FROM HAREM FANTASY TO FEMALE EMPOWERMENT:
RHETORICAL STRATEGIES AND DYNAMICS OF STYLE IN AMERICAN BELLY DANCE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the popular appropriation of Middle Eastern belly dance in the United States. Female American belly dancers find themselves engaging in an activity that has been informed by often contradictory discourses of women’s sexuality. These discourses stem from a history including the fascination of European colonialists with Middle Eastern dancers; its importation to World’s Fairs and cabarets; its highlighted role at tourist destinations in Middle Eastern countries; and its feminist appropriation as an index of the shifting views of female sexuality in the United States. Given the various connotations of the dance, dancers need to employ both delimited and expansive strategies as they find themselves constantly in the process of reframing the meanings of their performances, strategically colluding with or working against the meanings embedded in the popular image of the dance.

For the dancers, these strategies are employed most visibly in terms of style, including costuming, movements, attitude, facial expressions, and music, as well as verbal maneuvering within these categories. While genre works to contain the dance and to offer a sense of continuity, style allows it flexibility and becomes the place where appropriation works and change happens. Focusing on the dynamics of style and its importance to the rhetorical strategies of the dancers, this study explores the many ways in which global is annexed into the local practice of belly dance in America.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Globalization is often talked about as a broad homogenizing force, guiding encounters between different localities and subsuming these localities under the dominance of either colonialism or economic imperialism. Walter Mignolo offers an alternative view in his book, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, in which he views colonial difference as "the space where local histories inventing and implementing global designs meet local histories, the space in which global designs have to be adapted, adopted, rejected, integrated, or ignored" (2000: ix). For Mignolo, globalization is the meeting of different local histories which become subsumed under the "overarching imaginary" of global commodification and homogenization. This overarching imaginary, however, is merely a local paradigm that has gained hegemonic status. Thus, while homogenization and commodification are strong local forces acting upon cultural expressions in global contexts, other local forces must be taken into account as well, those forces that create "moments in which the imaginary of the world system cracks" (Mignolo 2000: 23).

Arjun Appadurai addresses similar issues in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, in which he looks at how imagination works as a social
force in the modern global world, borrowing and transforming various elements of culture as they are mobilized by mass migration and electronic media. In this context, imagination in the practices of everyday life “is neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern” (Appadurai 1996: 4). Once again, commodification and homogenization are strong forces here, but the space of contestation involves forces of counter-hegemonic resistance as well. Thus, as cultural manifestations travel and transform through the meeting of various local histories, it is beneficial to pay attention to how they are strategically annexed at the site of reappropriation.

Belly dance¹ in the United States is a prime example of a cultural practice that has emerged from the meeting of different local histories and has become a site of contestation between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces. In this study, I will examine the popular appropriation of Middle Eastern belly dance in the United States and look at the various ways in which the global² has been annexed into this cultural practice in America.

In 2002, Miles Copeland founded a dance troupe called the Bellydance Superstars and the Desert Roses which has since toured both in the United States and in Europe. This troupe first came to my attention when I read an article in The Los Angeles Times written by staff writer Scott Timberg, entitled “Fire in His Belly” (January 14, 2005). In this article, Timberg recounts an anecdote told to him by Copeland in which a roadie on the troupe’s tour saw the beautiful young dancers for the first time and said, “They can’t

¹ Also known as raqs Sharqi, Middle Eastern dance, and Oriental dance

² In this case, I use the term “global” to refer both to the perceived differences associated with “other” localities and the perceived “overarching imaginary” of homogenization and commodification.
be belly dancers! Belly dancers are supposed to be fat and ugly!” (2004: E24).

According to Copeland in this article, “the art needs an image transfusion” (2004: E24), and it is his goal to bring the Bellydance Superstars to the level of public recognition and admiration held by Riverdance, another stage spectacle.3 The article is accompanied by a large picture in which two dancers, Sonia Ochoa and the troupe’s choreographer, Jillina, are posed on either side of him, each smiling at the camera and dressed in brightly colored bedlah4 with one arm lifted up toward her head and the other extended outward. Copeland sits between them, a bit in the background so that he looks smaller than the two women, looking toward the camera with a straight face and his hands folded under his chin.

When I asked dancers in Columbus, Ohio what they thought of the Bellydance Superstars, I found out that it has been the target of much criticism among both professional and amateur American belly dancers. At the same time, though, there are a number of dancers who support at least some aspects of the troupe. 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” [Sandy*], perpetuating the stereotype of the harem fantasy, and fostering unhealthy attitudes about body image in the United States:

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3 A closer look at Riverdance, involving the transformation of folk dance into stage spectacle, might reveal similar issues to those addressed in this project.

4 The bedlah is the two-piece bra and belt set costume. I discuss the influence of Hollywood on the emergence of this costume in chapter two.

* This symbol indicates that the name has been changed.
I think [Copeland's] trying to make it generic, and I don't think you can do that with belly dancing. There needs to be all sizes, not these people who are writing diaries saying "Oh, I need to lose ten pounds." That's not what belly dancing is. That's the American part that we don't want. [Aneaj]

At the same time, others see the troupe in a more positive light:

So it's a very pop fusion Americanized style but they are saying that. They're saying that, especially now in the programs, that someone just posted about that, they respected them for doing it, you know, not saying "Oh this is Egyptian style or this is Turkish style." No, this is a fusion Americanized style. It will remind you more of a jazz show than it would of watching one of the Egyptian greats, but they are hardworking artists and they are really nice people. [Shakira]

So I think they take a lot of good things in the dance and they bring it in a venue that the public really sees. They see the costumes and they see it isn't easy. I mean the things I see these women do, I know as a dancer is not easy. But I think they convey to the public that they don't just throw on a hip belt and start doing stuff. They've studied, they understood that these are very accomplished dancers...I think they might spark people's interest in it and get people to take lessons from the local dancer and things and that would just support the entire community. [Angela] (emphasis added)

For these women, as long as the Bellydance Superstars do not say they are performing "authentic" Middle Eastern dance, they can be seen as beneficial to the dance community in general.

Copeland's Bellydance Superstars and the diverse reactions to them within the belly dance community is a good site at which to start my discussion, for it highlights some of the complicated issues I will be addressing throughout this study. American women who belly dance,⁵ whether as a hobby or as a profession, find themselves engaging in a practice that is saturated with contradictory images relating to women's

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⁵ There are male belly dancers as well. Some of the more well-known in America are Tarik Sultan, Roman "Bert" Balladine, and Ibraham Farrah. Nevertheless, this project focuses specifically on the image of the female belly dancer and the experiences of women who do the dance.
sexuality, including the objectified sex object of the harem fantasy and the woman trying
to gain empowerment through fully inhabiting her body.

Through my fieldwork with dancers in Columbus, Ohio, conducting interviews,
watching performances, and taking classes in Middle Eastern dance, it has become
increasingly clear that the term “belly dancers” does not describe a coherent group.
Currently, there is no one standard process of certification for teachers nor is there a
standard terminology for the steps incorporated into the dances. During one of my early
interviews, I asked Shakira, a dancer who teaches and performs professionally, if there is
a strong dance community in Columbus, and she answered:

No...there’s a lot of people and they are scattered. When I think of strong I think
of some place like Ottawa. Every instructor who teaches all different styles, they
all get along. And they unify and they collaborate. They don’t put events
opposite each others. And they all talk to each other even though they may all
have wildly divergent artistic visions. You know, someone may be totally into
fusion and not want to do what Denise does and Denise is just totally into fusion,
but they are like “OK, you have a different artistic vision.” But they still meet
and they still talk and they still support each other. That, to me, is a strong
community. I mean a community of a lot of people who are at each others’
throats, like some of the other cities, however many you have is not a strong
community. This is one of my pet peeves with the word “community”...to me,
my community is anyone I want to associate with, and anybody else just happens
to be in the same field. I think to have a sense of community you have to have
some connection to the person and some understanding...

Dorothy Noyes’ discussion of the ways in which a network model can be
beneficial to examining the social bases of cultural practices is particularly useful here.
According to Noyes, “The network as both field procedure and organizing metaphor is
better adapted than more bounded notions of group to get at the social grounding of
expressive practices” (2003: 26). For belly dancers, national and regional dance
seminars, workshops, dance periodicals like Habibi and Arabesque, and email list serves
offer a greater sense of community than more local associations. Clearly, given the various motivations of American belly dancers (including wanting to get into shape, improving body image, wanting to be sexy, participating in a spiritual practice, making money, and “doing something different”), the social grounding for belly dance in the United States is unstable. Although all the women I have talked to and have watched perform live and dance in the Columbus area, the similarities among them are difficult to define. For this project, I am focusing on several women with different “artistic visions,” different teachers, different terminologies, different conceptions of what the dance entails, different levels of expertise, and different motivations for doing the dance in the first place.

One of the forces linking them together, however, is that they are all performing a dance that has been informed by often contradictory discourses of women’s sexuality. These discourses stem from a history including the fascination of European colonialists with Middle Eastern dancers; its importation to World’s Fairs and cabarets; its highlighted role at tourist destinations in Middle Eastern countries; and its feminist appropriation as an index of changing views of female sexuality in the United States. The American dancers’ acute awareness of the possibly problematic connotations of the dance becomes apparent in their discussions about the “fallout” from the indiscretion of the costuming and choreography of individual performers, calling attention to how dancers must always be aware of what they are communicating about the dance with their bodies, movements, attitudes, and costumes.

Given the constant tension and negotiation of what the dance signifies, what is conveyed in individual performances is not easily defined and comes under scrutiny by
many of the dancers themselves, especially those who teach and perform for a living and thus stand to be the most affected by the “fallout” from others’ “indiscretions.” As I will show in Chapter Four, what constitutes such indiscretions is just as hard to define as the group itself, for what is “authentic” and “appropriate” is constantly shifting and being redefined, depending on the venue, the audience, and evaluations of style. Lacking the recognizable standards of such dances as ballet, the flexibility of the dance is both a good and bad asset for the women with whom I worked. While enabling women of all ages to explore their own personal creativity through their bodies, and thereby leaving the door open for the possibility of individual empowerment, the ways in which meaning is communicated (and interpreted) never stays stable and can quickly be linked to racialized images of objectified sexuality.

Even the name “belly dance” comes under scrutiny from some dancers, given its exploitative history in relation to the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. The anxieties over this name are clearly articulated in the Fall 2004 issue of Habibi Magazine, in which the tagline has changed from “Middle Eastern Dance * Health * Inner Beauty” to “Bellydance * Health * Inner Beauty.” In the Publisher’s note, Jennifer James-Long writes:

The term ‘bellydance’ is highly controversial among professional performers. It is a term given to this dance by an entrepreneur who intended to make big bucks off of the group he brought to the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. Simply calling it a traditional dance from Algeria wasn’t bringing in the audience he needed. In conservative Victorian times, when proper citizens called arms and legs ‘limbs,’ ‘bellydance’ brought so much attention that the dance was categorized as something unfit for decent society. With this kind of stigma, why would any self-respecting performer of raqṣ sharqi – the Arabic name of the dance – use the term ‘bellydance’? And why would the oldest magazine in the field use it as an identifier on its cover?...Why has Habibi Magazine adopted a word so detested by its own community? The public simply doesn’t know how to find out about the
dance by any other name. If you want to buy a dozen roses for your sweetheart, you’re not going to look up *rosa*, the Latin word for rose. Flower shops realize this. As a group trying to reach out to the public, we must be where we can be found (2004: 4).

The public image of belly dance in the United States, given its history of Orientalism and fantasies of racist, objectified sexuality, is problematic, but it is also one of the elements of the dance that initially draws in audiences and new dancers.

Steve Zeitlin’s focus on strategies in his article, “I’m a Folklorist and You’re Not: Expansive versus Delimited Strategies in the Practice of Folklore,” is particularly applicable here. In this article, Zeitlin discusses the expansive and delimited strategies employed by folklorists, both in academia and in the public sector. Through his examples, he shows that “Expansive positions often reach out to new members, constituencies, and audiences. Delimited strategies often impose academic requirements and boundaries that both limit and professionalize the field” (1999: 6). One of the key examples Zeitlin uses in exploring folklorists’ use of these strategies is the rhetoric of naming. He notes how he himself strategically uses a variety of names, including “living cultural heritage, folklore, oral history, folk literature” (1999: 15) in order to solidify funding and support for his public folklore projects. He also calls attention to how the term “folklore” itself embodies very different connotations as it find itself linked to, for example, its nineteenth century past which fed into the ideologies of Nazi Germany as well as its ties to populist folk revivals. Thus, folklorists must be very conscious of the message they are sending by using this term.

Both folklorists and dancers carry a certain cultural stigma. Members of each community, among others who are stigmatized in some way, find themselves constantly...
negotiating among the various connotations of their public identification and their personal goals, so that expansive and delimited strategies of identification play a very important role in these negotiations. While searching for support, alliances, and funding from outside resources, there is also a need to maintain the integrity of the delimited group. Given these similarities, I have found it useful to approach the belly dancers in this study in terms of the delimited and expansive strategies they employ as they find themselves constantly in the process of reframing the meanings of their performances, strategically colluding with or working against the meanings embedded in the popular image of the dancer.

