Belly Dancing: Arab-Face, Orientalist Feminism, and U.S. Empire

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The winner gets to tell the story.

—Renda Dabit, belly dance manager

In the winter of 2004, I went to Dhamaal, a very popular South Asian music party in San Francisco. Dhamaal draws a mixed crowd of South Asian, Latino(a), African American, Asian American, and white American hipsters of all ages who dance to remixed South Asian folk music and sip chai. However, that night I was in for a surprise. Four white women sailed onto the stage and gyrated in eclectic outfits that were a mix of Indian and Middle Eastern style, their tattoos and jewelry shimmering in the blue light. I was simultaneously amused, intrigued, and puzzled. Why on earth were these women performing a dance associated with the Middle East at a South Asian event? I wondered. Why was such an Orientalist performance being staged at an alternative music party? Why were only white women performing onstage and not Arab, let alone South Asian, dancers?

Over time, I realized that belly dancing is a pervasive phenomenon that is increasingly popular among U.S. women, particularly white women, of different ages in the Bay Area and also around the country. Middle Eastern restaurants and dance parties in the United States have often featured belly dance shows, but belly dance classes have become especially trendy among non-Arab women across the United States since the 1990s. I interviewed belly dance students, performers, teachers, and managers in the Bay Area to explore: why is belly dancing so popular among non-Arab women in the Bay Area?[1] Why has it exploded at a moment when Arab Americans themselves have been profiled and attacked during the War on Terror? What does this embodied performance of putatively "Middle Eastern culture" reveal about post-9/11 U.S. nationalism?

This article reflects on what it means for American women to stage Middle Eastern dance at a time when the United States is engaged in war and occupation in the Middle East and there is intensified preoccupation with the

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figure of the Arab and Muslim "other," and particularly with the image of oppressed Middle Eastern and Muslim femininity. Performances by American belly dancers are not without their aesthetic and sensual pleasures, and there is indeed beauty and virtuosity in the art of belly dancing. At the same time, the politics of dance forms that travel, such as belly dance, are important to consider, because they allow us to trace historical connections between the Middle East/West Asia and the United States/"the West" and the movement of bodies that migrate to the metropole.[2] As I argue in this article, belly dancing performances are entangled with the imperial engagements that link the United States and the Middle East and reveal a deeper politics of imperialism, racialization, and feminism in this moment of U.S. empire. The massive appeal of belly dancing and its growing resonance with white American women since 2001 needs to be situated in relation to contemporary gender and nationalist politics, and I will demonstrate that belly dancing has become a popular site for the mobilization of "whiteness" and "Americanness" in relation to Arab/Muslim femininities and masculinities.

I focus here primarily on women who study, perform, or teach belly dance, and less on audience members, because I am interested in understanding what draws American women to embody "Middle Eastern" culture through dance. Talking to belly dance students and performers, not just watching performances, is important to understanding the political and social meanings that these women invest in this performance in relation to gender politics, nationalism, and racialization. Belly dance is a highly performative genre, and as Priya Srinivasan observes, "it is the corporeal 'liveness' of Orientalist spectacle," manifested through dance, "that brings such an overwhelming response for white American audiences."[3] I found that most women who study belly dance are interested in performing, not just studying, dance and for many it is a way to conjure up a certain kind of "glamorous" self or stardom. Undoubtedly, belly dance performances are shaped by the context of reception, and I will touch on the ways in which the politics of reception figures in dancers' understanding of femininity, sexuality, race, and nation in performing for "Arab," "American," and "male" audiences.

Imperial Feelings and American Orientalism

Dance theorists have emphasized that "as an embodied social practice and highly visual aesthetic form," dance "powerfully melds considerations of materiality and representation" and that dance stages the "structure of feeling that is generative of national difference."[4] I argue that belly dancing is a

site for performing, and interpreting, what I call the "imperial feelings" of the present moment: the everyday "structures of feeling" that undergird what William Appleman Williams called "empire as a way of life."[5] Imperial feelings are the complex of psychological and political belonging to empire that are often unspoken, sometimes subconscious, but always present, the "habits of heart and mind" that infuse and accompany structures of difference and domination, drawing on Edward Said's seminal work on "structures of attitude and reference" that are part of the "cultural topography" of empire.[6] The varying sentiments associated with the United States' imperial role have been intensified since 9/11: anger, loathing, fear, uncertainty, ambivalence, apathy, denial, and dissent. U.S. imperial culture also displays feelings of imperial guilt, the "self-scrutiny and self-loathing that follow among decent folk" about the violence inflicted on others, both outside and within the United States.[7] Belly dancing is appealing in the present moment because it offers a site where these imperial feelings, including the ambivalence about empire, are embodied and expressed, and where white as well as nonwhite American women can constitute and perform their Americanness and femininity through a liberal, multicultural vision of the nation.

U.S. imperialism rests on a multicultural nationalism, or what Randy Martin calls the production of the "composite body" of the nation, that is constantly reinvented in relation, as well as opposition, to other peoples, places, and ways of life. Dance, like other forms of popular culture and performance, has long been a vehicle for negotiating cultural difference within the nation, and in the post-9/11 moment, these negotiations are layered with deepened anxieties about the relationship of the United States to the Middle East and, in particular, to Arab/Muslim femininities as well as masculinities. In the Bay Area, it is not just white women who are drawn to belly dancing, but also Asian American women, Latinas, and African American women, although they remain in the minority. At a time of overt U.S. investment in dominating the Middle East and the occupation of Iraq since 2003, not to mention the post-9/11 "homeland security" projects of monitoring and targeting Arab, Muslim, and South Asian populations within the United States, it is critical to examine the popular manifestations of Orientalism in American culture and the ways different groups of men and women relate to, and produce, a range of "imperial feelings."

Belly dancing has become a site for staging a New Age feminism and liberal Orientalist perspective on Arab and Muslim women, illustrating what Said called the "neo-Orientalism" of the present moment.[8] Orientalism continues to be a deeply appealing, binary frame for imagining the "West" in opposition

to the "Orient" or the "East"—a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient," through the production of "an idea that has a history and tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that has given it reality and presence in and for the West."[9] The present moment of U.S. Orientalism builds on earlier imaginings of the "Orient," and of the "Middle East" specifically, that have evolved in response to different encounters with, and fantasies of, "Arab culture" and "the Muslim world." Orientalist forms of popular culture have a long history in the United States and are expressions of an American Orientalism that is multivocalic, evolving, and cumulative, building on the sediments of earlier representations of the "Orient," and situated in the particular relationship of the United States to the "Orient," as distinct from that of European colonial powers.[10]

In contrast to Britain or France, for example, the United States did not have a direct colonial relationship with the Middle East but has had a history of covert interventions and non-territorially based policies to assert its political, economic, and military interests and hegemony in the region, especially since World War II.[11] Furthermore, the United States has a long history, since its wars in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines in 1898, of "imperialism without colonies" or of "informal empire."[12] This neocolonialist model is rooted in what some call the strategy of "New Empire," promulgated by Theodore Roosevelt and other early twentieth century figures who wanted to expand U.S. economic and military power without the burden—and stigma—of administering overseas colonies.[13] However, Neil Smith argues that 1898 was not a sharp break between "formal" and "informal" modes of empire, but rather a transition in evolving forms of U.S. expansionism that continued to use territorialized forms of domination, globally and also domestically (confining Native Americans; enslaving African Americans; and importing Asian, Latin American, and Arab labor).[14] This imperial expansion and conquest of new geographic and cultural frontiers was accompanied by the appropriation and exploration of "other" cultures, which shaped the crafting of a distinctly "American" national identity.

Images of the "Orient" and processes of cultural appropriation are key to the everyday cultures of U.S. imperialism and imperial feelings, for they have long provided Americans with "opportunities for creating selves and settings of aesthetic appeal and social charisma" and with a "foil for the 'progress' that many Americans so assiduously pursued as their birthright and destiny."[15] Orientalist images of Muslim "infidels" and "barbaric" Arabs have historically permeated U.S. popular culture, providing an antithesis for American national identity and helping to legitimate U.S. imperial expansion and racial

domination, including its interventions and support for colonialist projects in the Middle East. American Orientalization of Muslims and Arabs has a long history that can be traced to the foundational Holy Land myths of the Christian settlers and the U.S. Navy's war with the Barbary states (early "terrorists" in the Mediterranean) in the 1780s.[16] During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United States ventured into trade with the Middle East during what Mark Twain described as the "Gilded Age," and American missionaries, tourists, and merchants contributed to racist as well as romanticized notions of the "Orient" that was imagined as "exotic" as well as "backward."[17] These stereotypes crystallized in archives of American Orientalism that were shaped by historical events, including U.S. support for the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the creation of the state of Israel in the Middle East in 1948, the overthrow of Mossadegh in Iran and installation of the Shah in 1953, the attack on Beirut in 1958, the OPEC oil crisis of the 1970s, the American hostage crisis of 1979, and the two wars on Iraq.[18] Strikingly, the repertoire of American Orientalism has remained relatively stable as U.S. strategic, economic, and political interests in the Middle East have drawn it more deeply into the region.

