variant or time period and context. These names include: *raqs sharqi, raqs baladi, raqs Arabi, raqs Masri, Oriental dance or danse Orientale, cabaret bellydance, danse du ventre, dances of the ghawazi and awalim/almeah, Middle Eastern dance, the Greek tsifteteli, the dances of the Turkish kocheck and khawal, tribal bellydance, tribal fusion, theatrical bellydance, modern bellydance, gothic bellydance, American Tribal Style, Improvisational Tribal Style* and many more. While many practitioners do not like the term “bellydance” because of the negative connotation it conjures in people’s minds or because it is a name given to the dance by the West and therefore a tool of the colonizer, I choose to use the term bellydance. Bellydance is the most overarching and general word I can use to refer to many practices that I understand as all related to a common history. Although Stavros Stavrou Karayanni states he does not like the term, he adds, “respectful usage might reclaim it to a certain extent.”<sup>32</sup> While I maintain that all terms are slippery, in that they unsatisfactorily describe the specific practice to which they refer and often evoke an

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<sup>32</sup> Karayanni (2004), p. 27.

imperialist history, I believe that “bellydance” is being or can be rebranded at least in America as an umbrella term that refers generally to the many variations, styles, and histories that make up the transnational tradition.

Throughout this study, I use various terms to refer to the dance as it exists in a particular socio-political, geographic, and temporal context. I also use various terms to refer to specific movement styles. The dances performed by the *ghawazi* and *almeh* at the time of heightened European travel to Egypt in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were not “bellydance” since the term had not come into usage yet, but rather they performed solo improvisational dance characterized by movements we consider to be bellydance: “elaborate hip articulations, isolations, movement on the vertical and horizontal axis but not across large space.”<sup>33</sup> The English term *Oriental dance* is a translation of the Arabic title *raqs sharqi*, which means “dance of the East.” The Arabic usage of *raqs sharqi* is likely an adoption of European references to “dances of the East” that foreigners used to describe the dance performances in Egyptian cafés of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and nightclubs on the Nile in the 1920s. While *raqs sharqi* typically refers to showy, staged performances, *raqs baladi* refers to the version of the dance as it exists in villages as a folk form (although *raqs baladi* has also been codified as a staged aesthetic as well). *Raqs Arabi* has a pan-Arab signification and *raqs Masri* refers specifically to Egypt (*Masri* is the Arabic name for Egypt).

“Belly dance” is a translation of the French term *danse du ventre*, which the French used to describe the dances they witnessed during the time of French colonial conquest of Algeria, Tunisia, and other regions of the Middle East. While some American dancers in the 1960s and 70s adopted the French term as a way to discard

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<sup>33</sup> Karayanni describes the general markers of the dance idiom that Kuchuk Hanem and Azizeh performed for Flaubert and Curtis. These historical characters and performances are discussed in the first part of Chapter One.

the embarrassment of the English version, others find the French term to be a more explicit reference to what Karayanni describes as “redolent with imperial soldiers’ heterosexual pursuit of hedonistic fulfillment on colonized subjects’ bodies.”<sup>34</sup> Sol Bloom and other World’s Fair goers used the English version, “belly dance,” to describe the first dances by North African immigrant performers in America. The term “belly dance” became popular in Hollywood iterations and as such, adopted by much of the rest of the world. Recently the single word version, “bellydance,” has come into popular usage in the United States, perhaps due to the publicity around the commercial touring company Bellydance Superstars wherein the words are compounded, or perhaps as an effort to rebrand the word without changing it essentially.

As we will see in Chapter One, performance traditions in early burlesque and vaudeville called *hoochie-koochie*, *exotic dance*, and *serpentine* contributed to and borrowed from the movement idiom of bellydance and could be considered as part of the overall bellydance history, as well. Many scholars have chosen to use the term *Middle Eastern dance* in order to reclaim legitimacy, however for my purposes this term is much too solidly rooted in a geographical location that some argue is itself a colonial construct. By calling the practice *Middle Eastern Dance*, I would imply that all versions of bellydance that exist outside of North Africa and Western Asia are decontextualized where as I would like to propose that bellydance has become a varied transnational tradition. *Oriental dance* and *raqs sharqi* refer mostly to the dance as it is performed in the Egyptian style that is heavily influenced by Golden Era Egyptian film and dancers like Tahia Carioca, Samia Gamal, and Nagwa Fouad. While I refer to the dance in its different historical periods, contexts, and movement style by using

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<sup>34</sup> Karayanni (2004), p. 25.

many of these terms and I recognize the usefulness and complications implied by them all, I have generally committed to “bellydance.”

## CHAPTER ONE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF BELLYDANCE IN AMERICA

### Introduction

#### Myths of Origin and the Importance of Historicity

Bellydance today is a transnational matrix of dances that exist in North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, North and South America, East Asia, South Africa, Eastern and Western Europe. Bellydance does not have a classical tradition in that it does not have a universally codified movement vocabulary. The term typically denotes a solo improvised form in which the movements are closely tied to the rhythmic elements of a piece of music, but also refers to choreographed and improvised group dances, all of which “engage the hips, torso, arms and hands in undulations, shimmies, circles, and spirals.”<sup>35</sup> Practitioners, critics, and scholars put forward different interpretations of bellydance’s origins. Some researchers support the idea that bellydance originates in the temples of India, believing that one or more of the Turkish Sultans may have imported *devadasi* dancers to be part of their harem.<sup>36</sup> Other scholars and practitioners trace the origins of bellydance to ancient pharaonic Egypt.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Shay and Sellers-Young (2005), p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Gillis Bailey (1980) supports the claim that bellydance originated in the courtesan temple service of Indian nautch dancers. “Suhelya” Kate McGowan connects bellydance to the Turkish Sufi dance tradition and Leona Wood (1979) finds connections between bellydance and Turkish gypsies.

<sup>37</sup> Orientalist scholar Edward William Lane, who wrote the 19<sup>th</sup> century *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, claims that he found similarities between the Oriental dances of the female performers he encountered in Cairo and the ancient dances represented in tombs. Lane also supports the idea that the dancers themselves were descendants of dancers of Pharaonic times. (Lane 1836, pp. 386-87) In support of the Ancient Egypt theory, Magda Saleh traces Egyptian folk dances through 4,000 years of Egyptian civilization, citing historical documents produced during the Arab conquest of Egypt in 640 AD as well as later documents from Mameluke and Ottoman rule. (Saleh 1979, pp. 458, 527) Curt Sachs draws connections from bellydance to fertility rites of Egyptian peasants. (Sachs 1963, pp. 23-24) Ted Shawn connects oriental dance to Ancient Egyptian ritual dances. (Shawn 1974, p. 12) Qamar el-Mulouk traces the Ancient Egyptian history of the modern bellydance costume. (el-Mulouk 1975) While he acknowledges that no one can say how similar the bellydance of today is to dances of earlier eras, Morroe Berger claims:

Researchers have also looked to various ancient sites of civilization, such as Phoenicia, Babylon, and the Etruscans of Italy,<sup>38</sup> as well as to Greek dance, Biblical dance, and various fertility dances of Africa. One of the most popular beliefs among practitioners today is that bellydance developed among the gypsies traveling along the Romani Trail.<sup>39</sup>

The longstanding interest in establishing an origin for bellydance indicates the importance of historicity within the form. While recorded historical evidence may or may not support any one of these origin stories, the myths themselves continue to influence the form as we know it today. Bellydance has existed in various incarnations throughout its long and potentially ancient history, about which Paul Monty writes:

Unlike the languages which have prospered, decayed and died, belly dance is a form which has been attracting, and demonstrates repeatedly its ability to change, adapt, assimilate, and creatively grow.<sup>40</sup>

In support of Monty's romantic notion of the enduring capability of bellydance, I put forward the claim that in order to continue this history of adaption and change in a way that allows practitioners access to its transformative potential, bellydancers must understand a basic history of the form, including how the history is contingent upon

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"Evidence for a general resemblance appears in the work of al-Mas'udi, an Arab historian who died in the tenth century A.D. In his account of the world since the creation, which he called *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*, he relates that in the ninth century, just after the golden age of Baghdad, Caliph Mu'tamid asked a scholar to tell him what qualities made a dancer great. The scholar began his reply with a brief statement of eight kinds of rhythm. Then he described the temperament and physique a great dancer must have. Among the latter qualities he mentioned one that indicates he probably had in mind something like the Oriental dance of today. A great dancer, he told the Caliph, must have 'loose joints and a great agility in twirling and in swaying her hips.'" (Morroe Berger 1961, p. 4)

<sup>38</sup> Rather than Ancient Egypt, Irena Lexova, a Czech scholar writing in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, claims that bellydance originated with the Etruscans of Italy. (Lexova 1935, pp. 85-178)

<sup>39</sup> In her book, Paulette Rees-Denis references the documentary *Latcho Drom* as a source for placing the origins of bellydance on the Romani Trail. (Rees-Denis 2008, p. 4) Aubre Hill also cited the movie as a source for the potential origins of bellydance, explaining that gypsies migrated from India across present-day Afghanistan and Iran to Turkey, some went to Egypt and Spain and others to Eastern Europe. She notes that there is evidence in the dance and instrumentation of all these places, mentioning the stick is an iconic element of *saidi* dance and the *ghawazi* people and comparing Egyptian finger symbols to Spanish castanets. (Hill, Aubre. Phone Interview. February 29, 2012)

<sup>40</sup> Monty, Paul. 1986. *Serena, Ruth St. Denis, and the evolution of belly dance in America (1976-1976)*. PhD dissertation, New York University. p. 11.

imperialist politics and intercultural exchange. In this chapter I do not outline a detailed chronological history of bellydance, rather I highlight specific moments in bellydance history prior to 1960 in order to show how the tradition has been constructed and represented in specific cultural and historical contexts. The moments I draw attention to show bellydance as it developed transnationally from colonial Egypt to the American Worlds Fairs, in vaudeville and early modern dance, on the silver screen, and in Cairo nightclubs. These moments reveal that bellydance practitioners today cannot avoid the legacy of colonialism, Orientalist representation, sexual objectification, the form's relationship to pure vaudevillian entertainment, the spiritualized legitimizing strategies of modern dance, Hollywood exploitation, or innovations made in Cairo nightclubs. These moments have not only influenced public perception of bellydance, they have also fundamentally shaped bellydance movement quality, staging, and costuming. Bellydance exists as it does today because of these historical interstices.

### Colonial Egypt (1750s-1850s)

In this section, I demonstrate that improvised solo dance by Egyptian female entertainers in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries did not develop in a vacuum of local authenticity and was, in fact, largely influenced by European colonialism and tourism. During this time period, the dances that women entertainers traditionally performed at secular and religious festivals and weddings became geared toward a foreign audience as tourism increased. This new audience of paying European and American viewers affected how the dance was performed. In particular, the dance became a performance of the Oriental other for the colonial male gaze. Travelers returned to their countries

with written accounts of the specific variation of Egyptian female solo-improvised dance they witnessed: typically, a performance of sexualized otherness catered to the Western male patron. At home, in Europe and America, these travelers' accounts inspired paintings, novels, plays, and popular ideas about the Orient and the feminized East. In her book, *A Trade Like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt*, Karin van Nieuwkerk, investigates public opinion about female performance in Egypt. I reference van Nieuwkerk's research on the Egyptian performance trade to demonstrate the political factors that contributed to change in Egyptian solo improvised dancing as female entertainers adjusted their performances to cater to an imperialist male audience.

In Egypt in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, there were two classes of female entertainers: the *awalim* and the *ghawazi*. The *awalim* were learned poet-singer-dancers, considered necessary entertainment for all high-class occasions. Unveiled *ghawazi* performers commonly danced at religious and secular street celebrations, in front of coffee houses, and as affordable entertainment for lower-class weddings and birthing celebrations. The *ghawazi* did not have the same oratorical skill set as the *awalim* and were rumored among Egyptian society to be prostitutes as well as dancers, but were nonetheless tolerated and enjoyed as entertainment during celebratory occasions.<sup>41</sup> During the period of the Napoleonic Expedition from 1798 to 1801, *ghawazi* dancers who discovered a new class of patrons in the French soldiers stationed in Cairo solidified their reputations as prostitutes associated with disease.<sup>42</sup>

Appreciation for the female dancer declined among the Egyptian religious powers as

<sup>41</sup> For more information on the *ghawazi* and *awalim* traditions, see: Nieuwkerk, Karin van. 1995. *A Trade Like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

<sup>42</sup> "The French as well as the Egyptian civil and religious authorities tried to keep the dancers and prostitutes away from the army. The women were accused of being a source of infection. The number of French soldiers with syphilis was considerable, so that it became necessary for the French to establish brothels in order to facilitate control and medical examination." (Nieuwkerk 1995, p. 30)

she became associated less with learned skill and more with prostitution and a form of entertainment that was increasingly monopolized by foreign viewers. When the British and Ottoman forces pushed the French out of Cairo, leader of the Albanian Arnaut soldiers, Muhammad Ali, filled the power vacuum. Like the Mamalukes before him, Muhammad Ali levied taxes on performers and other tradespeople to increase state revenue in order to gain independence for Egypt from the Ottomans. Because governmental control was more difficult to execute outside of the capital, many *awalim* and *ghawazi* seeking to avoid the tax on their profits left Cairo for cities in the south like Esna and Luxor where Mameluke and Ottoman armies still fought one another and patronized female performers.<sup>43</sup>

Entertainers who remained in the capital increasingly performed for foreigners as Western travel to Egypt became more common in the mid-1800s. By performing for European and American travelers, female entertainers earned higher wages and avoided the heavy taxes levied on local performances by the Egyptian government. Foreigners who docked their boats off the banks of the Nile invited female dancers to perform on board and at private parties for consuls and governors.<sup>44</sup> The religious authorities in Egypt put pressure on the government to restrict female dancing. The *ulama*<sup>45</sup> disapproved of the state collecting taxes on what they believed to be sinful behavior and fiercely opposed Egyptian women performing for the eyes of infidels, which was becoming increasingly more prevalent. Muhammad Ali, making efforts to cooperate with religious powers, ultimately banned the practice of female public

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<sup>43</sup> Nieuwkerk (1995), p. 31.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> The *ulama* are a class of Muslim legal scholars and religious authorities.

dancing in the capital in 1834.<sup>46</sup> Dancers left Cairo and resumed their trade in Upper Egypt. By 1850, all higher-class trained *awalim* and lower-class *ghawazi* dancers had been pushed to the margins of Egypt's capital city. Fined and kicked out of Cairo, female performers of all kinds found themselves in the more destitute town of Esna. Western travelers followed the dancing trade to the south where most foreigners went to see the most popular tourist attraction: dancing women. Due to pressures being put on female public performance in the form of heavy taxation and restriction from Cairo, the separate classes of performance trade, the *awalim* and *ghawazi*, lost their distinction and more dancers combined their work with prostitution.<sup>47</sup> The earliest permutation of bellydance that became available to the Western imagination was this type of dancer-courtesan performance in Upper Egypt that Western travelers witnessed and wrote about.

European travelers, individual scholars, and Romantic writers had been traveling to Egypt, Greater Syria, and Central Asia since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, bringing home stories from the Orient, appraisals of the culture, and creatively reconstructed images through painting.<sup>48</sup> Popular ideas about the Orient in America and Europe were largely influenced by these travelers' documents and their related images.<sup>49</sup> The French writer

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<sup>46</sup> While local female dancing for private celebrations probably still continued in secret in Cairo the practice of public dancing was also taken up more by men. "The most striking side effect of the ban was the replacement of female dancers by men. Although dancing boys had existed before 1834, their number increased. Two types of male dancers performed, native *khawal* and non-Egyptian *ginks*. The appearance of the *khawal* was similar to that of female dancers." *Khawal* dressed as females and performed with kohl on their eyes. Travelers Nerval and Flaubert saw these male performers. (Nieuwkerk 1995, p. 33)

<sup>47</sup> Nieuwkerk (1995), p. 35.

<sup>48</sup> Syria in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Greater Syria) was a term that denoted a historical region of the Near East bordering the Eastern Mediterranean Sea or the Levant.

<sup>49</sup> The accounts of tourist travelers such as Flaubert, Villiers Stuart, and Warburton included stories of local Egyptian dancer courtesans who postured themselves seductively and submitted to removing their clothes to perform the bee dance. The "bee dance" or the "wasp dance" appears in travelers' accounts and is described by French 19<sup>th</sup> century writer Prisse d'Avennes as when "the prettiest of several dancers comes forward and quivers as if stung by a bee. Her companions dance around her looking for it. They begin to strip her clothing piece by piece as she assumes provocative poses. The hunt is fruitless, of

Gustave Flaubert wrote about his time spent on the banks of the Nile in Esna and Aswan where he witnessed performances by famed Egyptian dancers Kuchuk Hanem and Aziza.<sup>50</sup>

Likely just a few weeks apart from Flaubert's trip to Esna in 1850, George William Curtis traveled to Upper Egypt where he saw Kuchuk Hanem perform with her companions Bambah and Safia Zugairah.<sup>51</sup> In 1857, George William Curtis published his book, *Nile Notes of a Traveler*, in which he describes Kuchuk Hanem's performance in detail.<sup>52</sup> Curtis recounts an instance in which musicians played the *rebab* and *darabukahs* while the dancers sang and danced with the skills and knowledge of the *awalim* class of learned female performers.<sup>53</sup> His published stories about the dangers and pleasures of the East contributed to how America saw the Orient well before the first public bellydance performance in America in 1876. Through Curtis' writings, the Eastern dancer becomes available to the American imagination. Curtis saw Kuchuk Hanem at a moment in history when Egyptian dancers had been cast out of Cairo and the feeling in the West about the Orient was one of ambivalence, nostalgic fascination, and anxiety. This simultaneous fear and fascination was reflected in his writing and the scene he describes with Kuchuk Hanem demonstrates the sexualized frame through which he witnessed the performance of a clearly learned *awalim* performer.

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course, and the dancer stands forth in the nude, going through endless gyrations as she suffers the pain inflicted by the elusive bee." (Morroe Berger 1961, p. 19) These types of travelers' stories contributed early on to the immoral reputation Americans attached to dancers from the Middle East.

<sup>50</sup> Nieuwkerk (1995), p. 34.

<sup>51</sup> Karayanni, Stavros Stavrou. 2005. "Dismissal Veiling Desire: Kuchuk Hanem and Imperial Masculinity." In Shay and Sellers-Young (2005). p. 116.

<sup>52</sup> Curtis was a writer who had stayed for a time with a Transcendentalist community at Brook Farm, had ties with Ralph Waldo Emerson, and helped build Henry David Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond. Curtis was influenced in his writing by his time traveling in Egypt and Syria. Dancer-courtesan Kuchuk Hanem is probably the most well known to people outside of Egypt today, as Curtis and Flaubert both visited her and wrote about her. While Curtis' accounts are written in his book as poetic prose, Flaubert's are frank details of intimate affairs that he shared in letters to friends.

<sup>53</sup> Tucker, Judith E. 1985. *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 152.

The contemporary scholar Stavros Stavrou Karayanni, who attempts to discover Kuchuk's choreography and instill agency back into her body, argues that in alignment with the institutionalized Orientalist thought at the time, Kuchuk's agency and identity as a subject are removed in Curtis' and Flaubert's accounts. Karayanni writes that

Curtis is undoubtedly a modern embodiment of the observant and curious, indefatigable bourgeois subject whose task is to record what he sees in order to titillate, educate, and ultimately reassert the superiority of his own ideology to his own people: white, bourgeois American readers.<sup>54</sup>

Kuchuk's role as trained dancer and paid courtesan would definitely have colored her performance as more seductive than it otherwise might have been for the women-centered harem performances she gave before Ali's edict.<sup>55</sup> The dance that Kuchuk performed for her Western male viewers, Curtis and Flaubert, was a version of bellydance that for the previous few decades had been geared more and more toward a performance for the imperialist male gaze.

Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism*, recounts Flaubert's written account of Kuchuk's performance in Esna, in which Kuchuk is "merely a monolithic representation of the available woman of the East, peculiarly Oriental in her luxuriant and seemingly unbounded sexuality."<sup>56</sup> Said writes:

[Flaubert] was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was 'typically Oriental.' My argument is that Flaubert's situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled.<sup>57</sup>

The image of the bellydancer in American culture is deeply rooted in the patriarchal colonial modes of seeing that first brought the image of the Oriental dancer to the

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<sup>54</sup> Karayanni, Stavros Stavrou. 2004. *Dancing Fear and Desire: Race, Sexuality, and Imperial Politics in Middle Eastern Dance*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press. p. 120.

<sup>55</sup> Before her banishment from Cairo after Ali's edict against public female performance, *awalim* such as Kuchuk typically performed for the harem, or all-female contingent, of private celebrations and weddings.

<sup>56</sup> Said, Edward. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books. p. 187.

<sup>57</sup> Said as quoted in Karayanni (2005), p. 118.

West.<sup>58</sup> Written accounts by American and European male travelers who witnessed specific kinds of women's performances in Egypt in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century underscore the dynamic of Western superiority to Eastern primitiveness and passion. In Chapter Two, we will see that American bellydancers sometimes look to these Orientalist paintings and travelers' accounts in order to construct their idea of what authentic bellydance must have looked like and they model their costumes and dance postures off of these images. When practitioners construct their ideas about bellydance based on images and documents from this time period they reinforce representations of bellydancers that were constructed through the lens of the colonial male gaze.

However, the uneven power dynamic between the 19<sup>th</sup> century dancer and viewer does not entirely diminish the agency of the female Egyptian performers who were not merely dancing passively for an imperial desire, but dancing in service of themselves, empowering their bodies and profession within the landscape of foreign interaction. I would also like to emphasize that this period of history did not simply produce imperialist textual representations of the dance that contaminated the Western imagination of Middle Eastern dance, but that the dance itself as performed in the Middle East shifted and changed in this 19<sup>th</sup> century cultural context. In his readings of travelers' accounts that describe performances of Middle Eastern dancers, Karayanni describes the complex relationship between increased Western tourism to Egypt and the dances performed in Egypt. Referring to the traffic of European travelers,

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<sup>58</sup> The accounts of Western travelers to Egypt are some of the earliest depictions of bellydance that helped define the form in the imaginations of the American public. While Americans would not have read the letters Flaubert wrote to his mother and friends, they might have read Curtis' book or his articles in the *New York Tribune*. Indeed, one might not necessarily have had to read anything Curtis had actually written to form a picture of a bellydancer in one's head in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the images and Orientalist paintings that Curtis and Flaubert's words inspired were seen in advertisements for everything from beer and cigarettes to soap for decades to come. Because of these travelers' accounts, Americans brought with them preconceived notions of what to expect when they came to see the famed hoochie-koochie and *danse du ventre* at the Chicago World's fair of 1893 discussed in the next section.

explorers, missionaries, fortune hunters, and settlers that traveled through 19<sup>th</sup> century Egypt, as described in Amelia Edward's 1873 travel narratives,<sup>59</sup> Karayanni employs Gayatri Spivak's assertions that each body traveling through Egypt inscribed the landscape as individual agents of colonial domination, scripting the colony and other bodies therein:

In the same way that these travelers inscribed the land, they also inscribed the dancing body, interpreting it for the empire but also interpreting it to the native as well. While undergoing this "Europeanization," the dancer and the viewer set up an economy that involves, but is not limited to, the satisfaction of mutual needs. In their intercourse they enter what at times resembles a wrestling, a grappling to impose their power over each other, and at other times resembles a scopie intercourse that consumes both performer and imperial subject with longing. Ultimately, however, the uninitiated and phobic Western viewer is most at home with the dancer as a threatening image. Constructed in terms of threat, the dancer yields the art to a colonial order, thereby absolving the subject of the deviant transformations that Middle Eastern dance suggests.<sup>60</sup>

The written accounts of Western travelers to Egypt in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the paintings they inspired introduced the idea of the bellydancer to America and helped to define public perception of the "Orient" as feminized, an association that serves imperial agendas to ostensibly rescue and moralize the East. Female improvisational dancers in Egypt adjusted how they presented their dancing based on the changing context and increase of Western viewership as well. The solo improvised dance traditions of the *ghawazi* and *awalim* changed as the dancers responded creatively to increasing threats to the survival of their profession by colonial and religious regulation.

Throughout this chapter I highlight a few performance genres in the US that elaborate on the fantasy of the Oriental dancer that was originally set in motion by tales of Western travelers, emphasizing ways these American performance genres enter into a dialogue with contemporaneous versions of bellydance in Egypt and other parts

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<sup>59</sup> Amelia Edwards describes her stay at the Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo in the late 1800s, indicating "the volume of Western human traffic and the magnitude of its impact." (Karayanni 2004, p. 24)

<sup>60</sup> Karayanni (2004), pp. 24-25.

of North Africa and Western Asia. Moving beyond the milieu of imperial images of the Oriental dancer available to the American imagination, in the next section I describe the literal exportation of female dancers to America, in the flesh, by Western males with power and money. These first Middle Eastern dancers in the US fascinated and disgusted the American public and set the stage for many different variations and reinterpretations of Oriental dance by American popular theater performers.

### World's Fairs (1876 and 1893)

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the auspices of exhibition producers, dancers traveled from various countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia to perform in several world exhibitions hosted in Europe and America. These World's Fairs were popular at a time of large-scale Western industrial development and European colonial expansion into Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and the curators of the fairs organized exhibits to demonstrate the lack of civilization in the colonized world. These ethnological exhibits featured actual people of different ethnicities performing a version of their native cultural practices among reconstructions of their "natural" regional settings. Bellydance first appeared in America at the 1876 and 1893 World's Fair Expositions, where women from parts of Northern Africa and Western Asia performed solo improvised dance in the context of these exhibits. Producers of the fairs advertised the spectacle as *danse du ventre* and "belly dance." These lascivious names and the freedom of movement on display by non-corseted women quickly offended and fascinated Victorian Era sensibilities.<sup>61</sup> This section shows that

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<sup>61</sup> *Danse du ventre*, "dance of the abdomen" in French, is the name given by fair goers to the dances from the Middle East performed at the Paris Exposition.

bellydance appeared in America not in some pure authentic form but as carefully crafted entertainment acts designed to represent the East in a microcosmic model of the world in which the West was progressive and civilized and the East was backward and dangerous but mysterious and alluring. The emerging field of social science, which purported to prove the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race by way of scientific evidence,<sup>62</sup> had a large presence at the fairs and shaped how the general public viewed bellydance, which was presented as an amoral practice from the inferior Orient. The *danse du ventre*, or the hoochie-koochie as it became known at the “A Street in Cairo” exhibit and Algerian Theater, was the most popular attraction at the Chicago Fair, famed for its ability to tantalize working class men and according to the press, disgust women.

The first known public bellydance performance in the US was at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. This International Exposition commemorating America’s centennial anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence included major exhibits from Egypt, Turkey, and Tunisia, and boasted an Algerian and a Turkish Coffee-House.<sup>63</sup> After an impromptu dance performance, the Philadelphia police raided the Turkish Coffee-House to arrest a female dancer and charged her with performing a dance that was “immodest in character.” Though the official story was that the police had raided the coffee shop because it was not supposed to have dancing or charge admission, Philadelphia law enforcement officials, alarmed and threatened by the freedom of movement the woman displayed, also cited the dance as

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<sup>62</sup> Contemporary social scientists understand 19<sup>th</sup> century racial science as faulty scholarship.

<sup>63</sup> “President Ulysses S. Grant and Congress approved funding in 1871 for an International Exposition commemorating America’s centennial anniversary of the signings of the Declaration of Independence in the city of that hosted the original signing, Philadelphia. Over 50 nations were invited, and responded to the government invitations; thus was born the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876.” (Monty 1986, pp. 14, 18) According to Monty, this performance in the Turkish Coffee-House provided the first American public performance of the *danse du ventre*.

reason for arrest.<sup>64</sup> Although the performance and incident itself was brief, the reaction of the American public was immediate and lasting, establishing a reputation for bellydance as immoral even before its first officially marketed public debut at the Chicago Fair in 1893.<sup>65</sup>

Similar World's Fairs were happening in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of the four expositions in Paris that were open to exhibitors of foreign nations between 1855 and 1889, the most famous was the Paris International Exposition of 1889. At this Expo, American businessman Sol Bloom, an entertainment and music entrepreneur who also served in the US House of Representatives, became infatuated with the mock Algerian village where women performed the *danse du ventre* among performances of acrobatics and various dangerous feats. Bloom was certain he could make money off of the Algerian performers by touring them in the United States. He consulted a lawyer and gained exclusive rights from the troupe's French manager to exhibit the Algerian entertainers in North and South America for two years.<sup>66</sup> In his autobiography, Bloom writes:

Of all the exhibits at the fair I had found those of the French Colonies the most fascinating, and my favorite was the Algerian Village. I doubt very much whether anything resembling it was ever seen in Algeria, but I was not at the same time concerned with trifles. The Algerians themselves were genuine beyond question, and what was really important was that they represented a varied entertainment that increased in excitement in proportion to my familiarity with it. I knew that nothing like these dancers, acrobats, glass-eaters, and scorpion swallows had ever been seen in the Western Hemisphere, and I was sure I could make a fortune with them in the United States.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> "Even though the Turks were performing the dance native to their country, the freedom of movement was more than the Philadelphia law enforcement officials felt they could allow." (Monty 1986, p. 19) In *Habibi* Magazine, Jamila Salimpour mentions dances performed at the Tunisian exhibit but according to Monty there is no evidence to support this. Monty writes that he assumes Jamila was unfamiliar with the Turkish Coffee Shop scandal when she wrote, "There was no evidence of any anger or furor over the dancers at the Centennial such as there was at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893." (Salimpour 1975, quoted in Monty 1986, p. 19)

<sup>65</sup> Evidence of Americans' attempts to name the unfamiliar Middle Eastern dance, *The Dance Encyclopedia* attributes the first use of the word "hoochie-koochie" to this Philadelphia Centennial Fair. Chujoy, Anatole and Manchester, P.W. 1967. *The Dance Encyclopedia*, Revised Edition, ed. New York: Simon and Schuster. p. 474.

<sup>66</sup> Monty (1986), pp. 25-29.

<sup>67</sup> Bloom, Sol. 1948. *The Autobiography of Sol Bloom*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons. p. 107.