For the dancers, I argue that these strategies are employed most visibly in terms of style, including such elements as costuming, movements, attitude, facial expressions, and music, as well as verbal maneuvering within these categories. As I will show in Chapter Four, by looking at these stylistic devices and how dancers talk about them, we can see how dancers engage with the contradictory meanings communicated through the dance. Through my historical research and fieldwork, it has become clear that both the public perceptions of the dance and the instability of what constitutes “appropriateness” and “authenticity” in individual dance performances point to issues that are “larger-than-local” (Shuman 1993), and it is the purpose of this study to highlight the ways in which the dancing body, more specifically the belly dancing body, becomes a site at which to explore these larger issues, from ideas of self and other in cultural encounters between East and West to shifting views of women and sexuality in the United States.

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6 This anxiety resulting from the need for both expansive and delimited strategies is explicitly addressed in Taal’s “Are We Losing Our Essence to the Mainstream?” in which the dancer writes: “The mainstreaming of belly dance has opened a lot of doors, but I hope that being popular never means that we sacrifice our acceptance and respect for womanhood in all its glory” (2005).
Jane Desmond, a scholar of dance, asserts that:

In studying the transmission of a form, it is not only the pathway of that transmission, but also the form’s reinscription in a new community/social context and resultant change in its signification that it is important to analyse. An analysis on appropriation must include not only the transmission pathway and the mediating effects of the media, immigrant patterns and the like, but also an analysis at the level of the body of what changes in the transmission (Desmond 1998: 159).

Here, Desmond brings up two very significant points that cannot be overlooked in the study of dance, especially one that has circulated through different cultures and across national borders. First, the body can be both a site of inscription by others and a site of agency, and in order to get a better understanding of the meanings embedded in and emerging from the body, it is necessary to treat the actual actions and movements of the body as “texts” to be “read” and understood in specific contexts. There is the possibility that new identities can be created through movement, not just imposed on the body from outside, and the details of this movement merit attention. Second, Desmond highlights the need to focus on such movements both synchronically and diachronically. It is necessary to explore the dance form, in this case belly dance, in terms of its “new community/social context” while situating it in its larger than local context as well. In looking at this transmission, I would add, one must also ask why belly dance, a dance associated with the Middle East, has been appropriated by American women. As I show in Chapter Three, while the dance certainly does change in its new context, its meaning also depends on its retrospective continuity with its “folk” roots. One key question that
develops, then, is: How is this sense of continuity maintained? The transmission of belly dance involves continuity and transformation,7 and it is necessary to look at both in my own exploration of the dance.

This study combines historical analysis and ethnography, so that while situating the dance in its broader social/historical contexts (from colonialism to feminism), I also draw significantly on the individual experiences of the women I have met during my fieldwork. I have attended many performances, ranging from the small and intimate to the large and theatrical; interviewed female dancers, both beginners and professional teachers/performers; and taken weekly classes with Shakira, a teacher in Columbus. The belly dance community is quite diverse, so I do not intend the experiences of the women I quote to be seen as representative of all belly dancers in the United States. Rather, I hope to use the individual experiences these women have shared with me in order to have a better understanding of how dancers’ evaluations of individual performances, whether their own or those of others, strategically navigate the intersecting, contradictory discourses informing each performance. Modeling this study in part on Anthony Shay’s study of solo improvised dance in the Iranian cultural sphere, I want to explore how the “complex, sometimes contradictory attitudes” (1999: 11) about dance performances can

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7 This becomes apparent when you look at the range of styles that are encompassed by the term “belly dance.” Since the dance was introduced to the United States, several new forms have emerged, including Cabaret style, which I will describe the next chapter, and various Fusion styles. One example of a Fusion dance form is American Tribal. Usually performed by a group, American Tribal can combine movements and costumes from different areas, including Egypt, Turkey, and North Africa, while leaving room for interpretive choreography. It is then conceived of as both Middle Eastern and American.
tell us about contemporary society, especially given that “these attitudes are dynamic and subject to change as the performance of this dance engenders new meanings” (1999: 11) in its various transnational contexts.  

I begin in the next chapter by exploring how the public image of the hyper-sexualized belly dancer so prevalent in popular culture today has developed throughout a history of colonialism, tourism, and global commodification. Used as a marker of both gendered and cultural difference, the belly dancer became a site on which people in both Western Europe and the United States were able to displace their own desires outside the constraints of Victorian morality and address the anxieties revolving around women’s sexuality and feminist rebellion at home. Comparing the trans-nationalization of belly dance with other dance forms that have undergone similar processes of reappropriation and reformulation, including bharata natyam in India and tango in Argentina, I also show how the image of the dancer has taken part in the dialectical flow of cultural influence resulting from global encounters between East and West.

In Chapter Three, I turn to the emergent meanings of belly dance in the United States starting from the 1960s and 1970s. Amidst the discourses of second wave feminism and the sexual revolution, the individualized nature of the dance and the female-centered communities in dance classes made belly dancing an ideal way for women to engage in an activity that allowed them to reclaim their sexuality and resist the standards of the beauty that were recognized as so constraining on women in this time

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8 Shay looks specifically at the dance within the Iraanian cultural sphere, examining how perceptions and performances of the dance have been influenced by “long-term cultural and historical identity formation” (1999: 95) in terms of social, class, and gender roles, which has extended into the diaspora. Since none of the women I have talked to are of Middle Eastern descent, this study focuses on performances of the dance that do not necessarily have any link to a specific cultural identity formation. At the same time, as I argue in chapter three, other links to heritage, specifically feminine heritage, are formed.
period. These emergent meanings, however, directly contradict many of the meanings encoded into the public image of the dancer.

In Chapter Four, I focus on my fieldwork to examine how individual women engage with and navigate these often contradictory discourses through expansive and delimited strategies of style. In performance contexts, a disjuncture emerges between public and private meanings of the dance, and I argue that for belly dance in the United States, it is at this disjuncture that the strategies of style are most apparent. I extend the ideas of Mikhael Bakhtin, Peter Seitel, Charles Briggs, Richard Bauman, and James Fernandez to explore how rhetorical strategies that specifically address style open up spaces for dancers to work within and against the meanings already carried by the intertextual genre of the dance. Style has become the focus of the discourse because it is the most dynamic part of the dance. While genre works to contain the dance and to offer a sense of continuity, style allows it flexibility and becomes the place where appropriation works and change happens. Focusing on the dynamics of style and its importance to the rhetorical strategies of the dancers, I am able to explore the many ways in which the "larger than local" is annexed into the practice of American belly dance.
CHAPTER 2
THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF THE BELLY DANCER

I went and bought myself a ticket and I sat down in the very first row
They pulled the curtain but then when they turned the spotlight way down low
Little Egypt came out a-struttin' wearin' nothin' but a button and a bow
Singing, ying-ying, ying-ying, ying-ying, ying-ying

She had a ruby on her tummy and a diamond big as Texas on her toe
She let her hair down and she did the hoochie-coochie real slow
When she did her special number on the zebra skin I thought she'd stop the show
Singing, ying-ying, ying-ying, ying-ying, ying-ying

She did her triple somersault and when she hit the ground
She winked at the audience and then she turned around
She had a picture of a cowboy tattooed on her spine
Said, Phoenix, Arizona 1949

Yeah, let me tell you people Little Egypt doesn't dance there anymore
She's too busy mopping and a-takin' care of shopping at the store
'Cos we've got seven kids and all day long they crawl around the floor
Singing ying-ying, ying-ying, ying-ying, ying-ying

The image of the belly dancer in popular culture is saturated with connotations of hyper-sexuality and the exotic. For example, in the 1964 movie Roustabout, there is a scene in which a belly dancer performs on stage while Elvis Presley sings the song Little Egypt, whose lyrics are written above. Before the performance begins, an announcer tries to entice customers to see a carnival show by shouting: “She walks, she talks, she crawls on her belly like a reptile!” while the dancer, Little Egypt, struts in front of the crowd

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9 Originally written by the Coasters in 1961
wearing a red bikini and high heels. When a man buys a ticket, the announcer tells him, “You’ve just bought yourself a ticket to paradise.” For the show, the stage becomes a harem. One girl is lying down while another fans her, and there are five undulating dancers in front of them, all wearing see-through harem pants and veils. Then Little Egypt prances onto the stage, performing a dance that incorporates high kicks and wriggling on the floor. After the last verse of the song, Little Egypt goes over to Elvis, who has been singing in the foreground, and dances around him. Then, she begins to walk away, gesturing seductively with her finger for him to follow her.10

More recently, on March 20, 2005, Lynn Johnston’s comic strip For Better or For Worse featured the grandfather asleep on the couch, blissfully dreaming of himself in a lavish palace surrounded by women, their midriffs bare, pouring perfume into his bath, feeding him grapes, playing music for him, and massaging his feet. Embedded in the imagery and “story” is the assumption that these women will do anything he asks to fulfill his every fantasy.

The image of the sexually available, exotic belly dancer appears in various forms of popular culture, from Killian’s Irish Red and Coors beer advertisements to television sitcoms, including the Fresh Prince of Bel Air and Who’s the Boss. This chapter explores how and why hyper-sexuality and sexual availability has come to be so strongly associated with belly dance and shows that the popular image of the dance is, in fact, a product of a multi-directional flow of influence and agency resulting from various historical interactions between East and West. For the purposes of my argument, I have intentionally focused on public images of the dancer in this chapter, necessarily leaving

10 A belly dancer, Tania Lemani, also appeared in Elvis Presley’s 1968 Comeback Special.
out the rich social bases for the dance in its cultures of origin as well as the wide diversity of dances that have come to be distilled into a problematic, heavily-encoded representation of Orientalist fantasy. I am offering here not a history of the dance, but a selective history of its perception, in order to highlight the numerous discourses informing the “larger than local” context in which every performance exists.

In his book Orientalism, Edward Said explains that there is a complex web of knowledge production sustained by cultural traditions, schools, libraries, governments, and popular culture, and that it is through these institutions that the representations of the Orient have been naturalized and unquestioned, allowing only a “limited vocabulary and imagery” (1979: 60) about the Orient. Representations of the Orient, then, can only be understood in terms of the West, or at least in terms of the power relations embedded in the interactions between the Orient and the Occident. Gendered metaphors have often been employed in this process of knowledge production, from descriptions of the land itself as feminine as it passively invited “penetration, insemination—in short, colonization” (1979: 219) to the written descriptions of Oriental women who were characterized by travelers as sensual and willing. According to Said, in Oriental-European relations, “the Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (1979: 40). Such dichotomies facilitate the process through which the Orient has been objectified in academic study and political events as a monolithic, coherent “Other” that is culturally, politically, and morally inferior to its Western counterpart.11

11 See also Julie Marie Fisher’s Orientalism, Representations, and Created Fantasies: The Transformation of Traditional Middle Eastern Dances to Belly Dance (2003), in which she provides an extensive discussion of the relationship between belly dance and Orientalism.
Female imagery has played a very important role in maintaining these dichotomies so important to the self-definition of “the West,” as “both ‘woman’ and ‘the East’ are constructed by Western patriarchy as ‘natural’ categories of difference requiring explication, investigation, illustration, discipline, reconstruction, or redemption” (Desmond 2001: 263). Embodying both signifiers of difference, Eastern women came to be the subject of many works of art and literature about the East, highly eroticized in order to solidify the clear-cut differences between the sensual, irrational nature of the East and the strong rationality of the West.

In her study of the role of dance in tourism, Jane Desmond asserts that “bodies function as the material signs for categories of social difference, including divisions of gender, race, cultural identity…” (1999: xiv). Although Desmond is referring to hula dancers in Hawaii, the same can be said for the image of the belly dancer, for the focus on the body in the highly eroticized descriptions of the dancers of the East and the images that emerged from them worked well to naturalize the social categories of difference

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12 Desmond uses Rhada, the work of white modern dancer Ruth St. Denis, to show how dance can “function as a site of condensation and displacement of desire” (2001: 275) in Western discourses surrounding both women and the East. She notes that “Rhada presents a hyperbolization of categories of otherness, mapping markers of race, orientalism, and sexuality onto the white middle-class female body” (2001: 257).

13 Although there are notable similarities between perceptions of the hula dancer and the belly dancer, one key difference that Desmond discusses is that the hula dancer is often portrayed as “softly exotic,” that is easily conquered. This non-threatening portrayal is markedly different from the association of the belly dancer with the sexually aggressive femme fatale. For more on the dancer as femme fatale, see Said’s “Homage to a Belly-Dancer: On Tahia Carioca,” an essay on the belly dancer Tahia Carioca in Cairo (2000).
people in the West were trying to establish. Therefore, it is not surprising that representations of dancers of the Orient were and continue to be a very recognizable representation in the discourses of Orientalism.

 Europeans’ views of the East were also highly influenced by the stories of the *Thousand and One Nights*, first introduced to Europe through the French translation of Antoine Galland in the early sixteenth century, and the fantastic images of harems presented in them. The works of such nineteenth century Orientalist painters as Eugene Delacroix, Jean Léon Gérôme, and Jean-Jules-Antoine Lecomte du Nuoy utilized the tropes of the harem fantasy to meet the demand in the economic marketplace for images of the exotic, consistently presenting women as “slaves, entertainers, and voluptuaries” (Williams 1993-4: 131) in paintings like *The Dance of the Almah*, *The Slave Market*, and

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14 I would also argue that these same embodied categories of difference emerge from contemporary tourist belly dancing performances in the Middle East. Postcards (Edwards 1996), tourist brochures (Dann 1996), movies, and seemingly more, shall we say, “ethnographic” images such as those in National Geographic magazines and documentaries (Smith 1999, Steet 2000) all feed into a destination image, which Jane Desmond describes as “that set of visuals and ideas associated in the tourist’s mind with a particular locale, [acting] both as a lure for potential customers and as a framework for perception and evaluation of the tourist’s experience once she or he is on site” (1999: 5).