Given this history of growing U.S. involvement in the Middle East, perhaps it is not surprising that an Orientalist imaginary of the region as fundamentally antimodern and antidemocratic persists and permeates mainstream media in remarkably unsubtle ways. According to Amy Koritz, the perpetuation of a rather stark form of Orientalism in modern dance performances by white women who imagine the Middle East only confirms the fundamentally "binary opposition" of Orient/Occident that Said critiqued.[19] The repertoire of images of wily, despotic, and fanatical Arab and Muslim males—and the accompanying images of oppressed but sensual and mysterious females—has justified these various imperial encounters in the region, attempting at times to distinguish between "good" Arabs (our allies) and "bad" ones (our enemies), a pattern that recurs today.[20] The lurid Orientalism of the post-9/11 moment only reinforces the exaggerated civilizational distinctions and cultural arguments produced by present-day Orientalists and "terrorism experts," from Bernard Lewis and Steven Emerson to David Horowitz and Glen Beck, but they also work their way into liberal spaces, an issue that deserves greater attention.

Furthermore, I think that contemporary processes of auto-exoticization need to be considered from multiple angles: why, given, the glaringly Orientalist nature of belly dancing performances, is it still possible for them to flourish in liberal spaces in such seemingly predictable ways?[21] Why is this Orientalist imaginary about the Middle East in belly dancing so significant to

a particular variant of American liberal feminism? I argue that liberal conceptions of the American female "self" are key to answering this question, for it is liberal consent to U.S. empire that is, as always, important to secure and yet often more difficult to critique than overtly racist, hyperpatriotic variants of U.S. imperial nationalism. Liberal humanitarianism has long been used to mobilize support for colonial interventions or policies and to justify Western "benevolent imperialism," as is the case with present-day U.S. military interventions that are legitimized through a discourse of human rights and women's rights.[22] The preoccupation with oppressed, veiled Arab and Muslim women is at the heart of the neo-Orientalist discourse of U.S. empire, including its liberal feminist variants, in the current moment. Belly dancing performances demonstrate the usefulness of (liberal) Orientalism in negotiating the relationship of individuals to nation and empire and, I argue, in reconciling with U.S. imperial power through a discourse of bodily liberation.

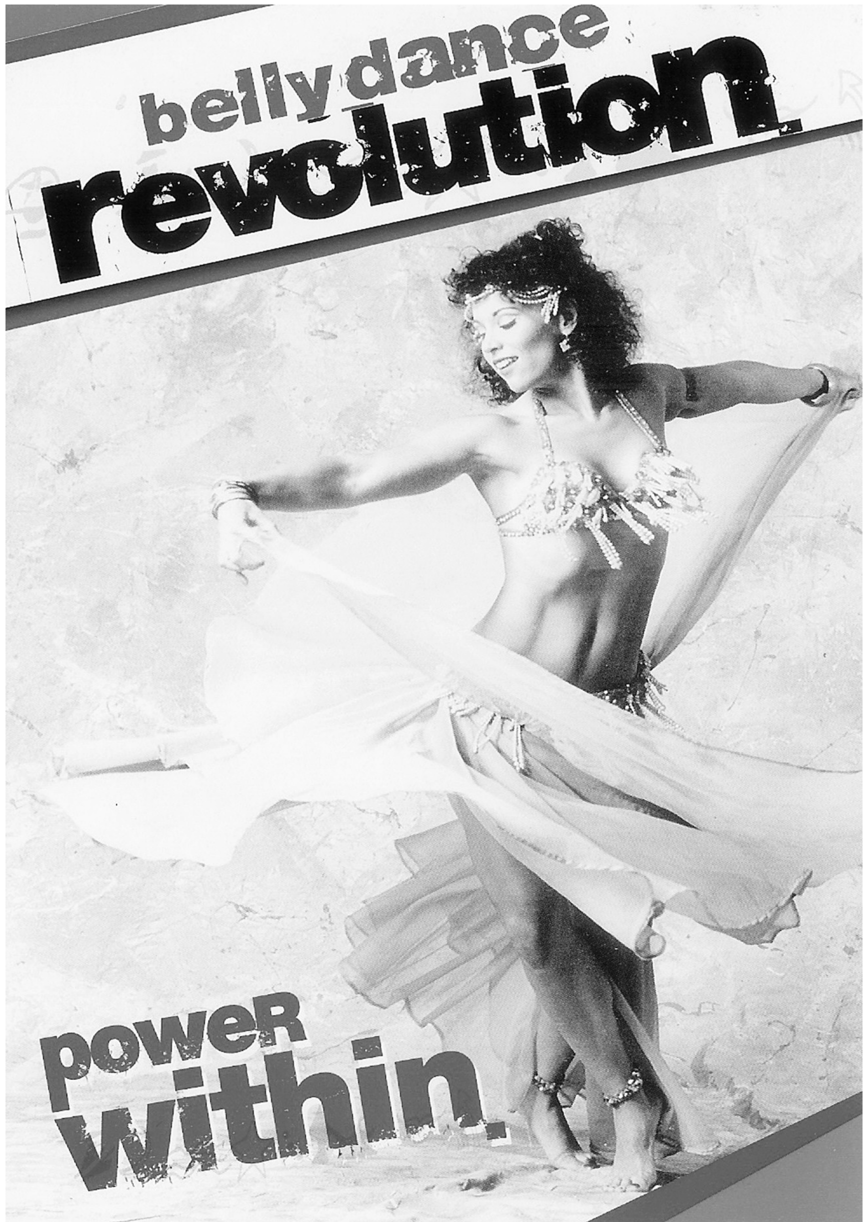
Many of the contemporary texts on belly dancing, including the lavishly illustrated books by non-Arab authors, reinscribe Orientalist narratives and images of Arab women and cultures, and reproduce gendered tropes such as the "harem."[23] Originary narratives trace American belly dancing to 1893, when an American, Sol Bloom, returned from the Middle East with Syrian and Algerian dancers, including the famed "Little Egypt," who performed at the Chicago World's Fair.[24] The scandal surrounding the exotic Dancing Girls boosted the profits of the exposition, underscoring that transnational cultural tourism and commodification have been part of belly dancing spectacles ever since their introduction to the United States. Turn-of-the-century Hollywood films featured Orientalist versions of Middle Eastern dance, such as *Passion Dance* and *Salome*, and modern U.S. dancers such as Ruth St. Denis and Maud Allen performed "Oriental dance" with veils.[25] The heightened interest in what was variously called "danse du ventre," "hoochy coochy," or "nautch dance" sparked a global circulation of dancers.[26] Arab dancers began performing at other world's fairs in the United States and Europe, and Western dancers began traveling to Egypt, developing a cabaret form with Western-style orchestras in American dance halls in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[27] Belly dancing was (re)invented as a highly sexualized, nightclub performance that was then exported back to Cairo and other Arab cities to be performed as "local" culture for tourists.[28] This "hybrid dance style" is still mutating into new forms and continues to be shaped by encounters between imperial fantasy and global markets and local capitalisms and cultural economies.[29]

Liberal Feminism, Goddess Power, and Arab America

Belly dancing has been intertwined with liberal feminist ideas about "Middle Eastern culture" since well before the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the post-9/11 War on Terror. As belly dancers I spoke to pointed out, and as documented by Barbara Sellers-Young, belly dancing flourished in San Francisco in the late 1960s at clubs such as the Baghdad and Casbah.[30] By the mid-1970s, hundreds of women in the Bay Area were taking belly dance classes and performing at nightclubs and restaurants, and belly dance journals such as *Habibi* and *Arabesque* were founded in California and New York.[31] In fact, an American belly dancer, Roman (Bert) Balladine, received an award from Oakland mayor Jerry Brown for making belly dancing "one of the state's most popular forms of exercise."[32] California and particularly the San Francisco Bay Area are thus important sites in the evolving history of belly dancing and its resignification in the context of liberalism, feminism, and multiculturalism.