Bloom was aware of the invented nature of the practices he saw at the Paris Expo and recognized a moneymaking opportunity and ethnographic pursuit in bringing the performers to the US. Bloom's words highlight the extent to which the practices he advertised to be ethnically authentic, were in fact constructed as pure entertainment for an American audience, designed to shock the public in a carnivalesque display of otherness. While Bloom dismisses accuracy as a "trifle", many bellydancers in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century looked to written accounts, film, and photographs of the dancing at these fairs as a source for discovering the movements and aesthetics of authentic bellydance.

After Bloom hired the Algerian performers under contract and gained exclusive rights to produce them, he returned to America to find a venue to showcase the spectacle. He became manager of the amusement concessions for the World's Colombian Exhibition in Chicago in 1892 and exerted his influence on designing the main fairway, the Midway Plaisance. On the Midway, Bloom had model villages built that showcased performers from all over the colonized world.<sup>68</sup> The most popular exhibit of the entire fair was "A Street in Cairo," which featured the Algerian and Egyptian performers and other dancers of the *danse du ventre*.<sup>69</sup> In his autobiography, Bloom writes, "when the public learned that the literal translation [of *danse du ventre*] was 'belly dance' they delightedly concluded that it must be salacious and immoral.

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<sup>68</sup> Bloom returned to New York and on hearing about plans for a World's Fair in Chicago to celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the discovery of America, Bloom went to Chicago to secure his position as manager of the amusement concessions for the World's Colombian Exhibition in Chicago. In doing so, he found a venue to exhibit his Algerian performers and drafted plans for the fair's famous Midway Plaisance, a main fairway consisting of reconstructed colonial villages.

<sup>69</sup> The Algerian Village set up by Sol Bloom began in the summer of 1892 before the official opening of the fair partially due to the fact that the performers had arrived in Chicago one year early. In 1893 New York newspapers created a buzz about the arrival of the many other performers from the "Orient" who came through Ellis Island to get to the World's Fair in Chicago. The New York Daily Tribune wrote articles announcing the arrival of Algerians, Tunisians, Moors, Syrians, Arabs, and Turks, along with their wares and camels. They were on their way to the Midway Plaisance in Chicago where they were to be cast in exhibits representing the people and practices of Turkey, Persia, Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt.

The crowds poured in and I had a gold mine.”<sup>70</sup> While Bloom had a genuine appreciation for the “muscle dances” he produced in their own right, as a shrewd businessman, he helped construct a representational frame and marketing scheme that drew in American audiences. Bloom presented North African solo improvisational dance performance as “belly dance” and paired these female dancers with live musicians and circus-like performers such as sword swallows and men who walked on hot coals. Bellydance became popular in the US partly by way of a single man with money and connections. This would not be the only time bellydance in America would see a resurgence in popularity partially at the hands of such a man as we will see in Chapter Two with Joe Williams in the 1960s and Miles Copeland in the 2000s.

The dances performed at the 1893 Chicago Fair, immortalized in print, drawings, and film, have served as a source for reconstructing bellydance since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Written accounts proliferate describing the various types of dancing featured in the Middle Eastern and North African exhibits at the Chicago Exposition. All exhibits featured dancing that was described as movements of the torso with very little to no movement in the feet and was often called *danse du ventre* or the “hoochie-koochie.”<sup>71</sup> In reference to the dancing showcased in the Cairo Street exhibit, newspaper reviewers describe the choreography as “a series of posturings, rhythmically performed, in which only the upper part of the body is used. It is a swaying and a movement of the body above the hips to a musical accompaniment.”<sup>72</sup> The Algerian theater was reported to exhibit women dancing with swords and

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<sup>70</sup> Bloom (1948), p. 135. Bloom also credits himself for creating the popular tune known as the hoochie-koochie, which contributed to the popularity of the name for Middle Eastern dance, by improvising an oriental sounding tune on the piano to serve as the score for his Algerian dancers to put on a preview for the Press Club of Chicago. (Monty 1986, p. 30)

<sup>71</sup> Monty (1986), p. 52.

<sup>72</sup> Eliot, George E. 1893. “Egyptian Dancers.” *Frank Leslie’s Weekly*. August 10, 1893.

castanets, wearing drapes of fabric and rows of coin necklaces and anklets, as well as men who ate hot coals and live scorpions and stuck pins in their flesh. A tambourine-playing dancer in the Persian theater was described as wearing a fabric inlaid with metal, the kind that is produced in the Egyptian village of Asuite. The Cairo Street carnival that showcased a daily wedding procession boasted such famous dancers as Fatima and Farida Mahzar (later referred to as “Little Egypt”)<sup>73</sup> who are associated with later developments in belly dance in New York City and Coney Island, where many imitators claimed the names. These descriptions of choreography, costume, and terminology have been popular sources among pioneers of modern-day bellydance for reconstructing movement quality and costuming. Many American bellydancers understand these written and photographic sources to be accurate depictions of an authentic bellydance. It is important to understand that these descriptions and accounts are loaded with preconceptions from the Victorian Era about the Orient and about women, based on the representational frame under which they were presented.

Karin van Nieuwkerk writes that, at the Chicago Fair, “the audience received the dancers in an atmosphere of expectancy, created by the descriptions and images of travelers and painters.”<sup>74</sup> Nieuwkerk is referring not only to the advertisements for the individual exhibits or the illustrated magazine reviews that were being circulated at the time but to the general milieu of images and Orientalist thought about the Near East by the West. Western ambivalence toward the Middle East is discussed in a review of the exhibition, “The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse - The Allure of North Africa and the

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<sup>73</sup> Farida Mahzar is understood by Monty to be the original dancer to perform under the famed name, “Little Egypt.” Scholars disagree on the whereabouts of Little Egypt and who all actually took the name. Other famed dancers at the fair include: a Dervish dancer named Rosa featured at the Turkish exhibit and a male dancer from Syria, Mohammed, who was boasted by some to be the best performer of the *danse du ventre*. (Monty 1986, p. 71)

<sup>74</sup> Nieuwkerk (1995), p. 41.

Near East,” which was organized by Mary Ann Stevens for the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in October 1984. The review states:

Mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Europe was in the throes of Charles Darwin, social upheaval and profound industrial change. Westerners saw in the landscape, monuments and customs of the Middle East a bastion of absoluteness and timelessness. In every instance, however, that absoluteness provoked not only wonder but apprehension.<sup>75</sup>

The Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 was a place to display and reinforce the superiority of America in the world by exhibiting the country’s new technologies and theories. In a display of cultural and material exports from other countries, the fair ordered a world in which the emerging fields of social science, anthropology, and ethnology “scientifically” proved the superiority of Western culture.<sup>76</sup> The World’s Fair’s organizers arranged the exhibits on a linear arc from uncivilized to civilized peoples, thus attempting to demonstrate the evolutionary superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race over “savage races” and low-class immigrant populations.<sup>77</sup> Exhibits featuring *danse du ventre* or bellydance were located at the semi-civilized midpoint. The presence of the Women’s Movement at the fair demonstrated the changing social attitudes toward women and contributed to the air of progress that America was trying to showcase. In contrast to how American women were represented, women from “exotic” places were showcased as lascivious, primitive, and immoral and these assumptions about Eastern women were scientifically underscored by colonial taxonomies.<sup>78</sup>

Eastern dancing women were not only judged by their Easternness but by the act of dancing itself. In the Victorian era, attitudes toward dance were similar to

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<sup>75</sup> “The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse - The Allure of North Africa and the Near East.” National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Review in *The New York Times*. October 1, 1984. p. 54.

<sup>76</sup> June, Jennifer Brooke. 1999. *Toward Legitimacy: Late Nineteenth Century Feminized Burlesque as an influence on Early Modern Dance*. Master’s thesis: University of California, Los Angeles. p. 63.

<sup>77</sup> June (1999), pp. 74-75.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

attitudes toward prostitution. In her research on attitudes toward burlesque in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jennifer Brooke June writes, “It was generally assumed by middle-class America that dancers sold sex if not solely, certainly in combination with scopie pleasure.”<sup>79</sup> The bellydancers were famed for their salacious entertainment value and ability to attract working-class male audiences. Other producers and entertainers took notice and after the fair’s close, bellydance became the new fad in amusement parks, vaudeville popular theater, and burlesque. The fair dancers who stayed in the US went on to perform in other venues once the World’s Fair was over and were quite successful monetarily for a time, adjusting their dance to suit their professional interests, but the American female entertainers they inspired benefited much more from their creative imitations of Oriental dance.

#### Coney Island, Vaudeville, and Burlesque (1893-1917)

The American public’s fascination with the bellydance and *danse du ventre* popularized at the World’s Fairs created demand for that type of performance in the amusement park at Coney Island, burlesque theater, and vaudeville shows, allowing for the rise in popularity of kooch dancing, exotic dance, and the serpentine. Three characters, Little Egypt, Fatima, and Salome, embodied by scores of female entertainers, have each left their own mark on the public perception, movement quality, and costuming of bellydance today. Each of these character personas represented the “mystery” and “danger” of the Orient, and of women in general, in different ways that appealed to the different classes of American society. Working class men were fascinated by the penny arcade freakishness of kooch dance and the

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<sup>79</sup> June (1999), p. 65.

overt sexuality on display in exotic dance that markedly contrasted from socially accepted ideas of proper female behavior and the Gibson Girl standard of beauty.<sup>80</sup>

While upper-class women found kooch and exotic dance repulsive and threatening to their advancing social progress toward suffrage, they were fascinated by the serpentine skirt dances performed on the vaudeville stage by the early pioneers of modern dance.

At the close of the Chicago World's Fair, some of the performers from the Cairo Street exhibit traveled home while others found work at the amusement park at Coney Island.<sup>81</sup> From 1895 to 1897, dancers who had traveled to America from North Africa and Western Asia performed *danse du ventre* and the hoochie-koochie in the park alongside countless American imitators.<sup>82</sup> Many dancers claimed to be the original Little Egypt or Fatima from the Chicago Fair.<sup>83</sup> Dancers in amusement park peep shows

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<sup>80</sup> The statuesque, narrow-waisted Gibson Girl, made popular by Charles Dana Gibson's satirical pen-and-ink illustrations, was the American ideal of female beauty in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Always portrayed as at ease and stylish, she was a member of upper-class society and always perfectly dressed in the latest fashionable attire. (June 1999)

<sup>81</sup> With a handsome sum of \$500 and stories of their six months in America, the fair dancers who returned "prompted other Egyptian dancers to set out for Europe and the United States. Western dancers, in turn, set out for the East." (Nieuwkerk. 1995, p. 42) With this statement, Nieuwkerk brings our attention to the fact that, after the World's Fair, bellydance began to develop diachronically in Egypt and America.

<sup>82</sup> From 1895 to 1897 the reproduction of the "Street of Cairo" exhibit fared well at the amusement park, but due to changing tastes and repeated harassment, fines, and arrests for indecency by the Brooklyn police, by 1903 the deserted Cairo Street at Coney Island was dismantled. The reason for decline of the exhibit is not known for certain, but Paul Monty entertains the possibility of ethnic prejudice against the Middle Eastern and North African colonies living in New York and at the amusement park. The community at Coney Island consisted of Turks, Armenians, and Egyptians, known by the Americans as Syrians or Ottomans. Monty writes that in 1895 "much pressure was being exerted from the 'civilized West' to end the brutal crisis between the Turks and the Armenians. Genteel Americans looked upon the actions of the Ottomans as barbaric, an opinion which extended to their form of music and dance." (Monty 1986, pp. 95-96, 101) The original Little Egypt and Fatima, as well as their countless imitators who were fascinated with bellydance, left Coney Island and found other venues for performance. Kooch dance was considered to be on the fringes of acceptability and respectability and the many run-ins of dancers with the police at Coney Island had helped to secure its taboo, increasing its popularity in vaudeville and burlesque.

<sup>83</sup> The Syrian dancer, Farida Mahzar, who was one of the most famed at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, had become known as "Little Egypt." On Coney Island, numerous Little Egypts sprang up, claiming to be the original hoochie-koochie, or kooch, dancer from the fair. It is documented that "the original Little Egypt arrived in New York less than two months after the October closing of the Chicago Fair, and was warned by Inspector Williams about performing at the Grand Central Palace Theater Exhibition." (Monty 1986, p. 92) Along with imitators of the famed Little Egypt there were also many imitators of the original Fatima from the exposition's Cairo Street and it is possible that the original Fatima did perform at Coney Island.

represented the freakish and mysterious East, where the “freak” was the Orient itself.

Paul Monty cites John Kasson’s description of the new “Street of Cairo” at Coney Island:

Besides freaks of nature, Coney Island further mocked the hum-drum character of the larger society by presenting freaks of culture. Only two years after the Columbian Exposition, Coney boasted its own ‘Streets of Cairo.’ Visitors stared at camels and warily fed elephants, not in a circus setting but as participants in a drama that attempted within its means to suggest the mysteries of the orient. Women and especially men clustered eagerly before canopied booths where barkers exclaimed over the allure of ‘Little Egypt’ and other practitioners of the *danse du ventre*.<sup>84</sup>

Robert C. Allen supports Kasson’s identification of the kooch dancer as a perceived freak who was recognizable as a woman but completely out of line with the proper Victorian Era model of acceptable female behavior. He writes, “Her exhibition is structured around the tension between her similarity to ‘ordinary’ women the male audience member sees and knows outside the tent and her fascinating otherness produced by her expressive and displayed sexuality.”<sup>85</sup> Newspapers described the movement quality of Little Egypt and Fatima as a “relatively normal routine of gyrations of the torso,” in their description of their performances at the 1904 St. Louis Exposition, suggesting that hoochie-koochie and *danse du ventre* performed up until that point at Coney Island had been focused more on the upper body than the pelvis.<sup>86</sup> Green and Laurie contend that after 1904, the nature of the kooch dance changed as it grew in popularity with burlesque and vaudeville, saying that, “bumps were added...also the spinning of the breasts and the rump.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Kasson, John F. “Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the century.” New York: Hill & Wang. 1978. p. 53. (In Monty 1986, p. 92)

<sup>85</sup> Allen, Robert C. 1991. *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. p. 235.

<sup>86</sup> Little Egypt was reported to have performed at the 1904 St. Louis Exposition with another famous dancer Syrian born dancer, Djemille Fatima, both of whom began performing in vaudeville and burlesque shows after the fair. Green, Abel and Laurie, Joseph Jr. 1951. *Showbiz From Vaude to Video*. New York: Henry Holt and Company. p. 76.

<sup>87</sup> Green and Laurie (1951), p. 76.

After the Street in Cairo exhibits at the Chicago Fair and Coney Island closed, exotic dance quickly became the new fad in hot burlesque.<sup>88</sup> Exotic kooch dancers represented an overtly sexualized Oriental other, consciously heightening the scopical pleasure they made available to male viewers. On the inclusion of kooch dancing in burlesque after the 1890s, known as “exotic” dance, Robert C. Allen writes:

The spectator's desire was not diffused among a company of performers or mediated by drama but focused exclusively on the body of a single woman. She, in turn, played only to him; her movements served no function other than to arouse and please him. Her dance was a pas de deux involving her body and his gaze. She was an exhibition of direct, wordless, female eroticism and exoticism.<sup>89</sup>

Leaders of the Women's Suffrage Movement in the US saw the type of dancing described by Allen as a threat to the social progress they sought for women. Jennifer Brooke June elaborates that the kooch dancer was a freak and that if a woman entertainer “did not want to be considered a freak, had to ensure her audiences, and society in general, of her alignment and reverence of proper female behavior as defined by...women's rights activists, (and) reform groups.”<sup>90</sup> Like the freakish kooch dancer, the improper and sexualized exotic dancer was indefatigably associated with the Orient and performers used the East as a theoretical location that freed up the possibility of sexualized display and exploration of femininity.

The movement quality of exotic dance focused more prevalently on undulations of the torso and vibrations of the pelvis.<sup>91</sup> On the costume of the exotic kooch dancer

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<sup>88</sup> “Hot” burlesque, versus “clean” burlesque, was a disreputable entertainment that catered toward lower middle-class male audiences, using the allure of sex to attract regular patrons. (June 1999)

<sup>89</sup> Allen (1991), p. 231.

<sup>90</sup> June (1999), p. 83.

<sup>91</sup> This movement quality can be seen in a description of dancer Millie De Leon's hoochie-koochie burlesque act (De Leon was also called “The Odalisque of the East”). The *Philadelphia North American* article states: “For the remainder of the dance the woman didn't move from her tracks. Slowly, and in a manner hardly noticeable even through the transparent net which constituted the middle portion of her gown, the muscles of her body took on a wave-like motion. The undulation increased in rapidity. A purely side to side movement...complicated the pattern and introduced a chaotic activity that probably last five minutes. Finally, Millie de Leon became unspeakably frank. From knee to neck she was convulsive. Every muscle became eloquent of primitive emotion.” Adams, Katherine H., Keene, Michael L. and Koella,

in burlesque, Adams, Keen, and Koella write, “the costume remained vaguely Oriental: a short bolero with coin decorations, a white chemise, harem pantaloons allowing the navel to be seen, and a wide sash. The dancers’ hair hung loose over their shoulders in an outward indication of their abandon.”<sup>92</sup> These costuming choices and the shifting movement quality have affected bellydance as it is performed today and the association of bellydance with exotic and striptease dancing is still prevalent in public perception.

Contemporaneous with the popularity of kooch and exotic dance, were more respectable performances of “Egyptian Serpentine” or “Oriental Fantasy”<sup>93</sup> in popular theater of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In vaudeville, another Fatima appeared<sup>94</sup> and Loie Fuller performed serpentine, skirt, and Salome dances on the vaudeville stage that used more spinning and sinuous arm movements than pelvic vibrations. Fuller and her serpentine imitators’ performances represented the East with an air of mysticism, feminine spirituality, and danger. Early American modern dancers Ruth St. Denis and Isadora Duncan were influenced by Fuller’s serpentine dance and La Meri’s fascination with Oriental dance began after she saw Fatima

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Jennifer C. 2012. *Seeing the American Woman, 1880-1920*. North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. p. 141.

<sup>92</sup> Sobel, Bernard. 1956. *A Pictorial History of Burlesque*. New York: Bonanza. p. 57. (Cited in Adams, Keen, Koella 2012, p. 140)

<sup>93</sup> Laure, Joseph Jr. 1953. *Vaudeville: from Honkey-Tonks to the Palace*. New York: Henry Holt and Company. p. 41

<sup>94</sup> In 1913 Djemille Fatima, also known as La Belle Fatima, was a headline performer at William and Oscar Hammerstein’s Victoria Theater, where she was advertised as “an escaped harem dancer of the deposed Sultan of Turkey, Abdul II.” (Cohen-Stratynner 1982, p. 317) In 1911, she had been cast in Hammerstein’s Vaudeville show, “The Garden of Allah,” where famous early American Modern dancer La Meri was captivated by her performance. Cohen-Stratynner writes: “The Hammersteins sent her on tour with an act called the Tiger Lillies [sic] that consisted entirely of female headliner performers in 1917. Her personal act remained the same throughout her American career and consisted of four dances – ‘Dance of the Balkans,’ ‘A Fantasie,’ ‘The Algerian Apache as Danced 500 Years Ago,’ and ‘Arabian Dance.’” Cohen-Stratynner, Barbara Naomi. 1982. *Biographical Dictionary of Dance*. New York: Schirmer Books. (quoted in Monty 1986, p. 194) Willie Hammerstein was involved in several Oriental theater shows, including a cast of Salome dancers, one of whom was Gertrude Hoffman, in 1907.

perform on the vaudeville stage.<sup>95</sup> Kooch and exotic dancers represented popular notions about the wanton East with pelvic gyrations and revealing costuming; and serpentine dancers referenced the mysticism of the East with sinuous arm movements performed in flowing skirt and veil fabrics. It is possible that the modern-day bellydance skirt and veil was influenced by the costumes associated with this period of time.<sup>96</sup>

The scandal caused by a “public rehearsal” of Richard Strauss’ production of Oscar Wilde’s play *Salome* at the New York Metropolitan Opera House in 1907,<sup>97</sup> along with the infamous ban on Strauss’ opera in England after its 1905 German debut, inspired many vaudeville performers and early modern dancers to add an interpretation of Salome’s dance to their act. Wilde’s play includes a “Dance of the Seven Veils” in which Salome, whose love for St. John the Baptist has been rejected,

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<sup>95</sup> American burlesque and vaudeville dancer Loie Fuller (Mary Louise Fuller) was launched to international fame after her 1891 performance for a play in Brooklyn, New York, where she wore a large skirt. In 1892, her solo performances at the Casino Theater in New York, for which she wore her large skirt of rippling swirling silk, were described as “The Serpentine Dance.” de Morinni, Clare. 1948. “Loie Fuller: The Fairy of Light.” In *Chronicles of the American Dance*. Edited by Magriel, Paul. New York: Henry Holt and Company. p. 207 (cited in Monty 1986, p. 173) Fuller was known for her Serpentine skirt dances in which she used one or more veils of swirling silk fabric. She was especially known for pioneering stage lighting techniques and was clearly influenced by Art Nouveau and enabled by advancements in science and electricity. A number of serpentine dance imitators sprung up all over the US and Fuller took her act to Europe. She boarded a steam ship to Germany where she performed in the circus until she found passage to Paris. By the time she arrived, imitator Mabel Stuart had been performing Serpentine dance at the Folies-Bergere. In 1892 she debuted her original skirt and veil act at the Folies-Bergere and reached the height of her fame in Europe in 1896. Monty writes, “Oscar Wilde and Richard Strauss’ opera of *Salome*, opening in May 1907 in Paris, caused not only a world full of Salomes, but inspiration for Loie to redo her performance.” (Monty 1986, pp. 174-178)

<sup>96</sup> Paul Monty suggests that Loie Fuller, while her movement and costuming was not particularly “Oriental” influenced dancers whose interpretations of dance theater and veiled and skirted costuming, in turn may have influenced Egyptian dancers costume and performance.

<sup>97</sup> Heinrich Conried, director of New York’s Metropolitan Opera House, staged the controversial *Salome* at a “public rehearsal” on January 20, 1907 and a benefit performance on January 22, 1907. Many in the audience fled at the beginning of the final scene. Wilde’s play tells the biblical story of Salome manipulating her stepfather Herod’s lust for her in order to have St. John the Baptist killed when he spurns her affection for him. Salome dances with and kisses the lips of the Baptist’s dismembered head. Strauss’ opera was shut down after these performances due to the blasphemous and sexual nature of its content. Horowitz, Joseph. 2009. “Henry Krehbiel: German American, Music Critic.” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*. Volume 8, Number 2. April 2009. Available via *The History Cooperative* at [www.historycooperative.org](http://www.historycooperative.org). May 20, 2012.

dances before his decapitated head, ending the performance with a kiss on his cold lips. In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century America was in a grip of “Salomania.”<sup>98</sup> The Dance of the Seven Veils became popular in burlesque and vaudeville, and early modern dancers performing in more reputable theaters, including Loie Fuller, Gertrude Hoffman, and Maude Allan, performed their versions of the Salome story. Vaudeville costuming made Salome generally appear Middle Eastern through the use of “small breast plates, ropes of pearls, the swaying veils, tights or no tights, and bare feet or sandals.”<sup>99</sup> Dancers who performed the Dance of the Seven Veils removed each veil one at a time over the course of the dance until only one remained. Bellydancers today still perform the Dance of the Seven Veils and, as we will see in Chapter Two, have used this particular dance as a legitimizing strategy for attaching their dance to a notion of spiritualism and rebirth, connecting the veils to Babylonian Ishtar rather than Salome. It is apparent that this vaudevillian period in the history of American bellydance has influenced the public perception and aesthetic of the practice today, as one of the most recent trends in present-day bellydance outside of the Middle East is an incorporation of turn-of-the-century American vaudeville aesthetics in music and costuming.

### Early Modern Dance (1899-1922)

Some pioneers of early modern dance began on the vaudeville stage and were certainly influenced by the Orientalia present in performances at the turn of the century. Early modern dancers Loie Fuller, Ruth St. Denis, Isadora Duncan, Maude Allan, and La Meri presented a universal and “natural” feminism through essentialist

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<sup>98</sup> Glenn, Susan A. 2000. *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p. 96. (cited in Adams, Keene, Koella 2012, p. 146)

<sup>99</sup> Adams, Keene, Koella (2012), p. 146.

notions of women and the body, race, and nationality.<sup>100</sup> Often, they used the idea of a mysterious and spiritual East to legitimize their movement as art and to support the idea of the dancing body as a vehicle for expression beyond mere entertainment. Early modern dance was a metaphor for women's possibility that utilized the ideological constructs of Orientalism and femininity to legitimize the dancing body. In their versions of Salome and attempted reconstructions of vaguely Eastern dances, early modern dancers performed similar dances to the kooch and serpentine being performed in disreputable dance halls and vaudeville theaters but they were able to get more respect from the upper-classes. By limiting the use of pelvic movement, seen as explicitly sexual, and attaching sexuality to mysticism, early modern dancers used the idea of the ancient and spiritual East to legitimize their dancing as art. Upper-class women accepted this new dance and shared a kinesthetic empathy<sup>101</sup> with the dancers who drew from the Delsarte system, a movement practice that was common among middle to upper-class women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>102</sup> A departure from the performers of *danse du ventre*, hoochie-koochie, kooch, and exotic dance who generally performed for the working-class men, early modern dancers performed for

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<sup>100</sup> Manning, Susan. 1997. "The Female Dancer and the Male Gaze: Feminist Critiques of Early Modern Dance." In *Meaning in Motion, New Cultural Studies of Dance*. Edited by Desmond, Jane C. 1997. Durham: Duke University Press. p. 159.

<sup>101</sup> For an in-depth study of kinesthesia between dancer and viewer as socially mediated versus psychophysical, see: Foster, Susan Leigh. 2011. *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*. New York: Routledge, Inc.

<sup>102</sup> One of the more popular forms of physical education among women was a system of expression derived from French music and drama teacher, Francois Delsarte (1811-1871). Aiming to develop a complete system of dramatic expression, Delsarte observed people in daily life and scrutinized the details of their movement, facial expressions, gestures, and vocal behavior. The Delsarte system was introduced to America and expanded upon by Steel Mackaye, Reverend William Lager and Genevieve Stebbins. Stebbins associated the movements she taught with the sacred dance of the Orient and art of ancient Greece. Early modern dancers' incorporation of the Delsarte system had a publicly legitimizing influence on the dance. (June 1999, pp. 92-93)

higher-class audiences, eliciting respect, fascination, and a kinesthetic response from female viewers.<sup>103</sup>

Ruth St. Denis and Isadora Duncan, who were both influenced by the aesthetics of theatrical dance in the 1890s, saw Loie Fuller perform her serpentine skirt dance at the Paris Exposition of 1899. Fuller's expressive movement in conjunction with the general mood of Oriental fascination pervasive in books, plays, art, and dance, caused choreographers like Ruth St. Denis, Maud Allan, and Isadora Duncan to become fascinated with the movement that they felt must have existed in the sacred dance of the Orient and the art of Ancient Greece. Maude Allan toured her "The Vision of Salome" show in Europe in 1908, and Isadora Duncan explored nationalist, democratic themes that looked to Ancient Greece as the seedbed of Western civilization. In her 1910 performance of "Egypta," Ruth St. Denis attempted to reconstruct ancient pharaonic dances with a series of static two-dimensional postures and she produced her imagined version of many "ancient Eastern" dances including those from India in 1906, Greece in 1916, and an Egyptian Ballet in 1922 with her school, Denishawn.<sup>104</sup> Among some members of the present-day American bellydance community, there is a notion of a genre of bellydance called "pharaonic dance." The architecture of the poses used in this dance and the appearance of the costume look very similar to Ruth St. Denis' interpretation of Ancient Egyptian dance. In the modern-day bellydance community there are many references, in movement and costuming, to various Indian-style dances. This coincidence of vaguely Middle Eastern and Indian costuming and movement has existed in bellydance since before Ruth St. Denis and La Meri's Indian

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<sup>103</sup> This notion of kinesthetic empathy related to recognition of Delsartian movement in early modern dance is sourced from: Manning (1997).

<sup>104</sup> The performances I reference here are St. Denis' "Radha" (1906) and *Dance Pageant of India, Greece, and Egypt* (1916).

and Middle Eastern style choreographies. American's conflation of Eastern markers in dance speaks to the history during which the idea of bellydance, or Oriental dance, was constructed where all differences between the various nations that made up the Orient were flattened into a singular, interchangeable entity.

Nancy Ruyter contends that "associating the new dance with remote cultures of the past and of the mysterious East gave to dance a high tone and a sense of serious purpose as well as providing a metaphysical and philosophical rationale for dance as an art."<sup>105</sup> Early modern dancers touring the US and Europe manipulated Victorian moral standards in a way to make what was objectionable (the Orient and the dancing female body) artistic. Upper-class women accepted the dance partially because it was created and led by women and therefore reflected the themes of the Women's Movement, and partially because they identified with the physicality of the dance.<sup>106</sup> St. Denis, Allan, and Duncan created their own movement vocabularies that drew on aesthetic gymnastics and Delsartism, systems that were widely practiced by middle-class American women. Susan Manning attributes middle-class women's approval of modern dance to the kinesthetic response contemporary female spectators felt as they watched modern dance, since they had direct experience with the movement techniques involved.<sup>107</sup> Shared kinesthesia between dancer and spectator is paradoxical to the representational frame of Orientalism because the Orientalist frame encourages an objectifying gaze versus an inter-subjective empathic relationship. While the colonial and American working-class male gaze has defined much of how bellydance is represented, the form also elicits an inter-subjective spectatorship from women and

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<sup>105</sup> Ruyter, Nancy Lee Chalfa. 1979. *Reformers and Visionaries: The Americanization of the Art of Dance*. New York: Dance Horizons. p. 23.

<sup>106</sup> June (1999), p. 88.

<sup>107</sup> Manning (1997), p. 162.

men who practice the dance themselves and are familiar with some of its choreographic principles. On this tension between the tendency to elicit both an objectifying and inter-subjective gaze in early modern dance, Manning writes:

The juxtaposition of individualized kinesthetic subjectivity and generalized representational type created a dynamic tension underlying the form of early modern dance, a tension that grounded the paradoxical social function of the form. Whereas the representational frames reiterated and updated preexistent images of gender and ethnicity, the kinesthetic dimension introduced a new image of the female body in motion that was not precedent.<sup>108</sup>

In Chapter Two we will see how bellydance in America after 1960 has strategized to develop this relationship of kinesthetic empathy with the audience, while it struggles to deal with its Orientalist representational frame.