15 Van Nieuwkerk (2001) and Hellend (2001) also write about how the influx of foreigners in the early nineteenth century provided new employment opportunities for dancers (such as the ghawazi, who danced unveiled in the streets and were therefore “most accessible” to these foreigners) who were already marginalized both socially and economically in their cultures. Political and military insecurities of the eighteenth century led to heavy taxes, so that dancers were further inspired to dance for foreigners. Although the ghawazi were already associated with prostitution, at this time that the distinction between professional dancer and prostitute began to blur even more, and as Europeans followed the dancers outside of Cairo, the image of the dancer was further eroticized in the Western imagination.

16 Female European travelers also selectively utilized elements of the masculine harem fantasy in their own writings. In “Contested Terrains: Women Orientalists and the Colonial Harem,” Mary Roberts writes: “In harem painting such as Delacroix’s *Death of Sardanapalus* and Lecomte du Nouy’s *Rhamses in his Harem*, the fantasy was premised on the male spectator’s identification with the master of the harem, who is the central protagonist and for whose pleasure the multiplicity of women exist. In contrast, in the diaries, women travelers projected themselves as the central protagonists in harem adventures” (2002: 198).
The Moorish Bath. Similar representations emerged from the literary realm as well. For example, during his travels to Egypt in the late nineteenth century, Gustave Flaubert wrote very erotic descriptions of the dancers he saw:

Kuchuk dances the Bee. First, so that the door can be closed, the women send away Farghani and another sailor, who up to now had been watching the dances and who, in the background, constituted the grotesque element of the scene. A black veil is tied around the eyes of the child, and a fold of his blue turban is lowered over those of the old man. Kuchuk shed her clothing as she danced. Finally she was naked except for a fichu which she held in her hands and behind which she pretended to hide, and at the end she threw down the fichu. That was the Bee...Finally, after repeating for us the wonderful step she had danced in the afternoon, she sank down breathless on her divan, her body continuing to move slightly in rhythm (Steegmuller 1972: 117).

Such blatant sexual imagery inspired his own literary works, including his description of Salome's dance in his short story, "Herodias":

The eyes were half-shut, and her body writhed; she swayed her stomach like an undulating wave, made her breasts quiver. And yet her face remained motionless and her feet never moved...and invisible sparks shot from her arms, feet, and clothes which set men on fire. (Flaubert 1924: 173).

The fascination with the exotic, along with the fact that dancers were often the only women that European travelers had access to at this time, helped to create representations of the East, and more specifically females in the East, that were more indicative of Western expectations and desires than of the Eastern cultures supposedly being portrayed.18

17 Wendy Buonventura also provides an extensive documentation of Orientalist visual representations of Middle Eastern dancers in nineteenth and twentieth century paintings and photographs in Serpent of the Nile: Women and Dance in the Arab World (1989).

18 This hyper-feminization extended to Eastern men as well, including representations of male dancers in art and literature. See van Nieuwkerk (1995: 33).
The eroticized images of dancers have become further ingrained in the Western imagination through the practice of photography, which has worked to add a sense of "objective" realism to the fantasy. In her study of the portrayal of Arabs in National Geographic, Linda Steet describes how the magazine presents the Arab as an anachronism, and the stereotypical image of the dancing girl is a necessary part of the Orientalist imagery. Many of the pictures of Arab women in National Geographic are reminiscent of the postcards circulating in France between 1900 and 1930 featuring scantily-clad Algerian women in often seductive poses, once again incorporating tropes of the harem fantasy. Similarly, the documentary pictures and accounts in the magazine during the twentieth century very often featured Western soldiers watching Middle Eastern girls dancing enticingly. Through such accounts, the women are presented as both desirable and threatening:

We could see five graceful young girls facing one man. The girls were alternately advancing and retreating as they danced—at first slowly, rhythmically, and then, still keeping the rhythm, with an ever-increasing speed. Suddenly, before Schoedsack and I realized what was happening, the women, still unsmilng, not changing their rhythm at all, turned and danced right up to us,... the five of them stopped as one, shook their braided curls in our faces, and then hastily retreated—as we did (Cooper 1929: 480).

Her dancing! She moves on her toes, but barely raises them from the platform. In her hands she holds a silk handkerchief behind her head or waves it occasionally in the air. But feet and hands, legs and arms, do not enter much into the dance; she performs chiefly with the muscles of her neck, breast, abdomen, and hips... The eyes of the interested spectators sparkle as they gloat on the dancer's charms and movements. To them she is the poetry of motion, but to a European she is almost repugnant (Casserly 1928: 230).

Within these passages lies the suggestion that if the men do not have the chance to "hastily retreat" and thus give in to "charms and movements" of the "advancing" women,
the blame of immoral conduct is ultimately placed on the women. Since the men are presented as helpless against the sexually aggressive *femme fatales*, Western desires are effectively displaced onto the exotic “Others.”

Given its focus on both education and entertainment, *National Geographic* has proven to be quite similar to other popular venues for the presentation of “exotic” dancers: World’s Fairs (Steet 2000: 35). Toward the end of the nineteenth century, both male and female performers from the East were brought to Europe and the United States in order to perform in world expositions, presenting cultural displays that further reinforced the conception of “exotic others” already embedded in the Western imaginary. One of the most famous of these was the Chicago Exposition of 1893, which included the Midway Plaisance, a separate amusement and exhibition area meant to draw in large crowds and offset the costs of the Exposition. Sol Bloom, the superintendent of the construction of the Midway, was the man who used the term *danse du ventre* in reference to the Ouled Nail dancers and the handkerchief dancers of the Algerian and Tunisian exhibitors in order to solicit more people to attend the performances. Although claiming to be ethnographically authentic, the management of exhibitions such as the Persian Palace of Eros brought in uncorseted Parisian dancers, scandalous at the time, who performed dances with seductive hip and abdominal motions. The Persian Palace was so

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20 In his review of *Veils and Daggers* in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Laurence Michalak notes how Steet leaves out pictures and articles in the magazine that positively portray the Arab world. He also questions her idea that it is not possible to represent honestly another culture. Nevertheless, he writes that the book does a good job of highlighting the influence of Orientalism on the presentation of Arabs in the magazine.

21 Public moral outrage of the Board of Lady Managers and Director General Davis, who temporarily ordered the dancing of the Persian Palace to stop, added to the publicity and popularity of the *danse du ventre* (Carlton 1994: 52).
successful and brought in so many people that other concessions, such as those in the Moorish Palace, began to imitate the scandalous dance moves (Carlton 1994). Performances of danse du ventre, or belly dance, came to be the highlight of the Midway, as the dancers danced in “architecturally authentic” settings meant to provide very specific representations of Arab culture, such as those based on harem fantasies. Incorporating the most intriguing elements of Arab life to Europeans and Americans (Celik 1992: 28), “hoochy coochy”

22 dancing quickly spread to other sideshows, theaters, and independent concessions outside of the exposition.

Perhaps the most well-known persona in the 1893 International Exposition in Chicago is Little Egypt, a Syrian dancer whose “hoochy coochy” dance moves supposedly drew huge crowds and inspired a great number of American imitators whose performances made their way into cabarets and American cinema. The legend circulating among many dancers is that Little Egypt saved the Chicago Exposition from financial disaster by drawing in so many people with her enticing, uncorseted movements. In her book Looking for Little Egypt, however, Donna Carlton notes how there is no record of any performer named Little Egypt at the 1893 Exposition, introducing the possibility that even this famous character, this pre-Hollywood American sex symbol, “was created by and personified the Western obsession for the exotic” (1994: xi). The numerous “hoochy coochy” dancers who fascinated the public and drew huge crowds to the Midway

22 Donna Carlton offers the following explanation for etymology of the term “hoochy coochy”: “Hoochy coochy is from the French compound hochéqueue (hocher “to shake” and queue “tail”). A hochéqueue is a wagtail, a tye of small bird that, while standing, continually flutters its tail feathers. The word is related etymologically to “hodge podge” and perhaps to “hockey.” There’s a place in France where ladies do a dance and the dance they do is called the hochéqueue” (1994: 57).
Plaisance in 1893 were eventually generalized into this popularly created name. "Little Egypt" became the personification of all that the dance came to represent with its introduction to America at the Midway in 1893: unbridled sexuality and a blatant resistance to the constraints of Victorian morality. According to Carlton, "Little Egypt" was a common vaudeville stage name after the Chicago Exposition. Little Egypt as a character, however, was first popularized by the involvement of vaudeville dancer Ashea Wabe in the "Awful Seeley Dinner" scandal in 1896-7. Ashea Wabe had been hired to dance and pose for a group of artists at a New York dinner party, but the party ended early when the police came to investigate the possibility of "indecent dancing" amidst the revelry. This story was covered extensively by reporters who referred to Wabe as "Little Egypt," thereby directly associating the popular stage name with the scandal and perceived indecency that had been introduced at the Midway. Even though there was not one specific performer at the Exposition named Little Egypt, the influence of what "Little Egypt" at the Midway later came to represent (the scandalous display of sexuality outside the constraints of Victorian morality) has clearly informed popular images of belly dance in the United States.

The image of the exotic and sensuous dancer did not just serve to solidify categories of difference and displace desires of the West onto an "Other." It also created a means by which to address some of the anxieties faced in day to day life in the West, specifically anxieties associated with female sexuality. As noted by Elaine Showalter in her study of women and madness, by the end of the eighteenth century, "the dialectic of reason and unreason took on specifically sexual meanings, and the symbolic gender of
the insane person shifted from male to female” (Showalter 1985: 8). Through the emerging medical discourses in the nineteenth century, a clear pathological connection formed between madness and excess female sexuality (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 2000: 214), which was then used as an explanation for feminist rebellion in the Victorian Era. With this seemingly “natural” and “medically-verified” connection between rebellion, madness, and excess sexuality, the overtly sexual woman was seen as a threat not only to individual men but to society as a whole. According to Susan McClary, in response to this perceived threat, the nineteenth century saw a high production of artwork featuring “monstrous, vampirish women preying on our helpless males” (1991: 99). The foreign dancer, already associated with sensuality, irrationality (according to the dichotomies of Orientalism), and excessive, often threatening sexuality, became the perfect medium through which to project these anxieties over the dangers of women’s sexuality at home.

The representations of the dancer Salome at the end of the nineteenth century served precisely this purpose. Originally a character in a biblical story, Salome became a prominent subject in the paintings of Gustave Moreau in the late nineteenth century, portrayed as the ultimate femme fatale, “the demonic beauty who could lure men to damnation and therefore aroused in her beholder fear along with attraction, terror along

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23 For more on specifically feminine associations with madness and hysteria, see Elaine Showalter’s *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture 1830-1980.*

24 For example, doctors such as F. C. Skey in 1867 observed that “hysterical patients were likely to be more independent and assertive than ‘normal’ women” (Showalter 1985: 145).

25 The already established associations with the dancing body further served this purpose: “in the West, dance has been seen as a representation either of order (baroque and classical ballet, with their emphasis on physical control and discipline) or of madness and possession, excess and transgression (foreign or modern dance)” (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 2000: 204).
with desire” (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 2000: 210). Authors such as Flaubert, Mallarmé, and Huysmans also used this dancer as the subject in their works, and in 1892, Oscar Wilde published his play, Salome, which was later transformed into an opera by Richard Strauss. In these works, the character Salome is presented as both transgressive and mentally diseased, and her madness is clearly intertwined with her hypersexuality. Her sexuality also proves to be the source of her dangerous power, for it is through her enticing dance that she obliges Herod to offer her whatever she wants, in this case the head of the prophet on a silver platter. In their analysis of the music of Strauss’ opera, Hutcheon and Hutcheon call attention to the way the music accentuates the connotations of danger emerging from the sexual display of the dance and the madness such sexuality inspires:

Drawing on authentic oriental music (as modified by European clichés about it), Strauss set up a tension between distance and recognition for the audience. Familiar waltz music is interwoven with oriental(ist) sounds that, to a turn-of-the-century European, would have connoted sensuality – not to mention the luxury and cruelty associated with the Middle East (2000: 216).

As Salome’s body became the focus of attention during the “Dance of the Seven Veils” segment of Strauss’ opera, the tension between familiarity and difference in the music would have called attention to the dangerous power stemming from the sexuality of the dancer as well as the implications of this powerful sexuality among women in Europe.26

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26 This link between dance and feminist rebellion also becomes apparent with the revolutionary dances of American female modern dancers Loie Fuller, La Belle Dezié, Gertrude Hoffman, Bessie Clayton, Isadora Duncan, and Ruth St. Denis (who incorporated exotic Eastern imagery in many of her works, including Egypta and Radha). According to Elizabeth Kendall, “They were of their time, a time that saw the birth of a new social being, the Modern American Woman. They, the dancers, would become one of her prime symbols. The New Woman emerged as America emerged into world politics. She happened after decades of reformers’ and feminists’ trying to free women’s bodies and minds through spiritual and physical panaceas...” (1979: 7-8).
According to Peter Stallybrass and Allon White:

"the top includes that low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life. The result is a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity: a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level. It is for this reason that what is socially peripheral is so frequently symbolically central" (1986: 5).