Two major factors fueled the appeal of belly dancing in the age of flower power and political protest and continue to be important today. First, the 1960s and 1970s were a period of second-wave feminist activism marked by a focus on the "body as a site of pleasure and discovery," especially for white liberal feminists.[33] Dancers such as Daniella Gioseffi, a self-described "multimedia artist and feminist . . . concerned with women's rites and . . . women's rights," connected belly dance to childbirth rituals, female sisterhood, sensuality, and New Age spirituality and performed for the National Organization of Women.[34] However, feminists had an ambivalent relationship to belly dancing; for example, in 1970, some women's groups protested a belly dance performance in Berkeley because they viewed belly dancing as objectifying women's bodies.[35] This tension still marks discussions of belly dancing, reflecting an ongoing feminist debate about sexualized uses of the female body and sexual commodification. Furthermore, Stavros Karayanni observes that American belly dancing seems to primarily stage a heterosexual femininity and elides the homosocial potential of the dance.[36] However, what further complicates the debate about sexualized performance in belly dancing, and what I focus on in this essay, is that it draws on persistent clichés about hypersexual "Eastern" women and cultures, evoked through "scantily clad, opaquely veiled dancers."[37]

The second factor underlying the popularity of belly dancing in the civil rights era was the emerging ideology of cultural pluralism that fostered the


belly dance
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display of ethnic symbols by immigrant groups. Anne Rasmussen notes that popular culture was shaped by "a new adventuresome and cosmopolitan American public" that traveled overseas, including to the Mediterranean.[38] Urban nightclubs and restaurants catered to this taste for the "exotic" by hiring Arab musicians and dancers.[39] The flourishing of belly dance coincided with the growth of the Arab American community, by now two or three generations old, that participated in this cultural production.[40] This highlights a complex issue that is given little attention in contemporary writing on belly dancing in the United States: the ambiguous relationship of Arab Americans themselves to representations of "Middle Eastern" culture. Rasmussen notes that the performance of Arab identity by Arab Americans was not based on the "indigenous or community life" of Arab Americans but on a "set of symbols they came to know in the Western world," such as pyramids, sheiks, and harems, that was "exotic—even to themselves."[41] In the music performed by Arab American artists, there was a "haphazard fusion of Turkish, Greek, Armenian and Arab musical styles, languages, and cultural customs,"[42] producing a generic "Orient" that is "by nature and in effect inexact and composite."[43]

Figure 1.
"Belly Dance Revolution: Power Within." Postcard. Courtesy of Visionary Dance in Seattle, Washington.

Rasmussen's research on the role of Arab American musicians hints at the often obscured question of labor in relation to belly dancing. I will discuss the layered, and often contradictory, relationship to belly dancing for Arab American entrepreneurs, who continue to perform in the background in a variety of roles, from restaurant owners to musicians, providing cultural authenticity and access to the community but also labor. Belly dancing is a site where key issues of immigration, transnationalism, labor, gender, and race collide, and needs to be situated in relation to the underemphasized political histories of Arab communities in the United States.[44] It is interesting to consider the consumption of "Middle Eastern" culture in the Bay Area because it is the home of sizeable Arab immigrant communities (mainly of Lebanese, Palestinian, and Egyptian origin) dispersed across San Francisco, San Jose, Daly City, and other towns.[45] Some Arab Americans from the area are involved in the belly dance industry as event managers, performers, or teachers, but this is a genre that is largely dominated by non-Arabs, locally and nationally.

The question of Orientalism and auto-exoticization is complicated for Arab Americans, as observed by Renda Dabit, a Palestinian American woman who is the owner of Henna Garden Events and Entertainment, an agency that books belly dancers. As implied in the epigraph, Dabit understood that

any representation of Arab culture must be linked to the larger terrain of war and colonization in the Middle East and racism in the United States. Popular performances of "Arab" culture for a general audience by Arab Americans themselves are still relatively limited, and this cultural production does not express the diversity and specificity of Arab music, dance, or theater, which is barely known in the United States. The violent insertion of Arab Americans into the public sphere with the backlash and racial profiling of Muslims and Arabs after 9/11 has led to some contestation of Orientalist stereotypes by Arab Americans themselves, including a younger generation of performers, comedians, writers, and artists, but it has not been able to sufficiently challenge, let alone stem, the tide of Orientalist cultural production.[46]

Anti-Arab Racism and Tribal Multiculturalism

Contemporary U.S. multiculturalism has emerged in the context of intensified, transnational flows of media, capital, commodities, and people. However, while popular trends have commodified "Indo-chic" or "Asian cool," it seems difficult to utter the phrase "Arab cool."[47] Despite the recent proliferation of belly dance classes and clothing, hookah bars, and Arab music in urban U.S. popular culture, the word "Arab" is hardly ever used in connection with these products or practices, and they are more commonly glossed as "Middle Eastern." This naming might be technically accurate, as the Middle East includes countries such as Iran and Turkey that are not Arab but are associated with these cultural forms. However, the evasion of the word "Arab" is also due to the historical ambivalence in the United States regarding Arab identity and particularly to Arab nationalism, which has generally been perceived as a threat to U.S. imperial policies and interests in the region.[48] In general, there has been a persistent strand of anti-Arab racism in U.S. culture, heightened during events such as the Arab-Israeli war, the OPEC oil crisis, the first Gulf War, the 9/11 attacks, the current war in Iraq, and the ongoing, U.S.-backed Israeli occupation and incursions into the West Bank and Gaza.[49]

This history has made the category of "Arab" a vexed one in the United States.[50] Arab identity has historically been largely invisible and also racially ambiguous, falling between the cracks of the white/nonwhite binary and not officially recognized as an ethnic identity.[51] Despite discourses of cultural pluralism and later multiculturalism, "Arab" identity has historically been difficult for Arab Americans to perform in the public sphere due to the repressive domestic policies targeting Arab Americans that accompanied U.S. overseas interventions and involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict, well

before 2001.[52] Some scholars suggest that this repression and broader anti-Arab racism led to a general cautiousness within Arab American communities about publicly displaying Arab identity that dissolved, partially, in later generations and with the growth of pan-Arab nationalism in the 1960s.[53] While contemporary multiculturalism has made particular aspects of "Middle Eastern" and North African culture—particularly Morocco, which has been associated with counterculture movements since the 1960s—safe for appropriation by mainstream American culture, it has done so by excising "Arab" from the mix.[54] This is not surprising, for the current mainstreaming of belly dance has occurred while the War on Terror has targeted Arab, Muslim, and South Asian Americans as potential "enemy threats" to the nation. Much of the neoconservative discourse of the War on Terror suggests that it is essentially a "clash between civilizations," a conflict rooted in religious or cultural differences between "Islam" and "the West."[55]

The problem is that liberal multiculturalism has attempted to respond to the racial profiling of Arabs and Muslims through "culture talk," focusing on cultural and religious difference and evading the U.S. state's political, economic, and military interventions in the Middle East.[56] Within this liberal multicultural framework, rejecting racism involves "respect" for cultural differences, often proven through symbolic performances and the consumption of cultural commodities. Belly dancing, too, is perhaps a signal of liberal "tolerance" and cultural or aesthetic affiliation with yet another ethnic group. However, as Wendy Brown argues, supposedly apolitical understandings of tolerance and intolerance produce essentialized notions of "cultural difference" and "civilizational conflict" that legitimate "imperial liberal governmentality."[57] Strikingly, none of the belly dancers I spoke to said that they became interested in learning the dance because they were interested in the Middle East or in learning more about Arab culture. At best, the interest in belly dancing allows liberal American women to claim that they are not the "bad" Americans who are racist or anti-Muslim and simultaneously to distinguish between "free" and "unfree" women.[58] Clearly, the interest in belly dancing did not emerge due to a simple causal relationship with the War on Terror, given its longer history in the United States and in the Bay Area, but its availability as a cultural form that engages with the spectacle of Arab and Muslim femininity allowed it to be a venue where a range of imperial feelings could be staged during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Some of the women I spoke to had begun studying belly dancing before 2001, and all of them said that they were drawn to it primarily as a dance form or because of the spiritual, communal, or feminine qualities they associated

with it. None of the belly dancers spoke of a shift in their own consciousness about the Middle East or Arab Americans after 9/11. Daleela, who has been performing and teaching belly dancing in Northern California for sixteen years, was one of the few women I interviewed who acknowledged the anti-Arab backlash in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy. She recalled that hardly any of her female students showed up at a belly dance workshop right after 9/11, noting that "their husbands were afraid that other people would say, 'You're a Middle East sympathizer.' There was a slowdown in [shows at] restaurants. But with increasing interest in the Middle East, and with pop stars like Shakira [the Lebanese Colombian pop star whose music video *Hips Don't Lie* featured belly dancing], it became more popular, and there was an interest in knowing who are these people we're dealing with."[59] Belly dancing has become a hypervisible performance—in which Arab Americans themselves are relatively invisible—that negotiates the meaning of being an "Arab sympathizer" during the War on Terror and the ambivalence about "these people we're dealing with" through gendered culture talk.