### Hollywood, Egyptian Film, and Bellydance in Cairo (1916-1950s)

Some of the first dancers on film were bellydancers and the introduction of bellydance to the US coincided with the development of the motion picture. The actual dancers at the Chicago World's Fair were filmed and countless early films feature a dancer-vamp character who performs a film-appropriate version of *danse du ventre*.<sup>109</sup> Because American film censorship codes banned dancing movements that explicitly referenced sexual movement and as well as stationary dancing, early feature films that showcased bellydancing focused more on gesture, sinuous arm movement, and traveling across space.<sup>110</sup> Ruth St. Denis' take on Oriental dancing left its mark on Hollywood, and in turn Hollywood's representation of Oriental dance influenced the dancing and costuming in Golden Era Egyptian films. Filmic representation of

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<sup>108</sup> Manning (1997), p. 164.

<sup>109</sup> One of the most popular vamp characters was actress Theda Bara, whose name is an anagram for "Arab Death."

<sup>110</sup> Stone, Rebecca. 1991. *Salome, Scheherazade, and Hollywood: the Oriental Dance in American Feature Film*. Master's thesis. University of California Los Angeles.

bellydance in America and Egypt in turn affected how non-filmic bellydance in America and Egypt was performed.<sup>111</sup> In this way, bellydance continued to develop diachronically in both places as they engaged with one another in exchanging images of the dance and costume.

American modern and theatrical dance interpretations of Oriental dance made their way onto the big screen early on in motion picture history. In 1916 Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn's school, Denishawn, trained the cast of Oriental dancers for the film *Intolerance*. In the 1940s and 50s, Denishawn-trained dancer/choreographer Jack Cole became one of the most prominent Hollywood choreographers for films that contained harem scenes, biblical dances, or Middle Eastern café scenes. He too was fascinated with the "East" and "his choreography contained jazzed up variations of Oriental movement vocabulary."<sup>112</sup> At the same time Jack Cole choreographed Oriental dance scenes for Hollywood, famous Egyptian dancers were starring in Golden Era Egyptian films, which always included singing and dancing. Tahia Carioca and Samia Gamal, who were both trained by Badia Massabni, were two of the most famous dancers in Egyptian film.

Badia Massabni, a Syrian-born dancer who was the first woman to open her own *salah* or nightclub in Egypt, opened the Casino Opera House in Cairo in 1927. Massabni had a lasting affect on bellydance in Cairo and, in turn, on bellydance in America. She built a large stage to accommodate group numbers and the traveling

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<sup>111</sup> Rebecca Stone has researched the relationship of filmic and non-filmic bellydance in her master's thesis, *Salome, Scheherazade, and Hollywood: the Oriental Dance in American Feature Film* (1991).

<sup>112</sup> "It is interesting to view the work of male choreographers like Cole. The Oriental Dance, as a predominantly female performance art, is usually soft, sinewy, curvilinear in quality, punctuated by sharp accents. His work reflects an aggressive, sharp, or angular quality not seen in most performances of Oriental Dance." (Stone 1991, pp. 159-160)

capacity of the dance steps was increased to accommodate the space.<sup>113</sup> The costume Egyptian dancers at the Casino Opera House reflected the latest fashion in filmic Oriental dance. Sellers writes, “the traditional layers of costume were dropped for what Egyptians saw as the more exotic outfits of American and European music hall dancers. The newer costume featured a halter top and a girdle surrounding the hips with a skirt draped underneath.”<sup>114</sup> Massabni formed a school that graduated Tahia Carioca and Samia Gamal as well as other well-known Egyptian dancers. Massabni’s clientele were upper-class Egyptians and foreigners and she used the Opera House as a venue for innovation in the presentation of the dance rather than as a traditional *salah* where the main attraction were the dancers that socialized and drank with customers more than they performed. In addition to the new *bedlah* costuming, an increase in the use of space, group choreography rather than solo improvisation, and high-heeled shoes, dancers experimented with adding new elements to their acts. Nagwa Fouad danced with a candelabra on her head and added bells to her wrists while she danced. Massabni’s Opera House provided an avenue for Egyptian dancers to experiment, innovate, and incorporate global influences to their dance. American soldiers stationed on the banks of the Nile during World War II frequented the Casino Opera House and the nightclub scene around Massabni’s business became famous overseas. The next section describes the reproductions of this Egyptian nightclub scene that became popular in metropolitan areas of the US in the 1960s when America witnessed a resurgence in bellydance popularity.

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<sup>113</sup> Paul Monty contends that Badia Massabni built a large stage to accommodate group numbers because the dancing of European touring companies influenced her. I was not able to verify what companies Massabni might have seen, but this is a common idea among bellydance scholars, that American and European dance companies somehow influenced Massabni.

<sup>114</sup> Sellers, Barbara. 1984. “Bellydancing, Transculturation of a Folk Form: From Village and Harem to Cabaret and Theater.” Committee on Research in Dance. Hartford, Connecticut Conference, unpublished paper. October 1984. p. 3. (cited in Monty 1986, p. 168)

## Oriental Cabarets in America (1950s-1960s)

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Oriental Cabarets featuring live music and bellydancing became popular in Middle Eastern and Greek restaurants in many metropolitan cities of the US, beginning on the East and West Coasts. The first locus of this thriving new trend in Oriental-themed restaurants and nightclubs, or Casbahs, was in a three-block area off Eighth Avenue in Manhattan.<sup>115</sup> Shortly after the dinner-and-bellydancing fad boomed in Manhattan, similar districts opened up in Brooklyn, Boston, Detroit, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and other cities around the US.<sup>116</sup> The post World War II resurgence in popularity of bellydance in America (following its pre-War hoochie-koochie and serpentine variations) happened in the area known as Greek Town in Manhattan and as “Casbah Districts” in the rest of the US.

Paul Monty attributes this resurgence in bellydance popularity to a handful of societal factors.<sup>117</sup> For instance, American soldiers during World War II became fascinated with Oriental cabarets they visited while stationed in Egypt, like Badia Massabni’s Casino Opera House on the Nile. American middle-class society was

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<sup>115</sup> Paul Monty defines “Port Said” in Manhattan as the first Middle Eastern Nightclub, (Monty 1986, p. 233) while Ann Rasmussen isolates “Club Zahra” that opened in Boston in 1952 as the first. Rasmussen, Anne. 2005. “An Evening in the Orient.” (In Shay and Sellers-Young 2005, p. 175)

<sup>116</sup> Some popular New York Casbah clubs in 1961 were the Egyptian Gardens Café, the Kephisia, Port Said, the Africana Café, the Arabian Nights, the New Life, the Britannia Café, and the Grecian Gardens. (Monty 1986, pp. 234-236)

<sup>117</sup> Some of the factors that contributed to the popularity of bellydance in the 1950s and 60s, not mentioned in this section but outlined by Paul Monty, were the public marriage between Egyptian dancer/film star Samia Gamal and Texas oil businessman Sheppard King, and the popularity of the Broadway musical, *Fanny*, which featured Turkish bellydancer Nejla Ates. An interesting tangential side-note is Ates married King after his public divorce with Gamal. Newspapers in New York at the time of the sudden bellydance boom conjectured that another potential reason for increased patronage at Oriental cabarets was due to the official closure of burlesque clubs in Manhattan. If the link newspapers draw between patrons of burlesque and bellydance is reliable, the stories offer one reason why public perception of bellydance in the 1960s was linked closely to stripping. That the stories were run at all demonstrates the existence of a conflation between bellydance and stripping as bellydance emerged as a distinct category from its turn-of-the-century versions that included “exotic” dance. (Monty 1986, pp. 228, 230-36)

similarly fascinated with the images of the Orient portrayed in Hollywood film.<sup>118</sup> Dancers in Oriental cabarets in America looked to the images of bellydance that were being constructed in a back-and-forth between Hollywood and Egyptian film, and that were similarly reflected in non-filmic dance in Cairo nightclubs. Restaurant owners, often immigrants of Greek, Syrian, or Lebanese heritage, employed kitsch Orientalist tropes that did not usually reflect the food or visual culture from any single nationality in order to attract American customers.<sup>119</sup> Restaurant décor and advertisements, featuring pyramids, camels, *fezes*, and carpets, worked to create a setting of the ancient, mysterious, romantic, and sensual East. Musicians employed romantic verbiage in their song titles and LP liner notes that enticed the reader with the mystique of the ineffable quality of the magical Orient.

Ann Rasmussen traces the role of musicians in the popularity of Casbah districts in the US in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. She proposes, “the Middle Eastern nightclub became a distinct music context with a unique structure and overt Orientalist ideology.”<sup>120</sup> While the Arab immigrant community played music at *haflahs* at community gatherings or in religious settings, the poly-ethnic nightclub culture brought together various immigrant and American musicians using a blend of Western and Middle Eastern instruments and instrumentation to create a unique type of vaguely Oriental fusion music that was tailored to an American audience.<sup>121</sup> Rasmussen

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<sup>118</sup> Stone (1991).

<sup>119</sup> Rasmussen (2005), p. 172.

<sup>120</sup> Rasmussen (2005), p. 175.

<sup>121</sup> Some musicians who gained popularity at this time and helped to establish a new eclectic style of music through live gigs and bellydance music LPs were Eddie “the Sheik” Kochak, Artie Barsamian, George Abdo, Muhammad al-Bakkar, and Freddy Elias. These musicians adapted their backgrounds in Middle Eastern music to suit what they thought an American would like to hear, incorporating Western instruments and simplifying the melody. “Musicians of varying Middle Eastern heritage were creative in combining their indigenous techniques and styles: Turkish *qanun* players, Arab violinists, Greek *bouzoukee* players, and Armenian *‘udists* shared the stage. Some American-born musicians began their professional careers in this eclectic musical idiom that combined Arab, Greek, Turkish, and Armenian styles and aesthetics.”

writes, “although the music and dance styles were modern innovations, they were portrayed as primitive and raw, as a glimpse of the past. More conspicuously, the nightclub capitalized on the sensual images of Orientalism: dark lighting, pulsating rhythms, enticing aromas, exotic women, and erotic dancing.”<sup>122</sup> Rasmussen describes this restaurant décor and entertainment by Middle Eastern and Greek immigrants as a presentation of the self for the other.

Serena Wilson, Jamela Omar, Nejla Ates, Morocco, and Ibrahim Farrah were some popular dancers in the East Coast Casbah Districts. Around the same time, Dahlena was performing in Oriental nightclubs in Chicago and Jamila Salimpour was dancing San Francisco. The demand for dancers in the New York club district was so high that many of the dancers took jobs with little to no bellydance training and imitated what they saw of others. A former violin player on the vaudeville stage, Joe Williams, was the biggest bellydance agent in New York in the 1960s and supplied the restaurants in the Casbah District with access to bellydancers nearly every night of the week. The demand for dancers became so great that he started the first school for bellydance training in the US in 1964, “Stairway to Stardom.”<sup>123</sup> Because Stairway to Stardom was co-owned by the famous strip-tease dancer Delores DuVaughan and offered strip-tease classes as well as bellydance classes, many rumors circulated associating bellydance with stripping. The additional fact that Joe Williams served as a booking agent for strip-tease dancers as well as bellydancers contributed to the conflation between the two professions. Similar to Sol Bloom’s contribution to making bellydance available in America, Joe Williams was instrumental in increasing the

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(Rasmussen 2005, p. 179) For a more full analysis and history of “the creative risks taken by the new generation of nightclub artists” see Ann Rasmussen’s article “An Evening at the Orient: The Middle Eastern Nightclub in America” (2005).

<sup>122</sup> Rasmussen (2005), p. 177.

<sup>123</sup> Monty (1986), p. 241.

popularity and availability of bellydance performance and training in Manhattan in the 1960s. After Williams' interest in bellydance faded, Serena Wilson bought Stairway to Stardom in 1967, stopped allowing the studio to offer strip-tease instruction, and renamed the school Serena Studios. Serena codified her technique of bellydance and published an instructional book on the physical and emotional benefits of the dance, beginning the bellydance fitness craze that took over after the popularity of bellydance in Casbahs began to wane.

## Conclusion

### The Representational Frame of Orientalism and Objectification

The moments in bellydance history that I have highlighted in this chapter establish the mode of representation through which Oriental dance in America has typically been perceived and performed. The earliest presentations of Oriental dance used the ideas of the Orient and femininity to portray non-Western freakishness, dangerous sexuality, and sacred spirituality. By framing the dance with the presentation of these essentialized identities that can be known and controlled within the confines of staged Western imitations, early bellydance and related practices invite an Orientalist and objectifying gaze from the audience. Since Western travelers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century wrote about and invited creative interpretations of the dancing they witnessed in Egypt, the Oriental dancer has been a fascination of the Western imagination. The dancing exhibited at the World's Fairs spurred creative imitations in amusement parks and on the vaudeville stage. American performers in early burlesque interpreted the Oriental dancer in a variety of ways, using the idea of the elusive yet available Eastern woman to access non-corseted movement and unbridled

sexuality in exotic dance performances. In popular theater and penny arcades, the kooch dance allowed performers to highlight freakish and improper movement of the body's core and hips that drew in a grotesque fascination from paying variety-show audiences. Serpentine dancers and vaudeville Salomes dressed themselves in long fabrics or strands of pearls and breast-plates, mapping qualities associated with the East (dangerous, spiritual, sexual) onto femininity. On the concert stage, early modern dancers performed a less hip-focused choreography that sought to portray the sacred element of the East, and transposed that innate Eastern spirituality onto the female body, proposing that women's bodies could act as a vehicle for creative expression and opening up new possibilities for the Western woman.

The moments highlighted in this chapter also demonstrate that the practice of solo improvised dancing by women in Egypt developed in conversation with a Western imperial gaze and American representations of Oriental fantasy. Since the *ghawazi* and *awalim* profession was threatened by colonial-era political and religious pressures, changing context and viewership, the dance fundamentally changed from celebratory community entertainment to illegal, secret performances tailored to meet the desires of Western travelers. Later, Egyptian film responded to some of the representations of the Orient in Hollywood film and a new image of the bellydancer was created. This Hollywood-influenced bellydance appeared in many creative interpretations in Cairo nightclubs such as Badia Massabni's Casino Opera House and the movement quality, costuming, and staging of female dancing became indicative of the *raqs sharqi* (or "Oriental dance") genre. This nightclub cabaret style show became popular in the US and other parts of the Arab world where Egyptian pop culture is highly influential, and interpretations of cabaret style *raqs sharqi* cropped up outside of Cairo.

In the next chapter we will see what choreographic and rhetorical strategies American bellydancers since 1960 have employed in their search for authenticity and desire to expand beyond the limits of their own Western identity. The strategies 20<sup>th</sup> century dancers employ are often reconstructions or reinterpretations of these previously highlighted critical moments in bellydance history. It is necessary to understand the early history of American bellydance outlined in this chapter in order to theorize ways practitioners might confront the conventional mode of representation through which bellydance is presented. I suggest that in order to achieve a real and lasting transformation of self through bellydance, practitioners must manipulate and question the Orientalist and objectifying representational frame that has accompanied bellydance since its earliest exposure in the US. In Chapter Two, I highlight a number of ways American dancers since the 1960s have either reified or challenged the assumptions about the East and femininity that are historically embedded in bellydance performance.

## CHAPTER TWO: STRATEGIES FOR SEEKING PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

### Introduction

#### Manipulating the Representational Frame

Since the resurgence in popularity of bellydance in America in the 1960s, practitioners have employed several different strategies to legitimize bellydance in the public eye and to make the dance feel more authentic and personally transformative. Whether practitioners are more interested in the ancient beginnings of bellydance or in the current creative freedom they find in their practice, dancers have sought out and imagined reasons why bellydance carries meaning in their lives and how the dance allows them to expand beyond societally-imposed boundaries. In an effort to explain this transformative experience to themselves, their students, and their audiences, bellydancers have looked variously to the ancient past, to the “mysteries of the Orient,” to a divine feminine principle, to their own creative potential, to their own communities, and more recently, to the vaudevillian-style pure entertainment of early bellydance in America. Some maneuvers locate transformative potential in another place and time, while some strategies seek transformation in individual creativity or group cohesion. Bellydancers have variously strategized to reframe their practice in ways that allow them to answer the questions: where does this dance come from, why do I do it, and how should people view it?

From colonial Egypt and the American World’s Fairs, to early 20<sup>th</sup> century popular theater, Hollywood, and Oriental nightclubs of the 1960s, the representational frame around bellydance has often played to a patriarchal, objectifying, and Orientalist

gaze.<sup>124</sup> This historical gaze imagines bellydancing bodies as feminized and sexualized Eastern bodies who dance to exhibit the mysteries of the East to the West. Within the many heterogeneous variants of bellydance in America today, practitioners employ different strategies to challenge a frame that tends to invite a patriarchal, objectifying gaze. Some dancers' attempts to reframe the dominant mode of representation have spurred new subgenres of bellydance that vary greatly in appearance and structure from previous versions. This chapter explores ways bellydance communities since the 1960s have reflexively tackled the problematic framing of the dance, signaling possibilities in the future for how Americans can engage with bellydance practice. This struggle to confront and manipulate the essentialized identities typically portrayed in bellydance has allowed for the emergence of a myriad of different genres of bellydance practice. Some of these newer variants challenge the dancer-as-Oriental-object paradigm while others actually underscore and reinforce the idea of the bellydancer as a sexualized object of otherness. Earlier manipulations to the mode of representation have trail-blazed pathways for different and more effective strategies.

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<sup>124</sup> I use the terms "patriarchal gaze" and "colonial gaze" throughout this chapter to describe the dominant way bellydance is consumed by the viewer. I also use "colonial Egypt," to refer to the period in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century when Western travelers began to record accounts of viewing solo improvisational dance in Egypt. I make the case that practitioners explicitly and implicitly access and continuously reimagine bellydance through these accounts and associated images that were created by Western males from imperialist countries on the dominant end of an asymmetrical power structure. I am employing the word "colonial" in the way Stavros Stavrou Karayanni uses the term in his book *Dancing Fear and Desire: Race, Sexuality, and Imperial Politics in Middle Eastern Dance*. He writes: "In certain instances, by employing the term *colonial* I do not refer to historical fact. Egypt in the 1850s, for example, was not the colony of a European power but a province of the Ottoman Empire...What I refer to with the term *colonialism* are the effects and influences of imperial domination, not only on geographical sites, bodies of land and water but on human bodies as well." (Karayanni 2004, pp. 33-34) Citing Loomba's definition of "colonialism" as the nearly inevitable product of imperialism, Karayanni extrapolates further: "*Imperialism*, then, here refers to that discourse which affirmed the global centrality to the West and its assumptions concerning civilization, technological advancement, language, and so on." (*ibid.*) Using the term "patriarchal gaze" I try to expand the meaning of the objectifying and sexualizing gaze through which bellydance has been historically viewed. The patriarchal gaze refers to the dominant hegemonic order (while hegemony is specific to each culture, this chapter refers mostly to American patriarchy) that values rigid gender roles, a controlled body, and sexualized feminine notions of beauty.

I highlight six different strategies in this chapter that dancers employ to redefine how bellydance is perceived and what bellydance can accomplish for the practitioner. In search of ethnic origins, some practitioners have looked to North Africa, Western and Central Asia to discover authentic predecessors of bellydance that have been uncontaminated by the scopophilic Western gaze.<sup>125</sup> Seeking to legitimize bellydance as a spiritually transformative practice, some dancers emphasize their subjectivity by embodying feminine archetypes, and performing ritual rites of passage and underworld transformations. In order to ostensibly elevate the dance to an art form, some practitioners reframe bellydance as a classical tradition: codifying movement and standardizing pedagogy to emphasize technical skill and putting it on a concert stage. Other dancers challenge the historical non-practitioner gaze by valuing bellydance as a way to form community among people who question mainstream ideas of beauty and gender. Some dancers have questioned the traditional representational frame, emphasizing the constructedness of bellydance, by proposing the form has a fluid definition, that its main purpose is as a medium of self-expression, or by pointing to its previous incarnations in periods of American history.

While I have paid much attention to the patriarchal voyeuristic gaze, I would also like to emphasize the role of the fellow-dancer's gaze in the development of bellydance. Since the 1960s, bellydance has increasingly become a performance for

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<sup>125</sup> Scopophilia literally means "love of watching" and is synonymous with voyeurism, describing an experience of looking where the voyeur does not interact personally with the person being observed and derives sexual pleasure from watching, without being watched him or herself. My proposal that the dominant representational frame for bellydance has elicited an objectifying, Orientalist gaze relies on gaze theory. Susan Manning describes gaze theory as "a set of concepts that originated in film studies, migrated to theater studies, and now have found their way to dance studies. These concepts include not only the proposition that women on film and on stage typically are represented from the perspective of the male spectator (the notion of the 'male gaze' or, alternately, the voyeuristic gaze) but also the counter-proposition that female spectators possess the potential to look in a way different from their male peers. How and when female spectators are enabled to look differently and thus realize a subjectivity of their own remains a much disputed issue." (Manning 1997, p. 153) While this thesis deals with the scopophilic, Orientalist/colonial, and patriarchal gaze it also tries to address the female gaze and kinesthetically empathetic practitioner-to-practitioner gaze.

peers, with bellydancers often performing more for one another than for a lay audience. At bellydance festivals and conferences, on internet forums and in YouTube videos, bellydancers form insular communities in which they perform more for the accolades of their peers than for a tipping patron, though performances for lay audiences are still an important part of a professional bellydancer's subsistence and remain valuable in their own right. When bellydancers perform for their peers, the gaze is not voyeuristic but rather one of shared kinesthesia. I find Susan Manning's argument about early modern dance useful here, wherein she argues that the kinesthesia between early 20<sup>th</sup> century female viewers and dancers, along with the representational frame's reliance on essentialized notions of the body, mark a paradoxical social function of modern dance:

[Early modern dance's] distinct ideological profile, the dismantling of the voyeuristic gaze and the reliance on essentialized notions of identity...marked the paradoxical social function of the form, its ability to contest and to conform at the same time. Whereas the kinesthesia of early modern dance challenged the voyeuristic gaze, its representational frames deployed essentialized images of identity, images of a universalized Woman or generalized ethnic or national type....The juxtaposition of individualized kinesthetic subjectivity and generalized representational type created a dynamic tension underlying the form.<sup>126</sup>

I propose bellydance has a similar underlying dynamic tension to that which Manning identifies in early modern dance. Bellydance performers and viewers, male and female, who are both trained in bellydance technique and operate in bellydance culture share a kinesthetic understanding that allows them to experience new possibilities of bodily movement and identity construction. While this shared kinesthetic experience between dancer and viewer opens up the possibility for updated conceptions of the body, the unchallenged Orientalist and sexualizing representational frames around bellydance performances reiterate pre-existent images of gender and ethnicity that limit the form's ability to propose new and productive conceptions of the

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<sup>126</sup> Manning (1997), pp. 163-164.

body. Through this paradoxical function, early modern dancers, although they relied on essentialized notions of identity, opened up the new possibility in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century for women's bodies to be seen as subjective instruments for self-expression. Similarly with the resurgence in popularity of bellydance in the 1960s, the dance served as a site for women to claim the right to display and intricately move their bodies and to celebrate their capacity to draw in sexual allure. Bellydance has also allowed American male practitioners to access bodily movement and modes of expression that are stereotypically limited to women. Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century bellydancers have grappled with the form's paradoxical social function and have reflexively utilized various strategies to open up new possibilities for bodily expression outside of the strict social codes of femininity and sexuality. Some of the possibilities practitioners look to achieve by manipulating the frame of bellydance are cross-cultural interaction, community formation, counter-mainstream ideas of beauty, and in some cases, gender fluidity.

In the following chapter, I outline several ways bellydancers reconstruct the form in order to access new possibilities for the body. I argue that the essentialist assumptions that were embedded in bellydance early on must be acknowledged and challenged in order to open up new possibilities for accessing the transformative and transgressive potential that American bellydancers identify in the practice. Many practitioners believe that bellydance allows them to realize an affirming and confident relationship to their own bodies and concepts of self. American bellydancers see the practice as a way to foster and maintain a positive and tolerant community that operates within a shared set of values. Although I present the following choreographic strategies as separate, these categories are rarely ever mutually exclusive, and most often dancers employ one or more of the strategies I outline in this chapter

simultaneously. For example, practitioners may demand ethnic authenticity in the dance while also making a classicizing maneuver toward performance on a concert stage. Dancers may stress the spirituality of bellydance because they view spiritual transformation as its most “ethnically authentic” purpose. In the conclusion of this chapter I ask the question, how can we successfully frame bellydance in a way that allows us to access the transformative potential of the dance to open up new possibilities for the body rather than present simplified identities historically informed by an imperialist agenda? By examining how the following six strategies succeed and fail in challenging the frame and therefore succeed and fail in tipping the balance of its paradoxical social function away from essentialized notions of gender and nationality and toward new bodily possibility, we can then hypothesize what bellydancers might do to more fully achieve the transformative potential of their practice and disengage with the vestiges of colonialism.

### Tracing Ethnic Origins

In response to the increasing number of American bellydancers who were receiving jobs in Oriental nightclubs where they imitated their idea of bellydance movement and took creative liberties with what they learned from the few first generation dancers, a new phenomenon was gaining popularity in the 1970s. Noting an increasing number of Americans interested in learning bellydance, a number of American teachers traveled to North Africa and Western Asia in order to learn and become exponents of “authentic” Middle Eastern dance in the US. In order to erase the negative associations with bellydance, these ethnic originalists sought to erase the Hollywood harem image and the history of burlesque influences on the dance, and

replace those images with authentic Middle Eastern folk dances. By establishing themselves as reliable purveyors of the true dance form, these teachers created a market for teaching and performing their vision of an authentic bellydance alongside other regional tribal dances and ancient ritual dances. Some of these originalists saw themselves as stewards of Middle Eastern dance traditions, protecting the dances from extinction by Islamic fundamentalist pressures and modernization in their local contexts. Some of the dances and costumes that this group of practitioners identified as authentic in the 1970s are still part of the standard repertoire of “ethnically authentic” Middle Eastern bellydance troupes today in North America and even in the Middle East. I propose that this strategy was an important maneuver, attempting to refocus the representational frame back onto the history of the dances and to credit the cultures from which they came. However, it was ultimately a strategy that furthered colonialist pursuits through its focus on the market economy, misinformed source material, and the imposition of an East-West dichotomy onto a dance that is inherently a transnationally invented tradition.

Drawing on their vaguely “Oriental” parentage and their experiences traveling in the countries of origin, teachers like Ibrahim Farrah and Morocco<sup>127</sup> (Carolina Varga Dinicu) taught “authentic” folk dances from the Middle East. They wrote articles in the folk dance magazine *Viltis* and Ibrahim Farrah produced his own magazine, *Arabesque*, in which he published articles meant to clear the air of misconceptions about bellydance. In these publications, the term bellydance was not used, in favor of the

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<sup>127</sup> Morocco (Carolina Varga Dinicu) advertised her gypsy heritage as one way of presenting herself as a reliable source. Born in Transylvania, Suhelya describes Morocco in a *Viltis* article as a “full-blooded Gypsy of the ultra-orthodox sect of Sunnite Moslems which practices abdominal movements to strengthen their muscles in preparation for the possible honor of giving birth to the Messiah.” Suhelya. 1977. “Danse Orientale (Third Installment): Danse Orientale in the United States.” *Viltis*. Volume 36, Number 1. May 1977. p. 7. In her own autobiographical accounts Morocco describes learning bellydance by watching other restaurant performers, rather than by her family heritage. Morocco (Carolina Varga Dinicu). “Ask Aunt Rocky.” Retrieved from <http://www.thehipcircle.com/ARTICLES/10.html> April 17, 2012.

terms *danse Orientale*, *raqs sharqi*, *raqs baladi*, or Middle Eastern Dance. Reflecting the motives of this trend toward seeking ethnic authenticity, Suhelya writes in a 1977 issue of *Viltis* (with respect to practitioners of *danse Orientale*), “it’s not enough to gain a reputation for artistic skill and creativity; persistent effort is necessary to erase the negative burlesque theater and Hollywood harem image, and replace it with an authentic positive one.”<sup>128</sup>

Dancer-ethnologists like Morocco and Ibrahim sometimes looked to the nightclub and stage performance of *raqs sharqi* by Egyptian dancers in Cairo or to Golden Era Egyptian films, but generally looked to tribal and village dance practices like those of the *ghawazi* and *Ouled Nail*. Often the source material for choreographic and costume reconstructions were the Orientalist paintings of Gérôme or Delacroix,<sup>129</sup> anthropological texts like Edward William Lane’s *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, *National Geographic*, or whatever local activities could be seen when traveling to the Middle East, whether they be daily pedestrian activities or dance practices. Kristen Windmuller, author of “Imagining Movement: Orientalist Paintings and Photographs of Middle Eastern Dancers,” reminds her readers “while early paintings may have recounted ‘authentic’ dances, dance throughout North Africa was markedly and rapidly changed by European presence.”<sup>130</sup> Orientalist paintings and early anthropological texts provide an already skewed presentation of the dance, as they are products of the patriarchal colonial perspective. Even if one could trust the

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<sup>128</sup> Suhelya. 1977. “Danse Orientale Fourth Installment.” *Viltis*. Volume 37, Number 2. June-September 1977. p. 10.

<sup>129</sup> For a more in depth look at the Orientalist painters see: Windmuller, Kristen D. (Najla). “Imagining Movement: Orientalist Paintings and Photographs of Middle Eastern Dancers.” Not all dancers who sought out the ethnic origins of bellydance looked to colonialist paintings; Morocco was actually quite frustrated by this type of source material produced by the imperial male imagination.

<sup>130</sup> Windmuller, Kristen D. (Najla). “Imagining Movement: Orientalist Paintings and Photographs of Middle Eastern Dancers.” *Shira’s Website*. Retrieved from <http://www.shira.net/about/imagining-movement.htm>. April 17, 2012.

representation, the actual dance practices themselves were at that point creative adaptations for a foreign audience. Influenced by this trend toward uncovering ethnic origins, other dance teachers also became devotees of this strategy and began teaching and performing a standard repertoire of traditional authentic dances.