As I have tried to show through the examples I have offered thus far, the image of the belly dancer is a clear example in which the marginal has gained great symbolic value in the Western imaginary. 27 It has helped fulfill the need for an "Other" in the conception of "Western" selves, though it is important to point out that this need is not necessarily a natural, pre-cultural occurrence. Exotic fantasies are organically part of culture, both creating the desires and fulfilling them. The seemingly unrestrained bodily movements of the dancers as well as their perceived sexual availability has given "respectable," Westerners images on which to project "indecent" but powerful desires that had no place of articulation within the constraints of Victorian morality. 28 This was particularly clear in the examples from National Geographic, where men could displace their own immorality onto the dancers, the femme fatales whose undulations were difficult to resist.

Representations and perceptions of the dancer, highlighting a kind of gendered "otherness," have served to create categories of difference (sensual versus rational) in order to solidify the differences between East and West in the Western imaginary and to justify colonization by emphasizing the cultural, moral, and political superiority of the

27 Stallybrass and White also explain how in Orientalist discourses, "low" Others are both reviled and desired, looked down upon but necessarily a part of the "top," more dominant social structure: "The bourgeois subject continuously defined and re-defined itself through the exclusion of what is marked out as 'low' – as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating" (1986: 191).

28 Marianne Torgovnick also writes how people in the West need what they see as the primitive in their sense of self, "inventing a heightened...primitive as the screen upon which [they] project [their] deepest fears and strangest desires" (1990: 247).
West. The sexualized imagery associated with dancers “gave Europeans a socially acceptable way to express their own fantasies while simultaneously reaffirming the moral superiority of the West” (Lockman 2004: 70). At the same time, the image of the dancer created an already-sexualized template on which to project the anxieties related to the perceived connection between sexuality, madness, and feminist rebellion among women in the West.

After the introduction of *danse du ventre* in the United States at the Chicago Exposition, “bosomy bellydancers leering out from diaphanous veils” entered Hollywood cinema (Shaheen 2001: 22). Like the concessions at Midway and the burlesque shows they inspired, Hollywood also played upon the fantasies of the East, introducing costumes with glitter, beads, and pearls, glamorizing the exotic imagery that had captured the public’s imagination.29 By the 1920s, “the Western Oriental dance outfit, a combination of bra, low-slung gauzy skirt with side slits and bare midriff, was adopted by Arab dancers and became the cabaret uniform” (Buonaventura 1990: 152), and this cabaret costume, or bedlah, is still worn by performers in the Middle East today. I focus on the bedlah here not because it is the only, or even the most common, costume worn by those who do Middle Eastern dance. It is, however, the costume that is most often associated with the public perception of the dance as well as the Orientalist fantasies that accompany it. The reappropriation of this costume in Middle Eastern cabarets has since worked for Westerners to validate the sense of authenticity attached to the image of the dancer embedded in the Western imaginary.

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29 Such stereotypical images were not limited to Hollywood films. As noted by Jack Shaheen, “During the 1900s, imagemakers such as the Frenchman Georges Méliès served up dancing harem maidens and ugly Arabs” (2001: 8).
It is significant that, through Hollywood's influence on film and its mass marketing of the image of the belly dancer, its fantasy of Oriental dance made its way back to countries such as Egypt and was then adopted by many of the performers there, especially in Egyptian movies and nightclubs where the clientele was mainly Gulf Arab and European tourists. Using costuming as just one example, it becomes clear that the people of the West were not merely projecting their fantasies onto passive victims of colonization. There was, and, in fact, still is, a dialogic nature to the interactions between East and West as well as to the cultural expressions resulting from these interactions. In *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, Hugh Urban acknowledges that indigenous cultures were also able to “mimic, cooperate, [and] collude with Western representations of the exotic Orient” (2003: 12). Given that the development of the popular image of the belly dancer is not purely a Western creation, it is also necessary to acknowledge how views of public dance performances in their countries of origin inform these images in the West. Female performers, especially dancers, have held quite marginal positions in Egyptian society, and the attraction of

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30 For more on the influence of Hollywood and the European presence on the development of professional dance in Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, see Djamila Henni-Chebra and Christian Poché, ed. (1996).

31 As noted by Beaulieu and Roberts, “the univocality of the West is fractured into a plurality of voices with divergent and conflicting allegiances, and ‘Orientals’ are recognized as participants in the counternarratives or resistant images” (2002: 3).

32 James Siewyn also addresses this issue nicely in his examination of the problems inherent in ethnological fieldwork, noting how “the Other has always already looked at me, has robbed me of the truth of my desire, and has insidiously conspired to stage a false spectacle in order to lure my gaze away from its reality, from its own fraudulent purpose” (1993-4: 174). For Siewyn, the gaze is a two-way endeavor in which both the roles of “observer” and “observed” are ambiguous, and this idea particularly comes into play in touristic events. There is a link here with Dean MacCannell's idea of “staged authenticity” (1976), in which the “natives” perform what the tourists expect to see without letting the tourists into their real lives, but there are several other works that address the active roles of those “gazed upon” in the tourist industry. See also Seiwyn (1996) and Urry (2002).
Westerners to dancers further disassociated their actions and performances from “acceptable” female behavior. Their marginalization even moved beyond the social and economic realm in 1834, when Muhammad Ali Pasha prohibited female performers and prostitutes from working in Cairo, spatially separating these groups from the symbolic center of the country.\footnote{This ban was lifted in 1850, and dancers were able to return to Cairo.} Today, the validity of belly dancing is not recognized in public discourse in Egypt, to the extent that there is neither formal training nor venues for such dancers in theaters and on television (van Nieuwkerk 1995: 63). Anthony Shay examines the political representations of power through dances performed by state sponsored folk and traditional dance companies, looking at how such dance companies self-consciously create images of representations of ethnicity, gender, religion, and class through choreographic strategies. In his discussion of the Reda Troupe of Egypt, he describes the ways in which the troupe’s choreography is informed by colonialist discourses, in that it serves intentionally to move away from the overt sensuality that is so popular in the Western imagination regarding the Middle East. The belly dancer does not fit into the representative image they wish to portray.\footnote{As noted by Anthony Shay in his study of Iranian solo improvised dance, “Any individual conducting research on dance in the Middle East is soon confronted with widespread negative and ambiguous attitudes and reactions toward the subject” (1989: 7). For more on how Middle Eastern women negotiate between internal religious and classed discourses of honor and shame, see Karin van Nieuwkerk’s “A Trade Like Any Other”: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt (1995) and Sherri Deaver’s “Concealment vs. Display: The Modern Saudi Woman” (1978).} At the same time, however, the belly dancer can bring great economic benefits to the country in the context of the tourist industry. Thus, the recent ban on foreign belly dancers in Egypt in 2004 for the sake of
protection of Egyptian nationals working in the industry, calls upon ideas of history and tradition to put forth a claim of national ownership, complicating the clear-cut stigmatization of this dance.35

Other dance forms, as well as how they are perceived, have undergone notable changes in transnational contexts, and the shifting meanings of these dances within discourses of colonialism, exoticism, and nationalism indicate larger trends of cultural adaptation amidst the shifting power relations in colonization and globalization. The changing roles and images of devadasis, female temple dancers in South India, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, prove to be a prime example. The devadasis at one time held a privileged position in that they could associate with those of all castes, but by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they began to be viewed with disapproval. Amidst the foreign invasions leading up to the twentieth century independence movement in India, they lost much of the patronage they had relied on previously. Some turned to prostitution out of economic necessity, but such actions and the ideas of Victorian morality carried over by the British, led many Indian nationalists to believe that the personal life of the dancers profaned the art of the temples. In an attempt to reclaim this specifically Indian dancing tradition in the context of the independence movement of the twentieth century, “respectable” women were encouraged to dance to lend their purity to the art form (Meduri 2001: 103). During this time, Rukmini Devi, an upper-class Brahmin, learned the dance and established a dance school for the transmission of

35 The shikhait, female performers in Morocco, also embody several contradictory roles as both central to celebrations and marginal members of society. “She is appropriated as a symbol of immorality and becomes, herself, an emblem of shame” (Kapchan 1994: 90). Recently, however, in the media, the role of the shikhait has begun to shift, so that they are not viewed only as emblems of shame but rather as emblems of ethnic and regional identity in Morocco.
traditional knowledge among middle class young women. The dancer Balasaraswati then spread the fame of the reinterpreted, no-longer-stigmatized dance as she traveled and performed all over the world. Through these transformations, the image of the dance and the dancers became central to broader issues of womanhood, sexuality, and the nation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Medari 1996). Situated in the context of European colonialism, the transformation of bharata natyam in India “was deeply influenced by European Orientalist thought and Victorian morality” (Allen 1997: 25).

Marta E. Savigliano describes a similar process of transformation in her study of tango (1995). In the global capitalist economy, tango was commodified by the West as an embodiment of passion and the exotic. Originally a dance associated with the lower-classes in Argentina, tango was transported to Europe where it was “stylized, regimented, produced” (1995: 125) in order to fit into a specific European idea of the controlled exotic. This form was then reintroduced to Argentina, where it began to gain acceptance as the Argentinian national dance. According to Savigliano, this history of the tango, in which “exotic aesthetics [have been] reproduced, reappropriated, and re-exoticized among ‘exotics’” (206), is the result of the commodification of passion for imperial consumption. It is this same market demand of for the exotic, I argue, that has had a great influence in shaping the perception belly dance in the Western imagination.

Despite the differences between the transformations of bharata natyam, tango, and belly dance, there are significant overlaps in how the meanings of the dances have shifted within the global context and then been reappropriated, creating a multidirectional flow of influence informing both dance performances and the receptions of these performances. Turning once again to belly dance, we find that the public perception of
each performance in the United States is informed by a complicated history of intra- and inter-cultural perceptions of the exotic and of women's sexuality, and the many meanings this sexuality has come to signify through a history of colonialism, feminist rebellion, tourism, and global commodification. The powerful symbolism of the dancing, gendered, and "othered" body has come to be solidified in the stereotypical images so recognizable in popular culture, as demonstrated by the examples from the beginning of this chapter. Perceived as both threatening and available in Western cultures, the belly dancer has ultimately served as a discursive site on which to project categories of difference, everyday anxieties, and displaced desires.
CHAPTER 3
THE DANCE AS A MEANS OF FEMALE RESISTANCE

"...it's sort of your own personal touch to everything. It's sort of what it's all about, your own personal way to do it." [Jennifer]

Catherine and I walked through the open front door of Shakira’s house, just a few blocks from my apartment, shaking the water off of our umbrellas. It was a lot warmer inside the house than outside, and we could hear music coming from another room. We followed the music into the living room, where we saw three women, two sitting on the floor filling out paperwork and one standing by the stereo system. The standing woman introduced herself to us as Shakira and welcomed us. This was my first belly dance lesson. We waited a few more minutes for other students to get there, and then we began. She handed each of us a hip belt to tie around our waist and asked us to lie down on the floor and close our eyes. She then proceeded to tell us, "The next hour is your play time. Leave everything else going on in your life behind." We spent about ten minutes on the floor, moving certain parts of our body while paying particular attention to what muscles were engaging to allow that movement. We then stood up and she asked us to stand in a circle with our feet hip-width apart. We all shifted our feet to what we thought was the right position, and then she went around to each woman saying, "Your hips are not as
wide as you think they are. Move your feet closer together.” As she taught us some basic moves, like the hip lift, she emphasized that the dance is not meant to be mechanical. “If you feel the moves and connect with them, that is the most authentic type of Middle Eastern dancing.” When we moved on to learning how to do a hip shimmy, she told us not to hold our stomachs in: “There is supposed to be plop. It makes it better.” As if to emphasize this point, she informed us that that one of the best dancers she has ever taught wore a size XXXL. As some of us were still a bit self-conscious, she said “Dancers wouldn’t wear hip scarves with jingly things if their butt wasn’t supposed to jiggle!”

Group belly dance classes in YWCA and dance studios began to be popular in the 1960s and 1970s (Carlton 1994: 86), coinciding with second wave feminism and the sexual revolution.\(^{36}\) As many women asserted their independence from men by attempting to break out of their traditional domestic roles, they also sought to work against the negativity associated with female sexuality and to gain control over their bodies.\(^{37}\) In so doing, “women began to demand the right to define their own sexuality...to see themselves as sexually active rather than passive objects of male desire” (Jackson and Scott 1996: 5-6).

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\(^{36}\) These social and political movements came after the publication of Betty Friedan’s influential book, *The Feminine Mystique*, in which she criticizes how women were “confined to [their] own body and beauty, the charming of men, the bearing of babies, and the physical care and serving of husband, children, and home” (1963: 31). For Friedan, the image of feminine fulfillment through marriage and motherhood worked to inhibit the ambitions and accomplishments of women.

\(^{37}\) For a more thorough look at the various debates surrounding sexuality in the context of feminism, see Jackson and Scott’s *Feminism and Sexuality* (1996).
One major issue emerging from this time period is what Naomi Wolf calls the “beauty myth.” According to Wolf:

The ideology of beauty is the last one remaining of the old feminine ideologies that still has the power to control those women whom second wave feminists would have otherwise made relatively uncontrollable: It has grown stronger to take over the work of social coercion that myths about motherhood, domesticity, chastity, and passivity, no longer can manage. It is seeking right now to undo psychologically and covertly all the good things that feminism did for women materially or overtly (1991: 11).