Of the women I interviewed, Daleela, who is Peruvian American, was probably the dancer who seemed most interested in Arab culture; she had actually visited Egypt several times and studied belly dancing there. Daleela said she loved Arab music and food and expressed what was almost a desire to *become* Arab through cultural consumption, remarking, "It's through music and food that you know a people's soul. I almost feel more Egyptian than Peruvian." It may or may not be a coincidence that this fascination with Arab culture was expressed only by a Latina woman, and that the other belly dancers I spoke to had very little or no connection with Arab or Arab American communities, despite their immersion in Middle Eastern dance. For April Faith, who performs with her two sisters, this was intentional: "We stay away from Arabic clubs, weddings, restaurants; we don't do Arabic places." April remarked that this was because "Arab men don't see you as artists, they see you as showgirls; they want to get up with you and put tips on your body. I don't like the vibe at Arabic places from men and even from the women." While it is true that Arab customers at Middle Eastern restaurants sometimes put money into the dancer's costume, treating her like a stripper, non-Arab men commonly do this as well. April's group, Three Sisters, had never performed at Arab community events or weddings, where the atmosphere is generally different; thus they had no opportunity to challenge their own image of problematic Arab masculinity that seeps into the belly dance subculture.

While white women are very visible as belly dance performers and teachers, belly dancing performances in the Bay Area are featured at restaurants,

nightclubs, and events that have racially and ethnically mixed audiences, such as Dhamaal. For example, I spoke to Shabnam Pena, a performer who is part Salvadoran and part Egyptian, and who teaches classes in Oakland to a diverse mix of Latinas and Brazilian, African American, and white women. Generally, however, Latinas are not as involved in belly dance in the Bay Area—possibly because they are involved in a thriving local Latin dance scene—as are Asian American women. A white belly dancer I interviewed, Stacy, had studied with Amina Goodyear, a Filipina American woman who has been performing in San Francisco since the 1970s. Women of color may have a different relationship to belly dancing and connect to it via a notion of cultural similarity, rather than cultural difference, that is in some cases simultaneously self-Orientalizing and Orientalist. Daleela commented on what could be called "the Shakira factor": "There is a lot of Spanish/Arabic fusion [in belly dancing]; I think the two cultures work very well together. They are both passionate, fiery people."

This self-Orientalization is partly captured by what Said described as "second-order Orientalism" and Sadik Jalal Al-'Azm referred to as "Orientalism in reverse."[60] The affinities that women of color have for belly dancing may not always be imbued by a desire for a differently "exotic" other that is still close to self, but they do, in some cases, suggest what I would call a cross-ethnic, *relational* or *peripheral Orientalism* that goes beyond the white/nonwhite dichotomy.[61] Groups on the peripheries of power also engage with one another through Orientalizing discourses, but they do so in ways marked by their distance, usually, from the centers of production and mass marketing even as they try to benefit from them. In many cases, though, it seems the attraction of belly dance classes for middle-class women of color is similar to that of other women—as a social avenue to meet other women and a way to fashion their own femininity in the context of the middle-class American sisterhood it offers, thus emphasizing gender and class similarities. For nonwhite women, belly dancing is more about "fitting in" with a popular trend, a route to belonging in this female subculture and in the multicultural nation, via another kind of "otherness."

Belly Dance Sisterhood and Female Entrepreneurship

Most women I spoke to said that belly dancing offered them the feeling of belonging to a collective, and sisterhood is a dominant motif in the belly dance subculture. Pena said her students find a "certain camaraderie" in meeting weekly at classes that become a "social thing." Dabit commented that belly

dancing is appealing because it offers women a (homo)social space where they can meet, outside of work or bars. Belly dancing offers some women a sense of family, or at least belonging in an emerging subculture that has identifiable symbols, rites, and venues. This notion of female solidarity is key to American Tribal Style, a very popular genre of belly dancing in the Bay Area, associated with a neo-hippie aesthetic and body tattoos, that most of the women I spoke to favored. Carolena Nericco, the founder of the Bay Area group Fat Chance Belly Dance, describes her troupe in collectivistic terms associated with a tribe: "a community based on mutual respect. A group willing to acknowledge a leader, a leader willing to acknowledge the integrity of a group."[62]

Christina, who is white and Latina, had studied with Fat Chance Belly Dance and now designs tribal belly dancing clothing for a store in Berkeley. I spoke to Christina and her friend Julianna in the store, which sells various kinds of New Age paraphernalia and displays large statues of the Indian elephant god, Ganesha. Tribal belly dance, according to Julianna, who is part Finnish and part Native American, emphasizes the "togetherness of femininity, something that women can do together." Both women pointed out that Nericco's dancers perform as a group that improvises in harmony on stage. Similarly, the manifesto for Heavy Hips tribal belly dance proclaims that tribal belly dance offers a route to a "simpler, slower communal life" through "drumming and dancing." The overtly Orientalist theme of tapping into Eastern spirituality and an alternative way of life is coupled with the notion of becoming part of a collectivity—the belly dancing troupe—that stands in contrast to the presumed individualism and alienation of Western modernity.

Tribal belly dance, like other belly dance sub-subcultures, emphasizes collectivity but also idealizes travel, through exoticized images of "gypsy culture" in advertisements and Web pages for shows and classes, not to mention groups called "Ultra Gypsy." Apart from the fact that the term "gypsy" is itself considered problematic, these allusions play on the notion that belly dance has its origins partly in dance movements that traveled with gypsies from Asia through Europe.[63] The "nomad" motif is appealing to neo-hippies in an era of globalization, romanticizing nomadism when homelessness and statelessness is a difficult political reality for immigrants and refugees. Furthermore, while belly dance is hybrid in its origins—variously linked to India, Egypt, North Africa, Central Asia, Turkey, and the Levant—its reinvention as a putatively "ancient" Middle Eastern dance form in the West is significant because it has continued to be a popular site where "Middle Eastern culture" is interpreted and appropriated, and where actual Middle Eastern or Arab individuals step out of public view.

Figure 2.
Red Lotus Belly Dance troupe in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, 2007. Courtesy of Red Lotus Belly Dance.

The belly dancing subculture loosely mixes symbols and references to the Middle East, various parts of Asia, and Africa. For example, April and her sisters wear Indian bindis (decorative/adhesive designs) on their foreheads while performing. This fusion of Indian and Arab elements demonstrates the constant impetus to create new styles through the adoption of disparate cultural symbols and movements that are part of the marketing and commodification of belly dancing. Fat Chance mixes belly dance with flamenco and Indian dance, and the dancers wear an eclectic mix of clothing and jewelry: North African, Indian, Afghan, and Middle Eastern. Fat Chance's Web site advertises Indian "fluffy skirts" ranging from seventy-five to ninety dollars, and cholis (blouses), customized for belly dancing, at forty dollars and up. The issue of consumption is important because this is a subculture with specific appeal to middle-class American women who have the income to purchase these belly dancing clothes and accessories, not to mention the time and resources to take classes or, in some instances, travel to shows.[64] Belly dancing has also become a site for capitalist entrepreneurship by women who start their own businesses selling the growing range of belly dance apparel and commodities.

Christina's own clothing line, "Black Lotus," was on display at the store and consisted of black cotton harem pants, cholis, and waistcoats with colorful embroidery. Christina did not know where the embroidery was done, except that it was imported from a subcontractor somewhere in "Asia"; I noticed that one of the blouses was priced at thirty-five dollars, which suggests a substantial markup. Christina, who used to have a belly dancing troupe, hoped to sell her label at Rakkasah, the annual Middle East dance festival in Richmond, California. Tribal multiculturalism is the stage for the reinvention of American femininity via fantasies of the Middle East, but also for female entrepreneurship, an issue that is often overlooked in both scholarly and popular discussions of the growing American belly dance industry. The globalization of labor, capital, and commodities is an important dimension of a transnational popular culture that is deeply imbricated with questions of race, nationalism, class, and sexuality.