Many dance troupes, like Ibrahim Farrah's Near East Dance Group and Jamila Salimpour's Bal Anat, performed a show composed of vignettes showcasing various regional dances.<sup>131</sup> This vignette-type performance reflects the general trend in the 1970s of folk-dance societies who learned various folk dances from around the world.<sup>132</sup> Folk dance troupe Aman, directed by Anthony Shay and Leona Wood, was one of the most popular Middle Eastern folk dance companies in the United States, though bellydance or *danse Orientale* was not their main focus. Among the most popular regional dances that ethnic purists taught were the *zar*, often described as a "ritual of exorcism" or trance dance, the *guedra*, *ghawazi* dance, *raqs baladi*, *debke*, whirling dervish numbers, *Ouled Nail* dances, Turkish *karsilama*, and *raqs al-Sudan*.<sup>133</sup>

Ibrahim Farrah published one of the first prominent American bellydance magazines, *Arabesque*, and wrote articles that stressed the importance of ethnic authenticity in the *danse Orientale*. Students and readers who respected Farrah's emphasis on cultural legitimacy cited his "Lebanese heritage...travel and research in

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<sup>131</sup> Jamila Salimpour (San Francisco) and her troupe, Bal Anat, presented a showcase of vignettes that she presented as regional and ritual dances. In John Carney's documentary *Bal Anat* Jamila speaks in vague geographical terms about ancient people in the Middle East and their customs and rites of passage.

<sup>132</sup> I became aware of this folk dancing phenomenon while interning in the archives of the Society of Folk Dance Historians in Austin, Texas founded and maintained by Ron Houston. In an article, Houston explains the rise of the trend he calls recreational international folk dance (RIFD). Beginning in 1931, "Folk festivals figured prominently in efforts to integrate immigrants into American society." Houston, Ron. 2006. "How Folk Dancing Grew." *Phantom Ranch*. Retrieved from [http://www.phantomranch.net/folkdanc/articles/how\\_folk\\_dancing\\_grew\\_houston.htm](http://www.phantomranch.net/folkdanc/articles/how_folk_dancing_grew_houston.htm) The RIFD magazine, *Viltis*, contains many contributions in the 1970s and 80s from practitioners and researchers of *danse Orientale*, including Morocco, Suhelya (Kate McGowan), and Ibrahim Farrah.

<sup>133</sup> These dances are mentioned in a number of *Viltis* articles including: Suhelya. 1977. "Ibrahim Farrah Seminar Concert Review." *Viltis*. Volume 36, Number 1. June-September 1977. p. 35.

the Arab world” as an authoritative position.<sup>134</sup> In a review of a performance by his Near East Dance Group at a Michigan bellydance conference in February 1977, Suhelya describes Farrah’s authentic choreographic approach:

Ibrahim and his troupe succeeded in riveting the attention of the audience from the start by passing through it in a tribal procession that set the heart pounding with excitement. Thereafter we were held by gorgeous, swiftly changing vignettes ranging from the classical elegance of Phaedra performing a dance of tribute to the Egyptian goddess, Hathor, to vivid street scene in which Ibrahim, as a 19<sup>th</sup> century *Khawal*, joins the flirtatious *Ghawazi* (street dancers) in a festive finale that had us hoping the procession would move on to the marketplace of the next village so we could troop along and watch it all over again. Throughout the concert Ibrahim narrated, adding helpful insights to each of his choreographed pieces. Poignancy was added by knowing that *Raks al-Sudani* is inspired by the black-African influence on Islamic culture, and that the dance of the *Oulid Nail* derives from the North African nomadic tribe which teaches its female children to beg, in effect, for their dowry.<sup>135</sup>

One of the most popular styles of dance done in this vignette format is pharaonic dance. In his 1836 text, *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, Edward Lane mentions that dancers he met in Egypt told him they did the dance of ancient pharaonic Egypt, though in 1961 Morroe Berger proposes it was most likely a modern construction designed to appeal to foreigners and increase the respectability of the dance.<sup>136</sup> In the 1970s, Phaedra from Near East Dance group, acclaimed for her take on pharaonic dance, along with other pharaonic dancers, employed choreographic postures reminiscent of Egyptian cave drawings in order to demonstrate the ancient origins of the form. The two-dimensional right-angled type poses performers assume in pharaonic dance are intended as reconstructions of a dance believed to be depicted in Egyptian hieroglyphs.<sup>137</sup> The first American dancer to put forward this idea was Ruth

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<sup>134</sup> Suhelya (1977).

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> See Lane (1836) and Berger, Morroe. 1961. “The Arab Danse du Ventre.” *Dance Perspectives*. Library of Congress. Volume 10. Editors: A.J. Pischl, Selma Jeanne Cohen, Sheppard Black and Karl Leabo.

<sup>137</sup> In her article, dancer-researcher, Shira explains that bellydancers cite tomb carvings to support their claims that bellydance is up to 6,000 years old. She explains further, one of the oldest known images of dance “appears in the tomb of Mehu at Saqqara, Egypt, and is believed to date back to 3,000 B.C.E.” but this image does not resemble anything like bellydance (the figures are doing high kicks). Other images appear at “the Luxor Temple and the Karnak Temple, both located in Luxor, Egypt... Historians believe Karnak Temple was begun during the 12th Dynasty which lasted from 1991-1785 B.C.E.” but these relief images also do not resemble bellydance but rather some more acrobatic feat. Shira. “Middle Eastern

St. Denis with her choreography “Egypta,” discussed in Chapter One, though few bellydancers credit her with popularizing the pharaonic style and the idea of a pharaonic dance.

While some of these vignette-centered shows represented the various dance practices of Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, and other regions as decontextualized caricatures, the complexity and accuracy of the representation corresponded to the rigor of the ethnology by the practitioner performing them. Morocco (Carolina Dinicu) spent years traveling and dancing throughout North Africa, experiencing firsthand the state-sanctioned and Westernized versions of traditional dances as well as amateur performances among peers dancing for their own amusement within the home. She writes about her process of creating a show for her dance company, The Casbah Dance Experience, in a 1985 article in *Viltis*:

The obligation of the dance ethnologist is to gather as many different movements as possible for each dance/ritual/area, as much varied music to which it is properly matched, arrange it in a logical and theatrically pleasing manner (here’s where art and inspiration comes in), costume it with complete respect for tradition while making it theatrically interesting and set it on good dancers.<sup>138</sup>

From her travels throughout Morocco, Dinicu proposed the undulating movements typical of *danse Orientale* were for birthing-ritual purposes in their authentic context. She was invited to participate in a birthing ceremony in a Moroccan village in which she witnessed a circle of women around a mother in labor who all used undulating abdominal movements to offer encouragement through the birthing process.<sup>139</sup> Paul Monty credits Morocco with popularizing the idea in America that bellydance has roots

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Dance: The Spiritual Connection.” *All About Belly Dancing!* Iowa City, Iowa. Retrieved from <http://www.shira.net/advice/lifestyle/spiritual.htm>, April 17, 2012.

<sup>138</sup> Dinicu, Carolina (Morocco). 1985. “Discussion Re: Danse Orientale.” *Viltis*. Volume 44, Number 3. September-November 1985. p. 13.

<sup>139</sup> Dinicu, Carolina Varga (Morocco). 1981. “The Roots of Raks Sharki: Witnessing the ‘Dance of Birth’.” *Viltis*. Volume 40, Number 4. December 1981.

in birthing rituals, though La Meri proposed a similar idea in her early modern dance investigation of Eastern cultures.<sup>140</sup>

The popular “ethnic style” troupe, Bal Anat, that began in Northern California in 1968, presented a highly stylized vignette show in the 1970s in which dancers portrayed imaginative ethnic identities, as explained by Jamila in a quote from *Habibi Magazine*:

Bal Anat’s extensive program unfolded with flavors of Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, India, Turkey and Egypt. Solo and group choreographies included tray, cane, sword, snake, pot, Dervish, acrobatic, kathak and Oriental, but the opening “Mask” dance was the most mysterious and moving. ... Their shows were the most popular event at the Faire, and as soon as the Faire-goers heard the screeching *mizmars*, *zaghareets*, *darbuka*, *tabla beledi*, *deff* and *sagat*, they would rush by the hundreds to take their places before the open air stage. Entering in a magnificent procession, the forty or so members filed in, forming a crescent while continuing the cacophony of sounds. The troupe stared back at the audience with heavily-lined eyes, dressed in myriad forms of Middle Eastern costuming: turbans and tattoos, *assuit* and *galabiyas*, striped damask pantaloons, antique silver jewelry, amber bracelets, and necklaces with the hand of Fatima. “We were trying to be very tribal and old-world looking...” explains Jamila<sup>141</sup>

In later interviews, Jamila Salimpour states that her vignette show was mostly an invention based on her own creativity and imagination.<sup>142</sup>

By attempting to relate to another culture through physical practice, bellydancers who seek an authentic Middle Eastern dance seem to genuinely desire to expand their own world-view. North American bellydance students who believe they

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<sup>140</sup> Monty (1986). La Meri’s article “Learning the Danse Du Ventre” (1961), and Morocco’s “Roots of Raks Sharki” (1981) all cite a passage by Armen Ohanian that expresses disappointment about the beginnings of the nightclub vulgarization of a birthing ritual. (*The Dancer of Shamahka*, tr. Rose Wilder Lane 1923, p. 261-262) La Meri also notes that her teacher, “Fatma,” taught her that the dance was connected to birthing ceremonies. (Meri, La. 1961. “Learning the Danse du Ventre.” *Dance Perspectives*. Library of Congress. Volume 10. Editors: A.J. Pischl, Selma Jeanne Cohen, Sheppard Black and Karl Leabo) As was mentioned in Chapter One, Paul Monty suggests in his research that La Meri was first inspired to learn *danse du ventre* after seeing a Vaudeville performer from Syria named Fatima. It is a possibility that these Fatimas are the same person.

<sup>141</sup> El Safy, Shareen. 1994. “Shaping a Legacy: A New Generation in the Old Tradition.” *Habibi*. Volume 13, Number 4. Fall 1994. Retrieved from <http://thebestofhabibi.com/vol-13-no-4-fall-1994/jamila-salimpour/>. March 5, 2012.

<sup>142</sup> “While some of the material had been influenced by Jamila’s continuing research into the history of Middle Eastern dance, much of the repertoire was created with the free spirit of the times. I asked Jamila, ‘Wasn’t some of what you did authentic?’ ‘Absolutely not! That was the point of it...It was all crazy fun. It wasn’t meant to be authentic...I didn’t want the show to be the same thing every year...I wanted to keep innovating and making it unexpectedly crazy.’ One year she was inspired by an etching in her Orientalist collection of two *Ghawazi* dancers balancing swords (Gérôme), and created the now widely used sword dance.” (El Safy 1994)

are learning an authentic dance tradition of another culture do so seeking to expand the boundaries of their own concept of self, perhaps believing that “self-discovery in a cultural sense is intimately related to understanding others.”<sup>143</sup> In order to achieve an expanded idea of self in stark opposition to another culture, that “other” culture must remain radically different from ones own.<sup>144</sup> Therefore it is not advantageous for people seeking an authentic Middle Eastern dance to acknowledge the fluidity or inventedness of the tradition, nor to acknowledge that Middle Eastern dance traditions have been shaped by their environments including transnational media dialogue with the US, colonialism, and nationalist movements. Practitioners who seek the true origins of Middle Eastern dance, seeking to uncover its pure form before American and European influence, manipulate the colonialist representational frame by trying to remove the Western frame altogether.

Reframing bellydance performances in America as reliable reconstructions of pre-Western influenced Middle Eastern North African dance traditions can be a problematic way to challenge the representational frame. Due to lack of reliable source material,<sup>145</sup> the denial that bellydance is a transnationally invented tradition,

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<sup>143</sup> Writing about the value of reading other people’s self-narratives, Chang proposes that studying people in other communities, or “others” in one’s own community invites readers to compare and contrast themselves others in different cultural contexts and in turn discover new dimensions of their own lives. Chang, Heewon. 2008. *Autoethnography as Method*. California: Left Coast Press, Inc. pp. 33-34.

<sup>144</sup> To qualify this statement about the American “self” and Middle Eastern/North African “other”: some dancers who may be, for instance, Egyptian-Americans, or of mixed parentage, may not necessarily seek out that which is “radically other” but some form of roots or heritage for themselves, though the maneuvers I describe (recovering authentic sources) are likely the same or similar. By American I mean to collapse many different ethnicities, including those who self-identify as Middle Eastern, but the exoticizing dynamics I discuss are still valid as those subjects do have American privileges and positions that place them at least partly in an “imperialist” frame.

<sup>145</sup> Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young elucidate some of complications with the sources many dancers have used in their search for ethnic authenticity: “Scholar-adventurer Edward William Lane published *An Account of the Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians* based on living in Egypt in the mid 1830s. The book was a best seller in England and, as Edward Said suggests, contributed to the narrative structure of the imperial view of native Egyptians, including women via his descriptions of female performers. While impressed with the beauty of the female *Ghawazi* dancers, Lane found that their performance had ‘little of elegance.’ Such depictions, which seized upon the sensual, but ignored the

and the presence of a market economy that rarely benefits the proposed sources of the cultural production, this strategy can unwittingly further the Orientalist pursuit to know and explain the other to the West.<sup>146</sup> American bellydance teachers who traveled to North Africa in the 1960s and 70s, and even now, seeking a pure and definable tradition that they can then excerpt and bring home to teach, fail to acknowledge that North African dance traditions, like other traditions, are subject to change and in fact do change especially rapidly under the unique pressures of colonialism, nationalist cultural reform and revival movements, and globalization. While bellydance as a tradition is invented transnationally, there are colonial structures in place that allow many Americans to practice the dance publicly without the same repercussions as professional dancers in the Middle East.<sup>147</sup>

This strategy that privileges knowing and performing ethnically authentic dances has not often included cross-cultural exchange wherein native practitioners have been invited to share their knowledge. American exponents of Middle Eastern dance traditions in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century created market economies that did not monetarily benefit the people whose supposed authentic practices were being capitalized on. While most bellydance teachers in America do not achieve a high profit margin from their work, there is nevertheless a problem with establishing oneself as a

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subtleties of context, were repeated in the paintings of Gérôme and Delacroix, as well as the photographs of Geiser and others.” (Shay and Sellers-Young 2005, p. 6) It should be noted that Morocco was aware of the problematic colonial perspective through which this and other texts present dance in the Middle East. She writes: “I was dismayed by the fact that most of the information available in English, French and German was by two types of people: filthy-minded, racist, Puritanical missionaries and colonialists, who looked down on anything having to do with the indigenous population’s traditions.” (Dinicu 1981)

<sup>146</sup> Edward Said defines Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” and as a desire to know and explain the Orient to the West. (Said 1979, p.3) Said specifically references Flaubert’s representations of Kuchuk Hanem, two figures discussed in Chapter One.

<sup>147</sup> Karin van Nieuwkerk’s research explores the taboo and dishonor of being a professional performer in Egypt, revealing ways in which discrimination against dance in Egypt is a direct and indirect product of colonialism.

reliable source for the cultural knowledge of a society from which one is an outsider.<sup>148</sup> In Andy Smith's essay on the New Age movement's cooption of American Indian religious practices, she suggests that one of the problems with the desire by middle-class white America to learn the excerpted, decontextualized practices of another culture is that it tends to always be on the terms of the white American and unaccompanied by an ongoing relationship outside of that specific purpose.<sup>149</sup> Some proponents of ethnic origins in bellydance in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s did develop lasting relationships with the people from whom they learned dances: Morocco was invited to a birthing ceremony on the terms of the local participants and Aisha Ali has been invited to direct dance companies in North Africa.<sup>150</sup> Presently in the bellydance community, more North American and European festivals are contracting teachers from North Africa and Western Asia.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> With this notion of "outsider" I do not mean to position Middle-Eastern-American practitioners as natural insiders. Diasporic Middle Eastern practitioners are often not regarded as insiders by the people of the nations from where they claim their heritages.

<sup>149</sup> Smith, Andy. 1990. "For All Those Who Were Indian in a Former Life." Edited by Adams, Carol. *Eco-Feminism and The Sacred*. New York: Continuum. p. 171.

<sup>150</sup> According to Aisha Ali's biography she was invited to work with dancers in Tunisia and facilitated the opportunity for North African performers to come to the US. "In 1973, while a featured soloist at the Municipal Theater in Sfax, Tunisia, the Maison de la Culture asked Aisha to form a dance company. Later that year she stayed among the *Ouled Nail* in Algeria, a tribe famous for its dancing women. Over the years she has frequently danced at celebrations in Upper Egypt with the Banat Maazin, a Nawar gypsy family of Ghawazi. In the United States, Aisha directed the North African performers at the Los Angeles Olympics opening festival in 1984." Ali, Aisha. "Biography." *Dance and Music of the Middle East and North Africa*. Retrieved from <http://www.aisha-ali.com/bio.html>. April 17, 2012.

<sup>151</sup> The International Bellydance Conference of Canada 2012 roster of instructors includes: Khairiyya Yusuf Mazen (member of the Banat Mazen family, some of the few remaining practitioners of the dances of the Nawari Ghawazi of Upper Egypt), and Mahmoud Reda (the founder of the state-sanctioned theater folk dance company, Reda Troupe). 2012-IBCC International Bellydance Conference of Canada. "IBCC Instructors." Retrieved from <http://www.bellydanceconference.com/2012/instructors.php> April 30, 2012. In my experience, native practitioners tend to transmit an idea of authenticity that is similar to American practitioners. When I taught at a bellydance festival in Bari, Italy, the legendary Egyptian dancer and former Reda Troupe founder, Farida Fahmy was present as a knowledgeable source for Egyptian-staged folk dance style bellydance. Her vocabulary tended to support the dichotomy of East vs. West in a way that aligns with the dominant hegemonic way of thinking about difference: East as emotional and irrational, West as regimented and exact. When we were instructed to do a move languidly to arrive just after the beat rather than right on it she explained that we needed to stop thinking with the precision of our Western mind and to think like an Egyptian, with our Eastern mind. A male instructor from Egypt at the same festival suggested to me that I should teach and perform pharaonic dances because people really like them and I would make money.

Bellydance practitioners who emphasize ethnic authenticity and origins try to challenge the representational frame around bellydance by attempting to remove the American and European influences on *danse Orientale*. This strategy equates the sexualizing and objectifying gaze with American audiences, assuming that if the dance could be presented in its authentic Middle Eastern form, that itself would somehow preclude objectification. American bellydancers who are devoted to finding the ethnic origins of the form try to present the essential and uncontaminated practices of the East, meanwhile protecting the practices from extinction due to the oppressive forces or general disinterest in their native countries. As Marta Savigliano discusses in her research on the colonial and economic structures of tango, the search for origins in an idealized static tradition is in many ways a colonialist pursuit to know and dominate the other.<sup>152</sup> The idea that the West has the freedom, ability, and duty to preserve and reconstruct Middle Eastern culture implies the colonial assumption that people of North Africa are incapable of agency, of protecting and valuing their own culture, and ultimately supports the asymmetrical power dynamic that originally gave rise to imperialist representations of bellydance.

Bellydancers looking for origins and ethnic authenticity desire to learn more about the dance and the culture it originally came from. Embodying and learning about the practice allows them to expand their own definition of self within their own culture. If the efforts to learn traditional *ghawazi* dance, or any North African dances before the colonial period, were accompanied by an awareness of the effects and structures of colonialism, the transnational development of the form, and an ethical ethnographic approach, the knowledge gained would help to expand the known history of bellydance before it was called bellydance. With more knowledge about the history

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<sup>152</sup> Savigliano (1995).

of the form and more interaction with practitioners in the form's local context, the colonialist representational frame can be manipulated in a more informed way that could give voice and agency to local practitioners. In 2012, the International Bellydance Conference of Canada in Toronto and the Bad Boys of Bellydance festival in Las Vegas both invited Khairiyya Mazen, who is one of the last living practitioners of the *ghawazi* tradition, to fly from her home in Egypt to North America to teach *ghawazi* dance. Many North American dancers go to Egypt to study with famed *raqs sharqi*, *raqs baladi*, *shaabi*, and staged-folk dance teachers like Tito Seif, Farida Fahmy, and Mahmoud Reda. For bellydancers in America who are interested in learning Oriental dance in the current or recent Egyptian style, more opportunities are becoming available to learn directly from Egyptian instructors.

At a time when traveling to the Middle East or bringing an Egyptian instructor to the US was more expensive and less common, many bellydancers in the US began to look further beyond the Middle East as a point of origin, preferring to imagine the dance as it might have existed in an ancient time in the cradle of civilization. Rather than insist on ethnic authenticity and undergo the rigors of text-based research, ethnography, and travel abroad, more spiritually-focused bellydancers looked to mythology and goddess worship to legitimize the dance and imbue it with meaning. By locating the original authenticity of bellydance in an ancient past, practitioners were able to free themselves from the constrictions placed on the dance by ethnic purists and create a narrative that supported the idea that bellydance is inherently natural and transcendent for all women.

## Evoking the Spiritual

Some bellydance practitioners propose that the most authentic and original form of bellydance is a pre-Christian spiritual practice that embodies transcendence through goddess worship, priestess dancing, or moving meditations. Rather than stressing accuracy or allying the practice to any specific ethnic traditions, spiritual bellydancers present the form as a universal truth for all female bodies, an ancient practice that celebrates the lives and life-giving power of women.<sup>153</sup> This rhetoric of connection through dance to the feminine divine supports an effort to cast away restrictions on the female body imposed by Judeo-Christian-Islamic patriarchy and mass-media representations of women. By claiming spirituality, dancers try to neutralize the sexuality associated with bellydance.<sup>154</sup> While practitioners bring the intention of reclaiming the female body as sacred and not to be objectified, spiritual bellydance performers often fail to manipulate the representational frame to match their intention to challenge the sexualizing patriarchal gaze. Claiming the origins of bellydance can be found in the ancient past, practitioners legitimize innovation within the form by citing a history ancient enough that it must include change.<sup>155</sup> By locating

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<sup>153</sup> Researcher-practitioner Shira calls this spiritual slant on bellydance “wishtory,” meaning wishful history that is unsupported by historical evidence. She explains the pitfalls of “wishtory” are that it “distracts people away from the provable facts about the history of the dance form. Writing, “this is grossly disrespectful to the people who actually shaped the dance into the beautiful art form we love today.” Shira. “Middle Eastern Dance: The Spiritual Connection.” *All About Belly Dancing!* Iowa City, Iowa. Retrieved from <http://www.shira.net/advice/lifestyle/spiritual.htm>, April 17, 2012.

<sup>154</sup> The legitimizing goal of bringing subjectivity and spirituality into bellydance is very similar to the strategies of early modern dancers who used sacred and Eastern imagery to support the idea of the female body as a subject with expressive capability.

<sup>155</sup> Similarly, in the case of Bharata Natyam, Janet O’Shea proposes that by citing the form’s ancient *sastric* history, reconstructivist practitioners (namely Rukmini Devi) allowed for the possibility of innovation. Writing, “Recourse to the distant past paradoxically legitimized change by establishing a history for Bharata Natyam long and encompassing enough that the dance could not avoid transforming (p. 27)” Adding, “Rukmini Devi likewise legitimized her innovations by claiming to bolster the dance form’s religiosity. She therefore initiated such changes in stage practice as placing iconographic representations of gods onstage and offering an obeisance to the stage itself.” (O’Shea 2001, p. 70)

bellydance in an imagined past, dancers allow themselves to disengage from the ways recent history has affected bellydance. This strategy tends to support an essentialized notion of female bodies and shut male practitioners out of the form.

Dancer-researchers Donnalee Dox and Andrea Deagon have looked critically at the motives behind spiritual bellydance practice in America.<sup>156</sup> Donnalee Dox identifies four types of spiritual bellydance and describes their nuances in her research.<sup>157</sup>

Andrea Deagon notes that the central tenet for all variants of spiritual bellydance is that the practice requires no proof of authenticity other than testimony to the experience of dancing:

Spirituality is felt (emotionally and physically); a person has a unique and essential soul; time and place can be transcended; spiritual insights are both individual and universal; spirituality is intimately connected to sexuality; eternal forces can be invoked; wisdom is inherent in the alterity of Middle Eastern cultures; truth is accessible but beyond language; and, finally, belly dancing offers new knowledge of life, love, and divinity.<sup>158</sup>

The popularity of these sentiments in bellydance surfaced as early as the efforts of early modern dancers like Ruth St. Denis to present spiritual and ancient Eastern dances, and the trend has continued into the present, with a particular resonance among subscribers to the New Age movement since its rise in popularity in the 1980s.<sup>159</sup> Lisa Aldred explains that New Agers are a loosely defined group of people with disparate interests searching for spiritual meaning outside of hegemonic

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<sup>156</sup> As practitioner-researchers, Dox and Deagon have contributed articles to Shay and Sellers-Young's anthology, *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism, and Harem Fantasy* (2005). Dox is the author of "Spirit from the Body: Belly Dance as a Spiritual Practice" and Deagon authored "Dance of the Seven Veils: The Revision of Revelation in the Oriental Dance Community."

<sup>157</sup> Dox identifies "goddess dancing, priestess dancing, birth dancing, and dance meditation." (Dox 2005, p. 309)

<sup>158</sup> Dox (2005), p. 306.

<sup>159</sup> Lisa Aldred has theorized about the New Age commercialization of Native American spirituality. Explaining that since the movement's rise in popularity in the 1980s, "In the so-called postmodern culture of late consumer capitalism, a significant number of white affluent suburban and urban middle-aged baby-boomers complain of feeling uprooted from cultural traditions, community belonging, and spiritual meaning. The New Age movement is one such response to these feelings. New Agers romanticize an 'authentic and traditional'...culture whose spirituality can save them from their own sense of malaise." Aldred, Lisa. "Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality" *American Indian Quarterly*. Volume 24, Number 3. Summer 2000.

organized religions. They look to goddess worship, paganism, shamanism, and Eastern spiritual practices perhaps as a way to confront the conditions of modern society that cause people to feel alienated from spiritual meaning. Both New Agers and spiritual bellydancers seek personal transformation, spiritual transcendence, and community belonging through means alternative to patriarchal forms of Western organized religion.

By placing the origins of bellydance in an imagined ancient past, spiritual bellydancers attempt to dismiss the historical influences of colonialism and American popular theater and side-step the political issues with dancing a form from North Africa and the Middle East. One reason for the move to emphasize bellydance's origins in the past, in the cradle of civilization, versus in the present-day Orient could be related to an increase in American media attention on the Middle East. In the late 1980s, around the time of the events leading up to the Gulf War, it became problematic for practitioners to gain legitimacy from fellow Americans by citing the source of their dance as the place where there was increasing political tension as well as Arab women portrayed by the media as oppressed and made to wear veils. Looking to the ancient past allows practitioners to be apolitical. Spiritual bellydance practitioners have also rewritten recent history by revising Oscar Wilde's telling of Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils to the goddess Ishtar's descent into the seven gates of the underworld.

In her research on the spiritual bellydance community, Andrea Deagon reveals that the Dance of the Seven Veils, once a marker of Oriental degeneracy and female danger and a popular trope in burlesque and vaudeville performances,<sup>160</sup> has been revised as a spiritual transformation story. Deagon writes:

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<sup>160</sup> As discussed in Chapter One, the Dance of the Seven Veils is the 19<sup>th</sup> century invention of Oscar Wilde. In his 1894 play, *Salome*, Wilde includes a vague stage direction instructing the character Salome to do the Dance of the Seven Veils. After Richard Strauss' opera version of the play in 1905, the character Salome

The Dance of the Seven Veils (moved) away from its association with Salome and often into the story of another mythological figure, the Sumerian Inanna (Babylonian Ishtar), whose descent through the seven gates of the underworld has been adopted as a sacred text in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century women's spirituality movement....The seven veils also resonate with contemporary mystical language: the veils of illusion, the seven planets of astrology, the seven chakras, and all the other veils and sevens interwoven in New Age thought.<sup>161</sup>

This revision of the Dance of the Seven Veils emphasizes the subject position of the dancer by presenting her as going through a journey and therefore establishing the viewer as a witness. While dancers bring their intention of reclaimed, sacred subjectivity to the dance in an effort to challenge the scopophilic male gaze, Donnalee Dox suggests that the intention does not match the results:

Practitioners of spiritual belly (dance) take a dance form loaded with connotations of exoticism, eroticism, and objectification and deliberately internalize the opposite (spirituality). This is done by layering symbolic and experiential meaning over the dance, without necessarily changing the dance or its outward expression.<sup>162</sup>

A dance in which the main feature is the sequential removal of veils seems to promise a titillating nudity more than a dancer's subjective experience of transformation. Moreover, the intention to access self-realization or spiritual transcendence through an "ancient Eastern" practice is itself problematic. Karayanni explains, "the discovery of primeval truths in a dance tradition of the 'Orient' satisfies certain agendas that are connected to imperialism,"<sup>163</sup> wherein modern Western society idealizes and maintains its hierarchical relationship to the primitive, ancient East. The strategy of situating bellydance in an ancient spiritual past reinforces essentialized notions of the body and ethnic identity where the feminine and the East are dichotomously opposed to the

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was one of the most popular tropes in early 20<sup>th</sup> century popular theater. The phenomenon was known as "Salomania." Deagon writes that in the comic and burlesque versions of the Dance of the Seven Veils near the end of Salomania "it remained a free-floating signifier of ancient and Oriental degeneracy, chaotic feminine sensual power, and all of the things that made these both threatening and amusing." (Deagon 2005, p. 243)

<sup>161</sup> Deagon (2005), p. 244.

<sup>162</sup> Dox (2005).

<sup>163</sup> "The scare quotes indicate the shift into modernity where the geographical Orient is not the Middle East anymore but a vague floating concept." (Karayanni 2005, p. 166)

masculine and the West. Claims about the ancient spirituality of the Orient are often made in the name of feminism and alongside New Age commodity fetishism.

Many instructors advertise bellydance as a sacred healing practice to promote their classes, promising prospective students that they will learn magnetic movements to heal the body by channeling the energies of the earth and honoring the body and the womb like pre-Christian matriarchal societies and Middle Eastern village communities. While this type of rhetoric is problematic in that it projects imaginative and simplistic ideas onto unknowable ancient times and complex modern-day societies, the transformation and transcendence that practitioners may feel when dancing is actual. One cannot argue with another's subjective experience, but rather than imbuing imaginative rhetoric with transformative potential, I suggest that the movement practice itself and community structures surrounding bellydance are what allow people to know their bodies and selves differently. In Chapter Three I enter into a choreographic analysis of one variant of American bellydance to demonstrate how the physical movement and structures of the dance are themselves sites for personal transformation and community formation, prioritizing practitioners' choreographic rather than rhetorical strategies.