The standards of beauty in American culture, being unattainable to most and expensive to maintain, have proven to be a powerful constraining force for women, and continue to be greatly influential today. Nevertheless, the feminist movement has called attention to the problem of the “beauty myth,” and many have actively sought to resist it.

Situating belly dance in the context of second wave feminism and the sexual revolution, it becomes possible to see the emergent feminist meanings of the dance stemming from this time. In Women and Dance: Sylphs and Sirens (1992), Christy Adair explores the effects of the issues above on the world of dance performances. Although she writes about more institutionalized dance forms, such as ballet and modern dance, in which female dancers are often constrained by gendered hierarchies that do not have the same impact on belly dance, her discussions of the subversive potential of dance is particularly applicable here. According to Adair, Women’s Movement ideologies have led to “an acceptance of sensuality which is essential to dance” (1992: 23). By embracing the sensuality of the dance, many women have sought to take acceptable sexuality beyond the realm of reproduction and into the realm of pleasure. Belly dance, with its focus on individual expression and its association with sensuality, became an ideal means for many women to begin working against the stigma associated with female
sexuality, trying to break outside the ever-present Western Christian dichotomy between Madonna and whore. The women-only classes allowed women to utilize the sensual nature of the dance on their own terms, that is, by allowing them to be sensual for themselves and by providing them with a space where they could appreciate bodies that did not necessarily conform to the ideals sold to women in magazines, movies, and other forms of media. Joan Radner and Susan Lanser’s concept of feminist coding, which recognizes the explicit, complicit, and implicit communications embedded into forms of expressive behavior, is particularly relevant to my analysis of the emergent meanings of the dance during and after the women’s movement. For Radner and Lanser, coding “may allow women to communicate feminist messages to other women of their community [and] to refuse, subvert, or transform conventional expectations” (1993: 23), which I show to be the case throughout this chapter.38

Donna Carlton, the author of *Looking for Little Egypt*, writes that in 1993, her friend, Sarah, accompanied her to the Midway Plaisance in Chicago. According to Carlton, Sarah praised the dancers at the 1893 International Exposition in Chicago for “bringing the ultimate female liberation theology of *danse du ventre* to the New World” (Carlton 1994: 91). When Sarah returned to the Midway Plaisance, she saw herself returning to a kind of shrine, so that she could pay homage to the dancers and the

38 Radner and Lanser’s discussion of coding in women’s expressive behavior is also helpful in that it faces the question of intentionality, acknowledging “all interpretation to be uncertain” while assuming “that plausible, if provisional, meanings can be inferred through an understanding of the situation in which they have been produced” (1993: 7).
self-confidence among women they have since inspired. From this example, it is clear that for some women, this dance has an explicit link to women's empowerment, spirituality, bodily acceptance, and the positive recovery of sexual expression.

Many books emphasizing the potential for empowerment through belly dance have been published since its emergence amidst the Women's Movement, including Daniella Gioselfi's *Earth Dancing: Mother Nature's Oldest Rite* (1980) and Rosina-Fawzia Al-Rawi's *Grandmother's Secrets: The Ancient Art of Belly Dancing* (2003). In *Earth Dancing: Mother Nature's Oldest Rite*, American belly dancer and proponent of New Age feminism Daniella Gioselfi writes that belly dance had "sacred and ritual beginnings as a mystery dance of life and an enactment of birth, created as a celebration of fertility and Mother Earth" (1980: 27). It is a feminine dance which should be understood not as a cabaret spectacle but as a practice playing a central role in the celebration of women in ancient times. Similarly, Rosina Fawzia Al-Rawi, a belly dancer who has lived both in the Middle East and Europe, links the movements of belly dance to ancient spiritual dances celebrating acts of fertility and the power of the woman. For Al-Rawi, in addition to being suited to the female body, belly dance is particularly beneficial to Western women because the unfamiliarity and the free sensuality of the moves can help them break out of restricting cultural norms (2003: viii).

Both of these books draw on the ancient elements of this dance form to celebrate a specifically feminine creativity. In this way women can link the performances in the present to those in the past, thereby forging connections between women beyond spatial and temporal boundaries, connections used as a source of support and empowerment. As noted by Sitara, a woman who teaches belly dance in Columbus, the spiritual nature of
the dance can also serve as a means of personal discovery, an individual exploration that is often thwarted by the artificial expectations of women in the West. When I asked her why she loves to belly dance, she told me:

Sitara: For me, it’s very Earth based, and, like, the reason I love it (pause) Some of it’s more spiritual than anything else. Um, I guess, ah hell, um (long pause). That’s kind of like “Why do you like chocolate?” I don’t know. I just do. You can deprive the body, but the soul needs chocolate. The same goes for dance (laughing). The soul needs dance, and my personal soul needs chocolate as well.

Sheila: What do you mean by the spirituality in it?

Sitara: Well, I’m pagan, and Middle Eastern dance is very, I mean granted if you want to be technical and you look at the history, more men than women do this dance. It is Middle Eastern, it is Middle Eastern equivalency of ballet in the Western world. It is a folk dance, but it’s very rooted in what comes naturally to the body, for the most part. It’s relaxed, it’s knowing your body and if you take the time to learn Middle Eastern dance, you’re gonna learn more about yourself.

The association of belly dance with the act of giving birth, a prevalent theme in the two books above, further serves to naturalize the dance as a source of specifically feminine power. Morocco (Carolina Varga Dinia), a woman who has been performing, teaching, and writing about the dance since the 1960s, has written articles in which she talks about her experience in the Middle East watching a woman use the motions of dancing, such as the “abdomen roll,” while giving birth to twins, literally “dancing the baby into the world” (2003). Through her descriptions of the event, Morocco explains how dancing releases the inherent knowledge of the body which is repressed by the technologies and ideas of modernity. She writes: “In remoter areas, where the West hasn’t bolluxed things up, all the women would gather around a woman in labor and do certain movements, encouraging her to do likewise, thus easing the birth and reminding each other that they shared the same destiny and experiences as women” (2003). Thus,
she is 1) reframing the dance in terms of ancient traditions of motherhood and childbirth.
focusing on women’s power through sexuality rather than their exploitation and 2)
offering a critique of the repressive forces of the West, such as the reliance on science,
which does not allow this natural feminine power to emerge as it should.39

The ideas brought forth in these articles are closely linked to those in Robbie E.
Davis-Floyd’s article “The Technocratic Model of Birth,” which looks at “the rise of the
male-attended, mechanically manipulated birth” (1987: 482) as a means of reinforcing
the dominance of the ideology of science and technology, institution over individual.

Davis-Floyd writes:

Shifting needs in our society enable women to work in a man’s world, sometimes
for equal pay, but no matter how early in life a woman begins her career, nor how
successful she is, she will still be living and working under the constraints of her
conceptual denial by the technocratic model of reality. Based as it is on a
fundamental assumption of her physiological inferiority to men, the model
continues her continued psychological disempowerment by the everyday
constructs of the culture-at-large and her alienation both from political power and
from the physiological attributes of womanhood” (Davis-Floyd 1987: 489).

According to Morocco, dance is a possible way to bring the practice of childbirth out of
such a technocratic model, which threatens to look at the woman as nothing but a
machine, and back into the realm of women and their bodies.40

I have also found in conversations with female dancers that appeals to how the
dance reveals what is “natural” to the body are used to critique the cultural expectations
informing the younger generation of women in particular. Sandy has been dancing non-

39 See also La Meri’s article, “Learning the Danse du Ventre,” in which she writes that the dance “was of
ritualistic origin and was, at that time, still performed at the bedside of women in childbirth...But the spirit
of the Occident had touched this holy dance, and it became the horrible ‘danse du ventre’” (1961: 43).

40 For more on the (re)location of reproductive bodies out of the private and into the social realm, see Horn
(1994).
professionally for eight years, although she stopped taking classes and performing three years ago when she was four months pregnant. While talking to me about the flexibility and potential for creativity with the dance, she said it was difficult to "mess up" in a clearly recognizable way, but at the same time:

...you see a lot of these younger girls that come in and are in it more for kind of the glam side, the glamour side, you'll see a mistake that they constantly make is that they push their hips up real high with their foot while they're shimmying and they do it in such a way that it becomes unnatural...you can actually see it when they're younger. But the reason most older people don't make that mistake is that you'll make it once, and then when your back hurts and you spend 2 days on your back when you're old and decrepit, and I'm sorry but it's gonna start when you hit 30, you're gonna start getting hit with this stuff.

Described in this way, older women are better equipped to perform the dance since they are guided by what feels right in their bodies instead of expectations of "glamour." For Sandy, when women try to align themselves with the "glam" image of the dance I described in the previous chapter by focusing more on what they think the dance should be rather than what feels right, the "unnaturalness" becomes visible and takes away from the beauty of the dance.

The practice of belly dance is also seen by many of the women with whom I am working as a way to escape the restrictions of the "beauty myth." Liz, who has been taking classes, but not performing, for six years, said to me in an interview, "Since the dance is seen as sexual or sensual it's nice to see that you can be sexy without being (holds palms three inches apart on front of her face, indicating a very small waist) like in American culture." Here, she removes sexuality from the standards of beauty in American culture so often presented in the media.
Such distancing from the standards of beauty of American culture is evident in the teaching style employed in the class I described at the beginning of this chapter. For example, in telling us that one of her best dancers wore a size XXXL and that “dancers wouldn’t wear hip scarves with jingly things if their butt wasn’t supposed to jiggle,” Shakira emphasized that a Western conception of the perfect body is not necessary, or even beneficial, for this type of dance. Similarly, she made a point to share with her students that she was once told that, in order to perform in Egypt, she would have to gain fifty pounds, or nobody would take her seriously, here explicitly highlighting a clear difference between the expectations of the female body in each country. Such statements as “The Pakistani like big booty” and “In Turkey, they love for the women to have flab” further support the idea that what would be considered imperfect by American standards is actually appreciated in other cultures and enhances the look of the dance. This explicit differentiation from other cultures calls attention to the arbitrary norms of beauty set in America and takes away their power, at least during the “play time” that is the belly dance class.41

Like Shakira, Sitara also tries to get her female students to use the dance to evaluate themselves and their bodies separately from the constricting norms so prevalent in America:

...they see it as beautiful, and I think that’s really good, because most women, I mean, I look at myself and think, yeah, you need to lose a little bit more weight there, and I think almost all women are that way...for the most part, it’s considered to be, most women struggle with it, and they hate what they see when they look in the mirror, they hate the way they look, and this dance forces you,

41 Such a “play” atmosphere exists in Sitara’s class as well. During an interview, she told me: “I make my students play, because I have a studio set up at my house, and I force them to play. ‘Smile and relax,’ ‘No, you need to breathe.’ ‘This is not rocket science. It’s ok if you don’t get it right today.’
you’re gonna learn to be beautiful and you’re gonna learn to love it. Because curves are the thing. If you don’t have curves, you can’t tell what you’re doing...and I really do think it forces them to see themselves in a different light. It won’t happen immediately, but over time they’ll see it. I mean I know because I did, I’ve been there with some of my students who have, who come in and I see them regularly. I see them once a week and how much they’re struggling and how much they hate what they weigh, because some of my students are pretty big, I mean easily over 200 pounds, and they start to see that they have mastered something that’s difficult with their bodies that they have been hating for so long...

Liz told me during an interview that “The class is kind of like a mini-community, a safe space.” As these last examples show, it is in this atmosphere that women feel free to explore their bodies outside of the constraints they feel in their everyday lives. The women entering the class are removing themselves from such constraining structures, and this separation is marked by certain specific action, including listening to Arabic music, wearing hip belts or other costumes, and, in the case of Shakira’s class, beginning with a meditation on the floor. All these factors work to set the space and time of the class as “different.” I draw here on the works of Arnold van Gennep in which he explains that each rite of passage is marked by the three phases of separation, marginalization, and reincorporation (1960). Once the women have marked their separation from conventions of the “outside world” through such means as costuming and music, the class becomes a liminal space where their role is ambiguous and can stray from the structures they encounter in the rest of their lives. Victor Turner, expanding upon the ideas of van Gennep, notes that “if liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from

42 Andrea Deagan has approached the dance as a rite of passage on her article, “Initiation: Coming of Age with Oriental Dance” (2004).

43 According to Christy Adair, after the Women’s Movement, “The emphasis on women only space was fuelled by a determination not to be defined by men and to create a positive space for women apart from the male-dominated structures” (1992: 228-229).
normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs” (Turner 1977: 167). As demonstrated in the previous examples, the liminality of the class setting can allow scrutinization of, as well as resistance to, some of the values and axioms of American culture.

Such liminality is by no means limited to the classroom. The feeling of being in “a moment in and out of time” (Turner 1977: 96) can also be experienced on the individual level. When describing her experiences dancing, Angela, who has been taking classes since 2000 and performs in the Columbus area, told me:

*Angela*: I don’t even think about it, actually... it’s completely (pause) in the moment. I have no idea what I’ve done when I’m done. I, I just know that I kind of got up there moving around and I can remember a couple of things, but if you ask me to repeat it I couldn’t *(laughing)*. It could be completely different no matter what piece of music. If I use the same piece of music over and over it’s completely different.

*Sheila*: Whatever strikes you at the moment?