In contrast to the materialist aspects of consumption, production, and labor that underlie this subculture, most women in belly dancing emphasize the opportunities that belly dance offers to engage in a feminist spirituality. Daleela, author of *Belly Dance Wisdom: For Fitness, Pregnancy, and a Divine Spirituality*, comments that "belly dancing . . . is a connection to the divine feminine, to God the Mother. . . . Belly dancing is connected to the pelvis, so it is the center of birth, and it is sacred and positive."[65] There is a pervasive theme running through the discourse and texts about belly dancing associating it with the female body, childbirth, female power, and Goddess worship.[66] Other writers suggest belly dancing has a plethora of health benefits and is helpful for treating all manner of problems, from arthritis to infertility and even sexual trauma.[67]

Gioseffi, a self-described Wiccan (pagan) feminist who has performed at goddess-worshipping rituals, is one of many dancers who believe that belly dance in "its most primitive form was probably a worship of the ancient Earth Mother Goddess."[68] While this pagan/New Age feminism links belly dancing to women's rituals and women's bodies, Dabit says wryly, "The winner gets to tell the story; white Americans tell the story of belly dance as a birthing ritual, even though the reason it's become popular as a performance is to sell alcohol [to customers] at restaurants. . . they make things up as they go along about where it comes from and create this 'white woman mythology' because they become the authority." The question here is not just that of "authentic" meaning, but as Dabit suggests, about who defines, markets, and profits from a particular telling of the dance and how economic and racial relations of power are expressed or obscured by the mythologies of "belly dance feminism." For

example, the influx of foreign belly dancers, including American women, into Egypt, the site of belly dance pilgrimages for many American dancers, led to a displacement of Arab dancers. Daleela commented that the Egyptian government had to prohibit the performance of foreign dancers because Russian and American women were taking jobs away from local dancers, underscoring the unanticipated effects of cultural globalization.

Belly dance resonates with contemporary American feminist politics about body image and is viewed as liberating for women who are tired of conforming to the anorexic body type. For example, Nericco founded Fat Chance Belly Dance to counter "fat-phobic ideas of women" and belly dancers have performed at the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance convention.[69] Belly dancing becomes an escape from the restrictive fashion codes of American mainstream culture because it allows for a fuller, more curvaceous body type than other forms of Western dance. As April remarked, "ballet is about restricting your body, almost having an eating disorder, but belly dance is just the opposite." Troupes such as "Heavy Hips Tribal Belly Dance" emphasize that it is a way for women of any age and size to "reclaim their varied bodies as powerful, creative, sensual."[70] While some women assume that it is more acceptable to have a fuller figure in the Middle East, forgetting that the Western ideal of female beauty is now globalized, others combine spirituality and aerobics by following regimens such as Tamalyn Dallal's *Belly Dancing for Fitness: The Ultimate Dance Workout that Unleashes Your Creative Spirit*.[71] Belly dancing becomes a route to transforming self-image through a liberating Orientalism, allowing middle-class women, both white and nonwhite, to counter a waifish model of (white) femininity while simultaneously participating in a commodified subculture that helps to create social networks, largely for middle-class women. The cultural and body politics of belly dancing thus allows women to secure their class status by rejecting selected aspects of American femininity, without jeopardizing their class positioning or challenging fundamental gender norms, let alone the racial order.

Arab-Face

The paradox is that belly dancing in the United States is used to evoke a culture that is simultaneously oppressive and liberating for women, socially and sexually, and the figure of the Arab woman is one that is both envied and patronized by American belly dancers. Yet Arab American women are often missing from these performances, and it is generally white American women who ultimately stage this contradictory view of Middle Eastern culture through

the performance of what I call *Arab-face*. Belly dance performances detach Orientalized femininity from the bodies of Arab women themselves so that it becomes a form of racial masquerade, complete with Arabic names. Some belly dancers even have Arabic words tattooed on their body that are visible in performance, literally imprinting their bodies as the vehicle for Arab-face. As Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick observe, "racial masquerade has been employed by Americans for a long, long time" and "demonstrates both a felt need on the part of participants to do or say something about the social relations of white people and non-white Others, and a certain pleasure taken in the occasion."[72]

Arab-face performances echo the racial impersonation of "acting black" and "playing Indian" (both Native American and South Asian), and perhaps most closely mirror the liberal/hippie interest in Indian spirituality, fashion, and music in the 1960s and '70s, thus domesticating a certain segment of "Asian" culture, free of the anxieties associated with the Vietnam War.[73] But what if liberal Americans had adopted Vietnamese dance styles while the United States was bombing Southeast Asia? Why does this seem so unthinkable, at least from our present vantage point, when Arab-face seems to go largely unremarked as a problematic expressive act? What makes the lurid Orientalism of this racial masquerade both so obvious as to be a seemingly easy theoretical target, and yet so difficult to acknowledge in mainstream discourse? In my view, belly dancing and the discourses and silences surrounding it dramatize the difficulties that many Americans, particularly liberal Americans, have in reconciling themselves to the imperial role of the United States and its wars and occupation in the Middle East. The intensity of denial and ambivalence in our late imperial culture underlies the generally unexpressed uneasiness about the figure of the American belly dancer.

As with most expressions of Orientalism, and of racial ventriloquism, the performance of belly dance by American women represents not so much their ambivalence about Middle Eastern culture, but their ambivalence about their *own* culture—its individualism, materialism, or restrictive body image ideals. However, the ambivalence of American women, including liberal feminists, toward American or Western culture, also shores up a multiculturalist or liberal notion of U.S. culture that can consume elements of other cultures, making it possible for women to experiment with different cultural "selves" and transcend the limitations of their culture. Implicitly, belly dance narratives of the Middle East defend the projection of the U.S. "way of life" on the world stage at a moment of overt imperial aggression in the Middle East.[74] It is no coincidence, it seems to me, that some of these belly dance sites have

names such as “BellydanceNation,” for while they resort to the trope of tribe, they implicitly tap into a particularly *nationalist* discourse that cloaks imperial feelings in multiculturalist and feminist discourses. For *whom*, ultimately, is belly dancing a form of sexual liberation? *Which* women benefit from this cultural trend? And *against* whom does belly dancing enact its social/feminist critique?

In the intensified Orientalist discourse of the current moment, the Arab and Muslim male is the ultimate enemy of “our way of life.” Arab or Muslim masculinity symbolizes the enemy in the War on Terror, in media images of ruthless Iraqi “insurgent” males, suspicious Muslim immigrant men, brutal Afghan fundamentalists, and militant Palestinian youth. Uneasiness about Arab and Muslim masculinity is evident among belly dancers, who are at best ambivalent about performing for Arab men, viewing them as sexist and lecherous—even if white men are also acknowledged as viewing belly dancers as sex objects. White women who teach belly dancing are known to warn their female students of the dangers of performing for or dating Arab males. This advice coexists with instances of interracial desire, and in Dabit’s view, there are belly dancers who have a “fetish for Arab culture and men.” Orientalism, as always, is marked by the tension between fear/disgust and desire/lust.

If belly dancing is a form of feminist sisterhood that embraces the Arab or Muslim woman, at a distance, the threat to belly dancing is generally associated with either Islamic fundamentalism or Middle Eastern disdain for folk culture, both of which are attributed to repressive Arab and Muslim men. The focus on Arab or Muslim males as alien or threatening reinforces the Orientalist notion that in contrast, Arab or Muslim femininity can be part of the U.S. nation as long as it is exotic, mystical, and sensual and not assertive, critical, or political.[75] This is not a simple issue of white/nonwhite female subjectivity, for heightened patriotic nationalism and militarism since 9/11 has also absorbed some people of color, who are willing to align themselves against societies or religions that they view as “enemy” or “alien.” In the shifting racial politics of post-9/11 U.S. culture, there is a new investment in the boundary of Arab/non-Arab, or Muslim/non-Muslim (while “Muslim” is not a racial category, it has been treated as such and infused with racial thinking). The nonwhite and immigrant women I spoke to expressed varying degrees of political critique of anti-Arab racism and racial profiling, though they are a minority within this subculture. However, the quiet suspicion or ambivalence about “the Muslim world” and how “they treat their women” is generally shared by white and nonwhite American women alike, and is increasingly evident in liberal feminist discourse about women in the “Muslim world” after 9/11 that echoes neoconservative arguments.[76]

Imperial Feminism

Most white belly dancers I spoke to explained the striking invisibility of Middle Eastern women in belly dance classes and their relative marginalization as performers and teachers in terms of the cultural restrictions on Arab and Muslim women. As Stacy said to me, "most Middle Eastern people don't want to be associated with it, for reasons you can probably guess—it's *haram* [taboo]. They don't mind watching it, but they just don't want their relatives doing it." While this is certainly true in many cases, there is a particular cultural worldview of Arab and Muslim cultures in American belly dancing culture that is imbued with Orientalist assumptions about gender and sexual politics in the Middle East. For example, Daleela commented, "People often ask me, 'How can such a sensual dance come out of such a repressive Arab culture?' I say it survived despite it."