Many American bellydancers use the idea of the inherent naturalness of the form to explain to themselves and others why they enjoy the practice so much, why it makes them feel satisfied and allows them to know their bodies and selves in a more complete way. Claims about the naturalness of the form disregard the training that is required in most dance forms that once mastered, allows practitioners to feel "at home" and fully expressive within that particular movement training to the point that it feels natural, inherent, and even essential to their individual identity. Spiritual bellydance does not tend to be characterized by complex, technically difficult

movement or rigid codification systems, but instead is a loose idiom in which the movement is intended for all bodies and is open to individual interpretation. Rather than emphasizing the subject position of the dancer by presenting the dance as a private spiritual journey, in the next section we will examine the strategies of practitioners who have tried to legitimize bellydance by emphasizing the technical skill it requires and presenting it on a concert stage next to other established classical dance forms.

### Classicization

A few notable practitioners of bellydance since the 1970s have invested their efforts in “raising the level of the dance”<sup>164</sup> so that it becomes a classical, concert dance form, the technical difficulty of which is central. Jamila and Suhaila Salimpour and others in the States have made conscious adjustments to the physical movements, terminology, and pedagogy of bellydance to make it more technically difficult and standardized so that it may stand up to the rigor of a classical form. Their adjustments to the movement include developing complex sequences and anatomical formulas with an emphasis on muscularity. Reda Troupe in Egypt and Bellydance Superstars in America have used Western choreographic constructions to put bellydance on the concert stage, employing proscenium-theater staging and lighting design with ensemble numbers that follow the format of a few soloists among a corps of dancers. This process of grooming a dance so that it will be considered a classical

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<sup>164</sup> In a 1972 documentary by John Carney about Jamila Salimpour called *Bal Anat*, Jamila compares her efforts in bellydance to the levels of achievement in other classical forms like ballet: “I think that if every teacher that teaches bellydancing takes the dance really seriously and thinks of it in the same way you would think of ballet or the classical dance of Bharata Natyam or any higher form of modern dance, there are levels of achievement and I think that my primary interest is raising the level of the dance so that it becomes a very difficult but truly artistic dance art form.” Carney, John. 2011. “Bal Anat Documentary 1970/1972.” (Video File). Retrieved from <http://youtu.be/fG2MXSp7Zbw>. April 17, 2012.

tradition supports a colonialist model of defining civilization and cultural value in such a way that supports the superiority of Western high culture. Janet O'Shea describes the politics of "classicization" in a globalized South Asian form, Bharata Natyam, as a process that is complicit with imperialist values:

The logic of colonialism depended on an ostensible civilizational lack for its moral justification. Dismantling imperial rule required that nationalists counter the premise of native inferiority by supplying evidence of indigenous high-culture glory ... For orientalists, furthermore, civilization inhered in classical traditions and, conversely, 'classicism' provided evidence of civilization.<sup>165</sup>

In a process that in many ways parallels O'Shea's description of Bharata Natyam practitioners' classicizing maneuvers in the service of Indian nationalism, Egypt's Reda Troupe adapted regional folk dances for the high-art concert stage.<sup>166</sup> Mahmoud Reda started the staged folk dance company, Reda Troupe, in Egypt in 1959 before it was put under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture in 1961. Touring domestically and internationally, the troupe helped further Egyptian artistic legitimacy and pride during the country's nationalist reform movements. In order to represent Egyptian dance culture as a respectable art form, Mahmoud Reda adjusted the movement quality of *raqs baladi* to downplay the use of the hips and emphasize movement of the upper limbs and feet,<sup>167</sup> and he used a blend of Western and Egyptian musical

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<sup>165</sup> Janet O'Shea describes the politics of "classicization" (the process of making classical traditions) as it relates to the Indian nationalist movement's cooption of the value systems of the colonizer. "Because the logic of colonialism depended on an ostensible civilizational lack for its moral justification, dismantling imperial rule required that nationalists counter the premise of native inferiority by supplying evidence of indigenous high-culture glory. Nationalists replaced the narrative of the civilizing mission with an alternative ideological frame that celebrated local cultural products and practices by representing them as equal to, if not better than, those of the colonizer...For orientalists, furthermore, civilization inhered in classical traditions and, conversely, 'classicism' provided evidence of civilization." (O'Shea 2001, p. 95)

<sup>166</sup> Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young write that alongside Mahmoud Reda in Egypt, individuals like "Mustafa Turan in Turkey, and Jamal, Iranian co-artistic director of the Aman International Dance Theatre in the United States, are attempting to raise this popular form to the level of art through choreographies that utilize western choreographic strategies." Shay, Anthony. 2002. *Choreographic Politics: State Folk Dance Companies, Representation, and Power*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

<sup>167</sup> This adjustment to the choreography mirrors similar adjustments, discussed in Chapter One, made by American early modern dancers to the burlesque and vaudeville versions of *Salome* and *hoochie-koochie*: putting more emphasis on serpentine upper body movement and eliminating vibrations of the pelvis and hips. Anthony Shay's work explores how Mahmoud Reda's troupe choreography is informed by nationalist discourse. See Shay (2002).

instrumentation.<sup>168</sup> The emphasis on bringing bellydance to the concert stage in America was informed by similar constructs of high-culture values, though not from a nationalist standpoint. In *Viltis* folk dance magazine, practitioner-contributor Suhelya writes:

The goal of the *danse orientale* troupes must be to carry it to the concert stage so that, like other traditional dances, those of the Near and Middle East will be truly represented in the American public.<sup>169</sup>

Beginning in the 1970s, bellydancers in America have tried to codify the fundamental movements of the dance through books and copyrighted technique formats.<sup>170</sup> Locally organized seminars and teachers' associations have played a role in efforts to standardize teaching pedagogy and craft an agreed-upon set of values.<sup>171</sup> Although Serena Wilson and Dahlena were the first to publish books illustrating their technique, which included "first generation" movements they had learned from other immigrant bellydancers in the trendy Oriental nightclubs of the 1960s,<sup>172</sup> Jamila Salimpour and her daughter Suhaila's formats and terminology are most widely used

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<sup>168</sup> Principle dancer of Reda Troupe, Farida Fahmy, writes: "The Reda Troupe gained renown in Egypt and visited more than fifty countries. It presented command performances in Egypt, and performed in prestigious theaters abroad such as The Royal Albert Hall in London, Carnegie Hall in New York, Congress Hall in Berlin, Olympia Theater in Paris, Stanislavsky Theater in Moscow, Teatro De La Zarzula in Madrid and others" She credits Ali Ismail for his musical compositions for the troupe: "Ali Ismail blended western instruments with traditional Egyptian instruments, and presented traditional music with a new and fresh approach." Fahmy, Farida Melda. "Reda History." *The Art of Egyptian Dance*. Retrieved from <http://www.faridafahmy.com/history.html>. April 18, 2012.

<sup>169</sup> Suhelya (1977), p. 11.

<sup>170</sup> Some of the earliest efforts in America to standardize bellydance terminology and physical technique were by Serena Wilson on the East Coast, Dahlena in Chicago, and Jamila Salimpour on the West Coast. As discussed previously, Serena Wilson took over the first American school for bellydance in 1967, Joe Williams' "Stairway to Stardom" which he started in 1964, and renamed it "Serena Studios." Serena published her book, *The Serena Technique of Belly Dance*, in 1972. Shortly after, Dahlena published her book *The Art of Belly Dancing* in 1975. Jamila Salimpour published booklets *Bellydance: The Birth Magic Ritual: From Cave to Cult to Cabaret* in 1979, a photographic collection from the Chicago World's Fair, as well as *Finger Cymbal* and *Dance Format*.

<sup>171</sup> Paul Monty's international dance seminars, various conferences, and regional teacher's associations served as a forum to continue dialogue about standardization. Suhelya writes that the intent of the teachers' association of Middle Eastern dance in Michigan is "to help define the criteria for the formal technique of *danse orientale*, and to broaden our understanding of this art and its cultural sources for all teachers in our area." (Suhelya 1977, p. 35)

<sup>172</sup> Gamal, Farida. "Dahlena: An American Classic." *Habibi*. Volume 17, Number 4. December 1999. Retrieved from <http://thebestofhabibi.com/vol-17-no-4-dec-1999/dahlena/>. April 18, 2012.

in the States today.<sup>173</sup> While the names that Jamila assigned to movements are common terminology in the US today, there is still no globally shared terminology or codified movement vocabulary for bellydancing. Farida Fahmy reflected the view of many Egyptian dancers when she mentioned in a 2011 workshop in Bari, Italy that “the Americans have all kinds of funny names” for *raqs sharqi* bellydance movements.

Shareen El Safy explains in a *Habibi* article:

Jamila’s terminology was based on the names of the dancers she had seen doing the steps, or movements characteristic of certain countries. For example, there was Tabura Najeem’s “Turkish Drop”; “Maya,” the backwalk figure eight; the grapevine step, “Zenouba”; and the walking 3/4 shimmy, “Samia.” It seemed logical to her to organize sets of movements into families, such as “Tunisian,” “Algerian,” Moroccan,” “Egyptian,” and “Arabic.” “In giving names to steps,” Jamila explained, “it meant you could say ‘Arabic Two’ and immediately everyone would know what stance to take, and the step.”...Jamila developed technical ways to play the finger cymbals (sagat or zills) that included several different complex patterns and published these patterns in her *Finger Cymbal Manual*.<sup>174</sup>

By somewhat arbitrarily naming movements after countries in the Middle East, Jamila was able to present bellydance as a long-standing tradition deserving of classical status.<sup>175</sup>

Many bellydancers, from the 1970s to now, desire to make it known to the general public that the form is technically difficult and requires training. Since bellydance became very popular in the nightclubs of the 1960s, bellydancers had been stereotyped as being untrained dancers or out-of-work strippers who simply waved

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<sup>173</sup> In the late 1940s and 50s Jamila Salimpour learned Oriental dance from watching movie stars, Samia Gamal, Tahia Carioca, and Naima Akef in Golden Era Egyptian films. Years later she got a regular dancing appointment at Greek Village in Hollywood where she imitated a handful of regular dancers who had come to work from Egypt including Siham, Maya Medwar, and Zenouba. In 1958, after moving to San Francisco, Jamila danced at the popular Arabic nightclub 12 Adler. (El Safy 1994)

<sup>174</sup> El Safy (1994).

<sup>175</sup> Using the terms “Egyptian, Tunisian, Arabic” to name moves that do not necessarily have any actual lineage in those cultures furthers colonial pursuits to make the Oriental other known to the West. The teacher trainings taught by the Salimpours have succeeded in creating a common ground and base understanding of terminology and technique among bellydancers in America, but this collection of codified vocabulary has contributed to misinformation in America about to what extent one could actually trace the choreographic history of bellydance. The Salimpours have created a thriving market economy off of their technique formats.

their arms and swayed their hips vaguely.<sup>176</sup> The move toward classicizing the dance comes from practitioners' desires to make their art and training into a more respected art form, combating the stereotype that bellydance is easy. Jamila Salimpour also made an explicit effort to raise the standards of dancers' technical proficiency, saying, "my primary interest is raising the level of the dance so that it becomes a very difficult but truly artistic dance art form."<sup>177</sup> Jamila is quoted in an interview with *Habibi* magazine:

The most frustrating thing to me is where the dance is going. I'd like to think that people are definitely thinking in terms of technique, where it becomes so exciting and so impossible that the world will say this is really an art form — not just posing and postures...I am thinking in terms of the preservation of an art form. Unless it's catalogued and organized, and we have named our dance terminology, it's not going anywhere. There has to be a foundation to the dance, or the dance has no future.<sup>178</sup>

Jamila's daughter, Suhaila, who trained as a child in her mother's format as well as in ballet, tap, and jazz, has taken up her mother's legacy and teaches highly cerebral and technically complex choreographies as well as certifications in her own pedagogical format.<sup>179</sup> However, emphasis on technical proficiency and standardization supports the idea that a Western mode of choreographic evaluation should be imposed on the uncoded and disparate set of North African and Western Asian dance practices associated with bellydance in order to make it respectable and legitimate. Vaguely Middle Eastern terminology for movement was invented as a tool for emphasizing the

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<sup>176</sup> As detailed in Chapter One, Joe Williams' first bellydance school, "Stairway to Stardom" was also a striptease school co-owned by a burlesque dancer. Williams' affiliation with the stripping community and position as bellydance booking agent may have attributed to this stereotype of bellydancers in the 1960s Manhattan Oriental nightclubs.

<sup>177</sup> Carney (1972). *Bal Anat* Documentary.

<sup>178</sup> El Safy (1994).

<sup>179</sup> Shareen El Safy inquires about Suhaila's technically complex choreography in *Habibi*: "It's very organized," explained Su-haila [sic]. "When you go onstage, you shouldn't wait to be inspired to dance," said Suhaila. "You have to be technically ready...I think choreography is the most important part of making this dance legit." Suhaila Salimpour (quoted in El Safy 1994)

legitimacy of bellydance as an established tradition, furthering the Western-centric agenda to classicize bellydance.

One product of these classicizing maneuvers has been the appearance of bellydance on commercial concert stages. The most well-known American staged ensemble bellydance company is the Bellydance Superstars (also called BDSS), a touring commercial company started in 2002 by Hollywood music producer Miles Copeland.<sup>180</sup> The goals of this company are to entertain audiences around the world with an impressive spectacle that showcases the skill and artfulness of bellydance. Demonstrating that the polished Bellydance Superstar proscenium-style performance is not solely an American take on bellydance, Badia Massabni choreographed ensemble numbers for upper-class patrons at her Casino Opera House in Cairo in the 1930s that showcased the skill and artfulness of the dance through an impressive stage spectacle featuring beautiful dancers dressed in heels and the Hollywood-influenced glittery *bedlah*.<sup>181</sup> Massabni's cast boasted some of the most famous Egyptian bellydancers of all time and similarly, the Bellydance Superstar cast features some of the most popular American bellydancers today. Around the globe, Bellydance Superstars continue to receive rave reviews from mainstream audiences and mixed reactions from bellydancers. Stavros Stavrou Karayanni's account of a performance by Jillina and the Sahlala Dancers<sup>182</sup> articulates his anxieties about the direction he fears these types of

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<sup>180</sup> Among the bands Miles Copeland has produced are The Police, R.E.M., the Fall, and The Bangles. I discuss my experience as a touring member of Bellydance Superstars in the Autoethnography section of Chapter Three.

<sup>181</sup> The *bedlah*, a two-piece costume with beads and sequins, which we now associate inseparably with Oriental Dance, first appeared during this period, inspired by Hollywood films and European nightclubs such as the "Moulin Rouge". For more information on the appearance of the *bedlah* in Egyptian bellydance performance see: Jalila. "Badia Massabny: Star Maker of Cairo." *Gilded Serpent*. Retrieved from <http://www.gildedserpent.com/art47/jalilahbadia.html>. February 16, 2012.

<sup>182</sup> Karayanni saw this performance at the Second International Conference on Middle Eastern Dance in May 2001 held in Costa Mesa, California. (Karayanni 2004, p. 159) Jillina started her dance company, *The Sahlala Dancers*, in 1999 then in 2003 she became the first artistic director of the Bellydance Superstars where she was also one of the principle choreographers until 2010. Jillina. "Jillina's Biography." *The*

staged ensemble performances take bellydance (Jillina was the principle choreographer for BDSS and Karayanni includes this performance as part of his discussion about BDSS):

The upbeat choreography was impressive because of its staggering precision, the finished moves, and the meticulous shimmies. Yet despite the superb choreographic composition...I worry that the priority is on white, middle-class performance of femininity, which is also decidedly heterosexual in its signification. Sexually unequivocal interpretations have become not only fashionable (this group had that particular look that accords an almost archetypal performance of what seems to be a traditionally male construct of feminine beauty: white, fit, dynamic and youthful) but almost required.<sup>183</sup>

Karayanni's discomfort with the performance of Bellydance Superstars, and other shows like it, stems from the unchallenged representational frame that enforces a heteronormative, white middle-class sexualized femininity and physical beauty. These types of concert performances elicit the Orientalist and objectifying patriarchal gaze that the transnational practice of bellydance has tended to satisfy since its foreigner-ready adaptations in colonial Egypt.

### Transgressive Community

Many bellydance communities make the creation of a supportive and tolerant social space wherein everyone is accepted the number one objective of the dance.

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*Sahlala Dancers*. Retrieved from [http://www.sahlaladancers.com/www.sahlaladancers.com/About\\_Jillina.html](http://www.sahlaladancers.com/www.sahlaladancers.com/About_Jillina.html). April 18, 2012.

<sup>183</sup> Karayanni adds, "The potential for the dance to signify transgression and transformation, as in the cult of Salome, still exists, of course, although now the priorities have shifted and some of that transgression and transformation vanishes before the sparkling veneer of such performances." (Karayanni, 2004, p. 171) Karayanni's concerns about Bellydance Superstars are common in the bellydance community but usually focus more on issues of body image than on unchallenged fixed notions of gender and sexuality. In her dissertation, *From Harem Fantasy to Female Empowerment: Rhetorical Strategies and Dynamics of Style in American Belly Dance*, Sheila Bock describes reactions to Bellydance Superstars that she encountered in Columbus Ohio: "some criticize the troupe 'for presenting the most American or Disney acceptable, you know, young, pretty, hard bodied, not too many older women, not too many larger women' perpetuating the stereotype of the harem fantasy, and fostering unhealthy attitudes about body image in the United States. Bock, Sheila Marie. 2005. *From Harem Fantasy to Female Empowerment: Rhetorical Strategies and Dynamics of Style in American Belly Dance*. Master's thesis, Ohio State University. p. 4.

Practitioners new to bellydance often react to the sense of community between dancers, within and between localities. Often, practitioners who emphasize solidarity within their immediate community do so by valuing acceptance and tolerance, specifically in relation to physical appearance. The community-focused variant of bellydance I elaborate on in this section is American Tribal Style or ATS. ATS communities and their offshoots, discussed in the next section, often envision themselves as transgressing the normative social order by allying themselves with the ideal of a “tribe” that celebrates women<sup>184</sup> and by presenting an “alternative” aesthetic that includes body modifications.

In ATS, the rhetoric of community is supported by the actual choreography of the dance, a structured improvisation that requires respecting the voice and responding to each of the members of the troupe.<sup>185</sup> Carolena Nericcio, the founder of ATS, included in her vision for the dance an explicitly stated challenge to mainstream notions of beauty and femininity and used the word “tribal” to emphasize the importance of group cohesion among her dancers.<sup>186</sup> Through its personal aesthetic and costume choices, by prioritizing group over solo performances, and by dancing an improvisational choreography that requires dancers to be attentive of their own and fellow dancers’ subjective experience versus the audience’s attention, the ATS

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<sup>184</sup> While much of the verbiage in these groups is about the empowerment of *women* and about challenging unrealistic and sexualized media stereotypes of women’s bodies, many community-focused bellydance groups openly accept and welcome men.

<sup>185</sup> The improvisational structure, of ATS and other group improvisations like it require the dancers to relate to one another with mutual respect, empathy, and tolerance. I will further discuss the effects of the improvisational structure on group solidarity and individual ideas of self in Chapter Three.

<sup>186</sup> In an interview with Kajira for *Habibi* magazine Carolena talks about the importance of community. She communicates the importance of camaraderie to the audience by always dancing in a group as well as through the name “tribal,” and the “tribal” aesthetic she crafted for her FatChance dancers: “I generally don’t allow the girls to do solos. It’s OK to dance solo at a friend’s party, but in terms of being hired out, I insist on two or more dancers always. I really want the tribal part to come through and the camaraderie of women to come through.” Carolena Nericcio (quoted in Djoumahna, Kajira. 1999. “FatChanceBellyDance: American Tribal Style.” *Habibi*. Volume 17, Number 3. Spring 1999. Retrieved from <http://thebestofhabibi.com/vol-17-no-3-spring-1999/fatchancebellydance/>. April 18, 2012)

community tries to confront the sexualizing representational frame that has traditionally accompanied bellydance. The feeling of community among dancers is fortified by the generally agreed upon idea that “anyone can do it,” regardless of age, body size, or gender.

Throughout the process of teaching bellydance in Northern California, Carolena<sup>187</sup> created a group improvisational structure, an aesthetic, and an ideology that she named American Tribal Style. In 1987 Carolena formed a troupe for her students<sup>188</sup> that she called FatChanceBellyDance. At age fourteen, Carolena began studying bellydance in 1974 in Northern California with Masha Archer, a former student of Jamila Salimpour’s.<sup>189</sup> Through Masha, Carolena unintentionally plugged into the lineage of Jamila’s theatrical “ethnic style” or “California Tribal” style bellydance of the 1960s and 70s.<sup>190</sup> When Carolena began teaching her own style, she taught the foundational moves she learned from Masha, which were variants of Jamila’s format and as such share movement terminology.<sup>191</sup> In her article on ATS, Barbara Sellers-Young writes, “the name of the company, Fat Chance, is Carolena’s

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<sup>187</sup> I use Carolena Nericcio’s first name as I reference her throughout this chapter as well as the first names of other dancers like Serena (Wilson) and Jamila (Salimpour). Because I am myself a practitioner in and among this history and community, it feels very inauthentic to refer to these innovators by the formalism of their last names here when in the community practitioners refer to these well-known dancers by their entire or first name. The bellydance community often refers to people by a single name that is either chosen or parent-given, as is the case with Serena, Dahlena, and Morocco.

<sup>188</sup> Some of the early pioneers from FatChanceBellyDance who helped spread the practice of ATS throughout the States as well as their own influential takes on bellydance are Kajira Djoumahna who started Black Sheep Bellydance, Paulette Rees-Denis who founded Gypsy Caravan, and Jill Parker who created Ultra Gypsy.

<sup>189</sup> Djoumahna (1999).

<sup>190</sup> In order to differentiate between Jamila’s style of dance and the variants of bellydance that have recently emerged as a direct response to ATS, some practitioners refer to Jamila’s style as “ethnic.” However, Morocco called Jamila’s style “tribal” and “California Tribal” rather than “ethnic,” which for her signaled that Jamila’s version of *danse Orientale* was her own invention rather than a reliable source for accessing the actual folk dances of the Middle East and North Africa.

<sup>191</sup> The terms *basic Egyptian*, *Arabic*,  $\frac{3}{4}$  *shimmy*, *taksim*, and *maya* are some of the moves common to both ATS and Jamila format.

challenge to the male voyeur.”<sup>192</sup> About the name, Carolena says, in a *Habibi* magazine interview with Kajira Djoumahna:

I didn't feel any connection to Arabic names because I'm not Arabic. There's that story about when I was young and dumb, I would tell men I was a bellydancer and they would ask for a private show. I would think, 'Fat chance!' I told my friend Jim (Murdoch), who's a clown, with a rather subtle but ongoing sense of humor, and he just said, 'Oh! Fat Chance Belly Dance!' I just knew I wanted it! The first group of dancers absolutely hated the name. They couldn't believe I'd picked such an appalling, inelegant moniker to describe them. But I knew what I was doing—I'd picked an American phrase for an American Tribal Style troupe that was simple and catchy, that no one would be able to forget.<sup>193</sup>

The social context in which ATS gained popularity was in San Francisco during the trend of modern primitivism.<sup>194</sup> Carolena and her first group of students reflected their participation in this trend with their tattoos, piercings and fetish for antique Rajasthani jewelry and textiles from North Africa and India.<sup>195</sup> An intentional departure from the *bedlah* that cabaret, Oriental, and *raqs sharqi* soloists wear, the ATS costume conceals more of the dancer's skin and body shape. Kajira Djoumahna describes the ATS aesthetic as “strictly an American fusion of elements from many countries along the Romany Trail and heavily influenced by simply what works for the dancers and an audience of Americans.”<sup>196</sup> The intentionally modest and “tribal” aesthetic of ATS, the emphasis on community, the rhetoric against mass media images

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<sup>192</sup> Sellers-Young complicates the assumption that the confronted viewer would be male and that none of the dancers would want to entice scopophilic pleasure from a male audience member. Sellers-Young, Barbara. 2005. “Body, Image, Identity: American Tribal Belly Dance.” (In Shay and Sellers-Young, p. 286)

<sup>193</sup> Djoumahna (1999).

<sup>194</sup> See page 3 in the Introduction to this thesis for a footnoted description of modern primitivism.

<sup>195</sup> Kajira details the ways the Tribal aesthetic departs from the more cabaret style bellydance: “What seems to distinguish the ATS groups from the more traditional Oriental approach is the feeling evoked by the group. A tribal troupe can give one the impression that it is at once ancient and modern, primitive and highly evolved. The eclectic costuming influenced from areas throughout India, the Middle East, North Africa and Spain makes such a statement as to lead people to believe it is representing an actual tribe from these countries, when in fact, it is strictly an American invention. The costuming tends towards natural fiber fabrics, old textiles, coins and tassels, lots of jewelry, often from Afghanistan, Turkmenistan or India, elaborate headdresses and *bindis* from India and facial “tattoos” from North Africa. To achieve sparkle on stage we often employ *shisha* cloth (mirrored and embroidered textiles from north India) and *mozunas* (shiny metal disks) from Morocco or *beze* from Turkey. The dancers are well covered; almost every inch that can be adorned is! We at no time use plastic sequins or gaudy appliqués, and the beads are used judiciously.” (Djoumahna 1999)

<sup>196</sup> Djoumahna (1999).

of beauty, and Carolena's intention behind the name FatChanceBellyDance point to Carolena and the ATS community's desire to manipulate the sexualized representation of bellydance. However, these maneuvers do not concern themselves with challenging the Orientalist framework that accompanies bellydance and in many instances reify it, inviting an Orientalist gaze that marvels at the ideal of the vaguely Eastern tribal female society that ATS references.

The most successful challenge to the objectifying gaze is the choreography of the dance itself, which encourages the viewer to see inter-subjective negotiations being played out between the improvising dancers who dance in response to and for one another. Sellers-Young describes the choreography:

Performances rely on a set of visual and aural cues of a designated leader. Physical cues are subtle gestures to suggest a change in movement. They can be a rise on the toes to indicate a level change or a lift of a wrist to signal a turn.<sup>197</sup>

An ATS performance becomes a community effort and a scenario of play between subjective identities for the collective goal of synchronicity. The exhilaration dancers feel from maintaining the choreography despite the constant risk of falling out of unison brings the community together in a way that persists off stage. This innovation in American bellydance is now a global interest and has sparked an interesting lineage of offshoots. In Chapter Three I analyze the choreography of one of the offshoots called Hot Pot Improvisational Tribal Style.

The sense of community between bellydancers is actual and realized partly due to its subculture affiliation and its do-it-yourself ethos. Since Ibrahim Farrah's *Arabesque* magazine, several bellydance publications have emerged, produced by bellydancers with contributions by bellydancers to be purchased by bellydancers about bellydance history, contentious topics, album and DVD reviews, and how-to costuming

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<sup>197</sup> Sellers-Young (2005), p. 291.

tips.<sup>198</sup> Bellydance festivals bring dancers together to study, spectate, and perform with one another. All over the world, practitioners gather at events modeled after the original Tribal Fest in Sebastopol, California.<sup>199</sup> Festivals are entirely produced by dancers themselves and have allowed small, local clothing and costume designers to flourish.<sup>200</sup> Bellydance event producers and local entrepreneurs who produce various commodities for the bellydance community such as costuming, instructional DVDs, and music, generally do not economically benefit greater than the dancers in the community, unlike the top-down, male-female structure that colored Sol Bloom's business relationship with the Algerian performers at the Cairo Street exhibit, Joe Williams as booking agent for all New York Casbahs, or Miles Copeland's role as producer and decision maker for the Bellydance Superstars. The thriving information-sharing and economically viable community of bellydance is supported by the shared rhetoric of the "tribal" ethos and is run entirely by practitioners themselves.

Because the community and self-sustaining economy<sup>201</sup> of bellydance has remained strong throughout the recent 2008-2012 global recession, even Bellydance Superstars have changed their model. Rather than touring to large concert theaters to perform for lay-audiences of season-ticket holders, Miles Copeland has reduced the current BDSS company to six dancers who tour to small local venues. Under the title "Club Bellydance," the company teams up with the local bellydance community in each

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<sup>198</sup> Among the most popular magazines are *Habibi*, *Gilded Serpent*, and *Fuse*.

<sup>199</sup> *Tribal Fest Budapest*, *Split Tribal Fest*, *Tribal Umrah* in France and Spain to name few out of many. In the last 5 years tribal and fusion bellydance festivals have also sprung up in the UK, Latvia, Ukraine, Estonia, and Mexico (before 2013 I will have taught at festivals in Taiwan, Russia, Switzerland, Croatia, Colombia, the UK, and Italy) and tribal bellydance communities exist in Japan, South Africa, China, Australia and many countries I do not name here.

<sup>200</sup> Among these designers are *Black Lotus*, *Geisha Moth*, and *Melodia*.

<sup>201</sup> Unlike the paradigm of ballet companies who rely on donors and modern/post-modern choreographers who are often funded by grants, professional bellydancers (whose main income comes from bellydance) make dance works largely for their own community and are supported economically through teaching to that community.

city whom they rely upon to produce the first half of the evening-length show for which the Superstars perform in the second half. Joining forces with local bellydance groups is a new way to capitalize on the strong local communities of dancers who, generally excited by the prestige of performing with the BDSS, ensure ticket sales and provide local on-the-ground marketing.

American practitioners' desire for the personal transformation they feel bellydance offers partly arises from the need to overcome the isolating effects of modernity: alienation from community, lack of cultural traditions, and disassociation from one's own body. As discussed in relation to spiritual bellydance, practitioners often find bellydance to be a transformative experience that allows them to have a more intimate and empowered relationship with their own body and community. Referencing the argument that modernity and capitalism creates an alienated subject and need for replenishment, Native Studies scholar Lisa Aldred criticizes the New Age movement's romanticization of "authentic" and "traditional" foreign cultural practices. She sees Westerners expressing their interest in Native cultures by engaging in a purchase-oriented movement that is itself a consumer capitalist pursuit in order to unsuccessfully alleviate their malaise and alienation.<sup>202</sup> In her article, "Belly Dancing: Arab-Face, Orientalist Feminism, and U.S. Empire," Sunaina Maira makes a similar argument about bellydance in America. Maira sees bellydance as a primarily consumer-oriented activity that seeks to quell white-guilt syndrome and demonstrates "liberal consent to U.S. empire."<sup>203</sup> Many of the strategies discussed in this chapter that bellydancers since 1960 have utilized to address their feelings of lack have included

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<sup>202</sup> "In the so-called postmodern culture of late consumer capitalism a significant number of white affluent suburban and urban middle-aged baby-boomers complain of feeling uprooted from cultural traditions, community belonging, and spiritual meaning." (Aldred, 2000. p. 329)

<sup>203</sup> Maira (2008), p. 322.

seeking replenishment in an ancient spirituality or tribal identity. While the community and spiritual alienation of the Western middle-class might feel real for some, the idea that the rest of the world is available to fill the gap is problematic.<sup>204</sup> While Maira essentializes bellydance as purchase-oriented, I propose that bellydance is practice-oriented and that practitioners access community and personal fulfillment by engaging in the actual choreography and physical experience of the dance. While it is not a monochromatic assumption across all variants of bellydance, ATS and its related improvisational forms demonstrates that bellydance practice can be an entry point for practitioners to construct their self in relation to the needs of a group identity and develop a tolerant and affirmative perception of their bodies.