*Angela*: Pretty much, yeah. It’s very liberating, actually.44

In her study of spirit possession cults in Morocco, Margaret Rausch lists several functions that these mostly female-centered activities serve, including helping women come to terms with their “overdetermined self/hood” (2000: 27); “letting off steam” (2000: 27); and “fulfilling the women’s needs to escape from their everyday life realities and to find a form of resistance, transgression and self-expression” (2000:28). Although

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44 While van Gennep and Turner’s ideas are useful here, they are also limiting in studies such as this. In their models, liminality is a time of scrutinization that ultimately leads to reintegration into society. This, however, is not the case with the belly dancers in Ohio who often take this sense of liberation with them after the liminal moment. Belly dancing does not necessarily serve to reincorporate people into society. We are left, then, with the following questions to be addressed at another time: What is difference between liminality and liberation? How can we expand upon the ideas of van Gennep and Turner to look at discourses of liberation versus discourses of integration?
the differences between the social and political contexts of post-colonial Morocco and post-women's movement United States are significant, there are notable overlaps in the purposes served by the practices of spirit possession described by Rausch and the practices of belly dance I have encountered in my own fieldwork. Rausch explains that "it is the limitations placed on individuals by societal status or roles, particularly female gender roles, and the 'accepted' forms of conduct attached to these roles, that leads these women to seek relief or compensation in spirit possession" (2000: 27). Once again, while the limits associated with female gender roles are clearly different in the two contexts, both practices, given the focus on individualization and often "losing oneself," allow us to see how human action can be a communicative force and an expression against dominant ideologies (2000:32) through both public and private outlets. Drawing on the works of Michel Foucault, Rausch approaches the body as a site where the structures of everyday life are both reinforced/reproduced and rejected/altered, and this approach is particularly useful in my own examination. While reinforcing the link between sexuality and transgression, women have also been able to reframe sexuality into something to be celebrated, not punished as was the case with Salome in Chapter Two.

In this chapter, I have focused primarily on the subversive/resistant elements of the dance, though I must pause here to note that an analysis of women who belly dance in the United States cannot be limited to the discourses of resistance. This becomes particularly clear in performance contexts, where the disjuncture between private experience and public perception is the most apparent. Moving on to belly dance

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45 For more on the connections between trance states and dance, see James Boddy's *Womb's and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (1989); Erika Bourgignon's "Trance and Ecstatic Dance" (2001); and Shakira's (Elizabeth Fannin) "Magic in the Dance: Exploration of Trance and Transformation (2005).
performances in the next chapter, I bring attention to the strategies of style employed by individual dancers, as well as how they are talked about by other dancers, in order to show how these women negotiate between the often contradictory meanings associated with the ambiguous genre of belly dance.
CHAPTER 4

STYLE AND RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

In my examination thus far of the meanings embedded in the public image of the dance and the emergent meanings of female empowerment since the 1960s, a definite disjuncture between the two begins to emerge. Belly dance classes can be designated as "safe spaces," that is, spaces set aside from the constraints of everyday life in which women are free to experiment with their own means of personal expression. The liminality of such "safe spaces" provides women with opportunities to separate themselves from and even subvert the often oppressive forces of everyday life. At the point when these women move out of these spaces and encounter the public and its expectations, they must deal with the negative stereotypes of the public image. In the words of Andrea Deagon, while offering the possibility for women to display their confidence with their bodies, "performance is also the place in which the subversive values of Oriental dance come up against the values of the dominant patriarchy...The values [a dancer] sees in the world of performance often conflict directly with what she has experienced and come to understand in the community of the classroom" (2004: 33). My own observations and conversations with female dancers have also revealed that
performances often create a disjuncture in which meanings are ambiguous\textsuperscript{46} and highly flexible, and it is at this disjuncture that I will focus my discussion in this chapter.

It is impossible to talk about belly dance performances in general, for the venues are quite diverse. For example, Shakira attempts to create a “safe space” for performances by holding studio parties for all her students. The invitation/announcement reads:

Please feel free to bring your significant other & kids. It’s a family atmosphere. It’s also “just us,” relaxed and fun, NO general public—like one big house party! There is usually open dancing after scheduled performers. Performers can dance to whatever they like—and they may! So be prepared for some “innovation” along with traditional Middle Eastern dance! There are also occasionally acts from other art forms. This is open to all levels of students, from people who’ve been studying 8 weeks to those who’ve been studying Middle Eastern dance and music for 20+ years. The idea is to create a fun, friendly, supportive atmosphere for ethical performers of various styles, ages (Yes, we DO encourage kids to get up and dance!), levels. It’s a Good Time!

The purpose of the studio parties is to give people a chance to perform in a non-judgmental setting in a non-intimidating space. They usually take place in the dining room of Nazareth Restaurant, a small Middle Eastern restaurant in Columbus with carpeting on the floor and fans on the ceiling. They are described in the following way by Shakira’s students:

...It’s also a very laid back, supportive atmosphere. It’s very, usually the majority of the people who are there are other dancers that you know or that are in the classes with Shakira or they’re friends or they’re family or they’re just people who are also dancers that Shakira has invited from other groups...So it’s a very supportive group of people and they know the dance and they appreciate what you are doing, so you can do something a little different and they’re not going to judge you for it because you don’t speak Arabic. They’re just like “Oh, she’s just having fun” and that’s really the spirit of it. If you’re having fun, you’re doing it right. [Angela]

\textsuperscript{46} In the words of Roman Jacobson, “Ambiguity is an intrinsic, inalienable character of any self-focused message...” (1960: 370-1).
It's a very laid back atmosphere, sort of like everyone could come, and people will perform, or people who are ready and want to perform, or it might be someone more like me that doesn't want to do anything in any big capacity. They're just doing it for fun. It's a much smaller group. It's other people who have gone through the same thing, and have a lot of the same backgrounds, and sometimes there's family, part of families there, like spouses. [Jennifer]

On the other extreme, many dancers perform in less supportive environments, like in certain restaurants and clubs, where they encounter people who expect them to play up to the stereotypical public image of the dancer:

So a lot of times the people who, some clubs can be really skanky. You're supposed to let people buy you drinks or go sit with particular customers, and that kind of club I just tell people to walk out right away when they ask you something like that and don't go back. That's, that's a different kind of industry. If they want bait they can hire, you know, some other profession. So, it can be really variable in finding, it's like finding an honest lawyer, to find a club owner who values the dance and values a good person doing it. [Shakira]

I don't enjoy restaurants that much. I mean, that's not what I should say. I enjoy doing restaurants. I don't like the stuff that comes with it...There is a Lebanese club here that used to be a restaurant that I worked at. And the owner's brother is drunk. I come in and I have harem pants on and a skirt, and he goes "Where's your meat?" and I said "What?" And he said "Where's your meat? There's a guy over there. Where's the skin? We want to see skin." And I'm like, you know, it is acceptable to dance without harem pants, and I looked at the rest of the restaurant and it was all families, and I just never went back. [Laylia]

The various venues (including, in addition to those above, seminar shows, birthday parties, senior homes, art galleries, weddings, elementary schools, large theaters, and cultural festivals), range from large and impersonal to small and interactive, from supportive to sleazy, so that the experience of dancer and the reception of the dance are always different. In each performance, the dancer is on display with the intention of being looked at, but the variety of venues available to dancers brings up the question: What role does the audience play in meaning formation? This question has been the topic of analysis among feminist film theorists, especially since the publication of Laura
Mulvey’s influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), which draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to examine the ways in which the objectification of women is part of the process of image-making. According to Mulvey’s essay, women are always objects of the male gaze, “coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (1975: 11). Within this paradigm, which is quite problematic, there is no such thing as an authentic “female gaze,” for when the female is the spectator, she takes on the active/masculine role, reinforcing the binary opposition between male and female, subject and object, while at the same time identifying with her own objectification. Hollywood cinema is geared toward the pleasure of men, and the voyeurism of the camera creates power differentials by disempowering those being looked at. Females exist in cinema merely as objects of viewing pleasure.

This idea of the monolithic “male gaze” came under much criticism as later feminist scholars began to re-evaluate the gaze in terms of finding a space for the “female gaze,” both in examinations of female genres and subversive ideological readings of images in mainstream media. Such attempts to re-evaluate the gaze incited debates over different conceptions of female spectatorship and the spectator as active in the construction of meaning as scholars attempted “to expand the terms of [psychoanalytic textual analysis] through specific attention to the possible “reading positions” of women viewers” (Walters 1995: 94-95).47 Taking into account these various reading positions, men are not the only ones who can “gaze” and derive the power of that position.

47 See also E. Diedre Pribram’s Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television, a collection of essays “rethinking women’s cultural positioning” (1988: 5), both as spectators and the ones being “viewed.”
Returning this discussion to the realm of belly dance performances, the role of the gaze plays a rather ambiguous role in the meaning of the dance. While the darkened lighting of theater settings and the often perceived sexuality of the dance can facilitate voyeurism and fetishism, so that the dancer is subject to the "gaze" of the audience, more interactive, small-scale performances provide opportunities for the dancer to look back. In addition, in each performance, who is doing the looking? The performer? The audience? Who makes up the audience? The public? Other dancers? Family members? Not surprisingly, the role of the gaze can shift back and forth between empowering and objectifying depending on the context of the performance. It is necessary, then, to look elsewhere to answer the question: How are the meanings of dance performances determined?

In dance performances, the viewer's attention is drawn to the movements of the body, and the body is used to communicate to the audience. Mary Douglas, in *Natural Symbols*, draws a connection between the body and the values of society, in that the "social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society" (1973: 93). Thus, the socially-constructed body can communicate the values of a society. When, as is most often the case, the values of a society are ambiguous and unstable, as in the United States today, what is communicated

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48 The communicative body is by no means limited to the realm of dance, as evidenced by the ways in which "body language" is highlighted in so many popular analyses of everyday interactions, from job interviews to dating.

49 For more on the social significance of the body, see Katharine Young's *Bodylore* (1993).
by the body is open to negotiation. This is precisely the case in belly dance performances, where the body becomes a central site at which to grapple with the issues of power constantly affecting women in the United States, including “socialization processes, control of women’s bodies, and commodification of women’s bodies” (Adair 1992: 61). Where potential objectification and potential empowerment meet, though, it is not enough to look at what is communicated at the level of body movement. Rather, I argue that the meanings come to be negotiated and articulated through expansive and delimited rhetorical strategies focused on style. 

Existing scholarly work on genre and style provide a good framework in which to explore the strategies employed by different dancers as they negotiate between the contradictory images and experiences of the dance. In “The Problem with Speech Genres,” Mikhael Bakhtin writes: “Any style is inseparably related to the utterance and to typical forms of utterances, that is, speech genres” (1986: 63). Although he refers here specifically to language, the importance of style categories in determining both genre and meaning easily extends to my examination of what is being communicated both verbally and nonverbally during belly dance performances. Given the flexibility of the dance (in that there is no one official or universally recognized standard against which to evaluate each individual performance), style delimitation is constructed by the dancers themselves.

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50 What is interpreted can also be influenced by different cultural associations. Shakira provided me with an amusing example of this, in which a famous Egyptian dancer was performing in a seminar show and came out in a costume that had been designed to display the signs of the Zodiac. Unfortunately, but she had no idea what it meant to an American if you put a crab front and center on the belt, and many in the audience had to hold back their laughter.

51 Dick Hebdige focuses on style as a point of cultural analysis in his book, Subcultural: The Meaning of Style, where he writes: “It is on the plane of aesthetics, in dress, dance, music; in the whole rhetoric of style, that we find the dialogue between black and white most subtly recorded (1979: 44-45).
to determine what constitutes acceptable Middle Eastern dance in different American performance contexts. As noted by Peter Seitel, of its many functions, "style mostly conforms an utterance to make evident the shape of its thematic truth, and hence to convey its meaning in a particular context" (1999: 72). The very intertextuality of this dance genre\(^5\) certainly plays a large role in shaping the overall meaning of each dance performance, but the stylistic features of the dance offer the flexibility to play with meanings in order to convey a certain message within the recognized genre.\(^5\) In addition, they become the means by which dancers evaluate different performances.

Seitel also writes:

> In each genre of verbal art, features of everyday speech, genre-specific usages, and individually created patterns form a repertoire of stylistic devices. To a performer, this repertoire is like an artist's palate of colors or a stone carver's collection of tools. The artist or crafts-person deploys these features to realize his or her vision, to depict forms and events in time and space. The same feature or tool in an artworker's repertoire can be used to create different effects, and the same representational need can be fulfilled by a variety of features (1999: 77).

Once again, although this discussion of style refers specifically to verbal art, we see a similar deployment of features like movement, music, costuming, and verbal strategies to situate the meaning of belly dance performances. I turn now to a closer

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\(^{5}\) In their discussion of genre and intertextuality, Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman note that "invoking a genre... creates indexical connections that extend far beyond the present setting of production or reception, thereby linking a particular act to other times, places, and persons" (1992: 147-8). This idea can easily be extended to the genre of belly dancing, where each successive performance and its components (costumes, music, choreography, etc.) incorporate to some extent the multi-directional flow of agency throughout a history of colonialism, world expositions, tourism, Orientalism, and the Western desire for the exotic on the one hand, and the emergent meanings of female empowerment on the other. For a good demonstration of this multi-directional flow of agency, see the film Satin Rouge.