Belly dance teachers and performers produce a discourse of the dance's origins whose stock tropes are first, the oppression of Arab and Muslim women by patriarchal societies and fundamentalist forces, and second, the rescue of belly dance by white women, which becomes a metaphor for the rescue of Arab and Muslim women. Belly dance Web sites, manuals, and books generally focus on the restrictive life of Middle Eastern women in harems and under the veil. For example, Wendy Buonaventura, a British dancer and author, writes: "The terrorist crisis of September 2001 brought the tragic reality of women's lives under fundamentalist Islam before the eyes of the world. And it revealed to people who hitherto knew nothing of Middle Eastern life the unpalatable truth behind the romantic cliché of the veiled oriental woman."[77] In the post-9/11 moment, the restrictions of Arab culture or Islamic fundamentalism have been invoked as a reason that the United States must "liberate" Muslim women through invasion and occupation. These belly dancing performances and Web archives contribute to the larger cultural repertoire of images that link Arab, South Asian, and Muslim women to a culture that is simultaneously patriarchal, oppressive, and backward and also exotic, hypersexual, spiritual, and collectivistic.[78] Belly dancing thus becomes a site in which American femininity, as well as national identity, is constructed in simultaneous opposition to, and affiliation with, a Middle Eastern/Arab/Muslim female "other."

Daleela echoes the second refrain pervading narratives about the Middle East in belly dance, that of the neglect of the dance form in the Arab world and its preservation by foreigners who appreciate folk traditions more than the natives.[79] She comments that the "dance is becoming rare in Egypt, it is not appreciated as much there, it is appreciated more in the West." Several

authors suggest this is because of the prohibitions of "religious fundamentalist groups" and the devaluing of belly dance in the Middle East.[80] While a hierarchy of cultural forms certainly exists in postcolonial societies that often privileges Western aesthetics over indigenous traditions, it is striking that non-Arab dancers readily position themselves as the saviors of these declining traditions that natives are too blind to appreciate in their misguided quest for modernity. This hints at a missionary imperialism that is akin to the "cultural recovery" of colonial-era Western anthropology.[81]

The U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and continued support for the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories have decimated families and homes and destroyed cities and villages in the Middle East, along with their inhabitants' cultural resources and social lives. Yet in belly dance narratives and performances, there is little acknowledgment of how the ravages of imperial aggression and occupation in the Middle East have undermined local cultures. Imperial feminist discourse legitimizes these wars, as evidenced during the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan to "liberate" Muslim women, under the general premise of defending "freedom" and the American "way of life" from terrorists and fundamentalists.[82] As Amira Jamarkani observes in her analysis of the Belly Dance Superstars video, "the spectacle of belly dancing in the U.S. is clearly engaged with the rhetoric of freedom that is deployed as justification for military intervention in Iraq" and is "embedded within a neoliberal logic" of democracy and freedom.[83]

None of these belly dancing performances by white American women include any conscious reflection on the fact that Middle Eastern women and their families and communities are being targeted in the War on Terror, or that the countries from which they come are under attack. Even if belly dancers do not condone the destruction wreaked by the United States in the Middle East, it is rare for them to perform at fund-raising events for Iraqi, Afghan, or Palestinian women. Most belly dancers I spoke to seemed to see the dance as outside of "politics"; Nericco, an older dancer, was the only one who commented, briefly, on U.S. relations with the Middle East and remarked that "the U.S. is really pro-Israeli, it's not pro-Arab." But this general disavowal of politics is itself a political stance. I am sure there are liberal American women in belly dancing who are critical of the War on Terror and racial profiling, but the liberalism of these performers, and also of the performance space, is precisely the issue: wearing henna or doing belly dancing generally allows American women to disavow anti-Arab racism while avoiding any reference to the violence inflicted on those actually from these communities. The fact that these performances are focused on the body make it a particularly potent,

embodied form of imperial feminism/liberal Orientalism at a time when the actual bodies of Arab and Muslim women, here and in their home countries, are under attack by the United States.

Ethnic and Class Anxieties

Belly dancing is a site for an intense politics of ethnic authenticity that is complex for Arab American as well as non-Arab women because it stages charged questions of racial authority and cultural appropriation. While belly dancing offers middle-class white, and nonwhite, women a way to flirt with the "otherness" of Arab culture while remaining firmly embedded in American consumer culture, it is laced with a deeper ambivalence among Arab American women who find in it a contradictory stage to perform Arab American identity. This is not just due to the politics of cultural appropriation, but also to anxieties about ethnic authenticity and class positioning. Dabit, who grew up in a working-class, immigrant family in the Bay Area, suggests that belly dancing is particularly appealing for multiracial Arab Americans because "they want to feel accepted." This quest for ethnic belonging through belly dancing is humorously illustrated in Anne Soffee's (2002) memoir, *Snake Hips: Belly Dancing and How I Found True Love.*[84] Soffee, who is mixed Lebanese/white American, reflects: "If I'd taken belly dancing in high school, I wouldn't have felt like such a reject . . . the kids who were Lebanese might have accepted me."[85]

But Soffee's satirical take on belly dance culture is contradictory, for in the introduction she rejects the preoccupation with belly dancing as a conduit to ethnic authenticity that runs throughout the rest of the book: "I'm not communing with my history, I'm not getting in touch with my heritage. . . . I'm belly dancin.' I am doing things my ancestors would never have imagined in a million years. I am a fugitive from the Ethnic Police."[86] Yet Soffee also suggests that her obsession with belly dancing is precisely *because* it offers her a way to connect to Lebanese or Arab cultural "tradition," but through a form disapproved of by her parents. While apparently rebelling against expectations of performing Lebanese-ness, Soffee still remains contained by this desire for ethnic authenticity, while seemingly defining it on her own terms. The rhetoric of individual liberation is invoked by Arab American women as well, though for different reasons. Belly dancing offers Soffee a way to construct an individualized, autonomous self, liberated from ethnic and familial expectations, and an Arab American identity that is not overtly threatening in the current climate of anti-Arab racism but fits squarely within a consumerized, multicultural nationalism.

Class is a hidden dimension of belly dancing narratives that underlies the complex desires of immigrant and second-generation Arab American women not just for ethnic and national belonging but also for class mobility and entrepreneurial opportunities. Dabit comments that some Arab American women learn belly dancing because they "want to be sexy on top of being a doctor," trying to reconcile the desire for an exoticized femininity with the pressures of upward mobility in immigrant communities. However, these issues are emphasized much less in narratives of belly dancing, including Soffee's memoir, than the repressiveness and restrictions of "patriarchal" immigrant cultures.

For Arab American women and men, belly dance performances are layered with conflicting cultural sentiments and political reservations. An experience at an Arab restaurant in San Francisco encapsulated the heterogeneous implications of belly dancing for Arab American viewers. The restaurant, Amira, is in the heart of the progressive and increasingly gentrified Mission district. The owner, Azzam, a Palestinian refugee from Syria, pointed out that it is probably the only restaurant in the Bay Area that advertises "pan-Arabic cuisine" in its publicity rather than using the more common "Mediterranean" label to evade anti-Arab stigma. Azzam introduced belly dancing after he opened the restaurant fifteen years ago to "get the business moving," but noted that lately it has been slowing down. Other Middle Eastern restaurants in the area also offer belly dancing, so competition is intense. Azzam observed that most of the customers are "[white] Americans," and this was also the case that night when two or three groups of people came in to sit on the low-cushioned seats around brass tables.