### Creative Expression

Since bellydance became popular as a recreational practice in the 1970s, some early American instructors of the form did not claim that the movement was an expression of authenticity or tradition but rather that bellydance movement is open to creative interpretation for the purpose of self-expression. A former star student of Ruth St. Denis, Serena Wilson was the first bellydance teacher and studio owner who taught and choreographed bellydance with a critical eye for “authenticity” and high regard for the expressive potential of dance. Paul Monty describes Serena’s approach to her own loosely codified teaching method:

Within her technique, Serena was, however, not striving for authenticity of Middle Eastern dance movements, but for a freedom in her dance which sometimes changed the whole concept of the dances which she presented in concert. Her book was written at a time when teachers such as Ibrahim Farrah, Morocco, Dahlena, and Jamila Salimpour were promoting the authentic aspects of the dance.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Savigliano (1995).

<sup>205</sup> Monty (1986), p. 275.

Serena Wilson considered her bellydancing to be in a category she called “interpretive,” a marked contrast from most of her contemporaries who at the time who were invested in the ethnic origins of the dance.<sup>206</sup> Many styles of bellydance in America including that of Jamila’s Bal Anat, spiritual bellydance, certain reconstructed dances (like pharaonic), the performances of the Bellydance Superstars, and American Tribal Style, could all be considered creative interpretations of the idea of bellydance, extending out of a common history, pulling from similar sources, and exhibiting similar basic movement vocabularies. While some variants of bellydance are interested mainly in spiritual transcendence, intercultural encounter, or local community, some bellydancers are interested most in the open-ended expressive potential of the dance. Several permutations of bellydance have crystallized since the early 2000s from the desire of practitioners to expand upon what they perceived to be limited modes of expression available in any of its previous incarnations. With little regard for ethnic authenticity or spiritual significance, these dancers seem to identify bellydance as a vehicle for unique self-expression.

Practitioners who sought an alternative to the two dominant modes of bellydance at the millennium—cabaret and American Tribal Style—were motivated partly by the desire to access a wider range of emotive qualities,<sup>207</sup> partly by a desire to express a more fluid spectrum of gender and sexuality, and partly by a desire to make the practice feel more authentic to their particular identities. With its outward gaze and flashy costumes, cabaret, Oriental bellydance, and *raqs sharqi* are perceived by

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<sup>206</sup> Monty (1986), p. 275.

<sup>207</sup> In her ethnography of Experimental Middle Eastern Dance performers, Laura Osweiler discovers part of the impetus for the creation of new bellydance genres is the desire to access a wide range of emotive expression: “[Experimental Middle Eastern Dance] choreographers often feel constricted and unable to express all that they would like to within the frameworks, structures, and expectations of traditional Middle Eastern dance.” (Osweiler 2011, p. 29)

some contemporary American practitioners as limiting the mode of expression to celebratory happiness and allowing only for a hyper-feminine, sexualized identity. American Tribal Style, with its upright controlled posture and ethnic aesthetic references, is seen by some as limiting expression to a strong but demure formal quality and allowing only for a faux old-world “tribal” identity, precluding for example the ability to express one’s own contemporary identity as someone living in a present-day urban society.

Out of this desire for new expressive possibilities and ways to represent a more personally authentic expression of self through the dance, arose various departures from cabaret, ethnic, spiritual, and tribal bellydance, including: gothic bellydance, theatrical bellydance (or Experimental Middle Eastern Dance), tribal fusion, modern bellydance, fusions of bellydance with other “world” dances, and numerous other styles. In her study of what she terms the “Experimental Middle Eastern Dance” genre, Laura Osweiler utilizes genre theory to explain that once the image of a certain genre has been codified, people who feel restricted by the boundaries of what can be considered part of that genre tend to form new ones at once rather than work from within to expand the popular conception of the established genre itself.<sup>208</sup> In this section, I focus mainly on the emergence of the tribal fusion genre and gothic bellydance or what is now often called dark fusion, as a reaction to previous iterations of American bellydance.

Two important early figures, among many, in the upsurge of the tribal fusion genre are Jill Parker with her post-ATS troupe Ultra Gypsy and Frédérique with her breakbeat musical preferences. An original member of Carolena Nericcio’s FatChanceBellyDance, Jill Parker branched out to form what many consider to be the

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<sup>208</sup> For a more in-depth ethnographic study of Experimental Middle Eastern Dance, see Osweiler (2011).

first tribal fusion troupe, Ultra Gypsy, in 1996. Ultra Gypsy “began to scale down the tribal costume, expand the movement vocabulary, work with modern DJ mixed music and play with theatrical themes in their performances.”<sup>209</sup> A student of ATS dancers Amy Luna and Jill Parker, Frédérique was one of the first dancers to introduce American electronic music, drum and bass, breakbeat, and dubstep to bellydance around the turn of the millennia. Tribal fusion is often associated with electronic music and aesthetic references to ATS in jewelry, costuming, and movement style, but it is a very loose category that is often used as a catch-all term for bellydance that is not ATS, cabaret, Oriental, or folk.<sup>210</sup>

From my own observation as a trained performer and viewer of *raqs sharqi* and tribal fusion bellydance, the movement quality of tribal fusion puts more emphasis on intricate hip and torso isolations and employs more muscularly effortful arm movement than Oriental bellydance. In the Oriental bellydance style that is characteristic of current and Golden Era Egyptian dance stars, the postural composure and effortless body carriage of the performer helps to define the style as *raqs sharqi*. Except in the case of drum solos, where a *raqs sharqi* dancer performs intricate torso isolations to a piece of rhythmic drum music (music that does not include melodic instrumentation or vocals), the Egyptian Oriental-style dancer presents the appearance of an overall relaxed posture from which his or her isolations, undulations, and vibrations flow and are incorporated into her overall relaxed and loose composure that

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<sup>209</sup> Stants, Heather. “Tribal Fusion.” Edited by Rehor, Tom. Written for the *Bellydance Evolution DVD*. Retrieved from: <http://www.tribalalternative.com/tribalfusion.html>. April 18, 2012.

<sup>210</sup> There are exceptions to this description as many tribal fusion dancers do pull movement and costuming aesthetics from South Asian and North African folk dances, as well as from turn-of-the-century American cabaret (this will be discussed more in the next section “American Authenticity.” It is my personal opinion, or perhaps desire, that as bellydance continues to develop into uncharted territory with new movement, music, and aesthetics that the category “tribal fusion” will become more finite, referring to dance that is a departure from ATS but still related in costume aesthetic and movement style to ATS. Tribal fusion movement style often includes pop-and-lock style staccato torso isolations.

reads as elegant and effortless. The typical tribal fusion dancer, especially early in the genre's formation, does not have a signature style of bodily comportment that emphasizes the connectedness of all parts, but rather a relatively rigidly contained bodily posture that segments the body into isolated independently working parts. It is as if tribal fusion bellydancers had taken the press readings discussed in Chapter One of early bellydance performances by Middle Eastern performers, integrated them, and amplified the "grotesque" aspect of the movement by developing the skill to showcase the freakish ability of the body to disconnect in uncommon places and move independently of other body parts. Other factors that likely contribute to this departure in movement quality are the use of bass-heavy, rhythmically layered, electronic music that is usually in standard 4/4 time, rather than Arabic music which oscillates between different time signatures and layers melody with rhythm. At the time that tribal fusion bellydance style was forming, pop-and-lock and liquid style hip hop dances were becoming popular in the mainstream consciousness as they were featured in car commercials and music videos.

Since 2000, tribal fusion bellydance has become popular in the US and abroad. Several factors contributed to its initial popularity, including festivals like Tribal Fest<sup>211</sup> and others like it around the world; an increase in musicians creating electronica and world music for the new genre of bellydance;<sup>212</sup> and the tribal contingent of Bellydance Superstars, which included famed soloist Rachel Brice.<sup>213</sup> As a wider social context for

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<sup>211</sup> Tribal Fest is an annual event organized by Kajira Djoumahna and Chuck Leonard that began in 2000 as a response to the lack of tribal bellydance acceptance and availability at other cabaret-focused bellydance festivals.

<sup>212</sup> Some of the musicians and bands whose world-electronica music became popular in the tribal fusion bellydance community are Cheb i Sabbah, Bassnectar, Amon Tobin, Squarepusher, Pentaphobe, Solace, Maduro, Beats Antique, Djinn, Turbo Tabla, Balkan Beat Box. Miles Copeland, who produces Bellydance Superstars signed some of these bands and was partly responsible for the accessibility of their music.

<sup>213</sup> Miles Copeland's Bellydance Superstars included Rachel Brice on their first tour with Lollapalooza in 2003.

the rise in popularity of new genres of bellydance in the early 2000s, *Fuse* magazine contributor Julia R. Zay cites the disillusion with the Middle East as a result of the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the growing popularity of other alternative performance genres:

A post 9/11 country, disillusioned with the allure of the Middle East, embraced a grittier and more modern version of Orientalism. The Middle Eastern music of the previous generation fell out of favor with a less tolerant public, but it experienced a reimagining and new interest from a younger and more rebellious demographic. Electronica Orientale began to reach a wider audience as it was featured in films like Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001). Meanwhile, events such as Burning Man and an emergence of alternative performance genres once only found in circus acts stepped up to the plate in a Mad Max meets Danse Macabre union of incredible proportions. Fire dancers, hoopers, sword swallows, vaudeville acts, burlesque and a clash between the past and post-apocalyptic future created a niche for the next generation of bellydancers.<sup>214</sup>

Shows like Amara's *An Evening of Experimental Middle Eastern Dance* in October 2001, and the emerging trend of gothic bellydance, further solidified a moment of marked departure in American bellydance from harem fantasy and tribal idealism to an anti-mainstream contemporary and alternative subculture. Gothic bellydance in particular seems to have been a reflexive maneuver away from Middle Eastern fantasy and hyper-femininity with its dark aesthetic, angular movement style, industrial music and costuming. In her article, "Raqs Gothique: Decolonizing Belly Dance," Tina Frühauf argues gothic bellydancers are engaged in a process of "decolonizing" bellydance and creating a style that enables them to "reflect contemporary female identities...allowing for an unconventional display of femininity."<sup>215</sup> Frühauf cites gothic bellydancers' choice of non-Middle Eastern music, performing in combat boots instead of heels or barefoot, and use of non-Middle Eastern stage names, to argue that gothic bellydance is engaged in a process of decolonization (in Marta Savigliano's sense

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<sup>214</sup> Zay, Julia R. "A History of Fusion bellydance: Part III, Darkness Falls." *Fuse*. Spring 2011. p. 14.

<sup>215</sup> Frühauf (2009), p. 118.

of the word)<sup>216</sup> because it does not look to the Orient as a source of authenticity.

Though by totally disregarding the dance form's Middle Eastern/North African roots this maneuver also denies the historical and spatial contexts in which bellydance emerged.

Frühauf also argues that the dance style is an example of latent Orientalism, writing:

[Gothic bellydance] is as much of an Orientalist construction as belly dance. This is supported by the fact that Goth and the Orient are given the same attributes: the feminine, the mystical and mysterious, and the dark. In other words, unintentionally, Goth shares concepts of what Edward Said calls latent Orientalism—the unconscious, untouchable certainty about what the Orient is—in which the East is constructed as dark and feminine.<sup>217</sup>

Gothic bellydance, *raqs gothique*, and dark fusion seem to have risen out of a desire to express a deeper range of emotions that dancers did not feel was acceptable in cabaret or American tribal bellydance as well as a desire to release gender expression from the perceived hyper-femininity of other American bellydance forms. Similar to Carolena's desire to challenge the voyeuristic gaze through ATS, dark fusion dance often attempts to refuse the objectifying gaze. Dark fusion bellydancer Ariellah Aflalo explains that the dance manipulates the objectifying representational frame, saying in an interview that gothic bellydancers "are no longer geared toward aesthetically pleasing a man's wants and desires."<sup>218</sup> While Frühauf argues that gothic bellydance merely utilizes a slightly adjusted form of exoticism that still relies on a process of othering, gothic bellydancers are actively engaged in resituating bellydance in a contemporary non-Middle Eastern identity (or at least exclusively so) and confronting conventional notions of beauty and femininity.

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<sup>216</sup> For Savigliano, "decolonization means rejecting the search for origins and authenticity of the colonized in order to concentrate on the specific, original, and authentic ways in which imperialism operates." (Savigliano 1995, p. 9)

<sup>217</sup> Frühauf (2009), p. 120.

<sup>218</sup> Frühauf (2009), p. 118.

In the search for more outlets of creative expression, “world” fusion bellydance has become very popular. Many bellydancers have turned to other dance forms outside of bellydance, fusing jazz, modern, flamenco, hip hop, various classical and popular Indian dances, and many other dance forms with bellydance vocabulary. Bellydance in America has consistently emphasized the value of expressing individuality and many bellydancers’ attempts to discover and lay claim to an undiscovered fusion of two dances seems to be an outgrowth of the desire to express individuality with something new, different, and never before thought of.<sup>219</sup>

The desire to access greater creative freedom beyond dominant styles and codified formats of bellydance has resulted in an offshoot of American Tribal Style, as well. American Tribal Style dancers who were inspired by the concept of structured group improvisation based on a cueing system but wanted to create their own movement vocabulary and aesthetic, apart from FatChanceBellyDance, began calling their practice “Improvisational Tribal Style” or ITS.<sup>220</sup> One of the most well-known ITS troupes that does not use the ATS aesthetic is UNMATA, founded by Amy Sigil who created her own “Hot Pot ITS” format.<sup>221</sup> With the improvisational structure intact, UNMATA typically dances to contemporary American musical genres including pop, rock, rap, and electronic, wears minimalist costumes<sup>222</sup> with no reference to the Middle

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<sup>219</sup> Similar to the notion in hip hop dance, for example, bellydancers encourage one another to put their own twist, style, or signature on the dance. Often the go-to method for trying to demonstrate one’s own individual style is to invent fusions that incorporate different dance traditions. However, this trend seems to be falling out of fashion, at least in established communities that have lived through many trends in bellydance, such as those in Northern California.

<sup>220</sup> Amy Sigil first used the term “Improvisational Tribal Style” in 2005.

<sup>221</sup> Other ITS troupes and formats include Paulette Reese Denis’ Gypsy Caravan (Oregon), Kajira Djoumahna’s Black Sheep Bellydance (California), Trybe Habibi Bizarre (Louisiana), and many others. Chapter Three features an in-depth study of Hot Pot ITS as well as an autoethnographic account of my experiences as a member of the UNMATA dance troupe.

<sup>222</sup> While the costume is unlike the *bedlah*, the dancers abdomens are bare and they typically wear a belt to highlight hip movement. Often, the colors are dark if not always black and the belt is a punk-rock type studded belt.

East, and names new movement sequences not after regions in North Africa and Western Asia but through nonsensical phrases that bear some mnemonic association to the movement.<sup>223</sup> Depending on the costuming and music choice of the troupe, the only resemblance an inexperienced viewer might see between ITS and conventional notions of bellydance are vibrations of the hips and shoulders, undulations, torso isolations, and a nude abdomen. Many traditional *raqs sharqi*-style bellydancers agree that ITS is not bellydance. Most often, this sentiment actually means the dance does not look like Hollywood or anthropological representations of Middle Eastern dance, or that ITS does not have the essential movement qualities of bellydance in the Egyptian *raqs sharqi* style.

The popularity of fusion, contemporary electronic music, and various different non-Middle Eastern aesthetics within bellydance has been received with discontent by the “traditional” bellydance community. The argument against fusion, experimental, and theatrical bellydance is that the styles are not authentic, by which most critics mean to say not Middle Eastern or North African. In *Fuse* magazine, “modern bellydancer” Asharah offers her opinion of appropriate fusion bellydance, which includes knowledge of Middle Eastern and North African music and culture:

I think the dancer who chooses to perform to non-Middle Eastern music for her performances should, if asked, be able to perform to Middle Eastern music as well. If you are going to call yourself a belly dancer, then you need to have a *connection to the Middle East*, even when performing to non-Middle Eastern music...If you watch dancers like Zoe Jakes or Mira Betz, they're performing fusion bellydance, but its clear that they have strong training in more *traditional belly dance* as well. [Critics] are afraid that newer dancers performing fusion lack training in more *authentic belly dance*...Personally, I feel that if a dancer is going to call herself a belly dancer then she better be well-versed in the Middle Eastern elements of the dance and know the history of belly dance in the United States and beyond. What's happening today is there are instructors all around the world who aren't familiar with the music of Umm Kulthum, who couldn't dance to

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<sup>223</sup> One example of a Hot Pot ITS movement sequence is “Kickin’ the Cat,” which contains a low kick with the foot. Many of the basic moves in ITS formats, including the Hot Pot format, use the names originally given to them by Jamila Salimpour in the 1960s, as well as Masha Archer and Carolena Neruccio in the 1980s. Examples of these movement names are the Egyptian, Tunisian, *ghawazi*, and choo-choo.

classic songs such as “Aziza” or “Tamr Henna,” or who wouldn’t know how to do a Turkish Karsilama.<sup>224</sup>

For Asharah, and many others, fusion is a hybrid form held up to a standard of a “traditional” and “authentic” bellydance that has “Middle Eastern elements.” The idea of a vaguely defined Middle Eastern authenticity in the above quote is an outgrowth of the type of ethnic vignette performances that became popular in the 1960s and 70s wherein dancers would perform many styles of North African and Western Asian folk dances, including the aforementioned *karsilama*. It is interesting that Asharah refers to the dancing of Zoe Jakes and Mira Betz to explain appropriate fusion, citing their “strong training in more traditional belly dance.” Both of these dancers studied under Katarina Burda,<sup>225</sup> who was a student of Jamila Salimpour, soloist in Bal Anat, and founder of ethnic dance company Aywah. Asharah’s idea of traditional and authentic bellydance is heavily rooted in the tradition of American dancers in the 1970s and 80s who learned and taught what they could uncover and imagine of regional North African trance and social dances. American bellydance traditionalists who assert that American bellydancers should know how to dance to “Middle Eastern music” are most likely referring to the type of Oriental fusion music recorded on the first bellydance music LPs by bands composed of immigrant musicians of various national heritages. Anne Rasmussen’s research reveals that the music made in America for bellydance in the 1960s and 70s was composed by Arab, Levantine, and Greek immigrants who collapsed each of their own musical traditions and Western instrumentation to form a

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<sup>224</sup> Asharah interview in Kurtz, Karol (Medea). “Getting to the Heart of the Fusion Controversy: Four Dancers Weigh in on Fusion in Belly Dance.” *Fuse*. Spring 2011. p.12. (emphasis mine)

<sup>225</sup> Katarina Burda studied oriental dance primarily with Jamila Salimpour and was solo dancer and choreographer in the famed Bal-Anat Company. She studied Moroccan social and trance dances mainly with Robin Al Gnaoui and Hassan Wakrim in New York, Moroccan music with Yassir Chadly in Berkeley, and Near Eastern and Balkan music and dance with many excellent teachers. Katarina performed in Arabic and Greek cabarets in the Bay Area, as well as throughout the continental USA and in Europe. She formed and directed folkloric dance companies Inanna and Aywah! and a Guedra ceremonial group.

style of music that would appeal to their Western audiences in Oriental-themed Casbahs. Contrary to the aforementioned perception of “authentic” bellydance and appropriate bellydance music, many American practitioners hold up the Egyptian staged folk dance styles of Mahmoud Reda, the *ghawazi* dancing of the famed Mazen family, the Golden Era filmic dancing of Tahia Carioca and Samia Gamal, or the Cairo nightclub dancing of Nagwa Fouad and Dina as “authentic,” and look to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century compositions of musicians like Mohammed Abdel Wahab or Egyptian field recordings for appropriate bellydance music.

Asharah and others state that if fusion bellydancers are going to call themselves bellydancers they had better know bellydance history, meaning they had better know that bellydance is the result of North African and Western Asian dance practices exported to the US. I also put forward the notion that bellydancers should know the complexities and contradictions of the form. Attempts to reconstruct some authentic original bellydance prior to Western influence are ostensibly imaginative choreographic experiments informed by the current cultural context and desires of the choreographer. The historical moments highlighted in Chapter One demonstrate that bellydance is a constantly evolving idea that extended from a colonialist view of Middle Eastern female solo improvisational dance practices, was reinterpreted by American popular theater, film, and early modern dance in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and then reinvented again in Egyptian film and nightclubs, only to be reinterpreted again by imitation Casbah Districts in the US. Bellydance is a transnationally invented tradition, the authenticity of which cannot be understood out of its historical context of intercultural exchange or asymmetrical global power dynamics that gave the West creative freedom to invent the identity of the East as mysterious, feminine, and sexualized.

If bellydance is limited to the way the dance is and was performed in Egypt, then ATS, tribal fusion, gothic bellydance, world fusion forms, and ITS are not bellydance. If one understands bellydance as an umbrella term for a transnationally developing tradition that has changed and continues to change drastically over time and geography, then all forms discussed in this thesis are in fact bellydance. The dance styles I have discussed and consider to be “bellydance” are united by the fact that they are tied to a common, or at least overlapping, history. Choreographically, most bellydance utilizes the basic movement vocabulary of isolation, undulation, and vibration, and the bodily movement of the dancer translates a musical score into visual information. I prefer to think of bellydance as an inclusive term that points to this shared history and choreographic principles and I find the subcategories, although problematic, useful for denoting differences in context and style.

### American Authenticity

Whether for kitsch value, cleverness, or because they are historically informed, many bellydancers have begun evoking, by way of music and aesthetic, periods of American history that were formative for bellydance. Reinterpreting vaudevillian-era bellydance seems to be a self-reflexive attempt to either attain some kind of American authenticity or to draw attention to the constructed nature of bellydance itself. While some fusion bellydancers are turning to “vintage” American iterations of the form, other American fusion dancers are becoming interested in the movement quality of 1940s and 50s Egyptian dance and the Arabic music of formative Egyptian composers like Mohammed Abdel Wahab.

The daughter of vaudeville performers herself, Serena Wilson was one of the first bellydancers to cite the form's turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century American history in her 1986 choreography *Visions of Salome*. Paul Monty describes *Visions of Salome*, an evening of collected works, as a “chronicle of American bellydance history.”<sup>226</sup> Monty describes some of the choreographies, beginning with “Statues,” in which the dancers hold poses evocative of art deco statues that represented ideas about dance. “Victorian Interlude” features a young woman who was to be taken to the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, “realizing she has been forgotten, she dances sadly to a phonograph record of *Cascades* (Scott Joplin) as she might have danced to the music of the live band at the fair.”<sup>227</sup> Monty describes this dance as a combination of cakewalk and movements stereotypically identifiable as vaguely Middle Eastern. In “Palesteena,” dancers perform to the Original Dixieland Jazz Band recording of *Palesteena* (1919). Monty describes this dance as “a vaudeville-type presentation that represents what the dancer of the period (1920s) may have combined of movements she interpreted as Oriental-inspired, with those of the Jazz Age.”<sup>228</sup> “Kooch,” featuring a mechanical figure of a bellydancer that could be seen on the boardwalk of an amusement park, “is reminiscent of the Penny Arcade, fortune tellers, and the carnival.” Another dance in *Visions of Salome* is an ode to the Cecil B. DeMille period of American cinema history and the program lists it as “a loving salute to all the sultans, slave girls, camel drivers, and revelers.”<sup>229</sup> Finally, “One Night at the Egyptian Gardens” is “Serena’s fond

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<sup>226</sup> Serena’s *Visions of Salome* was performed March 2, 1986, at the Riverside Dance Festival, N.Y. (cited in Monty 1986, p. 389)

<sup>227</sup> Riverside Dance Festival, “Program—Visions of Salome,” Serena Dance Theater, February 27, March 1-2, 1986. (cited in Monty 1986)

<sup>228</sup> Monty (1986), p. 392.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

recollection of the famous club in 'Greektown' where she first danced."<sup>230</sup> In this evening-length work, Serena aimed to educate her audience about American bellydance history and she drew attention to how the form has been constructed over time.

Within the tribal fusion bellydance community, there has been a trend of evoking vaudeville aesthetics. In 2007, Miles Copeland produced Rachel Brice and The Indigo's *Le Serpent Rouge* tour, promoting it as "vintage cabaret meets vagabond elegance in a strange brew of Belly Dance and Ragtime, Vaudevillian, Mid Eastern and Gypsy music."<sup>231</sup> Bay Area bellydancer Frédérique produces a show called *Silent Sirens* that reinvisions silent films through staged bellydance. Zulu Lounge, a popular quarterly bellydance showcase put on by Zulu Tattoo in Los Angeles, was themed *A Vaudevillian Spectacular* in Spring 2012 and featured live music, sword swallowing, newsboy comedy, fire dancing and vaudeville-themed bellydance. There has been much overlap between the current bellydance and burlesque communities in throwback performances that reference early 20<sup>th</sup> century burlesque theater. The title of Rachel Brice's 2010 instructional DVD, *Serpentine*, shares the name of Loie Fuller and her imitators' dance style.<sup>232</sup> A group of California bellydancers have put together a show called *Dangerous Beauties* that references famed *femme fatale* characters in American popular theater and film history.<sup>233</sup> Michelle Manx, a bellydancer from Austin Texas, performs her own brand of "pin-up bellydance" which references cheesecake

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<sup>230</sup> Monty (1986), p. 392.

<sup>231</sup> Brice, Rachel. "Music from Le Serpent Rouge CD." *Rachel Brice: Unusual Bellydance*. Retrieved from <http://store.studiodatura.com/product/music-from-le-serpent-rouge-cd>. April 30, 2012.

<sup>232</sup> Loie Fuller's serpentine dancing is discussed as a part of the evolution of bellydance in America in Chapter One.

<sup>233</sup> "Embodying the characters of real world femme fatales, this living history belly dance performance tells the unique story of the world's most powerful women, often too enchanting to be understood and too wild to be bound by love, social hierarchies and rules." *Beauties, Dangerous*. "Dangerous Beauties Bellydance Fusion Show." *Dangerous Beauties*. Retrieved from <http://www.dangerousbeautiesbellydance.com/>. May 20, 2012.

images of femininity popular in America in the 1940s and 50s.<sup>234</sup> Rather than locating bellydance in the Middle East or in some ancient civilization, these strategies depict bellydance as a sort of American kitsch history.

There have been other efforts to establish the Americanness of bellydance that do not refer specifically to periods of bellydance history, but rather move to other American dance aesthetics and histories. One of the pioneer tribal fusion troupes, Urban Tribal directed by Heather Stants out of San Diego, evokes a sleek modern dance aesthetic in costuming and movement style. By incorporating another American dance form and by using the word “urban” in the troupe title, Heather establishes her dance as located in the present time period and locale of the American city. The LA Bellydance Improv Academy has performed ITS bellydance at Americana revival square dance gatherings in Los Angeles, California. These American historical and cultural references in present-day American bellydance show a desire to find some authenticity in the practice that lies outside of imitating a Middle Eastern cultural identity.

There has also been a renewed interest among the American fusion bellydance community in “vintage” Egyptian bellydance. By watching Egyptian film, or through a plethora of YouTube video clips of famous Egyptian dancers, by reading in popular bellydance journals about the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Cairo nightclub scene, or by attending workshops with Egyptian instructors, American bellydancers who were originally dissatisfied with the American cabaret version of Middle Eastern dance are becoming interested in the Egyptian version of the cabaret, Oriental, and *raqs sharqi* styles. There seems to also be a renewed interest in classic Arabic music of the 1950s and 60s. The market for bellydance music in America was previously dominated in the

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<sup>234</sup> Some of the first pin-up girls were burlesque dancers who used photo business card advertisements to ensure their recognizability. These were some of the same dancers who performed the earliest interpretations of Oriental dance, exotic dance, Salome dances, and the hoochie-koochie. Buszek, Maria Elena. 2006. *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press. pp. 43-45.

1960s and 70s by bands of first- and second-generation North African and Western Asian immigrants coming together to make “Oriental” music that fused all their individual traditions in a way that they felt would appeal to an American audience. In the 1980s and 90s, bellydance in America was commonly practiced and performed to contemporary Egyptian pop music. American bellydancers of the ethnic and tribal styles rebelled against the cabaret bellydance music by using field recordings of rural Middle Eastern music, while fusion bellydancers of the late 1990s and early 2000s rebelled against the available music choices by seeking out electronica and world fusion music. Presently, American bellydancers who are dissatisfied with all the above established music choices are seeking out the type of classic Arabic orchestral music used in Egypt by dancers of the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

With the reinvigoration of vaudevillian themes and music, tribal fusion bellydance, which was once characterized by a dark seriousness, has incorporated more humor and kitschy, playful movements. With the renewed popularity of Arabic music, perhaps the physical movement quality of tribal fusion will become less isolated and more holistic in the way orchestral melodies have influenced other forms of bellydance. As the tribal fusion genre continues to branch out in opposing directions toward contemporary and vintage aesthetics, with some variants moving intentionally away from and others toward references to the Middle East and the history of American representations of the “Orient,” tribal fusion’s image becomes more heterogeneous and movement qualities harder to define. The scenario when a style of bellydance no longer seems to fit under the heading of a certain genre, or even under the heading “bellydance,” has been reenacted many times throughout bellydance’s history. The fluid definition of this form is partially what allows the dance to continue to defy colonial domination and to provide a point of access to a

variety of people who find the dance to be transformative and transgressive from within their own socio-political position.