\(^{5}\) Also applicable here is musicologist Leonard B. Meyer's view of style as a "series of choices made within some set of constraints" (1989: 3).
examination of how individuals use interpretive/rhetorical strategies with particular attention to style in order to denote certain levels of collusion with and distancing from what is conveyed through this dance genre.\textsuperscript{54}

Within the disjuncture between public perception and private experience, the dancers are aware of the ambiguity of the meaning of the dance as well as what the dancer has the potential to communicate, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Given this awareness, I argue that the dancers evaluate specific performances as acceptable or unacceptable depending on how they map onto various continua within cultural “quality space,”\textsuperscript{55} and it is attention to style that situates and resituates these performances in better and worse positions in this space. Style in the dance and how it is assessed by the dancers, like metaphor in James Fernandez’s “Persuasions and Performances: Of the Beast in Every Body and the Metaphors of Everyman,” can extend inchoate experiences into more concrete domains (Fernandez 1986: 17). That is, belly dance and conversations about it can become a concrete and recognizable locus through which to address larger, less-graspable issues.\textsuperscript{56} By focusing on stylistic features, and how they are used to situate specific belly dance performances within cultural quality space, the expansive and delimited strategies of the dancers really come into view.

\textsuperscript{54} Making a similar point in Acts of Identity: Creole-based approaches to Language and Ethnicity, R.B. Le Page and Andree Tabouret-Keller write, “the individual creates for himself the patterns of his linguistic behavior so as to resemble those of the group or groups with which from time to time he wishes to be identified, or so as to be unlike those from whom he wishes to be distinguished” (1983: 181).

\textsuperscript{55} I am extending the idea of quality space from James Fernandez’s work on metaphor (1986). Fernandez offers a topographical model of society and culture, where culture “is a quality space of ‘n’ dimensions or continua, and society is a movement of pronouns within this space” (1986: 13), focusing on how metaphoric assertion is one important way of moving pronouns about in this space.

\textsuperscript{56} In the future, I would also like to use Fernandez’s idea of “quality space” to look more closely at the actual metaphors used by dancers in describing the women, specifically the use of food metaphors. For
Through my fieldwork, I have found that belly dance, as defined by the dancers themselves, falls along several discursive continua. By referring to the stylistic features of individual performances, the descriptive terms used by dancers place performances variously on these continua and establish their positions in quality space. While such a focus provides a way for dancers to evaluate performances in the absence of generally recognized standards, it also allows them to resituate their and others’ placements by, for example, lowering one’s position on the continua; reorienting an evaluation; or focusing on an alternate continuum. Amidst the ambiguity a type of order begins to emerge through these rhetorical strategies, but it is never stable enough to become solidified into restrictive standards agreed upon by the community at large. Such rigid standards could defy the often frustrating but nevertheless invigorating freedom that inspires many women to belly dance in the first place. In addition, the continua on which the dance is situated call attention to the larger cultural processes affecting these individual standards of evaluation and, by extension, the dance as it exists in the United States today.

Consider the following excerpts from an email discussion among dancers of all levels from all over the United States. The discussion, which lasted over the course of a week, began with a question about how one can choose an appropriate costume for

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example, I have heard the Bellydance Superstars described as being like a steady diet of chili: dramatic and entertaining, but sometimes a little too much.

57 I follow here Michael Baxandall’s *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, in which he explores how descriptive words and categories offer “a basic conceptual equipment for addressing Quattrocento pictorial style” (1974: 150). As with words describing dance performances, the terms have a structure: “...one is opposed to, or is allied with, or is subsumed by, or overlaps another. It would not be difficult to draw a diagram in which these relationships were registered, but the diagram would imply a systematic rigidity which the terms in practice do not and should not have” (1974: 150). By focusing on the terms, one can see both the individual reactions to the paintings and the larger processes informing these individual standards of evaluation.

58 “...giving a positive interpretation to what is ostensibly undesirable” (Fernandez 1986: 10).
performing at a senior home, and this eventually became a springboard from which to bring up many different ideas about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable sexuality in the dance.

#1 For mixed groups of seniors, families with kids, young adults or teenagers, (which is all I get where I live) I pretty much stick to Saida/Raks Assaya, or Belidi sometimes with a glitzy but always a full coverage costume or a North Africa folkloric dance (Andalusian Court dance with scarves à la Amel Tafsout). I save the sensual (maybe sexy, who knows?) performances for the audience that is 99% belly dancers.

#2 If your performance is aggressively sexual, it's going to look sexual, whether you're wearing bedleh, a gown, or a sackcloth...Maybe I'm a prude, but when I hear dancers say they have to "tone it down" for a family performance I wonder about them. My approach to this dance is celebratory, not sexual, so it seems strange for me to think you'd have to tone down anything. I've seen these kinds of dancers perform wearing a full gown, without cutouts, and thought it was wayy PG-13, if not bordering on R...And on the other side of the coin, I saw a dancer at Disneyworld in Florida who performed wearing bedleh with a split skirt, and her show was as G as it could be.

#3 A couple of years ago I went to a show and the audience responded to one of the dancers by murmuring "She must be a stripper." I thought the same thing, actually, as I felt her dance was VERY sexual and sort of in-your-face about it. After I met the dancer I felt bad about thinking that because she was just the sweetest person, but I kept coming back to wondering why exactly her dance made me a bit uncomfortable...She wore bedlah with a split skirt, but there was never a moment where I wondered if I was going to see something I shouldn't, or where I thought she was going to fall out of her bra. I got out the tape and really watched her performance, and what I was finally able to figure out was that she was using a very wide-legged stance -- not particularly "nasty" but very self-confident and aggressive. She faced the audience straight-on instead of being angled -- again a more aggressive position -- and her gaze was direct to the audience. All in all, it wasn't particularly SEXUAL (like no pelvic thrusts!) but Aggressive -- and that was something I wasn't used to seeing, and I and the audience interpreted that as "sexual."

#4 I found it interesting that aggressive was perceived as sexy. The old double standard? Women are passive and receptive and never ever overtly sexy? (at least good women aren't).
#5  For the record, I don't see anything wrong with being sexy either. Sex is a fact of life. We're all sexual creatures. I do find overtly sexual behavior offensive when it is not in the appropriate venue, however.

#6  I consider myself to be a dancer who has sexual overtones in my dance and I am not ashamed of that in the least. (Dancers who have seen me dance might have something to say about this...???) This is not a dance about math. I have rarely seen dancers from native countries that do not have some sexual content in their dance. As I have said many times, this is not a child's entertainment. I think that dancers who are put off by any sexual energy in the dance might not like my performances. Dancers who see sexuality as a thread that runs through every aspect of human life will have a better understanding of what it is that I offer in performance. The problem is not with sexuality, but with confusing sleazy and sexy, I think.

#7  I think it is a dance about sexuality among other things.... the dance is about an interpretation on the physical and emotional levels, of the piece of music to which the dancer is dancing. Music can transmit many things and one of them is a sexual nature. The dance is about who we are at any given time as we manifest a piece of music through our dance, on many different levels. I can watch a dancer and accurately tell you all kinds of things about who she is, because she has told me through her dancing! It took me a few years to figure this out. I can even tell when the dancer is trying to hide who she is. We dance who we are and this is one truth that can never be denied. I think one of the things that is so scary about the dance for some people is that when you dance, if you are doing so with any integrity, people can see clear through to your soul!!

#8  One of my theories has been, we're all willing to 'forgive'—if she needs it 😊- or even [more likely] *enjoy* [a dancer] when she stands on stage and shimmies for what seems like 10 minutes with delicious expressions on her face, as if she were remembering the most wonderful, sensual pleasure. 😐...In other words, *real* emotion, including from sensuality, we can deal with...It's sex used *to manipulate* that bothers us. The dancer who gets the club job *because* she has an 'I'm available for more than dance' deliberately-cultivated [note use of word *deliberate* 🤷] 'message' or demeanor. The dancer who dances to whichever other dancer's boyfriend or husband is in the front row, making direct eye contact and clearly *saying,* not *re-experiencing genuinely*, um, certain things. 😇 The dancer who rolls her hands through her hair in an *affected* way while looking at the young man in the audience—as opposed to the dancer who lifts her hair and has the facial _expression_ of remembering or feeling a most delicious breeze. I think it's *non-genuine* stuff that bothers us, here as everywhere else. Just a theory, and I know there *is* more to it...but this could be a start.
These excerpts clearly highlight the instability of what is recognized as appropriate sexuality in dance performances, given the sexual availability associated with the public image as well as the idea among many women that the dance is inherently, and positively, sexual. One of the main issues underlying the discussion above is the following question: What constitutes the difference between “sleazy” and “celebratory”? Similar to the case in Anthony Shay’s look at Iranian solo improvised dance, what is appropriate in the performance is relative, for what one “might consider as normative dance behavior or performance, another individual might look upon as transgressive or even out-of-control” (Shay 1999: 136). What is especially fascinating here is how this issue is addressed through specific attention to the elements of style: costuming, stance, music, movement, demeanor, and facial expression.

It also becomes clear that dancers can and do resituate the basis of judgment by shifting the defining focus to a different stylistic feature. For example, in #1, by changing her costume for different audiences, this dancer calls attention to one of her own strategies of style in using her costume to determine how sexy her dance performance will be. In #2, however, we find that another dancer responds by asserting that the costume is not the main signifier of sensuality. Even if a dancer’s body is completely covered, the performance can still be inappropriate if there is an “aggressively sexual” attitude. Others respond in kind, highlighting the prominence of other stylistic features as signifiers of sexuality, so that the sensuality or sexiness can be marked as much by the dancer’s facial expression and “gaze” as by her attitude or the costume she is wearing. As these examples show, for those who choose to determine the performance’s
place in quality space by situating it along a sleazy—celebratory continuum, the
placement can be challenged by shifting the focus to another stylistic feature.

In addition, it is possible to situate a performance by referring to something that is
positioned lower on this continuum. For example, Sitara told me that sometimes, the
only difference between her and someone with “less pure” intentions is ethics:

Sitara: There is a very distinct line between this dance and anything you think
you might have seen that was similar but not ethical.

Sheila: What do you mean “not ethical”?  

Sitara: Strippers, prostitution, dancing for tips, while it may look like they are
doing belly dancing, the biggest difference between them and me is ethics, and
there is a very clear line...

Here, Sitara is claiming her positive position within quality space by distancing
herself from those who hold a lower position on the sleazy—celebratory continuum. At
the same time, as her style may not be visibly discernable from the “less ethical,” she
places herself positively on a different continuum of the quality space that emphasizes the
feeling of the dancing experience when she dances for herself instead of for others. In
this way, she also calls attention to another continuum in quality space: natural—
theatrical. 59

In the previous chapter, I showed how, during the 1960s and 1970s, particular
emphasis was put on the “natural” aspects of the dance as the “natural” dance became a
marker of celebrating femininity. This positive association with the natural (and
individualized) has extended into the present as women praise the dance for being “Earth-
based” [Sitara], “rooted in what comes naturally to the body” [Sitara], and incorporating

59 Mojca Ramšak, in her study of the appropriation of belly dance in Slovenia, also calls attention to this
significant yet flexible distinction between “natural” and “affected.”
“your own personal touch” [Jennifer]. Based on this standard of evaluation, a dancer can be evaluated negatively for being too theatrical or performative, for executing the individual movements, such as hip circles, shimmying, and head slides, in ways that are unnatural to the body. For example, when Sandy describes girls who are doing the dance for “the glam side,” she explains that they show incompetent technique when “they push their hips up real high with their foot while they’re shimmying” so that it becomes unnatural, and even bad for the body. This continuum is also referred to in #8 above, where the dancer makes a distinction between movements, demeanor, and facial expressions that are “affected,” that is, put on for the audience, and feelings that are “re-experienced genuinely.”

Since the focus of the dance is not always on female empowerment, performances placed on the theatrical end of this continuum can also be reoriented positively. A good example of this can be seen in certain dancers’ evaluations of Miles Copeland’s Bellydance Superstars. The dancers in the troupe are all given credit for good technique: “...the things I see these women do, I know as a dancer is not easy. But I think they convey to the public that they don’t just throw on a hip belt and start doing stuff. They’ve studied; [the public] understood that these are very accomplished dancers...” [Angela]. Viewed in this way, the troupe has a positive effect on belly dancers in general, for it can help the dance get the status in the public’s eye as a legitimate art form. As a result, there will be a bigger demand for dancers, which will create more performance opportunities and draw in more students, ultimately benefiting those who dance for a living. This mainstreaming of the dance, however, worries many dancers, and such theatrical dances are often reoriented negatively once again, for example, when
the troupe is described as “American or Disney acceptable, you know, young, pretty, hard bodied, not too many older women, not too many larger women” [Sandy]. Consider also the following description:

I think [Copeland’s] trying to make it generic, and I don’t think you can do that with belly dancing. There needs to be all sizes, not these people who are writing diaries saying “Oh, I need to lose ten pounds.” That’s not what belly dancing is. That’s the American part that we don’t want. [Aneaj]

Here, the troupe is criticized for putting too much emphasis on homogenizing the physical appearance and the choreography of its dancers. Three descriptive terms particularly stand out as well: “Disney acceptable,” “generic,” and “American.” With the words “Disney acceptable” and “generic,” Sandy and Aneaj call attention to Copeland’s branding of belly dance and how the dance’s empowering aspects can be lost as it becomes commodified and standardized in the public eye. A different yet overlapping continuum begins to appear: standardized—individualized. The choreographed movements of the Bellydance Superstars, while impressive, further separate the troupe from the dance’s connection to individual creativity. Similar anxieties are encoded into the word “American,” which in this case connotes commodification and standardized beauty. Because of these anxieties, Sitara similarly situates those who perform American style dances negatively in the quality space of the dance:

Sitara: ...I am not a fan of American belly dancing or cabaret.