The dancer, a white American woman called "Lizzy," appeared on the small stage in the middle of the restaurant, wearing a studded bra and a skirt slit up to her thighs. The women in the audience seemed to have a mixed response, but most of the men seemed faintly mesmerized—much more so than Arab men at other belly dance shows I have been to, who sometimes look quite bored by it all. Lizzy put a bowl on her head and shimmied her way around the tables, receiving tips. When she sashayed up to our table, we were not sure what we were supposed to do. Azzam had already told us he did not like customers putting tips into the dancer's clothes. Nader, who is Palestinian American, had not witnessed many belly dancing shows and noted, correctly, that belly dancing is not "indigenous" to Palestinian culture; his mother always objected to belly dancing as very "Orientalist." Nader's wife, Leila, who is Egyptian American, spoke of how it had become a performance of pan-Arab identity at student culture shows after she graduated from col-

lege. Belly dancing has become an element of Arab American identity and cultural contestations among younger generations who struggle with how to produce and perform Arab-ness, given the emphasis on multicultural origins, the hyper-Orientalization of the Middle East, and the limits of the cultural imaginings of "Arab" identity in the United States. Lizzy lowered herself to the floor, smiling entreatingly, till we put our money into the bowl. Lizzy was a good dancer and skilled performer, but the location of the performance in the heart of a neighborhood known to be a hub for progressive (anti-war and Arab American) movements, and the varied and somewhat ambivalent responses of the Arab Americans in the audience, brought home to me the political and cultural contradictions that belly dancing illuminates as well as obscures.

Conclusion

Belly dancing is seductive, not just because it is sensual or titillating, but because it lures viewers into a liberal Orientalism that evades the violence of U.S. penetration of the Middle East and assaults on Arabs and Muslims in the United States and taps into a larger, and quite pervasive, cultural imaginary of "un-free" Arab and Muslim women needing emancipation by Western modernity and "democracy" that is used to justify the War on Terror. Belly dance creates in the public sphere the image of the exotic Arab/Muslim female whose sexuality is potentially liberated through the preservation of belly dancing in the West, but who must remain shrouded in a timeless Orient that can become "free" and "democratic" only through Western intervention. Belly dancing is invested in reproducing this image of Arab and Muslim femininity through veiling and unveiling.[87] Women in Afghanistan and the Middle East are potentially liberated through U.S. wars that bring "freedom" and "American values," while middle-class, white American women find liberation through a "Middle Eastern" dance that actually reinforces key neoliberal values of self-actualization and entrepreneurship undergirding the "American way of life," while appearing to escape from it.

In the present moment, the general American preoccupation with "the Muslim/Arab female" as a signifier of deeper imperial feelings makes female bodies a site where "American" femininity is linked to Western individualism and democracy, while erasing the specter of warfare against Arab and Muslim bodies, female and male. Belly dancing is, in this sense, an imperial spectacle[88] that replaces the bodies of Arab and Muslim women with Arab-face, making invisible these targeted communities within the nation. Belly dancing signals a domestication of "Middle Eastern culture" after 9/11 that evades all discus-

sions of racial profiling, criminalization, detention, deportation, surveillance, torture, dehumanization, and dispossession of Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians, within the United States and overseas.[89] It allows American women to craft national, class, and gender identities and to negotiate imperial feelings of ambivalence, denial, remorse, fear, suspicion, or anxiety about the War on Terror. These performances highlight the guilty pleasures of U.S. imperialism, revealing the difficulties of locating dissent in the face of liberal multiculturalism and the complicity of popular culture in the fissures of U.S. empire.

Notes

Thanks to my research assistant Nadeah Vali, to Magid Shihade for his valuable insights, and to Curtis Marez and the reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions and encouraging feedback.

1. I interviewed ten women, nine of whom were simultaneously or had been at various points students/performers/teachers and one of whom was a belly dance/events manager. Five were white U.S. Americans, four were mixed-race or Latina, and one was Arab American; they ranged in age from twenty-five to fifty-five years. I contacted them after doing research on belly dance classes, troupes, and events in the Bay Area and interviewed teachers and performers who were very well known as well as those who were less known; I was referred to some by friends who do belly dancing or are interested in belly dance. I also had numerous informal conversations with a range of people on the topic.
2. Stavros Stavrou Karayanni, *Dancing Fear and Desire: Race, Sexuality, and Imperial Politics in Middle Eastern Dance* (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2004); Priya Srinivasan, "Dancing Modern/Dancing Indian/Dancing . . . In America," *Ballet-Dance Magazine* (April 2004), http://www.ballet-dance.com/200404/articles/asiandance.html (accessed September 24, 2007).
3. Priya Srinivasan, "The Bodies beneath the Smoke, or, What's behind the Cigarette Poster: Unearthing Kinesthetic Connections in American Dance History," *Discourses in Dance* 4.1 (November 2007): 31.
4. Jane Desmond, introduction to *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 2; Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 107.
5. William A. Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life: An Essay on the Causes and Character of America's Present Predicament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).
6. Ann L. Stoler, "Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and Unseen," in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann L. Stoler (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 2; Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Random House, 1993), 52. Said developed the idea of cultural attitudes and references inherent to metropolitan cultural identities in the contexts of British, French, and American literature that implicitly upheld a certain understanding and imagining of imperial identity.
7. Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 101, 118. Gilroy argues that nostalgia or mourning for the glory days of imperial domination shapes the "melancholic outlook" underlying British racism and xenophobia. In contrast, U.S imperialism is not (only) in the past but is also in the present and is marked by a collective amnesia and denial of imperial power and history that differentiates it from British empire. See also Amy Kaplan, "Left Alone with America: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, 3–21 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993); and Michael Rogin, "'Make My Day!' Spectacle as Amnesia in Imperial Politics [and the Sequel]," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Kaplan and Pease, 499–534.

8. Susan Akram, "Orientalism Revisited in Asylum and Refugee Claims," in *Moral Imperialism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Berta Esperanza and Hernandez-Truyol, 61–77 (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 62.
9. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 3, 5.
10. Anouar Abdel-Malek, "Orientalism in Crisis," in *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. Alexander L. Macfie, 47–56 (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Holly Edwards, "Curator's Preface," and "A Million and One Nights: Orientalism in America, 1870–1930," in *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870–1930*, ed. Holly Edwards (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), ix, 16.
11. Timothy Mitchell, "McJihad: Islam in the U.S. Global Order," *Social Text* 73/20.4 (2002): 1–18.
12. Amy Kaplan, "Where Is Guantánamo?" in *Legal Borderlands: Law and the Construction of American Borders*, edited by Mary Dudziak and Leti Volpp, special issue of *American Quarterly* 57.3 (Fall 2005): 831–58; Harry Magdoff, *Imperialism Without Colonies* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2003).
13. Kaplan, "Where Is Guantánamo?" 837; Neil Smith, *The Endgame of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 49.
14. Neil Smith, *The Endgame of Globalization*, 47.
15. Edwards, "A Million and One Nights," 28.
16. Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 231; Steven Salaita, *The Holy Land in Transit: Colonialism and the Quest for Canaan* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2006).
17. Little, *American Orientalism*, 14.
18. Ibid.
19. Amy Koritz, "Dancing the Orient for England: Maud Allan's *The Vision of Salome*," in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane Desmond (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 134.
20. Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).
21. Marta Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1995).
22. Uday S. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
23. Wendy Buonaventura, *Serpent of the Nile: Women and Dance in the Arab World* (London: Saqi, 1989); Tina Hobin, *Belly Dance: The Dance of Mother Earth* (London: Marion Boyars, 2003).
24. Daniela Gioseffi, *Earth Dancing: Mother Nature's Oldest Rite* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1980), 50.
25. Rosina Fawzia Al-Rawi, *Grandmother's Secrets: The Ancient Rituals and Healing Power of Belly Dancing* (New York: Interlink, 1999), 50; on modern dance, see Srinavasan, "Dancing Modern" and "The Bodies beneath the Smoke."
26. Hobin, *Belly Dance*, 150.
27. Najwa Adra, "Belly Dance: An Urban Folk Genre," in *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism, and Harem Fantasy*, ed. Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young, 28–50 (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda Publishers, 2005).
28. Ibid., 47.
29. Hobin, *Belly Dance*, 151.
30. Barbara Sellers-Young explores Orientalism in belly dancing performances by U.S. women in the Bay Area, including those in the American Tribal Style subculture, but she does not examine the particular questions about white femininity, multicultural nationalism, and U.S. imperial culture that I am raising here; see her essay "Body, Image, Identity: American Tribal Belly Dance," in *Belly Dance*, ed. Shay and Sellers-Young, 278.
31. Sellers-Young, "Body, Image, Identity."
32. Gioseffi, *Earth Dancing*, 47, 52.
33. Sellers-Young, "Body, Image, Identity," 278.
34. Gioseffi, *Earth Dancing*, 9; Sellers-Young, "Body, Image, Identity," 288.
35. Gioseffi, *Earth Dancing*, 46–47.
36. Karayanni, *Dancing Fear and Desire*, 25.
37. Anne Rasmussen, "An Evening in the Orient": The Middle Eastern Nightclub in America," in *Belly Dance*, ed. Shay and Sellers-Young, 177, 187.