## Conclusion

### New Strategies for New Possibilities

In this chapter I have shown that bellydancers in America have engaged in a number of different self-reflexive strategies to manipulate the objectifying and Orientalist representational frame that has conventionally accompanied bellydance performance. The history illustrated in Chapter One demonstrates the dominant mode of representation that has framed bellydance performances and their early American variations. Bellydance has been framed as an invitation to the scopophilic male gaze since travelers from Western imperialist countries first recorded their accounts of witnessing Egyptian women's solo improvisational dance in the 1850s. Bellydance and its World's Fair, amusement park, and popular theater variations (named exotic dance, kooch, serpentine, and *danse Orientale*) have been available to the West through an Orientalist patriarchal lens in advertising images, anthropological texts, travelers' accounts, Orientalist paintings, and early film. This frame helped to invite the interest and patronage of working-class white males in the dance's burlesque, popular theater, and amusement park variations. In an attempt to deny the scopophilic gaze, early modern dancers presented "Oriental" dances as sacred and natural expressions of the female body. With "Salome" and "Egypta," dancers Maud Allan and Ruth St. Denis utilized the Orientalist frame to challenge the scopophilic gaze, negating the sexual with the sacred. In its many forms, bellydance has represented a feminized and mysterious East, an association that has, unbeknownst to most practitioners (or

willfully ignored by them), justified the imperial involvement of the masculine and rational West. I have proposed that in order to access the transformative potential of bellydance, its ability to redefine how a practitioner relates to her own body and identity, to form community, and to challenge conventional notions of the body, practitioners must challenge essentialized notions of nationality and gender that encourage viewers to passively consume the performance and deny the subjectivity of the dancer.

Despite the claims of dominant historical narratives, voyeuristic males were not the only fascinated onlookers; many female and male practitioners have been inspired to embody bellydance movement when they have witnessed the dance. Practitioners who train in bellydance encounter new possibilities for their bodies and identity and many American bellydancers recognize and espouse a transformative potential imbued in the practice. In their attempts to access the dance's potential to transform their sense of self and to promote the legitimacy of their desire to practice bellydance, Americans since the 1960s have redefined the practice in various ways. To present the dance as legitimate by way of citing its authentic origins, practitioners have sourced ethnic folk dances and evoked ancient spirituality. American bellydancers have tried to make the dance more respectable in the public opinion by codifying the movement and presenting it on a concert stage like any other Western dance. In order to challenge the audience's tendency to objectify bellydance performers, American Tribal Style practitioners have attempted to highlight the element of community by emphasizing the dancers' inter-subjective experiences in group improvisation. In their attempts to challenge the Orientalism latent in bellydance practice, dancers have by evoked gothic and urban identities, challenging hyper-feminine expressions of the dance and incorporating American music and other dance aesthetics. Bellydancers have also self-

reflexively drawn attention to the objectifying and Orientalist frame itself and to the constructed nature of bellydance by referencing its early American burlesque, vaudeville, and *femme fatale* film versions.

While some of these strategies succeed more than others in producing more complex, less essentialized and simplified identities, this chapter shows an evolution of the awareness among American bellydancers that the patriarchal assumptions about gender and ethnicity embedded in classical representations of bellydance should be challenged. These attempts to reframe bellydance, the global popularity of the form, and the strong communities that coalesce around the dance demonstrate that practitioners are invested in the ability of bellydance to open up expanded possibilities for their own identity, their relationships to their own bodies, and the strength of their immediate community. In Chapter Three, I offer a choreographic analysis of bellydance on the individual and group levels in order to show how the dance itself serves as a site for constructing identity and forming community. By reading the choreography of Improvisational Tribal Style, I aim to demonstrate that bellydance allows practitioners to construct their bodies, identities, and communities in an intentional and embodied way different from the way identities are proscribed by the norms of society.

## CHAPTER THREE: CASE STUDIES IN TRANSFORMATION

### Introduction

#### Constructing the Self and Community through Bellydance

In Chapter One, I highlight moments in bellydance history that complicate the notion of an “authentic,” original version of the dance by demonstrating that the form is a transnationally invented practice that has responded in various ways to intercultural exchange, imperialism, media representation, and a variety of social factors specific to the unique context of each variation. One cannot isolate a single time period and location, such as pre-colonial Egypt, as the authentic point of origin, relegating all Western and modern variations to the margins as misrepresentative imitations and departures from a true original incarnation. In Chapter Two, I examine the ways bellydance in the US has branched into many different variations, each with a different approach to establishing the authenticity and legitimacy of the dance in order to explain and access the transformative potential of the practice. From these two chapters we can see that bellydance as a genre is difficult to define and emerges in many different forms. In addition to some common movement vocabulary and shared history, I have also proposed that the potential for personal transformation, community formation, and social transgression is a common thread across variations of bellydance.<sup>235</sup> Through bellydance, practitioners encounter the capacity to realize that identity is constructed and performed, to rewrite the boundaries of their identities and form inter-subjective communities

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<sup>235</sup> This is also true for early variations of bellydance-related performance practices that may be called by other names.

In this final chapter, I employ a combination of movement analysis, ethnography, and autobiography to demonstrate that bellydance practice is not just an avenue for personal transformation within the sometimes hard to recognize boundaries of hegemonic societal norms. Bellydance is also an avenue for the transformation of those norms through non-mainstream self-supporting communities that actively transgress restrictions on bodily comportment and identity. In this chapter, I read bellydance movement on an individual bodily level to show how training in bellydance technique allows people to relate to their bodies in more intimate, self-aware, and empowered ways than everyday life allows. By analyzing the choreography of general bellydance movement and practitioners' learning process, I aim to show that bellydance encourages practitioners to transgress the social limitations placed on their bodies dictating how body parts should be contained and maneuvered. In the latter half of this chapter I provide a case study of one variant of the American bellydance community, comparing the experience of dancing within this alternative subcultural community to my experiences in other more spiritually-leaning or commercial bellydance communities. Through autoethnographic details of dancing Improvisational Tribal Style at Hot Pot Studio, I demonstrate that within this community of mutually interested but varied identities, dancers realize that they can construct their own identity outside the boundaries placed on them by their society. Through choreographic analysis of the group dynamics in Improvisational Tribal Style bellydance, I aim to show the physical movement practice of this bellydance form actually builds and maintains inter-subjective community.

## Individual Bellydance Movement Analysis

In this section I analyze bellydance choreography on the level of the individual body to show how bellydance movement invites practitioners to develop a self-aware, intimate relationship to their bodies, muscularly and energetically. I take as a given the understanding that our bodily experience shapes our ideas of self and of the world. Daily life and societal norms in the modern US require each person to hold and maneuver their body in socially appropriate ways that are contextually specific to gender, sexual identification, age, profession, and numerous other factors. Everyday techniques of the body are highly mediated and structured by context-specific societal norms. Even though we may not think about our daily unconscious movement, we often make choices in public spaces to contain the movement of the pelvis and keep the rib cage and abdomen in line with the verticality of the spine. Bodily disciplines like dance, martial arts, yoga, or any other movement technique encourage participants to explore different ways to hold and maneuver their bodies.

As with the unconscious choices we make about our bodily comportment in each social sphere, the conscious techniques and training we prescribe onto our bodies also affect our individual experience. Training in bellydance movement encourages practitioners to experience their own body and subjectivity in a way that is unique from everyday life. Bellydance training allows practitioners to access a wider range of motion and awareness of muscular minutiae in parts of the body that are normally kept quiet and encourages practitioners to realize the connectedness of all parts and the energy pathways that connect them. Because bellydance is a complex of practices that are not universally codified and can look and feel quite different from one another, I have chosen to closely read the movement values I find common to all

variations of bellydance; however, these detailed descriptions are sourced from my experience with the form. When a student of any variant of bellydance becomes trained in bellydance movement, the codified vocabulary of the dance may differ, but these several key movement values remain common regardless of group choreography or performance frame.

### *Vibration: Learning to Harness and Release Tension*

In bellydance, vibration may occur in the hips, legs, abdomen, or shoulders, and is characterized by controlled tension of the muscles or by loose muscles that reverberate as a result of a repeated action in the skeletal structure. Practitioners learn to harness intentional muscle tension in order to execute a movement sometimes called “vibration” or “tension shimmies”, in which vibration occurs as a result of controlled and sustained tension. To execute loose shimmies that oscillate in regular time, students must learn to release muscle tension entirely and only use the muscles necessary to move their skeletal structure in a repeated back and forth or up and down motion. For many students, learning to relax the psoas, a large muscle that connects the upper and lower body in order to access the full range of movement in their pelvis for loose shimmies, is difficult and requires intensive consistent training. Antithetical to the muscle use required for sitting and walking, learning to relax the hip flexors and associated muscles allows practitioners to experience the movement of their hips in a way that encourages them to recognize patterns of holding and to release tension.

When students first begin practicing these shimmy movements, many must first confront their socially trained assumptions about this type of free hip movement. Since the vaudevillian era, when “shimmy dancers” attracted the fascination of the public, and into the present, people tend to associate body vibrations with “low-class”

and Africanist dance forms.<sup>236</sup> On a personal level, students learning vibrations witness the flesh on their bodies in a resultant action of what they often refer to as “jiggling.” To appropriately access a loose hip shimmy, practitioners must first allow the tissues of their rear end and thighs to move freely in a quick and uncontrolled back and forth motion. This release and resultant “flesh-out-of-control” effect often makes many beginners uncomfortable. When executing tension shimmies, the flesh on the stomach and elsewhere also vibrates. I have often heard students remark that they do not like the way these vibrations look on their body.<sup>237</sup> To become technically skilled in the form, practitioners must learn to embrace and utilize the initially unwanted effects of vibrations.

*Isolation: Intimate, Pin-Pointed, Muscular Awareness*

Isolations of the torso, hips, rib cage, abdomen, shoulders, and neck in bellydance happen at such a detailed level that the abdomen, for example, may be divided into several different muscle groups. Isolation requires that the student learn how to quiet one area of the body while freely moving another. A bellydancer conditions herself to move specific muscle groups and nothing more. This is achieved by training the body to maintain active stillness throughout while activating only one part of the whole. Through bellydance training, participants develop a hyper-aware connection to parts of the body that are being intentionally quieted, becoming intimately acquainted with muscle groups that enable isolated movement. For

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<sup>236</sup> For more on this association and early “shimmy dancers,” see: Laure, Joseph Jr. 1953. *Vaudeville: from Honkey-Tonks to the Palace*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

<sup>237</sup> These accounts of student responses are gathered from my experience as a bellydance teacher at several dance studios in Los Angeles from 2007 to 2012. I gathered observational ethnographic data from my bellydance students during classes I taught at the LA Bellydance Academy in 2010, 2011, and 2012. Some of these students are named and quoted in the Group ITS Movement Analysis section of this chapter.

example, increasing the strength and flexibility of the diaphragm, intercostals, and upper back muscles allow a dancer to move the rib cage independently from the shoulders. By learning how to isolate the rib cage and the pelvis, individuals are encouraged to explore and expand the capacity of movement range in parts of the body that are normally held in line in everyday, socially appropriate activity.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, certain variations of bellydance emphasize the movement value of isolation more than any other quality. This focus on highlighting how disconnected one part of the body can appear from another is an interesting manifestation of American bellydance that may have been influenced by press reviews of the earliest bellydance performances in the US. Newspaper articles describing the dancers at the World's Fairs and in amusement parks often remarked on the dancers' overdeveloped abdomens, emphasizing elements they saw as grotesque and freakish. From what researchers can ascertain from these early bellydance performances, most of the movement tended to be wave-like motions of the upper body in stark contrast to the isolation-focused *raqs sharqi* drum-solo choreographies and pop-and-lock tribal fusion styles of today. While American fusion-style bellydancers seem to focus on developing the impressive technical ability to perform intricate isolations, Egyptian-style *raqs sharqi* dancers seem to prioritize a holistic bodily comportment often described as graceful and composed.

### *Undulation: The Holistic Connection of Body Parts*

Undulations of the spine, which require an intricate ability to contract and release specific adjacent muscle groups, are common to most forms of bellydance.<sup>238</sup> In

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<sup>238</sup> Undulations in the arms, colloquially called “snake arms,” are common to modern American styles of bellydance. This undulating arm movement may have been added to the bellydance repertoire by the

bellydance training, the student first learns to become aware that each individual muscle exists in a single concentrated area by practicing contracting and releasing it. She then learns how that individual muscle operates with adjacent muscles to produce sinuous, continuous movement. By contracting and releasing each muscle individually, the dancer learns to sequentially connect isolated muscle groups adjacent to one another, developing a supple muscular control that opens up the ability to follow energy pathways through the body.

When students first learn exercises designed to increase the flexibility and mobility of the pelvis required for pelvic undulations, some giggle and appear visibly uncomfortable. The student may look around the room, visually checking in with others to verify that it is socially acceptable in the classroom context to maneuver the pelvis in rising and falling, forward and back, undulating motions. As students repeatedly engage with pelvic movement in the context of dance class, the socially determined relegation of pelvic movement<sup>239</sup> to acts of indecency or sex is replaced by a positive or neutral anatomical understanding or free expressive relationship to pelvic movement, depending on the individual student.

### *Transference and Recirculation of Energy*

Learning the ability to isolate specific muscle groups allows bellydancers to pass an impulse from one part of the body to an adjacent part of the body in a visible transference of effort. Practitioners train themselves to explore energy pathways that move within the body and recirculate (as opposed to being sent away from the body) as

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influence of the serpentine dancers in American popular theater and Hollywood Oriental dance tropes as discussed in Chapter One.

<sup>239</sup> Pelvic movement is also associated with Africanist movement forms, such as hip hop and jazz, which are not considered “high art” or classical dance in comparison with ballet or modern dance which both exhibit an aligned and relatively “quiet” pelvis.

well as to interrupt those pathways and redirect the energy flow. Energy is sent out from the body's core through the moderated, continual flow of sequential movement and remains contained in the dancer's kinesphere through successive movement that circulates back in toward the core. This recirculation of energy in the body necessitates that the final step in successive wave-like motion feeds into the initiation of the movement again. An impulse that begins on one side of the body (in the arms or the hips) often continues to the other side, making a symmetrical recirculation of energy as it is transferred from one side of the body to the other in circular or figure-eight motions. As a bellydancer follows an energy pathway from one part of the body to another, by the time the dancer realizes the apex of that movement she has already begun to align her body in a way that has begun a recirculation of energy from the original source of the movement. Nothing is gathered and then discarded, and all movement feeds into the cultivation of more movement within the body.

### *Simultaneity / "Whiling"*

A bellydancer is in a constant state of "whiling"<sup>240</sup> and this principle of simultaneity is manifest in a variety of ways, including stillness in one area of the body while another area is moving and the distribution of layered contrasting movement throughout the body. As a solo improvisational form often performed to live improvised percussive music, bellydance is most recognized for the dancer's ability to embody distinct elements of the music in different parts of the body at the same time. Layering isolations requires that the student simultaneously control different parts of

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<sup>240</sup> Sally Ann Ness uses the term "whiling" to describe her experience having to move different areas of her body simultaneously as she learns traditional Balinese dance. Ness, Sally Ann. 1996. "Dancing in the Field: Notes from Memory." In *Corporealities: Dancing, Knowledge, Culture, and Power*. Edited by Foster, Susan Leigh. 1996. London; New York: Routledge, Inc. pp. 129-154.

the body to accent different rhythms and different qualities, without revealing effort. In order to develop this movement value, bellydancers learn to put one moving part of their body “on auto-pilot” so they can add more elements from other parts of their body that perhaps operate with an entirely different movement quality.

### *Musical Interpretation*

The bellydancer’s body (specifically through core isolations) acts as a conduit for the music itself, hitting the rhythmic accents and drawing movement out evenly across a musical phrase as if to give the music visible form. A dancer may keep in time with the most dominant part of a rhythm by vibrating or shimmying the hips while making the audible accents in the music visible by a staccato or sinuous movement in the rib cage. Some bellydancers can hold several elements of the music in many different places of the body at once, including the abdomen, head, chest, hips, arms, feet, and fingers if they are playing *zills* or *sagat*. Bellydancers are often evaluated on their ability to dance closely with the music, to let the music dictate the quality and duration of the movement, unlike much modern/post-modern dance and ballet in which the choreography is largely autonomous from the musical structure. In solo improvisation to unfamiliar music, a bellydancer hones his or her ability to spontaneously respond to musical accents and shifts. To do so, the dancer must be in a constant state of supple readiness, where on the one hand, unnecessary muscle tension interferes with the improvisation, and on the other hand, too much relaxation does not allow for a quick physical response to the music. Many dancers refer to this feeling of improvisation dictated by the music with the description of being a conduit for the music or channeling the music through the physical body, suggesting that their

body becomes a vehicle through which inspiration moves rather than a source from which inspiration flows.

### Improvisational Tribal Style

Improvisational Tribal Style Bellydance (ITS), currently practiced around the world, originally began in the United States as a categorical offshoot of American Tribal Style Bellydance (ATS). As discussed in Chapter Two, Carolena Nericcio of FatChanceBellyDance created ATS in the 1980s in Berkeley, California. Nericcio's ATS is a structured improvisational dance form performed in a group where dancers move in and out of pre-defined spatial arrangements that establish a leader and group of followers. The dancer who finds herself in a designated leader position chooses *stall* moves familiar to the group and is responsible for *cueing* choreographed combinations with a movement cue. These cues are often times a head look, hand *floreo* or wrist flexion, orientation change, or accent move executed at the beginning or middle of a musical phrase. At the close of the cued *combination* dancers anticipate which stall move the leader will signal the group to next by a detailed process of categorization which leads stall moves and combinations into one another based on fixed transition pathways. All ATS dancers around the world know the same set of stall moves and combinations as well as Carolena's specific conceptual variations on each combination. A *conceptual variation* initiates a combination to be done in a specific manner that varies from the basic combination. Examples of these conceptual variations are spatial orientation changes and/or turns as well as optional formation changes that may or may not result in a new dancer taking the lead role.

As dancers of FatChanceBellyDance began their own projects and other bellydancers became familiar with the ATS cued-improvisational format, troupe leaders around the US began choreographing their own combinations to insert into their own troupe's ATS repertoire, sometimes even creating new stall moves and spatial formations. Until around 2008 or so, most cued-improvisational forms of bellydance that used Carolena's structure of stall moves and combinations threaded together in a spontaneous arrangement among a group of alternating leaders and followers, were colloquially called American Tribal Style or the shorter and more popular term, "tribal bellydance." The use of the name "tribal" has become somewhat problematic in the bellydance community, as tribal is also associated with an aesthetic and general style of movement (versus the improvisational structure) that ranges from Jamila Salimpour's Bal Anat "ethnic" aesthetic to almost any aesthetic that differs from traditional "Oriental" or cabaret. Carolena Nericcio trademarked "American Tribal Style" in 2012 and many group improvisations that do not cohere with her format now call themselves Improvisational Tribal Style (some groups call their structure tribal improv or Synchronized Group Improvisation).

The acronym "ITS" was developed around 2008 when Carolena commented on an internet discussion-board that "American Tribal Style" could only refer to her specific original version of the cued improvisational form. To avoid disagreement and conflict with the much-revered creator of their form, non-certified ATS dancers who used the format to structure their own cued-improvisational choreography began calling the concept of cued improvisation itself "Improvisational Tribal Style." The name ITS, first coined by Amy Sigil of UNMATA,<sup>241</sup> solves the problem of what to call

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<sup>241</sup> UNMATA is a tribal fusion bellydance troupe based out of Sacramento, California (near the San Francisco Bay Area where ATS was first practiced). UNMATA is known for their specific high-energy

group cued improvisation that does not adhere to all of Carolena's specific codifications as well as clearly states the improvisational quality of the dance which first-time viewers almost never perceive without being told.

What will follow is an analysis of ITS as a dance that participates in the construction of a confident self, creates community, and embodies an ideal where non-normative identities are expanded beyond societal boundaries and strengthened by the group. This close reading of ITS is grounded in my autobiographical experience and a movement analysis of a specific, codified style in the improvisational form, created by Amy Sigil, called Hot Pot ITS. Like American Tribal Style, Amy's Hot Pot ITS is a formatted and codified version of Improvisational Tribal Style that has its own specific stall moves, cued-combinations, and conceptual variations. I began dancing at Hot Pot studio at sixteen years old, after four previous years of *raqs sharqi* bellydance training. In this section I pull from my own experience as a student at Hot Pot studio and professional performer in UNMATA to provide a case study that concretely reveals how one variant of bellydance serves as a site for community formation and personal transformation. I compare my experiences as a member of the Hot Pot community with my childhood experiences of being trained by a spiritually-focused cabaret bellydance teacher and my professional experience as a touring member of Bellydance Superstars. This personal evidence reveals that I have participated in a variety of incarnations of American bellydance and emphasizes the heterogeneity of the bellydance community. I then move on to a choreographic analysis of Hot Pot Improvisational Tribal Style, in order to ground my claims of personal transformation and social transgression in the movement and organization of the dance itself.

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variation of ITS and for being one of the first troupes to develop and codify their own version of cued-improvisational bellydance that differs in aesthetic and movement from ATS.

## Autoethnography

Bellydance has an uncanny ability to invite participants to construct their own identity. Some do this by changing their name, decorating themselves, or imagining themselves as someone they consider to be different from their everyday persona while on stage. The Orientalist assumptions embedded in bellydance can encourage people to construct their identity within the boundaries of dominant patriarchal norms of gender and ethnicity. Therefore, some bellydancers find liberation in their ability to transform their everyday self into a dark, mysterious, sexy, alluring, and powerful woman by reifying the image of the sexualized and dangerous “Oriental” that was for so long the European justification for colonialism. While the realization that one can perform their own chosen identity might be epiphanal and empowering for certain individuals, I propose the transformative power of the realization that identity is a chosen performance could be carried further into an interrogation of the dominant ways society constructs and restricts identity to rigid categories. The following ethnography aims to show that while some bellydancers reify Orientalist assumptions and essentialized identities, many bellydance communities share the desire to recognize and break out of rigid categories of gender, sexuality, race, aesthetic worth and to interrogate them through bodily practice.

I began bellydancing at eleven years old with my mother after seeing Suhaila Salimpour perform at a Renaissance faire in Northern California. My first bellydance teacher, Daleela Morad, framed bellydance as an ancient spiritual practice, a celebration of the divine feminine. For her, bellydance had roots in ancient pharaonic Egypt and was connected to birthing rituals and rite of passage ceremonies. She taught pharaonic style dancing, trance dances, and drum solo choreographies, and we

dabbled in playing the standard Arabic rhythms on *zills* and *dumbek*. We practiced on the uneven carpet laid out in her garage to cassette tapes of American bellydance classics from the 1970s and Egyptian pop songs. Daleela idealized Isadora Duncan and shared Duncan's romanticized and essentialist ideas of the female body. She believed that through bellydance, women's bodies could be a conduit for the divine and that bellydance came from a society where women were worshipped for their innate life-giving power and strength. However, the rhetoric of female strength and bodily acceptance I was inundated with as a bellydancer was no match for the trials of puberty and junior high school when my peers and I became the most lucrative age-bracket to target with mass-media images that defined our ideas of identity and self-worth. As a teenager I entered into a world with very restrictive societal norms of gender, beauty, and race in which social identities were boxed in, sexualized, and objectified.

At sixteen years old, I danced in a show that Daleela organized at a New Age store called *East West Books*. In the make-shift backstage area I was struck by a tall woman with tattoos and piercings, and when it was her turn to dance I watched her performance from the back of the audience. I had never seen anything like her dancing before, which featured intricate torso isolations and a direct sober gaze into the audience. She did not dress like a bellydancer and she danced to an electronica-influenced rock song. She wore wide-legged black pants and a black fabric-wrapped bra. A short black hand-dyed grass skirt highlighted her hip movements, her body was decorated with a few chunky pieces of silver jewelry, her neck and every finger adorned with giant natural stones. She had tattoos on her belly and long wavy brown hair that cascaded over her shoulders except for the two unruly buns that sat on the crown of her head. After she finished dancing I watched her come out into the crowd

from the changing room and kiss her partner. I did not even know that the person wearing baggy pants, a t-shirt and baseball cap was her girlfriend until my mom leaned over to me and said, "I think that's a woman."

I learned the dancer's name and began taking lessons from Amy Sigil in her tiny loft apartment in downtown Sacramento, which contained no furniture other than her bed in a small loft that was not visible from the main and only room below. Amy had originally begun taking bellydance lessons as a way to help her overcome a period of drug dependency. It worked and she taught the moves she learned to draw in other women and men looking for a positive outlet in their lives. The result was an amazing community and a version of bellydance that was not "authentic" in any Middle Eastern/North African way. It was authentic because it was produced by people doing what they wanted in a way that was relevant to the immediacy of their own lives. The studio was always dimly lit and full to capacity with about fifteen people, all women except for one brilliantly bald gay man.

In the first class I attended, Amy lead us in a partner-mirroring warm-up exercise in which I was to keep my eyes locked with a woman I had never met. She stared directly into my eyes with an occasional smirk but full commitment and we danced palms to palms. Between classes we would all sit in one big inclusive circle that formed not by any dictate but completely organically. I played the role of quiet observer in this new environment, too shy to share my personality with anyone and apprehensive of saying or doing something out of the code of conduct. Though I wanted to, I didn't yet know how to operate in this room where people treated me like an adult, where women were comfortable displaying their unshaven armpit hair, where men bellydanced, and where same-sex couples kissed and held hands. The rigid societal codes of high school had not prepared me for Hot Pot studio.

In a year or two we moved to a larger studio, the community grew larger, and we became an extended family for one another. After being poked fun at enough times, I learned to stop staring at myself in the mirrors that covered the walls and to engage with people through direct eye contact. I remember experiencing a paradigm shift in how I defined beauty. As I got to know some of the women who never wore makeup, one of whom had a shaved head and never bothered to fill the gap in her teeth from when she had her canine pulled, I remember having a moment of epiphany where I realized that these women who I found so very beautiful and ideal, were beautiful not because they had the “right” look but because their calm, comfortable energies and thoughtful creative personalities literally constructed them as beautiful. As a teenager, the realization was much more powerful than hearing the old adage “beauty is on the inside.”

At Hot Pot studio there was a general awareness of social identity as a performance and I learned quickly that identity is always constructed and performed. I learned to start calling someone by the name they had recently chosen for themselves instead of the former name by which I knew them. We all made conscious efforts to switch from using one gendered pronoun to the other when one of our friends decided to determine their own gender. Dance classes included an MTF (male-to-female) transgendered woman and an androgynous person who did not hide her large breasts or shave his thick black beard. For as many alternative people that came to class there were just as many “straight” people who came from the corporate day jobs to evening classes. Students would bring their significant others and kids to the studio to hang out with one another while they took class.

We all made our own costumes and many sewed their own clothes. We did not have much money and we tried to make everything we could ourselves. My friends

taught me how to sew and I began making my own clothes, sporting my homemade pants and shirts to high school. When occasions for gift-giving arose (like birthdays or winter solstice) we all handmade gifts for one another. I realized that I had the ability to make almost everything I actually needed and became acquainted with the do-it-yourself ethos. The dance studio was always full of abundance. People brought vegetarian-conscious homemade baked goods to class and everything our community needed to keep us dancing was generated within the talents of the community members: photography, graphic design, web design, editorials. People operated in a barter economy and paid for classes by an honor-based system of putting money into a bean pot that sat on the stove. In this group, catty gossip was silenced with non-response and the community seemed to be completely transparent and to never apologize for or hide any of its actions, inter-workings, or beliefs. As one might expect, I grew out of my teenaged rose-colored glasses and realized that not everything was transparent and that we were not always so consistent in living by our collective ideals. After a period of disenchantment, I later came to accept unavoidable human inconsistency even among those who are doing their best.

In contrast to the Hot Pot community, I have observed that being a touring professional with Bellydance Superstars involves sacrificing your own independence as a working artist, being constantly subject to the whims of a scrutinizing management team, and in constant competition with your only friends who you never have a moment of privacy from. While the Superstars are amazing technicians and individuals, their group dynamic is unlike any other bellydance community that exists, in that their practice pits them against one another as they face constant scrutiny. While the Bellydance Superstars are commercially representative of American bellydance, they do not represent the world of non-professionals and independently

operating professionals. In my experiences with multiple variants of the bellydance community, not all groups are like Hot Pot studio but the large majority of bellydancers operate in a grass-roots, do-it-yourself communities of people interested in forming inter-subjective relationships with one-another and participating in a non-mainstream culture. This desire to form community is especially evident in Improvisational Tribal Style bellydance communities. The following section describes how the dance itself allows practitioners to construct an expanded self-awareness and form community.

### Group ITS Movement Analysis

Improvisational Tribal Style bellydance does not merely represent the idea of community and it does more than give participants an opportunity to pretend that they are confident and secure. The dance form provides a framework through which communities are actually created, realized, and maintained in a way that depends on the individual agency and confidence of each of its members within her or his unique body. Considering that each body's experience is historicized and culturally specific and so is each person's construction of their own identity, Ann Cooper Albright's work explores the dancer as an object of representation and the subject of its own experience that engages with a variety of social discourses. She reminds us that the sphere of subjectivity is constituted through discursive and representational practices, including physical movement practices. Extrapolating further on Cooper's ideas and referring specifically to American Tribal Style bellydance, Barbara Sellers-Young writes:

In the class, rehearsal and on the stage, the dancer negotiates the intersections between self, society, and the perceptual awareness of her dancing body. The dancer's body in performance is,

therefore, an act of mediation between the physical vocabulary of the dance form and personal conceptions of identity.<sup>242</sup>

When rehearsing and performing, Improvisational Tribal Style bellydancers negotiate their individual positions together for the common interest of maintaining the synchronicity and solidarity of the group. At any moment during the dance all individuals are engaged in a commonly defined process of spontaneous decision-making, which is informed by the standards and values they have agreed upon. By confronting, again and again, the challenges that threaten their ability to maintain group composure, such as complex musical structure, each dancer's differing level of confidence and technical skill, the physical shape of the dance space, and the make-up of the audience, they create and reaffirm their identity and efficacy as a unified community. The exhilaration dancers feel from consistently overcoming the threat of falling into disunison contributes to their solidarity and commitment to one another in a way that makes space for them to feel confident in their own bodies' ability to contribute to the group. Adapting the model Cynthia Novack uses in her book, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*, I have attempted to elucidate the parallels between the "core movement values" of ITS bellydance and the values of ITS practitioners. Included in this analysis is a reading of the decision making processes, the codified physical transitions that allow those decisions to be made, and the negotiation of multiple positions of varying authority.