Sheila: What specifically?

Sitara: A lot of it depends on what you’re doing. There are certain moves, if you, if I go to D.C. and do some of the things I’ve seen in American belly dance, I’ve just insulted most of the [Arab] population.

Sheila: What’s offensive about it?
Sitara: Um, if your legs are spread too far apart, that’s a big one. That also tends to imply that you have more for sale than just watching you dance. I mean unless you are specifically stepping out or doing a turn, you mean to spread your legs more than hip-width apart, but for the most part, your feet should not be more than hip-width apart. Otherwise, it’s an invitation.

Notice how she draws on ideas of cultural authenticity to evaluate the American style of the dance as she expects it would be evaluated in its cultures of origin. In this way, she uses the descriptive term “American” to situate it negatively in the quality space by questioning the cultural validity of the dance and associating it with inappropriate sexuality.

Shakira, on the other hand, sees nothing inherently wrong with the “American” aspect of the dance as long as it is labeled as such:

So it’s a very pop fusion Americanized style but they are saying that...this is a fusion Americanized style. It will remind you more of a jazz show than it would of watching one of the Egyptian greats, but they are hardworking artists and they are really nice people.

Here, she indicates that they are good at what they do at the theatrical and standardized ends of the continua, and as long as they do not misrepresent themselves or their dances, she sees no problem with their large, theatrical performances.

In the examples I have offered thus far, appeals to authenticity play an important role in these rhetorical strategies of style, but authenticity is very difficult to define, especially given the ways in which the dance has been transformed throughout its history of colonialism, tourism, and global commodification. After all, “a choreographer who stages dances from specific cultural traditions is, in fact, representing not only his or her personal view of how that dancing should appear, but by implication, the choreographer also represents the people who created the traditions” (Shay 1999: 170). This

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responsibility of representation is often problematic when the performer has no link to the cultural origins of the dance, as is the case with most of the women I have worked with in Columbus. To move away from the issues of representation, many dancers claim an authenticity which is fluid and not necessarily marked by a continuous link to the past. This view of authenticity in dance separate from tradition is addressed by Yvonne Payne Daniel, who challenges the idea that once dance is commoditized, as in tourism, it loses its meaning, potential for creativity, and authenticity. Using Handler and Saxton’s (1988) idea of experiential authenticity, she writes that despite the shift in meanings that accompanies the reframing of dance performances, the experience of the performance for both the performers and those watching can still be felt to be authentic. For example, Angela explains that the authenticity of the dance comes from the inside, from the feeling of the dance, which then manifests itself in the quality of the performance:

The costume is one part of it, steps are one part, music is another part, but the attitude is actually a lot of it...It’s your mind controls everything in your body, so if you think light as a feather, then your arm kind of floats light as a feather. [lifts arm to demonstrate] If you have the Roma attitude, your body just kinda translates that into how it carries all those movements out. So you can just, I don’t think you can do the dance without the mental attitude to go with it. You can break it down to do this step and this step and this step. But to watch a dancer who is just doing a series of steps in a lot different from watching a dancer who has completely incorporated the steps and the mindset of that culture. You can watch an Egyptian dancer who has just learned the choreography and are just doing the steps. They haven’t incorporated it into their body and their mind yet. And then you watch someone from Egypt doing the same steps, completely different performance because they feel it in their body and their mind. And that brings out the magical quality of the dance [Angela].

In this case, authenticity is not determined by cultural origins. Anybody, once they internalize the mind-body connection, is capable of dancing authentically. Some are just better equipped culturally than others. When Angela refers to the magical quality of the
Egyptian dancer, the authenticity of the performance extends outward from the dancer’s attitude (perhaps manifested in her facial expressions) and is more important than any kind of “authenticity” imposed from the outside.

*Angela:* It’s more the spirit of it than, well, this is the letter, this activity happened and, um, we tend to call them “Authenticity Nazis” because they say, well, this is not right, you didn’t use the right pattern.

*Sheila:* What are “Authenticity Nazis”?

*Angela:* They are the one who go around and declare that this is right, this is wrong...they are people who try and tell you that you can’t do certain things, that this wasn’t done then and, they try to do it with an air of authority and nobody, you know, really, nobody really actually knows...

With this view, it is possible to draw on culturally “inauthentic” stylistic features (such as dancing to music by the pop singer Shakira) and maintain a positive position in the quality space.

At the same time, if a dancer says she is performing a certain style, given the responsibility of representation and the power that accompanies it, she is obligated to make sure her stylistic features are consistent with what she is saying:

If you’re gonna call yourself an Egyptian style dancer, it’s kind of good to learn Egyptian style and research what they wear and how they wear it, because you can end up with something Turkish. You’ll be dancing to an Egyptian song, and that’s kind of not good” [Aneaj].

The way dancers label themselves is very important here, so that while an “authentic” link to Middle Eastern culture is not completely necessary for a good dance performance, it is necessary to stay stylistically consistent with the way the dance is labeled.

All performances placed positively in the quality space, then, are supported with some sense of authenticity. The most interesting aspect of these appeals to authenticity is
not whether historical or experiential authenticity is more credible, but rather how the descriptive terms signifying authenticity (such as "natural") and inauthenticity (such as "American") are used by the dancers in their rhetorical negotiation of the meanings of the dance.

As I have shown in this chapter, performances are evaluated by dancers depending on how they fall onto the continua above, but there is always the flexibility of reorienting one's position by:

1) Referring to a less desirable position on a continuum (for example, differentiating oneself from a stripper)

2) Changing the focus to a different stylistic feature (for example, asserting that what constitutes inappropriate sexuality stems not from the costume but from the attitude)

3) Reorienting an evaluation from negative to positive (for example, by recognizing a good technique in an "American" style performance)

4) Shifting to a different continuum (for example, recognizing good technique but commenting that there is no feeling in the performance).

Situating performances on these continua within quality space offers both flexibility and constraints for individual dancers. While the idea of experiential authenticity and what "feels right" can be seen as expansive as it opens up the dance to individual interpretations, for example, the responsibility of representation becomes delimiting, providing a way to maintain the integrity of the dance if individuals go beyond the ambiguously defined realm of what is "acceptable." By acknowledging the dance's cultures of origin, the responsibility of representation also maintains a sense of
continuity to the “folk roots” of the dance. In addition, these rhetorical negotiations reveal some of the larger anxieties informing the performances and receptions of these performances, including the implications of commodifying a source of resistance; the power differentials accompanying cultural appropriation; and the ambiguous views of female sexuality in the United States. Given these overarching issues, the discussions surrounding the Bellydance Superstars and the ways in which other dancers situate them within quality space truly highlight the tension between the employment of expansive and delimited strategies. The troupe is certainly expansive by providing sources of publicity and funding for dancers, but for many, especially those who have entered the dancing world because of its focus on bodily acceptance and individual creativity, too much of the power of the dance is lost through this expansive strategy, where the choreographed movements and coordinated costumes leave little room for personal improvisation.

The numerous discourses informing each performance, as well as the personal experiences of each dancer, create a constant need to define and negotiate what exactly is being conveyed through the dance. This becomes even more pertinent for professionals who dance for a living, in that they are forced to engage with both the connotations of Orientalist fantasy and the potential for empowerment, navigating the discourses in a way that will provide a paycheck and maintain the integrity of the dance. In this chapter, I have not tried to find the definitive way by which the dance is evaluated, for I do not believe one exists. Rather, I hope I have succeeded in calling attention to the ways in which dancers respond when they find themselves in the middle of the often contradictory discourses informing the dance and its performances in the American context.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

A prominent theme in this study has been the ambiguity of belly dance and its perception as it has been informed by so many often contradictory discourses in its transnational contexts. Susan Stewart has addressed similar tension and ambiguity between creativity and predetermination in her study of poetry in “Lyric Possession” (1996). She calls attention to how works can be “haunted” by the structure, content, meter, etc. of other works, while noting the possibility of creativity within tradition. Meanings are both embedded in and emerging from the work of a poet. Using the metaphor of possession, she highlights that often the embedded meanings are unintentional, in that the writers are “spoken through” without their even realizing it. Although she is writing about this kind of “possession” in poetry, this can easily extend into other realms of expressive behavior. If we look at dance as a kind of poetry in motion, meanings are both embedded in the movements and costuming of individual performances and emerging from them by means of individual creativity.60 Situating the dance within larger cultural processes, from colonialism and feminism, I have focused specifically on female dancers in and around Columbus, Ohio in order to examine what rhetorical strategies are employed by

60 According to Diedre Sklar, “All movement must be considered as an embodiment of cultural knowledge...” (2002: 30) and one of the purposes of this project is to look at what cultural knowledge is embodied in the movements and style of belly dance in the United States.
individuals as they find themselves engaging in this practice and identifying with an image that is encoded with sometimes problematic meanings.

As I have shown, the belly dancing body is a site of contestation where meanings are constantly shifting. A close look at the appropriation and modification of belly dance in the American context reveals the ways in which several local histories have been annexed by American dancers. For example, by drawing on something clearly not American, the appropriation of this Middle Eastern dance has been a way of resisting the hegemonic views of appropriate female sexuality and standardized beauty (as well as the accompanying dangers of commodification). Returning once again to Mignolo and Appadurai’s ideas about globalization, it is possible to look at American belly dancing as a case in which local histories are meeting local histories to resist the hegemonic imaginary, which explains many women’s resistance to Copeland’s troupe. Given the huge impact of commodification and the allure of the sensual dancer in the Western imagination, though, especially on those who dance professionally, dancers must be strategic in this resistance.

Focusing specifically on the field of folklore, Steve Zeitlin addresses the need to employ both expansive and delimited rhetorical strategies in order to “disseminate and advance the core ideas of the field” (1999: 6). In doing so, he highlights some of the key issues people must face when they associate themselves with a stigmatized or marginalized group, issues which clearly extend to the dancers in this study. Working between the desire to maintain the raison d’être of the community and the need to make

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61 “The delimited stance is necessary to guard our centers of power—the folklore departments in academia and the funding agencies in the public sector. It is also necessary to delineate the core training and ideas that constitute the field. An expansive strategy is necessary if the field is to advocate successfully for itself and grow” (Zeitlin 1999: 7).
the group available to outsiders (for funding, networks, publicity, etc.), the rhetorical management of one's position is extremely important. As I showed in Chapter Four, for the dancers in this study, this rhetorical management takes place through a particular attention to style as the women situate performances along the flexible, evaluative continua within cultural quality space.

I have tried to demonstrate throughout this study that the practice of belly dance in the United States and the discussions surrounding each performance, although not publicly controversial and overtly political, can be indicators of issues that are. Cultural expressions are always part of a "larger-than-local" context, so that the politics of culture and the culture of politics are closely intertwined. It is important to realize that art, music, and dance "operate as part of the political arena - not simply as one of its more trivial reflections" (McClary 1991: 27). In the case of belly dance in its trans-national contexts, for example, we quickly encounter issues involving the power of representation. According to Anthony Shay, "Representation constitutes a form of power, and any artist who appears in public contexts, whether or not one conceives of his or her position in terms of providing representation, exercises that power through words and choreographic images" (1999: 169). Thus, even though a woman may be dancing "in the moment," experimenting with her individual creativity and making no claim to an "authentic" link to tradition, the moment she steps onto a stage in front of an audience expecting to see belly dance, the power of representation becomes an issue. The "larger than local" is inescapably ingrained in the local.

In addition, like so many other cultural expressions of resistance, this dance faces the challenges of being incorporated into the mainstream. What happens when this type
of "folk resistance," originating outside of, and in reaction to, the mainstream, is then repackage and sold as female empowerment? For example, while walking through a Barnes and Noble bookstore, I came across a gift set called The Art of Belly Dance: A Fun and Fabulous Way to Get Fit. On the back of the box was the following:

GETTING FIT HAS NEVER BEEN SO MUCH FUN. Women have been practicing the ancient art of belly dance for centuries. This dance that celebrates both feminine beauty and feminine strength is the perfect fitness solution for any woman looking to spice up her workout routine. The slow movements of belly dancing are great for shaping and toning muscles all over the body, while fast steps combine into excellent cardio workouts. This fully integrated kit features a step-by-step DVD; a CD with authentic belly dance music; a fully-illustrated, 96-page guide to the history and techniques of belly dance; an adhesive body jewel to decorate your belly; and four metal finger cymbals, or zils, to create your own music – everything you need is included.

While such mass marketing of pre-packaged belly dancing, as well as the "feminine beauty and feminine strength" it promises, gives more women access to the dance than before, what gets lost in the process of commodification? What happens if the Bellydance Superstars become the public face of belly dancing that Miles Copeland hopes for? While they are clearly talented and have the potential to draw in new dancers, what will these new dancers find valuable about the dance?

Attempting to answer these particular questions lies outside the scope of this study, but the questions themselves have a significant effect on the dancers I have been working with in terms of their varying employment of expansive and delimited strategies. There is a fear among some dancers that the dance will become completely mainstreamed, de-emphasizing individual creativity and acceptance of all body types and thereby losing the power of the margins. I argue here, however, that it is through flexible rhetorical strategies in internal evaluations of the dance that women have been able to
define and redefine the meanings of the dance, allowing it to evolve in shifting contexts without completely abandoning the power of the margins that many women have found so valuable. As I conclude this study, it is my hope that this close look at belly dance in the United States has provided at least a glimpse of the many power dynamics working to shape the cultural expressions traveling and transforming in an increasingly globalizing world.
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