38. Rasmussen, "An Evening in the Orient," 190.
39. Ibid.
40. Arab migration to the United States began in the late nineteenth century, increasing after World War II and the exodus of Palestinians after 1948, and swelling after the Immigration Act of 1965 and the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. See Alixa Naff, "Arabs in America: A Historical Overview," in *Arabs in the New World: Studies on Arab American Communities*, ed. Sameer Abraham and Nabeel Abraham, 8–29 (Detroit: Wayne State University Center for Urban Studies, 1983); and Michael W. Suleiman, "The Arab Immigrant Experience," in *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*, ed. Michael W. Suleiman, 1–21 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).
41. Rasmussen, "An Evening in the Orient," 172.
42. Ibid., 190.
43. On music, see Rasmussen, "An Evening in the Orient," 190; on Orientalism, see Marianna Torgovnick, cited in Carol Hendrickson, "Selling Guatemala: Maya Export Products in U.S. Mail-Order Catalogues," in *Cross-Cultural Consumption: Global Markets, Local Realities*, ed. David Howe (London: Routledge, 1996), 107.
44. See Priya Srinivasan's analysis of the underexplored role of Indian immigrant women who performed as nautch dancers in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fairs in the United States and inspired American dancers; Srinivasan, "The Body beneath the Smoke."
45. San Jose has the largest Arab population in the Bay Area, and California has the largest Arab American community among U.S. states (*The Arab Population: 2000—Census 2000 Brief*, U.S. Census Bureau: U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics, and Statistics Administration, December 2003).
46. For example, Arab American hip-hop such as Iron Sheik, the N.O.M.A.D.S, the Philistines, and Rogue State, and the collective "The Arab Summit"; spoken word poets such as Suheir Hammad; and Arab American comedians such as "The Axis of Evil."
47. See Sunaina Maira, "Henna and Hip-Hop: The Politics of Cultural Production and the Work of Cultural Studies," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 3.3 (October 2000): 329–69, and "Temporary Tattoos: Indo-Chic Fantasies and Late Capitalist Orientalism," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 3.1 (2002): 134–60.
48. Said, *Orientalism*; Salaita, *The Holy Land*.
49. Nabeel Abraham, "Anti-Arab Racism and Violence in the United States," in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Steven Salaita, *Anti-Arab Racism in the USA: Where It Comes From and What It Means for Politics Today* (London: Pluto Press, 2006); Therese Saliba, "Military Presences and Absences," in *Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, ed. Joanna Kadi, 125–32 (Boston: South End Press, 1994).
50. For example, see Therese Saliba, "Resisting Invisibility: Arab Americans in Academia and Activism," in *Arabs in America*, ed. Suleiman, 304–19.
51. Helen Samhan, "Not Quite White: Race Classification and the Arab-American Experience," in *Arabs in America*, ed. Suleiman, 209–26.
52. For example, the case of the "L.A. Eight" in 1986; see David Cole and James Dempsey, *Terrorism and the Constitution: Sacrificing Civil Liberties in the Name of National Security* (New York: New Press, 2002). Less well known is the 1968 case of three Yemenis falsely accused of plotting to assassinate President Nixon and the FBI's targeted surveillance of Arab Americans in Operation Boulder beginning in 1972. See Gregory Orfalea, *The Arab Americans: A History* (Northampton, Mass.: Olive Branch, 2006), 216.
53. The 1967 Arab-Israeli war and the anti-Arab representations in the media at the time galvanized a younger generation of Arab Americans who staged mass demonstrations and formed pan-Arab American political organizations, such as the Arab American University Graduates and the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. See Sameer Abraham, "Detroit's Arab-American Community," in *Arabs in the New World*, ed. Abraham and Abraham, 85–108. Other scholars have documented earlier moments when Arab nationalists in the United States tried to mobilize around the Palestine question in 1917–1932. See Lawrence Davidson, "Debating Palestine: Arab-American Challenges to Zionism, 1917–1932," in *Arabs in America*, ed. Suleiman, 227–40.
54. Philip Schuyler, "Jojouka/Jajouka/Zahjoukah: Moroccan Music and Euro-American Imagination," in *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East*, ed. Walter Armbrust, 146–60 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Renda Dabit pointed out that U.S. allies such as

Morocco, Jordan, and Egypt are considered less threatening and more popular with U.S. tourists than, say, Syria or Lebanon.

55. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
56. Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*.
57. Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 2006), 6, 8.
58. Ibid.
59. Shakira, one of the most successful Latin pop singers globally, has increasingly incorporated Arab rhythms and dance moves into her music. However, her Arab identity is sufficiently ambiguous in her performances and marketing so as to simply add an element of exoticism to her primarily Latin American identification, which is far less controversial than being part Lebanese (http://www.shakira.com; accessed November 8, 2007).
60. Said, cited in Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), vii–viii; Sadik J. Al-'Azm, "Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse," in *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. Alexander Macfie, 217–38 (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
61. Ella Shohat, "Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema," in *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*, ed. Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 47; Ernest J. Wilson III, "Orientalism: A Black Perspective," in *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. Macfie, 239–48.
62. Sellers-Young, "Body, Image, Identity," 287.
63. Karayanni, *Dancing Fear and Desire*, 163–64.
64. Group classes generally cost $10 to $15, and belly dancers charge approximately $150 to $200 for performances at private events in the Bay Area. At restaurants the rates vary, and most dancers cannot always rely on tips, as practices vary. Some complained to me that rates at restaurants and also events were unfairly low given the cost of clothing and jewelry. Price cutting and competition is a thorny issue in the belly dancing community (see dancer Nanna's discussion at http://www.gildedserpent.com/art32/nannagigrates.htm; accessed June 24, 2006).
65. Available electronically and in paperback at *http://booklocker.com/books/2732.html*.
66. Coluccia Pina, Anette Paffrath, and Jean Putz, *Belly Dancing: The Sensual Art of Energy and Spirit* (Rochester, Vt.: Park Street Press, 2003), 39; Gioseffi, *Earth Dancing*, 55.
67. Hobin, *Belly Dance*, 159–70.
68. Gioseffi, *Earth Dancing*, 9, 72.
69. Coluccia, Paffrath, and Putz, *Belly Dancing*, 4.
70. See http://www.heavyhips.net/palika.htm (accessed April 29, 2005).
71. Dallal's DVD on belly dancing can be found at www.amazon.com.
72. Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick, *Immigration and American Popular Culture: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 137–38.
73. Ibid., 166.
74. Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005).
75. Fatema Mernissi, *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001).
76. See, for example, recent writings on Islamic fundamentalism and "jihad" such as Barbara Ehrenreich's "It's Islamo-Fascism Awareness Week," *The Nation*, October 22, 2007, http://www.thenation.com/doc/20071105/ehrenreich (accessed October 30, 2007), and Katha Pollitt, "2, 4, 6, 8! This Beheading Is Really Great!" *The Nation*, July 13, 2007, http://www.thenation.com/blogs/anotherthing?bid=25&pid=213916 (accessed January 21, 2008).
77. Buonaventura, *Serpent of the Nile*, 275.
78. Marsha Hamilton, "The Arab Woman in U.S. Popular Culture: Sex and Stereotype," in *Food for our Grandmothers*, ed. Kadi, 173–80.
79. Karayanni, *Dancing Fear and Desire*.
80. Adra, "Belly Dance," 46; Buonaventura, *Serpent of the Nile*, 279; Gioseffi *Earth Dancing*, 40.
81. Ella Shohat, "Gender and the Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema," in *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Visions* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 33.

82. Lila Abu-Lughad, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" *American Anthropologist* 104.3 (2002): 783–90.
83. Amira Jarmakani, "To Be Free: The Spectacle of Belly Dancing in Contemporary U.S. Culture" (presented at Mapping Arab Diasporas conference, University of Dearborn, Michigan, April 2006).
84. Anne Thomas Soffee, *Snake Hips: Belly Dancing and How I Found True Love* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2002).
85. Ibid., 46.
86. Ibid., xii.
87. Mernissi, *Scheherazade Goes West*.
88. Michael Rogin, "Make My Day!"
89. Ibid., 499–534.