### *Leaders and Followers*

Many ITS dance troupes are led by a single choreographer or director, but regardless of the troupe structure, the cued-improvisational structure of the dance

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<sup>242</sup> Sellers-Young (2005), p. 289.

necessitates that dancers move in and out of a leading position. In each spatial arrangement there is a designated leader position and as dancers rotate through the stagger, circle, chorus line, or other line formation, every dancer passes through this leader position. If a dancer chooses to become the leader he or she stops all traveling movement and occupies the leader position. Here, the leader directs the troupe's movement until he or she chooses to continue the rotation. When a leader cues the group to do a half-turn or quarter-turn, a follower who occupies a distal end of the line formation may "steal" the lead when all other dancers are behind her, looking at her back, changing the orientation of the group. There is a constant awareness among dancers of what their position is and what options they have from that particular position.

An ITS dancer must be aware of her own position in relationship to the group: whether it holds the possibility for lead-stealing or not and how she will shift herself in space as the formations change while maintaining her position relative to the surrounding dancers. As the spatial arrangement changes, the dancers effectively move as one organism made of constituent parts. All members have a specific and necessary role but each individual must take action with regard for the group and only within the limitations or possibilities of her role. A successful improvisation is achieved by individuals working together from within the boundaries of their individual positions, each person accepting the responsibility of her role.

In my experience as an ITS dancer, performing within this structure encourages people to develop a skill that applies to life outside of the dance: knowing when to lead and when to follow. Students learn to finely hone the ability to lead and follow with mutual respect in everyday conversation and other team-oriented tasks like at work, for example. A student learns to develop an awareness of whether the people around

him are looking for a leader or if he is in fact part of a larger supporting structure in which he is expected to follow. Even in conversation, ITS can teach a person when to hold space with their silence versus their presence.

With minimal hesitation and confident initiation, the leader must commit fully to her spontaneous decisions as she carves her arms through set pathways, covering the agreed-upon increments of space as well as directing her gaze. Should she accidentally execute a movement that is not officially part of the repertoire, a good leader will find that her confidence in that unfamiliar movement will cause her followers to execute it before they have had time to process it as out-of-place. Because every dancer occupies the leader position at some point in a rehearsal or performance every dancer must become comfortable leading the group with confidence. As a dancer inhabits this confident, powerful, director's position she is confronted with the exhilaration of her personal agency and her ability to affect a group and manipulate the experience as it occurs. Inhabiting this role of confidence helps foment security and self-confidence in the dancer. The confidence that she instills in her body again and again as a tool for leading is felt outside of performance, as well. About her first experience of taking the lead position in Hot Pot ITS, UNMATA dancer Sarah Stinson said:

[Taking the lead was] terrifying because all of a sudden I was expected to not only understand a language but initiate a conversation on my own with a bunch of people who are very talented standing behind me waiting to hear what I had to say.<sup>243</sup>

I have observed in students beginning to learn ITS that those who are more introverted, shy, and less comfortable in the front of the room often learn to assume an air of confidence and become more comfortable over time in the leader position. While in performance everyone has the option to pass the lead, in the classroom every

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<sup>243</sup> Sarah Stinson. Interview May 27, 2010. Long Beach, California.

student *must* take the lead position and cue the new material. Dancers must lead confidently by extending to the fullness of their reach and consciously directing their gaze in the proper direction for the move. If a leader cues a move with bent, questioning arms while gazing down at his feet, the followers will be confused and the group will fall out of sync. A student must cue the new material effectively before they can leave the lead position. Shy, internally focused students learn to take up more space and direct their body and gaze openly and without hesitation. In contrast, students who are very boisterous, confident, and comfortable being the main voice in a conversation often learn through ITS to give others the opportunity to lead and can learn to appreciate the possibility of playing a supportive, following role. If a leader spends too much time in the lead position, or steals the lead at every possible moment, the morale of the group can suffer. Learning how to operate within ITS, where one cannot always lead or always follow, teaches practitioners how to consider themselves as part of a team with a shared objective.

### *Stall Moves*

Stall moves are short, easily manipulated movement phrases that enable a dancer to stay in line with the music and allow for spontaneous decision-making when cueing combos. Stall moves are the threads that connect combinations, allowing for travel and formation-changes, changes in directional orientation, and time to think about next possible maneuvers. Stall movements can be done for any length of time. The cue for all stall movements is to begin executing it on the initial downbeat of a phrase; effectively, there is no cue, just a committed initiation and follow through. A dancer can vary a stall movement by traveling or turning it in space or by adding a level change. Most stall moves are appropriated directly from Carolina Nericcio's ATS

style, and consequently are extensions of Jamila Salimpour's original format from the 1960s. As discussed in Chapter Two, Jamila codified the movements she learned from Middle Eastern dancers performing in San Francisco nightclubs in the 1960s, naming them after the dancers' names or nationality. Most ITS and ATS troupes share the same stall moves, performed as slightly different variations of Jamila's originally codified movements. Three common examples are the "Egyptian," "Arabic," and "ghawazi." Although Amy Sigil does not connect Hot Pot ITS to Middle Eastern or North African history or choose Arabic music to perform to, the names of these stall movements have remained and by their names, inherently reference the Middle East/North African regions.

### *Combinations*

Combinations are short choreographies that vary in length and may include formation changes. A specific singular movement, called a *cue*, which is done at the end of a corresponding stall move, initiates a specific combination. Combinations can only be cued from certain stall moves that allow for ease of transition from stall move to combination. These short choreographies allow different ITS troupes to insert their own creativity into the standard organizational structure. Hot Pot ITS combinations tend to employ humorous physical references, such as a line change in which dancers high-five as they pass one another. These combinations, versus the improvisational structure itself and the shared set of stall moves, are where ITS troupes tend to differ from one another and from ATS.

### *Conceptual Variations*

A series of options may be opened up during the execution of certain stall moves or combinations. In one combination there may be four options, each option “unlocking” the possibility for the next. For example, once a stationary move is done in a spin the followers will return from the spin and look to see if the leader will now travel with the move. If the leader travels back in space (cuing a line change) the followers will then look to see if the next dancer who finds herself in the leader position will maintain the lead or give it immediately back to the leader who cued these series of variations on that single move. Conceptual variations are also used to change the “front” when dancing for an audience in the round and to add a “cascade” effect created by dancers doing the same movement initiated sequentially at different times, in canon.

### *Formation Changes*

All repertoires of ITS have specific line formations or spatial arrangements. The most common are drawn directly from American Tribal Style: stagger, circle, chorus line, and facing duets. Hot Pot ITS includes “V” and “inverted V” formations as well as a circle within a circle, and variations on the classic chorus line. Trybe Habibi Bizarre, an ITS troupe from Southern Louisiana, has a complex spatial formation called a “flower” in which one main leader cues three secondary leaders to whom certain groups of followers that can not see the main leader look to for direction, allowing many people to dance together without compromising the ability of some to see the cueing leader. Formation changes are tricky to cue because in many cases, they must be initiated by the leader then immediately facilitated by the leaders-to-be behind her who must ripple the action through to the group. For example, in Hot Pot ITS, the

transition from circle to stagger requires first that the leader cue a traveling move, second that the next dancer does not yet take the lead, and third that a follower who does not occupy the next immediate leader position pushes forward out of the circle to cue a stagger formation. The spatial arrangement must be cued by the contributing efforts of many dancers not just by the simple direction of a leading one.

Experienced dancers who are familiar with one another are able to move collectively in and out of formations based on the decision-making patterns and standards set up by the conditions of the performance. When deciding to change the formation, dancers ask themselves the same questions and hopefully share the same answers: how much time has been spent in each formation, how many sides is the audience on, how soon will the song end, and do we want a specific individual to make her way to the lead by then? By rehearsing together over a long period of time, all dancers come to share certain values regarding how long is too long to be in one formation and in which performance setting certain arrangements should or should not be used. For example, an inwardly focused circle is less conducive to a proscenium theater stage and more common to informal settings.

### *Sameness*

When learning the movements for Hot Pot ITS, everyone must try to execute the movement exactly the same as one another in order to avoid confusion about what is being cued. If a leader performs a cue in her unique style, because of the speed of the dance and subtle differences between cues, no one will respond in the appropriate way. A dancer learns quickly that she must perform the movement exactly as it has been prescribed by the format. Amy Sigil has observed that this need to dance the same as one another prevents students from trying to “out-dance” one another. She gives the

example that in group choreography, students often try to perform the movement better or slightly different than their peers, whereas in ITS everyone must perform the movement the same. This need for sameness is different than most bellydance forms that encourage all dancers to put their unique style onto a standard movement. Individuality, uniqueness, and developing ones own personal style is very common rhetoric within the bellydance community. This group-oriented, mutual effort toward standardized sameness draws many dancers to ATS and ITS who are looking for a more structured approach to their dance training and may be a reaction against the relative absence of agreed-upon standards and codification in other styles of bellydance. While this group synchronicity gives some dancers a feeling of rigor or community it also conforms to the values of a “classicized” aesthetic where sameness is valued precisely for its ability to ensure the dance remains the same across different bodies, spaces, and times.

### *Fixed Planes of Movement*

Dancers must orient their torsos and move their arms along the same planes of movement as one another in order to dance close without colliding arms. Framing arms are always pulled away from one another either to unfold flat to the front or on a diagonal plane. The right arm is always placed in front of the dancer to her right and the left arm behind the dancer to her left to facilitate dancing close to others in a group. The pathway of the arms during line changes and fast spins are strictly set so that dancers transition from one movement to the next through understood pathways of acceptable movement: for example, during a spin sequence the arms draw in close to the body then out in the appropriate plane. The agreement about arm placement allows many people to dance together in a small space at a fast tempo without

colliding. As in many other dance forms, ITS bellydancers finely hone an awareness of the space and other bodies around them.

### *Calm Composure and Peripheral Awareness*

The calm comportment of the dancers is vital to the maintenance of their spontaneous movement together. If a leader appears visibly panicked, the effects on her followers are palpable as their slicing movements begin to halt with hesitation and insecurity, disrupting the set pathways that allow followers to anticipate the actions of the leader and causing the improvisation to fall apart. Elements that help to give the appearance of calm collectedness are the dancers' directed gaze and self-sensory awareness. The leader's gaze is consciously projected toward specified orientations as she cues turns and spins. The dancer's gaze and head cue directional changes as she sends her focus toward specific orientations with clear intention. While a core-initiated movement sends energy in multiple directions at once out from the core of the body, a good leader sends all her intention into one direction when cuing half turns, traveling half turns, and quarter turns, for example.

While her gaze is outward, her general focus is inward as she uses her peripheral vision to respond to the movements of the other dancers. In contrast to the gaze of an ITS dancer, which engages the audience but is equally engaged in taking in peripheral visual information from the dancers around her, the gaze of a cabaret dancer tends to play more to the audience. As a sort of nightclub style party dance, *raqs sharqi* performances tend to invite the audience to marvel at the physical feats of the soloist and watch her body. The visible interaction between ITS dancers responding to one another invites the audience to look at the inter-subjective

relationship between dancers. By witnessing this inter-subjectivity, the tendency to passively consume bellydance with an objectifying gaze is challenged.

One result of the inter-subjective experience of dancing Improvisational Tribal Style is the development of empathy and group solidarity among dancers. When students are first learning to lead the group and develop confidence as a leader or at least the ability to portray an air of calm composure, other students tend to be very patient in that process of discovery because they too must learn the same skill. About how she feels when another beginning ITS student is first learning to lead, new ITS dancer Adria Tinnin says:

[I feel] sympathy anxiety, like 'I hope they don't mess up' not because it's like 'I hope you don't mess *me* up' but just because I'm like dang, I know how that feels.<sup>244</sup>

Her class-mate Hannah Trimbath adds:

I go through the movements in my head as-well, thinking 'what would I be doing?'<sup>245</sup>

About how she feels when she is leading the group, three years experienced ITS dancer Leila Maitland says:

[Leading feels] familiar and it's empowering. It's kinda cool to have a bunch of girls doing the same thing you're doing, you know.<sup>246</sup>

Troupe-mate Cory Podielski adds:

I'd say that being in the stagger is kind of like being in a pack of wolves. It's pretty cool, all your girls are dancing around you.<sup>247</sup>

### *Calculated Anticipation and Readiness: Responsive Body, Present Mind*

All dancers must hold a catalog of movement pathways and variations in their minds that enable the followers to eliminate and anticipate all possible cues,

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<sup>244</sup> Adria Tinnin. Interview April 30, 2010. Los Angeles, California.

<sup>245</sup> Hannah Trimbath. Interview April 30, 2010. Los Angeles, California.

<sup>246</sup> Leila Maitland. Interview April 30, 2010. Los Angeles, California.

<sup>247</sup> Cory Marie Podielski. Interview April 30, 2010. Los Angeles, California.

variations, and sequencing initiated by the leader. Musically, a dancer is always aware of the counting and speed that the leader is dancing to, anticipating changes in the musical phrasing, climactic build-ups, and melodic “breaks.” A dancer must recognize the multiplicity of spatial and orientation-changing variations on a single movement to prepare herself to execute the specific variation cued by the leader.

Practitioners generally agree that dancing ITS is an exercise in presence. When engaged in all the decision-making and embodied presence that is required, practitioners are offered an escape from the preoccupations and worries that may consume them throughout their day. Because a dancer must be aware of the movement technique, the bodies and space around her, the musical structure, what the limits and possibility of her position is, and the leader’s cues all at the same time, one’s mind must be engaged present moment in order to organize the stimulus and information as it unfolds throughout the dance. About this need to be present in ITS that offers an escape from everyday worries, UNMATA and Hot Pot ITS dancer Kari Vanderzwaag says:

[ITS] allows us to not have to verbalize anything. At dance class, you leave it at the door. Who cares what is going on at your job, that you’re broke, that you’re parents are dying, you’re this or you’re that, that’s gone. And I can go and I can openly communicate with my friends and I don’t have to talk about that stuff, I don’t have to show that sadness on my face. It’s black and white. It’s not life, it’s not grey scale.<sup>248</sup>

### *Musical Interpretation*

A group improvisation is considered successful not only when combinations, cues, and stall moves are seamlessly hidden by smooth transitions but also when the combos and conceptual variations are executed to mirror the structure and phrasing of the music. As a phrase of music builds to a crescendo a leader might cue a series of

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<sup>248</sup> Kari Vanderzwaag. Interview May 27, 2010. Long Beach, California.

stall moves, varying them with orientation-changing quarter, third, half or full turns and arm embellishments until the climax is realized, at which point she would likely cue a combination that varies dynamic (from smooth and slow to sharp and fast). Hand embellishments called *floreos* are used to set the speed of a current stall move and subsequent combination, and as interpretive filler to finish out phrases in order to stay in sync with the phrasing of the music. This close relationship between the movement and music is one element of ITS that aligns the form with other variations of bellydance.

### *Comparing ATS and ITS to Raqs Sharqi*

Western choreographic influence on bellydance in the US as well as in North Africa and Western Asia can be seen mostly in the carriage of the arms, the emphasis on traveling found in more “classical” cabaret and Oriental bellydance.<sup>249</sup> The conscious decision among the more “tribal” or ethnic dancers is to remain flat-footed. In comparison to the liftedness of cabaret, ITS and ATS emphasize grounded solid movement, and the body’s core is dropped in vertical space by strong thighs and a micro bend in the knees. Freedom to move in the hips is found by bending the knees, tucking the pelvis for a long lower back, and slightly turning out the feet and hips. In contrast, more aesthetically classical bellydancers accent upward hip movement, sometimes by raising the ankles of straightened legs to send the hips vertical. An ITS

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<sup>249</sup> There are several reasons why Western concert dance has influenced bellydance movement. Briefly stated, dancers in Egypt were influenced by the strong presence of Russian ballet dancers and choreographers living and teaching in the Middle East since the soviet era and were also influenced by Egyptian and Hollywood film. A Hollywood edict in the 1950s forbade dancing in place (presumably to a rule that was invented specifically to censor the harem girl scenes that became popular at that time) so filmic Oriental dancers were required to travel. Early modern dancers who performed Eastern dances that looked similar to the hoochie-koochie dances of popular theater made their choreography more decent by downplaying the movement of the hips and incorporating more upper body and traveling movements. Similar censoring efforts were made to the staged folk dance troupes of the Middle East (such as Egypt’s Reda Troupe) in order to legitimize local dances for national pride amongst a global audience.

dancer uses all surfaces of the feet to bear weight in contrast to ballet-influenced variants of *raqs sharqi* in which dancers travel on relevé.

The freedom for knees to bend enables the look of “driving movement” which appears to travel downward in vertical space although the body does not change position or height level. Most movements are motivated by and accent the downbeat of the music, staying rooted in the rhythm versus riffing on the melody. As the body emphasizes its gravitational pull downward, the movement appears heavy and rooted. The constant reaffirmation of the ground as a source of support corresponds to the ideology of rootedness and groundedness that tribal style bellydancers readily refer to when attempting to explain how the community environment differs from the more light and lifted, typically solo cabaret and Oriental styles. Flat-footed stationary styles of bellydance and lifted traveling styles of bellydance are both conscious constructions rather than one being more “authentic” than the other, the existence of two distinct styles has resulted in one of the most apparent divisions between what practitioners tend to call tribal and cabaret.

In ATS, the spine is held vertically erect so that space between the lengthened vertebrae can facilitate undulating core movement, resulting in a lifted diaphragm and expanded rib cage. The chin is lifted, but the gaze is forward not up. The elbows are held high and square with shoulders held low so that arm movement can be anchored in the scapula and expansive in the armpit. Asymmetry in the arms is a result of favoring the right side due to lead-follow format that necessitates that dancers orient themselves toward the direction of the leader position to their left. The erect upper body posture of ATS and some ITS gives the impression of poised regality, a marked contrast from the free flowing arms of cabaret dancers who allow their limbs to hover in mid-space as they direct an outward gaze toward their impressive core isolations.

This shift in upper body posture reveals “tribal” bellydance as a rebellion against cabaret, and as an attempt to dance in a non-sexualized and empowered way that sometimes appears rigid and stoic in comparison to the latter form’s supple flirtatiousness.

## Conclusion

### Expansive Identities and Inter-Subjective Communities

I have proposed that bellydance encourages practitioners to expand their ideas of themselves, to become aware that identity is constructed and performed. In some cases, bellydancers choose to construct their identities within the boundaries of the hegemonic societal norms that have been established throughout colonial histories to preserve the power of the elite, performing a dark, hyper-feminine, mysterious Eastern identity. Bellydance allows practitioners to embody a stance that aims to transgress the limitations that have been placed on them in modern, consumer capitalist society. In some cases this manifests as a search for spiritual meaning by people who may feel alienated in Western culture. At times, this perhaps looks like American middle-class, typically white female, practitioners imaginatively reconstructing ancient ritual dances. In other cases the desire to transgress manifests as a desire to proudly claim the autonomy of the female body and looks like a hyper-feminized sexualized performance that tends to invite an objectifying gaze. Sometimes the personal transformation and social transgression that bellydance allows practitioners to embody looks like self-sustaining communities of gender fluid, variously sexually identified, do-it-yourselfers who invite others to question the societal boundaries and identity categories that are being transgressed. In all cases, ultimately Orientalist or

not, bellydance allows well-meaning people, who desire to attain a more meaningful existence through art and dance, to transform their own subjectivity and build community. On a choreographic level, the bodily discipline of bellydance technique requires practitioners to relate to their own bodies in ways that are physically self-aware and empowering. The inter-subjective communities that are created and maintained through the physical practice of bellydance give people a real, tangible experience of relating to other people who share a desire for collective meaning in their lives and productive, intimate relationships with their own physical awareness.

The number of bellydancers around the world, male and female, continues to grow with every year and the interconnected global popularity of the form feels like a political movement for many practitioners. More and more people are discovering the practice as a way to drop out of the mainstream and plug into a creative local and worldwide community outlet. Alternative bellydance communities exist in Latvia, Ukraine, Russia, Colombia, Mexico, South Africa, and the list goes on, demonstrating that bellydance is not simply popular with upper middle-class white people in North America and Western Europe, and for most, bellydance has nothing to do with a latent imperialist desire to dominate and know the Orient. Bellydance in its current varying transnational variations brings local communities together and asks people to move their bodies, make their own sense of the world, and craft their identities beyond whatever limitations they feel subjected to in their lives. Contrary to the claims of post-colonial critics, bellydance is not simply a purchase-oriented or commodified activity, and most communities converge primarily around the physical movement practice of the form. This chapter has tried to show that bellydance is an experiential way to engage in an inter-subjective, tactile, embodied, meaningful reality with other people in one's immediate community.

## CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters, I have highlighted moments in bellydance's transnational history that reveal that the form has developed within a milieu of imperialist global power dynamics and Orientalist and objectifying representations. I indicated that American practitioners since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century have engaged in a number of choreographic and discursive strategies in their efforts to contend with the essentializing assumptions embedded in bellydance practice and that some of these strategies succeed more than others in challenging the Orientalist and objectifying representational frame. In the process, bellydance has become an increasingly self-reflexive and dynamic global practice with a great degree of local variation. In addition to a common history and shared basic movement vocabulary, I have suggested that all variants of bellydance offer practitioners an opportunity to transgress social boundaries, to understand their own bodies and identities in intimate, expansive, and empowered ways, and to form inter-subjective communities. I have attempted to demonstrate this transformative potential embedded in the dance through choreographic analysis and ethnographic detail.

I have also suggested that in order to access the expansive subjectivity bellydance offers, practitioners must challenge the essentialized imperial assumptions embedded in the practice. How to successfully challenge those assumptions still remains a question. Can American bellydancers ever fully confront the essentializing representational frame by establishing their own complex individual subject positions and creating meaning specific to their own local contexts, ostensibly taking bellydance out of the Middle East and hyper-feminized representation? Or does divorcing bellydance from Arab music and dance culture merely encourage practitioners to

appropriate the dance without citing its historical context or acknowledging the sociopolitical processes that participated in its formation? Bellydance in America is characterized by at least two competing visions for the dance, and to what extent practitioners are compelled to reference and locate the dance in Arab culture. I am personally interested in which of these visions for the dance is better equipped to access personal transformation and to answer to the critiques of post-colonial scholars who see American bellydance as unable to be rescued from an imperialist agenda. As Janet O'Shea asks in her future considerations for Bharata Natyam, I ask, "Do these competing visions need to reconcile themselves or is their tension a productive one that sets the stage for an increasingly diverse and vibrant field?"<sup>250</sup>

#### Future Considerations for Bellydancers and Critical Scholars

The discourse between innovative and traditionalist bellydance practitioners tends to circulate around what is and is not "authentic" bellydance. Often, neither side of these disagreements acknowledges the actual history and national politics bound up in the form. I think that the discourse of "bellydance" versus "not bellydance" could be expanded to a more productive discussion of the complexities and contradictions of the form, its imperialist history, and how the practice in North Africa and Western Asia did not develop in a vacuum. Rather than codifying a specific list of qualities that make a dance bellydance or not, practitioners could discuss the interesting historical developments of the form that make definition and naming so difficult. The *awalim* and *ghawazi* dancers of Egypt most definitely adjusted their dancing to a new audience of foreigners after their craft was banned in the 1800s, Badia Massabni's

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<sup>250</sup> O'Shea (2001), p. 285.

Casino Opera House in Cairo showcased bellydance in a Western style proscenium frame with innovative props and costuming, Golden Era Egyptian filmic bellydance was influenced by Hollywood depictions of Oriental dance, and Mahmoud Reda-style Egyptian staged folk dances were creative reconstructions that demonstrated classical Egyptian nationalist and pan-Arab art. It is difficult to point to a style or time period and label it authentic "bellydance." When American practitioners have tried to reconstruct what they deem as authentic, non-Western-influenced bellydance, those reconstructions have been to some extent an imaginative projection onto the past made possible through incomplete sources like colonialist travelers accounts, Orientalist paintings, and imperial anthropological texts. Rather than searching for the most accurate way to represent the Middle East, practitioners could discuss the political implications involved with Americans practicing the dance form of another culture and defining how that culture should be represented.

American bellydancers who are more interested in self-expression and innovation than in representing Arab culture and dance also tend not to acknowledge the actual history of the form. From the opposite end of the spectrum, dancers who choose not to represent the overt markers of Middle Eastern/North African cultures also tend not to recognize the political implications of Americans appropriating a dance without citing, or even being aware of, its cultural and historical sources. The community of American dancers who do not look to the way bellydance is performed in North Africa, to Arabic music and rhythm, are missing out on a rich source for compositional complexity. Fusion bellydancers would expand their artistic resources by at least momentarily turning away from the driving electronic beats in 4/4 time that inspire impressive pop-and-lock style torso isolations as seen by Rachel Brice and Zoe Jakes in order to learn the varying time signatures of the *masmoudi*, *baladi*, and *saidi*

Arabic rhythms and the effortless holistic body composure of Dina or Tahia Carioca. Practitioners who espouse the importance of representing Arab culture through bellydance music and costume could develop a more in-depth choreographic understanding of the essential movement values and variable techniques in the current and past iterations of bellydance. For traditionalists, it is important to acknowledge that there is a history of this form and rich sources in the Middle East/North Africa but also to acknowledge that the history is contingent on intercultural exchange and imperialist politics. For innovators and fusion dancers, it is useful to acknowledge the inherent hybridity and inventedness of tradition but also to look at how bellydance exists in other cultural contexts to understand how each variation fits into a wide-ranging current and historical spectrum.

Academic critics of bellydance such as Sunaina Maira, who lean on the easily formulated assumption that all bellydance in America is a performance of Orientalist minstrelsy, could also expand beyond their accusations of American complicity to imperial domination in order to look at the more complex history of the form and varied motivations of American bellydancers. American bellydancers, though in many cases unintentionally complicit in patriarchal Orientalist systems of domination, are not engaged in the simple acts of white women impersonating brown women, demonstrating their consent to US empire, or even directly contributing to the subjugation of Arab women. While practitioners must acknowledge that white middle-class<sup>251</sup> Americans occupy an advantaged position relative to people in cultures of colonized nations who are fetishized and othered in the mainstream media and popular imagination, academic critics must not conflate the average American bellydance practitioner with the patriarchal systems of power that benefit from

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<sup>251</sup> Not all American bellydancers are white or middle-class, but this detail does not in itself negate my appeal to academics to expand beyond their accusatory rhetoric.

essentializing and simplifying the strength and complexity of ethnic and gendered identities. However, I recognize that we who live in the West are inescapably all part of an imperialist system, especially if we pay taxes and support certain government regimes, institutions, and overseas ventures. While American dancers may not intend to further colonialist agendas with how they frame their dance, they must be mindful that the byproduct of such systems of power is that they naturalize certain forms of racialization such that they appear unproblematic and are then available for deployment by “average” people. Rather than entirely exonerating American bellydancers from the system of imperialism they inevitably operate within, I suggest that by recognizing these global power structures, including how they have affected the development and current understandings of bellydance, dancers can challenge the assumptions provided by them.

Additionally, by looking critically at the complex transnational history of bellydance, researchers can highlight the agency and creative experimentations of innovative Arab dancers, emphasizing their self-determined roles as important figures in the development of the form. Fostering cultural awareness through dance is a reciprocal process, and dancers in the Middle East and North Africa have historically incorporated Western influences out of a sense of aesthetic appreciation or political urgency, not simply because of imperialist coercion. By looking at the various Western iterations of bellydance throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century as part of a larger historical development, researchers can understand American bellydancers to be increasingly more self-reflexive and interrogative of the essentializing imperialist assumptions embedded in bellydance. To simply suggest that an American should not be allowed to recognize the value of another culture’s dance or to desire to learn non-American cultural practices denies the inherent hybridity of the current globalized world and

denies individual people's desire to expand their cultural knowledge and embodied self-awareness.

In order for practitioners to refuse and transcend the white-guilt that is transposed onto them, American bellydancers must make themselves aware of the global power dynamics in which they operate and their inherent advantages within them. Practitioners must steer away from representing essentialized and simplified identities in their performance aesthetic and choreography. They must recognize the imperialist assumptions wrapped up in commonly told myths of origin and labeling systems that use terms like "Oriental" and "tribal." Stavros Stavrou Karayanni's work underscores the need for practitioners to reconsider their subscription to conventional ideas of gender and ethnicity and the importance of engaging critically with history:

Enthusiasts, who remain persistently oblivious to the wide-reaching effects of colonization, the history of oppression and exploitation of "Orientals," and the imperial domination of global affairs become complicit with systems of oppression, which they perpetuate in the field of Oriental dance.<sup>252</sup>

Like early modern dance, some bellydance tends to present universal, naturalized, and essentialist notions of women, the body, race, and nationality. In their attempts to open up new possibilities for expressing the freedom, sexuality, and spirituality of the body, many American bellydancers depend on the imaginative imperialist fantasies of an Eastern ideal. As long as bellydance is a performance of the essentialized East by the politically advantaged West it will participate in a colonial history that privileges the voice and perspective of the West.

I propose that the type of practice that lends to an authentic and transformative experience in bellydance is not one that presents an essentialized or idealized notion of the body but one that presents bodies as discursively and socially constructed as

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<sup>252</sup> Karayanni (2005), p. 169.

they are currently and complexly experienced.<sup>253</sup> American bellydancers, whether they are interested in innovation or tradition, must contextualize the practice in the immediacy of their lives and critically engage with the political factors that have directed the history of the form's development. For Rustom Bharucha, to engage with a performance tradition in an authentic way is "not a question of returning to tradition but rather of catching up with its immediacies incarnated through ever-changing truths."<sup>254</sup> Rather than disagreeing about the formal elements or appropriate aesthetic and context necessary for a performance to earn the title of "bellydance," practitioners must take on the task of asking themselves: what are the fundamental principles of bellydance that continue to resonate with practitioners despite its changing geographical and historic contexts? What are the productive shifts in the form that allow us to imagine authenticity differently? "Authentic" might mean "original" or "traditional" but it also might mean that which is "authentic" to the subject performing the dance, in the sense of reflecting his or her habitus, inspirations, and influences. I believe bellydance has the potential to allow practitioners to expand the boundaries of their selves beyond limited constructions of identity, to transgress social boundaries, and to form self-sustaining supportive communities. This incarnated and ever-changing truth about bellydance, the potential for practitioners to expand beyond societally-imposed boundaries, is compromised by an unquestioning treatment of the Orientalist assumptions built into bellydance practice and only through a critical engagement with history and a recognition of "the larger processes of politicization to

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<sup>253</sup> Wolff, Janet. "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics." In *Meaning in Motion, New Cultural Studies of Dance*. Edited by Desmond, Jane C. 1997. Durham: Duke University Press. p. 134.

<sup>254</sup> Bharucha (1993), p. 208.

which we are compelled to submit and resist,"<sup>255</sup> can bellydancers continue to access the transformative potential of the form.

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<sup>255</sup> Bharucha (1993), p. 245.

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